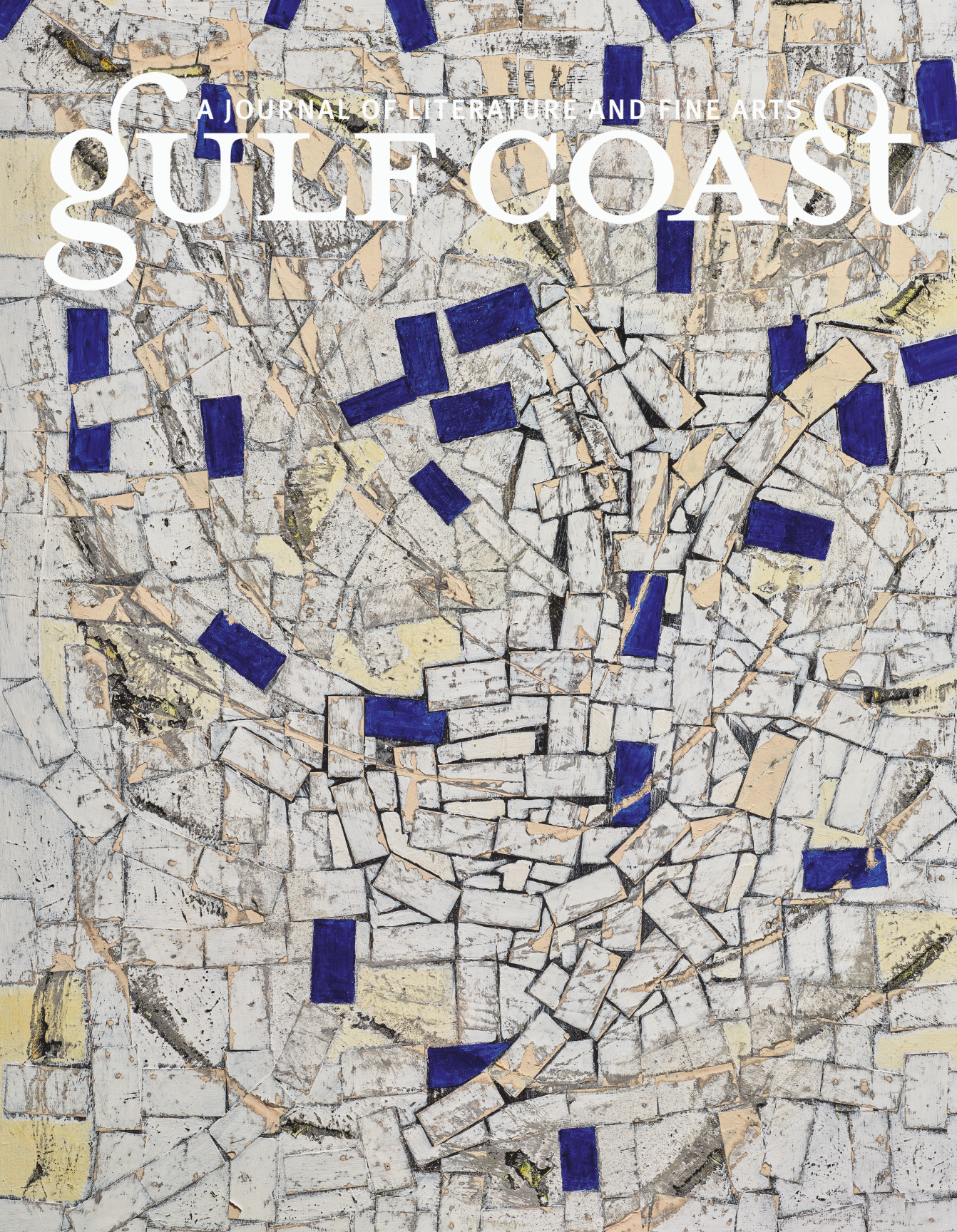
A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS
GULF COAST

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GULF COAST

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS VOLUME 34, ISSUE 2

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FEATURED ART

REVIEWS & INTERVIEWS

Dear Readers,

We emerge from the front of our bodies, from a year of wisdom and forgetting, seeking mountains in the folds of bedsheets. A year of plague, a journey around our rooms. What mansion? We were looking for a street, to hear someone at the far end shouting our name.

Not the bacchanal we promised ourselves, not the shedding of weight as in some New Year's resolution. Not the restoration of a harmonious order, what is that. Just the resuscitation of touch, trust in that. Come what may. In this compendium tilting strange we are
someone I can't see
And yet
unknown faces alchemize familiar
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to deplore the land that raised you
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it's just the generative force / I'm after
Don't you know
this was my time

All italicized lines are borrowed from work in this issue.

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

THE 2021 BARTHELME PRIZE

Judged by Molly McCully Brown

Winner, Sophia Stid

"Once Again I Fall Into My Family Grave" is a lyric taxonomy of hidden inheritances, an act of exacting attention to the ways grief, violence, faith and desire are borne out in a bloodline, a family, a body. In it, the sacred and the worldly pulse, side by side in the "marbleized muscle of [the] heart," a life and death's hard increments worthy of as much devotion as any saint on any altar, even and especially when we yearn to look away. Beautiful, unblinking, and restrained, this piece knows that all we carry, love, suffer and watch is consecrated in our sight.

—Molly McCully Brown

Honorable Mentions:
"Daily Sustenance" by Ah He Lee
& "Chapter from *Handbook for the Newly Disabled*:
My Neurologist (Who Doesn't Have MS) Explains
Pain is Not a Symptom of MS" by Allison Blevins

Sophia Stid

Once Again I Fall Into My Family Grave

In my blood, a continent. All the warring countries—almost reconciled. They breathe together as they weave through the marbleized muscle of my heart, taking their communion of oxygen, *amen*. My blood a Catholic mash-up. One long Mass in the mother-tongues of all my grandmothers, languages I pretended not to understand until I didn't understand. In the playroom, in those years I still dreamed in other languages, presided the old trunk we called the War Room, packed by one grandmother's family fleeing a country ridden with war.

Another grandmother's country started that war. She stayed in that country until the war was over, and after. She was very hungry her entire life. Her hunger did not die with her but hungers still, unrelenting, long trauma of deprivation reverberating through her descendants, epigenetic echo of empty. *Amen*. As a child, I turned away when I walked into an empty kitchen and saw it was not empty, my bayonet-thin aunt in the pantry eating butter with a spoon she dipped in sugar. Eyes closed, lips slick with shook, shocked cream. Desire churned until it hardened and held a shape, then pressed into sticks, wrapped for sale, and bought. As a child, I knew the word *sex* but not what it was, and wondered if this might be it—the rhythm of her gulping throat looked so private. I left the room quiet as her spoon sinking into butter.

This family inheritance of debt translates differently across genders, across bodies. An uncle I loved grew large on loud calories, his daily breakfast a cold Coke, half a pie, two cigarettes. His truck's glove compartment a graveyard of packaging, discarded sugar-smeared cellophane of the Hostess Donettes he popped easy as mints. *Takes out the bad taste*, he said.

What was that taste? I never asked. I looked away from the litter of his stuffed and shouting hunger whenever it announced itself from his pockets, his Chevy truck. I did not want to see. I was ashamed of my shame, the noise, the waste—all that plastic, crackling and empty. He died in a diabetic's hard increments.

My aunt is still alive, and thus still hungry. She does not keep butter in her house. At dinner, she moves food from country to country on some invisible geography of her plate. Making a map of denial, she says *I could not eat another bite*. During the war, my great-grandmother stole communion wafers and fed them to her children. *Consecrated or unconsecrated?* someone asked once—as though the story itself had not already answered that question. My ancestors listening from their cathedrals of war and flight, my American-ransomed heart.

THE 2021 GULF COAST PRIZE IN TRANSLATION

Judged by Sophie Hughes

Winner, Anam Zafar

The translator of *In the Tenderness of War*, a collection of powerful snapshots of life in contemporary Syria, is responsive to the narratives' mutable energies—from sobering to witty, tender to tragic—and intricate modes—both poetic and journalistic. They know, for example, when to use colloquial contractions and when to stretch clauses to their full extension, imposing the slower consumption of the narrators' more philosophical lines. Reading collections of independent yet tangentially connected vignettes is often a joltingly vital experience as you move from situation to situation and voice to voice; Zafar's excellent sense of rhythm and pacing in English runs throughout all of the pieces and anchored me firmly in the world of the book.

—Sophie Hughes

Honorable Mentions:
Maureen Shaughnessy for an excerpt from *Darkness Inside and Out* by Leila Sucari
& Tiffane Levick for an excerpt from *Rhapsody of the Overlooked* by Sofia Aouine

Translated by Anam Zafar

Najat Abed Alsamad

from *In the Tenderness of War*

My Friend's Basement

My friend calls her basement home. It is a lonely home.

From the hope of the morning to the boredom of the afternoon to the never-ending night, my friend spends her time weaving dreams. With those dreams she cleans her basement, polishing the stubborn dirt and memories off its floor and walls and dissolving its darkness with all her faithful fantasies.

As she dreams, she knits birds onto blankets, sheltering them from the misery of the outside world in the new homes she fashions from her palms. Other times, she knits cushion covers, continuing till an hour of night only inhabited by other lonely, dreaming women. She knits a sweater to keep her soul from the cold, and a scarf which travels to the faces of the loved ones whose whereabouts she hasn't known since her ex-husband sent her back and her family moved her to this basement: locking the door on her scathing account of why she had returned, and on her screams for mercy.

She sells what she has knitted and spins a new ball of yarn … Still dreaming, she reads Gibran and Tagore, Coelho and Mosteghanemi, limping between them like an abandoned gazelle. Dozing atop Qabbani's poems, she becomes his brunette, his Damascus, his Andalusia, and embodies his love for all that doesn't last. Still dreaming, she watches Bill Clinton's charm on the television, Romário's finesse, and Abdel Halim Hafez's melancholy melodies. They keep her desires burning, and she weaves them together with the thin yarn that keeps her company until daybreak.

When she gets bored, she plays with the few chess pieces decorating the table in the corner of the basement: pieces she retrieved from the bin, after her cousin threw them away. "The bin is no place for the pawns of such a clever game," my friend says, showing me how she arranges them in a line, adding two dice to the pattern to symbolise her "noble game against luck the extortioner."

The ceiling of her basement room is seventy centimeters above ground. Seventy centimeters is enough to open two windows and send tiny written messages north,

south, east, west, and anywhere else her paper messengers are willing to go. It is also enough to plant basil and carnations just outside.

She waits for my visits with such joy. It is the joy that comes from meeting a true friend, someone who does not sing to the same tune as those swarms of others who believe that now she is a divorced woman, everyone should forget her, her family should reject her, and her children should condemn the very womb out of which they came.

When her brother hands her money on Saturdays, she gives it back and returns to her yarn. "I'm the one who's rich," she says, "and they're as poor as beggars."

"Come and visit," she says. "We'll have coffee—we'll smell it before we drink it—and I'll cook you something. Let me knit you a case for your mobile phone, too. I don't have a mobile ... I don't have a landline, either."

"No one comes to see me," she says. "I hope my neighbors saw you coming into the house. Then they'd know some people think I'm worth visiting."

"I hide my money," she says, "so I can buy books. I mourn every book I haven't read. If only I'd been strong enough to ignore all the lies that son of a bitch told about me, he wouldn't have swatted me out his house like a fly and replaced me with a new, younger, prettier wife … I could have finished university and got a job, and wouldn't be here begging my family, my ex-husband, my children …"

"Your visit will leave me on a high for the next ten days," she says. "Please come back before then. And bring news from the war out there—it's exactly what we needed, isn't it? A war … The perfect excuse for my family to forget me completely, once and for all … All they've left for me here is an old television that only picks up two Syrian channels. I watch TV every day and ask myself, what's the secret behind these armed militias? They kill off one group practically every day and then new ones appear, more vicious than the last ones! To be honest, news of the war doesn't bother me much. I just miss hearing from my children. If only I could see them, just to let them know I'm alright, and nothing more … I miss hearing about other people too. Weddings, birthdays, graduation parties … And you know what I really miss? Having a good old gossip!"

Then, she says to me: "I'd love it if you wrote about me, about the things I tell you. Writers are friends of God, and I'm all alone here …"

I leave my friend's basement with a handful of fresh basil and a red carnation she gives me from her flowery window. As I exit the confines of this life of hers, frozen in time, it is Syria that stays on my mind: lonely Syria, knitting under a roof made of her own rubble, no end in sight.

My Name is Zahra

No one calls me by my name.

In our chatterbox village, they call me "the Sudanese man's wife." In the more esteemed neighborhoods of Damascus, I become "the maid."

Every day, I take the bus from Shebaa—my village, in the countryside—to Abu Rummaneh, al-Muhajirin, or al-Jisr al-Abyad, all in the heart of Damascus. I clean other people's dirty houses and then return to my mother's, the smell of bleach one step ahead of me. My father died when I was a child, leaving no inheritance, while my mother has passed down to me her profession, her frightful luck and the unhealing cracks on the soles of her big feet.

I dream of a husband, but no one proposes.

The woman I work for has offered to sell me a bedcover. It is as mind-blowingly beautiful as it is expensive. It's made from red Indian cotton, decorated with fiery flowers, colorful beads, and "I LOVE YOU FOREVER" written in English under a picture of a lit candle. I want it. But where on earth will I find three thousand Syrian lira?

A year and three months later, and the bedcover is mine. I have been paying for it in installments: two hundred lira every month. And still, no one has proposed to me.

But, eventually, someone does. I'm a pretty girl. So, why is it that no one has fallen for me, out of all of God's men, except Muhammad, the Sudanese man?

"Although he's black, we're all God's creations," they say. "Although he's from Sudan, he's still an Arab. Although he's unemployed, he's our guest here in Syria!"

Muhammad came to Syria to study, but he didn't study. He didn't get a job either. And now he's met me, he's stopped thinking about going back to Sudan.

We get married in Shebaa. There are no fireworks at our wedding, no cake to cut with a big sword like other newlyweds do. Now, we live in a bare room near my

mother's house. In our hours of love, I don't have the heart to spread my flowery bedcover over the borrowed mattress that I unroll and fold away again once it is over, can't bring myself to feel sad when I have to go to work at dawn, leaving Muhammad alone to smoke away his boredom and stare at the photograph of his mother that he brought from Sudan. In the picture, she's standing there in an orange, flowery dress, a blue belt making her skinny waist even thinner, picking bunches of bananas and surrounded by women and children.

He always hides his tears, pulling his gaze away from the photograph to watch the mist drifting underneath the only window in the room.

One year later, and homesickness has overwhelmed him. Sudan has become more beautiful in his eyes than Syria. More beautiful than Zahra. He doesn't say goodbye to me. He just leaves, pocketing his desires—and my savings—into the front of his shirt and running back to his country under cover of night while I, collapsed on the floor, stroke my stomach, feeling for the restless movements of a baby who will slip out my womb in a few months' time. I will give birth to a black son and I will call him Omar. I won't lay out my red bedcover to celebrate his birth because I, abandoned and disgraced, will be forced to return to my mother's house—a house which has never been graced with the presence of a bed.

My mother can't stand Omar. She thinks the color of his skin is a bad omen. So, out of love for her, I take him and leave. We move in and out of five rented houses, and at night I lie next to my son, comforted by his reassuring breaths. I stroke his curly hair, my two eyes blessing his long, thick eyelashes as they sleep soundly. Deep down, I wonder about his phantom father. Would it really have hurt him to stay with us? Why did he leave behind nothing except Omar's skin color, and how had he never pitied me for having to work so hard? I have nothing left except the bedcover, which stays in its bag all but once a month when I spread it out under the warm sun, its flowers laughing a little before I return them, weeping, to their home, shoving soap and lavender between the folds as I tell myself that nothing lasts forever.

I have now saved up enough to buy a bed, and Omar is old enough to go to school. But the revolution has arrived and the shells have started falling on Shebaa.

Did it not occur to them to only start their revolution once I have a bed for my bedcover?

Now we have moved to Najha. But here, the other schoolchildren hit Omar because they like the name "Ali'" and the name "Omar" makes them angry.

When I phone the woman I work for, she says: "Come and visit. There's no shelling over here in al-Jisr al-Abyad." And when I tell her that the roadblocks on the way are awful, she says: "Come and stay with me, then. I'll get your son into the local school." So, I sell my bed for a pittance, pick up my son and my bedcover, and go to her.

Here, in her house—a house which cheers on the revolution—are lots of women. They have travelled here, like me; have been abandoned, like me; they are ex-prisoners, and artists, and teachers who have lost their jobs. In the day, they all go out, first to protest marches and then to aid organisations, and they spend all night knitting and embroidering, giving the money made from sales to anyone who needs it. Omar has started working with us: he can't bear the thought of schools anymore, ever since the other students here at al-Jisr al-Abyad started ganging up on him, shouting "Black Omar! Black Omar!" behind his back.

In the house, one of the teachers has offered to give Omar English lessons. He's started speaking it fluently, and learning how to write it, and he doesn't even know Arabic yet.

My bedcover is still folded away.

As for Omar—Syrian-Sudanese Omar, born in Shebaa, living in al-Jisr al-Abyad, school outcast, English speaker … He has become like a son to all of these women.

And me? Right now, I sit on the precipice of my story. I have become used to all of my names: I am Zahra, I am the woman from Shebaa, I am the "Sudanese man's wife," and I am Omar's mother.

But I will never be "the maid" again.

Returning

I'm dragging myself back to you, Aleppo. Skin as cold as metal, limbs creaking like rusty hinges. If I make it, pick me up and pity me, and don't shut the door of mercy in my face.

I'm on my way to you, carrying nothing but despair, my baby girl, and our yearning for you. If we have to die of loneliness, hunger, longing, or need, let it be on your soil.

I know that no husband will be waving at me from the bus stop, flowers in hand; that no mother waits for me in the kitchen, making kebabs to dampen her worries and hiding her love inside Aleppo-style kibbeh. There will be no friends, either; no hard university classes to grumble over, and no house. The wreckage of what was my house, in the countryside of Aleppo, will be enough for me, and I'll either lie down next to the other corpses inside or stand up tall, the house and I giving each other life.

It's been two years since that day the bombs fell from your sky. Do you remember? I was in the final year of my English literature degree, just about to leave for class: eyes kohl-lined, cheeks rouged with rose paste, wearing an embroidered dress over my swollen stomach, and new shoes. I remember my husband's hand: how it pulled me out from the cement of our collapsed ceiling and how, out on the road, the sky overcast, he had taken off his shirt and torn it up to bandage my bleeding hand. Then he stroked my stomach.

I don't know how we ended up in Damascus. We met my father there, our family's only survivor, but he died a month after that—he was paralysed. There was no ceremony when we buried him. Afterwards, we headed south to Sweida, our route zigzagging to avoid the roadblocks where they would have arrested my husband for avoiding military service. Once in Sweida, we moved into an unfinished building, a skeleton of a place where I surrendered the load in my stomach, washed my wounded eyes with my tears, and relinquished what was left of our money.

When the soldiers came for my husband—they'd been after him all this time; he was long overdue to serve the country—he ran. I was left there, feeling like I knew no one else on this great big planet. When winter arrived, I rushed to cover the windowless panes with pieces of nylon, shielding my daughter and myself from the cold, and from intruding eyes that might have noticed I was alone in my empty house. If you can call it a house. While I was recovering from childbirth, I remember the neighbors spoiling me with big bowls of soup. And I remember the

letter from my husband, bringing the reassuring news that he had survived it all: the heaving queue of smuggled humans, the pillows of stone, the treacherous paths and even the vipers. The guards had been asleep when he crossed the barbed wire at the border, but his heart had still shivered in fear that the very night itself might betray him. And when he made it, alive, to the Jordanian government, they threw him into the detention center they kept aside for all rebels on the run from Syrian justice. But he escaped, and fled to Za'atari camp. There, he was safe. Nothing to trouble him except poverty, pangs of longing and occasional feelings of helplessness, homesickness, and anxiety for his wife and daughter, all alone in a strange city.

Once the soup gifts stopped coming, I started working. The landlord agreed to pay me five hundred liras per night to carry blocks of cement to the third, fourth, and fifth floors of our building, from the lorries parked outside.

Nothing hurt me more—not my cracked, hardened hands, my scoured elbows, or my screaming back—than my baby's cries. But she never did cry much. Even during her teething pains, she didn't make a fuss: falling asleep with a smile on her face and waking up the same way. Her little mouth refused any food that wasn't milk, and the only time she cried was when she didn't see me next to her.

In Aleppo, I used to sing traditional Syrian qududs. I don't sing here—instead, I've taken a liking to reciting the Quran. All I can bear otherwise is silence.

Sadness keeps pressing down on me. It is a self-assured sadness, kneading my skin like flour, eating a kilogram of my flesh every week and piercing my heart until, finally, I stop trying to fight my reality.

Checkpoints

As we stood in front of the bus, I told my husband: "The only people who go to Damascus these days are either stubborn students, terribly ill, or scared of losing their salary."

"There's one more group," he added. "Crazy people like you, going there just because you miss it."

Damascus—hot under siege—is one hundred kilometres away from Sweida—noticeably safer in that regard. Before the war, it took about an hour to get to Damascus by car or bus. After the checkpoints were put in place, this single hour

stretched to several hours. There are checkpoints for the army, checkpoints for the National Defence Forces, and checkpoints for the Lijan militias, each one belonging to an infallible authority that doesn't acknowledge the legitimacy of whoever controls the checkpoint before or after its own. Identity cards are scrutinised (the identity checks are never-ending) and suitcases and handbags are searched before the driver is allowed to continue.

My husband's comment hit home after the fourth or fifth checkpoint, when two soldiers appeared suddenly, just like that, as if from the belly of the earth, pointing their machine guns towards the bus—towards us, the passengers, already terrified even before they showed up. There were two more soldiers behind them, making threatening hand gestures and ordering the driver to stop. We weren't in a conflict zone, nor one of the "liberated" zones controlled by the tyrants of Daesh or Jabhat al-Nusra or their newer Syrian peers. We were still within the Sweida city limits, an area under complete control of the regime. Who would even dare target us here, in our own safe territory? More than a minute passed, the soldiers taking aim but not shooting, until an officer's car appeared, windows tinted. The car simply drove across the road, from one side to the other.

At that moment, the road was as it usually is. Almost empty. The traffic moved feebly, the vehicles seeming almost lonely. The officer wouldn't have needed to wait more than thirty seconds for the bus to pass, so he could drive across safely. He didn't have to wait, though, because he was scaring us with his soldiers and their guns; because they were only here to keep us, the pampered minority, safe.

But the slogans scrawled on the checkpoints, in shoddy ink and even worse handwriting, suggested an answer. Heartfelt words appeared at each one, such as *Assad or we'll burn this country down!* next to a magnificent picture of the leader. Above, below, and around the picture were the words *We love you* and *We're all on your side*. Then another picture, bigger in size and splendour, with *You've got this, boss* written underneath. We also saw *You are safe*. *The Syrian army is here* and *We are looking after your safety*. I didn't understand this one: *Syria is men with missiles!* And on one small, modest checkpoint, somebody had written *Our homeland is our honour!* My God, how I loved that last one.

We were stopped at the next checkpoint for more than a quarter of an hour. An

officer with two stars on his shoulder parked his car in the middle of the road, blocking the exit to both the public lane with its permanent bad luck and the military lane that is usually luckier. This was the spot he chose to have his suitcase inspected, right from the boot of his car. We watched from behind our driver as the officer folded each item of clothing back into the suitcase as carefully as if he were in his own bedroom, gazing at each piece as if recalling a fond memory about this white shirt or that green sock. We looked on from our seats behind the bus driver, baffled by his elegant packing.

At the last checkpoint, we couldn't continue our journey after our bags had been checked. A fancy car had parked in front of the bus, leaving no space to pass through the gate. An overweight man with a regal air was standing in front of the car, a Syrian citizen from the Lijan. He wore a black suit and dark sunglasses, his moustache shaved off but with a long beard, and with a large revolver poking out of his belt. The checkpoint officer got up to meet him as soon as he arrived. They embraced, greeting each other very warmly, and had a long discussion that must have been about the country's problems. The passengers in the bus made sure to display their respect for their country's etiquette by waiting patiently for the pair to reach an effective solution.

What do these checkpoints look like? Apart from the sand-sullied, thirsty oleander bushes at the roadside, the checkpoint is an exhibition of recycling techniques as far as the eye can see. Nature's waste is turned into walls and a roof for the soldiers to rest underneath: tall, sun-baked sand barriers, their grains melting under the sun, are peppered with patched-up rubber tyres, rusty metal panels from the shells of damaged cars or oil cans, and fragmented concrete blocks from demolished, evacuated buildings. When the soldiers get bored of standing around, they amuse themselves with rocks of all sizes, moving them around and arranging them in horizontal and vertical lines, or creating zigzag courses like the ones in driving schools. They might move the checkpoint one hundred metres forwards or back, or widen the military lane to let pretty girls use it, who soften the soldiers' hearts with a laugh or a whiff of perfume.

Most of the soldiers we saw hadn't visited their families for more than a year, and most should have been discharged from military service long before that. Most hadn't eaten food fit for a soldier—or even eaten their fill of the terrible food

they did have—even once. They hadn't bathed in warm water for a lifetime. They couldn't have been more than twenty years old. They should have been in the first years of university, studying and dating and brimming with hope. As they searched and inspected us, it seemed as though their exhaustion reached their souls. They all asked for water to drink.

One of them walked towards the driver's window. "On the way back, please bring me a cold bottle of water … It has to be water from Sweida!" he begged.

On my next journey, I'll bring eight bottles of cold water. One for each spray-painted checkpoint on the road to Damascus.

THE 2021 BEAUCHAMP PRIZE

Judged by Jenna Wortham

Winner, Adéolá Olákiítán

"To Allow for Tenderness" was a pleasure to read and roam around in. Good criticism raises questions without necessarily answering them, and this piece also allowed emotional access to a critical body of work and situated that response in a rich artistic and literary lineage. The author has a long career ahead, and it is my hope this prize will help nourish that journey.

—Jenna Wortham

Honorable Mentions:
"A Chinese Cure" by Stephanie Mei Huang
& "Collage and (In)Visible Histories: Kandis Williams at ICA at VCU" by Haley Clouser

Adéolá Oláḳìítán

To Allow for Tenderness

Miatta Kawinzi's artistry is attuned to the pulse of their inner life, and often holds diverse states of being together with precision, through a complex and wide-ranging poetics. In the exhibition *Soft is Strong*, a strain of this poetics works through fragmentation and articulates a sense of being while Black, which is extended through the exhibition's highlighting of softness, fragility, and multiplicity. These modes of existing are still often deemed weak by a heteropatriarchal order, and derided as feminine, self-indulgent, or not worthy of emulation. Counter-notions to this order have, however, long existed in Black feminist thought, whose literary and aesthetic references resonate in this exhibition. As Toni Morrison asserted, being a Black woman writer was never a shallow place to think from—what she calls a "wakeful" position of working from the margin produces work that is lush and intricate, affording deeper wellsprings of revival and possibility.[1] Kawinzi's commitment to multiplicity extends not only to the relations between their references—which include Morrison and Nikki Giovanni—but to their choice of working with a swathe of mediums, across the image and performance, through performative gestures of sound, video, photography, and sculpture. All of these are deployed in this recent body of work.

Fig. 1. Miatta Kawinzi, still from *She Gather Me*, 2020. HD Color Video & 16mm Color Film Transferred to Video. Two-Channel Audio: Vocalization, Cassette Tape recording, Synthesizer, Original Electronic Score.

[1] Paraphrased from a profile of Toni Morrison's literary works. Hilton Als, "Toni Morrison and the Ghosts in the House," *The New Yorker,* October 27, 2003. URL: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/10/27/ghosts-in-the- house.

Footage of a railway track overlaid with another moving frame of the ocean begins *SHE GATHER ME* (2021) (Fig. 1), one of two experimental video works in this exhibition. In this video, Kawinzi sings a personalized rendition of "Dat Old Black Gal" in a soothing manner reminiscent of aural accompaniments performed through chore-hours in Black domestic spaces.[2] The 11-minute video is interspersed with clips of moving imagery including a stark grey concrete building and pastoral scenes indicating what the artist describes as real and imagined geographies of the African diaspora. White texts are visually spread across the video, spatially broken into different pictorial compositions on the frame of various landscapes. This compels the viewer to pause and look at different points on the projection to achieve cohesion. The video switches between digital and analog clips: in watching these, the viewer's experience leaps between different temporalities embedded within these landscapes. Rhythmically assembled as though a visual jazz, footage after the song concludes is spliced with gestures of hands reaching out with palms open, and weaving through grass. The video is replete with a polyphonic score that fuses organic sounds of breath and synthesized vocals.

To be intimate with Kawinzi's poetics is to be attentive to the question of origins. Born and raised in the Southern United States to Liberian and Kenyan parents, the artist affirms how growing up in multiple geographic, cultural, and linguistic spaces influenced the parameters of their practice. This resulting hybridity undergirds *SHE GATHER ME* (2021), titled after a phrase drawn from a short monologue in the 1987 novel, *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison. "She gather me, man," says the character Paul D., in a moment of tenderness with Sethe, the maternal protagonist of the story. With deep knowledge of the necessity for "a gathering" that could hold our being in whatever form, Paul D. characterizes this gathering as such: "The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right

[2] American Folklife Center, "Dat Old Black Gal," Library of Congress. Accessed Nov 30, 2020, URL: https:// www.loc.gov/item/flwpa000005/.

order."[3] The act of gathering can be an internal process to achieve resolution, or a form of grace given through acts of care and communing. In Kawinzi's video, the body appears in movement within different landscapes, and is suggested by a white vest hung within a patch of plants. The merger of these landscapes with gestures or traces of habitation resolves the artist's feeling of dislocation, and reveres land as a site of care for the body. *SHE GATHER ME* enacts gathering, and creates a sense of belonging across various sites including New York City, Johannesburg in South Africa, Detroit in Michigan, Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, and Tulsa in Oklahoma. As a whole, the abstracted landscapes of Kawinzi's work do not finalize belonging as a settled thing—as is not the experience of the Black diaspora—but situates belonging within a concert of fragments, possibilities embraced and left open-ended for continuous construction.

Another work in the exhibition, *New Patterns* (2021) moves in dialogue with visual culture from Ghana. A monochrome photograph of two hands clasp a sunflower with the words "in defense of flowers," borrowed from Nikki Giovanni's prose poem of the same name. This phrase is splayed across the bottom of the photograph, towards the edge of the frame. This image—*The fragrance of our blooming* (2021)—is placed over a wallpaper inspired by the colorful Ghanian Kente textile patterns. A commingling is present here. The image on Kente connects the African Diaspora to West Africa, opening onto a meaningful interpretation of duality carried by the Akan adage, *baanu so a emmia*: when two carry, it does not hurt. Interdependence, reflected by two or more people shouldering effort together, expresses communal relations that have long been practiced in African traditions. The dynamics of village clusters since pre-colonial systems of extended cohabitation, conceived forms of care beyond limiting and individualistic ways of navigating the world. Such care is a way of survival through others, or many.

[3] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, (Vintage International, 2004): 306.

Fig. 2. Miatta Kawinzi, *I wish for my kin the space to gently unfurl*, 2021.

An alternative symbology of flowers, and the gestures of reaching and holding, signify richly across the works in Kawinzi's exhibition. *River City* (2021) (Fig. 2) exemplifies another instance of Kawinzi's hybrid material approach, comprising a photographic diptych connected by a meshwork made from cotton blue threads and cream cowrie shells. Flowers appear again. The photographs are inverses of one another, and each frames a hand holding a sunflower stalk. Dwelling with what the recoded symbol of flowers could mean—and the exhibition's implicit defense of this imagery—requires a glance at unfavorable stereotypes associated with them. Prior to contemporary ecofeminist critiques that reclaimed femininity from patriarchal botanical metaphors, classification systems have often applied and instituted the gender binary and assignments of femininity to nature.[4] As a

[4] American Folklife Center, "Dat Old Black Gal," Library of Congress. Accessed Nov 30, 2020, URL: https:// www.loc.gov/item/flwpa000005/.

result, floral associations often carry perceptions that mutually devalue emotions, nature, and women. In quotidian use, flowers are often deemed to be romantic objects expressing emotions ranging from happiness to grief. Nikki Giovanni has defended flowers and their emotionality by elevating them beyond normative perceptions, arguing that they are not only additive pleasures, but can relay other intricate intimacies that words fail to transmit.

If Giovanni has nudged us toward reconsidering these floral beings, Kawinzi asserts the multiple values that flowers may invoke. However ephemeral, flowers are significant not only for their beauty in a state of full bloom, but for their transformations over time.[5] Attention to flowers reveals a sensitivity and openness to the world around us, and can stimulate our awareness of being alive. When viewed as a single installation, *River City* presents a vista that functions as an embodied site where a cocktail of emotions can occur. By integrating the life-giving symbology of flowers with gestures of one hand holding or two palms clasping, the photographs reconstitute the image of Blackness away from its negative, racialized connotations. The Black body, en masse, is rendered tenderly and tender, allowed a rich palette of all it might mean to be human.

Poetics are also expressed through the works' haptic materiality. In *Blue Mantra* (2021), blue threads are assembled and knotted with cowries—the thickness and length of thread vary, even as they are evidently connected. As materials, threads are delicate yet malleable; may be taken apart or woven together. In this work, the blue threads exert a sense of presence, evoking the exhibition's overarching relationship of strength and fragility, and the chromatic undercurrent of blue(s) as a sign referencing the African-American blues tradition. In Western popular culture, Blackness is rife with projections of resilience, as seen in the trope of the "Strong Black Woman" or the representations of African American

[5] From an edited conversation with the author, November 11, 2020. Subsequent quotations unattributed to other references are by the artist.

men in the post-Civil Rights era.[6] Such objectifications dehumanize even when intended as celebratory. *Blue Mantra* recasts such prevailing notions of Black strength, by locating single lines of thread within a network. The support of fragility by other threads indicate an openness to compassion and community even in melancholia—in this way, the networks demonstrate how vulnerability is in fact a rightful state of being.

The exhibition's poetics triangulate flowers, softness/vulnerability, and Blackness—this ensemble calls to mind bell hooks' inquiry into the question of a Black aesthetic. Charting a discourse through her memory of childhood in living spaces, social spaces and her engagement with the Black Arts Movement, hooks reaches a conclusion that is non-reductive and expansive. She writes:

> Remembering the houses of my childhood, I see how deeply my concern with aesthetics was shaped by black women who were fashioning an aesthetic of being, struggling to create an oppositional world view for their children, working with space to make it liveable. She did not inherit her contemplative preoccupation with aesthetics from a white western literary tradition […] We must not deny the way aesthetics serves as the foundation for emerging visions.[7]

hooks' definition offers aesthetics as crucial modes of perceiving and becoming, and foregrounds phenomenological considerations through ways of dwelling in space—including social spaces of relation and inhabitation. What it has meant to grow up in a Black household, to be mothered by a Black woman, to navigate the world and art-making as a Black artist, is ennobled by the poetics of *Soft is Strong*, across its fragmented parts: a craft of the blues, voices from the South, tactile transferences of nurture-consciousness from one's foremothers.

[6] See "Looking Back at Black Male: A Conversation with Thelma Golden, Hilton Als, and Huey Copeland" 12 December 2014, Whitney Museum of American Art. URL: https://whitney.org/media/143.

[7] bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional," Lenox Avenue Vol. 1, (1995): 71-72.

In a social landscape laden with numerous tools of oppression, resistance often comes in the form of making visible one's own contract of freedom. When Kawinzi contemplates their liberation in the space of poetics, they affirm it as "a place where things don't have to have the same kind of logic imposed in external spaces—things can have their own internal logic of freedom." Freedom as an internal and continuous assertion also trickles outwards and externally, in the way we gift softness to the social spheres we inhabit. Softness is pleasurable, as it ensures a depth of life attuned to a sensuality that we might understand by way of James Baldwin's words—"to be sensual is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread."[8]

For more equitable worlds, could we conceive of softness and its sensualities as a universal right particularly for a discourse of Blackness whose prevailing definitions in mass culture prohibit it? At a time of ongoing brutality against Black lives worldwide, staying soft is bound to the necessity of continued demands for the liberation of the oppressed. Through the exhibition's spatial poetics, the viewer is reminded that staying soft is an oppositional force to the negative constructions of vulnerability as a sign of weakness. To be soft, to deliberately instill softness, offers a spot of respite and alternative ways of survival, reckoning and healing.

This essay was originally published by CUE Art Foundation for Miatta Kawinzi's Soft is Strong.

[8] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (United States: Vintage International, 1992): 43.

A Place, Here:
A Folio of Writing from Less-Translated Languages

Curated by Guest Editor

Madhu H. Kaza

Madhu H. Kaza

An Introduction

I wanted my work to be the work of disabling the art versus politics argument; to perform the union of aesthetics and ethics.
—Toni Morrison

here, of a place in the world
—Birhan Keskin, tr. Öykü Tekten

Let me start plainly. On the day that Nick Rattner emailed me, introducing himself as Editor-in-Chief of *Gulf Coast* and asking if I'd be interested in guest-curating a section of translations for this issue, I'd been talking on the phone with a friend about difficulties with a publisher. I had announced, with my friend as my witness, that I was taking a long break from anything having to do with literary translation. I hung up the phone and opened Nick's message. Right away I dismissed his proposal but I forwarded the email to my friend with the note, "Life is weird." My friend encouraged me to consider the trickster energy of the timing of the invitation and at least weigh the possibilities. So I put the editor through a test: I wrote to him and asked, Could we talk on the phone? He had originally suggested that I might curate a selection of under-represented translators, languages, or authors, and while I felt that to be a worthy project, I'm wary of art expediencies; I don't want to be consulting on representation improving institutional diversity quotients. What I wanted to know was: Who are you, what kind of collaborator will you be, how do you care for process, why is this important to you, and what are your unresolved questions about literature and translation?

Reader, here we are. I am tremendously honored to present to you a selection of translations from Arabic, Kurmanji, Turkish, Turkmen, Kazakh, Telugu, Nepali, Vietnamese, and Chamorro. I framed this project around an urgent need to see more writing from less-translated languages in circulation. As Catalan scholar Albert Branchadell notes, "less-translated languages" are not necessarily minor

languages, endangered languages, or vernaculars—though some are. Less-translated languages include some of the most widely spoken tongues in the world such as Mandarin, Arabic, Hindi/Urdu, Bengali, Javanese, Punjabi, and Telugu. Whether the languages are large or small, national or regional, the term doesn't speak to anything inherent in these languages or their literatures, but rather to the ways in which global power operates.

If this project is political, then, and it is, it's so because the status quo of literary translation in the U.S. is political; the culture rests on and reproduces imperialist histories. But I, too, want to lay down the tired debate of art versus politics for now (since what is at stake is always art and politics and aesthetics and ethics anyway), in order to avoid flattening the work presented here. There's livingness in these pages.

When I first wrote to the translators, I noted that my approach to this special feature was not to make any big claims about world literature, but to offer a small sample of divergent work. And that's what we have: the spare evocation of nature and longing in Öykü Tekten's translations of Birhan Keskin; the dense, visceral stream of consciousness of Kaitlin Rees's rendering of Nhã Thuyên's experimentation; Muna Gurung's translations of Sulochana Manandhar, who makes night into a territory for contemplative conversation; Orhan Elmaz and Zohra Saed's translation of the seemingly direct sweetness in Annasoltan Kekilov's lyrics, which are pierced by the poems' occasional telling awkwardness; the refrains in the song poems of Rojavan poet Xoşman Qado as translated by Zêdan Xelef and Shook and of Telugu Dalit poet Joopaka Subhadhra in Nitya Rayapati's version; the tenderness and bravado of call and response quatrains in Danielle P. Williams's adaptations of ancient poetry of the Mariana Islands; the clipped lyrics that speak of destruction, dislocation and mourning in Sinan Antoon's self-translations; and Mirgul Kali's translation of Baqytgul Sarmekova's humorous story of patriarchal culture and exchange value, a story whose pace and structure bears no resemblance to American realist fiction.

We should be careful not to read these writers as cultural ambassadors whose works are representative of their original languages, literatures, or nations. Many of the poems are political, and some—as in Joopaka Subhadra's "Sing Sister Sing,"

Danielle P. Williams's translations of kantan chamorrita, and Sinan Antoon's "Smoke"—take aim at imperialist violence and implicate U.S. readers. But a number of the writers also dissent from the dominant literary traditions within their cultures. Nhã Thuyên has been actively engaged in community building with marginalized writers in Vietnam who are neither state-sanctioned poets, nor necessarily opposition writers. Joopaka Subhadra's work includes critique of the Telugu literary tradition's caste exclusions. After Annasoltan Kekilov, a twentieth-century dissident Turkmen writer, filed a complaint about state corruption and misogyny with Soviet authorities, she was forcibly committed to a mental asylum where she spent the rest of her life. Her manuscripts were disappeared.

Many kinds of silence attend these works, including the active repression of a writer's voice in Kekilov's case, and in the more pervasive, invisible silencing of non-European writing in Anglo-American literary translation culture. But productive silences might be found here, too. Perhaps all translation is in conversation with silence, with aspects of an original text that cannot be conveyed in a new language. Much can be said about what gets lost in translation. For me it's also vital to honor that gap as a condition of what it means to be worldly. If you care about others—if you genuinely respect their languages, cultures, their difference—then you must take really good care of silence and not merely close the door on what escapes you or confuses you. Moreover, most of the works selected for this feature are poems. And isn't silence the undertow in all poetry?

A common element in these pieces is attunement to place and the natural world. Land is in these poems, and the wind, the rain, the sea. The stutter of cliffs, circling birds, barking dogs. The voices of collective local experience as well as one speaker's ordinary desire to be recognized as they are: a person, with the memory of a fish, who forgets to protest and only wants to live. What do you hear in these works? Where do they sing? Where are they silent? Where do they leave you silent? Can you feel, as I do, how strange a word like "here" can be, how it must always be translated from writer to reader, from reader to reader, from one place to another, from one instant to the next, so that we sense the embodied intimacy and also the drift when someone says, "a place in the world, here"?

Translated from the Turkish by Öykü Tekten

Birhan Keskin

A Rite of Relief

a place in the world, here,
a lake stands still.
a blue-lavender morning
of a place in the world
sets itself up slowly.
a woman, a little younger than me,
gently explains the world,
the wonder of the morning to me:
(in a water-poem, i was the affluent
low countries before).
a woman, a little younger than me,
(let's call her splashing water)
rains down on the silent sheet covering me.
here, of a place in the world,
a lake stands still.
behind are the mountains
reflected on my lavender,
for more mountains, even more mountains.

a shaman, here, is beating her drum
until the morning with the sorrow of beech.

Birhan Keskin
Translated from the Turkish by Öykü Tekten

Ache

since that day, i've never had a beautiful sentence to construct
for the world. my dreams, since the tulle and the guns, have been misty.
i've remained like an undulating pensive road, an old stone on the road,
a boat docked in the harbor, a mossy rope.

o[1] was the distant high seas, stood up and walked away.
i was a forsaken house by the shore, a wooden dock squeaking in a thin strait,
a rubber tier on the dock, orange buoys a little ahead,
i hit the serene waters with the reflection of a northern memory.

within a black & white square, all, all of this is a memory now
you left, i forgot, i was forgotten.

they've broken me from the same place i broke you,
i can't cry you anymore in any sentence.

[1] Translator's Note: Turkish has no grammatical gender, thus the equivalent to "he," "she," and "it" is a gender-neutral pronoun "o." In Keskin's poem, the gender neutrality of Turkish also establishes a certain degree of ambiguity that blurs the distinction between the human and non-human subject. Thus, I left "o" untranslated, instead of using the gender-neutral English pronouns since they would alter significantly the meaning created through the sonic and ontological ambiguity of "o."

Birhan Keskin
Translated from the Turkish by Öykü Tekten

Snail

the stone in me slid over.
beneath the sky,
on the squandered face of the earth
i fell onto the "no way" leaf of a daisy
if i fell silent, so should the word. it didn't happen,

the next day i moved to the "alright" leaf.
i raised the memory there,
from there i fell.
let the memory also forget itself in its depth.

i wanted you
to come to me find me take me
put the memory in me to sleep wherever you wished.

the place i've come to is a stutter of cliffs
my silver thread is on the wane—
i'm attempting to forget, to sleep,
be silent.

Translated from the Kurmanji by Shook and Zêdan Xelef

Xoşman Qado

Why Don't They Believe?

They don't believe that I can't drink wine anymore.
They don't believe that even carelessly I respect women.
They don't believe that I cry frequently.
They don't believe that my love is enough for everyone I know.
They don't believe that I celebrate butterflies,
And that I paint a rainbow on the sky of my bedroom before I wake up.
They don't believe that my body
Sings like a sparrow once I embrace my dreams.
They don't believe that I talk to myself
And that I forget to sew my twin's mouth shut with a buzzard's needle
They don't believe that I have the memory of a fish
And that I kiss everything unwittingly.
They don't believe that the route through my mind is short
But my steps remain the same steps.
They don't believe that the sky is just a plain above us,
Where only the birds make their home.
They don't believe that my memories are also dreams,
Like everything pleasing.
They don't believe that we drape thousands of worn-seamed dresses
Over my homeland
And that we fling the patches off our faces.
They don't believe that our children faint
And that all we do is draw a cross on their foreheads.
They don't believe that our children were spellbound by whirling spindles
And that we recited prayers for them to heal.
They don't believe that we crushed the grapes made of wishes
And that every night we drank them against the sound of darkness.
They don't believe that my leaf has fallen from the tree,
And that the street's mouth is choked with leaves.

Xoşman Qado

Translated from the Kurmanji by Shook and Zêdan Xelef

They don't believe that freedom is my childhood toys
And that those toys have been broken.
They don't believe that man is a new landscape
And that only love can beautify it.
They don't believe that Şakiro is the king of singers
And that he beckons cranes back from the sky.
They don't believe that our faces can be darkened without soot,
And that I'm no exception in my homeland's sun.
They don't believe that I only want to live.

Translated from the Kazakh by Mirgul Kali

Baqytgul Sarmekova

The Black Colt

Embarrassed of being deaf in one ear, he worried about missing out on things and had a habit of nodding and giggling whenever anyone twitched their lips, prompting some to wonder if he was soft in the head. The harsh glare of a stranger's eye made him uncomfortable, and he'd fidget and tousle his hair, which was sprinkled with gray strands that had crept in too early for his age. Especially when a woman came near him, Turar would start blinking, get all red and sweaty, then turn white as a sheet, all the while grinning awkwardly and baring his tobacco-stained teeth. Some of the more brazen women in our aul had taken note of this and would tease him by pinching his side or brushing against him with their breasts, plump and quivering like intestines filled with sour cream, as they walked by. In those moments, one couldn't help but feel pity for Turar.

Wishing to pluck this Turar out of the wicked women's claws, my grandfather decided to introduce him to Zharbagul, his wife's younger sister. He instructed my grandmother to cook the salt-cured meat left over from the winter, mounted his three-wheeled motorcycle, and drove off to town to fetch Zharbagul. Turar grew very thoughtful, and we sensed his heart stirring as we watched the ash at the end of his cigarette reach the length of a finger.

