

GULF COAST

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS



IN THIS ISSUE

"The iceman went on a string of killings, attacking animals, an old man, a blonde in a convertible, only to be befriended by an orphaned deaf girl. The deaf girl and the iceman sat at a table in a boathouse, a huge bowl of oatmeal on the table. The girl heaped brown sugar on the oats. Pantomimed for the iceman to eat. He tilted his head like a confused dog, but lowered his face and tasted the oats."

-Alan Heathcock

"Nothing to cry over. Nothing at all, really. But how many times has it floated me over despair? Just to think of that moment. The music and the speeding blue three-speed I commanded, hair whipped in the wind, the clattering old paving stones. I rolled this inner photograph gently, *molto pianissimo*, into the kit-bag of consciousness. The ground-beat of being, pounding like a heart, *forte, forte.*"

-Patricia Hampl

"Lake Superior roars over a record number of drowned bodies this year, and its icebergs—even the little eyelet ones—creak against each other in the sound of steam escaping through some thick blanket of potato product. Uncle cracks his knuckle against the casserole dish, burns himself, finally breathes in, as, over his head, above the couch, the print of Matisse's *Goldfish*, painted in 1911, shudders against the sheetrock."

-Matthew Gavin Frank

"Yes, everything here, now, again, always: the blue Chrysler ablaze, our bodies flung in the desert, the rearrangement of things, the infinite possibilities, the light of stars, yes, I have never seen so many stars anywhere, an ocean of sparkling light, stars alive and dead streaking toward us."

-Melanie Rae Thon

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Gulf Coast Fiction Prize, 2013

Judged by Maggie Shipstead

WINNER:

Alexander Lumans, "Power and Light"

HONORABLE MENTION:

Ravsten Cottle, "The Young Mormon's Guide to Not Having Sex in the 1980s"

Syed Ali Haider, "I'll Take It Neat"

Gulf Coast Nonfiction Prize, 2013

Judged by Darin Strauss

WINNER:

JR Fenn, "Where We Went and What We Did There"

HONORABLE MENTION:

Alessandra Nolan, "Guilt Letters"

Daisy Pitkin, "Scattering Theory"

Gulf Coast Poetry Prize, 2013

Judged by Stanley Plumly

WINNER:

M.K. Foster, "Fugue for the Sky Burial of Your Father"

HONORABLE MENTION:

Melissa Barrett, "If I Were the Moon, I Know Where I Would Fall Down"

Scott Challenger, "Maine"

The deadline for the upcoming contest is **March 15, 2014**. Each contest winner receives \$1,500 and publication in *Gulf Coast*. Each Honorable Mention receives \$250. Submit one previously unpublished story or essay (7,000 words max) or up to 5 poems (10 pages max). Your name and address should be included *on your cover letter only*. Your \$23 reading fee will include a one-year subscription. For more information about this year's contest, including judges, stay tuned at www.gulfcoastmag.org.

Dear Readers,

The first issue of *Domestic Crude*, the journal that would ultimately become *Gulf Coast*, was published in 1982. We recently turned up what is perhaps the only extant copy of that issue, opened to page one, and found that the very first piece we ever published—text or art—was a black and white photograph by J.J. Gallegos of mud wrestling in a Texas honky-tonk. As that photo and the tongue-in-cheek title indicate, *Domestic Crude* was a journal that aimed from the start for a subversive take on the complicated and often contradictory culture of Houston.

Maybe it's just the Texan in us, but more than thirty years later, *Gulf Coast*—despite the name change, despite the expanded focus of the journal and its international roster of artists and writers—has tried to maintain some of that renegade spirit. We have also been sure to maintain our association with visual art, hence the evolution of the journal's full title to the one you see on the cover today: *Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts*.