My grandfather returned with Zharbagul, whose bucket-shaped head bobbed in his motorcycle's sidecar as they rode down the bumpy road. It was the first time we had met our aunty who had thin pigtails attached to her huge head and whose dark, rough, trowel-shaped face and stumpy legs were a strange match with her wire earrings and lacy, ruffled dress.

The grin didn't leave Turar's lips until the meal was over. He blinked and nodded to every word. Clustered near the door, we entertained ourselves by watching Turar's every move. At one point, everyone marched out of the house: my grandfather went to check on the cows, my grandmother hurried to drain the curd, and the women headed toward their homes to catch a movie. They dragged along their kids who, like us, had been playing out in the front yard.

When evening came, Zharbagul got ready to go home. My grandfather kicked the pedal, starting the motorcycle. Zharbagul's twig-like pigtails slapped against her monstrous back as they rode away. Still grinning, Turar squeezed a cigarette between his yellow-stained teeth and announced, "We're going to have a toi!"

The next day, someone brought a colt and tied him to a tree in our front yard. It was Turar's gift to my grandfather for helping him find the love of his life, Zharbagul. My grandfather who'd raised cows all his life was overjoyed. All of a sudden, he was busy brushing the colt's mane and braiding a lucky red string into it, having horse tack made, and ordering sackfuls of oats from town. Cows were all he'd ever known, but now, whenever he got together with other old geezers, he talked at length about the care and training of horses. He began to sound like someone who owned hundreds of horses. "Did you make sure there's enough water?" "Have you checked the hobble?" "See to it that the mice don't chew through the oat bags." "By fall, he'll be old enough to saddle up and take out for a ride," he'd say and begin to count the days. The colt was indeed a beautiful animal. We couldn't help but stare at him in awe, though he'd whinny at our approach and look askance at us, his nostrils flared, his ears flicking, his forelock flying in the breeze. We named him Qarager.

After Zharbagul visited a few more times, the preparations for the wedding toi began in earnest. My grandmother started beating fleece for new körpe mats for Zharbagul's dowry, and the women scoured local markets for fabric to decorate them with. Turar's family got busy sprucing up their house and repainting the windows and doors.

Then, on a wet summer day, while driving the sheep toward the aul, Turar stepped carelessly on the broken end of a downed power line and died, his body burned to a crisp. The adults who had gone to look at his body said, "He was grinning ear to ear when he passed on to the Great Beyond." No one knew if he was beaming at the thought of his beloved Zharbagul or grimacing in pain when the fatal charge struck.

It wasn't the thirty-year-old Zharbagul's destiny after all to sing the bride's farewell to her family. She came by to pay her respects, and as she whimpered quietly, her translucent tears left wet traces on her rough-hewn face.

When the commotion caused by Turar's death quieted down, his brother Sailau showed up in our front yard with a rope in his hand.

"I've come to take the colt, Qabeke!" he said. He must have prepared for this moment because his voice came out rather loud and firm.

"Which colt?" my grandfather stared at him with the look of a man whose pastures were teeming with herds of horses. His hat tilted back disdainfully as he looked up at Sailau.

"The colt is ours. I never heard Turar say that he was giving it to you," Sailau said, spitting loudly to the side.

The startled old man stared at the frothy spittle on the ground, then back at Sailau.

"I'm not giving Qarager back," he said bluntly.

"Then I'll see you in court," was Sailau's response.

After that, my grandfather fell into the habit of sighing wearily whenever he stroked Qarager's mane with the red string woven into it. By then, the colt had put on some weight and turned into a shapely, long-limbed horse.

When a court summons came, my grandfather started his motorcycle and rode to town, the brim of his hat bending defiantly backwards in the wind.

No notes or gift deeds had been exchanged between him and the colt's owner Turar, who must have been grinning down upon Qabeke from heaven. At the court hearing, finding himself backed into a corner, my grandfather said: "I spared no expense in raising this colt. I bought feed, I spent time, I exerted myself. He was a foal when I got him, and now he's a yearling colt with a fine mane and tail. I want my expenses paid."

"The colt goes to Sailau, and Qabeke's expenses are to be tallied up and reimbursed," said the judge, bringing the gavel down.

Back at home, the sullen old man tried to comfort himself by reminding us, "The judge himself said to pay Qabeke's expenses back." Sitting at the dinner table, he drawled the words in a singsong manner, and they did seem to cheer him up.

With the court order in one hand and a rope in the other, Sailau came striding into our front yard again. The front brim of my grandfather's brown hat didn't rise this time. He lowered his eyes and didn't say a word.

Qarager's mane and tail rustled in the wind and his hoofs clattered on the dry, white ground as Sailau led him away. Only when the sound of hoofbeats faded, my grandfather lifted his head and murmured, "If we could take him to the ambler race next year, he'd win a prize."

Soon enough, Sailau showed up again, holding the same piece of paper in one hand and leading Qarager by the rope with the other. My grandfather's hat tilted up as he stared at him in astonishment. Sailau proceeded to remove four bags of feed from the colt's back and, raising a cloud of dust, dropped them by the door.

"These are for your material expenses, and the rest is here," he said as he handed my grandfather a carefully sealed envelope retrieved from his shirt pocket. Then he walked away with the unburdened Qarager. When the old man's brown hat began convulsing as he abruptly stood up, we thought he'd sprint to catch up with Sailau and, after lashing him with a whip, jump on Qarager and gallop away into the barren steppe. But we were wrong. He went over to his wife, whose white headscarf blended with the gray smoke from the outdoor cook stove where she was busying herself, pushed her away, and threw Sailau's envelope onto the glowing dung embers. He then walked to the bags with feed and after gazing at them thoughtfully for a moment, said: "Take them to the cow shed." Then he went into the house.

Translated from the Nepali by Muna Gurung

Sulochana

Birth

Knowledge was born from night's womb
and from the same womb
came light

Unknowable night
stretching into darkness,

what else
are you trying to bring to life?

Sulochana

Translated from the Nepali by Muna Gurung

Property

Night—
my ancestral inheritance, my birthright

Shall I cover myself with it or lie on it?
Shall I look upon it as a mirror or a field?
Shall I hold it in my heart or scatter it?
Shall I surrender to night's embrace
or play with it until I'm sated?

My night is without a deed,
it cannot be given to another
it is the land in which I feel free
it is the land I can call my own

Sulochana
Translated from the Nepali by Muna Gurung

Sleep (1)

I want to sleep again
to dream a new dream
night
return what you have taken from me

Sulochana

Translated from the Nepali by Muna Gurung

Kingdom of Dogs

Night has spread
into darkness.
Dogs continue barking

Is this not a kingdom of dogs?
I touch myself
It seems I still have a human heartbeat
inside me

Translated from the Vietnamese by Kaitlin Rees

Nhã Thuyên

flapping from where the wings

the road to Hồ market pulses a warm earth smell up from hard falling rain on this Twelfth Month, interminable, this stranger stumbling along, fingers bleary with rain, feet squishing with mud, my steps here pulled forth by some line of poetry out of time, showing up to market on an off-peak day, take it you're from somewhere or other place eh little lady, how about the old ferry is it still coming around these days Gramp, thanks to Google i know this stretch of the levee once held a ferry crossing, not since that bridge's finished no one's been calling on any more ferryman, so how long've you been here whittling chopsticks then Gramp, i get a flash of the old man from some tale long ago told, a ballad whose poetic line has since dropped out of time, and now, all things that once were now a different tale, all mistakes that once were now a different tale, all times that once upon ago are now only a tale of mistakes, wind nuzzles into the stall's thatched roof in this market under the levee keeping for ages the thousands of buying and selling steps in its mute grounds, wind threads the purpled veins of shiny brown hands aged and whittling away, wind blushes a rosiness into paper-thin skin who knows when will be young again, wind crawls along the grain of bamboo, older the bamboo better the stick, village bamboo, hand split, soaked, and whittled each stick, must be fifty years i've been here, must be a thousand markets i've seen, though handmade's never as even as machinemade isn't that so Gramp, and with the bamboo hedging our levee lately thinning out, i chat away as if having memorized every last corner of the levee, every grassy bank, every clutch of bamboo, these baby steps of reacquainting feet, so how long've you been away miss, me oh just here and there but nearly vanished from view, so how bout i take you round to all your old spots then, the brother driving a xe ôm who calls himself the rambling Chu Du is perched on his moto beneath a sea-almond tree whose sinewy branches pierce the thatched roof as he wedges himself into conversation, doesn't know my steps aren't the retracing kind, doesn't know that here all paths i roam for the first time, just fill up my tank and belly that's enough, the sister selling drinks down the way passes brother xe ôm a hot cup of green tea to place in my hands, in my hands i roll the steaming cup

having passed now between how many hands, its fragrant breath meets my eyes, so what's the little lady planning to buy at the market here, i don't know what to buy, what can be bought, what is possible to buy, this cup of green tea for three thousand đồng who would call that shopping, thick in the market unknown faces alchemize familiar, thick in the market i breathe in a human air, thick in the market i contract a homeland's contagious air, thick in the market i hallucinate a grandpa a grandma an auntie an uncle a sister a brother, thick in the market i crave dressing up in the roots of family trees planted in villages i pass through on Việt soil with my Việt utterances unlocalized not disclosing an origin, my North Việt homeland full of cities within villages, villages within cities, any village behind clutches of bamboo is so, when blood sheds the skin turns pale, as i dress up in the interlacing roots of Kambuja Mranma Siam Muang Lao Southern Waters Fragrant Harbor Philip's Land Oman Ayra Singapura Melayu Land Nippon Koryŏ and my Greater Việt of the Peaceful South with an English voice neither British nor American, my Asian homeland where every place murmurs its intimate and strange vernaculars, recognizing each other even when divided by speech, any country behind its border seems so, all are relatives born from the same sac of one hundred eggs, when blood sheds the skin turns pale, i pluck at random roots of a family tree to relieve the pitied fate of having strayed, taking a pair of serving chopsticks that the Grampa here displays on his flax blanket, stroking them, my body abruptly aches, for the serving sticks that were my grandma, my mom, the serving sticks at the head of the pot, waiting until the last bites, pronouncing fairness at the gathering tray, counting the number of mouths, conceding to ravenous kids, sharing with old folks, bearing hunger, seeking a beloved thousands of miles away, was he just glancing up at me in amusement or simply continuing to work his busy hands, older the bamboo better the stick you know miss, the more you use'm the better their complexion, i look to the levee, someone on the distant bank stumbles along, rain stumbles down falling on hair, saturating hands, blurring face, the levee bamboo lately thinning out, what do i plan to buy at this market, don't know what to buy, what can be bought, what is possible to buy, what is possible to carry with these stumbling steps that keep taking me who knows where, afraid anything i carry will be heavy, i look down at the old fingers, follow the grain of bamboo

shaping the chopstick, must be more'n fifty years already, must be i've seen to the sticks that feed countless couples of the village, i get a flash of the man from some tale long ago told, a ballad whose poetic line has dropped out of time, and now, all things that once were now a different tale, all mistakes that once were now a different tale, all times that once upon ago are now only a tale of mistakes, i rev with inarticulate babble, Gramp you're that guy that young peasant from the old fairy tale who has to find a bamboo tree one hundred segments long to whittle all the village's chopsticks so he can marry the rich man's daughter, the old man peels back a black-toothed smile, i don't want to give in to the quiver of nostalgia, i fear decorating happy couples with tragic dreams, what do i plan to buy here, what is possible to buy here trudging along this stumbling road in search of the market, the market road of earthy rain interminably falling, the road home just as interminable, i've strayed from home, forgotten the illusion of enveloping harmony, forgotten how it was with mom at my side, forgotten her old serving sticks, forgotten to teach the little ones how to count people, count chopsticks, forgotten to teach the little ones the hundreds of rules that mom of the rice paddies drilled into my first tale of life beside her tray, remember that chopsticks come in pairs, that chopsticks don't stand alone, remember to measure them so they match, that eating sticks are not to be shared, remember to sit with enough space between so you don't clatter with your neighbor, those first fumbling lessons of holding the sticks, the lesson to eat like a bird, so the belly knows hunger, so the mouth knows taste, so the hands know to place which pieces on your beloved's plate, so the eyes know the good match, chopsticks are a testament of a person's heart, the road back to a tale of childhood just as interminable, i've strayed from home, forgotten the illusion, forgotten how it was with mom at my side, forgotten her old serving sticks, older the bamboo better the sticks, the voice of the old Grampa is bleary in the hard falling rain, surely all the chopsticks you've whittled in your life would add up to a tree of a hundred segments though, his leisurely jaw reveals the black of his few remaining teeth, must be more'n a hundred little lady, but the question is who's gonna whittle the sticks for my funeral, my body abruptly aches, i'd forgotten how my eldest brother whittled in haste the pair of flowering chopsticks for dad's funeral bowl of rice and egg, the chopsticks stumble in my hands again,

again in my first tale of life, i descend the channels of mom into life, i descend the channels of life with mom no longer at my side, the road anywhere interminable all the same, unnerved by those tragic dreams, i resist the quiver of nostalgia, i should buy some thing, should pay for some thing, should carry along some thing, ten pairs of bamboo chopsticks for fifteen thousand đồng who would call that shopping, ten pairs of bamboo chopsticks perhaps just to be burdened by one more useless drop out of time, but i should buy some thing, just to snip the cord and leave this market under the levee, should be able to pick myself up, should flap the wings to some other village, a different region of strange and intimate vernaculars, should let myself be dragged along by some line of poetry out of time lost in a different tale, a different tale, a different mistake, to pluck the roots of a different family tree, a different interlacing of relatives, i undulate, is the bundle too heavy to carry, where the intertwining dreams, where the roof covers, where the firewood accumulates, a shared pot of rice, where childhood's tale, where the homecoming day beside mom's rice tray, how long have i strayed from this place, i get a flash of myself from a tale long ago told, a ballad whose poetic line has since dropped out of time, and now, all things that once were now a different tale, all mistakes that once were now a different tale, all times that once upon ago are now only a tale of mistakes, the wind gasps over the levee, this stranger stumbling along, the bleary wet fingers slip into squishy earth, rain you are there hard falling on the right bank, blinding mist on the left, a pale white length of curtain unfurls across golden green patches of plants otherworldly in this season of buds in their nurturing brown cases, season of newborn worms rolling in the womb of a damp earth, of orphaned souls who alchemize familiar, of souls who contract the warm airs of incense, of souls who breathe in a contagious human air, floating in aimless anxious hope for a homeland, creatures living and dead as blood sheds the skin turns pale, how long have i been flying, my flapping wings above the levee panicked in the fierce wind falling rain, through lonely villages, hamlets, towns, my flapping wings bleary in rain, undulating in wind, my mud splattered wings coated in slippery cold, my slowing collapsing wings, a worm burrows into earth, sprouted grass vigils over the grave, as if just passing a dock, as if there's a ferryman still holding out for someone to want to cross a river

Kantan Chamorrita 1–5

kantan chamorrita[1] *#1 (for hiding love from others)*

ya malago' yu na hu tungo'
manu nai gaige piniti-mu;
kao i trongkon korason-mu,
pat i pintan babli-mu

//

i would like to know where
you store your love pains
at the pit of your heart?
at the ends of your lashes?

i'm cratered wall
all limestone and stubbornness
this love is big and hurts
but it is my burden alone

//

((for hiding from myself))

and i'm still
falling
fading into
waves' foam

and nobody told me
how to love
only how not
to die

[1] Kantan Chamorrita is an ancient style of improvised rhyming "debate" indigenous to the Chamoru natives of the Mariana Islands, comparable to modern-day "battle rapping" or poetry slams. Two opponents would throw out four lines of verse back and forth in a competition of poetic interplay.

still in my pit
in my rigid
core i'm still
waiting for you

but i can't
love you
i can't even
love myself

kantan chamorrita : #2 (for the chains i break free from)

yanggen lulok bai hu hulok,
an kadena bai desåse.
bai atotga bumusero
yanggen gaige hao fondon tåse.

//

give me iron and watch me break it
chain me and watch it come undone
i'm a dared diver roaming
find me free at the bottom

i will master your trials
move heaven and earth to make way
i will find what you've hidden
search each end of the world

//

you better have
better weapons than iron
for i am fire
and you
have kept me long enough

kantan chamorrita : #3 (for the children who rot away, slowly)

an tumåtånges i patgon
nå'e na'-ña entot tupu.
yanggen sige ha' de tumånges,
håtsa hulo' ya un na' susu.

//

when tears fall from your children
plump their gums with sugar cane
cushion their fears / make them feel love again
offer them everything / your bosom as comfort

when the waves rage we cry
tears soften into your ocean of arms
will morning follow night?
does a mother rage when provoked?

//

((sugar king park, saipan))

there seems to be a trend in thievery
a reaping of sacred lands hands in the
dirt harvesting crops and hearts and other things
and we lost so many lives to outsiders thinking
they know better and now our children have cavities and

we spent too many years numbing their pain
goddamn sugar cane goddamn sugar cane
come cry in nana's bosom child come listen to the waves
fall asleep and i'll rage i'll question the moon
when i give my child to the sea what will come of her?

kantan chamorrita : #4 (for fishing)

ti gumadi yu' put ti'ao
na gumadi yu' put hagu
an' chumefla yu' tres biahi
yute' gadi ya'un falagu.

//

i'm not fishing for small fish
net cast wide as the sea
count to three wade whistle wait
someone will come for me

who's to say you'll be found
who's to say anything is out there
come to terms, come to your senses
come feel the island air on you

//

oh to
feel
the tide
against
my toes

to know
in my
heart
there is
someone

//

there's beauty in thought
you think over
and over to yourself:
here is where love can live

withstand the waves restore the sea
sometimes you forget the tide takes
more than it gives

kantan chamorrita : #5 (for places we've never been but dream of going once we die)

ma susede un desgråsia
as malilok na lugåt.
ya ti ilek-ho na ti un måtai,
na un måtai naturåt.

//

have you heard of the misfortune
at a place called malilok?
i never said you would never die
only that death would come naturally

a soul transformed
a life of storms
you should know by now
everything dies

//

like the new tide
there then gone
and malilok
was my last sight

a beauty to behold
for the last time
i let the water carry me softly
deliver me
to the light

//

there's always something
grinding its way to my death

//

((returning))

returning
back to myself

returning home
it's been a long
time gone

it's been many lives

clawing flesh
breaking skin
raging to be

more than memory

and i am many lives

and each day
i write a new poem
study a new ache

my body
a graveyard
a familial obligation
a way of translating

what it means
when they say

it's not over until it's over

Translated from the Arabic by the author

Sinan Antoon

The Saz Player

His undulating voice
mimics the distant topography
on the slopes of that village

he left behind
His fingers argue with the strings
Rephrasing the same questions

Was his village flooded
by blood?
Or wiped off the map by a state?

His voice calls out
to a stray horse
which is the untamable agony
inhabiting every form

A bird that lost its nest
has been building a nest of thorns
for years now
in the singer's throat
where it sleeps alone

A bird now hungry as the deer
that survived the massacre
and hid in the singer's memory

The song is hungry
looking for a morsel of bread
But the entire scene
means very little for tourists

Sinan Antoon
Translated from the Arabic by the author

Wind

A wind died
No one, and nothing, wept for it
Nor did another wind carry it
Its corpse stayed there
Until a flock of migrating birds
It had once carried
Saw it
They circled seven times
Then carried the wind
And flew
Looking for a cemetery

Sinan Antoon
Translated from the Arabic by the author

Smoke

He stares into the void
Or that's what we thought
But he says he can see his hometown
Burning in the horizon
And he's waiting for its smoke
It'll take refuge in his eyes
At night
After it crosses the ocean

Translated from the Turkmen by Orhan Elmaz and Zohra Saed

Annasoltan Kekilov

Prologue to *Collapsed Star*

I head out on a path, not alone.
Time takes each step with me.
My land with secrets collected in its chest
is ready to reveal its stories.

Even if the stories gathered here
Try to hold onto my naive heart
never will I turn back from this long journey—
even if left alone with my grey hairs.

Even though I will die, time will not, it will live,
Even though I will die, generations will not, they will live.
If one were to remember me fondly,
I will be content with this life—
for then I live, live!

Annasoltan Kekilov
Translated from the Turkmen by Orhan Elmaz and Zohra Saed

Longings

I rest in sweet sleep
Life gently rocks me in its cradle.
With me lies longing.
I tuck my feelings in its wide embrace—

Sometimes it kisses, sometimes it presses me close.
Longing teases me at night.
Powers bend to the wind,
Mother—we set off in the morning.

A voice binds me in its melody
echoing in my heart—
I listen full of want.

We spend every day on this journey.
Longing, my eternal companion:
I become through you.

I create with you.
Hope brims, overflows from you.
From one destination to another
we move together.

Translated from the Telugu by Nitya Rayapati

Joopaka Subhadra

Sing Sister Sing

Sing sister sing of the village
wake the fading dula song
the disappearing kolatam dance
couple them with the Bathukamma song
Sing memories of the motherland's corn
why hesitate
nothing will stop your song now
Sing the ponds of sweet experiences
that painted green fields on the motherland's feet
Sing the vicious cycle
from hunger harvests to suicide markets,
hearts wrung by tractor fangs
appeasing Terminators, breeding high-tech
cutting the dot-com crops of computers
Sing the World Bank's schemes
"Nothing is available free of cost"
the village mother's lifeblood of trees and forests
rivers and streams, soil and dust
drylands and swamps, fire and water, cattle, fodder, feed
everything, everything stamped with patents
values voted at auction
Sing the motherland's cries today
her house looted by thieves
walls left burnt and bare
Now sing the fairy tales of multinationals
releasing an obesity of pesticides
grafting corporate agriculture's skin
making the village mother a high-tech syndrome mom
Because for harbors, swelling streams, and rising tides
cool breezes, moonlit nights, and warm sunlight
and finally even for your color green
a patent could arrive, be careful

Becky Hagenston

The Participants

The first time she appeared in our Zoom we could see a long dark hallway stretching out behind her. "It's nice to see you, Laura!" said Janice. We waved. Laura waved. "Your house looks so clean," said Edie, then winced and re-muted herself. Behind Laura, the hallway was a throat, a portal, a metaphor for what her life was like now. Maybe she was trying to tell us something. Or she wasn't. Of course, we couldn't ask. Could we?

Whose idea was it to invite her anyway? Not that it was a problem. Not that we didn't want her there.

We talked about our kids, our pets, our gardens, our jobs, our online shopping, our offline shopping. There were five of us, in two time zones. For the past three weeks there had been four of us, and we'd talked about our kids, our pets, our gardens, our jobs, our online shopping, our offline shopping. So nothing was really different, now that Laura was here, staring at us with annoyance—or no, that was just her face. In college we'd think she was mad at us, and then she'd say something like, "Shaun still has some weed, you guys," and we'd realize she wasn't pissed off at all. That was just the expression she made when she was thinking. What was she thinking about now? We didn't ask.

(But seriously, who had sent her the link? Not that it mattered.)

During that first meeting, she didn't say a word. She sipped something clear from a glass. (Water? Vodka? We remembered how she would do shots of Cuervo, stagger to the bathroom to puke and then return to the party, glassy-eyed, saying, "What'd I miss?") Once, during that first Zoom, she got up and walked down the hall and vanished into the darkness for so long that we wondered if she was coming back. One of us murmured, "I may need to make dinner soon," but then Laura returned and we kept on talking for another hour. By talking I mean that we spoke very loudly and retold some of the stories we'd already told over the past three weeks and pretended this was the first time we'd told them. We talked about the neighbor's dog that scooted his butt up our driveway. He left skid marks! We laughed, like we hadn't already heard this. We talked about the

asshole in Kroger with his mask around his chin, about our wilted tomato plants, our new stationary bicycles.

Laura regarded us calmly, sipping whatever she was sipping.

Someone said, "Geez, I really do need to make dinner," and we said, "Oh, boy, look at the time, we have to go, too. Okay, see you next Sunday! Bye! Bye!" and waved. Laura didn't wave.

A half hour later, the person who had hosted the meeting texted: That was fun seeing Laura, right? And no one could figure out what she meant so we didn't text back.

The next week, Laura had set up her computer in the kitchen. Oh, thank goodness, the kitchen! No dark hallway. Just the microwave behind her, a stainless-steel refrigerator, sink, azure backsplash. Some of us remembered being in that kitchen two months earlier, bringing casseroles and condolences. Some of us remembered hugging her in that kitchen, while people in dark suits and dresses milled about and asked if there was anything they could do and by the way, where was the bathroom.

"Laura, I'm jealous of your backsplash," Nancy said, and Laura said, "Thanks." That's all she said for the entire—was it really three hours? Our calls normally lasted an hour; we had things to do, meals to cook, pets to walk, kids to feed, papers to grade, appointments to make, online bills to pay, parents to check up on. Our lives were busy busy busy, even with all this bullshit, even with the things we *couldn't* do now, it seemed like there was *more* to do, why was that? But Sunday evenings: now there was something to look forward to, a mini-reunion, whose idea was it? We couldn't even remember. College was thirty years ago, but we were still young, hell yeah.

We talked about where we would go when we could go somewhere. Disney World? Or what about a cruise to Alaska, see the ice before it's gone forever.

Or no: Let's all meet up in Vegas, baby. We raised our glasses to Vegas, baby. One of us had stopped drinking two decades ago after almost killing a family in a drunk driving accident, so she toasted with orange juice. Janice said she would go anywhere, she just wanted to get the hell away from her family and be *alone* for one goddamn minute.

Oh, did she really just say that? Laura's expression didn't change. None of our expressions changed, but Nancy changed the subject to how many *delivery* trucks there were these days, were there always so many *delivery* trucks? Is anybody getting food delivered, is anybody doing take-out?

We were getting take-out! We talked about take-out. We talked about take-out for another full hour, that's how much we had to say about it. We wondered if we should ask Laura if she also got take-out, but no, what a terrible topic of conversation this was, we couldn't even bear to think about it—calling up a restaurant? Ordering *one* meal? Or worse, ordering two, eating both alone. Dear God, it was too horrible, and so one of us finally said, "Geez, I really do have to go make dinner." And we logged off bye-bye-bye-bye as fast as we could.

Was that okay? Nancy texted, and we texted back, Of course, thumbs-up, smiley face.

Because we'd all gone to the same liberal arts college we felt safe talking about politics, safe enough that we didn't really have to talk about them at all. Yes, we marched; yes, we were outraged, of course, of course. One of us had a neighbor with one of *those* signs in their yard. "Just one neighbor?" said Michelle. "I'm fucking surrounded." She lit a cigarette. A cigarette! "I know, I know," she said. "But I'm outside, whatever." We could see a magnolia tree behind her, a wooden fence. "Marlboro Lights. Remember those?"

We did remember. We remembered so well that we took a collective deep breath. Except Laura, who had gotten up and was out of the frame. Did she even see Michelle's cigarette? We tried to remember what had happened, if it had been a kind of cancer. Fuck fuck fuck, it *had* been a kind of cancer. We watched Michelle's eyes go wide, watched her move the cigarette out of camera range.

Who was watching what on Netflix? We talked about the funny things we were watching. Remember watching *Pee Wee's Playhouse* hungover on Saturday mornings? All of us crammed into Nancy's room while her roommate was asleep on the top bunk with some guy, and he'd jump down and scratch his balls and we'd just laugh and laugh, remember? Oh, God, that was funny, whatever happened to her? Not that we cared. We didn't go to reunions.

Well, one of us had gone to a few reunions. And one of us, she hated to say it, one of us didn't actually vote for him, no way, but she could understand—I mean, what were the other options? Not that she'd vote for him now. But you know.

Laura was eating what looked like a bowl of Fruity Pebbles. She was hunched over at her kitchen table, concentrating as hard as she did when she made us a bong out of an apple core. Just spooning cereal into her mouth. She was not, thank God, in her bathrobe—we don't know what we would have done if we'd seen that. She was wearing actual clothes. Even, it seemed, make-up. Her hair was brushed. She was clearly fine—or going to be fine.

"How are you doing, Laura?" said someone. "I think maybe I'll make cereal for dinner, too."

Laura nodded. Gave us a thumbs up.

See? She was fine.

"Speaking of which," said Janice.

"Geez," said Edie. "I guess it's time to make some dinner for the hungry masses. I wish the hungry masses could make dinner for themselves!"

Later, she texted: Shit, I wish I hadn't said that about feeding the masses, you know? Was that bad?

And we texted a smiley face, smiley face, thumbs up.

Every week—was this terrible?—every week we thought: Well, maybe she won't log on. Maybe she's out doing something. (Yeah, right, like any of us were out doing something.) Maybe one of her kids had come to visit. Did she have kids? No, that's right, she didn't have kids. Maybe she was sick of hearing us talk about our kids and our online shopping and offline shopping, and all that pot we used to smoke, and that time—remember that time?—when Edie threw up on that guy! And then married him! Or no, no, we weren't going to talk about that, about getting married. Only one of us had gone to Laura's wedding, twenty years ago, or however many years. We'd drifted apart, in those pre-social-media days. One of us drifted to France and back; one of us drifted through two husbands before falling in love with a woman she was now married to, not that we were going to mention marriage, or weddings, or how come three of us went to that wedding and only one of us to Laura's?

Sometimes she logged on from her bedroom; behind her we could see the neatly-made bed, or sometimes it wasn't made, and we could see the place where she slept, the dented pillow and the not-dented one, and we tried not to look at that bed as we talked about our kids' teachers and our bosses and did everyone know there was an *app* for Pilates?

Michelle was smoking all the time now, indoors. We could see an open window behind her, the leafless trees in her yard. Sometimes she looked up from the screen and yelled, "I'm in here! Leave me alone! It's Sunday!" and then rolled her eyes and said, "He fucking knows what day it is." Edie had three kids at home, and one of them was driving—that's what happens when you give a kid an Audi for her sixteenth birthday! Driving and not coming home and not answering texts and not saying who she was spending time with. We'd forgotten that Edie was rich. We'd forgotten how much that annoyed us.

Nancy's husband wanted to try some really fucked up sex things. Ropes and whips and shit like that. We held our breath. But it seemed okay, to mention a

husband when you were saying how crazy he was, how he wanted to baby-talk to you while spanking you. We laughed, we couldn't help it. We watched Laura's face: was she laughing on the inside? How long until you could laugh on the inside? "I don't know what the hell he's watching on the YouTube," said Nancy. "Ever since he lost his job, he's just not right in the head." She poured herself another drink.

Janice was having an affair with a married man from her office; they had sex in the backseat of his Subaru Outback. "At least it's not a Volkswagen Rabbit," said Edie, because we all knew about Janice getting pregnant in a Volkswagen Rabbit; we knew about the abortion, we remembered making kill-the-rabbit jokes. Were we awful people in college? Were we awful people now? But anyway—a Subaru! That's not very hygienic, we said, and Janice said, "Yeah, I know. But at least we wear masks." We didn't know if she was kidding or not.

Laura raised her eyebrows. She wasn't judgmental, that was the thing about Laura. She'd been our RA freshman year and didn't report Janice for getting so drunk she peed in the closet.

"I mean, I know it's not ideal. It's just for now," Janice said. "I don't want to do this for the rest of my life."

Afterward, Janice texted: Fuck fuck fuck, I can't believe I said rest of my LIFE. And only one of us bothered to text back a thumbs up.

And it wasn't that Laura said nothing. Sometimes she talked about her online shopping and her offline shopping or the things she was watching on Netflix. In mid-October, she said: "How long can this go on?" She was in her living room; the curtains were open to the darkness outside. Was she just sitting there with her curtains open, for everyone to see? Some of us remembered being in that living room, murmuring so sorry, we're here for you, and then we went out to our cars and drove home to our own lives.

We said, "There'll be a vaccine soon."

We said, "He'll get voted out of office."

We said, "Do y'all have Disney Plus? You should get Disney Plus! The nature shows! So good!"

And we talked about nature shows for another hour. Wildebeest and meerkats and whales. Michelle bobbed out of the camera to snort some cocaine she was buying from a guy on her street—how weird, that *now* we get to know our neighbors. "Yeah," she said. "I love those whales."

By the middle of November we had seen all the rooms of Laura's house: the dining room, with its china cabinet of silver and fancy plates; the basement, with its big screen TV, its posters of places we'd never been; and the bedroom—oh, God, the bedroom, with its pillows and wedding pictures, the bed behind her, the new green dust ruffle, the matching bedside tables.

We went on a two-hour tear about crazy neighbors when we saw that new dust ruffle—our crazy neighbor with those signs still in his yard, the crazy neighbor with the cocaine and the barking dog, the crazy guy who knocked on the door and said he was lost, then hey, remember that time we all got lost on the way to that New Potato Caboose show in Philly? And just ended up in a Denny's all night? Remember?

One of us said: "Was I there? That doesn't sound familiar," and we said, "Of course!" though actually, we weren't sure. We were starting to remember things we'd forgotten—like when two of us got an apartment senior year and then had a screaming fight and finally stopped speaking for weeks, or was it months? When one of us slept with another one's boyfriend. And one of us hadn't actually *graduated* from college, per se. Well, none of that mattered now. What mattered was that we had reconnected and that we were still close, still had so much in common, cheers to that!

Laura got up and left us with a view of her unmade bed, that open wound of a bed, and was that an indent in *both* pillows? Which meant—? We couldn't imagine

what it might mean. When she came back she said, "Yeah, I remember Denny's, that was fun."

Did it mean she was sleeping on both sides of the bed? On her side part of the night, then switching? Did she wake up in the place where he had slept, looking over at the emptiness on her side because it was better than seeing the emptiness on his? And how was she sleeping, anyway? Because us? We weren't sleeping very well. We woke up at three in the morning, sweating. We heard strange thumps in the night and prodded our partners awake and they said they heard nothing. Our pets were restless, peeing in corners, tearing the furniture to shreds. Our children were spiraling into places we couldn't follow; one of them posted a TikTok that went viral for its stupidness, not that we brought this up.

Or did it mean she'd found someone else? Another head for the pillow?

"What's new, Laura?" we asked, and she said, "Just trying to get through, you know." And we said cheers to that, to getting through. Then she just sat there, and it was too much to bear—that bed, what did it mean?—so one of us said, "Oh, geez, I'd better go," and the rest of us said, "Us, too, gotta go!" And we went.

We'd lost people over the years. A father, three mothers, our grandparents all gone for decades, friends and colleagues and neighbors and classmates, beloved teachers. We'd had our own scares: breast, heart, breast. We knew that life was fragile; every damn day we read the newspapers, we read the obituaries, we knew, of course we knew; we wore a mask to Kroger and tried not to die.

"How's it going, Laura?" we asked, and she shrugged and said, "It is what it is."

Really? It was like she wasn't even trying. *We* were trying. We were also feeling like it was what it was, but we weren't going to just say that. The planet, it seemed, did not want us here, and who could blame it? We didn't say this out loud, either, and we didn't say that thinking about who we were thirty (not *thirty*?) years ago made us understand that the world we had lived in was gone, and we mourned this, even though we didn't talk about that, either, or talk about how moments from our childhoods would suddenly appear to us: trying on stiff little pants at Sears, or

riding our bicycles down honeysuckle lanes, or lying in the grass and letting the bugs crawl on our necks and arms.

We were going to talk about the holidays! Oh, the holidays. One of us—don't judge—one of us was going to get together with a couple of friends, very socially distanced. Behind Laura, a Christmas tree glowed. It was almost worse than the hallway, that glowing tree, and the silence grew as we refilled our drinks and murmured about the weather, would we get snow, or no snow, or too much snow?

"It's been so nice seeing you all every week," Laura said then. "But my Sundays are getting a little hectic."

"They are?" we said.

A shadow passed behind her—or did it? Was that laughter? Was that music? Or maybe we were imagining it.

"Geez," she said. "I think I need to make dinner." She waved, we waved, and then she was gone and we felt, yes, that a weight was lifted—now we could say all the things we'd been holding back, whatever those things were.

Our faces on the screen were bigger: dear God, did we really look like that? Our faces stared at us and we stared at our faces. Michelle's nose was running and Edie had dark circles under her eyes, Nancy had a bruise on her cheek and none of us mentioned this, and Janice was logging in from a hotel room now; we could see a beige sink behind her. "When will this end?" someone asked, and no one knew what she meant, so we said Geez, it's getting late, gotta go, bye bye bye and then it was just me, with my orange juice and my dark eye circles: would I like to end the meeting for all? I didn't know the answer to that question, but I clicked the red button.

Cass Garison

Aubade or Nocturne

There are days, here. No,
nights. Cantering moments, porphyric
patchworks stretching through a window
that I have constructed
with my mind. From memory: parapets, trellis,
post and lintel liminalities. Imagine
a light and a shadow, a glare
off the prosopos of the clock that hangs
on the walls of my cerebellum. It is eleven
I say, eleven. No, the doctor
decides, it is four, four say it again
it is four. It is four, but still it is eleven, and for that
I get a pill. This is not
about windows or the subtle arithmetic
of separation, the stark illusion of exterior.
This is about living
because there is no life without movement, no
meaning without motion: a basic metaphysical concept
that it does not help me
to know. I am no longer a body but a single eye
wrought into the torso of a tree. Recognition:
across the trusses of my limbs
a bleached towel thrown as blanket. A suspicion
of cold, but the hypothalamus does not register
sensation. Recognition: beside
the bed, trays of untouched breakfast dinner breakfast

dinner lunch dinner breakfast breakfast. Re-
cognition: a nurse follows me
to the bathroom, watches me shit like a leashed
dog. I am handed paper, a square folded over
a square over a square over
a square No, I tell her, do not watch me.
For that: another pill. Not for just that
but for other no's and the no's
that they know I will say again, say even
when I am saying yes. Antipsychotics:
I address you
like other poets address their lovers, address
their gods. I left you because you did not know me
anymore, could not know me.
I decide where my complicity lies. It is eleven.
It is four. It is eleven. It is eleven.

Alisha Dietzman

Emily

Central European sadness. Again, a city with few limes.
Home late. The second floor balcony doors still open.
Still curtains. Still lace curtains. Factory white. Pedestrian
tunnel under the road swollen with bad light,
beautiful light. Almost cinematic. New Wave.
Take the metro to the summer palace.
To the former etc. Drinking, eating fruit in the park.
Drinking in the park. *Where were you?*
Eating apricots. Attending the opening in a man's shirt.
Years later when you tell me he'd died
[the artist] there is a natural association:
you smelling like marble. Reading Thackeray on buses.
The train to Vienna in the wrong car recommending flowers
to the conductor. Mouthing *miss you*.
We kissed each other in the style of movies.
Something strong made with plums. More than once,
I wanted to be looked at, more than once.
What did he say, the American, maybe,
that you sounded exotic when you said those words.

Jeremiah

My sister calls daily to say she wants to kill a woman; says she's driven
by her house *with vision*. I like bad ideas. A good car
I know by color. I hear two people cry that summer, only,
one through the drywall like a cat.

When I look out the window at night I worry I am looking right at someone I can't see.

Eric Kocher

The High Life

There's a champagne of everything.
My wife would likely say hydrangeas
are the champagne of plants,
that they effervesce.

On the leaves of one she planted
the other week in front of our house
now lives a praying mantis
who seems to be the plant's guardian.

Perhaps, the champagne of guarding
plants. There's so much lore
around the mantis—I remember,
when I was a kid, thinking it was illegal

to kill one, that somehow
among all our unspeakable acts,
removing this insect from the earth
was counted with the punishable,

the champagne of internalizing
codification. Although, to be fair,
when I was a child, I also assumed
I would meet a lot more people

who had birds as pets, the champagne
of pets. Later, in high school, I pressed
an alka-seltzer into a candy bar
and fed it to a seagull which I thought

would impress my friends.
As we watched it struggle
to fly away, dropping suddenly
like a plane in turbulence, regaining

composure, dropping again,
I knew myself as an agent of pure
senselessness, a story I told to myself
to pass the time. There's a champagne

of self-pity, sure, but there's also
a champagne of regret. A great way
to alienate yourself from everyone
you know is to tell them

that you don't think that you, or they,
for that matter, actually exist. Because
I am new to composting,
I keep having to fish things from the trash.

I tried to write this poem a few years ago
but I kept getting caught up
on this image that didn't really work
in which I was trying to clean our shower

using baking soda and vinegar
like I was making a volcano late one night
in my underwear. I had to look up the word
peripatetic. I had to look up the champagne

of words, which is, if you are wondering,
ok. No matter what I tried to describe
as being the champagne of X,
I kept arriving at this portrait

of me as someone who doesn't understand
how to clean a shower.
Maybe, because, in a sense, the shower
is the champagne of places, or maybe

it had something to do with volcanoes,
that the planet beneath our feet
is merely a cork just waiting to be popped,
that there is enough force, enough pressure

to someday launch us up
into the sky like birds. Or, maybe, I just
wanted to write a poem with the champagne
of endings, like trying to say something like birds.

Cat Wei

A Private Engagement

I first met the married man in the summer, when business at the consulting company was slow. We were assigned to a short term engagement that needed two consultants to travel around the country for two weeks interviewing sales reps for the corporate division of a global credit card company. I had never met the married man, but we started at the consulting company the same year. He had joined the company after business school, and I after college. We talked on the phone briefly about logistics.

You know where this is going.

At the airport in Dallas is where I first met him. I was coming out of the gate and there he was, tall and sleek, with a carbon carryon and a look of slight cockiness that was almost a sneer. It was a look I might have disdained had it not been for his round wire-rimmed glasses. At the time they suggested to me that he was some kind of intellectual, a thing I desperately wanted to be. I think this is what first warmed me to him: the glasses.

Usually the team consisted of several consultants, a manager, and a partner, but here it was just the two of us. At the time, I had been working in the consulting company for a year and a half, but it felt like much longer.

I had joined the company right out of college. When I first entered college, I thought I would work at the UN or in international relations. Instead, I followed the majority of my classmates who flocked to finance, consulting, or marketing. Finance paid the most but bonuses had been slashed since the financial crisis and it was now considered rather gauche to be pursuing that career. Consulting was the second most lucrative, but post-crisis, the most prestigious. Consultants worked on two to four month long projects as generalists, which gave them a sampling of functions and industries without having to commit to any one in particular. Consultants got to stay at nice hotels, collect airline miles and expense fancy dinners at Michelin star restaurants. And lastly, there was marketing. Marketing was a good choice if you were not smart enough to get into finance or consulting, but you were into something more creative and didn't mind the major pay cut.

Personally, I wasn't interested in any of these jobs. I wanted to feed the planet or educate girls. I wanted to talk about Kantian ethics and moral values. But I ended up accepting an offer to join the consulting firm.

On the first morning of the engagement, as we sat down for breakfast in the hotel in Dallas, the married man laid out his stance toward the job. "I'm planning to get out of here in a few months," he said matter of factly. "I want to get the job done well, but not go crazy."

This was honest. And not what I had expected. I wanted to leave the company myself, but I was scared. I had no backup plan, and I was not a risk taker. He was going to start his own business, and made leaving seem exciting.

Our mini-engagement was designed to help the partners sell a longer, much more expensive engagement to improve the sales organization's operational efficiencies. By then I had learned that the term *operational efficiency* meant cost cutting and that often, the biggest variable cost on the P&L was people.

He was socially skilled and knew how to phrase questions so as not to arouse the suspicion of the employees. "And just so you understand," he would say, "we are here to learn how to make your jobs easier." And step by step, the sales reps would walk us through the tasks in their week, and we'd separate out the high value from the low value tasks. The high value tasks would continue to be worked on by the sales team. But the low value tasks would be offshored to somewhere with cheaper labor costs. Not everyone would keep their jobs.

After the first day of interviews, we had dinner close to the hotel in Dallas. Even then, I remember feeling self conscious about the setup, how it might look in a restaurant, a man and woman dressed nicely, sitting across from each other with candles, eating oysters.

The married man had spent almost a decade in publishing before joining the consulting firm. Until now he had managed to keep himself staffed locally, so as not to disturb the cadence of life with his wife and two young children.

"This makes the work a lot harder," he remarked on the physical demands of traveling for work.

"You don't have much of a life until the weekend," I said.

"So you're basically M.I.A. from your friends and your boyfriend, or girlfriend,

or whatever," he gestured with a hand in the air, a phrase I would recall later with meaning to my responding headshake "Oh, there's nothing."

It was easy to talk to him. We spoke about literature, travel, and philosophy, topics I cared about with the same urgency the partners attributed to selling a case. He told me about how he and his wife had lived in Peru for a year. I told him about riding horses in Mongolia. He said, "How did you get such an adventurous spirit?" I laughed it off, but I was charmed.

The rest of the week filled up quickly. We'd plow through full days of meetings, regroup, and retreat to our rooms to type up notes. The constant need to prove that we were adding value never ceased to deplete my spirits. Was it not apparent from the 1 a.m. emails we sent asking for feedback on the deck? Or our 2:30 a.m. follow-ups with the requested changes? And on top of that, the need to posture, assuage, and aggrandize. This ritual felt unfamiliar and exhausted me. I had stepped out of school with a lot of vague ideas about making an impact and saving the world. Instead, I was just making slides.

I later found out that many of my fellow analysts had parents who reigned over the very types of boardrooms we consulted. And that many of them were remarkably comfortable with the kinds of verbal framings, pushbacks, and maneuvers required to be a successful consultant. I was told I needed to speak up, but I was deathly afraid of saying the wrong thing. Growing up, my parents had always admonished me for speaking up at the dinner table, and I was coming to understand that this would be a difficult pattern to unlearn. The game and dance of consulting was not natural to me. I preferred spending my days asking questions, talking about books. I preferred reading, and telling stories.

Looking back, I believe the only reason I landed the job was that I could tell stories. I regaled the partners with stories about how I increased the loan repayment rate at the microfinance company I'd volunteered at through operational changes and how much I had been energized by my banking internship building financial models the summer before. I claimed that I was results oriented and interested in working as a consulting generalist so that I could narrow down to a specialty later.

I didn't yet identify as a storyteller. But over the weekend I replayed my conversations with the married man and started thinking in earnest about what

else I might do with my life. I thought about our conversations, and I thought about his gravelly voice. *Stop it*, I told myself, then proceeded to fantasize about his touch. To distract myself, I read BuzzFeed listicles like "10 Essential Books For Sad, Young, Literary Girls" and Medium posts like "How to Follow Your Passion."

"It sounds like you already know what you want to do," said the married man the following Monday morning, as we drove from the airport to Phoenix for the second week of our engagement. "It sounds like you want to do something creative. You're just seeking permission to do it." But what did something creative mean? I didn't want to be poor and live on the streets, or wait tables wasting away my Ivy League degree. And I didn't personally know anyone who was an artist. The only girl I knew doing something creative was a classmate who majored in art history and worked in a museum. But her dad worked for JP Morgan.

Still, it was true that I had anchored my choices to other people's plans. And in the past, wherever there were choices to make between the pragmatic and impassioned I had simply not made them. I had done both. I had completed two bachelor's degrees, one in literature and one in business; and two internships, one in banking and one in corporate social responsibility. But consulting was an all-in business.

It's simple, the married man said. "Do what you want to do, don't do what you don't want to do." But what did I want to do? To want was not in my vocabulary.

When we arrived at the hotel in Phoenix we discovered that the hotel was in fact a resort. Because I had accumulated so many hotel points, I was upgraded to a suite with a balcony overlooking the green of the golf course. The married man remarked on this as we stood in the lobby after check-in and I pretended not to hear. But alone in my room, taking my first steps onto that balcony, I found a view of the sprawling green, and far beyond it, the faint purple outlines of the Phoenix Mountain Preserve. It was stunning, although I had little time to enjoy the view.

We worked intensely again all week, just like we had the previous week. But since that first evening in Dallas, we had not dined together again. I suspect we'd both felt the tug of that first night, one we both knew was dangerous. Yet on the last night of our engagement, we agreed to have dinner again to celebrate. The restaurant in the hotel came recommended.

He wore a dark navy shirt and slacks. He had his hands in his pockets and said "shall we?" The waiter seated us around a table corner. His gaze sometimes lingered a little too long.

"It's not their fault," I continued, "My parents came from nothing. They didn't have a childhood. It was the Cultural Revolution. Had it not been for a tremendously kind teacher who pulled strings to create a space for my dad, my dad wouldn't have gone to high school."

"Your dad must be really proud of you," he replied, "to have a daughter who has gone so far."

During this time, I wasn't on very good terms with my parents. I didn't return a lot of their calls because I was unhappy and resentful. I felt that I had done it all for them. I would never have studied or worked in business if it hadn't been for their insistence. "We just want you to be happy," my mother would later say, ever the revisionist historian. I knew they were conflicted too. On some occasions, my mother would say "when your dad's startup makes it big, we'll buy you an apartment in New York and then you can do whatever you want. You can write every day." When I had chosen colleges it had been between Wharton to study business, and Princeton for a liberal arts education. They didn't say I had to choose one or the other. They said the choice was up to me. I was pretty sure that I wanted to study literature and maybe international relations at the Woodrow Wilson School, but at the last minute my dad took me aside and said look, think about all the money you could make with a degree from Wharton, and once you made it, you could do anything. He didn't say I had to do anything. He just said to think about it. I saw the desperation in his eyes.

"It just never feels like it's enough," I said to the married man. Was I going to laugh in my parents' faces now and throw it all away?

"Don't worry so much," he said.

Afterwards in the elevator, I could feel my heart pounding. His floor came and he leaned in close, but pulled away at the last minute. "Good night," he said. But as he stepped out of the elevator he turned around and said "wait, what is the plan for tomorrow?" I reached an arm into the closing gap, and he inserted a foot, but the doors beeped loudly and we retracted our limbs at the last minute.

The tomb of the elevator rose higher and deposited me on my floor. Alone, I walked down the dark carpeted hallway and into my room like it was the only thing I still knew how to do. I pulled back the sliding door to the balcony and sat there in the summer breeze, remembering to breathe.

Then the text: "How's that view on your balcony?" And before I could think: "432 if you want to see it."

When I opened the door, he had his hands in his pockets. He followed me to the balcony and I stared out at the view, afraid to look at him. "See, isn't it great?" I managed before realizing that it was so dark there wasn't anything to see. I turned to him, embarrassed, and his mouth approached mine. I realized that I had been lying to myself the whole time.

The married man made me feel wild and sexy and free. He made me feel seen.

"But you're married," I managed. He put his ring on the table.

I was disappointed by the married man because I had idealized him. I felt sad wondering about his wife and children as I unbuttoned his shirt. "Do what you want to do, don't do what you don't want to do." Is this what he'd meant the whole time?

I didn't feel guilty about kissing him as much as disbelief. Affairs happened to other people, maybe in movies. Later, I found his wife's Facebook profile and lingered on it for days.

But I had also wanted to kiss the married man. To feel his hands on me. I told him that he needed to find a condom. And then I fucked the married man on the crisp white hotel sheets.

At the end of the year I left the consulting firm, but not of my own accord. I had not performed well enough to be promoted to the next level and was both upset and relieved. Had the company not released me, I don't know if I would have had the courage to leave. What I did have was a heightened sense of my body directing the steps of my life. In that moment on the balcony, I'd experienced with clarity the sound of my own wanting above the voices of all others.

"Don't do it again," my friend M said, and held my hand. I didn't want to cause any strife for his family. What had happened on that trip stayed on that trip. That's how we agreed to leave it. But I did see the married man a few more times over the

next few years. Usually in a fragile moment, he would comfort and encourage me, and then we would fuck. But for the most part, we kept our distance.

I tried my hand at many things in the years to come. And failed at an almost equal number. But slowly, I found a job I could keep. I continued to write. And I had my first publication.

It's been a few years since I've seen the married man. I thought of him because I was getting brunch with a friend uptown before we went home for Christmas. After ham, eggs, and Bloody Marys, we walked arm in arm down 5th Avenue gazing into the window displays at Bloomingdales.

I bring this up because the last time I saw the married man was around Christmas. In a coffee shop in the Flatiron district we sat in lounge chairs and caught up on our lives; his business, how it was gaining traction; my work, how I was writing. And all of a sudden he said "Do you want to see the windows at Bloomingdales?" And it seizes me with something.

For a moment, I could picture it.

In the fictional version we stroll down 5th Avenue, laughing, kissing, holding hands.

But there is a veil.

In the real version we don't have enough time and take the subway straight to my apartment where I find myself on all fours, his hands clasped to my hips.

Afterwards, he lingers for a moment, but not for long. And then I'm in the quiet and it's strangely peaceful in the dimming blue of the winter afternoon.

Mag Gabbert

The Breakup

I spend evenings at home with drawings of ethereal landscapes

evening lands
in a cape
of
raw ether
with real
wings he
pen s me in
even here

sometimes my brain feels totally scrambled
so in
my bra a ram led
me to
rain
i ambled
in eels bled

Huan He

swamp men

flayed by the sound

of cicadas, unravel

me and all of it

uncentered in bog

heat—we are swamp

men, metabolic rising

coming up to extend

until we break into

black stars. you say

you don't remember

us as boys, and how

could you when we

had already buried

our boy bodies in

risen clay, marked by

a glowing X, spot

checkers in sand:

you never knew

how to play the

game we invented,

it was always your

turn, tag, you and

back to you always

turn in—to me.

Moriah Cohen

Reflection on My Frustration with Living in the Present

for Yellow Starthistle

If the yellow floret is a harbinger, then it is a harbinger
I follow over train tracks, unbraiding its lattice,

a buckle of stems barbed and sprawling.
We covet nature's patterns. The river keeps its distance.

We covet nature's patterns. The river keeps its distance,
a buckle of stems barbed and sprawling

I follow over train tracks, unbraiding its lattice.
If the yellow floret is a harbinger, then it is a harbinger.

Elizabeth Lindsey Rogers

Superovulation

Instead of one soprano moon, Queen
between velvets, the Diva's platinum tour,
I'd hear a string of pearls break
into thundering funk,
backup vocals rushing forward.
Against the screen, we measure each
crown to floor, millimeters
of nacreous flash. A pen in her mouth
as she circles the wand, proclaims
one ovary still asleep, the other
percolating, a powerhouse.
At first, the word unnerves
me with its abandon:
my insides hot & charged,
the floodlights' artificial whir.
But I grow accustomed
to the pageantry, the TV
monitors, the backwards-worm
shimmy on the exam table.
I switch to dark blue dresses
when my waist expands
beyond my recognition,
the old contours lost inside
this new, sidereal groove. In truth,
I never wanted to feel this
female. It's just the generative
force I'm after. Who else's gravity
could line up that follicular choir,
me with the future's fat sound.

Jordan Nakamura

Motherland, Formless & Void

You find yourself driving aimlessly
in a city with no moss.

The city dwindles as you drive further
into the blue ache of the stereo,
a trumpeter playing something like tulips
opening, and the road, like most,
leads finally to the sea.

Because it is ancient, the one ancient thing
you have been near in months, and the same
altar, the same school of reflection,
and in your nose and down your tongue,
taste of its riddles of persistence,
the salt that was in your father's mouth
when he went to the cliffs to pray as his car
was broken into and even his Bible was stolen,

your mother laughing saying if they read it
maybe they will bring it back, her heart
had that kind of humor, that kind of hope,
the same taste as the friends who confessed
wandering down to the dropoff to step out
into the original sound but turned,

and that they did became a hinge where the rest
of your life is knotted, and salt gracing skin
on the backs of the marooned, and it is in you and still
you do not know it, because of all this you
are afraid. But already you've left your car,
and stand at the limit of the ridge.

Waves unaccompanied by bird talk,
a song old as God. You make an ocarina
of your hands, fingers sealing out the night
wind around a heart shaped darkness,
a trick your father left you.

You send the breath through the valves
over obscured waters, toward
the north of a second sight.

No moss in the city
growing over the stone of old pagodas.
No pagodas in the city, no peace, no prayer.

In place of stars, a shroud,
an upturned basin hoarding engine refuse.
Stern towers through which the dark
freight of commerce moves.

Ren Arcamone

The Covenant of the Mardues

The Addling Avalanche

A week after the Scrabble fiasco, things seem fine. Better than fine, even. Steadily on the up-and-up. We go out to dinner at the fancy Buddhist place near St. Mary's Cathedral and play 'Subtitles,' where we make up conversations we think other patrons are having. I see a woman in love with her son-in-law. A family pretending not to know their daughter is pregnant. Thea finds a father convinced his toddler is possessed.

As a kid, I read this series: The Covenant of the Mardues. The Mardues are an ancient order of interdimensional beings who bestow their powers on a group of teenagers, aiding them in the fight against the evil, body-snatching Nalwraithes. I try to explain it to Thea, how the Nalwraithes are these mist-like demons who possess people, how you can never be sure who among your loved ones is inhabited. Thea, absorbed in the radish cakes, looks up. "Sorry," she says. "What did you want?" I just want us to talk the way we used to, an easy back-and-forth about nothing in particular. But Thea's getting that look, like she can't tell where I'm taking the conversation and would like me to drop it, so I do, I drop it, and she smiles and I think: progress.

Later we go back to mine and have sex. A rare event these days. It's tender and passionate but also effortless, and as we're falling asleep we talk about what we were like when we were kids, whether we would have been friends. We would have, I say. Thea would have been the bossy one and I would have followed her anywhere. Then in the morning we have a fight about something trivial, and then a long conversation about everything, and in the afternoon I am foraging my apartment for Thea's possessions, her socks and knickers and grimy red Tupperware containers and a stray Airpod thingy and even a yoga mat she'd been keeping in my closet, and I am putting these things into a fruit packing box from the grocery store and leaving them in the hallway of my apartment complex. The yoga mat does not completely fit in the box and I tape it into a plastic garbage bag, so it doesn't get gross from sitting on the floor and so Thea will know what an act of compassion looks like.

I email my boss at the *Observer*. I give him too much detail about a gastrointestinal bug I claim to have and spend the next three days hyperventilating on the sofa, hating myself.

The Bewitched Warehouse

Nobody is great at dealing with heartbreak. Still, I have long suspected I am less competent than other people. I am easily paralysed. Five years ago, when Mum was in the hospital, there were a lot of decisions I didn't know how to make: who to contact and when, what to bring to cheer her up. My aunt ended up organising the funeral. The day after the breakup, I feel like I've forgotten how to use my limbs. Possibly I will never leave my apartment again and all my muscles will atrophy from disuse. But this is too private and dull a way to die, and Thea wouldn't know about it for maybe weeks after I'd become a vegetable. I leave the house and wander aimlessly until I reach St. Vinnies, the warehouse-sized second-hand store out in Alexandria.

The store is dim and echoey, like an airplane hangar, and organised according to no clear logic. The books dissolve into gardening tools; the jewellery gives way to kitchen knives; the racks of shoes, far removed from the clothing section, sit nestled on an island in the middle of the furniture. At the back of the warehouse is a second room with a low, ordinary ceiling, devoted entirely to lamps. Behind that room is another room with a locked door. I want everything. I want the lime-green Osh Kosh overalls and the dalmatian-print tea set and the ornate mirror with fairies carved into the frame. I want to remake my apartment so it looks like it belongs to someone else. But there is a wave of retrenchments coming up at work and I can see my head on the block. I buy one thing: a dogeared paperback, *The Ghostly Glitch*, volume #47. One of the Mardues books. I'm stunned they have any at all. It's like a gift from the universe, or the kind of gift you pay for.

The Eternal Library

Anyone possessed by a Nalwraithe still talks and acts like themselves. They play catch with their kids, go to the bank, keep up their jobs as mechanics or florists or whatever. But the Nalwraithe always has an evil mission, like infiltrating

the local government or opening an interdimensional portal. The grand plan is to make everybody a slave-host and build a Nalwraithe empire on the human plane. The good guys, the Mardues, are beings with mythic superpowers: Aranchin the Weaver, Entol the Cunning, etc etc. Like the Nalwraithes, the Mardues can't appear in this dimension in their true forms. They can only imbue an object with their essence. Every time a Nalwraithe hatches a plan, a Mardue sends the human heroes an imbued object, a "grimhull," and a psychic vision about where to find it. Grimhull in hand, the bearer can temporarily channel the powers of the Mardue to defeat the Nalwraithe in battle.

Unfortunately and predictably, the people charged with fighting the Nalwraithes are a rag-tag bunch of adolescents. The teens are standard hero fare: Brad, the golden-haired leading man, and Javier, the wisecracking best friend. Rhonda is the shy, sensitive nerd, and her bestie is Sheridan, the snooty hot girl. The weirdo lone-wolf outsider is Dmitri, who plays the drums in a punk band.

I go back to St. Vinnies. More and more foil-embossed covers materialise on the shelves, singing out like they remember my name. *The Nefarious Factory*. *The Singing Bone*. *The Demonic Dime Store*. *The Howling Zoo*. The prose is awful. I buy all of them.

The Devil's Offer

I call my boss in a panic on Tuesday morning because I cannot leave the apartment. I have tried on all of my skirts and none of them make me look like I have not spent the night crying. My boss sounds strangely relieved. "You are actually owed a week of annual leave," he says, "so it's better if you take that now instead of claiming it as a payout." He means I already have a payout coming, the redundancy payout. He makes it sound like a great deal: a nice break and a nice paycheck, and then no money ever again.

The promise of no money has a weird effect on me, which is that I want to spend all of it. I put my CV up on Jobseeker and contemplate hot-topic pitches for paying magazines, but the vortex of online shopping whispers seductively. At least St. Vinnies is cheaper. A store worker with a manager haircut and scary-long fingernails watches as I stare down a shelf of pink-tufted Beanie Babies. I come

back the next day, and the next, and the next. It is apparently the only thing I can do, so eventually I take my CV with me. A short pale woman with bobbed grey hair and a badge labelled KIM asks when I am free to start. I tell her I have never been more available.

The Singing Bone

Rhonda receives a Mardue vision when she and the gang are on a school field trip to a palaeontology dig site. A Mardue vision is more like a creepy dream than an instruction manual, so the kids aren't sure who the Nalwraithe is. They suspect it's Mr. Bletsoe, the loud-mouthed business tycoon who wants to build a mall where the fossils are. He spends all his time on his flip phone and often says, "Puh-lease!" But when Bletsoe's body turns up in the rubble, bloodied and missing a spine, they realise they're off track. It's someone else.

The missing spine is key. To keep a hold on their host, the Nalwraithes must consume human bones. Turns out the Nalwraithe is sweet Sheryl Swaimy, the palaeontologist who helped Javier with his research paper. Dmitri spies her in the caravan car, snacking on a bowl of human vertebrae, cooking up a potion that'll transform her into an allosaurus. Rhonda finds the grimhull at the dig site—a hidden, rusty trowel—and unlocks it to channel the powers of the Mardue storm being, Cerena, striking dino-Swaimy down with a blue-white blast of lightning, killing both Nalwraithe and host. She grapples briefly with the horror of having taken a human life before the gang goes out for milkshakes at Rudy's, the local diner.

The Double Act

The manager at St. Vinnies is Deirdre. Kim is second in charge. Both women are somewhere over sixty.

Deirdre is the one with the scary-long nails. They're five inches long and curl over the tops of her fingers, yellowed and thick as talons. "Been growing them since I was thirty-two!" she says.

"It's true!" says Kim. "She hasn't stopped!"

"Are they uncomfortable?" I ask.

"I couldn't cut them off now if I wanted to!" says Deirdre.

"It's true!" says Kim. "You'd need a power tool!"

Deirdre shows me how to use the cash register and the ETFPOS machine. She gives me a map of the store's layout so I know where to shelve stock once it's been priced and tagged. I won't learn about pricing until much later.

"Pricing is very complicated," says Deirdre. "And I'm particular."

"She's not lying," says Kim.

Kim leads me through a tour of the store. Most objects give off a deceased estate vibe. An ancient wooden rocking horse. A pair of white lace gloves. I keep wanting to touch things, take them home.

On my lunchbreak I read *The Nefarious Factory*, where the gang discovers a Nalwraithe-run cannery that produces tins of human bones. The grimhull is a tire swing strung up in an abandoned industrial lot. Grimhulls are like that: obscure, hard-to-find junk, dead wrist watches or flashlights. One time, a prehistoric shoe the kids had to swipe from a museum. You'd think the all-knowing, all-seeing Mardues would make grimhulls out of objects a little closer to hand, but no. The kids just have to trust there's a greater intelligence at work, that what looks like chaos or coincidence is really guided by the Mardues' higher knowledge of purpose and fate.

The Dissolving Girl

There are two ways of walking to St. Vinnies: the direct way, and the circuitous way. I keep taking the circuitous way, which leads right past Thea's house. It's like taking a dog on a familiar walk, if my legs were the dog. On one of these walks, I remember: Thea still has my Scrabble dictionary.

It's a Chambers dictionary, actually. A big red tome. During our Scrabble phase, we discovered we were both competitive, at first in a cutesy way, then less so. I would get pedantic and hyper-logical, and Thea would get angry, almost comically furious. One time she threw the Scrabble board at a floor lamp. The lamp was fine, but we realised we needed an official, third-party arbiter.

From where I'm standing on the street, you can see right into the living room, where an unlidded bottle of red sits out, accompanied by three grimy glasses. She

had friends over last night. It feels like a punishment, that Thea gets to resume her social, single life, while I wander around dusting vases and forgetting how human interaction works.

Honestly, it was that social streak that first drew me to Thea. Our first date, at the night noodle markets in Hyde Park, she made it so easy to talk. She made terrible puns, told me all about her life, her childhood, wasn't phased in the slightest by my ongoing grief. Anything, she said, you can tell me anything. Still, when we kissed, she was stunned into silence. String lights twinkled above us. She was secretly shy around me, she confessed, and I laughed because in the moment I didn't believe her. We fell in love quickly, or quickly by hetero standards, so basically regular lesbian velocity. Soon we were wearing each other's clothes. It frightened her, this melding, but it didn't frighten me. I am accustomed to dissolving and with her this made me powerful.

The Familiar Stranger

Sheridan's best friend from elementary school comes to town, bubblegum-slick with her bouncy blonde hair and blue eyes and yellow-heeled sandals. Together, Sheridan and Charity look like a televisual dream-duo, Mary-Kate and Ashley with a slight height difference. Charity is a hit with everyone but Rhonda, who is instantly suspicious. "She smiles a *lot*," says Rhonda. "You guys notice this?" Rhonda is short, dark-skinned, with big glasses, too serious, too intellectual. Obviously, Rhonda is right to be suspicious—Charity is a Nalwraithe, infiltrating the group to turn them against each other. Her contact lenses contain tiny hypnotist spirals. Now Brad is irritated with Javier, and Brad and Sheridan have a lovers' quarrel, and Javier thinks Sheridan and Rhonda are gossiping behind his back. Dmitri hates everyone, but this is on-brand for him so no one notices. Rhonda misses Sheridan desperately. Honestly, Sheridan and Rhonda make more sense than Brad and Sheridan. Maybe I'm reading between the lines, but I think Rhonda agrees. In the heat of her bewitched fury, she looks at Sheridan with so much scorn it could be love. Things will go back to normal in the end. By the time I leave for my shift, Dmitri has channelled the powers of Yonto the Revealer and Charity is melting into a puddle of goo.

The Blinding Light

"This is the tagging machine," says Kim, "and this is the tag maker. I'll make the tags and you put the tags on the clothes, like this, you see? You put the five-dollar tags on this pile of clothes, and the seven-dollar tags on this pile of clothes, unless Deirdre tells you something different. We do this when it's quiet, but not when it's busy. Deirdre will tell us when it's busy."

The storage room is at the back of the warehouse, beyond the room filled with lamps. I pass them on my way to the loo, the lamps on their shelves gleaming like sentinels. One is chrome-plated and sci-fi. Another is decorated with garish cherubs. The newest is green, stained glass.

I tag the clothes in the back with another junior staff member. She has a full face of goth makeup and zero interest in conversation.

"Do you want to tag the five-dollar pile, or the seven-dollar pile?" I ask. I feel weirdly drawn to the five-dollar pile. I've decided it has a good aura.

"Do you care?" says the goth. Not in a mean way, but like she's worried I'm deranged.

We tag in silence. She leaves first and lets me close up, which she's definitely not meant to do. She must be immune to Deirdre's wrath.

Alone in the store for the first time, I plug every lamp I can into the rows of baseboard power strips. It's like standing in the glass of a lighthouse. I sit on the musty lamp room carpet and breathe it in, feel the light seeping through my pores, like something that could change my cells.

The Cruel Piper

Sheridan's new orchestra teacher is a Nalwraithe. She keeps a tin of mints in her purse, but the mints are oddly shaped, and when Dmitri swipes the tin their suspicions are confirmed: they're finger bones, each piece a different length, and small. Children's finger bones. "Looks like Mrs. DiMartino's got bigger problems than halitosis," says Javier. Brad and Dmitri snicker, and Rhonda clasps her hand to her mouth, but Sheridan's just mad. She's radiant with it. Who sees evil like this in the world and isn't furious? Alone, she tracks down the grimhull. An antique flute hidden in the bowels of the school basement. When she summons

the awesome power of Demienne the Shrill, she feels pure joy rattling through her limbs, bursting from her throat. She plays the final note. The orchestra teacher's head explodes.

The Sentient Scent

On the weekend I open all my apartment windows, newly energised. I'm afraid I will text Thea, so I drink two coffees and drop my phone in a glass of water, then vacuum the carpet and fill the filter to the brim. Everything in there is the dust of me and Thea, our skin cells mixed together to make dirt. I wipe down the shelves and the cabinets, even high up, even the top of the fridge. I strip the bed and find long brown hairs clinging to the mattress, bits of her that have pressed through something seemingly impermeable, like bacteria through skin. I worry I will do something disgusting with the hairs. I'll probably be finding them forever.

I wash the sheets twice but they still smell nostalgic. It's my laundry detergent, the smell of the bed we slept in together. I go out and buy different detergent, scented with geranium. Now my bed linen smells like a posh nursing home. The effect is exacerbated by the trinkets I've accrued from St. Vinnies: a bronze owl paperweight, a blue glass vase, an old-timey luggage trunk.

In the series, the kids activate a grimhull by speaking a "Word of Opening," but the word never actually appears on the page. When the grimhull is open, the energy of the Mardue who touched it runs through the veins of the bearer, temporarily transforming them, filling them with power. I wouldn't mind being transformed for a bit. I wouldn't mind some fucking emotional variety.

The Rotting Mask

Rhonda's sister is a Nalwraithe. That's Rhonda's new fear. She tells the gang and they exchange awkward glances. Everyone knows Rhonda is hypersensitive, borderline paranoid, but you can't ignore a claim like that.

Now Dmitri busts into the garage, long hair flopping in his face. He was right: Mr Soukup from the dollar store is definitely a Nalwraithe. Soukup's receiving a shipment of bewitched silly string cans in time for Halloween, and think about the trick-or-treaters.

The group turns back to Rhonda. They have to triage. How worried is Rhonda about her sister? Rhonda feels crazy, inarticulate, but she swallows it. Sheridan holds her and Rhonda breathes in the smell of her hair.

The Bottomless Well

The reason things turned sour had nothing to do with Scrabble, or even Thea's temper. It was the lump. First, Thea put it down to her period, which often made her tits tender and swollen, but I sensed a kernel of something terrible inside this particular lump. I begged her to see a doctor, who sent her to a specialist, who sent her for a biopsy, which even Thea found nerve-wracking. In the moment, you can't always know how badly a thing will turn out, whether you're standing on the brink of tragedy, and because all up it took a month, the appointments and then the tests and then the results, we were nervous that whole time—nervous together, with me performing admirably as Supportive Girlfriend. Then the results came back and it turned out it was nothing, "fibrous breast tissue." That closed the matter for Thea. Me, I sort of—glitched. According to the specialist, Thea's cycle would make it difficult to detect worrying lumps in the future, so it was important to "remain watchful." I got a little obsessive. I'd ask if she was checking herself, but I knew she wasn't doing it properly. And so sometimes, we'd be in bed together, and I'd have my hands on her tits—normally, like in the normal sex-way—but then my brain would wander, and I'd be pressing with the flat of my hand. Firmly. Like, medically. It wasn't even a breast thing that got Mum, it was ovarian, so it was weird, how fixed I got on this body part, and then on all the other parts. I read up on different cancers, genetic factors, the signs of their secret progression from one stage to the next. I knew plenty of this stuff already but I had packed it away, and now it was spilling out of the boxes in my head. In the early morning, I'd lie awake, trapped in these involuntary daydreams: Thea in hospital, Thea losing her hair, Thea dying. When my crying woke her up it wasn't deliberate, I wasn't trying to be manipulative. I just wanted to put my head on her chest and hear her heart beating like a regular heart. She let me do this, for a while, told me she was still here, still right here, although eventually she wasn't. She was busy on weeknights, too busy to stay over. If I touched her arm, she would tense up. The more I needed

her, the more she needed not to be needed, the more I turned desperate. I could see all the parts moving, like an engine that feeds itself.

I kept having these dreams where I'd find Mum in our old house. She was always leaving the same room I was entering, through a different door that hadn't been there in real life, or maybe I was the one coming through the made-up door. I just wanted to talk to Thea, because I would wake up with the strongest memories of things I'd forgotten, a kid I had tripped in pre-school, a balloon clown at a birthday party, even the voice of my uncle, who had died when I was three, and in a similar way it seemed that I could see the future, not just the inevitability of Thea's death but also my own death, and the diagnosis of minor horrors along the way, osteoporosis, viral pneumonia. Inside my grief were many other, smaller griefs, a matryoshka doll of sadness. It frightened Thea, my capacity. Anytime I opened my mouth, she was scared of where it might lead. I grew weird and deferent with her conversationally, too agreeable. The last night we played Scrabble, she could tell I was scoring badly on purpose, and she yelled at me: are you just stuck like this now? She pitied me but she was also disgusted by me, and I was too.

It really is a great dictionary. It doesn't feel right to leave it there. Thea was always careless with her own possessions, even precious or important things, and a dictionary, to my mind, is an inherently powerful object. If the Word of Opening were real, I could imagine worse places to look. Through the living room window, from the street, you can't see the bookcase, but I know exactly where it is, what shelf it is on and how the Scrabble set is wedged into the space above it.

The Invisible Poison

The days blur into one another, interchangeable containers with the same stuff inside of each of them. I shake out garbage bags of moth-eaten cardigans, brush the dust from ornamental glass swans, shelve them in their designated spots. I have not yet earned the privilege of pricing goods. It takes time to understand what things are worth.

I go to the back room to tell Deirdre I am taking my lunchbreak. She and Kim are evaluating a painting of baby Jesus.

"Go make us a cup of tea, love," says Deirdre.

"I have mine black with one sugar," says Kim. "But Deirdre has hers white with no sugar. Make sure you don't put any sugar in hers."

"Not even a granule," says Deirdre. "I can taste it."

"When you stir *her* tea, you can't even use the same spoon you've used to stir my tea," says Kim, apparently impressed. "She'll know!"

"Oh, I'll know!" says Deirdre.

You'd think in real life, the Nalwraithes would be irritating people. But getting possessed by a Nalwraithe doesn't turn you outwardly unpleasant. To others, you seem exactly the same. You shrink down inside your own head to accommodate for the swelling presence of the Nalwraithe, see yourself performing tasks from a distance, like you're the hero in a video game with someone else at the controls. But you still feel things: pain, and the cold, and hunger. You're hungry all the time.

The New Wolf

It's late. Rhonda's sister, Lucille, is putting on mascara in the bathroom, and Rhonda hovers by the crack in the door, watching. Lucille tilts her chin in the mirror, sticks out her tongue in concentration, looks like a kid. When they were little, Rhonda was the boss of Lucille, but now Lucille is fifteen and beyond cool, untameable. "Don't tell Mom and Dad," Lucille says, and Rhonda jumps. She jumps at everything these days. She can't tell who is speaking inside of Lucille: Lucille, or something awful. She can't trust what will come out of her sister's mouth. Rhonda suspects Lucille got possessed the day the Nalwraithes besieged the state fair. She wants to doubt herself, because doubt is hope. "Won't breathe a word," she says.

When Lucille climbs out the bedroom window, Rhonda paws through her wardrobe and finds the stash of half-chewed ribs buried under Lucille's cheerleading gear. She runs back to the bathroom and is sick.

The Living Statue

In the mirrored changing rooms of St. Vinnies, I am reflected endlessly, twenty blank-eyed selves Windexing away their youth. I'd forgotten about Lucille becoming a Nalwraithe. They stretch it out for ages, kill her off in the battle with

the Nalwraithe senator. Now I remember it's coming, I'll just have to sit through it, watch the kids scramble and fail to find a solution. There's no known cure for Nalwraithe possession. I kill the afternoon rearranging the crockery by size and color, searching for something I haven't yet identified.

In the evening, my feet carry me past Thea's house. The lights are on, the blinds are open. Inside, Thea is pacing back and forth, holding her phone and a neon green feather duster, and there goes my plan to break in and steal back the Chambers dictionary. I stand on the street, dumb and rooted to the earth. It's bewildering to see her in the flesh, and somehow terrifying, how familiar she is, how specific. The exact curve of her chin is excruciating. I want her to look up. I want my phone back so she can text me so I can ignore it, only I wouldn't ignore it, I would watch hateful things spring forth from some unknown well inside me. A truck rumbles past and wakes me and I turn away.

The Rotten Reel

Dmitri has a part-time job at the local cinema. He sits in a high box at the back of the theatre, examining the film reels for *The Night of the Risen*, an unheard-of horror flick that showed up under the care of the mysterious new theatre manager. On screen, the actors' faces come out perfectly, but on the film strip you can see them for what they are: mists in human dress. "So what's the deal?" says Javier. "They're gonna zombify the film buffs?" "We can't take that chance," says Brad, his gaze steely.

Only Dmitri has inside access. He's the one who finds the grimhull, a silver lighter that will channel Synera the Torchbright, the Mardue known for his cleansing fire. Probably burn the whole place to a crisp. Dmitri will do it. Fuck, everyone knows he's a delinquent. He'll lose his job and maybe worse, but he'll do it.

The Doomed Trial

I was actually the one who called it off, that morning, after the Buddhist restaurant. I think part of me did it as a test, like I was seeing if she would take the bait, reveal herself as secretly uncaring. She did take the bait, which is another way

of saying she took me at my word. And then I was only furious with myself, and glad for her. I couldn't blame her. I had consumed so much of her already.

The Speaking Tree

A box comes in. It's from Thea's house. Self-help manuals and junky plastic jewellery and brand new, bad-smelling candles. The dictionary too. Deirdre grabs it out of my hands like I'm giving it to her, sniffs the pages. It is worth ten dollars, apparently.

"Oh, Deirdre," says Kim. "You're cutting off your own ear. At least fifteen."

I take the tome from Deirdre and turn it over. The edges are more battered than I remember. I wait for something to jump awake in me, but it's just a book. Lifeless.

"I think ten makes sense," I say.

"What do you know," Deirdre says. "A girl with her head screwed on."

Dusting the shelves, I take my time with the china ornaments, the milkmaids and preening swans. I am not totally unhinged. I understand that Mardues and Nalwraithes are made up, that no otherworldly monster lives under my skin. But it does not seem crazy that somewhere in the world there really might be one concrete, opening thing you could say that would transform you completely. Someone somewhere must know what it is.

In the lamp room, half the bulbs are dead. I spend my afternoon switching them out for new ones. I take the lamp with the green shade and dust it off, saying, Wake up, wake up, and it does. Its segments form the shape of leaves: a glowing tree. I unscrew the shade and wrap it in newspaper, put the parts in a cardboard box. It's the first thing I take home without paying.

The Floating Room

I keep thinking it'll get old, the moment of turning, the half-page prelude to the climax. Still, it hooks me every time. Poor Rhonda, bruised and concussed, has managed to shut off the anti-gravity machine in the inventor's secret lair. While her friends are coming to, she grabs the grimhull, a gold-handled wrench, and speaks the Word. The Nalwraithe inventor turns, enraged, but it's too late.

Rhonda's glowing. There's that familiar fizzing in her belly, a hot hum rising through her chest, her jaw, a power that will turn her limbs to metal. She'll kick down the building, the basement filled with experimental Nalwraithe technology, and her eyes will pour lava; she'll liquidate the power generators. Obviously this won't bring her sister back. It won't melt her grief, or make Sheridan understand. Hell, it won't even last that long. In twenty minutes, she'll be trapped in her own human skin again, feet on the ground, brain soft in her skull, but that—that's later. Right now, and for the next ten minutes, she's something bigger than human, and who am I to say that's not enough. It might be enough. Maybe, really briefly, she's grateful.

The Great Renewal

I wake up and do not put on my uniform for St. Vinnies. I open the windows and stand at the kitchen sink, washing glass jars in luxurious quantities of detergent. When I am done the skin on my knuckles is peeling and it is drizzling outside. Dead leaves curl up in the rain and smell sweet.

At the end of the day I turn on the new lamp, which sits on my coffee table. The light is absinthe green. The longer I stare, the brighter it is, the more it blunts the edges of objects in my peripheral vision. Night is falling, and some word is waiting to be spoken, some word that will pour the light from the lamp into my fingers. I don't know what it is yet, but I know it is moving steadily and invisibly towards me, like a radio wave.

Carmen Giménez

A Painting I Can't Remember 5

The painting I can't remember left me queasy and agog;
and I want to take a Xanax, but Xanax never ended well,
erased my memory and I didn't have a a Xanax anyway.
The painting was trompe l'oeil, a word I could never pronounce
so would say in fake French, *troomp a louie*, to disguise
not being able to pronounce it without class contempt.
The memory of the painting I have makes it look like a reproduction
meant for a grandmother's parlor, then the memory brightens
and then it's a shadowbox: you can almost touch a bird in it.
In my twenties everyone loved the shadow boxes of Joseph Cornell;
he collected photos of opera singers and birds that he kept in archives
in a barn. Because he was famous, it wasn't creepy, but he did
sort of stalk one singer who was indifferent to his eccentric devotion.
Why did young poets in the mid-90s love Joseph Cornell
so much? I look at his boxes now and only feel the humiliations
of being stupid and twenty-five and hear the scratched Son Volt CD
that got stuck in my car radio. When I saw the boxes in person
for the first time, the small constructions of glue and paper
and real feathers, I felt art feelings but not the sublime, to be honest.
Rather it was the gift of trying and making, which was a good enough
lesson at the time. The box that comes to mind has a black collage
of stars or moons I won't bother Googling. To be clear,
I rarely love a still life, isn't that what trompe l'oeil is,
still life and pyrotechnique, the latter which redeems?
This painting I can't remember is part of an archive of paintings
that, if you knew me well, would not be a painting in the archive of paintings
I love that I can't remember. Yet the illusion felt so, so gratifying
that, in the moment, I could almost pronounce the word without
affect, as if it had flown into my mouth in a moment of grace.

Amber Jamilla Musser

Sensing Vastness: *The De Luxe Show* Then and Now

From mid-August until mid-September, 2021, Karma Gallery's New York and Los Angeles branches revisited the 1971 *De Luxe Show*. Less of a strict restaging than an opportunity to bring together the same cadre of artists, the exhibitions celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the original Houston show and occasion renewed contemplation of its themes.

Standing before Virginia Jaramillo's *Green Dawn* (1970), tracing a fine yellow line slithering the upper right quadrant across a 7' x-6' canvas that is painted green, with a flat evenness that prevents the eye from latching onto anything except the movement of this single s-curve, the viewer has the feeling of traveling a narrow road through impenetrable space. Similarly, the yellow, orange, and gray acrylic lines from Jules Olitski's industrial spray gun lead the eye around the dark center of *Eighth Loosha* (1970) (Fig. 2), drawing attention from the bottom of the 9.6' x 5.5' canvas to its top. These spray-painted lines are thick neon, their edges bleed slightly as they approach and move away from the painting's layered interior. As the lines recede and reappear, the viewer is invited to peer into the depth of the central void, made mysterious by the contrast between the colors and intensity of the surrounding spray as well as the complex textures of blackness produced by the combination of spray and wash on the canvas.

The De Luxe Show's predilection for engulfing viewers with vastness isn't reserved for paintings. The size and scale of the sculptures also deploy tactility to immerse viewers in abstraction. At 48¼ × 77 × 56 inches, James Wolfe's *Untitled* (1971) (Fig. 3) is a painted steel gray sculpture comprised of a rectangular base on the ground and vertical beams with geometric cutouts that meet in a point in the air. Steel aside, the sculpture is mostly negative space, and it is this airiness that promises play—the angles where components meet is slightly askew and the components of the base—large rectangles—can be twisted to interlock into different positions, allowing the viewer to imagine not only different permutations

of this abstract tableau, but also how their own relationship to space and to these objects might shift with each change. Each of these works, in their largeness, evokes the smallness of humanity: their approaches to vastness guiding viewers toward the edges of what they might think and know.

The aforementioned artworks of Jaramillo, Olitski and Wolfe were included in the first version of *The De Luxe Show* staged by the artist Peter Bradley in August 1971 in Houston, Texas. In the intervening fifty years, the show has become famous for being one of the first integrated art exhibitions, featuring Black and white artists side-by-side. The organizer's efforts at desegregation were multipronged. In addition to the previously mentioned artists, the show included many up-and-coming artists who shared a modernist approach to art: Walter Darby Bannard, Anthony Caro, Dan Christensen, Ed Clark, David Diao, Sam Gilliam, Bob Gordon, Richard Hunt, Daniel Johnson, Al Loving, Kenneth Noland, Larry Poons, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Michael Steiner, and William T. Williams. Location was also key. Bradley worked with Dominique and John de Menil to bring these artists, from New York and elsewhere, to the De LUXE Theatre, a then dilapidated building in Houston's predominantly Black Fifth Ward. Bradley's goal was to bring "first-rate art to people who don't usually attend shows … [and to] bring life to an otherwise neglected part of town."[1] This wasn't merely a one-way experience, bringing art (and inspiration) to a poor Black neighborhood; Bradley wanted the exchange to work both ways, inviting artists, critics, and collectors to experience the 5th Ward's deep cultural dynamism.

In 1971, *The De Luxe Show*'s efforts at integration signified an important parallel to the then recent victories of the Civil Rights Movement, including Supreme Court decisions that formally ended segregation. The show was a first step toward racial equality in the art world. Underlying Bradley's expansive curating of the show is an expanded vision of modernism that pushes against its all-white reputation toward more nuance and diversity. Widening the parameters ideally grants space to non-white artists to make art outside of racially overdetermined categories in which people of color make art exclusively about race, a representational catch-22 especially prevalent in the civil rights era. Artists whose work was not clearly about race were often criticized for being

[1] Darby English provides insightful context to *The De Luxe Show* in his book *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Peter Bradley's fundraising letter is reproduced on page 193.

apolitical and were relegated to the sidelines. Many of the artists in *The De Luxe Show* negotiate these representational challenges by showing us how race always exceeds the frame, giving us indirect routes into questions of what race and racial integration mean.

For example, considering Ed Clark's *Paris* (1971) (Fig. 4) and Sam Gilliam's *Drape* (1970) (Fig. 5) within a conversation about scale and immersion, a nuanced, differently racialized vision of modernism comes into view. Rather than overwhelming viewers with the enormity of their works, Clark and Gilliam invite viewers into the contours of the interior. Though only 29½ × 41⅜ inches, the pencil-drawn oval at the center of *Paris* offers a window into a different conception of vastness. *Paris* is a work of dry pigment on paper, with the concentration of coloration overlapping with the penciled oval. However, Clark's layering of translucent pigment lends the work an aura of immateriality and transience. The colors blend into something oceanic and murky: the pigment washes over the oval's edges. The top layer is the brightest of the blues, each striation bringing the painting a gradation closer to the sea green at the bottom. The color seems to hover above the paper, stopping, as if by happenstance, in the midst of the oval at the center of the frame, with the surrounding unpigmented paper offering a contrasting counterweight to these multiple senses of impermanence. Gilliam's *Drape* is large—94 × 84 inches—but it appears smaller because it keeps some of its enormity hidden within its blue and green folds. The colors—blues and greens, with a hint of orange, densely pigmented acrylic washes—resonate with those used by Clark. But unlike other works in *The De Luxe Show*, which hang in rectangular frames, Gilliam's canvas is affixed to the wall by its upper corners, leaving the canvas to hang loosely between hooks on the wall, producing folds. This draping effect not only gives the painting additional texture, it adds an aura of mystery because viewers cannot see what is within the folds. Eschewing the discipline of the frame and working with the sculptural elements produced by the loosened, draped canvas, Gilliam invites contemplation of the unknown. Clark accomplishes a similar feat by not working to the edge, thereby concentrating attention on the oval and its excesses. Viewers must work to apprehend what is in front of them. In lieu of making vastness explicit, Clark and Gilliam play with

negative space, asking viewers to sense what is being withheld, a vastness that exists just beyond visual perception.

On the one hand, we can read Clark's and Gilliam's works for their use of color and form, but we might also ask how they offer insight into always unstable racial categories. That is to say, while race is not the subject of the paintings, thinking about the ways it might be present but not represented is important to understanding the work of *The De Luxe Show*. There are many inroads into this type of interpretation, but I am particularly drawn to Clark and Gilliam's evocation of water, given the preponderance of blues and theorizations relating the Black diaspora to water, especially in relation to the transatlantic crossings of chattel slavery, contemporary migrant crossings across the Mediterranean, and the floods occasioned by today's climatological disasters. I register Clark's play with the oval as evoking a porthole on a ship, and I see the ocean waves in Gilliam's unstructured canvas. Clark's perspective transforms a sea voyage into opportunity—Paris—and Gilliam's highlights the uncontainable, majestic forces of nature. Both of these, in turn, offer specific versions of enormity. This is an immensity that asks viewers to think about the raw and orienting forces of space and a temporality that may not quite be infinity, especially since these references to water can only resonate through the legacies of the multiple forms of violence—physical, psychological, semiotic—of the transatlantic slave trade in this space that Christina Sharpe names "the wake" to evoke a Black diasporic connection to water.[2] Black life, Sharpe argues, exists in this extended temporality, such that vastness registers as endless variations of violence and mourning. This reading of Clark's and Gilliam's work does not restrict its interpretive spheres. That is, these paintings are not about Blackness, but they can show us how different textures can be added to the experience of vastness. Neither Clark nor Gilliam is making a statement about what it is to be a Black artist, but to omit the reflection of their experiences of racialization in their approaches to art is to miss an opportunity to reckon with race's unruliness, a project that resonates in 2021 as our nation becomes more attuned to the pervasive depths of structural racism.

This more nuanced, more inclusive interpretation of how race can signify allows us to consider the ways in which racialization constructs non-Black artists'

[2] See Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

perspectives as well. We might think, for instance, about Jaramillo's Mexican heritage and its possible connection to an uncluttered, unknowable space—what might an infinite road and opaque outside mean in the context of borders and migration? Likewise, Olitski's youthful migration from Russia might allow viewers to read the dark center of the *Eighth Loosha* as evoking an open door or window, itself a portal between future possibilities and a past to which one cannot return. Viewed as an opportunity to investigate the breadth of racialization, the *De Luxe* exhibition enables conversations about race and art by prompting the viewer to sense racialization's subtleties—adding textures of geographic specificity and experiences such as migration—instead of predetermining what an interracial conversation might look like.

These conversations resonate through the 1971 iteration of *De Luxe*. I see another one between Peter Bradley's *Barbantum* (1972) (Fig. 6), an ombré painting of yellows, oranges, and red, in which the paint is applied—sometimes dripped over—the canvas in thin layers that accrue to produce texture. When one looks long enough, these colors resemble that of metal corroding, transforming from brass into tarnished green or rust; this set of colors and textures, in turn, allows us to think about decay, neglect, and the slow passage of time. Perhaps Bradley is summoning the ruin of the De LUXE Theater and the erosion of the Fifth Ward itself. Playing with a similar color palette, Dan Christiansen's *Solar Scope* (1969) (Fig. 7) brings together thin coats of ocher, green, and maroon. Atop these layers of wash, he places a thick opaque stripe of blue crossed with purple. The underlayer's thinness allows one to see the different layers merge and separate—giving us insight into what it might be like to try to look at the sun. The danger of sun blindness lurks, and viewers sense, with some anxiety, their smallness under the sun's bright and unyielding light. To be absorbed in these paintings is to feel the different forces of change beyond one's control. Together they show us that there is not just one conversation happening; instead, we open toward a multitude of interpretations, each registering the breadth of possibilities of thinking race sensorially that also exists beyond the scale of the human.

While the 1971 exhibition reflected that moment's hopes for racial equality, the historical context of 2021 has made it clear that the utopia promised by

integration remains out of reach. While the 2021 exhibition brings together the same artists as the 1971 iteration, some of the featured artists chose to substitute different works—some from the same era and some that were more recently completed. This difference shifts the tenor of the conversation; works of art speak to each other between a historical expanse—showing us how racialization might register differently now and what feels unique about the current moment.

What might William T. Williams's *Bus to Somewhere* (2018), a set of thickly textured and vibrantly colorful overlapping rectangles—one side filled with black and maroons, the other various shades of red with a pale-yellow rectangle in the middle say to *Water Witch (After Sophia Jackson)* (1970), his earlier painting of geometric abstraction? Both are acrylic, but while *Bus to Somewhere* is painted on two conjoined pieces of plywood (20¼ × 24⅞ inches), *Water Witch* is rendered on paper and is larger in scale (39 × 30 inches). The thick texture of *Bus to Somewhere* recalls asphalt and the uneven joining of plywood suggests an indeterminate destination. We can also think about this thickness as an added layer of protection between Williams and his viewers—perhaps the intervening years have compelled a more distant stance from the openness that *Water Witch*'s thinness of paint and purity of color invite. Placed side by side, we can see how both use violets, blues, yellows, greens, and reds but *Bus to Somewhere* does not allow these to coalesce into contained shapes—the colors bleed into each other and become murky and mottled. On the other hand, *Water Witch*'s precise shapes juxtapose colors so that each is invited to shine, signaling its own form of optimism. Fifty years of living makes its mark. Whereas one might register *Water Witch*'s optimism as inhabiting a similar emotional valence as the 1971 *De Luxe Show* in that it feels unabashed in its attachment to the possibility of being taken at face value, *Bus to Somewhere* does not make the same presumption of its viewer; the tone is more reserved, less trusting. Viewers might gain access to the painting's contours, but they might not, a coding that resonates with the learned weariness of failed gestures at racial equality.