Just as that title was becoming a permanent part of the *Gulf Coast* identity, another arts publication across town was busy making a name for itself. Originally a bimonthly journal covering the Houston visual arts scene, *Art Lies* rapidly grew into a biannual that brought Gulf Coast area artists, curators, scholars, and critics into dialogue with their peers around the globe, never losing its enthusiasm for, or its skepticism of, the visual arts. As the name suggests, *Art Lies* is a journal committed to irreverence and wit. In the first piece of the first issue of *Art Lies*, the great art critic Dave Hickey writes in "The Vegas Manifesto":

I want art that takes risks—an art that I can buy and buy into,
so that I can share those risks, so I can look at it longer,
so I can exchange a piece of paper signed by a bureaucrat for one
signed by a soldier of desire;
I want an art that is so fucking amazing it is illegal in the boondocks and
—believing that anything worth doing is worth doing fast and loud
—I want visual rock and roll.

This issue that you are holding inaugurates a new era in *Gulf Coast's* history, one that brings together *Art Lies* and *Gulf Coast* as a single nonprofit organization producing a single publication biannually. Reading those early issues of *Domestic Crude* and *Art Lies*, this merger has the feeling of inevitability. It joins two Houston-based arts publications committed to giving lie to the assumption that the middle of the country is filled with fly-over states when it comes to the literary and visual arts. You may not find mud wrestling or manifestos in these pages, but perhaps insisting that the Gulf is as important a coast as the East or West when it comes to the creative arts is subversive enough.

With that in mind, we encourage you to read the new *Art Lies* section of *Gulf Coast*, especially Bridget Cooks' essay about Houston's 1971 *The De Luxe Show*, the first major racially integrated exhibition of contemporary art in America, and Lucy Bradnock's essay on Walter Hopps, a curator who came of age on the West Coast but whose most lasting impact may have been as the founding director of Houston's world-famous Menil Collection. With any luck, this issue will find you moving fluidly between the verse script of Mary Reid Kelley, whose art is featured on the cover; the ekphrastic poetry of Donald Platt, Adam Vines, Matthew Pennock, Angie Estes, and others; and our roundtable on graphic storytelling. It's true: art lies, but never more so than when it throws up artificial boundaries between forms and genres. This new iteration of *Gulf Coast* will seek to break some of those boundaries down and fulfill its mission as a journal of literature and fine arts.

Zachary Martin, *Editor*

Karyna McGlynn, *Managing Editor*



Before the Menil: Walter Hopps's Curatorial Adolescence

Lucy Bradnock

An intriguing tale crops up in oral history interviews conducted with Los Angeles artists and curators of the 1950s.¹ Recounted by the curator Walter Hopps (fig. 1), the artist Craig Kauffman, and the gallerist Jim Newman, it concerns a Midwestern farmer, who, in the early hours of a morning in the early 1950s, stepped in front of a truck on a quiet rural road and was killed. Hopps locates the incident in Nebraska in 1952, Kauffman in Ohio in 1954, and Newman in Indiana in 1953.² Despite these discrepancies, all agree on one thing: the name of the unlucky farmer was Maurice

1. An earlier version of this article was published by the College Art Association in *Art Journal*, vol. 71, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 126–136.

2. Walter Hopps, interview by Thomas Crow, Andrew Perchuk and Rani Singh, November 16, 2003, transcript, "Modern Art in Los Angeles: The Beat Years," Pacific Standard Time collection, Getty Research Institute, 2004.M.30, 15; Craig Kauffman, interview with Henry Hopkins, Andrew

Syndell. In 1954, when Hopps opened the doors of his gallery in Brentwood, Los Angeles, he christened the space after the farmer, whose ignominious death had been witnessed by the young Newman. The first gallery venture undertaken by Hopps, who would become known as a founder of the Ferus Gallery, curator of the Pasadena Art Museum, director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and founding director of the Menil Collection, was thus Syndell Studio (fig. 2).