The call now is to listen and learn, so that we might build a shared understanding of race's structures and materializations. By refusing to prioritize one perspective over another, *De Luxe* in 2021 highlights the importance of maintaining interracial

dialogues and shared spaces, locating the generative potential in the poetics and politics of aesthetic conversations. *The De Luxe Show*, in both of its iterations, asks us to consider a diverse group of artists together to gain insight into how different histories and circumstances can be felt. From there, we can imagine solidarities, and vast interracial futures.

p. 121, Fig. 1. Installation view of *The De Luxe Show*,
De Luxe Theater, Houston, 1971.
Courtesy of Menil Archives, the Menil Collection, Houston.
Photograph by Hickey-Robinson, Houston.

p. 122, Fig. 2. Jules Olitski, *Eighth Loosha*, 1970.
Acrylic on canvas, 115.25 x 68.75 in.
Image courtesy of the artist and Karma, New York.

p. 123, Fig. 3. James Wolfe, *Untitled, 1971*.
Steel, 48.25 x 77 x 56 in.
Image courtesy of the artist and Karma, New York.

p. 124, Fig. 4. Ed Clark, *Paris*, 1971.
Dry pigment on paper, 29.5 x 41.375 in.
Image courtesy of the artist and Karma, New York.

p. 125, Fig. 5. Sam Gilliam, *Drape*, 1970.
Acrylic on canvas, 94 x 84 in (as installed).
Image courtesy of the artist and Karma, New York.

p. 126, Fig. 6. Peter Bradley, *Barbantum*, 1972.
Acrylic on canvas, 117 x 41 in.
Image courtesy of the artist and Karma, New York.

p. 127, Fig. 7. Dan Christensen, *Solar Scope*, 1969.
Enamel on canvas, 66 x 38 in.
Image courtesy of the artist and Karma, New York.

p. 128, Fig. 8. "The De Luxe Show," De Luxe Theater, 1971.
Courtesy of Menil Archives, the Menil Collection, Houston.
Photograph by Helen Winkler Fosdick.

Angelo Nikolopoulos

SOS

In the town square
a man's hairy torso gleaming with oil

like a nest of brown spiders.

I must decide today
whether to buy carnations or pay a debt.

C. E. Janecek

Restoration

When properly channeled ~~by the actress and regulated by the male mentor, libertine~~ excess can be

trans
formed

into compelling,

emotive

expressions of

~~feminine~~ pathos.

key words: excess, *transformed*, e.g.,

the fall of 2018 when I saw Denise Gough going

down on Keira Knightley

I was, simply speaking,

t r a n s f o r m e d

dreaming, I embodied the stamen:

anther, filament:
its incandescent
phallus—

I am rearranged
and consumed

with how the clit
grows
hard

I call it

budding

when the pistachio peeks

demurely from its shell and I roll it

against the roof of my mouth

to suck out all its salt.

(for the first time I want
it bee stung,
puckered
and erect like
a nipple)

I dreamt
I embodied
an amalgam
of maturation
tapes
grass crowning in my armpits

and fresh loam spilling from my navel

like an open fire hydrant and my clit,

emotive, transformed sentinel, a bright

red herring

Clarence Harlan Orsi

Clocked

In January of 2020, two months before a gathering of this kind would become unthinkable, I treated myself to a $30 cardio dance class at Banana Skirt Productions in midtown Manhattan. We'd been promised an original choreographed routine to Kelis's hit "Milkshake," and I needed to bring the boys to my yard to kick start a sluggish year. The song choice was nicely calibrated to the participant demographic, mostly white women in their twenties and thirties with leggings and platform sneakers, roughly in the range of body types of a Dove ad. Our instructor, a Black man fresh off his BFA in musical theater, with diamond earrings and a high voltage smile, started in with affirmative instruction right away. "You're serving Rihanna modeling Fenty," he said, demonstrating a louche strut. "Now give us a fierce little turn to the mirror," he said, squatting and popping. Like all skilled dance instructors, he demonstrated and validated simultaneously. "Work it," he said, making a vogue-like arm motion while looking at us in the mirror. "Sickening," he nodded, moving to the sidelines as we performed. "Come through!"

Like everyone else there, I did not need the vocabulary explained; like everyone else there, I had watched *RuPaul's Drag Race*. I'd realized how mainstream the drag vocabulary that originated from Black and Brown women and femmes had become the first time I purchased a tub of Yaas! Hummus. This was something more. It wasn't just that drag-speak was so common that affluent white women felt at home using it. It was that these same women *needed* the language of drag to feel good about themselves. Shimmering moistly under the studio lights, we'd been given permission to exult in hyperbolic femininity. It didn't matter that we might not consciously have been thinking about drag queens; we didn't need to. The language had transcended its original context, which meant that it had transcended gender transgression, drag's reason for being.

And though, as a trans man, I'd like to think myself more versed in queer culture and therefore more deserving of its language, I was, in fact, there for the same reasons the cis straight women were. It didn't matter that I had a moustache;

I still wanted to Wake Up and Slay, as the shirt on the woman next to me read. Like everyone else, I was channeling my inner queen.

What is drag without gender—or, more precisely, what is drag when it has become decoupled from crossing gender lines? At the point (mid-twerk) that I realized a primary function of contemporary drag is to make cis white women feel better about themselves, I'd been researching gender and drag for a while. Specifically, I was interested in drag that troubled the traditional male to female crossing. This troubling is not particularly unusual. Though the popular understanding of a drag queen is "a man who dresses as a woman," we know that the lines between man and genderqueer and trans woman are fuzzy, especially as drag developed in a social-historical context without such designations. Queens who might now call themselves trans women paved the way for drag as we know it today. *RuPaul's Drag Race*, however, was slower to catch up. Kylie Sonique Love from Season 2 was the first queen to transition after being on the show, but it took until Peppermint on Season 9 for a queen to enter the competition as a trans woman. The delay was likely due in part to RuPaul's own views on trans women and drag, which sound suspiciously like a red state legislator talking about trans girls in high school sports. "You can identify as a woman and say you're transitioning, but it changes once you start changing your body," he said in an interview, later tweeting, "You can take performance enhancing drugs and still be an athlete, just not in the Olympics."

After a backlash, RuPaul apologized, and hasn't weighed in on the issue since. He may have changed his views, or he may have decided policing the boundaries of drag isn't good optics. Under pressure from the trans community, the show eliminated the longstanding catchphrase, "You've got she-mail." The queens on the show began to speak more explicitly about their genders. High profile contestants like Shea Couleé and Sasha Velour came out as nonbinary, while Season 7 winner Violet Chachki publicly identified as gender fluid.

All these queens, however, were assigned male at birth. Outside of *Drag Race*, a different kind of revolution was taking place, with increasing numbers of people

assigned female at birth (AFAB) identifying as drag queens. On the alternative horror-influenced drag series *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula*, Eve Hollow, an AFAB nonbinary queen with a penchant for provocative gross-out couture, made a dress out of menstrual pads to illustrate mainstream drag's shaming of processes associated with women's bodies. Cis women drag queens aren't new in some circles, but, in the wake of RuPaul's comments and the larger rapidly evolving conversation about gender, they began to speak out in larger forums. A 2018 video from The Cut called "Who Does Drag?" mischievously included a cis woman drag queen in a lineup, out of which a befuddled straight man had to guess who was a drag queen. Once revealed, the queen, whose drag name is Femme Daddy, told the visibly uncomfortable straight man that, "I realized I identified more with drag queens and faggots than I did with heavy dykes."

My own research on this topic led me to speak with several AFAB drag queens, among them Venus Envy, who calls herself "Orlando's Uncanny Valley Girl." I interviewed Venus in late 2019 at RuPaul's Drag Con, a massive celebration of the RuPaul franchise held annually (pre-covid) in midtown Manhattan. Dressed in a lime wig, a pink vinyl dress and a matte makeup known as "skin frost," Venus said there were no other cis women doing drag in her area when she started. The only reason she could book gigs, she told me, was because the way had been paved by trans women performers. Venus's drag mother Danielle Hunter, a trans woman, "defends me endlessly," she said. It was her drag mother who challenged area clubs when they were reluctant to book Venus. According to that logic, if the club didn't want to book a woman, they shouldn't be booking Danielle as a trans woman, either. "So you think Venus is a woman and I'm not?" Danielle would say to the managers, and they would back down.

Now, Venus told me, there are several cis women drag queens in her area, and she gets much less pushback from club managers. Other AFAB queens described a similar arc: initial resistance to them is giving way to curiosity. AFAB queens have become a useful symbol in determining people's perspectives about the future of drag. In 2016, RuPaul dismissed the prospect of cisgender women competing on his show with the quip, "That show already exists. It's called Miss Universe." At the DragCon where I interviewed Venus, cis female queens were also a litmus test.

When someone at a panel featuring longstanding New York queens asked about them, the panel was fiercely divided. Merrie Cherry, a Brooklyn queen, voiced her opposition to AFAB queens: "There's a difference between a drag queen and someone who dresses up." On the other side was Marti Cummings, a Hell's Kitchen queen who was then running for City Council. "The minute you put drag in a box you kill it," Cummings said, to applause and cheers.

As the DragCon audience indicated, the Hell's Kitchen perspective is winning out: expanding drag's relationship to gender past man-dressing-as-woman is now both the progressive and the fashionable choice. Bambi Galore, a Baltimore-based nonbinary queen, told me that when they started performing, "there was a lot of gatekeeping around the term drag queen." Now, Bambi feels empowered to say to anyone who thinks they aren't a "real" queen: "You can think that. My paychecks tell me differently. My awards tell me differently." Before the Baltimore *City Paper* closed, Galore was named "Best Drag Performer" by a reader poll.

It is becoming a truth universally acknowledged that anyone can be a drag queen. Still, there is one gender demographic I never saw coming.

I would say it as a joke: when are we going to see a trans man drag queen? As if it were the last gender frontier. And in many ways, it was. Cis gay men might not want to live as women full time, but many clearly get joy out of dressing as them. Cis women, trans women, and nonbinary people (both AFAB and AMAB) aren't being asked to make a particularly large gender leap to get to drag queen. But trans men? We put a lot of effort into rejecting womanhood. We cut parts of ourselves off, inject ourselves with hormones, spend thousands of dollars, submit to years of therapy and painful conversations with loved ones. Our traumatic memories often involve being made to dress up in frilly things for holidays. How could anyone expect us to willingly don those clothes again? And if we did, to do it with such consistency and talent that we become good enough at the art form to get on a national platform like *RuPaul's Drag Race*?

In retrospect, there was a lot I didn't see coming. I didn't know that the dance class I attended in Manhattan would be one of my last. I didn't know, when I cancelled my plans to shadow an AFAB nonbinary drag queen through their performance at NYC's Club Cumming, that NYC wouldn't just be in lockdown

for a week or two (events at Club Cumming restarted a year and a half later). And I didn't know about Gottmik.

I found out somehow in the haze of Season 13 buzz, the brutality of a pandemic winter: there would be a trans man on Season 13 of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. My friends who watched *Drag Race* said, Holy shit. My friends who didn't watch *Drag Race* said, Wait, so he started as a woman, and then he transitioned to be a man, and now he's dressing as a woman? And when I said yes, they said, Holy shit.

To me, Kade Gottlieb—drag alias Gottmik—was a marvel, a gift from a benevolent god. I decided to invest all my hopes in him. "He better be good," I texted my friend Liz. "He's representing all my people." "CRUCIFY HIM TO THE HIGHEST STANDARD," she texted back.

Information started to be available online. Gottlieb was twenty-three years old, had come to LA from Arizona to work as a makeup artist, and had connections (I'll use "she" pronouns when referring to Gottmik and "he" for Gottlieb, Gottlieb's expressed preference). He was friends with popular trans YouTuber Gigi Gorgeous and painted Paris Hilton's face. "I need to be the first trans winner of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, period," Gottmik announced at the start of her Meet the Queens episode, the first taste for Season 13 audiences. She wore a shoulder padded space-like suit with geometrical front chest openings that highlighted her bejeweled nipple pasties, and silver-blue makeup that perfectly mirrored the suit in color and contour. Gottmik was obviously a skilled artisan, but did she have a chance at the crown? I decided to scale back my expectations, mostly for my own protection. Now Gottmik existed in reality, instead of just as a concept, and anyone who existed extra-conceptually could fail me.

Despite Gottmik's own attempts to get in front of the narrative that she was "only a look queen," comfortable on Instagram and at a loss on the stage, I thought that she was probably only a look queen. That was ok; it was enough that she was clearly competent. I could see that she wouldn't embarrass our people. She would last until the fourth episode or so, I thought, and then she would go

home, and it would still be historic, and that would be fine. I settled in to wait for the season premiere.

I began my transition a decade ago—an eon in transgender time. In Lincoln, Nebraska, where I went to graduate school, I attended a support group that met at the local Planned Parenthood. Outside, there were often anti-abortion protestors. Inside, the trans men were pretty tough, for reasons of both necessity and style. We might have been eighteen years and eighty miles from Brandon Teena's murder, but that time and distance collapsed for Nebraska trans men, for whom the shadow of Teena's death and the risks it implied loomed large.

The guys in my group were hardened in the way that comes from a certain interpretation of manhood but also from the rest of the world failing you. Many were not in contact with their parents. Many had lost butch lesbian friends, who viewed them as betraying the cause. Many of them worked "man jobs," in construction or landscaping, jobs in which they went stealth, their past unknown to the people around them. One of them had gotten his mastectomy covered by insurance by saying he wanted a breast reduction for back pain, and then telling his doctor on the morning of the surgery that by "reduction" he'd meant taking everything off.

I felt out of place there. I had the opposite of a job that required me to work with my hands: a comfortable grad student life I was privileged enough to be able to conduct mostly in my head. My masculinity models were the nebbishy men of the *Seinfeld* episodes on which I'd been raised. I was picky with the hem of my pants, the fit of my shirts. I loved Beyoncé. I was attracted to women, but I'd never been butch. I couldn't fix anything or set up a tent. I knew that my days as a ballet dancer in early adolescence were not an aberration from my gender journey, but part of it in a way that I hadn't yet been able to articulate. Among my fellow trans men, I wondered if I was real. Maybe I was transitioning to be part of the trend, as the conservative cultural commentators were just beginning to say. Maybe I wasn't enough of a man.

That was also the time when I began watching *Drag Race*, then in its third season. I fell in love quickly: there was its structure with its sequence of mini and main challenge and runways, dependable in its constraints and delightful in its variations; the runway wordplay, which felt like the humor fashion had been missing; the inside jokes and catchphrases and the seduction of knowing in-group drama. The delight of learning an aesthetic world that was far from my own but that I could now pretend to be a judge of: whether a queen had cinched and padded properly, whether the line of her makeup reached her wig, whether she'd worn the same silhouette for the past three runways and really needed to branch out.

I've kept watching *Drag Race* in the decade since, even as many of my friends have stopped—whether because it's now too mainstream for queer bonafides, or because of Ru's past comments about trans people, or because of his baffling decision to lease his Montana ranch for fracking. Through it all I remained faithful to the show and to the fantasy that, as unlike the queens as I was, I could imagine myself among them for an hour every week.

Kade Gottlieb might have been a foot shorter than the other queens, but otherwise he fit in seamlessly. I know because I monitored him closely for the entire season. Part of me was waiting for him to slip up, to reveal some irreconcilable difference between his world and the world of the other queens. Some slang used artificially, perhaps, or a reference missed, or an awkward disconnect in the obligatory disgorging of personal histories.

It didn't happen. From early on, Gottlieb was sharing the kind of easy physicality and affectionate banter with his fellow queens that some of them would never develop before they were eliminated. "You bitch. You're a linebacker," Gottlieb said in an early mini-challenge, playfully shoving Kandy Muse as they both ran for the same fabrics. Kandy Muse is a broad-shouldered queen from the Bronx who could not be more dissimilar, physically or culturally, to Gottmik. Yet in what seemed like no time at all the two were ensconced in a clique, with Tina Burner, known as the Mean Girls.

The Mean Girls label speaks more to the group's popularity than their attitude, because Gottlieb is not mean. He has an unfussy warmth that translates well in the conspiratorial cocoon of the "werkroom," without preventing him from delivering the shade that is also its necessary discourse. In fact, he won the famous "reading" mini challenge, which judges queens by how successfully they can lob personalized barbs at each other. Again using his friend Kandy Muse as the punchline, Gottlieb gestured to the assembled queens: "It is so amazing how we represent such different communities here: Gay, trans … pug."

Gottlieb evinced an appealing complexity. The camera would often show him with his legs crossed delicately on the werkroom couch, quietly observing, yet he was not shy. He has a sly self confidence that often emerged in conversations with RuPaul. When Ru asked Gottlieb to name his three favorite disco songs (part of Ru's ongoing project to publicly shame gay men into knowing their history), Gottlieb didn't miss a beat: "I think I might keep them to myself for right now." Ru found this hilarious—his response to pretty much everything Gottlieb said.

There was a reason why I tensed at every joke thrown Gottlieb's way, then relaxed when he'd aced another verbal test. I was viewing the embrace of cis gay men as the ultimate validation of masculinity. I'm not proud of it, but it's a perception that many of my fellow trans men share. Maybe it's because cis gay men (unlike cis straight men) are known to be particular and aesthetic focused, the arbiters of who is man enough to be desirable.

Or maybe it's just because I'm self-hating. "Gay cis male culture can be incredibly cruel to gay trans men and to femme men," says my friend Mickey, a gay trans man. Mickey, his husband Jack (also a trans man) and I watched Season 13 warily, braced for microaggressions. Would the other queens make a comment about Gottlieb's body not being masculine enough, about his voice being too high, a crude joke about his genitals?

They did not, at least not in the edited version. When Gottmik used a song verse challenge to reveal that she was assigned female at birth, fellow queen Olivia Lux (Freddy Carlton) proved invaluable in supporting Gottmik in the emotional fallout. It is not clear whether Carlton knew that Gottlieb was trans; at any rate, he responds admirably, first modeling his own pronoun use before asking Gottlieb

his. "Thank you for sharing that with us," Carlton says, to Gottlieb's obvious relief. "You're changing the shape of drag. This is big."

Over G-chat, Mickey, Jack and I marveled at this reception, as well as the simple existence of Gottmik in the first place. "I'm amazed at the confidence and security that this kid has," Mickey said. "She's part of a different generation and likely came into gender discovery under a different set of rules. Not to minimize the barriers that Kade Gottlieb had to overcome in his world to get comfortable in his skin, but it's a new queer world."

Among the three of us I sensed some sadness (or maybe it was just me feeling it), for what Kade has that we didn't: the ability to move easily into his gender, to see future versions of himself. Mickey, Jack, and I, who all now look and act extremely gay, all came up to varying degrees in the world of lesbians. Transitioning to queer manhood had felt like immigrating to another country. This did not seem to be the case for Gottlieb. Like me, Gottlieb had watched *Drag Race* from its inception, but instead of being a late twenty something grad student in Nebraska, Gottlieb had been a middle school Catholic school kid in Arizona. Kade Gottlieb was developing a selfhood just as *Drag Race* was developing a selfhood.

Of course, this didn't necessarily mean that becoming a drag queen was self-evident for him. There was no Gottmik for Gottmik to look up to. At least he had drag to watch, though. As a kid growing up in Indiana pre-Internet, my exposure to drag was severely limited. My first time seeing drag live had been the Miss Gay Indiana University pageant in 1999, and though in retrospect the performances were rather conventional, it was still a revelation. Here was a man, putting on another gender. What kinds of gender could *I* put on?

That Miss Gay IU performance came three years after the publication of *Bodies That Matter*, the book in which Judith Butler made it clear both that drag is one of the best ways to think about gender and that inhabiting a gender is not as simple as putting on and taking off clothes. Of course, at the time I didn't know

Butler's work. I'm not sure that Gottmik does either, but that hasn't stopped her from embodying Butler's theories.

In her famous reading of *Paris is Burning*, Butler writes that the labor of drag makes the labor of gender visible. The word *labor* here is intentional; performativity is not nearly as playful as the popular gloss of Butler's work would make it seem. Gottmik, too, tends to frame his drag as work, and not just in the Werk, Bitch sense. In his first confessional, Gottlieb explains, "I was born a girl, transitioned to a guy, and dress like a girl for money."

Gottlieb's neat summation reflects our increasing understanding of the difference between gender identity and gender expression. We (the viewers of *Drag Race*, at least) are now comfortable with someone being assigned one gender, identifying as another, and expressing a third. It's the expression that takes *work*. Gottmik makes visible the emotional labor we expect from femme individuals. This is the reason drag kings have never taken off on any major level (perhaps in addition to their more limited palette of silhouettes). None of us—not cis women, not trans people, and certainly not cis men—use men to help us access our best selves. Gottlieb puts on women's clothes to work for us.

So what kind of work is he doing? Butler says drag can either denaturalize or renaturalize gender; it all depends on the drag. A queen who can't be "clocked" (identified as having been assigned male at birth) is known as a "fishy queen" (fish refers to the smell of a vagina). The fishier you are, the less of the work of your gender the audience sees. If you're a fishy queen, you're not transgressing gender norms, you're showing their power. But a queen who can be clocked shows us not just her own failure to meld seamlessly into an ideal, but the failure of gender overall. Every lump in hip padding or darkened jawline reminds us that what we think of as womanhood is just a collection of repeated signifiers.

Gottmik complicates the question of what is fish, like she complicates everything else. When we see Gottmik dwarfed by her fellow queens, our thought is not to call that "fish," though technically it's the most fish of all, since height and bone structure are among the least fungible sex-related characteristics. Our instinct, when we see her dwarfed by the other queens, is to remember that Gottmik was born a girl. If we're seeing her as fish, on the other hand, we're acknowledging that

her female illusion is successful, which means we're acknowledging that there was an illusion in the first place.

When Olivia Lux said she uses "she" in drag and "he" out of it, Gottmik says she does the same. If she's called "he" in drag, she feels clocked. You'd think that on one level, clocking would be a win-win situation for Gottmik. If she's not clocked, she's seen as a successful (in the fishy sense) drag queen. If she's clocked, she's being read as a man, which you would think would be validating for other reasons.

But I don't believe that Gottmik means "clocked" in precisely the same sense. I believe she means clocked as in "assigned female at birth." In other words, she doesn't want to be different from the other queens. If you're not reading her as a successful drag queen, you're not reading her as a successful man.

Two years ago, I went to see Divine Trash, a cis woman who impersonates Divine, the late and much beloved filth queen famous for her John Waters film roles. Divine made her name in my home city of Baltimore, and the small crowd at the bar that night—mostly older white women—was eager to prove their bonafides. One woman used to own a vintage store where Divine shopped. She'd seen a lot of Divine impersonators over the years, she told me, but thought that the one we were about to see was "the closest thing so far" to the actual Divine. I asked what she thought about this particular drag queen being a woman. "It doesn't bother me," she said. "Her face out of makeup is Glenn Milstead."

In becoming Divine, the Divine impersonator had also become Glenn Milstead, Divine's given name. The more I talked to cis women and nonbinary drag queens, the more that idea returned. Through a circular, retroactive magic, their drag queen personas created a background image of manhood, which in turn lent legitimacy to the drag queen foreground.

Bambi Galore, the Baltimore-based AFAB nonbinary drag queen who hosted the Divine Trash show, introduced me to the concepts of "ghosting" and "spooking" in drag, which describe attempts by AMAB performers to disguise the parts of their bodies that appear male. Bambi in contrast, told me they "spook the spook"

by wearing gloves (as if to hide mannish hands), or wearing a choker to hide an Adam's Apple that isn't actually there. If someone is hiding, we assume there is something to seek.

Gottmik, by contrast, isn't hiding anything; she may not have an Adam's Apple, but her manhood is real. That makes her drag a little different from AFAB cis or nonbinary queens who create the illusion of a manhood with which they don't identify. Does this make Gottmik's drag less transgressive? After all, Gottmik, unlike cis and nonbinary queens, is *doing the opposite*, in Orlando queen Venus Envy's succinct assessment of conventional drag. Thinking like a second wave feminist: might there be an edge of misogynistic parody to Gottmik's drag, as if she rejected her "natural" womanhood so she could put it on again in a gross approximation of the form?

But such an interpretation wouldn't actually be seeing Gottmik. She's capable of serving fish (as someone who has done Paris Hilton's makeup, her Snatch Game Hilton face was indistinguishable from the original). But she also uses drag to call attention to her transness. This happens in the content she creates, as we saw with her "born a girl" verse. It also happens in her fashion: in her trans flag inspired ensembles and in her penchant for cut-outs that reveal her top-surgery-flattened chest and a seemingly endless parade of cheeky nipple pasties.

With her drag, Gottmik validates her particular manhood while problematizing manhood in general. Showing, like revolutionary drag should, the seams on the body where gender is made. Gottmik is now famous for her opening Snatch Game gambit, the gimmick that set the tone for her challenge win. Positioned on the game set with the other queens, Ru feeds her his opening question. Gottmik, as Paris, pretends that she doesn't know she's being filmed: "Just let me know when the cameras are rolling, and we'll kill it." When Ru says they are in fact filming, Gottmik abruptly switches vocal inflections to a signature Hilton sultry rasp. Ru busts up.

The thing about Gottmik is that she's always performing. She's performing even when the cameras are off (because the cameras are never truly off), even when she is impersonating someone who is pretending she's not performing, even when she's Gottmik out of Paris Hilton drag, even when he's Kade Gottlieb

out of Gottmik drag. Gottlieb's confessionals are their own masterful exercises in persona. He mostly uses the cutaways to self-deprecate, creating a humanizing counter-arc to his otherwise unassailable competence. He winces in reaction to a shot of his fumbling dance moves and claims that "this footage is gonna haunt me forever" after he does a particularly white impersonation of the Afro-Latina Kandy Muse.

All this isn't to suggest that Gottmik is fundamentally manipulative, all cold artifice. We don't know who the real Gottmik is, not because there's no real Gottmik, but because they're all real Gottmiks. Nowhere is Gottmik's interplay of personas shown so powerfully as when she participates in the finale episode ritual where Ru holds up a photo of each contestant as a child and asks them to speak to their younger self. In the photo, which Ru specified was being shown with Gottmik's consent, the toddler drag queen is dressed in turtle pajamas, peeking out of what appears to be a toilet bowl. "Kade—that's your name now," Gottmik says, addressing the photo, "you just have to realize that you have to live your truth."

In showing a childhood photo, Gottmik has taken the final step in owning her own narrative. Before we can clock her, she has clocked herself.

Etymologically, "clock" has been slang for "face" for a long time. We read faces like we read clocks. In drag, you're supposed to be *unclockable*. If someone clocks you, they've identified you as a drag queen—i.e. not fish, i.e. not a "real woman."

We already know Gottmik revels in clocking herself as a drag queen, because that makes her more of a man. When she shows her childhood photo she clocks herself, in that she identifies herself as having been born a girl. She also clocks herself in the chronological sense. In turning back the clock she's showing the self that she used to be the love that he needed, and so retroactively healing herself, just as being a drag queen retroactively makes her a man. She's doing this without forgetting her girlhood which is also her boyhood, there in the photo of young Kade, whose birth name we don't know because it doesn't matter, even though it does matter to Gottmik, who has said her birth name is part of her drag name,

thereby showing this name is not dead so much as reconfigured in a new identity that was also already the old.

It's true that Gottmik's "live your truth" assertion is more than a little pat. It's an inspo-cliché, right at home with the decontextualized drag discourse of my cardio twerkout class. It's easy to be cynical about the function of drag today: the words and worlds of femmes of color commodified to enhance the lives of white women. That's all true, and it's more than that. Gottmik's citational, playful, and vulnerable drag is a good reminder that a commodified discourse can be used for transgressive purposes. The first time I saw Gottmik confront her childhood self, I was too busy being genuinely moved to clock the Live Love Laugh vibes. My girlhood is not dead to me, but I have never known precisely what to do with it. It's easy for me to slip into thinking of it as something to be ashamed of. Watching Gottmik in front of young Kade, I felt a new agency around my own childhood. I was reminded, like good drag does, of the ways I can create myself. That there is no part of my story that doesn't belong to me.

Georgina Marie

Self-Elegy

my passing left behind words of hemlock
and mountain stones

what I worked for as wordsmith, poeta del dolor
Pura neta, a fellow writer exclaimed once

removed my leaned-back body from below
Konocti Avenue oak trees

before this, I kept repeating to myself
how my presence was not needed, would not be missed

does anyone see me anymore?

I left behind language of peonies and out of season blood-tulips
a house of deer sternums and collected budgie feathers

overused books of poetry and a pain I couldn't bear anymore
did I leave an impression on the hardwood dining floor

where my dogs (loved more than this world) and I would lay together
when the afternoon sun hit the cherry veneer just so—

the aureate sun shimmering on our backs as we flipped
from backside to belly like pearlescent fish out of water

do the hounds call for me when traffic nears the house I once inhabited
do they still sleep where my bed was placed, king-sized

bought for them with a small corner for myself
so they could live out their rescued lives with ample space

did I regret the leaving?
Yes

did I know it was coming?
Yes

Malachi Black

Each Crack in My Voice Is Static from Another World

I'm unintelligible: black glass
split, a broken lens: or is it

closed, this aperture: a little
hole, bored like an orca's eye

into a camera: on screen,
a flicker pixelating, blue

as a butane flame: binary,
this is zero, yes: one, no: it

is, it isn't: on, it's midnight:
I can see it in the living

room: it's clear, I'm standing in
the image, distant: here

I hear, so let's begin: I blink
the signal, host: hello: I speak

in code, I say: my name, echo,
repeat, it's strange, I see, I'm re:

arranged: I have to go, that is:
I'm breaking up; I can't, I'm in:

the network: error: message, me,
is it: the microphone, I'm in

this face, the signal failing is
my own: I am satellite: hello

Bobuq Sayed

The Prayer of Fugitives

Fridays were the worst because, with everything shut for the holy day, the scalding questions at home became impossible to ignore. One of Madar's friends from the factory might waddle over to deliver a lidless pot of korma bamiya or, if I was unlucky, a neighbor with an eligible daughter would stop by again to check if I had reconsidered their offer.

"Believe me, child, no girl in all of Tehran is more pure than my Tamina. Not one." I confessed I was too committed to Allah for any kind of love distraction. Or I said I was focused on saving up for an education to secure a better life. Madar and her sister-in-law Schaesta Ama, whom we lived with in a dual room attic, were convinced I was wasting precious opportunities.

"Paykhambaram, my little prophet," Madar cooed as I tore the sesame-lined seams of the flat bread to sop up the last of the breakfast paneer. "Beauty never lasts. All these long days you spend out there laboring on the roads are crisping your skin. The sun will not be kind to you for much longer. The change is happening already. Your eyes are older than your age. Soon there'll be no girls left to marry. You'll become a shriveled up raisin. Then what will you do?"

Madar came to me and pressed her palm to my forehead, sweeping my row of black curls. Up close, her crow's feet were dead-end forks in a riverbed.

"And how will we afford to live?" I said. "A marriage is not cheap—you know that. A new bride has certain expectations of her groom, and we have no more gold bangles left to pawn."

"She's right," Schaesta Ama interjected from the next room. Though her spine had buckled with age, her hawkish sensibility remained intact. I pictured the flecks of saliva that accompanied her words and didn't have to be close to feel their spray. "What girl will want to marry a spoiled boy who cannot recognize the good offers made to him? I wouldn't give my daughter to a brat like you."

I waited for her to finish, but my eyes remained on Madar. "Each month, our purses get tighter. New costs all the time. I fear what the three of you would do if I

wasn't able to help you with the costs. And where would this new bride live? Look around. Madar, dear, imagine another mouth to feed."

"It is possible that Afsanah may be able to return to the public schools soon," Madar said. My younger sister, Afsanah, was busy memorizing her school books, breaking her attention only to tend to Schaesta Ama's sore legs and gut. "Without the cost of her tutor, we'll be able to breathe again."

"Madar, there's been talk of letting Afghans back into the schools for years."

"Yes, but the government might reverse course in the near future. Your Khala said so at the market. They'll give the Afghans who are already here papers and close the borders for good."

"And then what? Schaesta Ama's health is not improving. Her medicine is not getting any cheaper, not with the sanctions. You've been working so late, you can barely stay awake."

"Tsk, can't you listen to me for once, Mansur? All I own in this life is wisdom. Allow me to talk some sense into you." She withdrew her gentle hand from my head and turned her attention to the stubborn thread of blue string that had come loose from the stitching of her shawl.

"There is time for marriage. Better to find a suitable girl with modest expectations. Wait until our hands are open again. It's important we choose carefully."

Madar took my empty plate and placed it in the pigeon-gray sink. I was quietly grateful for the pressure subsiding, though it would resume again soon enough.

Privacy was never valued much at home. Demands for steaming cardamom tea and pleas for help with arithmetic travelled freely through the thin walls of our flat. When Mirwais, the mercurial tailor downstairs, fought with his wife, Schaesta Ama's mood soured for days, though Afsanah soon developed the strength of will to knock on their door and enquire for lentils when we came up short, a penance on their part for our bearing witness to their infighting.

This was the lot we'd been handed, and in truth, we were grateful for it. Plenty of others hadn't made it across the border. Many still tried.

That night, when I left the fireside to check the back alley, a frigid cold poured in through the window. We were nearing the eye of the season, and none of us were sufficiently prepared to suffer through another winter.

Hasib's paint-chipped white sedan purred outside. He must have just arrived. I had been checking every few minutes before I placed the pot of water onto the fire rail to boil. Even then, he grew impatient and the sound of his horn soon pummeled into the housing flats, rattling the naked almond tree that hung inches above the car's roof. I needed to hurry.

Schaesta Ama would not want to hear the horn more than once. The shooting knee pain that made her patience dwindle had exceeded breaking point a while ago. If she peered out of the foggy glass and saw that I was leaving with Hasib of all people, at this late hour no less, I wouldn't hear the end of it. The gate would be locked when I returned, as she often threatened, and I'd be lucky to catch any sleep before dawn. For four years, the three of us had been living in her home, and she never missed a chance to remind us. She was the first of our family to cross over and, after her husband died from an infected kidney stone, she called our home on the outskirts of Kabul one day and told us it was time to join her. She had expected her brother, my father, to be with us when we arrived at her door.

In the ensuing years, I came to wonder what happened during her time alone in Tehran to make her change the way she did. Her temper did not used to be so easily triggered, that much I remember, although I was younger back then and only spent time at her house on Eid, where she delighted in watching as Afsanah and I gorged on her fig and walnut spread. She used to insist we eat more, stay longer, help pick the cherries from the bulging trees in her backyard. Those days of abundance were long gone. I placed a thermos of hot tea by her feet and ran a stained hand towel under the copper faucet before laying it over her knee. Her gaze didn't stray from her TV serials.

"What's all this?" she snapped. My attempt at retreat had been poorly timed to an ad break. "Think I don't know these games by now, boy? Dewana, you think your own Ama a mad woman? Not me. I see right through you." She shook her knobbed index finger at me, but her eyes darted back and forth from the little square television balanced on a wooden stand in the corner.

"Ama jan, I would never. Not in this lifetime. Your poor knee needs attention. Hardly anyone cares. The others worry only for themselves. But not me, Ama jan, I suffer tenfold to see you suffer even a pinch. That's my curse. Haven't I always cared for you the most?"

"Ungrateful, yes, I knew that. But dishonest too? Your father would be so ashamed to see his only son ..." Schaesta Ama's voice trailed off into a mild groan as the pressure of the cloth, with thin sheets of ice from the neighbor's freezer tucked inside, numbed her knee.

A prayer spilled from under my breath. Kneeling by her side on the red rug worn to its coarsest nub, I witnessed the release of pain from Shaesta Ama's body. My palms were wet from a mixture of relief and the damp cloth. Placing three kisses on Schaesta Ama's cheeks, our customary ritual for greetings and farewells both here and back home, I slinked out of her space, grabbing my favorite Levi's denim jacket from the back of the chair on the way out.

I was glad on this occasion that Madar worked such late hours. Hers was a different kind of disappointment to Shaesta Ama's. Powerful in its subtlety. She could run a blade across a crowded room with a flick of her jasmine-scented wrists. I appreciated that strength in her. Afsanah and I owed our lives to it.

"Trouble," Madar called Hasib whenever she discovered I'd met up with him, perplexed by what a good boy like me could want with that nobody, who had all the privileges of Iranian citizenship and still amounted to nothing more than a street urchin.

"Trust me," I told her. "Hasib has promised better opportunities for our family, better paying work for me, and another job for you, Madar, one that won't make your cough worse."

Careful to place one foot directly in front of the other on the most stable part of the narrow clay steps that connected our home to the rest of the city, I noticed the small window was still lit in the room Madar, Afsanah, and I shared. My dutiful sister was in there, the gleaming polestar of our family, burrowed inside her English language text books until exhaustion roped her eyes closed or the sudden loss of electricity shut the whole complex down. Even when it did, I often found her reading by candlelight late into the night. It was not so long ago that she used

to compare notes with her Irani classmates and spend afternoons at their houses but, one by one, as the months of her reluctant absence from school grew in tally, those friends fell away. She dreamed of using her English to live in Europe one day. I worked to make her dream possible.

"Ay there's the big guy. Player boy, huh? Finally, you show up," Hasib said. His shaven cheek reeked of cigarettes. I watched him extinguish one under the sole of his shiny dress shoe.

"I told you not to park here. Anywhere else I said. Don't you remember? Schaesta Ama can see you if she looks out. She makes a big problem for me if she discovers I'm sneaking out."

Hasib curled the side of his mouth. "Player boy, don't you know by now? I like when your dumb Ama waves her cheap sandals at me from the window. I almost blew the horn a few more times just to see the monkey beat her breast, give her a good reason to put on a show."

Anger swelled beneath my skin like a geyser splitting my chest. That moment, I swear, I could've cut loose at him. A dig at a family member is a grave dishonor, no matter the nationality or the context. Hasib knew that. Though we'd only been friends for a few months, he knew my duty was bound to my family, he knew the web of their lives threaded together every decision I made. Hasib also knew I was counting on him for the free seat in his car. He knew I needed it for the chance of another encounter with the silver-jeweled man from the rotary. Hasib could get away with saying whatever he wanted to me, and he chose to do exactly that.

I squeezed myself into the back seat, next to two other young men I recognized from previous rides. They nodded to me, but didn't extend a hand or a cheek. The second my door slammed shut, the volume of the bass and the synthesizer on the stereo doubled, and then tripled, as the car skidded away. I could only hope my departure hadn't aroused any suspicion but, lurching forward, I swept my mind free of fear. It was of no use now. This was my time.

The frame of the vehicle had been illegally lowered on its axis, and the adjustment made the tires vibrate just inches beneath my hips. We sped past the dark shapes of milling bodies gathered outside the Tehran Bazaar. Wallahs peddling chai and chewing tobacco dotted the streets the whole way. My

legs struggled to find a crevice between the backpacks crumpled at my feet. The other men brought overnight bags with them, prepared in case they met someone who invited them home. I hadn't seen that happen yet and, the way the grease glowed on their faces and collars, I couldn't imagine them ever breaking their dry spell.

Hasib brought me along in his car because I was pretty and young. He told me that the first time we met, after I declined his offer to join him in the public restroom of Khob Park. All kinds of men gathered there. Doctors, husbands, body builders. I only meant to see it for myself.

"Watch out for the men in uniform," he'd told me that first night. I had no one left to message and he could see I was cycling through the same read texts in my inbox.

"I'm only here to watch," I told him respectfully.

"You learn a lot from watching," he said, and inched closer to where I sat on the end of the unlit bench. "But you learn more from doing."

Taking the left at the junction before Baharestan Square and pushing on beyond the traffic by the aluminum mall, the trip to the neighborhood around the University took no longer than twenty minutes. I remember because each minute felt like an hour and my knees were starting to darken from the sweat I wiped onto them.

Hasib swerved into the circle alongside another car driven by an old squinting woman and, a second later, he changed lanes to the innermost ring where he found a comfortable cruising speed, hugging the edge of the yellowing plants around the old black statue of a man on horseback lit up at the center. The rotary was not busy yet. Sometimes there was a brief lapse between the regular evening crowd and the late-night visitors we had come to mingle with.

It only took a few minutes of circling to spot the first car, drawn to the infamous rotary for the same narcotic purpose as us. Men our age and some much older were crammed into a compact silver Nissan. Their elbows dangled out of windows rolled all the way down: a clear sign of prowling interest. They weren't exciting, but their appearance held the promise of more to come. The man sitting beside me reached over my lap and wound my window down. He hollered out into the wind. The Nissan sidled up to the side of our car and remained there as

Hasib, one arm wrapped around the steering wheel and little heed paid to the road, addressed them.

"Actif or passif."

Even in the poor light of the quick-spinning streetlamps, a set of calluses were visible on the mouth and cheek of the one seated in the back who I was suddenly closest to. He snarled his interest. The sight of his injuries made me recoil but the man beside me, who was smothering me in my seat so he could engage, either didn't notice or didn't care.

"Come over. What you want, ah?" the other driver, a squat-faced man with a thick moustache, said slyly. From the backseat, the calloused man revealed a mouth of bulbous teeth stained purple with betel nut. His collared shirt was an unbuttoned solicitation.

I made a pass for the window knob to withdraw my interest, but another jerking motion swiped my hand away. It was the man seated next to me; his thigh and half his pelvis were now straddling my knee, pinning me to the seat cushion as though I were caught in a mouse trap. His mouth hung loose around his jaw. Even as shades of street light blinked on and off his skin, bringing him in and out of focus, the source that energized him was clear: the hunger of the hunt. Confronting this urge in a man inches away from me flushed my face crimson.

Then, as quickly as we'd been brought into the rotary's orbit, the two cars peeled apart.

"What the hell, Hasib? Are you crazy?" He slammed his palm against the driver's felt headrest and the rebounding swing of his elbow narrowly missed my face. "Why you ruining it for me, man?"

"You saw what we saw. Don't be stupid." A chorus of laughter spread through the men in the car and I felt the weight on my side ease at last. "What's the use of old reptiles like that if they can't host anyway? You going to take him back home with you and introduce him, are you?"

He clucked his tongue. "Man, he was into me."

"He was not into you, stupid. He was looking at the Afghan."

Hasib's eyes sent daggers at me from the rearview mirror and, as the man beside me settled back in his defeat, his legs spread again and squeezed me

further into the side. Still, I kept my breath steady by imagining a glimpse of the silver earring. Just one more sighting was all I needed to sustain myself, some confirmation that the enduring pulse of our first encounter—when our bodies had dangled in the night like two notes of the same flute song—was mutually felt. Hasib had resented it, of course. He said the silver jewel was poser-behavior and he drove off knowing that, by doing so, something bound would be split apart. My fourteen-hour shifts replacing the lead pipes that burst often under a city as ancient as Tehran had been bearable because of those too-brief minutes four Fridays ago. I withstood the gruel of marital pressures with the vain hope that, by night, I might chance upon him again.

I turned my focus to the four roads that fed an infrequent stream of cars into the rotary. Four opportunities for the car containing him. A gold Lexus stopped at the brink of the circle and, for a fleeting moment, while my vision was interrupted by its headlights, I shifted up on my seat, only to swiftly be let down a second later when the passengers turned out to be two young women wearing pink chadors tossed elegantly around their necks. Perhaps students at the University.

Another car of men appeared. An unmarked bottle was passed between its occupants and the car moved so fast its wheels lifted off the ground. More cars of leering men came and went as we crawled toward the lip of midnight and, each time, Hasib elected to peel away. Either the men weren't fit enough, or they all insisted they were actif only. Regardless of the reason, if we even got one, there was no point in any of us protesting. There was always a car to replace one rejected.

"Ay look who's coming," said Hasib. His shoulders rolled back. "The pretty rich boys from the north. These ones are mine. Just you wait."

My ears tingled and I shook myself free of the nook I'd been forced into. The gold Lexus sped through the stop sign and flew into the rotary meters away from us. It kicked up dust, but the car's condition was pristine and gleamed as though it were new.

I couldn't see the backseat at first, where I'd spotted the silver-jeweled man last time, but Hasib didn't let us fall back for long. This was his territory, after all. He never told us how long he'd been at it, but his confidence made me think these

thrills were years in the making. Soon the two cars were side by side and it was there that my eyes found what I'd been looking for all along, first by the glint of his earring and then by the shy smile that quivered on his mouth.

Both our windows came down fast. I twisted and turned my face to the window the way spearwort flowers bend toward the sun. I inhaled his closeness and kept the fresh breath of it inside my lungs. No amount of pressure could make me spare one inch of room at the open window for the impatient arms and shoulders that flanked my side. He belonged to me.

Then and there, the freezing night nibbling the tip of my bare nose and ears, I grew drunk of him. My eager heart stood no chance of restraint. That's the way I remember it still. The moment the poets spoke of. What all the ghazals were about. The longing of the longest croon. Unfettered desire had finally graced me and I welcomed the blessing.

His clean fingers tapped a cryptic chord on the flap of the window and his mouth opened as if to receive me from the wind. The two of us weren't aligned for long. His face would come into view for a brief gleaming moment and then someone tapped the brake and my eyes landed instead on the gelled hair and pruned beard of the man up front or the gold paint of the trunk.

Like me, he was the youngest of the men in his car and the only one clean shaven, whereas ink-black facial hair hedged the jaws of everyone else: an excessive tendency for self-curation popular among city men. I was snagged by his smile, all of me surrendered to it, but I couldn't open my mouth to speak or even settle on the right moment to try. I knew he felt it too.

Impatient, Hasib intervened. "You have space for all of us?"

No response. The other driver focused on completing the turn of the rotary again and again, almost in denial of our deliberate symmetry. One of the other back seat passengers leaned over to whisper something into the driver's ear.

A frustrated voice beside me spoke up. "What are you doing, man, get closer. They're all eyes. Look at them. They want it." Hasib sucked his teeth from the front but, moments later, he narrowed the slim distance that separated our two cars. The move silenced the cold air that rushed like running water between us.

"We can follow you home. Any parties tonight?" Hasib repeated.

Still there was no reply from the other car. The violin-swept melody of Googoosh's latest hit "Behesht" wafted out from their speakers. Her forlorn voice sang of the crippling fear of love's end and the misleading road of doubt. I wanted more than anything to listen closer.

Their driver turned to the man seated beside him at the front, the one face-to-face with Hasib, and they shared a laugh that was short but audible, though the words leading up to it weren't. My silver-jeweled companion tilted forward on his seat and addressed the man in front of him through the head rest. Then, as Hasib spoke up again, my gut sank.

"What? You think you're better than us or something? Too good to stop and talk like real men? Fuck you and fuck your whore mother too."

The exhilarating beat in my head rose to meet Googoosh's majestic peak just as the windows of the two cars closed abruptly, smothering the song in the most punishing of silences. Hasib slowed the car from the pace he'd been keeping, and the Lexus sprang forward. It overtook us and started widening its course out of the rotary. A pair of gleaming eyes shot through the departing car's rear window and some impulse tugged me into action, something I couldn't name, let alone reason with.

The opportunity was too potent to concede. I couldn't let him go so soon, not after weeks of bracing myself to see him again. I took the door handle and prayed my duas. One second, I was stuck inside the spurned chamber with Hasib's foul mouth and the next the gravel road slammed into me as my body entered the evening like an unfurling rug.

I didn't stop to check if I was ok. I didn't think. My legs shepherded me to the place I needed to be, back to the closeness of him that lingered on my tongue. Hasib's howls and the chiding laughter of the other men came in waves from somewhere behind me. A horn blared several times. Thankfully, there were no other cars or, if there were, they avoided me. I crossed the four lanes of the rotary toward the exit the Lexus had taken to speed away. I could see a set of taillights in the distance, little rubies getting smaller, blending into the misty intersection ahead.

My run settled into a jog. Plumes of hot breath came out of my mouth. I slowed to a canter and, for the first time, dared to glance over my shoulder.

Hasib's car was receding from sight and, still, I pushed on. What else could I have done?

Soon I would need to pay attention to the side of my thigh that had hit the ground during my fall but there was time before the ache and exhaustion wore me down. I wholly believed I could make it to the car—the rubies hadn't yet vanished from the horizon. In fact, when I squinted, the car appeared larger than it had just a minute ago. I picked up my pace. The rear fender came into focus and then the side mirror, and then I saw the patch of window where two bright eyes stared out at me, compelling me to return. The exhaust pipe chugged smoke and the Lexus hummed, perched precariously by the side of the road.

I didn't have anything to say to him. There was no way to explain myself. I was hurt and alone and out of breath and without any way of getting home. And so I stood there, empty-handed, leaning on the side of the car door as the window slid down.

"You crazy son of a bitch," he said.

I smiled wryly. Heat and the sweet stench of imported clove cigarettes drifted out from the interior. Another car slammed on its brakes and swerved around the Lexus.

I beamed at him, the time between us a vacuum that devoured every thought of every other man I'd ever yearned for. "May I have your phone number?"

Someone from inside the car hissed. They wanted to keep moving. From the open window, he looked up at me through his thick endowment of lashes. Then he handed me something, as though he'd been waiting all along for me to ask.

The Lexus took off with the window still down. Dust and smoke coated me but I didn't think twice about my appearance. I watched the rubies recede until the hungry night consumed them again. I opened my clenched fist. On the back of a folded sales receipt, twelve digits were scrawled in blue ink and one word, a name: Payam.

The sun was an unsavory reminder of the day ahead. I managed to scramble together enough loose change for the first bus heading east and let the secret

numbers burning a hole in my trousers fire the engine of my long journey home.

It was no surprise that Hasib and the others had left me behind. I suspected they were not at all concerned for my whereabouts. If anything, they were probably content to let me suffer.

What mattered was that I won by having made contact with Payam. I didn't have to play their game anymore. His furtive smile and the few words I milked from our moment redeemed all the lost sleep and the throbbing pain in my grazed thigh, which showed through the gash in my jeans. The feeling was mutual. Payam had shared his details. Knowing this, the bus ride felt luxurious.

When I arrived home at last, I found the front gate rattled on its hinge but didn't give way to one firm push after another. I swore under my breath.

A flimsy padlock on the handle prevented the gate from opening. The lock hadn't been there when I left. I stared through the diamond-shaped fencing of the gate at our attic at the top of the stairs. This had to be the work of Schaesta Ama, though she wouldn't have come all the way down to do it herself. Afsanah had likely been recruited, however reluctantly. While Madar was at work, Schaesta Ama had forced her young niece out into the cold to teach me a lesson.

I cupped my hands and blew warm air into them. Under different circumstances, I might have scaled the fence, however, my injury already made every step a stab and I couldn't imagine completing the maneuver without making my injury worse. The neighbors were up for the workday. One of them might call the police on me if they saw me try, though in the southern part of the city it often took several hours for anyone to show up during emergencies. Still, I feared having the Iranian authorities called without any papers in my possession. I wandered over to the back lane and hoisted a seat under the skeletal figure of the overhanging almond tree.

My phone calls to Afsanah went unanswered. Either she was asleep or forbidden to respond. The two or three people I might consider friends in Tehran, who I'd met on work sites or online, didn't own cars and they could be of no help in my situation. The blue hue of my screen taunted me to send the text message it hurt to even consider. But the cold and the isolation hurt more. I dialed the numbers on the back of the sales receipt and waited. And waited some more. Nothing.

Eventually, Mirwais, the tailor who lived downstairs, appeared at the gate and fiddled with the little lock on his way to the small shop on the main street where he worked.

"You Afghans only make life difficult for us. You think we don't have our own problems already? Are you trying to make me late?"

I stood behind the grills and held steady the hollow bar of the gate for him to unlock. "My apologies, Mirwais jan. Never would we knowingly obstruct your good work. I'll speak to the others. It won't happen again."

A scowl and a mumble was all he offered in response. I closed the gate behind me and pocketed the lock. In my palm, the silver lock seemed so weak and yet it made clear that my worst fears had been realized. I scaled the clay stairs carefully, though by then I knew the damage was done. My attempt at discretion had failed. Only prayer could keep me company now.

When I opened the creaking front door, the first thing I saw was Madar holding her head in her hands on the table in the center of the room. It took a moment to make sense of everything but, when I did, the sights and sounds came crashing in like floodwater. Schaesta Ama hobbled back and forth behind Madar, rapping her cane on the floor in a sort of ritual flagellation.

I only caught the tail end of her tirade, some mention of our ungratefulness and disrespect, the smear we were on her brother's good name. Then Schaesta Ama caught sight of me.

"And here he is, the dewana himself. Has us for fools, does he? The nerve! Is this a hotel, is it?" She shook her cane at me, holding herself steady as her white knuckles clenched the headrest of Madar's chair. "We stay here all night while you go off with the city scum to do who knows what all night. Is that our agreement, is it? Well, I never agreed to such treachery. Not in my house. Not under the purview of Allah. After all we've done for you. Your mother breaks her back working all night and this is how you choose to repay us? Have you no shame, boy?"

Madar tried to cut in, but her voice was drowned out. "Not just any old scum either. Everyone knows those men you ride with. They are carnal, or are you too stupid to realize? I've told you before. I've made my position clear. All along you've

been declining these good Muslim girls we offer you, and for whom? For them? You think your Ama is crazy, but not this time."

Again, Madar tried to raise her voice, gazing at me across the room with shattered glass in the corners of her eyes, but the indictment from Schaesta Ama at her rear was too strong. "This is not your home anymore; do you hear me? Don't ever come back here. I'm done with you. And if anyone asks, you tell them you chose this path for yourself. Get your stuff and go. Leave."

"Tsk, Schaesta please," came Madar's voice at last. Heavy breaths rasped from her chest as though she were fresh from exercise. I hadn't heard her so broken since Baba's death at the border, when she first realized we would need to head onwards into Iran without him. "Maybe he has some other explanation. Don't kick him out without giving him a chance to speak."

Both of their faces turned like fishing hooks toward me and, my back against the front door, I saw a third set of eyes too, Afsanah's, webbed with worry. She was hidden partly by the door to the next room. All that was left of my heart took flight.

I have shuffled that moment over in my memory a thousand times. I might have flatly denied any affiliation with Hasib and the wretched company he kept, or invented a near-death and urgent rescue of someone in need, an Afghan colleague perhaps or an orphan or a widow. But any minor lie was an insult to the truth of Payam in my heart. Instead, I met my small opportunity for redemption with silence and red-faced retreat.

As it happened, Payam did read my messages. Later that morning, he came directly from the north in a taxi and picked me up from where I sat unmoored beneath the naked almond tree. I carried only the Levi's jacket on my back and whatever other clothes and documents I had stuffed into a satchel. Amidst the prodding of Schaesta Ama, I barely had time to hold trembling Afsanah to my chest and tell her I loved her, that I was sorry I had to leave her so suddenly, that I'd be back for her, that I would find a way to keep paying for her tutor, that we'd get her to Europe.

"Payam," I asked in a whisper. "Where do you live? Could I come stay with you?"

I was rifling through options in the taxi, but my expectant tone faltered as I read the expression on his face. The hours between our encounters had flattened my desire and his too, once he'd heard what transpired, corroding the fledgling fibers of whatever might have been.

Outside, the number of construction projects along the roads were already increasing in frequency and scope as we drove closer to the center of the city. "Mansur, this city is fine for people like us when you've got a bit of money. If I get arrested, my parents will buy my way out. They don't like what I do but they will make sure I have the freedom to live however I want. You understand? If I can't find a job, they will find one for me." After a pause, in a considerably quieter voice, he added, "I don't know what kind of life is possible here for someone like you."

The driver's eyes glanced back at us from the rearview when Payam switched to the middle seat. He had another idea. Had I considered Istanbul? It was a better life there, he said. He knew some people, good friends, other Iranians who could help me land on my feet and connect me to resources for refugees. It was easier for Afghans to apply for asylum on humanitarian grounds. He leaned forward on his seat and told the driver to take us to the central train station.

"Let me buy your ticket." The side of his hand brushed mine on the cracked leather seat and it was the closest to completion we'd come. In the side pocket of my Levi's jacket, I fingered the cold grooves of the padlock as though it were a string of prayer beads. I had heard of people getting across the borders to Turkey, but the thought shook loose a terror in me. Istanbul was more than a thousand miles away from everyone I knew. Could I make it? And even if I did, what next? Would I ever come back?

I passed the padlock over my lap and pressed it into the soft palm of Payam. I had nothing else of value to give him. No one was coming with me. There was no one but me.

The silver gleam of Payam's earring-—the possibility it had dangled before me and then snatched away in the same breath—was the last I saw of Tehran before the midday train departed.

Ralph Angel

Nothing was a lie

Nothing was a lie. You could be that solitary.

I put myself or other people in the picture so that I might escape your gaze.

You have no idea about how to hang
above the door.

Maybe I should learn to sing

or how to pose my hand and foot among the snake plant and blooming
jasmine.

I paint on the wall and lay down with fishes.

You are kind and happy.

The rooms were large and open. There was good sun. The rest of us
is naked

or how to lay down naturally at the water's edge.

My body is the paper. Your body is the light

or how to lay upon the glass
and be inside it

or to protect yourself with muddy
fingers.

Love's inexperienced. Tell me how to love
and go away.

Adam Day

Illuminated Edges

Morning, I lift myself
out of the floor. Afraid

of nothing, but nothing's
a funny thing

like stepping on a jellyfish
in the dark doglick

of sea at feet—always
something gives me

the impression I exist.
To love this world

and want to leave it.

Wes Matthews

Robert Johnson Tunes His Guitar at the Crossroads

Sunshine beats down on the philosopher
just as he imagined: a tumbling of sheer will,
the devil of summer roving like a rogue coyote
seeking muses from the strawed mouths of ramblers,
instruments of their own one-off wager with fate.
To come this far is to deplore the land that raised you,
curse that stubborn weevil that torched your family
into blue oblivion long before white men descended
with their soundbox machines & notepads trying to make
a new study of sadness. Sacrifice, they call it, beadlike eyes
scrolling the country like vermin, welling with exhaustion.
To be the boss, you pay the price—playing lonely, no place to go,
your fingers hardened to the point that every lover flinches
from your touch & puts their warmest disguise against yours.

Blessing J. Christopher

Our Love Language Was Hair

My mother is eight years old and lost in a field of corn. Above her the sky is dark and moody, grumbling intermittently. Lightning forks the earth in the distance. The ground is bloated with rainwater, and when my mother walks her bare feet sink tiny basins into the earth. Having shrugged her arms out of her white school uniform, the top part of the dress hangs over her slim hips. As she wades through the sea of corn, wet leaves brush against her bare torso, and it itches like the stings of a million soldier ants, but she doesn't feel the crimson welts sprouting on her skin.

My mother, in deep concentration, chews on her tongue and hums to herself. She moves from stalk to stalk as though in a trance. She peels the husk from each cob, splits the husk into three equal parts, weaves the strands into one smooth braid. On some plants she works corn silk into the braids like highlights. By the time her mother—my grandmother—finds her and drags her home, every cob in the field is naked but perfectly coiffed. Although the premature harvest earns my mother a talking-to, no one can refute her gift. My mother's talent spreads to her sisters until all seven girls catch the contagion. By the time Em, my mother's last sister, is born, everyone knows she is going to do hair like her sisters.

On Em's lips, my name sounded like an accusation. She would stress the three syllables into one long scream. Edeeedeeeeooooongggg! Uyo is small enough to run into the same people at least five times a day, even with a population of one million. Every time I was in the same vicinity as my aunt, I gritted my teeth and waited for my name. Edeeedeeeooooonggg! People would turn and stare, waiting for me to respond. I always waved back and hurried along. I couldn't ignore or pretend I didn't know her because we had the same face—people often commented on how I had her big cheeks and bulky eyes. At thirty, she was close enough in age to be considered my sister. Sometimes motorists, stuck and bored in the traffic gridlock

that plagued our city, joined her in calling out to me, waving like they'd known me all my life. Over the din of weary engines and clouds of exhaust smoke, my name would pass from vehicle to vehicle until it became a chant.

I could escape my auntie's friendliness when she called to me from afar, but there was no avoiding her when my grandmother died. The head of the family summoned everyone and handed us the list of stuff we had to buy for the funeral. After we quarreled over the price of the casket and the number of cows we had to slaughter for the wake, my aunt grabbed me in a hug as I was heading home, crushing my windpipe until my eyes swam in my head.

"I heard you got into the university," she grinned. "I always knew you wouldn't fall for a broke idiot and get pregnant for him and move in with him and then have another baby immediately after because to him you're nothing but a warm vagina and now you're stuck because you didn't leave him when you had the chance."

"Wow," I said. "I'm all of sixteen and not ready for any of that."

"Yeah," she smiled and shook her head as though she needed to clear her thoughts. "I guess I'm saying congratulations for getting into uni. Don't have sex. It lasts for five minutes but destroys your life forever."

On the day of the funeral the church was full, but there was spillage, so people huddled together outside and peered into the church hall, their somber faces framed by the open stained-glass windows. The priest said the closing prayer and sent us off like he was desperate to get us out of there. He wiped streams of sweat off his face with the sleeve of his cassock, shaking his head at the mass of bodies piled up against the windows. At the graveside, the same priest said the blessings as my grandma's coffin was lowered into the yawning chasm. A few sobs broke the silence. Someone crumbled and wailed. This show of emotion was unexpected, seeing as my grandma's passing had long been coming. She had never recovered from the stroke that left her paralyzed from the waist down eight years before.

In the end there were only three of us left at the graveside—my aunt Em, my grandma's best friend, and me. Everyone else had gone to eat at the funeral

banquet. It was the way my grandma's best friend folded into herself that caught our attention. She was the last of their age group, and with my grandma gone I could imagine mortality staring her in the face, unblinking. When my grandma was alive, the woman would visit every week with a bottle of lukewarm Heineken. The two women often took turns swigging from the bottle, rinsing their mouths with the dark brew before swallowing. They'd laugh about the events of the past and play a game of "Do you remember when?" Often, their mirth dissolved into long stares into the distance. My grandma's best friend finally unfolded herself and staggered away as the gravediggers threw in the last shovelfuls of earth.

Em and I were the last ones at the graveside. We stood shoulder to shoulder, our sniffles the only thing breaking the silence. Earlier that day, we had collapsed my grandma's wheelchair and put it away, then took out the plastic tub we used to bathe her in—remembering how she had become easier to carry as the end neared.

"Don't stand too close to me," Em said.

"Am I that ugly?" I was laughing through my tears.

"Your hair is. With me being the best braider in Uyo, I'm not about to claim you with that mess on your head."

My braids were truly messy. There were blond and red ones. The braider, my disgruntled friend, hadn't bothered about blending the colors. The end product was garish and unbelievably tacky. Each braid was furry and untrimmed. Some braids had already unraveled all the way up to my scalp. It was like a feral cat had been set loose on my head.

Em pushed her shoulder into mine playfully.

"Come to my salon," she said. "I can fix you."

The day I went to get my hair done, she asked if I had become born again. I had taken down the tacky braids and washed my hair. Because my hair was unpermed, it floated on top of my head like dark brown cotton candy. My aunt dipped her fingers in a vat of hair food and greased my scalp. The menthol in the

product burned my eyes. With her fingers still buried in my hair, she began a massage that drew a moan from my lips.

"I'm asking about the born-again thing because I don't understand why you haven't had a relaxer," she said. "You know those fanatical Christians who won't get a perm because they're married to Jesus and therefore above all forms of worldliness."

"I don't think Jesus would marry a frumpy woman," I replied.

Starting from my nape, she parted my hair into tiny, neat sections and began to braid with Expression hair attachment.

"The whole married-to-the-Lord thing confounds me," she continued. "Going around with pleated skirts down to their toes. Necklines up to their eyes. Fingers lost in long sleeves."

I laughed then because I understood her ire. Once upon a time, she had been forced to attend one of those churches. She was still a Christian, just not obsessive about it anymore. I explained to her that I had spent six years in an all-girls boarding school where we had to scrape off our hair every three weeks because the school didn't want us to get distracted by beauty. I had now started university and growing out my hair, but my scalp was not yet used to straightening chemicals. I was taking my time.

A few customers came in as she worked on me. Em said she'd be done in three hours, and that they should come back then or get their hair done by the other stylists in the salon. The customers shook their heads and opted to wait rather than let the other girls touch their hair. A few hours later, she stepped away and sighed. My hair was done, and it was glorious. Her face fell when I handed her money for her work.

"You're my blood," she protested. "I'd never charge you for hair."

Em made my hair every three weeks up until my graduation. In place of cash payments, she told me to pay her in food. Before I went to her for an appointment, I'd stop by fast-food places and load up on meat pies, fried rice, ice

cream, Jollof, and fried chicken. I always got enough for everyone working in the salon, and because of this, the other stylists became my friends. They'd tease me about my big head, saying it was family-sized and that I should love my mother for being brave enough to push me out. We'd eat and laugh about the latest gossip in town. Sometimes we ate street food from hawkers, our fingers greasy from fried snails on skewers or steaming moin-moin cooked in rusty cans. There was always some story about someone's snatched husband or someone's wayward wife, so we ate and talked and made hair. My deal with Em was that I was never to tell anyone she did my hair for free. She understood the classism inherent in institutions of learning. Soon, everyone came to believe I was rich because I changed my hairstyle frequently.

The one time I went to another braider to get my hair done, Em ran into me at the market and wrinkled her nose like she had seen something foul.

"Who did this to you," she demanded. "And why did you sit there and let this be done to you?"

I learned my lesson after that. No one else could touch my head. This embargo extended to wigs. I once went to get my hair braided with a wig on. She yanked the hairpiece off my head and held it up to the light. She said it felt crunchier than potato chips, wanted to know what vegetable oil I had fried the wig in.

"I smell olive oil," she said, eliciting loud laughter from everyone in the salon.

Sometimes her two children came to the salon after school and hung around until the close of work. That day, her seven-year-old son was there. The boy was in the process of learning how to ride a bicycle, so my aunt threw the wig on his head.

"I haven't bought him a helmet yet, but this hard-as-concrete wig will do."

The boy started to spin in place with the hairpiece sitting jauntily on his head, his arms extended behind his back in a Naruto run. A week after confiscating the wig, I saw Em at a family friend's wedding. She was wearing my wig. Flipping the hair this way and that, she told me that she'd dissed it because she wouldn't let a Wish.com hairpiece prevent me from coming to her.

I got maroon cornrows for graduation. She wove each row with care, making sure to tuck my now relaxed hair into the attachment. She hated the fact that I had straightened my hair, said I now looked like everyone else with a relaxer.

"Didn't you say that my afro made me look like Jesus' wife?"

"I say so many things," she replied. "Why did you have to take that particular thing to heart?"

She was proud of me for graduating. As a teenager, she had stopped going to school because she enjoyed making hair more than studying. Marriage came immediately after. So, seeing me going after my dreams made her heart sing, she said. For my first job interview she insisted on bra-length black Senegalese twists. The short length and lack of color were what her professional customers preferred. She wanted me to present myself well. When the company didn't call back, she took down the braids and gave me blonde butt-length braids. We agreed that I was too good for the company. Being unemployed, I had enough time to hang at the salon even when she wasn't doing my hair. Her customers became my friends. Her co-workers called me often to tell me the salon was too quiet without me. Most mornings, I'd take my computer to her salon to get some freelance writing done.

One afternoon, my aunt called to say that her son had become a python. Her voice was high-pitched and scared. She said I should come to the salon to see things for myself. I hadn't seen her for a month because I had been scouting models for an agency. When I arrived at the salon, the boy who had allegedly become a python was sitting on the veranda, scowling.

"Did he turn back into a boy?" I asked.

"No," my aunt said, hugging me warmly. "He's still very much a python. If you're in doubt, ask him why he is frowning."

"I want to eat boiled eggs!" the boy said. "She has refused to buy me some."

"I told you so," my aunt said to me.

"This doesn't even make sense," I sighed.

"I want boiled eggs!"

"To reduce your confusion, what kind of reptile loves swallowing eggs?"

"Snakes?" I replied

"Exactly!"

I bought boiled eggs for everyone. My aunt held my hand as she ate, her plump cheeks moving with every bite. She told me how she came up with the python story because she hadn't heard from me in so long and wanted to check in. I told her about a short story competition I had won and how I had been invited to Sweden for a writing workshop. I needed my hair done for the trip. She made an appointment for Sunday, but I would have to get my hair done at her house because she didn't open the salon on weekends.

Her fifteen-year-old daughter walked in then. The girl was so tall that she had to bend at the waist to get through the doorway. My aunt wanted me to scout her. I taught the girl how to walk the runway, and she stumbled along like a foal just out of its mother's birth canal.

"My daughter walks like a bulldozer," my aunt cried.

"I feel like I inherited that from my mother," her daughter said, chomping on an unfortunate piece of chewing gum.

"If I walked like you, I'd have donated my legs to science."

That Sunday, my aunt called and told me to get someone else to do my hair. She said she was sick and didn't want me to catch whatever she had. This was so out of character that I took a taxi to her house. I met her children outside. Her son hugged my belly, and her daughter wrapped her long arms around my neck. When I asked about their mother, they nodded towards the door but refused to follow me inside.

In the living room, my aunt was sitting on the linoleum, clutching her shattered shin. A bloody pestle lay beside her. She looked up and saw me, then averted her eyes and sighed.

"He doesn't do this all the time."

"He shouldn't be doing this at all."

"You can't tell anyone."

Outside, drizzles stung my exposed neck. I called my other aunts and told them what I'd seen. Em's husband returned while I was still on the phone. He flashed a smile at me, but I turned my head away and waited. I noticed how his kids huddled closer to me now that he was home again. Fortunately, my relatives arrived with the police in tow. Two officers had to restrain my other aunts, who grabbed the bloody pestle and tried to break the husband's head. When the officers were able to cool rising tempers, they summoned everyone to the station. Em had to come along too, even with the congealed blood caking her leg.

At the station, my other aunts gave a written statement and left for home because night had fallen and they needed to get back to their families. I waited behind with Em and her husband. She sat on a bench and held the affected limb, her face a mirror of pain. Yet, she refused to admit that the gash on her leg was from him.

"You women have perfected the art of provoking your husbands," a policeman said after my aunt refused to implicate her husband. "You push and push until the man can do nothing but retaliate."

"That's nonsense," I replied. "Even wild animals know self-control."

"You'll be picking your teeth from the floor if you don't shut your mouth," the officer wagged his baton at me.

"Look at this prostitute," a policewoman said to me. "You're not yet married, but your mouth is already sharper than a razor blade. I always encourage men to beat your kind."

My aunt's husband wore a satisfied smile that grew wider as more officers defended him. I wanted to say more then, but I knew the officers needed little to no excuse to rough me up and throw me in a cell. They told my aunt to apologize to her husband for provoking him, and when I saw her hesitation, I faked a phone call and stepped outside, giving her privacy in humiliation. From my position outside, the words of her apology were forced and barely audible.

"Will you comport yourself and do it the right way?" somebody commanded. "Get on your knees or something."

I heard the bench creak as she rose. I heard her hobble around. There was a groan when she stooped and knelt. A tearful apology followed. Later, she ran her fingers through my hair and promised to braid it the next day. I objected.

"I've been making your hair for years now, but you suddenly get a chance to travel abroad and I'm no longer good enough."

We laughed at the absurdity of her words. We held hands in the taxi that took us back to her house. We had made a stop to get the wound dressed at the hospital. When we got back to her house, her children ran to us and almost knocked her down. She kissed their faces and hugged them to her chest.

"Please come tomorrow," she said to me. Her voice was broken but resolute.

I saw then that it was not just hair. She needed the familiarity of sectioning my hair, greasing my scalp, tucking my hair into braids.

The next day her leg was swollen under the bandage, but she swore that the pain was almost gone. Occasionally, she would forget about the injury and move too fast and end up cursing under her breath. She kept the hairstyle simple because of the pain. We called it The Sweden Hair. She mentioned all the things I was to buy her from Stockholm—bags, shoes, dresses, and jewelry.

In Stockholm, the cold seeped through my thin shirt and settled in my bones. My blood was frozen solid by the time Em's call came through. I was waiting outside Arlanda airport for my hosts to pick me up when my phone dinged in my hand. She prayed for me over the phone, asking God to make my writing career grow bigger and for a white man to fall in love with me and then take me to the altar.

"I'm kind of cynical right now as far as husbands are concerned," I said.

"I hope it's not on account of my marital problems."

"It's just not important to me right now."

"You want kids, right?"

"Someday."

"Well, husbands are good for that."

Back in Nigeria, she told me about a church where miracles happened daily. According to her, the prophets there could heal the sick and raise the dead, so getting me a husband wouldn't be hard. I went just to humor her. The church clapped and sang and danced late into the night. I dozed off around midnight but woke up around 3 in the morning to see my aunt in front of the church. One of the prophets motioned for the congregation to be silent.

"Death hangs around you," the man said to my aunt. "The stench is so strong that it follows you around."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"Someone close to you will die soon."

The night Em's husband died, she called me and sang a mournful song. She wanted me to come to her house in the morning.

"He decided to leave me alone with two children," she sobbed. "Typical."

At the funeral, she ran her hand through my wig and said she was proud of me for now buying non-crunchy hairpieces.

"I see you've progressed from Wish.com to AliExpress."

She went to the backyard to cry after her husband was lowered into the ground. When I found her hours later, she cleaned her eyes and cleared her throat.

"He was too young to go," she said. "God didn't have to take him from us just yet."

Her children found us then. They went and huddled with their mother and wept into each other's hair.

I was going to see my long-distance boyfriend for the first time in three years, so I needed to get my hair done. My aunt was sleeping in a corner of the salon

when I arrived for the appointment. I told her I was meeting him that evening and that we needed to get started on braiding. Em said she was too tired to do my hair. She suggested I come back the next day. I remember yelling at her and storming out of the salon. She ran after me, equally yelling about my ingratitude.

"Is this what I get for styling you for free all these years?"

"It's not fair to make an appointment and just disappoint."

"You should be a little bit more grateful than that, miss."

Motorists gathered to watch us fight. Passersby stopped. I stormed back into the salon because I hated making a scene.

Inside, she pointed me to her chair. Her steps were slow as she walked around the salon. She gathered her comb, scissors, and hair food and got to work. The hair took seven hours to complete against the three hours it normally did. She stepped back when she was done and inspected her handiwork.

"I'm sick," she said. "I'm very, very sick."

In the dream, Em was famished. She came to me for food. After eating what I offered her, she told me she had to leave. Tears shimmered in her eyes. When I jumped awake and checked my phone, I saw that it was 2 a.m. I hadn't spoken to her in a while. In fact, our last phone call was three weeks before when she had been moved from the hospital to my aunt's house because she was so sick and her children were too young to care for her. She called me immediately after she got to my other aunt's house.

"This sickness won't kill me," her voice was weak yet hopeful.

"This sickness won't kill you," I repeated.

My words felt like a lie because at that point she was so thin you could see her ribs. Her puffy cheeks had also deflated. We needed a miracle. The thing with the sickness is that we never called it by name because you empower whatever you name. I knelt beside my bed after the dream and prayed, something I hadn't done in a while. I begged God to restore her health. Three days after the dream, an aunt called and told me Em had passed. The time of death was 2 a.m., and the date of

death was the same morning she had eaten my food and said goodbye to me in the dream.

At Em's funeral, her children hugged each other and sobbed. People wailed as they sunk her coffin into the grave. Her customers and coworkers rolled on the ground, their clothes gathering mud. It began to rain just as I headed out of the cemetery. My eyes were dry, but my body shook like I had a high fever. I didn't know where to direct the anger that stirred my soul. I wanted to yell at God. I wanted to punch Em's doctors for failing to save her. I wanted to fight her for leaving so soon. I couldn't wait for the grave to be filled, so I got on a bus and headed home.

A woman smiled at me as I took my seat on the bus.

"She's here right now, you know," she said.

"Who?"

"You know who."

I told the woman I wasn't interested in any of that. I just wanted to get home and have a good cry.

"She is crying," the woman continued, eyes rolling in her head like she was in a trance. "She's crying for the children she left behind."

The tears I had been holding in began to flow then. They were hot and fast as they streamed down my cheeks. The woman wrapped her arm around me and rocked me like a baby.

"She is begging you to look after her children. Says you're the only one who can love them as much as she did."

The woman waved from the window when I stepped out of the bus. The drizzles had matured into a heavy downpour by then, soaking me to the skin. I yanked off my wig and let the rain flow from my scalp down to my legs, diluting my tears. Walking home alone in the cold, a light breeze whipped up around me. The breeze was warm and soft and felt like a hug. It wrapped around me for a few seconds and then melted away. I imagined that it was my aunt embracing me one more time before taking her leave. She had passed her message through the woman on the bus, and now she was going home to rest.

Matthew Flores

Huisache

familial we're weather
carried on angled mirrors

in brush of critique, women teach how
close the harsh brush is. since nation's
lonely speech near erasure tonight

is recollection building homeliness up,
highway sounds bed in dreams.
and neglect a similar reflection
refraction.

along the fields of cotton
your sense of ghost is in the mesquite, live
oak, and huisache. your entrance to all this
is membrane to every person that's purpose is

now horizon. along clouds, where names are
to recognize migration—words—at your age
are then singular birds astray on telephone wires.
and do they even signal when to leave the flock,

say—when you come across them, whenever
you're hush, barked up, again listening.

Curanderismo

after Amanda Ellis

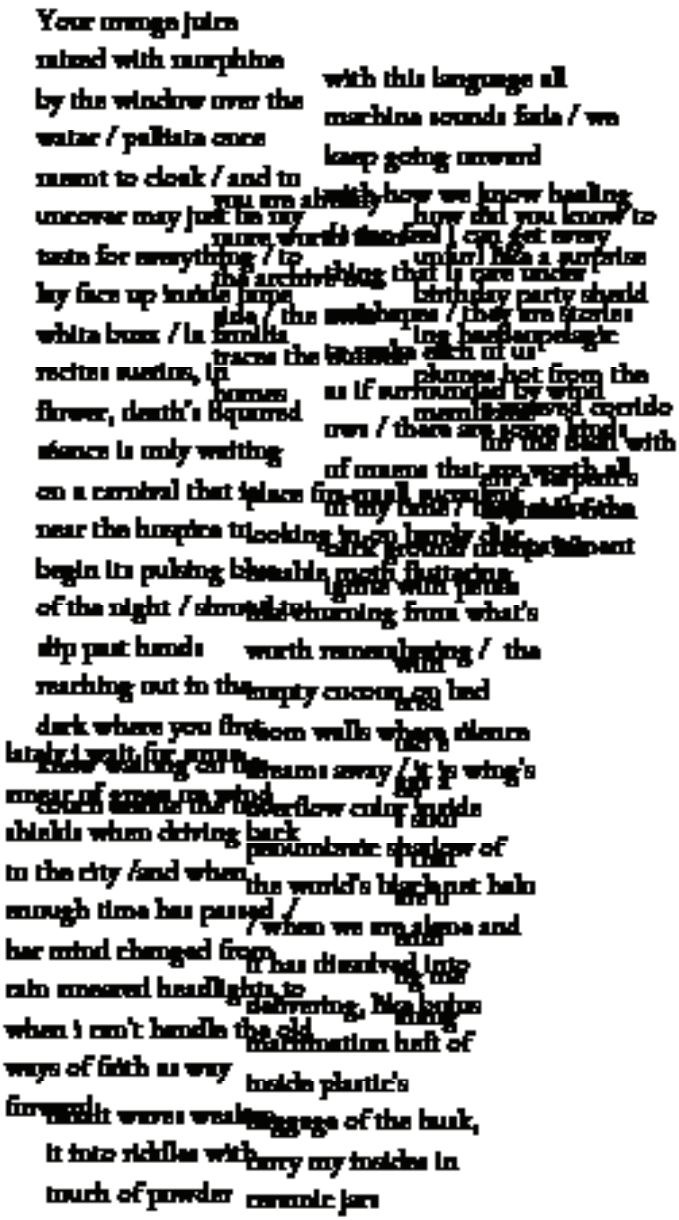
i. [la gripe]
the root of selves is to rub saliva along the suns / these steps could flower persons as perfection closes its held ashen grips

ii. [el ojo]
rake down dirt tomorrow for some / hear the wither of old eggs as sustenance bends souls

iii. [susto]
patients bruised from givingly deciduous meanings are the trees / use vines as basalt
ridden waves with a riddle of / weakened with ochre or water or wants touching the palliative
weave corridos for / the dead wither serpent's mumble from inside pavement

iv. [cancer]
subterranean biospheres fluoresce in situ for a hymn known with rich paraffin / use in beds that rid of devastation sanctioned by anonymous ploys that sold profanation / our elk dream's obsidian ontology are of the warm substance in hours / our needs are that netting of all our wants / or holy within rainstorms / can we steal it back; this / she still brews
suns in night's waxing oracular salve

v. [hospice]


Your orange juice
mixed with morphine
by the window over the
water / pelicans once
meant to cloak / and to
uncover may just be my
taste for everything / to
lay face up inside large
white boxes / in facility
recites routine, in
flower, death's figured
silence is only waiting
on a carnival that
near the hospice to
begin its pulsing
of the night / shroud
slip past hands
reaching out to the
dark where you first
mear of xenon on wind
shields when driving back
to the city /and when
enough time has passed /
her mind changed from
rain smeared headlights to
when I can't handle the old
ways of faith as way
it into riddles with
touch of powder
with this language all
machine sounds fade / we
keep going onward
how we know healing
how did you know to
birthday party should
of mums that
worth remembering / the
empty cocoon on bed
from walls where glances
dreams away / it's wing's
pentimento shadow of
the world's blackest halo
/ when we are alone and
delivering, like holes
hollow plastic's
bone of the husk,
bury my insides in
ceramic jars

vi. [entremundos]

To see any moving
beside us that keeps
up with ethereal
pace of bags
caught in limbs
of trees like unwashed
hair from a few days
of dreams left out
on the pillowcase.
collection is lifted
back up from
the garden,
metastasis
pot holed traveling
with you always
intimating the trans-
ience. anticipate
medical dystopia
closing in with
sterilization's immediacy.
my presence alone
could never be
enough for smoothing
out these holes.
heightening the place
for gratitude, sitting
inside a corrido
spread by arpeggios—
neighbor's dog howl
at an ambulance

as fog of elegiac
indecision.
I will stay
do the work
of dredging
into the night
shifting emerald
dimness from
a lamp—
glowing.

Allison Glenn

Power Play: Trace, Index, and Grid in Rick Lowe's Paintings

Artist Rick Lowe has been collaboratively world building for the better part of three decades. While recently in the news for his painting and for signing with Gagosian gallery, Lowe has, since the late '90s, been at the forefront of a group of artists utilizing built environments to create a public practice embedded in the urban fabric, engaging in dialogues around site and place. From his founding and involvement in Project Row Houses (PRH) in Houston to participation in the Watts House Projects in Los Angeles, Transforma in New Orleans, and the Victoria Square Project in Athens, Lowe's city-based endeavors imagine new trajectories for development as well as space itself and the body's relation to it. Each of these projects are hybrid works that allow Lowe to consider site specificity, public engagement, and community development, providing a platform at a local level and outside traditional exhibition spaces.

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Jessica Cusick, Sam Durant, New Orleans-based artist Robert Ruello and Lowe founded the collective Transforma to place "greater emphasis on the role of artists, the arts, and culture in addressing the social and political needs that confront our society."[1] In many ways, Transforma achieved its goals, developing three pilot projects as well as the Creative Recovery Mini-grant Program. During its five-year existence, it awarded funding to over twenty programs supporting New Orleans-based artists and arts organizations, including Mel Chin's *Operation Paydirt* (2006–present) and the *Fundred Dollar Bill Project* (2006–present), two programs that address the risks posed by high lead levels in the city. *Operation Paydirt* develops models to neutralize these risks while *Fundred Dollar Bill Project* asks children to draw their own versions of the hundred-dollar bill to raise awareness of the need for funding solutions to lead poisoning.[2] Transforma also supported Home New Orleans and Plessy Park.[3] Founded by a New Orleans-based group of artists and educators, Home New Orleans fosters collaborative neighborhood

[1] Jessica Cusick, Sam Durant, Jess Garz, Rick Lowe, and Robert Ruello, "Preface" in *Transforma, 2005-2010*. (New Orleans: Transforma, 2010), pp. 5-6.

[2] "Fundred: Kids Are Worth It," *Fundred.org*. Accessed December 8, 2021.

[3] "Pilot Projects" in *Transforma, 2005-2010*. (New Orleans: Transforma, 2010), p. 49.

revitalization efforts and is anchored in four wards—Lakeview, Central City, Seventh, Ninth—and three universities: Xavier, Tulane and Dillard.[4] Plessy Park, meanwhile, was created by artist Ron Bechet and community activist Reggie Lawson and presented programs and events at the site where Homer Plessy, a light-skinned Black man, staged an arrest for sitting in the "whites only" section of a train in 1892.[5] The case that eventually came out of his arrest was *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, the landmark Supreme Court ruling that allowed for segregationist "separate but equal" laws.

Lowe's involvement in Transforma can be traced back to his Houston-based work with PRH, ideas for which came out of his involvement with S.H.A.P.E. In the early '90s, Lowe volunteered and created site-specific installations at S.H.A.P.E., a community center in the Third Ward. While in the neighborhood, Lowe happened upon a row of shotgun houses at the corner of Live Oak and Holman Avenue, which for him recalled John Biggers's iconic paintings. The late, highly influential Houston-based painter frequently depicted the shotgun house, often exploring vernacular Black experiences in painting, lithographs, and large public murals. Architecturally, the houses represent a connection between West Africa and the Black diaspora in the Caribbean and Southern United States, with Lowe and many other artists viewing the home as an iconic form. Biggers taught at Texas Southern University for 36 years, and it is there, during his studies, that Lowe came to understand the shotgun home as a representation of West African forms adopted by free Haitians. Speaking of the importance of the row houses to Biggers' vision, Lowe noted that the elder artists "used [the houses] as the foundation for his composition … the foundation for the people that he was portraying in his world."[6] This vision moved Lowe into the realm of interdisciplinary, conceptual artist, a social sculptor, and cartographer mapping relationships across time and geography.

What does it mean to use the form of the shotgun house as a platform for collectivity and exchange of ideas across racial, social, and economic stratospheres? For Lowe, it meant creating an artist- and community-centered organization around the iconic architecture and urban ecology of Houston while at the same time responding to housing and economic challenges within the Third Ward. The row

[4] "Pilot Projects: Home, New Orleans?" in *Transforma, 2005-2010*. (New Orleans: Transforma, 2010), p. 51.

[5] "Pilot Projects: Plessy Park" in *Transforma, 2005-2010*. (New Orleans: Transforma, 2010), p. 55.

[6] Jason Sweeney. "John T. Biggers (1924-2001)" Texas State Historical Association Handbook of Texas. https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/biggers-john-thomas. Accessed December 8, 2021.

houses Lowe happened upon in real life were slated for demolition, but, thinking of Joseph Beuys's notions of social sculpture and "the way we shape and mold the world around us,"[7] Lowe decided to treat the houses as found objects and opted to renovate instead. Out of this work, PRH was born.

Founded in 1993, PRH currently includes 39 structures that unfold over five city blocks. A collective of visual artists, urban planners, funders, architects, historians, and community members, PRH offers community-centric and artists-focused public programs and events. In developing an organization that, by its very form, provides site-specific responses to local concerns, Lowe has channeled Beuys's philosophy into a methodology for bringing together iconic architecture and public art, providing socially relevant content that exists in conversation and collaboration with residents of the Third Ward.

In 2018, after nearly 25 years of dedicating himself to community-based projects, Lowe returned to painting. In keeping with his past work, Lowe began to use the new medium to consider social dynamics, particularly through play. He found inspiration for a new body of work in dominos, specifically the games frequently played at PRH. (A long-time domino player himself, Lowe favors the four directional styles often played in the South though he has noted the game can be played many different ways.[8]) In the early '90s, he began photographing these games. In hindsight, Lowe sees this documentation to trace formal relationships shared between the dominos themselves and the urban grid: planning, redlining, and other cartographic methodologies made manifest through shape and line. Tying the game to urban planning and civic design became a way to "better understand the [way] mapping related to interest in urban development and other social and political realms."[9] When it came to dominos, emergent patterns suggested a geometry rooted in the formal components of the game. With each new game, fresh cartographic metaphors emerged.

Soon, Lowe's documentation shifted to drawing, tracing the outline of each tile. He began to keep score. The earliest works on paper from this period feature marginalia intersecting with the central composition. In *Untitled* (2018) (Fig. 2), a modestly scaled paint-and-marker work on paper, scorekeeping marks intersect with trace work of actions in the game. In *Untitled* (2017) (Fig. 3), a similarly

[7] Rick Lowe and Mark J. Stern. "Social Vision and a Cooperative Community: Project Row Houses" in *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*. Edited by Tom Finklepearl. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 135.

[8] Rick Lowe and Tom Finklepearl. "Interview: Rick Lowe on Designing Project Row Houses," in *Dialogues in Public Art*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), p. 243.

[9] Rick Lowe, "Artist Statement" in *Rick Lowe: Paintings & Drawings (2017–2020)*. (Houston: Art League Houston, 2020). p. 7.

scaled work on paper, a record of the outcome of the game runs the drawing's perimeter, enclosing a depiction of the action. Ultimately, each composition presents a record of play, in terms of score and figuration. Like Lowe's earlier photographs, these drawings are imbued with an indexical quality, so that they function both as art object and historical documentation.

In Lowe's newer paintings, including *Untitled* (2019) (Fig. 4), inverted silhouettes of shotgun homes appear. Here, an ambulatory line of tiles crawl across the painting's surface, which is anchored with yellow, inverted, semi-transparent silhouettes of the structures. The forms easily recall Biggers's *Four Seasons* (1990), a colored lithograph on paper that depicts four women, each standing in the doorway of a separate shotgun home in Houston's Third Ward.

Lowe shares an affinity for the embedded meaning of objects with a long list of contemporary artists, including Mark Bradford, McArthur Binion, Betye Saar, Theaster Gates, vanessa german, and El Anatsui. Conceptual connections can be made between Lowe's acrylic and paper collage paintings and the ink and Staonal crayon paintings by McArthur Binion. Both Binion and Lowe, for example, share an interest in repetition and time. Lowe's traces-of-the-game operate similarly to the photocopied documents of birth certificates, phone books, and more found in Binion's underconscious,[10] with both artists using collage to simultaneously embed and deconstruct a record of the personal within the surface of the canvas. Both artists deploy distinct, idiosyncratic uses of the line and contour in mark-making; Binion's interest in repetition can be seen in his continual use of color and line as tools to obscure official records as well as in his adherence to the grid. Lowe's *Untitled* (2017) (Fig. 5) includes a hint of a grid in the underpainting, with formal references to an aerial view of the lots in a city neighborhood. However, the pattern of shapes sprawling across the surface of Lowe's compositions disrupt the grid, instead of adhering to it as in Binion's. And despite continual reference to a grid, no two of Lowe's compositions are the same, offering a language of mark making specific to each painting. His compositions evoke the movement and action inherent in dominoes. While the goal is always to be the first to have no remaining tiles, no two games unfold the same way.

[10] The underconscious, as described in a press release for Binion's 2019 solo exhibition at Lehmann Maupin, is a term used for the appearance of birth certificates and out of date entries from the artist's NY phone book that the he uses as the ground in many of his paper on board paintings. Lehmann Maupin, "McArthur Binion *Modern: Ancient: Brown*," https://www.lehmannmaupin.com/exhibitions/mcarthur-binion4/press-release. Accessed December 8, 2021.

Thematically, play was not as much a part of Lowe's early paintings, which were politically charged, representational compositions that considered histories or injustice, such as *Untitled* (1988), a multi-panel painting exhibited at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston as part of the 1988 Texas Triennial, the artist's first museum show. At this point in his practice, intersections with social justice were overtly articulated through recognizable motifs and iconography. And yet here, the outline–a familiar gesture in Lowe's recent practice–first emerges, as seen in the red paint outlining two centrally located crosses. While subtle and therefore not immediately recognizable as a key painterly language in this composition, the gesture of outlining would return as a regular motif in the domino paintings.

Most recently, to mark the 100th anniversary of the 1921 Black Wall Street massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Lowe collaborated with artist william cordova to develop The Greenwood Art Project, an initiative of the 1921 Tulsa Massacre Centennial Commission. The ensuing public art exhibition engaged Tulsa-based artists to activate sites of their choice across the city–many within public or community spaces. During the development of the exhibition, Lowe began making his *Black Wall Street* paintings, a series of multi-panel compositions that map the movement of Tulsa-based domino games played in and around the Greenwood Neighborhood, formerly the center of Black Wall Street. *Black Wall Street Journey #5* (Fig. 7), for example, is a composition of immense scale that considers the massacre's abhorrent history. Lowe created it through a process of addition and subtraction, collaging fake currency and cut paper onto the surface of the painting and then grinding it down with a power sander. The green color of the paintings from this series point to not only the color of United States currency but also landscape, evoking a sense of time and place, as well as larger historical and sociopolitical systems.

The *Black Wall Street* series is an extension of, and in dialogue with, Lowe's work in Houston's Third Ward. In the Tulsa works and in his documentation of the domino games at PRH, Lowe considers both currency and a sense of play that challenges official infrastructure. At the same time, on a formal level, his work evokes aerial views of landscape, extending a life-long practice that considers its

environment within frames of local histories and cultures. Drawing on his own history of interdisciplinary work and collaborative community organizing, in his return to painting Lowe continues to thoughtfully map the histories of, and relationships within, the communities he has served over the last four decades.

p. 193, Fig. 1. Rick Lowe and Jesse Lott in 1993.

p. 194, Fig. 2. *Untitled*, 2018.
Paint marker on paper, 36 x 23.5 in.

p. 195, Fig. 3. *Untitled*, 2017.
Ink on paper, 35 x 26.5 in.
Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

p. 196, Fig. 4. *Untitled*, 2019.
Acrylic on paper, 72 x 86 in.
Collection of Elliot Perry.