For a time the elusive figure of Maurice Syndell has loomed legendary in the minds of historians of postwar Los Angeles art; some even began to suspect that the farmer might be a figment of Hopps's fertile imagination. Recent research, however, has uncovered in the archives of the Ohio Historical Society the death record of one Maurice Sindel, who was killed on a public highway in Williams County, Ohio, on June 6, 1953.³ Newman was a student at Oberlin College at that time, so the identification seems plausible, laying to rest any creeping doubts as to the veracity of the story. More intriguing than this confirmation of the farmer's identity, however, is the posthumous role that he played in the development of an art scene several thousand miles from his home, in a state that he never visited. The phenomenon of Maurice Syndell (with revised spelling) reveals much about the dynamics of the Los Angeles avant-garde in the 1950s, and points toward a new understanding of radical art practice in the postwar years.

The building at 11756 Gorham Avenue that housed Syndell Studio no longer exists, but it is documented in a series of photographs taken by Hopps's friend, the photographer Charles Brittin (fig. 3). The gallery was housed in an unusual building constructed from used pier pilings and changing-room doors from a demolished Santa Monica beach club, in what was then a relatively undeveloped neighborhood. By selling his stamp collection and cashing in some war bonds, Hopps raised the rent of \$75 a month, and he and his wife Shirley Nielson temporarily lived in the back room.⁴ Later, Newman took up abode there. The gallery was open for only a short time—it most likely closed by the end of 1956—but it rapidly gained an impressive reputation as a

Perchuk, and Rani Singh, April 9, 2009, Pacific Standard Time collection, Getty Research Institute; James Newman, interview by Paul Karlstrom, May 13, 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; James Newman, interview by Andrew Perchuk and Rani Singh, September 30, 2010, Pacific Standard Time collection, Getty Research Institute.

3. Ohio Department of Health Certificate of Death, state file no. 42714. Sindel's life dates are given as May 9, 1919–June 6, 1953.

4. Hopps interview, 11.

place of artistic experimentation that showed works by Bay Area artists such as Roy De Forest, Sonia Gechtoff, and Julius Wasserstein, as well as young local talent such as Gilbert Henderson, Kauffman, Edward Kienholz, and Paul Sarkisian. "For a glimpse of avant-garde art in Los Angeles," concluded the critic Jules Langsner in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1956, "the place to go is Syndell Studios [sic]."⁵

Among the most significant solo exhibitions that Hopps organized at Syndell Studio were one devoted to the Abstract

Expressionist-style paintings of Arthur Richer and another to Kienholz's wooden relief constructions. The only sale made at the gallery, Hopps later recalled, was a painting by Richer, although the artist was reluctant to let it go, breaking into the gallery and stealing it back.⁶ Nonetheless, both these exhibitions represented the straightforward display of works of art. Alongside them, however, Hopps undertook other more playful and conceptually complex gestures of display. Included in at least one of the group exhibitions that he organized was the work of his gallery's eponymous artist: in 1956, work attributed to Syndell was included in the



Fig. 2. Charles Brittin, Arthur Richer at Syndell Studio, 1956, gelatin silver print, 9 1/2 x 8 in. Charles Brittin Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2005, M11 (C). Paul Getty Trust

5. Jules Langsner, "Association Opens Show of 'Human Figure in Art,'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 1956, D6.

6. Hopps interview, 9.

Action' (Action Squared) exhibition that was organized jointly with Kienholz's Now Gallery, where it was installed. Syndell, both the gallery and the artist, also appeared (the latter albeit briefly) in the annual Los Angeles All-City Outdoor Art Festival at Barnsdall Park, which Hopps and Kienholz had been (somewhat surprisingly) contracted to organize.⁷ In addition to the usual juried exhibitions, Hopps introduced a section for commercial galleries, inserting both Syndell Studio and the Now Gallery into the proceedings alongside more recognizable establishments. He also put forward a "semi-abstract female nude" under the name Maurice Syndell, although the work was censored by the city administrators, who also demanded the removal of four other works from the show. Despite this setback, Hopps would later recall that "in those years, art publicly attributed to Syndell, a deranged and institutionalized man in the Midwest, was made in a consistent style by a variety of Southern Californian artists."⁸ These may have included the poet Ben Bartosh and his wife Elizabeth Brunt, the poet-mathematician Michael Scoles, and the poet and printmaker Robert Alexander, as well as Newman, Kienholz, and possibly even Hopps himself (although Kauffman apparently wanted no part of the group's Syndell shenanigans).⁹