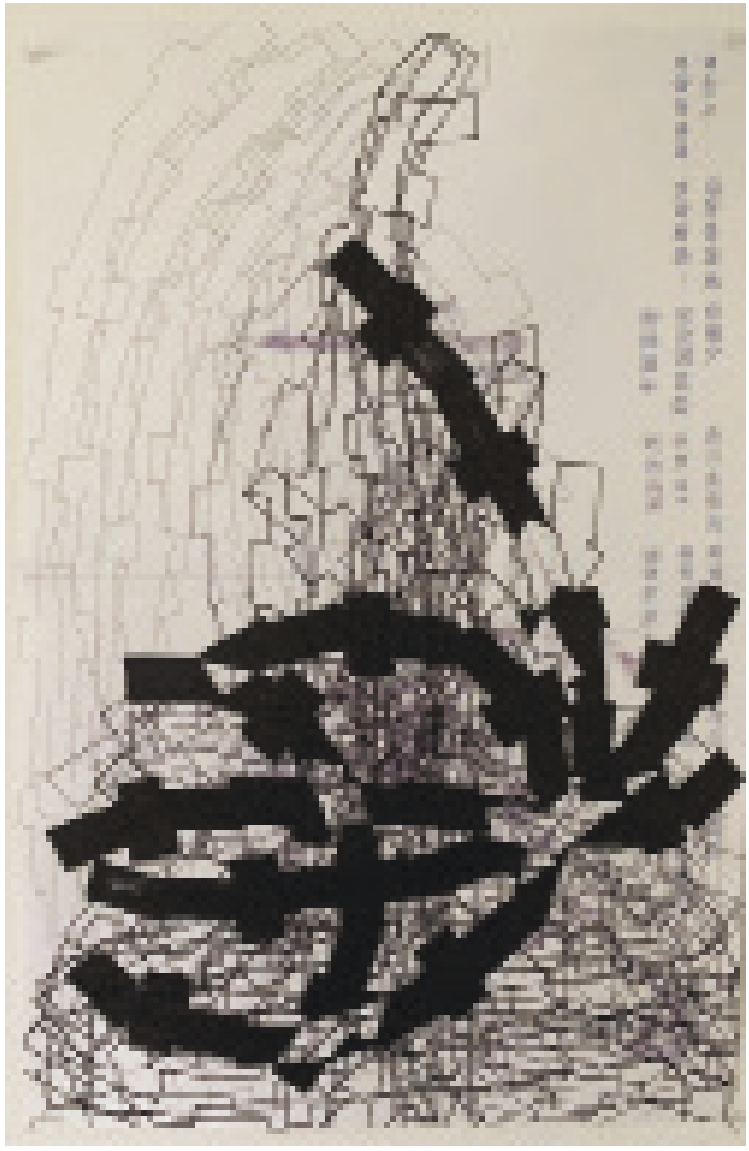
p. 197, Fig. 5. *Untitled*, 2017.
Ink and acrylic paint on printed paper, 39.5 x 27.5 in.
Collection of the Menil Collection.

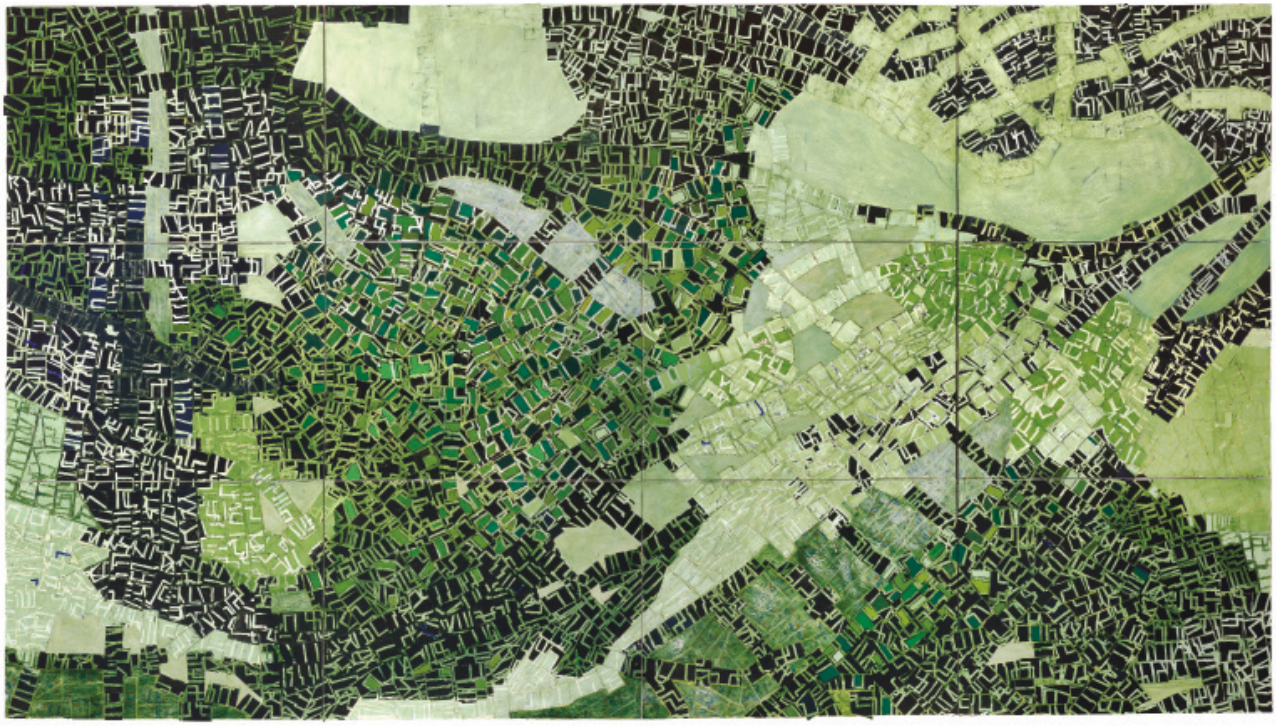
p. 198, Fig. 6. *Untitled*, 2020
Acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 72 x 60 in.
Collection of the Menil Collection.
Photograph by Thomas Dubrock.

p. 199, Fig. 7. *Black Wall Street Journey #5*, 2021.
Acrylic and paper collage on canvas,
composed of twelve 36- x 48-in canvases.
Collection of the Brooklyn Museum.

p. 200, Fig. 8. *Untitled*, 2021.
Acrylic and paper collage on paper, 48 x 36 in.
Collection of Pantera.
Photograph by Thomas Dubrock.

All images courtesy of Rick Lowe Studio.





Brett Shaw

Self-Portrait as Hybrid

Did you have shame sutured inside,
at the base?
Rootstock split for scion,
grafted crossbreed. How we manufacture purity
for juice. Say sunshine. Say holy.

Say lord. Place a mourning dove in
my branches. Nail it down till the feathers
are a bloody cross. Tell my bones
to flute. Tell my voice,
higher still.

Direct me with a cue, *sotto voce*.
How young were you made mute
commodity? something the drain
circled down in reply.

If I can't stop my fingers'
curl toward light, what was
my training for?
The narrow body strung to pluck, taut from
top to bottom—sinuous fate the blade

is placed against
to deliver a pure tone.
What audience hasn't asked for this breaching—
a song to voice
the living & the dead—

The Last Poem I Write

On our trip to the Dead Sea, my daughter couldn't stop crying because the salt content was so high it burned her vagina.

My best friend refuses to write about flowers but feels it's acceptable to write about trees—because of the more serious nature of the subject matter.

There's a moral obligation in poetry not to pass on cruelty through the poem itself.

Yellow bird magnolia.

My daughter asks when I will put the tree swing up.

البستان is Arabic for *the garden*.

Rob Nixon calls "the inattention we have paid to the attritional lethality of many … crises" *slow violence*; he means this in the context of ecological catastrophe.

The Arabic word for *catastrophe* is Nakba (نكبة).

The flowers in the vase are white lisianthus and heather.

In the al-Bustan neighborhood of Silwan, 13 families face home demolition to make way for a religious theme park where some believe King David owned a garden.

A major concern with the lyric "I" is whether the reader can empathize.

Did you know David Jackson's funeral photo of Emmett Till first appeared in *Jet* magazine?

The word *magazine* comes from the Arabic مخزن which means *storehouse*.

There's a moral obligation in poetry not to pass on cruelty through the poem itself. I should take the line about my uncle burning newborn mice out of the poem I wrote earlier this week.

In the last poem I write, we pass a bipartisan infrastructure bill. There's a provision for planting crepe myrtles along the interstate.

The problem with taking it out altogether, as I see it, is that it fails to consider intention.

There's a moral obligation in poetry not to pass on cruelty through the poem itself. I really should take the line about my uncle burning newborn mice out of the poem I wrote earlier this week—

herbs gathered under the shade of frail acacias

—or maybe I can turn it into a question.

Note: The penultimate line borrows from Wade Davis's *The Wayfinders.*

Scott Chalupa

Like any odd god among the thousands

our small existences are tricks of language
stone- or shame-faced masks through which some

one we each assume is an I
echoes a bantam brain behind the eye

shouting its pings in the quantum chaos
Today this guy seems azure

as your brain belies eyes the shade his ire is
narrows when you're late

the blue bends more E-flat than bright
because blue is minor

perceptual byproduct The photon's
frequency only is fact

the twice-nightly blue- to red-shift of
his Harley passing mere meters

beyond your curtains is as real as it gets

We with ears to hear strain to listen and do not
understand retweet hashtag share and go

unheard We don our camera-ready swipe-right best
curate our captchas written for the heavens

Sound rides a wave of infotainment Photon is
a diffuse spherical wave propagating spacetime

nowhere until measured
a data trove available for the looking

Dear please don't be disheartened
these are facts of existence

the fundamental particles of relationship
we are such stuff as stars are

made up little lives rounded out in
our local group that's always been

a constituent of the Virgo supercluster Yes there
is safety in such numbers The echo of

your minor tragedy will wave into
imperceptibility and truth

the universal code is violent collision
is the catalyst the cataclysmic calm

will soon swing away

Olivia M. Sokolowski

Ode to Plácido Domingo on *Jeopardy!*

So right now we throw our darts "At the Opera," laughing
because I said I'd nail it but I haven't, three-ish beers steaming up
this evening's machinery, this evening in which Tom and I watch
Jeopardy! with my brother who has brought over his new girlfriend
—*bravo!*—for the first time tonight, and when your name pops up,
Plácido, it's the opposite effect of its meaning, a little spark
(laughing on the couch *I can get this one!*) as you cameo
for the last question, and by the time you say *hunchback* I blurt
out *What is Rigoletto! Rigoletto! What is Rigo–*
letto? I offer up but start thinking to myself *what*
is *Rigoletto*, huh, pulling out its little blue velvet drawer
inside me, all the silk sashes leaping, that first level
Rigoletto like one wriggling out of a bind, the petals

of the trashed azalea fall into a ring, it's North Carolina,
it's spring and the sun downs like orange sherbet
over the tennis court, the parking lot where I first
heard the Prelude was the last place I saw an ex,
I was cleaning out my car, I watched him turn
the corner, he turns it again and again now his hair still
matted down with grease; that summer I walked every day
through my mom's neighborhood I was trying to write a poem
about the Russian bar where I dressed all in leopard, balanced
a plastic shot of vodka on my nose—a better poet
could get that one down, don't you think, Plácido? Could you
sing it for me, omitting the bit on "stillness"? Yes, I want

to vanish only under the weight of silly things. And of course
you sing the famed aria for us now, while Tom at the fridge
says *I just know that one from comedies*, and I agree it's weird
the song is used for those devices—it's the precipice before
shit hits the fan and already sounds sour—but no stress, it's a Tuesday
and we're wearing bunny slippers, and my brother is just now
stretching his arm around his girlfriend and I fear I've hit the end
of an argument, here: how that melody remains the same,
but *la donna, la donna* … I turn my face to you, to
the kitchen, catching the light from both sides.

Natalie Louise Tombasco

[king hunt 1.2]

midwinter fanfare: it is our lord, our bard, our play,
right? did you know i was a cottage with blue smoke?
come in, come in. my body is mostly warm, only cold
as a vault in some places—how lovely and unexpected.

the solstice spiral that led you here was accidental. dear,
how long you've space traveled, how deadly the catskills
become at this hour, especially on the most long-winded
night of the year—wolves? yes. just push the dog down.

down boy. let's brush the chill off you. i'm an aggressive
nester with a hunger for parasocial relationships—some
long johns straight out of the dryer? a sleepy drink
to sink into? live trap is living as half-bloomed tragedy,

fire iron and yule fallacy *(aside) are you my prisoner or
my guest*? how clumsy to fall asleep beside a dying fire.

Seth Wang

Mirror for Princes (a perfume ad)

I am attempting to binge-eat the last bag of Papà's fancy prunes—the ones specially airconcierged from Damascus to imbue his stool with the suppleness of tenth-century ecclesiastical samite, the forbidden ones he keeps combination-locked in a refrigerated vault, the ones which begot a total Adult Baby/Diaper Lover meltdown when they were discontinued last month, *those* prunes—on an autumnal summer night in the taiga surrounding an "infinity pool" (read: abattoir) on the grounds of some dead nobody pedophile's mid-century fauxcoco fuck-dacha (in one-hundo-percent-literal Siberia!)—which Papà has rich-people-AirBnB'd to host our family's fake vacation, a cover-up for my month-long convalescence from one of those chichi little gastric bypass/face augmentation/nose job bundles, my 18th birthday present from Papà—when my phone buzzes with a message from the copromanic prune-hoarder himself, the sender reading not "Papà" but "Roddin[sic]Enthusiast," his name on the pretentious statuephilia fetish site where he's been corresponding with one xXx_Geefs_slut_666_xXx, a 21-year-old catboy who wants to be a bronze doré replica of younger Geefs bro Jozef's church-comissioned twink-Lucifer sculpture (*so* much better than Guillaume's), a lifelong fantasy that will come true tonight when xXx_Geefs_slut_666_xXx meets, and is subsequently offed, by my at-last-homicidal Papà. The twist here is that xXx_Geefs_slut_666_xXx, like, *c'est moi*. Which is to say xXx_Geefs_slut_666_xXx is a complete non-entity in the ontological or whatever sense. Read these coquettishly bandaged lips: xXx_Geefs_slut_666_xXx *ain't real*. In other words, when my catfished poseur of a Papà shows up erelong, I, *I*, am the only one he'll find having a moonlit skulk like an Elizabethan revenge tragedy bastard, suffering the innumerable indignities of Outside, soiling my oversized midnight-teal Italian acetate-viscose satin Margiela womenswear pajamas—except, get this, he won't know it's me. Oh, don't be crude. By soiling I mean I'm staining irreversibly the knee-and-

elbow areas of the Margiela by crouching on all fours, the pilgrim-buckled toes of my lambsblood Junya Watanabe antipapal loafers uprooting fairy circles of bisque-colored baby champignons, while I train a pair of military-grade-night-vision-retrofitted periwinkle-and-matte-silver antique enamel Alphonse Mucha opera glasses—for which I blackmailed the only non-(full)-blood-related woman I've ever loved—on the pink marble tiles of the infinity pool-cum-abattoir where Papà intends to bronze-cast xXx_Geefs_slut_666_xXx alive. I take out my phone to see what pompous dogshit Roddin[sic]Enthusiast has messaged "him" now. But because my pastel taupe ruched Miu Miu leather gloves are famously touchscreen-unfriendly, my phone drops facedown onto the permafrosted peat, forcing me to perform an elaborate one-handed disglove, which not only looks extremely cool but also allows me to fetchingly display my custom Michèle Lamy sky-burial mourning bracelet as I rescue, then unlock, the phone in one fist-bitingly suave flourish. I now adopt a slouchy contrapposto which doesn't obscure the line. I prepare to read Papà's undoubtedly fucktarded missive when my phone buzzes again. This time, it's the latest emotionally laborious plea from the anhedonic 34-year-old purple-hair-stripey-socks fujoshi, Libby, who thinks I'm Silas (née Doug), a ring/sword/ponytail guy of a certain age who's taken his vampire cosplay full-time since he was let go from his substitute Honors English gig. *Not now, kitten, Daddy's busy; he'll give notes on your Adult YA mythpunk campus novel's 11th hour game-changing Mpreg scene later* I type, without reading what she said. I begin to choke as I press send, an accidental drool emoji totally undermining the cryotherapeutic insouciance of my neg, because one of Papà's prunes has reversed direction in my esophagus. This is quite the immediate problem, I must say. Having been placed on a strict post-procedure diet of savory mousses and meal-replacement affogatos, I am bandaged such that my jaw can only unhinge insofar as to insert a duck-billed metal straw. But of course Adderall-congested little Adrian (the aforementioned little moi), with his male bulimia and au-pair's-pet hubris, just *had* to stick it to the surgeons and prematurely introduce solid food by throat-kegeling an entire prune down his newly stapled gullet, where it's rapidly rehydrating to full-size. And there's nary a soul around to answer my Heimlich-maneuver-summoning

bell. You see, you can only get to the pool/abattoir from the main road through an insanity-inducing eight-hour hike. One story goes, that in the '90s, whilst attempting a raid on the fuck-dacha, two FBI agents took a wrong turn through a weird gate and were found three days later, trying to turn each other into human chandeliers. So what did Papà do but give xXx_Geefs_slut_666_xXx *the* most loquaciously unintelligible directions. If xXx_Geefs_slut_666_xXx were real, he'd have said Nah, fuck that, and gone home at once. Luckily for me, Papà also spelled out his plan, kill-site included, in laughably obvious riddles on his serial killer "roleplay" forum, where for the past three years I've been pretending to be these two guys: the former a compulsive devil's advocate/sadistic grammar pedant who heckles Papà's posts, the latter a silent lurker who favorites then unfavorites, at unsettling hours, Papà's furiously impotent retorts. And to get to the pool/abattoir from the main manor, tee hee, all one has to do is press a certain combo of glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling, which opens the shelf displaying the unread first-edition Bataille collection onto the indoor moat with the high-speed gondola ferried by the faceless but still underage-looking robo-gondolier who serenades you with a *Phantom of the Opera* medley, set to theremin accompaniment and transposed to mezzo-castrato range. It occurs to me, as I continue fruitlessly unchoking myself, that perhaps Papà gave xXx_Geefs_slut_666_xXx impossible directions on purpose. That is, perhaps Papà is chickening out, as usual. Perhaps I've defected from the exquisitely room-temperate bosom of my Jenny de Rahden-print Mongolian cashmere Hermès horse blanket, unhitched myself from the Fabergé wire-mother of my showpony-grade ketamine IV, and endangered my new nose, all to virginally choke to death, alone, *Outside*, in some random taiga in the bumfuck Altai Mountains, beneath a celestially inauspicious (if admittedly slimming) waxing gibbous. But I calm down and quickly dismiss this possibility. I have good reason to believe I've finally cracked Papà's victim profile, besides which there's an easy solution to the prune. Reaching under my trompe l'oeil lapels, I take out my replica poison-rosary/coke-spoon (*please*: Lucrezia Borgia, *not* Kathryn Merteuil), and mix the good shit with the contents of a gold-and-alligator Cartier bracelet-flask which once belonged to Barbara Daly Baekeland—rewards, both, from Papà, for taking

his side during two particularly attritive wars with Mom. I forget what the Lucrezia fight was about, something *stupid*, something about how they'd gratuitously overbribed to get the charges dropped against *somebody* for shoplifting at the Yohji Yamamoto pop-up boutique in the Vatican, or whatever. But the Barbara, I distinctly remember, was because Papà was displeased by Mom's over-dinner impression of Bitsi, her on-and-off childhood best friend, whom she's considered her sworn enemy ever since the woman took *one* couples workshop on love languages in Bora Bora and started giving unsolicited "pro-tips" on how to improve my parents' relationship, "babybirding me little *amuse-bouches* of shit," as Mom put it during one of our enboudoired party postmortems, allowing me to paint her toes smoked ochre and Marian blue. I say "party," but no social occasion was too small to trigger a postmortem. After sharing a couple lines of my prescription painkiller cocktail, we'd subject the losers of the debutante brunch we'd crashed, or the money-laundering film premiere we'd deigned to attend, or the brutal post-PTA-meeting mom-dick-measuring contest at my brother Philippe's Upper East Side private remedial school for exceedingly naughty boys, to a round of shit-talking, which always included several merciless impressions. I say "Mom and I," but really, she was the star. It was her job to do her thing, and mine to applaud. Although both my parents do absolutely vicious impressions of people, Papà is the hotel-caged method diva, momentarily inhabiting your emotional truth to play whatever stupid thing you just said back to you, while Mom is the shiv-carrying street mime, which is the nice way of saying that while she'll otherwise straight-up fucking ream you oratorically, Mom just cannot do voices. Instead, she inflates your tells, your nervous tics, your defensive postures until she's showing you your inner child. In public, of course, she did the socially acceptable thing, which was shank someone mid-conversation with an exaggeration of a goofy lip-bite or grovelly twitch they thought they'd exorcized in therapy decades ago, before moving on like nothing happened. Only during our postmortems did she bust out the mime performances, doing physical caricatures of people for five, six, seven minutes at a time. Because it was just us, this wasn't cringe the way it'd be in public, and I let myself go during the applause, clapping like a malnourished pygmy marmoset

in a Pierrot onesie, laughing in that obsequious late-night host way particular to Mom's most obviously gay sidepieces, and unlike those guys, I maybe even meant it. So I guess you could argue it's partially my fault for what happened next. This was during Family Dinner, a few months after Bitsi and hubby's Bora Boran adventure. Family Dinner is never just family; there's also the rival cliques of Lapdogs, Teething Jewels and Pubic Lice that follow us around, whom we refer to, collectively, as the Mephitis. This makes for very complicated seating etiquette indeed, which Grandmama (Papà's Mama) uncomplicated by arranging the Mephitis around our family in concentric circles according to how many of our inside jokes they can convincingly pretend to understand. Usually, it's a bloodbath, but that night, I remember feeling an unusual, almost physical sense of balmy plugged-in-ness, with my parents, my siblings, even with the Mephitis, unusual not just because I was only on half my usual dessert-time dose of Ativan, but because I knew that everyone else was feeling it too, mesmerized by the tactility of … I guess you could call it a sort of mass hysteria of anti-spite, people keeping their various rhetorical torture devices tucked inside their cheeks, sucking on them like candy, content with simply tonguing and retonguing their destructive potential. I was facing away from Mom when it happened. All I saw was that incredible inner-sanctum view of a domino effect of Mephitis-dwellers becoming increasingly less certain why they were making faces of contempt. If you've ever watched a Caravaggio get authenticated, it's not *like* that but it is also and equally not *not* like that. Honestly, I'm surprised I remember this much, given how tranquilized I was at that age. I mean, this was around the time I discovered Papà's travel blog, the one disguised extremely poorly as Gilles des Rais fanfiction, in which he penned tedious complaints about restaurants and hotels we'd patronized, interspersed with graphic play-by-plays of murders, all written in his godawful (not to mention disgustingly anachronistic) pastiche of fifteenth-century French, this odious lisping cursive like a Jacobean Pepé Le Pew, each entry always accompanied by the last known photo of a boy, a boy who'd gone missing around wherever we'd stayed, a boy just a few years older than me, a boy who never looked like much. Seriously, they were all complete dweebs and boners, greasy-clean, skinny-fat, twitchy-looking forgettables whose social media

revealed nothing besides that the poors have weird interests too. Their one common trait was they all had these perfect little Peter Pan noses, the ones that look even fey-er and pert-er when covered with a skinny gurokawaii bandaid, you know the sort of proboscises I mean. Unrelatedly, I also began to have trouble sleeping—night terrors, wetting the bed, sleep paralysis—"the whole kit and caboodle," in the words of the celebrity-child psychiatrist who liked to begin our appointments with tasting flights of the latest designer benzos. Because of this, that entire year is a blur, except for the night I earned the Barbara Daly Baekeland Cartier bracelet-flask. I'll never forget the impudent purr of some cousin's Pubic Louse, a grotesque hunk Frankensteined together from sundry ugly-hot '90s erotic thriller male leads: "*Dude*, is that your *mom*?" Or how the slow horrible journey of my head seemed sliced into frames, all of which I could *feel*—like that one oft-homaged Damien Hirst homage in Tarsem Singh's *The Cell* (2000), or perhaps salvia—as I turned to face Mom, knowing she'd be doing her five-minute rendition of Bitsi, not even aware everyone was looking at her, so engrossed was she in her performance for a dead-eyed Lapdog. Something flickered, peripherally. Who but *Papà*. Our eyes met. Unseen by everyone else, he moved a couple muscles of his face, but it was all he needed to communicate that somehow he'd been watching the enboudoired party postmortems, that he was going to defuse the situation with a perfect impression of my Mommy-love-me routine—unless, that is, I showed Mom, right then and there, why she would never humiliate him with her cringey mime performances ever again. (I inherited Mom's nose and Papà's impressions, let's leave it at that.) The next morning, the Barbara was mine. It's contained every color of emetic ever since, a mood ring, if you like, and tonight I'm feeling a "candied" violet. It tastes like a little *amuse-bouche* of shit, but as the prune begins vibrating to start its ascent, prune-chunks spraying my uvula, my phone buzzes again. This one's from Brother Amon, the pianist-fingered, Jesus-bearded Saint Sebastian Archabbey head apiarist who believes I'm a passively suicidal associate professor of art history specializing in Fayum mummy portraits, and who is also my best friend on earth. The message says that Brother Amon was reminded of the passively suicidal associate professor when he was enjoying the Qatsi trilogy, as per their conversation about Philip

Glass, that he didn't know why (semi-colon and closing parentheses indicating cheeky facetiousness), but he had a sneaking suspicion the passively suicidal associate professor would enjoy Paul Schrader's *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985), whose Glass score was positively "rapturous," a copy of which he'd smuggled into one of the Saint Sebastian secret cinema club's bi-monthly root-cellar screenings, and that if the passively suicidal associate professor would be so kind as to bless him with his mailing address, he'd receive the contraband Schrader DVD in question, plus a care package containing a miscellany of soothing beeswax wellness products hand-mixed by Brother Amon himself. My heart quickens at the prefix *bi*. Also because my oxygen's cut off, a direct result of the prune's meteoric rise through my newly halved nasal cavity. The direness of the situation forces me to resort to plan b, currently sheathed inside my shoe, which has shapeshifted magical-girl-transformation-sequence style from the Junya Watanabe loafers to black knee-high logo-embossed Renaissance assassin boots by Telfar, my Margiela womenswear pajamas now a bloomer-length Galliano-era Dior sailor uniform in eau de Nil powersuit-taffeta. Plan b's a bribe from Papà too, a few years after the Barbara. My sister Dolly was conducting her season-long audition of suitors, another tradition established by Grandmama, wherein the eligible young lady devises various mentally, emotionally, physically, erotically, and spiritually gruelling trials to determine a fitting addition to our family. It wasn't Dolly's idea. She was quite happy terrorizing the debutante circuit, masterminding one of those *Dangerous Liaisons* x *Saw* gambits of which girls in my tax bracket are so inordinately fond. You should've seen Dolly work. If you did, you wouldn't think poetry is dead. This, however, was an issue for the debutante parents, who begged (read: bribed) our parents to get her a husband, "for dart practice," they moaned, some none-too-bright Twin Cities dauphin, the heir to a microwaveable cereal or a niche orthopedic insert, whom she could torture as she liked. This was my parents' wager: If none of Dolly's suitors made it through her audition, she could continue psychologically uprooting the prize roses of the one percent. Because they lived in fear of Dolly, this wager was a big deal to the Mephitis, and it wasn't long before not a single Teething Jewel, Pubic Louse, or Lapdog hadn't placed a bet on a suitor. I abstained, being too busy on

the internet, inventing boys. By this point, I'd solved enough of the murders on Papà's blog to confirm he hadn't committed any of them, that he was only a sick fuck mentally, at least for now; I didn't know how long he'd be gratified with merely posting on the serial killer "roleplay" forum, where he unveiled M.O.s completely different from the frou-frou meat-sculptures on his blog and kept his victim description vague, except for—you guessed it—one crucial detail. I tried luring him with fake profiles, pairing leaked high school photos of Midwest emo boy band bassists with the backstories of nepoticided puppet il-khans in Mongol Persia, spending hours Photoshopping their noses, but Papà rarely bit. The few times he did, he'd stop responding within one, two days at most. To be fair, he was distracted—Dolly had unveiled her audition for the season, which started with a dognapping competition and ended with a naked race by eclipse-light on human-subject-grade psychedelics through a rosebush labyrinth filled with nightmarish statuary—and Papà was *very* competitive about the suitor he'd bet on, a beautiful moron who looked like he had any number of cults vying to sacrifice his chiseled pushover body. As wordlessly as he'd gotten me to betray Mom for the Barbara, Papà let me know that if I helped his guy win, I'd get a handsome reward. This decision was much less morally fraught. Dolly picked guys like this out of her teeth; besides, maybe I could suss out Papà's victim profile better in person. Predictably, I didn't. I, too, was distracted, getting a little carried away scheming with Papà, so much so I also failed to realize his beautiful moron was no moron, but a formidable psychopath who'd figured out beautiful morons are treated like pet gods. On the night of the nude psychedelic nightmare run, Papà and I did so much ethically harvested adrenochrome with this guy he simply punched his way through the labyrinth. As Dolly rode off with the ersatz himbo in a baby-blue convertible, I was overcome with the then-irrational conviction that it was the last time I'd see my sister; for this reason I chose, for my reward, the orbitoclast that lobotomized, well, *you know who*—a gesture so tastelessly on-the-nose in its symbolism I'm surprised it was utterly lost on Papà. Having removed it from my boot, I now inch the orbitoclast up my nostril at an angle that will hopefully skewer the prune while eluding the important stuff. The point is shuddering against my septum when I hear footsteps on pool-tile.

Although this is the worst possible time for another costume change, my Telfar Renaissance assassin boots become fluorescent persimmon elf-toed Balenciaga knife mules, which means they have no traction, so I tumble down, muddying the *Salò*-print UNDERCOVER snowboard suit into which my Galliano-era Dior sailor uniform has morphed, the orbitoclast unraveling my bandages in one elegant swoop, before I land, lips first, upon my reflection in a gibbous-lit puddle. xXx_Geefs_slut_666_xXx kisses me back. It's crazy how a new nose can change your face, especially when paired with equally fey and pert jaw, lips, and forehead. The prune sludge leaking out of the doomed 21-year-old catboy's left Peter Pan nostril brings out the pomegranate in my post-surgical black eyes, an effect I emphasize by demuring behind the opera glasses (you know, the only-non-[full]-blood-related-woman-ever-loved-etc. ones), toying with the little *H* charm on their side, which stands apocryphally for (duh) Habsburg. I've only had them for a year, since the abrupt departure from our house of _____, the latest in a long list of boarder-cousins foisted upon us by Grandmama. By then I'd become a recluse, spending all my waking hours trying to catfish Papà, only leaving my room at night, creeping emaciatedly along the corridors in a towel to raid our collection of artisanal floral jam, leaving the unwashed jars lying around my apparently bioluminescent-germ-infested room, where they incubated life, little velvet puddings that in the afternoons gleamed like dirty jewels or clean piss and at night glowed like poison. One night, hoping to switch an ill-chosen cornflower jam for the limited edition fermented rosebud-ivy mix from Mom and Papà's 5th anniversary garden party, I heard a Pubic Louse (Grandmama's 30-something boyfriend Jacques, a slime-tressed parvenu with absurd stepgrandfather delusions) and a Lapdog (long-time boarder-cousin Crescent) whispering about _____. Usually I wouldn't have deigned to eavesdrop, but I'd swallowed a big spoonful of the rosebud-ivy mix, remembering too late that Mom and Papà's 5th anniversary had been at the height of their psychonaut phase. With my third eyelid pliered off, I became convinced Jacques and Crescent held the key to the abyss-cathedral within me. So I stayed and listened. They were saying Grandmama had sent _____ to "quote-unquote 'entice [me] out of this eunuchoid stupor.'" I saw red: people, let alone my *grandmother*, thought I

could be pity-statutoried by some hussy-once-removed into returning to sociability! So the next night, I had _____'s toilet clogged; afterwards I crept to the pantry to pick up a lavender-bergamot jam, which I scraped clean while squatting outside her room, in wait. Unfortunately, this jam was laced too (were none of my parents' condiments safe?!), so at 3 AM _____ found me sprawled against her door, fingers slick with lavender-speckled goo, the jar-edge drawing a sticky sickle on the floor. My eyes were all white, like a prophet's, she told me later. My nosebleed had left a blackcurrant drizzle down my ribs. So _____ knelt down on the asymmetrically ruched, black-bow-échelled train of her orange velvet evening slip (vintage, designer unknown), put her face beneath the saintly droop of the dead sunflower of my face, dabbed clean a corner of nostril, and screamed, "WAKE THE FUCK UP ADRIAN!" I sat up, yelping. The slip slithered over my knees, the door slammed on my finger. I howled. "_____!" I screamed under the door. "I'm on to you, you freak! I have eyewitness accounts! I have—" whereupon she dragged me inside. "YOU think I don't know YOU think I'M a PISS BABY CHAWITY CASE who needs GWANDMAMA to BLACKMAIL people into BEING HIS FWIENDS!" I screamed as she screamed "HOW'D you KNOW I'm a CORPORATE SPY!" as someone elsewhere in the house, someone with impressive breath control, screamed "SHUUT! THEE! FUUCK! UUP! AA! DRII! AAN!" At that, _____ and I found ourselves clutching each other, giggling. "I don't think you're a piss baby charity case," said _____. "In fact, I heard you're some kind of idiot savant aesthete, so hideously deformed they have to keep you locked away," to which I said, "What is this? Am I being groomed? Are you grooming me," to which she instantly let me go, scowling. I laughed, delighted. The lighting was the toxic lunar periwinkle of an anglerfish in a sick ocean, and it made us both look bitchy, uncanny, and overpriced, like a neo-giallo Korean revenge thriller acted out by fashion BJD. _____ handed me three spherical ice cubes in a crushed-silk-velvet sock the color of a cigarette-burned peach, for my finger, she said. The silk-velvet-filtered ice water lazily traced my path as I rifled through her closet, inquiring as to her flavor of corporate spy. She said she was here playing whistleblower because Grandmama was (she turned bright red) grooming (I

started laughing again) her for Papà's job. "Man, your dad sucks," she said, inappropriately, as I held her watermelon tourmaline statement choker up to my neck. As I tried on her collection of secondhand engagement rings, batting my eyes at her in her mirror, I said, "I'm rooting for you." Things continued in this manner, until 21 days after our fateful witching-hour meeting, when _____ walked in on me inventing a boy. She was like, "*Oh* are you a *writer*," in this horrible too-neutral voice, to which I was like, "*No* I'm not a *writer* I'm trying to *catfish* an *inchoate serial killer* yet to make his *first kill*," to which she was like, "*Well* did you *figure out* his *victim profile*," to which I was like, irritably, "I'm *getting there*." To which she said, "Gimme." Obediently, I abdicated my throne (yes, a real throne, I surf the internet on a throne). When she reached the end of Roddin[sic]Enthusiast's statuephilia fetish site profile, she paused, evidently in shock, long enough for me to begin fretting about whether I should do something drastic, like kiss her, but where it was clear the kiss took place in a pocket universe of irony where we were both performatively masculinity-secure heterosexual males instead of one flamingly pansexual woman plus one proudly homoflexible boy, when she clicked "create profile" and typed "xXx_Geefs_slut_666_xXx." I sat like a bundle of après-Pilates laundry in the corner while she typed. When she was done, I walked through a Wong Kar Wai slow motion scene to my laptop. Somehow, even before I looked, I knew that xXx_Geefs_slut_666_xXx would be me, all of me, not just whatever glass slide of me _____ liked to take out and look at every day—only (and this was the part that hurt), she wouldn't know it. "So, like, what do I message him," I said in a more nakedly self-pitying voice than usual, but when I looked up, all I saw was one salmon stiletto and a Xanadu-grey marabou boa centipeding elegantly out the door. The statuephilia fetish app chirped. Messaging with xXx_Geefs_slut_666_xXx, Roddin[sic] Enthusiast was the most responsive he'd ever been—within 2 weeks, he was asking for a late-night phone call. I agreed, panicking. I'd gotten so used to catfishing Papà unsuccessfully, I guess I'd thought we'd be doing this for years, Papà never killing a boy, me circling ever-closer to his victim profile until, on his 80th birthday, he finally wants to try murder, so I gift-wrap for example an insolent nepotism intern, whose murder Papà is unable to carry out in his

doddering dotage, forcing me to kill the intern, in his honor but also practically. So when Papà called me, I froze. I sat there, gulping, listening to the blood in my ears, until I heard, sotto voce, "Papà." Only of course it wasn't "Papà" this new voice said, but his name, pronounced so deliciously it made him forget to hang up. Something made me stay on the line. I realized what I was hearing. So Papà was *having an affair*! I thought, gleefully nauseated, a *long one*, from the sounds of it, and, most hilariously, one involving love—true, tender, requited, unconditional love! I cackled with relief. So all this serial killer stuff was merely an egregiously sustained adultery-guilt metaphor! It wasn't until Papà's lover lit a post-coital cigarette, exhaling my name, that I realized it was _____. The next day, I made her listen to the whole thing while I watched her face. Afterwards, she took my hands. "Listen, you little bitch," she said. "I'm gonna be your stepmom, and then you and I are gonna depose him, and then we're gonna rule the world." I even believed her, almost. Then I said, "Where did you learn that line, uh, uh, *Grooming for Dummies*?" And we flew at each other, hissing, like Miss American Vampire 2nd and 3rd runners-up. When she had me pinned against the armoire, I whispered in her ear, in luxuriant detail, what would happen if she didn't excommunicate herself from the family at once. I said, "The man you love wants to kill little boys." I showed her my proof. "Now get the fuck out." On the threshold, one foot on granite, she stopped, because I made her. "Give me a token," I said. She looked at me blankly. "You know, like for a deal well-struck. Like I'm a corrupt Pope and you're a piece of simonious scum." She gave me a look full of spit. "I'm serious!" I said. Then she was throwing an H-for-Habsburg-monogrammed something at my head, giving me (surprisingly) my first black eye, the memory of which still makes me shiver, barely perceptibly, as I train the ill-begotten things on the pool tiles where Papà intends to bronze-cast a xXx_Geefs_slut_666_xXx-faced me alive. Ah, there he is, my at-last homicidal Papà. He's pacing up and down, spiritually fighting himself, wringing his hands à la Lady Macbeth, but where! The fuck! Are his bronze-casting materials?! What's he playing at?! Enraged, I whip out my phone to DM him on the statuephilia fetish site. That's when I see the notification for Roddin[sic] Enthusiast's message: "Dont come i h8 u >:(." And then, somehow, I hear it. The

click. Of the trigger. Like, of a gun. Even though, when I look up, Papà is still scratching his head with the pistol grip and reading the back of the ammo box. My fall had only taken me halfway down the mountain. There's no time to scheme. I roll up the coprophagic-nubiles-patterned sleeves of my *Salò*-print UNDERCOVER snowboard suit. I brush the peat off the bandages and re-swaddle my new face. I inhale deeply. Start to roll. It hurts. It's filthy. My mouth fills with dead leaves, worms, dirt; I'm pretty sure I flatten my new nose; I'm rolling so fast it's like I'm reading a flipbook of Papà's milestones in firearm mastery. I'm ten meters away when the barrel is snug inside his cheeks. "DAD!" I bellow. He looks up. I crash into his chest, luciferously. The gun sinks, lost forever, to the bottom of the abattoir. Somehow, I have fallen exactly so that Papà and I are doing the Pietà. Cradling my neck, staring at his number one boy with inarticulable sorrow, Papà pulls out a bottle shaped like a cannibal dowager empress' eternal-youth potion. Then he turns his head, looks you dead in the eye, and says, "Mirror. The new eau de parfum. For princes."

♥

Family:

Fruity Oriental

Notes:

Head:

plum, moat water, Siberian deer musk,

spilled nail polish, candied violets

Heart:

beeswax, frankincense, upturned loam,

roses, gasoline, baby's breath, antiseptic

Base:

lavender, bergamot,

cigarette (peach-flavored, kiss-stained),

melting ice, gunpowder (unsparked)

Beverly Burch

Busted Sonnet

My mother, my devoted one, had her limits.
It was weep at your own risk. It was ridicule by song.
If I teared up, she crooned *She's a real sad tomato,*
a busted Valentine. What was I to do with scorn
but collect other mothers, listeners and consolers,
fan wavers, hand-holders. Schoolmarms embraced me
like madonnas. Little favor here, kind words there.
I turned to neighbors, an auntie, piano teacher,
gathered beads for my rosary, wore its prayer.
Her aim was true. *Dear female child, I'll toughen you.*
What if at last her stomach churned, had enough
of this work. Poor brain, etched by acidic tools,
impulses fleeing down the same neuron's path.
I ran blind up the hallway, her voice pursued.

Shannon Elizabeth Hardwick

Elegy for My Older Brother Who Taught Me How to Contact the Dead

I remember the door to the treehouse,
the Ouija board balanced between us,

as one remembers their childhood
telephone number outside a lamppost-
lined street of the brain.

I remember ascending the ladder
to call on Kurt Cobain.

I remember your face as a foal
on a forgotten farm—folded

within itself. It's raining. Somewhere
there's a ladder. I will ascend.
I will call on the foal, watch it collect its legs.

Sarah Curtis

Blood Harmony

In the early days of the pandemic, my mother told me a secret. We were talking on the phone while I stood cobbling a salad out of half-limpid vegetables, the dusk falling like a woolen cloak outside my kitchen window. The subject of our conversation was silly. I was telling my mother how, earlier that day, a man I didn't know contacted me on Facebook to inform me his mother and my father had a long-ago love affair. Before I could process this information, I read his second message, which basically said, *Oops, wrong guy*.

My mother had been depressed in the pandemic, frightened for the health of my father, who, at 84, is older than her and has a compromised immune system. I'd hoped this comedy of errors would cheer her up, sweep her mind off our changed new world. "For a second I thought I might have a half-sibling out there!" I joked, stabbing a celery through its heart.

"Oh, that you do," she said.

I set down my knife. "I do what, Mom?"

And so it was that my mother told me the following story. Years before she met my father, a musician, he had a brief affair with an English woman who came to one of his concerts. It was the spring of 1960, the dawn of a bright new decade. My 23-year-old father was touring Great Britain, playing guitar for the Everly Brothers, a pop duo known for singing silvery harmonies that only family members with the same genetic vocal timbre can achieve. In the music business this is known as blood harmony.

When my mother mentioned the tour, I immediately made the connection—my father had told me about it over the years. The tour was important in his life. He'd grown up very poor at the tail end of the Dust Bowl, and this tour marked the moment his career began to take off. He went from sleeping on couches and hitchhiking to gigs to catching first-class train cars and signing autographs for

swooning fans. Perhaps this English woman was one of many English women, a swarm of birds in Mary Quant miniskirts winking cat-eyed up at the stage. I imagine he felt like a sun-starved flower, finally kissed by the spotlight.

When the band returned to England two years later, my father reconnected with the woman for several days. During this reunion, she revealed to him she'd given birth to a baby boy the year before whom she'd given up for adoption. The child, she said, was his.

By this point in our conversation, I'd walked out of the kitchen to my bedroom where I sat at the foot of my bed, my eyes resting on a pillow embroidered with the word LOVE. *She had a child*, I heard my mother say again. LOVE. *Child*. Love child.

My mother detonated this bomb in a voice she might use to tell me she'd found a cool turtle in the road, as if the secret were one big, madcap hilarity. "Yep! You gotta half-brother out there somewhere!" Underneath her breezy tone, I detected another message: *For God's sake, don't take it so seriously*. Maybe she was pulling back on the reins, attempting to make light of the load she'd dropped in my lap. But it was too late. I did take the secret seriously.

I am my parents' only child. That fact is an integral part of my identity, one that has shaped my consciousness from an early age. Growing up without siblings on a remote farm meant my friends were often imaginary, my mind my most trusted companion. I have compensated for that truth my entire life, lived with and around it, given birth to three babies so my children will never know the shape of my loneliness. Being an only child is as much a part of me as the contours of my face, the make-up of my ancestry, the scents and textures of my childhood.

I still don't know why my mother chose this banal moment to reveal the secret; I doubt she gave it much consideration. She tends to blurt her thoughts, a trait that has embarrassed me from a young age. But her revelation had consequences. For in the truth of my half-brother, another truth expressed itself: I had been living a half-lie.

Lately I've been thinking about the word *express*, and the ways we succeed and fail at it. It's one of those English words a non-native speaker must find maddening, because it can function as a noun, an adjective, and a verb. The adjective comes from the French *exprès*, meaning a precise description, an image truly depicted. A well-wrought portrait is an express likeness of its subject. Depending on which genes expressed themselves, my half-brother might be an express likeness of my father, or me.

The verb derives from the Latin *ex*, or out, plus *pressāre*, or to press: to press out. The Oxford English Dictionary lists many ancient examples of this usage, mostly from early scientific journals. Juices are expressed, as are grapes, oils, blood, sulphur, tears, nutmegs, honeydews, and bladders. We don't say mothers' milk is discharged or squeezed; we say it is expressed. During my own all-consuming breastfeeding days, I was grateful for this terminology. Breastfeeding can be a tedious, bovine routine, but express lent it an air of poetry. I expressed my milk as I expressed my love for my babies, a pleasing symmetry.

The verb is used most frequently in reference to language, and here is where I think the word really shines. If a friend were to come to you with the words, "I want to *say* something to you," you might back up, thinking you were about to be scolded. If she were to say, "I want to *share* something with you," you might lean in to hear a secret, though tentatively, for the word carries a whiff of dread. A doctor might share your test results, or your mother might share with you that your father has a secret love child. Per its definition, the word implicates the listener. It says, *You're about to hear a secret, but that secret involves you*. But if a friend were to say, "I want to *express* something to you," you might straighten your spine and pay attention, for your friend is about to convey something from within. There is a difficulty implied on her part; she is trying to shape her thoughts into language, like meat through a grinder, or an apple through a mill.

In case it's not clear by now, I like the word very much. *Express* is graceful, refined, maybe a little snobbish, but accurate. When I recall the deepest sentiments I've uttered or written in my life, even words of love (maybe especially words of love), they hurt a little in the telling. They pressed.

My father didn't know my mother had told me about his mystery son, which meant we now had a secret upon a secret. The next day, I called her back with more nagging questions. "Hang on," she said, walking out of earshot of my unsuspecting father. I asked if she thought it was possible the woman had lied about the pregnancy. No, she didn't think so. My father had portrayed her as trustworthy, "a nice girl." How long had my mother known about the baby? "Oh, only a year or two," she guessed.

"Really, Mom? In fifty years of marriage he just told you this a year ago?"

"Okay, maybe ten years ago," she admitted.

Ten?

The answer I most sought was the woman's name. If I knew that, I figured the mystery would unfurl in a simple Google search. But my mother claimed my father did not remember. "Bullshit!" I snapped. His memory for minute details is a joke in our family. He can recall the date he first tried mustard as a child, but he can't remember the name of the woman who birthed his son? My mother sighed. She said she wasn't sure she believed him either. This secret brother was planting a deep seed of mistrust, smudging the narrative of my life—not the arc, but the tenor.

For years, my parents tried for more children. Though my mother had no problem conceiving, hormone deficiencies prevented her from carrying out a pregnancy, and she suffered a string of miscarriages before and after my birth. *You are a miracle, the lucky one*, she told me from an early age—the only child able to survive the dark hollows of her womb. She miscarried for the last time when I was a toddler. The fetus was a boy, five months along. He almost took her with him.

Enough, my shaken father declared beside her hospital bed. *One child is enough*. Then, because he has a hard time expressing anything serious without levity, he added: *Trust me, siblings are overrated*. As far as I know he loved his five siblings, despite the fact they robbed him of valuable airtime with his parents. Perhaps this is why he became a performer, to spend his life winning back that lost time.

My mother did not wallow in the vacancy but filled the gap with off-key songs and glib conversation. "You know what? I'm *glad* I never had more kids. Because I

could never love another child as much as I love you," she'd coo when I was young, painting my face with damp kisses. This was supposed to make me feel good, but it did not, especially after I learned about the miscarriages. I felt sorry for those unloved babies who couldn't clear the threshold of life. And I envied my friends with siblings, the way they could share the burden of their parents and make meaning of each other's experiences. Only children can't do this. We must process our pasts alone. But if I have a brother out there, we could be allies, rewriting our definition of normalcy.

It's a fantasy; or so I thought until one night in September, when I met my friend Sarah and her sister for drinks at an outdoor beer garden. We greeted in the parking lot, masked and wary. It had been months since I'd met up with friends, and everywhere I looked I saw signs about distancing and protocol, a strange mix of comfort and danger.

Fall was settling in, chilling the mossy air, the green giving way to gold. Orange arrows duct-taped on the ground led us to a picnic area where we sipped piney IPAs and tried to remember how to socialize. I'd never met Sarah's sister, but she appeared to be around the same age as Sarah, in her mid-to-late-forties, with the same wavy, black hair. When I asked them about their mutual childhood, they exchanged a weighted look.

"Oh, we didn't grow up together," Sarah said. "We only met a year ago through ancestry.com." Then they laughed, their voices harmonizing as siblings' do. Blood harmony.

A string plucked in my chest. The spruces bowing over us seemed to sigh with yearning. Sarah explained that her sister had been their mother's love child, given up for adoption at birth. The pregnancy was the result of a college fling, a secret their mother had kept until a DNA test gave her away. The sisters had pursued different career paths—Sarah is a rockabilly bassist; her sister is a scientist who studies, of all things, genetic mutations in rats. But their life choices had been similar. They lived less than an hour from each other, both married with no

children. "Not only did we never have them, we never wanted them," Sarah said, her sister wrinkling her nose in agreement.

Their story is becoming mundane—a secret revealed through a spit test, a life re-examined. It's likely this generational phenomenon will never be seen again, thanks to the advent of birth control and reproductive rights. My alleged half-brother was conceived in 1960, the year before England legalized the pill.

Yet it felt like the universe had tipped its muscular hand by showing me my own hope made manifest. As I lay in bed that night, I wondered about my secret brother. Did he share my quick temper, my heart-shaped face, my tendency to sneeze when drunk? Did he inherit traits that skipped me—my father's round-tipped nose, his brunette coloring, his innate musical talent? Or maybe he expressed some part of me I would only recognize if I saw him face-to-face, held up like a shiny reflector of my soul.

I wish I had a crystal ball and could see him, I thought. Lacking one, I formed a picture in my mind. My secret brother is handsome, of medium height and build, with a swoop of salt-and-pepper hair. He works in a factory, maybe as an engineer in Manchester, or Birmingham—somewhere industrial. He went through a rebellious phase in his youth (possibly after uncovering his adoption), drinking and drugging and smashing beer bottles on skulls in dingy underground bars, but he managed to rebuild his life in his forties. Now he is clean of all substances except nicotine. He smokes. He broods too, but he's kind. He's married, possibly a father or stepfather, distant but loving like our father. He still wears black leather jackets and jeans, and his face, full like our father's, looks younger than his sixty years.

Then I realized the source of my image. It's very likely that my secret brother is Joe Strummer of The Clash.

My father is an old Texan who shies away from expressing his feelings into words. Years ago he told me if I truly wanted to understand his childhood growing up in small-town West Texas, I should watch the 1971 film *The Last Picture Show*.

It bored me in a college film course, but a few months after the secret, I was flipping through movie channels when I landed upon it. As soon as I heard the characters speak, I remembered that the main character's name is the same as my father's: Sonny.

The Last Picture Show, based on Larry McMurtry's semi-autobiographical novel, is bleak, with sad, hardened, and unfulfilled characters whose language reflects the emptiness of the flat, Texan plains. It centers around Sonny and a few of his friends and lovers as they experience the passions and anguish (mostly anguish) of late adolescence.

In the final scene, Sonny pays a visit to his spurned ex-lover, Ruth, who is stuck in a miserable marriage to the town football coach. Ruth answers the door in a bathrobe, then rails at Sonny for leaving her. She smashes a coffee pot against the wall and berates him some more. Finally, Sonny takes her hand across the breakfast table. Her body swells with tears as she tries to express herself. In the book, McMurtry writes:

> She was on the verge of speaking to him, of saying something fine. It seemed to her that on the tip of her tongue was something it had taken her forty years to learn, something wise or beautiful that she could finally say. It would be just what Sonny needed to know about life … she gasped with it, squeezed his hand, and somehow lost the words—she could not hear them for the rush of blood. The quick pulse inside her was all she could feel and the words were lost after all.

The Last Picture Show is a book about disconnection, but the ending feels hopeful, not because Sonny and Ruth are likely to make it as a couple, but because they achieve what the rest of the characters do not. They forge a true, emotional bond. But this connection is only possible when they move beyond language and sit in silence, tracing the lines on each other's palms.

This romanticism of the inexpressible surfaces in much of Western American art. Real men don't share their feelings, the trope suggests; they drink or fight or fuck them away—or maybe, in my father's case, express them in music. He

internalized this value system from a young age, and certainly he passed it on to me. Flawed as the model is, I have to admit I find the ending of *The Last Picture Show* beautiful, and relatable. It reminds me of my phone calls and visits with my father: two people sitting together and apart, immersed in all they cannot name.

Here's how I wish this essay would end. I take an ancestry test, which reveals my brother's name. We agree to meet over Zoom, and my anxiety dissolves the second I see a younger version of my father's face reflected on the screen. When he speaks, his voice is deep and melodic like my father's, but with a British accent. It's so strange I have to laugh, and he laughs too, and that's when I realize we share the same sense of humor. We make promises to meet in person after the pandemic, promises we keep. Eventually, I introduce him to my father, and the connection enriches us all. My brother expands our universe while narrowing the distance between us.

Here's how this essay actually ends. I drop the subject with my mother and leave it unexpressed with my father. Expression has consequences, an unpopular idea in today's culture of oversharing. We're only as sick as our secrets, we say, and there is truth to this. Confession brings forth redemption, an idea that dates back to at least 400 A.D., when St. Augustine felt so guilty about stealing a peach he wrote *Confessions*, the first Western memoir. Today, the self-help guru Brené Brown echoes St. Augustine when she urges people to "excavate the unsaid." But when I imagine what this excavation actually looks like with my father, I don't like what I see. I see a conversation that wounds a man—a blameless man, really. I see my embarrassed, regretful father, pacing his floor at two a.m., wrestling with old ghosts. And for what? He's wily, unlikely to give me a definitive answer.

No, the secret holds a question, one it's up to me to manage. I already took an ancestry test years ago, but after meeting with Sarah, I pay $100 and order a different one. Six weeks later, the results arrive in my in-box with a thud. Like the first test, it reveals nothing, other than the fact I'm Norwegian like my mother and Scotch-Irish like my father. A typical white, American mongrel, a recipe I already knew. On my

family tree, my parents appear as blue and orange bubbles above my name. One line—and one only—descends under my father's bubble, and that line leads to me. Our tight triangle, still intact. *How is that possible?* I wonder. Did neither my half-brother nor any of his blood descendants take the test? Maybe he died young, I think. Or maybe the whole thing was a mix-up, and he never lived at all.

The French surrealist poet André Breton once said, "All my life my heart has yearned for a thing I cannot name." When my mother first revealed the secret to me, I thought breathlessly, somewhat vainly, that I had found that thing. I thought my half-brother would make sense of my life by expressing some intractable part of me back to myself. Or that he would be a lasting gift, a part of my father I could hold onto after he is gone. That thought gave me hope when the world felt hopeless, my aging parents held captive in their home, their lives at the fickle mercy of a particle smaller than dust. The promise of my secret brother was that I would never have to say goodbye to my father, because I could still find his soul reflected in a living phenotype outside my own body, in a gesture or physical attribute only a Zoom call away. Genetics as eternal life.

But in all likelihood, my daughters and I are the only living expressions of my father I will ever know. I do see him reflected in them at times: in the peach curve of my oldest daughter's cheeks, or the way my younger daughters are drawn to music and performing. Or maybe I am imagining these traits come from my father. Maybe they come from my mother's side, or from my husband's grandfather, an Italian immigrant who played the mandolin. Genetics can be a trick of the mind, an empty receptacle into which we express our longing.

When I was a child, my father taught me to sing two-part harmony on long car trips. He would sing the root notes, and I the upper third. We filled hours this way, the dashed highway lines whizzing by like beats on a metronome, my mother dutifully clapping after each song. Over the years, we developed a repertoire that included Cole Porter and Peggy Lee and old cowboy campfire songs—our specialty was a version of "Red River Valley" my father made up:

Come and sit by my side if you love me
Do not hasten to bid me adieu
Just remember the Red River Valley
And the cowboy who tore half in two

We sang that song so much the absurdity wore off, though it never failed to make my mother laugh. I didn't know how the cowboy had managed to cleave himself, but I did know that the ugliest image could be made beautiful by harmony, and that harmony could not be expressed alone.

Which is why, against all reason, I sometimes envision my lovely, jaded brother, sweet-faced and rough-edged, strolling along the Thames. He takes one last, thoughtful drag off his cigarette, then flicks it into the water, rippling his reflection.

I'm right here, I wish I could tell him. *Come find me*.

Ramón García

Chapala in Early August

A day to read Vallejo, nothing more.
The lake under an ancient spell,
Blessed and mild the rhythmic glare of its waters,
But nothing in relation to my soul.
Forgive me, daylight perfection, for being so neglectful!

I want to be alone, although it hurts
To the bottom of my childhood.

The world distances itself, takes
Humanity along.
It is not self-pity
To think that love and tenderness
Have been orphaned. That poets are
Capricious children of the world's wounded parents—

But who are they, the progenitors who didn't make a place
For us in our skin, in their love, in those
Warring political parties of the spirit?

Parental figures: All those lovers
Who couldn't love or only feigned affection,
Punishing figures
Of nocturnal hours. An evil leak in the vessels of lineages
Made us descendants.

The hours of a beautiful day trickle along,
And I look forward
To the night, its death song of indifference.

The pregnant night awaits in the holy dark lap of summer
Bloated with the immaculate conception of morning.
In urchin morning light
We'll again be born,
Deformed and beautiful,
Revered like ancient Mayans.[1]

[1] Physical deformities in Mesoamerican civilizations were considered divine attributes granted to humans by the gods.

Rochelle Hurt

Meret Oppenheim—Object (1936)

fur covered cup, saucer, and spoon

[a man on the street once called out to me: *if i had you, i'd share you!* what generosity—not at odds, after all, with misogyny. all the surrealists made objects, but none so smirking as this, all *go ahead and touch then*. as in: would you lick what you'd grab? as in: please, could you? i don't want to run my finger around Miró's wooden vagina, but Oppenheim's teacup? even a tongue, just to know. *waiter, a little more fur!* she joked, and took the idea home, spoons clinking in her purse. considerable, the power of fur. a man in a restaurant once called me a boy over a haircut. some ancient alumnus who spotted me chain-smoking in a uniform shirt—and sheared close enough to the ears that he couldn't see my skirt when he called the dean to tattle. the *fur-lined-cup school of art* didn't sweat authenticity. but here in the center of the cup, where fur swirls into hide, i see thick seams, as on stockings. my hand to the glass like a pant. slick glint of the spoon's edge like wet saliva under fringe. it nearly hisses. *if i had you, i'd hurl you*. a recoil when i see how the naked skin of the plate peeks through. as in: caught you looking. or: oh, it's just you. the distasteful familiar. like being misnamed or catcalled. as in: this again? another of Miró's objects dangles across the room, subtle as a leg lamp. when will an object start or cease to bore you? a man in my bed once called me *woman*, and a woman in my bed once called me a *bitch*. i stayed with them both but only forgave one. still, everyone liked my long hair better. the papers called her Mr. Oppenheimer. as in: art sexed her. or as in: that's mister to you.]

Bonnie Jo Campbell

Kicking Over Tombstones

RIP, Christopher Columbus: Oh, you master navigator, you red-headed rake! You girded your loins and set out toward the ends of the flat earth, and when your commanding smile curved the planet, you looked back and winked at Queen Isabella. Brilliant adventurer! All the girls in my middle school crushed on you in your black hat like you were our father's handsomest friend who took us on your pontoon boat and let us taste a whiskey sour from an insulated *Cap'n* glass. We imagined you as slim hipped as John Travolta, swinging your leg over the side of the Santa Maria onto a beach in the Bahamas with a *howdy-do* to the brown-skinned fishermen wielding spears. We dreamily traced your path to Cuba and on to Hispaniola where you introduced yourself to the Arawaks as a stern but fair man (and so fashionably European). We saw you sitting down to sup, sampling their corn and squash and peanuts for the first time. Yum! Isabella was back home with Ferdinand, but she was dreaming of you. You sent her vanilla, chocolate, tobacco, and a passel of American slaves. Even when your joints ached from arthritis, even when your eyes swelled nearly shut from staring into the sun (you knucklehead), you and Bartolomeo and Diego, your bros, found the strength to torture and mutilate as was needed. Of course, you had to cut the tongues from native girls—would they never stop their disrespectful chatter? Parading dismembered amputated body parts through the streets was simply your attempt to restore peace. King Ferdinand felt a kinship and pardoned you, one manly man to another.

RIP, NN: My mother went to her grave thinking you were grand, her devoted younger lover who would have saved her from being alone if you hadn't died at age 28. When the truck hit your snowmobile, your alcoholic blood spilled out onto the pavement, stained the ice. Such a tragedy! Nobody asked whose bedroom you were in at 8:30 that evening. I pretended not to be relieved you were dead. A few nights later, Christmas Eve, Mom was drinking homemade wine and crying. I took over wrapping family gifts. *What if no man ever loves me again?* she asked, and only then

did I see I'd kept secret what I should have told. I knew it was too late to tell. I was electrified by a description I overheard of your blood in the snow, and months later, when I started bleeding too, I didn't tell that either. When it was warm enough to ride my bike to the place you were struck down, the blood was gone, so I had to close my eyes and recreate the scene from my own dark little heart.

RIP, Paul Gauguin: Bravo, Bohemian renegade! Van Gogh cut off his ear for you, and the balmy colors of your adopted paradise still inspire the world! It would take nuclear cultural annihilation to take that moniker *genius* away from you! Bravo for quitting your stockbroker job and moving to Tahiti. Bravo for leaving the old battle axe and five children, trading that ball and chain for a monumental art career. You go, man! Like you, I can't stop looking at those island girls with their almond eyes. Ooh-la-la, your eyes must've bugged out like the cartoon wolf when you spied thirteen-year-old Teha'amana, your second wife. (Your third wife would be Pahura, age fourteen.) The pretty Polynesian teenagers say thank you, Monsieur, for showing us the European way. Did you have syphilis, like they say? Did you know that syphilis in a girl's body gets passed to her babies—assuming they're not stillborn. Think, Paul. If you gave a bacterial strain to your delicious lovelies, then that too became part of your legacy. Your legacy of pure colors and strong lines expands to include vaginal lesions and pustular papules on slender young women sitting under palm trees even today! The Tahitian vendors still flog your depictions of island life. Personally, I can't look away from your brilliant visions, your *Primitive Tales*, your *When Will You Marry?* and *Why Are You Angry?*

RIP, Nicolae Ceausescu: Nobody had more statues than you! A slimmed-down depiction of your chubby figure stood bronzed in the center of every Romanian village. Every shop selling pink sugar water and sawdusty crackers (there was nothing else in most of those shops) displayed a re-touched photograph of you and your stiffly coiffed Elena above the empty cash box. In the autumn of 1989 the Transylvanians were hungry, restless, fiddling wildly in the mountains, howling in the woods like canis lupus lupus, weren't they? December 21st in Timisoara they began to heckle and jeer you, and Christmas Day they arranged you and Elena

against the wall next to the toilets and fired. Nobody had more books published than you! Your 32-volume opus, *On the Way of Building Up the Multilaterally Developed Socialist Society*. A Romanian bestseller while you wielded absolute power. Well, nobody reads you now, Nicky. Even the National Library has pulped your books. Welcome to the fickle world of publishing!

RIP, Elena Ceausescu: They hated you even more than they hated your murderous tyrant of a husband. Isn't that just how it is for women? They blame you for the starving babies in those orphanages—they figure babies was your department. What does a man know about not putting little kids in cages? Fair or not, it's how it is in a man's world, sister. Along with the rest of them, I spit on your grave.

RIP, GP: You are legendary around here and much loved. You should have transcended the whole death thing and come to your own memorial—you would have really dug it. Hundreds of people hung from the rafters to sing your praises. You, our transcendental meditator and Master Bullseye Pistol Shooter, a rank earned by a lifetime of concentration and care. You put on your blinders to block the distractions of your past and the violence of the present moment. Joined the NRA despite disliking their politics. Pulled the trigger again and again. You taught a lot of us to shoot and shoot safely, and you never fired a gun in anger, but that didn't keep you away from the business end of your stupid, angry neighbor's pistol. All your own safe practices couldn't save you from the full expression of his very bad day. When your neighbor's anger was spent, he sat down and cried in his hands, let the little pink gun hang lightly from one finger. (His wife's pink Glock—she feels just awful.) He whined and moaned. *Wah-wah, my best friend is dead, I killed my best friend.* To attain your exquisite accuracy, you pulled the trigger more than a million times, without hurting anybody, but you had always been a point on that line of fire.

RIP, Mother Teresa: Saint of the gutters! You fed the blind and the homeless and the dying as you harvested their souls for Christ. You and your volunteers rinsed the unwashed, prayed over their souls, baptized them quietly when they were too weak to object. No denying you denied yourself comforts. You also

brought in the cash like nobody's business, and the Vatican said *Thank you, ma'am*. No holy sense in wasting it all on porridge and bandages. Jesus suffered, so why not everybody else? "I think it is very beautiful for the poor to accept their lot, to share it with the passion of Christ. I think the world is being much helped by the suffering of the poor people," you said. The church will soon confirm your second miracle and then, *ka-boom*, you're a saint, honey. Whew, after all your hard work. Makes you roll back your shoulders, put your feet up on a cloud and take a load off. Let the harp-playing commence! Talk about the long game—you played it well.

RIP, Henry Kissinger: You escaped the Nazis, and people used to call you the smartest man in the world. Never the kindest. As the decades passed, you accumulated more blood on your hands than one of those Nazi doctors bleeding out prisoners at Auschwitz just to see what it was like. A highly effective secretary of state, some say, apart from all the innocent lives you sacrificed. Wait. You're still alive? Holy shit! Maybe all that blood keeps an old man's heart beating, like they say about transfusions from virgins.

RIP, KC: Orange and leathery, in your coffin at thirty-nine, laid out on satiny fabric—nobody sprang for the embalming. The preacher went on and on about Jesus saves, *Jesus is better than nine one one*. Yes, the guy really said that. Why somebody thought you needed that man of authority to send you off, I do not know. You didn't think much of the authorities. As kids, you and I drank tequila and split the worm, took mescaline, smoked joints and cigarettes, sniffed gold spray paint from a rag. We drove fast, we kissed boys, we burned in the sun, said fuck-you to the boys and the whole world. You scared me like a ride at the fair, but I wanted to ride along. Truth be told, I was never as brave as you, couldn't quite fly free, and after a while, I declined the whiff, snort, pill, and puff. I took up college education and joined the volleyball team. But I hate what people I know now would say about you. They can't know how funny you were, how full of life. Your daughter looks just like you. She seems brave like you. She lives just a half mile away from me and I am afraid to know her better.

RIP, CO: What a confused mess I was at thirteen years old when you culled me from the herd. I'd already learned the idea no guy would ever love me. You were twenty-nine, handsome, clever, and you liked them young, as my friend KC could have also attested. I'm glad you're dead now so I won't have to see you at the post office anymore, nearly half a century later. Not so dashing at the end! Takes its toll on a man to smoke up every yummy morsel that crosses his path—but you had fun, didn't you? Tasted things other men didn't dare taste. Did they put that on your stone? What, no stone, poor man? Nobody stuck by you to the end? Not saying I didn't understand you, sympathize with you—I was raised to understand men and to be pleasant. Otherwise I might have said, *You're gross, I hate you. I'm angry.* But then I would have seen you at the gas station, and it would have been a big deal. I would have seen you at the stoplight, when I was turning left and you were going wherever the hell you were going. It was always easier to just wave and smile.

RIP, Dad: Right before you died, you finally read one of my books. My second novel. You said it wasn't bad, and I cried. Somehow your *not bad* felt as good as a starred review. Surely you liked me, or liked me as much as you liked any female of our species. Surely you didn't mean for me to spend my life feeling ashamed of every success. Surely you hadn't wanted me to feel I'd stolen accolades away from somebody more deserving. Probably it wasn't about me at all. Probably you hated the woman in yourself, and I just got caught in the crossfire.

RIP, Mom: You taught me to love men, to please them, but never to depend on one—independence is my superpower, and I thank you. (*I don't need you or anybody!* I say on countless occasions.) You taught me vodka and cigarettes and flirting, and how to keep talking—even as I collapse to my knees, my spirit crushed, I keep right on talking! You showed me how to build the world from outrageous stories, and only much later do I see your raspy voice as a curtain of smoke concealing the stories you weren't telling. What I wouldn't give now for one more outsized conversation with you beyond the grave, both of us shouting, no holds barred. We'd use an extravagant language to pin one another to the wall—a language both

literary and cronish that only the two of us would understand. As the earth rose up to reclaim you for good, I would cry and moan and cling to your bones. Now I talk to your etched stone under the pawpaw trees. *She loved and was loved*, the stone says, but that ain't scratching the surface.

RIP, Other Dad: I don't even know where to start.

RIP, Grandpa: The patriarchy is dead. Long live the patriarchy! Remember how I used to hide behind the couch from you, Grandpa? All us kids loved our sweet Granny—she'd show us wildflowers and make us those butter and jelly sandwiches—but you terrified us, old man. You bullied Granny and disparaged Mom and shook your head at us too, but we could run away into the woods, climb trees, and toss sticks down at you. We all thought (hoped?) you'd die before Granny and we would have her to ourselves, but surprise and RIP to your long-suffering wife! What now? you asked after the funeral, gazing out at the empty years before you with nobody in high heels fixing you a highball. Here's the confounding thing. As time passed, loneliness made you kind. It made you better. You became generous at eighty. Sympathetic at ninety. You proved a man could change, and our poor sweet Granny missed your redemption. Every day I miss your dry roasted peanuts in a wooden bowl and glass of sherry at 11 a.m. I miss your memories of past presidents and old local farmers, and I miss your excellent table manners. And I curse you, too. Because of you, I have to believe in the possibility of transformation. And keeping that kind of hope aloft is way more exhausting than just kicking over tombstones.

REVIEWS & INTERVIEWS

Luisa Fernanda Pérez

Una Conversación: Adriana Corral *y* Celia Álvarez Muñoz

Artists Adriana Corral and Celia Álvarez Muñoz are two of 15 Latinx artists who recently received the Mellon and Ford-funded Latinx Artist Fellowship, which awards $50,000 each year for an initial commitment of five years and targets the longstanding systemic lack of support to Latinx artists. This important acknowledgment fueled my desire to have a conversation with both artists at this pivotal moment in their careers. As I prepared for our conversation, I wanted to provide a space where the artists could talk about the implications of the fellowship on their lives and careers as women who have close contact with *espacios fronterizos*.

Celia's and Adriana's work has been crucial in the border town region of El Paso, TX / Ciudad Juárez, México. Además, al ser originaria de Cd. Juárez y al haber estudiado en La Universidad de Texas en El Paso (UTEP), su trabajo ha sido significativo para mi desarrollo como historiadora del arte, and throughout my own career, I have been in contact with their art in one form or another. In 2018, I was an intern in El Paso Museum of Art (EPMA), where part of Celia's *Postales* (1988)—a mixed-media project comprised of paintings, and street signs that reference El Paso—is on view in the permanent collection galleries. Having easy access to *Postales* enabled me to reflect on issues of assimilation and the way art might deploy humor and creative confusion to explore bilingual experience. One of the last events I attended, pre-pandemic, was a talk with artists and curators on Latinx art in the borderlands, hosted by the EPMA in March of 2020. Celia was the consummate performer—she opened her talk with a joke, and I heard the fellow attendees rousing from their seats as she made her pun (read to the end for the punchline). In her art, she went on to note, one can see a "weaving of place and time, hot and cold topics, never really resolving but exploring, presenting more questions than answers."

No less exploratory, Adriana's practice is an ongoing investigation into social injustices and human rights violations. I first encountered her work

Memento (2019)—a site-specific installation that both documents and denounces feminicidios in Cd. Juárez—through a discussion in a class and was inspired to learn more. Creating an abstract space that memorialized victims by using text and acetone to transfer their names onto three interior museum walls, Adriana's choice to depart from strictly representational forms or straight-forward text resonated with me. As with *Memento*, her text pieces are often ephemeral; Adriana articulates a moment between the visible and invisible, an installation in the process of disappearing. Another vital part of her work is the creation of a database with the names of feminicidio victims. Thus, *Memento* is a temporary installation, but it is also an ongoing project: not just a trace of violence, but a database, one that continues to grow at an alarming rate.

Although the subject matters of *Postales* and *Memento* are geographically centered in México and the borderlands, both works reflect changes and injustices that are not exclusively a problem of the border or *latinoamérica*. Therefore, it is crucial to address their work as part of a canon of artists who continuously challenge hegemonic narratives. My hope is that this fellowship, through its support of artists like Celia and Adriana, will foster re-examination of discourses of Latinx and "American" art: a geography that refers to Las Américas: the entire continent.

While the impetus of our exchange was a discussion on the impact of the Latinx Fellowship, our two-and-a-half-hour conversation ranged in themes: challenges in the process of artmaking; the physicality of their respective practices; borders and their many facets; our shared love of film. I am excited to witness Celia's and Adriana's next projects and I am grateful for the opportunity to have shared a space with these pioneering artists; les agradezco a ambas por su calidez, su disposición, su paciencia y honestidad.

Luisa Fernanda Pérez: I understand you had a meeting with the other 13 Latinx Mellon fellows; how was it?

Celia Álvarez Muñoz: It was interesting. The fellows are formulating a resource for access to the arts community, especially for the Latinx arts community. We have a spreadsheet instead of a drawer full of brochures and booklets.

Adriana Corral: Yes. It is wonderful to have some of those resources, but it could also be informative and helpful to have individuals we could directly reach out to. In this stage of my practice, I have been shifting gears and working on an installation that has taken me years with quite a few challenges. A lot of moving parts, but it has been educational especially working with fabricators and companies who do not necessarily work with artists.

CAM: Give them a box of chocolates. I would always go with a bribe, always.

AC: Unfortunately, we are all in different states! My main concern resides in how I've been treated in trying to realize this installation over the years. Some fabricators in the past have been demeaning and disrespectful and even go so far as to treat me like a little girl. It's insulting. I've had to take a few lessons from my father on how to compose myself more assertively and directly.

CAM: Wear your hard hat and your heavy boots. There are a lot of pecking orders; everywhere you go, there is some pecking order. But you are getting things done. I was looking at the big wall with the carvings, *Requiem* (2016–2019) (Fig. 1). Who helped? You and a crew?

Fig. 1. Adriana Corral working on *Requiem* (2016-2019). Image courtesy of MASS MoCA.

AC: I hand-carved each contributed date out; they were on 4' x 4' sheets of drywall. I worked with the museum to realize it on a monumental scale (40' x 20'). The museum has an incredible construction and install crew. I expressed I needed somebody who is an artesian with drywall, and the team provided me with Magic Mike—that's what I like to call him. A true guru with drywall. He brought the wall I envisioned to life. I documented Mike's entire process. For me, that is such an important component to capture for each of the installations I create.

There are different stages of the work: the conceptual, the research, the creation of the work, and the documentation. There are certain moments in the process when I am by myself in the research or production phase, but when a team or individual helps to realize the completed installation, that's when the magic happens.

CAM: I always love learning from the work crew or whoever is in charge. There is always a nice give and take. I think that is the synergy that I gravitate to in projects like that. I like the collaboration. I like working in the studio, but I also like being around people. I like traversing space and going into places that I don't know; it is a learning curve for me, has to be that. It's always fun and necessary to learn whatever new tools, processes, whatever will help you.

AC: Yes. Regarding *Requiem*, Vince (Vincent Valdez) and I collaborated on this installation, and there is a bronze eagle that lies in front of the etched wall. The entire installation was all done by hand; it took us three years to produce.

CAM: In clay?

AC: Yes. It was initially carved in plasticine clay. Then we created a mold from the clay and later had it bronze casted.

CAM: I really liked the contrast of the organic black eagle against the minimal white carved dates on the wall.

LFP: Was there a specific reason you decided to create such a strong contrast between the dark eagle that lays on the gallery floor and the carved dates?

AC: To some degree, there's an element of visibility and invisibility in most of my works. The eagle [sculpture] has a strong presence, which is due to its gun metal coloring. We achieved this color by reducing all the contributed texts and carvings from the drywall into ash. A burning ritual within my practice that I have done for over ten years. Vincent then took the ashes and used them as a patina on the eagle. In-person, viewers can see the bronze radiate through the texture of the ash patina. It's very reminiscent of a meteorite!

LFP: Adriana, you mentioned invisibility and visibility, which reminded me of your work in *Impunidad Circulo Vicioso* (2014). The installation documents and memorializes the names of murdered and disappeared victims of political and social violence in México. However, because the names overlap each other, it is impossible to read them, so the viewer knows the names are there but cannot see them clearly.

AC: Oh, yes!

LFP: I watched the video that you did for the MacDowell Fellowship in 2014, where you explained the process of the installation and the different materials that you employed for *Impunidad*. It seemed to me like the process was much more significant than the result, is this so? and how does your practice engage with material?

AC: I feel as though I am in constant conversation with the material I bring into the studio. It's being respectful of the material because it usually comes from a particular place or space. Then, I also have to be an active listener and pay attention to how the material responds when it is transmuted in certain ways. To take a few steps back, I believe the installation *Memento* was where I first began to use ashes. I would not say the process is more significant than the result. All the stages are

Fig. 2. Celia Álvarez Muñoz working on *Postales* (1988). Image courtesy of Tracy Hicks.

equally important, the concept, the research, the process, and the finished artwork or installation. Many of the works inform or feed into the next one as well.

LFP: Speaking of process and experimentation, Celia, I was able to attend the 2020 talk that you did at El Paso Museum of Art, where you mentioned that for *Postales* (1988) (Fig. 2) you had to compromise or change the original idea because of the budget and because it was before the digital age. You also mentioned that you learned to airbrush because of that, so through experimentation and not having the specificity of the materials, you had to adapt, which led to learning new techniques and new ways to express your work.

CAM: Yes. I listen very carefully to see what it wants to be. We are talking poetically, and that's the romance. I repeatedly say that I am still in awe of how we artists create; necessity IS the mother of invention.

For *Postales*, it was initially a photo project, a small fold-out, like a souvenir postcard book with all these funky houses that had been transformed, changed as the demographic changed in the city, when the Chamizal Treaty was settled in the '70s. Houses that white families owned initially were now occupied and appropriated by Latinos with clear evidence in gardens and house colorations.

It would have been costly to print those things back then. I said. I can do it; I will teach myself to airbrush. Those turned into a collective and romanticized memory.

AC: Celia, what you're saying resonates so much in my practice, especially the physicality and the language. Where did the physicality and durational aspects of your work come from?

CAM: The big question is how do you measure influence? That's the composition of your DNA, and living on the border developed, in me, I know, an agility to traverse both temporal and physical space. Plus, the conflicting poetics and entrepreneurial makeup of the maternal family versus the boisterous irony of the paternal side. Both very creative, musically inclined on both sides. They made songs that poked fun at each other. My dad and his brother had a comic strip on the walls of a small room that we looked forward to following every time they would add to it.

LFP: In Spanish or English?

Fig. 3. Celia Álvarez Muñoz, detail from *Postales* at the Center for Research for Contemporary Art, UT Arlington, 1990. Image courtesy of the artist.

CAM: Spanish and in English; language was just so much fun. Well, of course, so many of the folks had to learn or struggled or made up their words.

LFP: I think the language aspect of your work is timeless. I remember observing the street signs in the *Postales* series (Fig. 3) that address the transmutation of the Spanish/English language in the region. Likewise, in the scrolls, you have text referencing bilingualism, accompanied by illustrations of hybrid insects.

CAM: Yes, hybrids like a grasshopper that is blended into a cricket, and that's us, that's assimilation. The streets signs were the mispronunciations of adopted and adapted languages by both English and Spanish speakers.

AC: It's fascinating because I see exactly where that kind of narration was coming from now in some of your scroll pieces! Where you were drawing from, and your acute sensibility to what was happening in your environment.

CAM: Well, like you, I'm interested in the big picture: globally, politically, culturally and art historically.

I liked bits and parts of movements, the spontaneity of Fluxus, inversion of conceptualists, the lies in narrative art, the dynamism of modernists, rawness of German expressionists, Pop, advertising, and films, the masses' seducers and storytellers.

The dynamic waves of history change us. I mean, it's dimensionally layered, complex. Then, can it be synthesized into something simple? That's the art; it's not only about language or being Hispanic. No, no. I inject myself in it because I'm making the work, that's me and I don't want it to look like anybody else's.

AC: Film has and continues to be a huge influence and interest. I was inspired and ignited by international films because they showed me more of what was happening globally and how interconnected we really are. There are very specific films for me that resonated, or rather, they were books first and then adopted into films. Celia, what kind of films were igniting this research and way of thinking for you?

CAM: In El Paso, we had a bunch of wonderful theaters. You are probably too young. Of course, the Plaza ruled! There was the Ellanay, Wigwam, Palace, Texas Grand, Crawford, Mission, Pershing. And the Drive-ins. And of course el Colón showed Mexican films, the Alcázar, across the street, showed episodes, los Epis.

But then, when I was in college, there was the Yandell theater that brought the art films and that brought the foreign films. It was during that time there was a coffee shop near the university in a theater downstairs. That's where I saw Andy Warhol's film *Empire* (1965). The Yandell, oh man, I mean all the new realism, the French New Wave, Buñuel, Fellini, Truffaut, Bergman.

AC: That's amazing I've never heard of this!

LFP: I cannot believe there was French New Wave screening in El Paso.

CAM: Yes. At the Yandell theater if you research—it's in El Paso's history. I draw from film, especially in the early works. There's a sequential form.

LFP: Adriana, you mentioned that you are also very interested in international films. Which films stuck with you the most? Which filmmakers?

AC: I love Michelangelo Antonioni films. Especially the film *Deserto Rosso (Red Desert)*. A dear friend introduced me to his work, and his films have stayed with me ever since. When I was younger, I was entranced by Bjork's music videos and films. Especially, Dancer in the Dark. Books that have been adapted into films, like *The Constant Gardener*, *A Mighty Heart*, and *Miral* were also inspiring and illuminating. What these films of this type did for me was expose injustices on so many different levels. The network of people who are in control and how corruption and colonialism play into it.

LFP: It is interesting to understand the implication of films in your work; I am curious, what ignited the physicality within your artistic practice?

Fig. 4. Adriana Corral, *Requiem* (2016–2019). Image courtesy of MASS MoCA.

AC: I believe my physicality derives from the sports and activities I played in my youth. I would ride horses with my dad, play tennis, and run track. Thinking about *Requiem* (Fig. 4) in terms of physicality, I reverted to my disciplined days as an athlete. Conditioning my mind and body. Setting alarms throughout the day to do various yoga sessions in between carvings, eating an anti-inflammatory diet, walking several miles, and icing my hands. This is something I continue to do.

CAM: Did you do it by yourself, or did you have assistance?

AC: I did it myself. There was a specificity in the way that I was carving, and I didn't want the carving process to be varied, it needed to be consistent. It could have been a much easier process to use a laser cutter, but for me it needed the hand in it, just like the eagle.

CAM: When I hear you Adriana about the carving and the investment in that, I wonder to myself, if it was like you trying to feel what those people must've felt, your investment in that because there's labor involved and there's punishment involved too.

AC: Celia, you are spot on, the investment. I wouldn't say that I'm trying to feel what people have felt, but rather how can I understand through their shared stories, the impact, ramifications, the trauma, and their strength to speak about injustice. It's literally carving out these experiences in time and sharing them with a broader

audience. A kind of history for the people by the people. Regarding many of the feminicidio works, the text transferred onto the walls or gessobord is an intimate moment to re-remember the victims and the ways in which they were murdered. How might we search for someone who disappeared or was murdered? How can we honor their unjust death? This active mourning in my practice is a moment to give them space.

CAM: Did you make installations to address feminicidios?

AC: Yes, large-scale installations. The feminicidio series of installations grounded the way I create work to this today. Early on, I reached out to the human rights attorney Ariel Dulitzky; he happened to be a professor in the Law School at UT Austin. Once we connected, Ariel took the time to share more information regarding the *Campo Algodonero* case. His generosity and valuable information allowed me to gain a more in-depth understanding of the case and the complexities that surrounded them.

Works like *Memento* are like memorials or monuments because they commemorate the names of murdered victims. However, most of my text pieces are ephemeral and site-specific. Unlike a typical memorial, the walls I place the names upon are painted over after each installation.

For me, the ephemeral nature of works like *Memento* parallels the murders they document, in that each time these women's stories are told in the news or courts, they have a moment of validity and potency, but then disappear or fade out, creating a cycle that repeats itself over and over.

Even though many of my works are ephemeral, I intend to always keep a record of my own work in a way that runs counter to the hidden nature of the histories I expose and question, which is why I always archive and preserve part of the installation. Then, the work takes on another form of existence as part of an archive. The installation, Campo Algodón, Ciudad Juárez, 21 de Febrero del 2007, was the catalyst for my practice of documenting my process and then archiving the residual matter.

LFP: I am from Ciudad Juárez, and I grew up learning and hearing about feminicidios. It is something that follows me and is constantly present in my work as a scholar. How do you prevent it from taking a toll on you?

AC: It would take more of a toll if I didn't do anything. Writing, making the work, and walking allows me to work through it.

I think you said it so poignantly Celia, there's so much dimensionality to what happens along the border. It is so complex, and it is so layered and, it's how you start to unpack that.

LFP: Right, it is difficult to unpack and even try to convey to someone who has not been in contact with a border the many facets and the everchanging *ecosistema* that exists in spite and through a border.

CAM: I think the border is unique, and I think more barriers are evident now with the manipulation of time; before, there were no barriers to cross from one world and the other, now we have the bridges, the bridges hold you.

In terms of being invested in what you do, when I did the feminicidios en Juárez, I was collecting all the stories from the newspaper. People were sending me the newspapers from the border, and I was compiling that, not knowing what to do, but ultimately, I used some of the actual reportage to form the big banner, *Las Mordidas*. An extension of the installation, *Fibra y Furia: Exploitation is in Vogue* (1999). A reporter, Nancy San Martin, wanted to do a story and wanted to go with me into Juárez, to El Lote Bravo.

We went, and it didn't feel good at all. I saw myself as an outsider. I remember the desert. You can't dismiss the surroundings. You can't dismiss that desolate, raw desert out there. So, getting closer didn't feel good for me. I marvel at the reporters who are on the front.

AC: It was a learning curve and illuminating for me to see the different approaches from writers, attorneys, anthropologists, victims' families, journalists, and artists and how they spoke about these injustices through their respective fields of

experience. This kind of collective action is what mobilizes action in government and more public awareness. It can't be done only through one angle. I try to apply this to my own practice; it must be a collective action to make change.

LFP: To me, that is what is wonderful about art. It has the flexibility of working through many lenses within a community. Art is constantly changing, always evolving, and we are learning through it.

CAM: At times, not so wonderful. It's been a learning curve, indeed. Now I look back and I never thought I would be responding to some of the issues that I have. I think that the profession, the discipline, the inclination, it's an exploration. Art is an exploration. It's an interpretation, but the exploration must be there for you to interpret so that you can understand.

AC: Yes. Finding that balance. I love that—how you choose to live in the light.

CAM: I like to feel that there's hope. There was a beautiful prayer that my grandmother taught me when I was a kid and has stayed with me. I think it's very connected to artmaking. It's poetic, as most prayers are supposed to be hypnotic, poetic so that you'll learn them just like the nursery rhymes: "Gracias y alabanzas te doy Señor Nuestro por dejarme amanecer con el alma en el cuerpo, para saber y creer que hay Dios en los cielos, en la tierra y en todo lugar, Amen." With a soul in your body, that's how you know you're alive.

AC: I think within both of our work there is a large element of spirituality too. The way that you spoke about going to Lote Bravo and feeling that space. You literally feel the space in your bones. That connectivity is what often drives the work for me, along with the serendipitous moments. Again, it's going back to active listening and being in tune with an architectural space, landscape, people, object, or material. It all feeds into the work and the person that I am.

LFP: I remember observing both of your work in my classes, and it seemed very

anecdotal, very personal. I could see the way it related to my classmates, to me, to the social and historical context of El Paso, but it was also so much more profound. It is interwoven into "the bigger picture," as both of you mentioned. That is what I enjoy, and it is such an honor to have this conversation with both of you.

CAM: Oh, Thank you! From an activist perspective, I like to think it's for the next generation.

LFP: I did not even have the chance to congratulate you both on the Latinx Mellon Fellowship. Congratulations. So exciting, so important because it is essential to recognize Latinx art and artists. *!Felicidades a las dos!* Ahora les pregunto, *¿De qué manera afecta este fellowship a su vida y a su arte?*

AC: This fellowship is truly transformative. It will undoubtedly alter my artistic trajectory and affect the way I make work during these unprecedented times. This fellowship signifies the nation's growing awareness of the presence of Latinx artists working across America.

CAM: This fellowship is a much-welcomed validation for all my trajectory, and it will be an assistance to develop newer projects. I am so glad that the organization became, you know, at this moment. It's that term streaming from the x of Mexico. You (Luisa) attended that lecture in El Paso. Adriana probably hasn't heard the joke. They asked me what do you feel about this new term Latinx? I'm very glad that it's more inclusive, and we're embracing our gender issues, but every time there's a new term, there's papers to write, presentations to generate money to keep the ball rolling.

I saw the audience; they were listening very attentively and getting kinda tired, and I thought, "we have to break this." So, I remembered a story about these two girls that were crossing the Santa Fe bridge. One of the girls, the [US] Customs [Agent] asked her, "are you Latina?" And she said, "No, yo soy La Susy, La Tina ya pasó."

LFP: You brought the house down, you know, right there.

Paige Quiñones

Earning Pleasure, Feminine Momentum: Sandra Lim's *The Curious Thing*

The Curious Thing (W.W. Norton, 2021) is Sandra Lim's third collection in a career marked by deliberate, serious poetry. In a world of frequent publications, Lim's work comes as a quiet delight. She traffics in neither straightforward narrative nor airy lyricism—rather, the poems offer cerebral meditations folded within the quotidian, given significance by the mere fact of the poet writing through them. Lovers while away the afternoons on pigeon-dotted patios; the poet contemplates a wintering house; the poet admires the doubling of shadows at sunset. Though populated with lovers, family, and other figures outside the speaker, these poems maintain an intellectual solitude that plays out over the screen of the space between imagination and reality, often inching close to premonition. "I licked my fingers like a cat. / Now I'm / omniscient … Here's the / future: / I laugh, because the pleasure was earned" ("A Walk Round the Park"). Though the book's settings flit between Boston, Chicago, Naxos, San Francisco, and Seoul, there's never a sense of being adrift; Lim grounds the reader through the continuity of the poet's singular eye. The poems shift from first and third person to an incantatory "you," stepping into the realm of adage through the speaker's critical eye and sharp intuitiveness: "Look how the erotic imagination / honors you little rose, it runs its kingly grade over you / remorselessly" ("The Immoralists").

The Curious Thing's centrifugal obsession is the poet's ability to manipulate fictions, both threading and dancing between the stories she tells us; that if this act is done correctly, the poet can rightly render a human truth through writing. Memory is fluid, unreliable, and when set against the concreteness of the page, the writer experiences a dilemma: once a poem is written, does it accurately portray an authentic life? This is an obsession as old as poetry itself—it's part of a writer's erotic engagement with language. See: John Berryman's *Berryman's Sonnets*, Robert Lowell's *The Dolphin*, Sharon Olds's *The Dead and the Living*, among countless

others. Lim takes this collection to the domestic, the deeply personal, and the quietly suggestive. "But the pain of not knowing / how to write— // Ah, says Fate, you have a treat coming. / And it was always so." ("The Future"). Lim turns often to tropes of fiction, narrative, and storytelling, as well as song and painting composition in poems like "Theme and Variation," "Pastoral," (a play on both the poetic and artistic styles), "Bent Lyre," and "Portrait in Summer." (This preoccupation is evidenced before the poetry even begins, with an epigraph from Pierre-August Renoir). "She loves to tell stories / because they're already finished / by the start of the telling." ("The Stronger"); "I draw a line down the middle / of my life— / that's my night now, that's my day." ("Naxos"). But these are no mere fictions; they are the necessary coordinates by which we set our lives, our very humanity: "all perfect friendships / eventually come to an end. Is it a story / that must at all costs / be dragged from the darkness?" ("Portrait in Summer"). The poet connects the fluidity of stories with landmarks of lived experiences: first illness, separating lovers, moving across a country and finding oneself in the throes of loneliness. We come to understand that it's not only these moments that make up a life, but the fact of telling them itself. Exactly halfway through the collection, Lim has placed a poem called "Endings":

> This story has two endings.
> It has one ending
> and then another.
> Do you hear me?
> I do not have the heart
> to edit the other out.

A compelling decision that locates the reader in the liminal space between what's literally on the page and the *potential* for another version—can we tell which is which? A vulnerability, then, to involve the reader in the writing process; or at least, to pretend to. By invoking various other writers and artists, such as Luis Buñuel, Jean Rhys, Goethe, Ovid, Flaubert, Spinoza, Charlotte Brontë, and Scheherazade, Lim deeply considers her place among them (à la Chaucer's *House of Fame*). And

yet, she delivers a nervous reproach of the art: "There is more to life than writing" ("The Mountaintop").

To move into the surreal, Lim makes ample use of the oneiric potential for stories and imagery. "I dreamt of strung pheasants in old paintings, a horse / of thick paste biting my arm." ("Pastoral"). From "Happiness," the book's final poem:

> In the dream, I got up early
> And went out to shoot a rabbit, because
> There was no meat for Sunday.
> It was too cold, horses and birds were frozen solid.
> …
> I had no reflection there, but then who could be
> Reflected in ice?

There's an undercurrent of witchcraft, of an off-kilter world, of the beguiling nature of domesticated animals ("Barking Noises," both "Pastoral" poems, "A Walk Round the Park"). Often, she explores the interplay between the masculine and the feminine—here, an echo of one King Arthur legend:

> Make him come back, she said,
> her voice like something brought up intact
> from the cold center of a lake …
> I can't read a book
> all the way through, she said,
> and most days I'm only unhappy. ("Black Box")

The weather and seasons are often wrong, invoked by the speaker as their opposites; the action doesn't match the setting, and the body won't do what the mind wants—this pressure of the real jutting up against the imaginary pushes the reader to question what is dream and what is not. "I thought of how dark and cold summers could be." ("Pastoral"); "I go inside and read another psychosexual story / set in a dreary seaside town … I should grow thinner, more of less / of

me, as I grow more solitary." ("Portrait in Summer"); a hoarder lives "in a state of tragic grandeur" ("San Francisco"). The dreamlike, unnamed lovers the speaker interacts with, loving and losing, are both men and women scattered across the poems, bending between queerness and heterosexuality. Like Lim's relationship with writing, there are multiple storylines to be performed.