Thus Syndell was reconfigured from farmer to artist. Hopps's choice to name his gallery after Syndell is in part an act that speaks of memory and memorial. "It's just too absurd," Hopps explained, "that this man dies in obscurity. We're going to make him an artist. We're going to create work for him. . . . We're going to put him in group shows. We're going to name our place after him, as though it had been his studio."¹⁰ A similar gesture is found in the example of the more famous Ferus Gallery, founded in 1957, and named, in part at least, for Jim Feris, a deceased art student at Eagle Rock High School, where Hopps and Kauffman had both studied. (Alexander suggested a change in spelling to bring the name in line with the Latin word for wild or untamed.) But Hopps was quick to negate the earnestness with which such an act of memorializing might

7. On *Action'*, see Ken Allan, "Creating an Avant-garde in 1950s Los Angeles: Robert Alexander's Hand-printed Gallery Brochure in the Archives of American Art," *Archives of American Art Journal* 42, nos. 3-4 (2002): 21-26.

8. Walter Hopps, "Edward Kienholz: A Remembrance," *American Art* 8, no. 3-4 (Summer-Autumn 1994): 124.

9. Hopps interview, 15.

10. *Ibid.*



Fig. 3. Charles Brittin, Arthur Rivera and Wallace Berman at Syndell Studio during Richer's exhibition, 1955. Photograph, 8 x 11 in. Charles Brittin Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2005.04.11 (© J. Paul Getty Trust)

be associated, explaining in an interview in 1975 that “there was as much deliberate irony as there was a genuine kind of memorial. It was two-edged, something very involved about what we felt was living art and how it would be named after someone who was no longer alive.”¹¹

The conceptual implications of the Syndell designation were key to the peculiar nature of the fledgling Los Angeles art world at mid-century, one characterized by ambivalence, humor, and a particular self-awareness. In addition to the “deliberate irony” that Hopps identified, the (mis-)appropriation of the name Syndell might be characterized as bathos, a deliberate underwhelming of narrative, or the imperfect, rather than the perfect, cadence. The repetition of the story of the farmer in oral history interviews frames the incident not as tragedy, but rather in terms that evoke at best the romantic and the surreal, and at worst the banal and the deadpan. Kauffman even ventriloquized Mrs. Sindel's bemused response: “Gee, he's always in the street.”¹² Above all, what Syndell

11. Walter Hopps, taped interview, October 4, 1975, cited in *The Last Time I Saw Ferus*.

12. Kauffman interview, 19.

Studio reveals is the adoption of a complex position in relation to the structures of Los Angeles's burgeoning art world, to the conditions of art criticism and art-historical discourse, and to notions of artistic regionalism. In co-opting, rather than opposing, the cliché of the backward American Midwest, I suggest, Hopps sought to position himself at the forefront of the West Coast avant-garde.

Syndell Studio opened in 1954, well before the city's art scene received increased national and international attention. It was a predecessor of the better known Ferus Gallery (established in 1957, also by Hopps); it far predated the existence of *Artforum* (not founded in San Francisco until 1962); and it came over a decade before the Los Angeles County Museum of Art opened its new campus in Hancock Park in 1965. In the first years of the 1950s, the Los Angeles art market was negligible, and many artists still depended on annual juried exhibitions and community association shows to display their work. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Los Angeles witnessed the growth of a distinct art scene, with a number of commercial contemporary art galleries opening and the development of La Cienega Boulevard into a newly popular Gallery Row.¹³ The steady increase of commercial galleries was attended by an equally significant group of alternative spaces in which artists sought to take control of the production, display, and dissemination of their own work. These included informal art shows held in businesses, eateries, and other unofficial spaces, including such venues as Vons Café Galleria in Laurel Canyon, M. J. Royer's bookshop in West Hollywood, and Books 55 on La Cienega Boulevard; displays organized by Kienholz in the foyer of the Coronet Louvre Theatre; and such collaborative ventures as Connor Everts's cooperative printshop and Exodus Gallery in San Pedro.