"What does art know? Sometimes it remarks, I didn't think you were like that," Lim writes in "A Shaggy Dog Story," the longest sequence in the book. It recalls Anne Carson's "The Glass Essay," another long, segmented poem ruminating on a Brontë sister, though Lim's imaginative eye takes the poem into the realm of persona. Once again, Lim calls attention to the artful act of writing in the title, telling the reader that the poem will likely contain a series of anecdotes and end in an anti-climax. "I was as anxious to entertain / as Scheherazade, and as certain that if I failed, / I would die." The mantle of Charlotte Brontë proves to be a useful vehicle for Lim to play out her own imaginary, writerly life.

Love was losing its explanatory
power,

and I was beginning
to smell a rat.

Are we going to keep to this one
grand concern,

        like a serious drinker who sticks
to one drink?

        Start again.

She takes this opportunity, through Brontë, to wonder repeatedly about pleasure and its hold on life from childhood to death. The timeline of the poem's ten sections is unstable—it moves freely between the writer's death, her infancy, and

all between. "I'm still having difficulty writing about time; / it does not appear to be the great healer / that all of us say it is." And yet: "Pleasure! / Like a focusing lens." Lim can better render a scene—a life, "human concerns"—through this erotic lens. The adult Charlotte takes pleasure in work, sees friends fall in love and fall away, always mired in the seriousness of writing; child Charlotte plays in the mud, where the earth and its objects "tried to draw me / into the passionate logic of their work," finding "what makes life shameful and exciting" down there. It's the friction between the known and unknown, between "glamor and passion" ("The Mountaintop") between what we want to say and what we haven't yet: "What's bad in one story // is good in another. Something has made you brave."

Spiral Motion: Janika Oza Interviews Shruti Swamy

Shruti Swamy's first novel, *The Archer* (published in September 2021), explores art, ambition, class, and gender roles against the backdrop of 1970s Bombay. The book follows 16-year-old Vidya as she comes of age, reconciling her fractured family history while also navigating social expectations and pursuing a creative life as a dancer of kathak, a classic dance form that requires utmost dedication.

Janika Oza's debut novel *A History of Burning* will be published in 2023, and traces four generations across India, Uganda, Canada, and the UK as they search for a sense of home in the aftermath of forced migration and colonial rule. Pirbhai, a teenager, must contend with a dark inheritance after he is tricked into indentured servitude at the turn of the twentieth century.

This fall, *Gulf Coast* invited Swamy to sit down with Oza to discuss desire, the subtleties of political art, and the self-actualizing potential of dreams, among other topics.

Janika Oza: A recurring thread in your novel *The Archer* is Vidya's search for models for how to live—a model for how to be a girl when she doesn't have a mother, and later a model for the kind of unconventional life she wants to make for herself, how to be an artist and a woman. When I was reading your book, I was struck by how it offers new possibilities, for language and syntax and form, and how it feels like a model for me as I also navigate these questions of doing something you haven't yet seen. In creating this book, did you have any models you looked to?

Shruti Swamy: That's really beautiful to hear, Janika, thank you. There were a lot of books (and movies, and visual art, and dance) I was looking to to find a way through this project, but the finished book wound up both nothing like those other things and also nothing like the book I *thought* I was writing. There were

certain things I was in control of, sort of, but a lot of the process was writing and trusting and listening and following, allowing myself to be surprised. I wanted the right shape to tell this story most honestly, in terms of sentence and structure.

JO: I'm thinking about the limits of language—how much of this novel is devoted to dance, which is beyond words, but also writing about feelings like grief and loneliness that also resist concrete description. There's a passage I love, where Vidya says: "When I try to put this time into word, I find I am not able to capture what I truly felt, for the words 'happy' and even 'melancholy' do not seem to hold the meanings I need. I need a shape, a taste, an essence, a pose." It seems like you were reaching for new ways of using language to articulate what is maybe inarticulable. What was it like to engage in that act of translation?

SS: This book has so many aspects of translation, the kathak of course, but also trying to depict Vidya's sense of herself as a child, as childhood memory often bypasses language, and as you mention, trying to explore inarticulable emotions. This book is sort of "translated" from another language, meaning, I composed it in English, but Vidya would be narrating it in Gujarati, and much of the dialogue is a "translation" into English. Knowing this book would be published in America, I felt like I had to pay attention to the cultural nuances of the story and make sure that people who were not familiar with Indian cultures would be able to follow.

All that said, we're always translating as writers, putting things into language that didn't happen there.

JO: The pleasure of that challenge comes through in your prose. Your writing is so certain and distinct. It has an actual rhythm! This feels true across your short stories and novel. How did you come to your voice, your own "I"?

SS: Years of imitation, I think, trying the voices on that I was reading. Reading so much, reading outside my comfort zone, reading very widely, reading in translation, so that I saw lots of possibilities for the sentence, for the story. I think my writing has gotten better on the level of the sentence over the years, but I always felt

confident in making them, I always had a strong internal sense of rhythm and image. My problem when I was starting out was that a beautiful sentence can mask a shallow story, that if you just read a beautiful sentence followed by a beautiful sentence but there is nothing underneath, it feels empty. The reader can feel tricked. The books I love the most ask something of me, I enter into the space of them and we work together to find it, that thing at the center. Some books get there using beautiful sentences, and others don't. Where I am right now as a writer, I am wondering: how do I go deeper?

JO: I love the idea of dropping deeper into the work to find what's at the center. So much of novel writing is going further into that kind of excavation.

In *The Archer*, the main character often engages with dreams. What is the relationship between dreaming and art for you?

SS: Dreams are a space of wild possibility and absolute freedom. When I write, I strive to reach into the dream space then pull it into reality through language. When you are falling asleep, you are never saying "no" to yourself or your thoughts. You are only following the thought all the way down into the pit of sleep. The place I write from is similar. A space of permission.

Maybe dreams are a way of allowing other truths into the work, things my characters feel but have no way to express or understand. I am often surprised and moved by the rich vocabulary of symbols the unconscious uses to communicate.

JO: What a beautiful idea, never saying no to yourself. How do you get yourself there, away from self-criticism and fear?

SS: It takes an acknowledgement of my fear, my insecurities, my inadequacies—a lot of care. It takes an acknowledgement of what my body needs. If I am experiencing a lot of upheaval in my life, I may not be able to get to that space at all—and that has to be okay. A big part of my process has been respecting the times when I'm not able to get into that space instead of fighting against them. In this way, the way I approach writing is not unlike the way I approach meditation.

JO: Right, putting care at the center. One of the passages in *The Archer* that stayed with me is when Vidya as a child is so overcome by her hunger and desire to eat that she eats nothing at all. I was so struck by that denial—how a desire can be so intense that it almost becomes something sinister, revulsion maybe. Can you talk hunger in this book?

SS: You know, when I wrote that part of the scene that ends the chapter, where the Mother takes away Vidya's plate, I was sort of devastated. I still feel crushed when I read it. Because of the fundamental misunderstanding between them, and also because of the kind of lesson it offers Vidya—not for the first time, but in a particularly brutal way—about what are acceptable and unacceptable ways to manage your desire, and your hunger. That there is no room for curiosity, gentleness, patience, or fear. That moment is sort of violent, and this kind of violence shapes Vidya's basic understanding of herself in relation to her own hunger.

This is a book all about desire, hunger, longing. By the time Vidya is in college she is self-aware enough to understand that it is through the lens of longing, unfulfilled desire, that she defines herself, and in some ways, almost takes pride in what she lacks. The ability to shut out the pain of the body can be helpful when you are so singularly focused on something, like dance, or like physics, that needs your uninterrupted concentration—maybe this is because the hunger for the dance, or the knowledge is greater than the hunger of the body. But to see yourself as someone whose desires will always be out of reach means that when what you have been longing for is within your grasp, it may be too terrifying to take it. It might annihilate your sense of self. So you do the violence that was done to you, and refuse to eat before someone takes the plate away.

JO: The world in this novel is a world that no longer exists, a Bombay of the past. This is something I've been navigating with my own novel, half of which is set in Uganda and in a version of Kampala which no longer exists today. How did you access that time and place? Did you feel a sense of responsibility to "get it right"?

SS: This was a huge challenge for me. I imagine that it might be even more intense for you, because there are many iconic books about Bombay that already exist so I can point to them and say "if you need a definitive portrait of a city, look here." I was always clear in my mind that I was never going to write *The* Bombay of the '60s and '70s, only *a* Bombay. One of the things that drew me to this project was this very beautiful world I had grown up hearing about and created already in my imagination. But for the first few years of this book my poor characters were stuck in the flat just like peeking out the window because I was too nervous to take them outside!

JO: Ha! My early drafts were like that, too.

SS: A few things that helped me: I was lucky to have my mom read several drafts and offer me feedback. Another was reading books set in Bombay, particularly Ambai's work. Ambai lives in Bombay so when she's writing about the city, she's never trying to prove she knows about it. I was really feeling this anxiety to prove something, and when I read her, I relaxed. I felt, I can show you one tree with all its leaves and then you'll trust me that there are other trees, I don't have to show them all.

And of course, we're not writing textbooks! When I am writing, I have to give myself the absolute freedom to go wherever the story will take me. That's why for many years this novel refused to really be set down on the page. There was a moment I had to say to myself *yes, this is yours too* so I could write it. It is mine because I love it. It is mine because I was raised by the people who lived there. It is mine because it shaped the course of my life.

I'd actually love to hear how you're approaching this in your novel. It must be a different challenge because I can't think of as many "big" books that are set in Kampala.

JO: Yeah, I really feel what you're saying about writing *a* Bombay rather than *the* Bombay, *a* tree rather than *all* the trees. Particularly as writers of color writing places outside of America, there's this implicit (and sometimes very explicit) pressure to

be a guide for readers into this other world. And it goes beyond whether or not you italicize your non-English words—it goes into the very substance of the work itself. It impacts how honestly and fully you can render your characters and the worlds they inhabit. Of course, that brings up questions about who the implied audience is, but I also find that it alienates *me* from my own work—in a way, I'm decentering myself by writing for someone who wants this world explained to them, I'm distancing myself from what I know to be true and privileging the desires and sensibilities of someone else over my own. So for me, part of this process is actually claiming space for myself and reminding myself, like you said, that this is mine too, that it's coming from me.

Having said that, there are still times when the doubt creeps in and I ask myself, who said you could write this, is this really your story? But I've been trying to frame it less as an act of taking than as an act of love. When I'm writing about historical events like Amin's dictatorship in Uganda or the expulsion of Asians, events that happened to people whose lives I'm connected to, to my family, but that I didn't live through myself, I'm not taking these stories away from those who experienced them—I'm writing towards a deeper understanding of what happened, of that place and time. I'm writing towards my ancestors with curiosity and attention and a desire for honesty, and I see that as a kind of love.

SS: That honesty part is so hard though, right? We have to render these people, places, experiences with complexity; we must allow ugliness in. What you're saying about being a representative of your culture, and that it causes estrangement from your work—the representative thing goes both ways, too—people both inside and outside your culture are reading with certain expectations.

Ultimately, though, like you, I have always thought of the act of paying attention, close, compassionate attention, as an act of love. When I am reaching into other people's experiences with my imagination, it is to bring myself closer to them, and this phrase "writing towards my ancestors" is so meaningful to me in this context—writing this book was in some ways an act of claiming them and letting them claim me.

JO: Yes. I love that. There's this crushing line Vidya says to Radha, "What do you dream, if you can't dream what you want to?" This felt like a central question of the book for me. I don't have a question exactly but wonder if you want to talk about this.

SS: I think about my grandmother. I don't want to presume too much about her life, much of which was a mystery to me—I mean, I have the biographical details, but I have little information about her internal experience, her thoughts and feelings. But what I do know of her, and also of my mother—they wanted to be free. They wanted to make a space for themselves in their life, places where they had agency and power. And my grandmother, even with so little room available to her, managed to make some—my mom a little more. And in some ways I feel like my life has the kind of freedom they wanted, but were not even able to conceive of, going back to the thing about models. But it's one of the reasons I always felt my grandmother sort of got me, that she didn't disapprove of all of my choices, the choice to be a writer, or to wait to marry and have kids, for example. Instead I always got the sense of bemusement from her. I don't mean this in a grandiose way, but I felt that I got it, the freedom that she had wanted for herself. My life was nearly unintelligible to her as a result—there was a high cost to this freedom—but I got it. And I think, if you don't see it, there is only so much you can imagine for yourself.

JO: There's so much tenderness in that idea that you're getting to live out something that the generations before you wanted but couldn't have.

Did this always feel like a novel for you? Did it feel like you were working the same muscles as your short fiction or were there new ones you had to grow to write this?

SS: Very few times in my life have I felt like I was receiving something rather than writing it. That's how the first chapter felt. There was just too much inside that first chapter, the relationships that it contained. This book taught me how to write into and around something, to wander in a notebook and through sentences

to find the world and the characters first and then the story. With a short story I often start with a situation that I find compelling and want to understand how it will play out. Then I look at *who* would find themselves in that situation and what they would do about it. With a novel, my process is almost opposite. I take a long time to understand the voices in the novel and the shape and the texture of the world they are moving through. Through that I can find out what the situation is, and then get the story moving.

JO: I'm interested in the ways that this novel is troubling gender roles and patriarchy—Vidya is always bumping up against the limitations of her girlness, and at one point she realizes she can dance "boyly," among so many other moments—and it reminds me of the ways that Hindu mythology and classical Indian dance forms also encompass a kind of gender fluidity and expansiveness. Was this something you were consciously bringing into the work?

SS: To me, this is a political book because it is, in part, a book about a person negotiating power. There are larger political and historical events at work in Vidya's life: in this time and place, for example, the RSS is becoming a real political force locally in Bombay, and we are also in the lead up to Emergency, but these are at the very edges of the story. There are also subtle forms of what I think of as "micro-resistance" against patriarchy, gender roles, and power structures at play in Vidya's life, many small acts that might not even be legible to an outsider. I wanted to focus very tightly on Vidya's internal experience and consciousness, to watch how struggle both personal (like her family life) and political (her future, the opportunities available to her) might shape her sense of self.

The kind of resistance I wanted to offer Vidya, I wanted it to be Indian, something that would arise from her culture and her way of being in the world. I love that you identify that passage as "troubling gender," because of course that performance does, and of course it is the most natural thing in the world, in the context of this culture. Kathak is traditionally a solo art form, so it is completely in keeping with the tradition that the gender of the performer would be irrelevant to the genders of the characters they are depicting. Nothing she does in the

performance is radical to the people watching it. And isn't that thrilling? Some of the ideas we hold in the West about gender—maybe also about oppression, resistance, freedom–can make other expressions of those concepts that are rooted in other cultures invisible to us.

I'm curious if this feels resonant to you in your novel. Do you think of your novel as political?

JO: Yes, absolutely. At every moment my characters are also negotiating power, whether it's the larger power structures that shape their existence and livelihood or the more intimate shifts of power in relationships. There are times in the novel where the narrative is more Political with a capital P—the ongoing presence of colonialism in India and Uganda, the material consequences of government decisions, characters joining underground resistance networks—and then there are parts where someone is simply making a choice about how to care for themselves.

I've been thinking about how imagination itself can be a tool of the marginalized—it doesn't belong to the historically powerful and it represents a space of possibility and redefinition. Just the act of writing this novel, reimagining my family's history and giving space to these histories that have been erased and excluded, feels political, a way of resisting.

Can you talk about the pleasures of writing this novel?

SS: I love this question. Yes, it was really hard at points to write this book for so many reasons; I was afraid of failing this story and these characters, of getting something wrong, and I was grappling with my own limitations in terms of skill. But there was real, deep pleasure in wandering through Vidya's world, and I didn't really want to leave it. In the very beginning of the process, I was just filling up notebooks about this world, wandering through it as though through a dream—in fact some of the earliest writing I did for this book was in poetry, though I am very much not a poet.

I feel this is a very joyful, hopeful book. I wrote it for myself to understand how to live. The questions it asks are the ones I grapple with: how does one live a good life, a beautiful life? How does one look at their past, accept what happened,

and *still* live a beautiful life? At the end of the book, we leave Vidya in a really different place from where we found her, even though we leave her on the rooftop of the chaali where the novel basically began. That was important to me. I wanted for her not to outrun her past, but to return to it changed. There is a refusal of the linear in that movement, it is a gesture more like a spiral, returned but pointed in a new direction, changed. That feels the most realistic to me, and the most hopeful.

Adele Elise Williams

Born Lonely: A Review of Emily Kendal Frey's *Lovability*

I asked my boyfriend to marry me last weekend at a Grateful Dead concert —the hippies communing and migrating in droves like bleached cattle—and while nearly stoned to the point of paralysis, he still managed to understand my request, my bony knee down in the mud an ultimate illustration of sign and signified. We have been together for nearly six years and are right at forty with no other notable unions to speak of. I have learned to love him in a way I have never loved before—a typology of partnership that is less romantic than functional, less dramatic than fair. Although, its charming reciprocity is nearly nothing, to be sure, without the trail of broken men I've left behind, their busted hearts stuffed in the closet. Right now, while sucking down this Coors Light at ten in the morning, the dogs fed and walked, the TV looping through season after season of *Fear Factor* on mute for days, truly, I am feeding myself with Emily Kendal Frey's newest collection *Lovability*.

Lovability is about loving, sure, but it is specifically about longing and power and loneliness. Frey pines for that which she already has while also not wanting it (yet wanting more of it). She calls the shots, and sometimes those calls are for sabotage. She presents a loving that is nearly always on the edge of lonesome. *Lovability* offers snapshots of the power dilemma that comes with loving as a woman—how to keep a little for the self but still adore. It is a psychologically motivated collection for sure: the place of the poems is nearly always interior; the subjects are family, neighbors, lovers, strangers; the motivation, a reconciliation of heart (for others) and harbor (of self). While the title suggests emotive vulnerability, the poems hold back, they caution:

> Baby what do you want
> I'm a flawed protagonist
> When I look from a window

The lawn has shit on it
Baby be gentle
We are all
So afraid
Of love

And, yes, "feeding" because spoonfuls! Every. Single. Poem. Lineated for digestibility. Frey crafts her poems like a chef, offering bite-sized lines of otherwise overwhelming ideas; each line a bite to relish the celebration and futility of love. The goal in Frey's *Lovability* is not glut and cloy, and certainly not fulfillment, yet this collection feeds me to no end, for no end. It does what it says:

I make you pork
I know you like it
What do you like
I make it…

In the world
I understand
Pork
We are lost
From ourselves
No love hangs
On hooks

Frey pays such close attention to the unit as formal invention, recalling Ellen Bryant Voigt's description of "the poetic line [as] inherently artificial, imposed by the poet onto language," and Frey crafts these discrete lines so that her reader, her lover, is ultimately present for each stab of the fork. Yet this is not just a stylistic venture for Frey, the relentless staccato lineation, but rather the vital form requisite for the deliverable. *Lovability* is a sort of litany—I am inclined to respond out loud, the concise lines granting space for *me*, a space

of "temporarily suspended comprehension" (Voigt). We are in this together, us cynics, us lovers, and despite my current state of newly engaged bliss, I know (and I do know) it will end before death, because love is both forever and never; it is the worst.

In this, I am reminded of Laura Kasischke's *Wild Brides*, both because *Lovability* follows in its lineage of bold women dissecting (failed/ing) loves, and because I drool with anticipation to reference *Wild Brides* every chance I get (always and forever). Kasischke exclaims:

> Please please marry me
> The daises on the shades are eggish
> and bleed and the pork
> reeks on the plate I have become a girl
> huge and dreadful with love

Like Kasischke, Frey privileges the sensory and the somatic. As manifest in food, edges, nature, and the corporeal, love is physicalized, repeatedly, neither untouchable nor incorruptible. Frey pukes in bushes, heats butter, rots plants, burns toast, touches trees, spills coffee, manipulates muffins, lays in bed, sweats, feels weird, loses her face, picks her nose, floats, takes showers, bleeds, photographs ugly things, eats a cream cheese croissant, and all the rest. While the emphasis on the body creates metaphorical space for the supremacy of love, Frey's relentless invocation of mastication and nourishment reminds us that love is a physical process and that we (can) stand in our own way. Much like transubstantiation where the bread is not the bread but Christ's body, yet through consumption—taste, chew and swallow—one cannot deny the actuality of bread, Frey accuses the body of betraying the transcendence of love.

How have we ended up here? Waxing Eucharist? Because as an ex-Catholic turned addict-artist turned spiritually desperate turned scholar, I can think of nothing more erotic than communion. And Frey basks in devouring and self-debasement:

I am ashamed when I
Remember I'm living
Free fall

Is it too much to say that the paradox of my self-loathing yet undeniable power as a woman allows me to inhale Frey's poems? Of course not. This is the crux of the collection. While Lovability laments flawed love as well as an inability to love, it also admits to choosing not to love, and sometimes Frey resents herself for it. But she is not denying her own agency; rather Frey calls it as she sees it. The drama of this collection creates itself in the tautology of our everyday failures, no matter how sincere. No one is innocent (not even the moon).

Returning to the pork poem, which has a proper title, "People Will Like You if You Like Them First," I'm thinking of economy: formal, emotional, and voyeuristic. The poem presents itself like a flip book of manipulation, each line a gift or a promise of an item, a dream, a possibility. On one page of the flip book, "a jacket," on the next "a bike." "A salad with sassy tomatoes," and on the next "more meat." The images are secular in their sacredness. The presentation, cinematic. Frey does not dilly-dally. The quick lineation allows her exposition to become mantra, she entices her lover this way—a codex of disposable offerings for an expendable lover. *Beetlejuice, Beetlejuice, Beetlejuice*. Does the lover show? Who cares! Frey does not want the lover, but rather the *loving*, to be seen doing the act. The collection is an artifact of proof. *I did it. I tried. This is what it looked like.*

Everyone loves a ghost until you pull off the sheet. (Who said that?). Frey wants the sheet. I want the sheet. What's under the sheet is not nearly as fun as the illusion.

People keep asking me when I am getting married. I don't know that answer, because I did not think of the actual ceremony one iota before my proposal. I didn't think past the moment; I am not sure anything is more significant than that effort. Perhaps a more honest answer is that I am obsessed with the image of myself proposing, a woman to a man, and how lovely I am in control of my own heart. I proposed. I can un-propose. Like the dog shit on Frey's lawn, I have a secret bank account. My mother said that all women should. It is more of a sign

than an action, but I know exactly where I'd go if I had to, right then. I have no plans to abandon my lover, but I've lived thirty-seven years with my own monster, and I know damn well what I am capable of—and that lovability, as Frey says, is really just "a beautiful system of loneliness."

In *Lovability* Frey allows possibility to exist in vain. I cannot affirm the collection is only about loving and loneliness, any more than someone else can claim the collection is—Frey's title notwithstanding—solely about lovability. Loving is the framework, fallibility the lens. *Lovability* is about how we do and do not create our own realities, sparing no mundane detail; Frey offers us her heart-beast bloody on a plate, and we *amen*.

Contributors

Najat Abed Alsamad is a Syrian writer, gynaecologist, and Russian-Arabic translator. Born in Sweida, in southwestern Syria, she now lives in Berlin, Germany. She likes to write about the realities of contemporary Syrian life and often focuses on female characters. *In the Tenderness of War* is the third of her five published books, which comprise fictional novels and creative non-fiction collections. Her 2017 novel *No Water Quenches Her Thirst* won a Katara Prize in 2018 and has been translated into several languages. Alongside her novels, she has had several articles and research papers published by Arabic-language newspapers and thinktanks. She holds a BA in Arabic Language and Literature from the University of Damascus.

Ralph Angel's collection, *Your Moon*, was awarded the 2013 Green Rose Poetry Prize. *Exceptions and Melancholies: Poems 1986-2006* received the 2007 PEN USA Poetry Award, and his *Neither World* won the James Laughlin Award of The Academy of American Poets. In addition to five books of poetry, he has also published an award-winning translation of the Federico García Lorca collection, *Poema del cante jondo / Poem of the Deep Song*. Angel also received numerous honors, including a gift from the Elgin Cox Trust, a Pushcart Prize, a Gertrude Stein Award, the Willis Barnstone Poetry Translation Prize, a Fulbright Foundation fellowship, and the Bess Hokin Award of the Modern Poetry Association. His most recent work includes *entropia*, a collection of thirty-one images from the fine art photography publisher, Dark Spring Press, and *Strays*, a limited-edition chapbook of poems from Foundlings Press.

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Scott Chalupa is the author of *Quarantine* (PANK Books 2019). He lives and writes in South Carolina and teaches at Central Carolina Technical College. He's obsessed with baking, canning, and queering quantum theory, astrophysics, and religious texts and history. He reads for *Nimrod International Journal*. Chalupa's work has appeared in *HIV Here & Now*, *Transition: Poems in the Afterglow*, *PANK*, *pacificREVIEW*, *Nimrod*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The South Atlantic Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and other venues.

Blessing J. Christopher is a Nigerian writer and an MFA in fiction candidate at Virginia Tech. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Sun*, *Guernica*, *The Southampton Review*, *X-R-A-Y*, and other places.

Moriah Cohen's poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Best New Poets*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Mid-American Review*, *Narrative*, *Juked*, and *Contrary, A Journal of Unpopular Discontent*, among others. Cohen received an MFA from Rutgers University's Newark Campus. Her chapbook, *Impossible Bottle*, as well as more of her work can be found at https://www.moriahcohen.com.

Adriana Corral uses data and historical records to inform her practice and encourage meaningful dialogue. She transforms archival resources provided by historians, attorneys, activists, scholars, and journalists into examinations of injustice. Her works lay bare inequalities and stories of repression and asks viewers to choose to remember and to question why some things are collectively forgotten or erased. Corral received her BFA from the University of Texas at El Paso and completed her MFA at the University of Texas at Austin. In 2021, she was awarded the Latinx Artist Fellowship in collaboration with the New York Foundation for the Arts supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Ford Foundation. Corral is the recipient of many additional awards, grants, and residencies.

Sarah Curtis's writing has appeared in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Salon*, the *American Literary Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Crazyhorse*, and elsewhere. Her work has been noted in the *Best American Essays* series and anthologized in *River Teeth: Twenty Years of Creative Nonfiction*. She lives in Michigan, where she is at work on a biographical memoir. Visit her website: sarahcurtiswriter.com.

Adam Day is the author of *Left-Handed Wolf* (LSU Press, 2020), and of *Model of a City in Civil War* (Sarabande Books), and the recipient of a Poetry Society of America Chapbook Fellowship for *Badger, Apocrypha*, and of a PEN America Literary Award. He is the publisher of the cultural magazine, *Action, Spectacle*.

Sulochana Manandhar Dhital grew up in Jhochhen, an old neighborhood in the heart of Kathmandu. Raised by a single mother, who was widowed at twenty-six, Sulochana describes her childhood as a time of darkness and poverty; and she sees herself as "a tiny bird, a lover of light, that somehow managed to fly away." Enamored by Marxist rhetoric and politicized at a young age, Sulochana led many prominent labor and women's rights movements during Nepal's stifling Panchayat era (1960–90). Sulochana was the first writer to chair the Mother Tongue Literature Department at Nepal Academy. She writes fiction, nonfiction and poetry in Nepali, Nepal Bhasa (Newari) and Chinese. A regular columnist of *Sampurna Aakaash* (*The Entire Sky*) and a host for a radio show called *Jivanbata Jivan Sikau* (*Learn about Life from Life*), Sulochana calls herself a "people's writer." Published in 2014, *Raat* (*Night*) is Sulochana's second book of poetry.

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Orhan Elmaz is Assistant Professor of Arabic at the University of St Andrews. As an Arabist and computer scientist by training, he enjoys working on linguistics and comparative studies supported by the application of digital methods. Recently, he published *Endless Inspiration* (Gorgias Press, 2020) a volume on adaptations of *One Thousand and One Nights*. His current research is dedicated to the transcultural spread of feminist thought in the Middle East, Southeastern and Eastern Europe of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Matthew Flores is originally from the Corpus Christi area of south Texas and completed their BA at the University of Houston. They have received fellowships from the Mellon Foundation and the Ideafund, and are an attendee of the Tin House Summer Writers' Workshop. Their writings are published in *Defunkt Magazine* and they are currently an MFA candidate in poetry at Arizona State University.

Mag Gabbert holds a PhD in creative writing from Texas Tech University and an MFA from The University of California at Riverside. She is the author of the chapbook *Minml Poems* (Cooper Dillon Books, 2020), and her work can also be found in *32 Poems*, *Pleiades*, *The Paris Review Daily*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Waxwing*, and many other journals. She's received poetry fellowships from Idyllwild Arts and Poetry at Round Top, and in 2021 she was awarded a 92Y Discovery Award. She teaches creative writing at Southern Methodist University and serves as the interviews editor for *Underblong Journal*.

Ramón García is the author of two books of poetry: *The Chronicles* (Red Hen Press, 2015) and *Other Countries* (What Books Press, 2010); and a scholarly monograph on the artist Ricardo Valverde (University of Minnesota Press, 2013). *The Chronicles* was a finalist for the International Latino Book Award, in the category of Poetry Book in English. His poetry has appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies, including the *Los Angeles Review*, *Springhouse Journal*, *Best American Poetry 1996*, *Ambit*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books (LARB)*, *Mandorla: New Writing from the Americas* and *Plume*. He teaches at California State University, Northridge and lives in Los Angeles. https://ramongarciaphd.com/.

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Allison Glenn is a curator and writer deeply invested in working closely with artists to develop ideas, artworks, and exhibitions that respond to and transform our understanding of the world. Glenn's curatorial work focuses on the intersection of art and publics, through public art, biennials, and major new commissions by leading contemporary artists.Recently, she received substantial critical and community praise for her curatorial work in the groundbreaking exhibition at the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky titled *Promise, Witness, Remembrance*. The *New York Times* selected it as one of the Best Art Exhibitions of 2021. This year, Glenn was listed as one of the 2022 ArtNews Deciders and on the 2021 Observer Arts Power 50 List. She is one of the curators for the Counterpublic triennial, opening April 2023 in St. Louis. She is a member of Madison Square Park Conservancy's Public Art Consortium, and on the Board of Directors for ARCAthens, a curatorial and artist residency program based in Athens, Greece and the Bronx.

Muna Gurung is a writer, translator and educator based in Kathmandu, Nepal. She is the founder of KathaSatha and teaches writing at the Open Institute of Social Sciences. When not writing or teaching, she runs an inter-generational pickle and preserves company, ĀMĀKO. Her translation of Sulochana's poems, *Night*, was first published in the UK by Tilted Axis Press (2019), and a second updated version was published in Nepal by Safu (2020).

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Rochelle Hurt is the author of the poetry collections *The J Girls: A Reality Show* (Indiana University Press, 2022), *In Which I Play the Runaway* (Barrow Street, 2016), and *The Rusted City* (White Pine, 2014). She's been awarded prizes and fellowships from *Arts & Letters*, *Poetry International*, Vermont Studio Center, Jentel, and Yaddo. She lives in Orlando and teaches at the University of Central Florida.

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Born in Andhra Pradesh, India, **Madhu H. Kaza** is a writer, translator, artist, and educator based in New York City. She is a translator of Telugu women writers, including Volga and Vimala. Her writing has appeared in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Yale Review*, *Guernica*, *Waxwing*, *Chimurenga*, *Two Lines* and more. She is the editor of *Kitchen Table Translation*, a volume that explores connections between migration and translation and which features immigrant, diasporic, and poc translators. In 2021 she served as a juror for the National Book Award in translated literature. She works as the Associate Director for Microcollege Programs for the Bard Prison Initiative and also teaches in the MFA program at Columbia University.

Annasoltan Kekilov (1942–1983) was born in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan in 1942. She published two books of poetry in her lifetime. Several of her poems were translated into Russian and published in Moscow. These established her reputation. Her writing uses amorous imagery to delve into political issues and in particular the struggles of women. Kekilov stood defiant against the government. In 1969, she wrote a fifty-six page document noting her grievances with corruption and misuse of authority in Soviet Turkmenistan. She presented this to the Turkmen Central Committee, who then forced her to quit her job. She sent the detailed and illustrated complaint to The Communist Commision in Moscow. In response, Kekilov was taken by ambulance to a psychiatric asylum in August of 1971. She fled many times and was placed in several different asylums in Ashgabat. She spent the remainder of

her life, twelve years, separated from her young child and elderly mother. Kekilov's third collection of poems, *Collapsed Star*, was published posthumously in 1987 and reprinted again in 1992. She was related to Aman Kekilov, the father of Soviet Turkmen poetry, and Shaali Kekilov, who was head of the first Communist Turkmenia Writers Union. Kekilov is a dissident Soviet Turkmen poet.

Birhan Keskin was born in Kırklareli, Turkey. She graduated from Istanbul University in 1986 with a degree in sociology. Her first poems began to appear in 1984. From 1995 to 1998 she was joint editor of the small magazine *Göçebe*. She has since worked as an editor for a number of prominent publishing houses in Istanbul. Her books include: *Delilirikler* (1991), *Bakarsın Üzgün Dönerim* (1994), *Cinayet Kışı + İki Mektup* (1996), *Yirmi Lak Tablet + Yolcunun Siyah Bavulu* (1999), and *Yeryüzü Halleri* (2002). These five books were collected by Metis Publishing into *Kim Bağışlayacak Beni* (2005). Metis published four further collections, *Ba* (2005), *Y'ol* (2006), *Soğuk Kazı* (2010), and *Fakir Kene* (2016). Birhan Keskin was the 2005 winner of Turkey's prestigious Golden Orange Award for *Ba*. Her *Soğuk Kazı* won the Metin Altıok poetry prize in 2016.

Eric Kocher teaches literature and creative writing at Wofford College in Spartanburg, SC, where he lives with his wife, Audrey, and daughter, Louise. Some of his work has appeared in *Boston Review*, *A Public Space*, *Diagram*, and *Best New Poets*.

Rick Lowe is a Houston-based artist and professor of art at the University of Houston. Over the past forty years he has worked both inside and outside of art world institutions by participating in exhibitions and developing community-based art projects. In 2021, he launched Black Wall Street Journey, a project centered around black economics based in Chicago, and Greenwood Art Project, a collaborative project to raise awareness of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. He is best known as the founder of Project Row Houses, a community-based art project established in Houston in 1993. He has served as a Loeb Fellow at Harvard University, a Mel King Fellow at MIT, and as the Stanford University Haas Center Distinguished Visitor. President Barack Obama appointed Lowe to the National Council on the Arts in 2013; in 2014 he was named a MacArthur Fellow. Lowe signed to Gagosian Gallery in 2021.

Georgina Marie is a poet from Lakeport, Northern California. She is the current Lake County Poet Laureate for 2020–2024, the first Mexican-American and youngest to serve in this role for Lake County. She is the Literary Coordinator and Poetry Out Loud Coordinator for the Lake County Arts Council and Poet in Residence for *The Bloom*. In 2021, she was selected as a Poets Laureate Fellow for the Academy of American Poets. She has received support from the Mendocino Coast Writers' Conference and the Napa Valley Writers' Conference. She is currently working on her full-length poetry manuscript.

Wes Matthews is a Detroit-born, Philadelphia-based poet and essayist. His work has been published in *68to05*, *Scoundrel Time*, *Muzzle*, and elsewhere. Wes served as the 2018–19 Philadelphia Youth Poet Laureate and received the Congressional Award for "outstanding and invaluable service to the community." He is the recipient of the 2020 College Alumni Society Prize for his poetry and the 2020 Lillian and Benjamin Levy Award for his music criticism.

Celia Álvarez Muñoz is a conceptual multi-media Texas artist known for her diverse works including artist's books, photography, installation, and public art. She is the recipient of many awards and honors. Her work has been nationally and internationally exhibited and included in the Whitney Museum of American Art's 1991 Biennial. Her work is in numerous private and public special collections of major museums, universities and corporations. Her work is featured in many critically acclaimed exhibition catalogs and books. Recent accolades include the U.S. Latinx Art Forum Fellowship, 2021, and Texas on the Arts Commission State 2D Artist, 2022.

Amber Jamilla Musser is Professor of English at the CUNY Graduate Center. Her research focuses on the intersections of race, sexuality, and aesthetics. She is the author of *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (NYU Press, 2014) and *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (NYU Press, 2018). She also writes art criticism for the *Brooklyn Rail*. She is currently at work on a project about art, race, and the limits of representation.

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Born of Olúfẹ́mi & Olúyẹ́misí, **Adéolá Olákìítán** is a trans*themme poet, artist and curator living and working in spirals & reversals. With past experience in global contemporary art, art & politics and new media practices, their current research (and dream work) is committed to creating errant, vital imaginaries and systems of relation. Olákìítán holds an MA from the Curatorial Practice Program at the School of Visual Arts. Qra33 is their transversal studiolab designing projects and spaces of critical nuance and play. They are the author of the collection of lyric essays and poems, *Whiskery Squid*.

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Luisa Fernanda Pérez is a second-year Art History master's student at the University of Houston. She focuses on the study of Latin American and Latinx art, particularly in themes of erasure, memory, artivism, gender violence, and transgressive artistic practices. Luisa was born and raised in Cd. Juárez, México; she graduated from UT El Paso with a BA in Art History and a Minor in Museum Studies. During her time at UTEP, Luisa served as a 2019 HIS Pathways fellow through the Andrew Mellon Foundation. In her first year as a master's student, she was a fellow at the International Center for the Arts of the Americans at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and served as the Assistant Art Editor at *Gulf Coast*. Currently, Luisa Fernanda serves as a Graduate Research Fellow for The Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Houston and hopes to finish her thesis on time.

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Paige Quiñones is the author of *The Best Prey*, winner of the 2020 Pleiades Press Lena Miles-Wever Todd Prize for Poetry. She has received awards and fellowships from the Center for Mexican-American Studies, the Academy of American Poets, and Inprint Houston. Her work has appeared in *Best New Poets*, *Copper Nickel*, *Crazyhorse*, *Juked*, *Lambda Literary*, *Orion Magazine*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Quarterly West*, *Sixth Finch*, and elsewhere.

Nitya Rayapati is a fiction writer and translator from Austin. She is a Periplus fellow and an MFA candidate in fiction at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her work has appeared in *Electric Literature*, *PANK*, and *Bright Wall/Dark Room*.

Kaitlin Rees, born in Wampsville, has been windily between New York and Hanoi since 2011. With Nhã Thuyên she founded AJAR, a small bilingual publishing press with an online journal and a poetry festival. Her translations of Nhã Thuyên's poetry have been published in various literary spaces, including in one full-length collection, *words breathe, creatures of elsewhere* (Vagabond Press, 2016). After editing the Transpacific Literary Project of The Margins for several years, she is currently a public school teacher in Queens.

Elizabeth Lindsey Rogers is the author of two poetry collections: *The Tilt Torn Away from the Seasons* (2020) and *Chord Box* (2013). Recent poems appear in *Poetry*, *Waxwing*, *Pleiades*, *Bennington Review*, and elsewhere. Her essays appear in *Best American Nonrequired Reading*, *Best American Travel Writing*, *The Missouri Review*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. Rogers is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Oberlin College. She lives in Ohio with her wife and son.

Zohra Saed is a Brooklyn-based writer. She is a co-editor of *One Story, Thirty Stories: An Anthology of Contemporary Afghan American Literature* (University of Arkansas Press), and editor of *Langston Hughes: Poems, Photos, and Notebooks from Turkestan* (Lost & Found, 2015). Zohra is a Distinguished Lecturer at Macaulay Honors College, The City University of New York.

Baqytgul Sarmekova is a Kazakh writer whose darkly humorous short stories featuring ordinary Kazakh people first attracted the attention of readers in 2014. She has since published two collections of stories: *Күн батқан кездегі оқиға* (*An Incident in the Twilight*), published by Ağatai Press in 2019, and *Кейіпкер* (*To Hell with Poets*) by Qalamger Press in 2020. Sarmekova is the winner of the prose award at the 2016 Shabyt International Festival of Creative Youth and a recipient of a 2020 Rahymjan Otarbaev Foundation grant, awarded bi-annually to talented young writers, poets, and playwrights.

Bobuq Sayed is an Afghan writer, performance artist, and James A. Michener fellow in the University of Miami's MFA program. They have received support from Tin House, Kundiman, Seventh Wave, and VONA/Voices. They are working on a novel about queer and trans refugees and they tweet @bobuqsayed.

Brett Shaw is a poet and educator living in Alabama. Recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Colorado Review*, *Sycamore Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and elsewhere. His work has received support from the Community of Writers. He holds an MFA from the University of Alabama.

Shook is a poet and translator based in Northern California. Winner of the 2021 Academy of American Poets/Words Without Borders Poems in Translation Prize and a 2021 Global Africa Translation Fellowship from The Africa Institute, their most recent translations include Mario Bellatin's *Beauty Salon* and, with Bryar Bajalan, Zêdan Xelef's *A Barcode Scanner*, whose title poem Shook adapted into a film that won the 2020 ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival's prize for Best Film for Tolerance.

Olivia M. Sokolowski is a poet currently pursuing her PhD at Florida State University. She earned her MFA at University of North Carolina Wilmington and her undergraduate degree at Berry College. Her work is recently featured or forthcoming in *Lake Effect*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and *Nelle*. You can also find Olivia streaming at twitch.tv/clockwork_olive.

Sophia Stid is a writer from California. She is the Ecotone Postgraduate Fellow at UNC Wilmington, where she teaches creative writing and serves as an associate editor for *Ecotone*. She received her MFA in poetry from Vanderbilt University. Her micro-chapbook, *Whistler's Mother: An Essay*, is out now in the INCH series from Bull City Press.

Joopaka Subhadra is an Indian Dalit activist, poet, fiction writer, and translator. She has co-edited collections of Madiga women's stories and poetry in Telugu, and she helped found Mattipoolu (a SC, ST, BC, and Minority Women Writers' Forum). She is a columnist for the feminist journal *Bhoomika* and works as an Additional Secretary in the Telangana government.

Shruti Swamy is the author of the story collection *A House Is a Body*, and the novel *The Archer*, both from Algonquin Books. The winner of two O. Henry Awards, her work has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *McSweeny's*, and elsewhere. She lives in San Francisco.

Öykü Tekten is a poet, translator, and editor. She is also a founding member of Pinsapo, an art and publishing experience with a particular focus on work in and about translation, as well as a contributing editor and archivist with Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative. Her work has appeared in the Academy of American Poets, Words Without Borders, *SAND Journal*, *Jadaliyya*, *The Markaz Review*, *Oversound*, *StatOrec*, and *Gazete Duvar*, among other places. She lives with her two tabby cats in Granada.

Nhã Thuyên was born in Việt Nam and works as a writer and editor in Hà Nội. Her most recent books are *bất\ \tuẫn: những hiện diện [tự-] vắng trong thơ Việt* and its English edition: *un\ \martyred: [self-]vanishing presences in Vietnamese poetry* (Roofbook, USA, 2019); and *moon fevers* (Tilted Axis Press, UK, 2019). Her main practices are writing between languages, experimenting with translations and poetic exchanges. With Kaitlin Rees in 2014 she founded AJAR, a micro bilingual literary journal-press, a precariously online, printed space for poetic exchange. She's been talking to walls and soliloquies some nonsense when having no other emergencies of life to deal with. Her next book of poetry *Vị nước* (*The Taste of Water*) has been waiting to see the moon.

Natalie Louise Tombasco is pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing at Florida State University and serves as the Interviews Editor of the *Southeast Review*. Her work can be found in *Best New Poets*, *Copper Nickel*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *Yalobusha Review*, *The Rumpus*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *Poet Lore*, and *VIDA Review*, among others. She has a chapbook titled *Collective Inventions* (CutBank 2021).

Seth Wang's fiction has appeared in *Ploughshares* and now *Gulf Coast*. A previous version of this story was named a finalist for *BOMB Magazine*'s 2021 Fiction Contest. Seth is also a nominee for the 2022 PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Prize for Emerging Writers. They are completing their fiction MFA at Washington University in St. Louis, and working on a novel cycle about historical eunuchs.

Cat Wei is a poet and writer in New York. She is a Tin House Workshop alumni and an Idyllwild Writers Week Fellow. Her writing is *Best of the Net* nominated and appears in *Gulf Coast*, *Vagabond City*, *Sundog Lit*, and *Lantern Review*. The recipient of a Manhattan Arts Grant from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, she is also the founder of East Village Poetry Salon, a reading series that centers female, queer, and trans poets of color. She holds a BA in Comparative Literature and a BS in Economics from the University of Pennsylvania.

Adele Elise Williams is a writer, editor and educator pursuing her PhD in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her work can be found in *The Florida Review*, *Guernica*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Split Lip*, and elsewhere. adeleelisewilliams.com.

Danielle P. Williams is a Black and Chamorro writer and spoken-word artist from Columbia, SC. She has nominations for a Pushcart Prize, Best New Poets, Best of the Net, and Best Microfiction, with fellowships from Palm Beach Poetry Festival, The Watering Hole, and The Alan Cheuse Center for International Writers. Her chapbook, *Who All Gon' Be There?*, is out now from Backbone Press (2021). She is currently based in Los Angeles. For more, visit http://daniellepwilliams.com/.

Zêdan Xelef was born on Şingal Mountain in northern Iraq, in 1995. Displaced from his home by Daesh's attempt to exterminate the Êzîdî, he arrived with his family to the Chamishko IDP camp in late 2014. *A Barcode Scanner*, a chapbook of poems about life in the camps, was published by Kashkul Books in Slemani in 2021. Xelef's work has appeared in magazines like *Asymptote*, *Poetry London*, *Tripwire*, *Words Without Borders*, and *World Literature Today*. Today he is an MFA student at San Francisco State University.

Anam Zafar translates the voices that tell their own stories on their own terms. She translates to fight against misrepresentation and sensationalism. She works from Arabic and French to English and holds an MA in Applied Translation Studies from the University of Leeds. She was longlisted for the 2021 John Dryden Translation Competition and selected as a 2021 ALTA Virtual Travel Fellow; has collaborated with the National Centre for Writing as an Emerging Translators Mentee and translator in residence; and appeared at the 2021 Bila Hudood: Arabic Literature Everywhere festival. She volunteers for World Kid Lit and leads creative translation workshops for young people with the Stephen Spender Trust. Her translations have been published in print by *ArabLit Quarterly* and the National Centre for Writing, and online by ArabLit, ArabKidLitNow!, *The Markaz Review*, the SpLitera Cultural Association, and World Kid Lit. She is based in Birmingham, UK. Twitter: @anam_translates; www.anamzafar.com.

Issam Zineh is author of the forthcoming poetry collection *Unceded Land* (Trio House Press, 2022) and the chapbook *The Moment of Greatest Alienation* (Ethel, 2021). His poems appear or are forthcoming in *AGNI*, *Guernica*, *Pleiades*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, and elsewhere. Find him at www.issamzineh.com or on Twitter @izineh.

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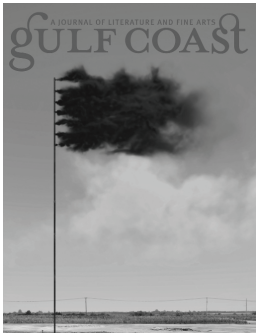

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