Even in the context of this dual development of commercial and alternative spaces, not unusual for any burgeoning art scene, Syndell Studio appears decidedly odd as an avant-garde proposition. The striking narrative of the gallery's christening establishes a peculiar place for Syndell from the moment of its inception. Indeed it is notable that Hopps did not name his first venture after

13. On the growth of the Los Angeles art scene in the postwar period, see Lucy Bradnock and Rani Singh, "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag: Crafting an Art Scene," in *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art, 1945-1980*, ed. Rebecca Peabody et al., exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011), 67ff.

himself, as had his more commercially minded peers Esther Robles, Frank Perls, Felix Landau, and Paul Kantor, who had all opened galleries in Los Angeles between 1947 and 1952. Nor did he choose the kind of name that evoked the dynamic immediacy or urgency traditionally favored by the self consciously avant-garde (a strategy employed by the Zeitgeist Gallery and the Now Gallery). Emphatically designated as a studio rather than a gallery, Syndell was a work in progress, a space that emphasized art production over and above the display and sale of a finished product.

Furthermore, it was dedicated to a dead farmer, an unknown person, one without reputation or avant-garde or artistic credentials. In the face of the demands of the commercial gallery system, the naming of Syndell Studio subverted the



Fig. 4. Robert Alexander, business card for Syndell Studio, ca. 1956, letterpress on cardstock, 3-5/16 x 3-5/16 in. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2005.M.11 (© Estate of Robert Alexander, courtesy the Temple of Man, Inc.)

implied authority of the gallerist, while the creation of the artist Syndell worked against the exchange value contained in the process of artistic attribution. Hopps's project articulated a deliberate strategy, one that toyed with the validation offered in the guise of a name, the "author-function" as Michel Foucault would come to define it the following decade.¹⁴

By naming his gallery after an unknown nonspecialist, Hopps sought to disrupt the principle that the gallery name stands for a guarantee of quality. By choosing a Midwestern farmer, he further played with regional stereotypes of the American Far West as an artistically barren frontier land. In much of the critical discourse generated on both the east and west coasts, Los Angeles was still framed as a regional backwater, far from the vibrant artistic centers of New York,

14. See Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" (1969), in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113-38.

with its established matrix of galleries and dealers, collectors, cocktails parties, and critics, let alone Europe (for which read Paris). Jules Langsner, writing in *Art News* in April 1954, bemoaned California's artistic isolation from European trends, "placed as we are at the end of a transmission belt moving from Paris to New York to Los Angeles."¹⁵ Such attitudes, and those that insisted upon interpreting California art in terms of "the West's wide open spaces," dogged the reception of Los Angeles, even as it was framed as America's "Second City" of art.¹⁶ Lamenting the "problem of regionalism" in 1972, Peter Plagens identified the destructive ambivalence that had plagued the Los Angeles art world in the 1950s and 1960s, a time when "this city was promoted inside and outside, as a peer or at least a *strong* second to the Big Apple."¹⁷ In choosing a name for his new venture in 1954, however, Hopps demonstrated an acute awareness of the terms of this discourse and a reluctance to participate in it unquestioningly. In the face of repeated characterizations of his native city as the unwashed country bumpkin of the art world, Hopps's strategy of adopting the hyperbolic nomination of an Ohio farmer was a radical move.

In these terms, Hopps's gallery might be read as a performative gesture that operates near the realms of parody and pastiche, engaging in a playful trickery that is not un-Duchampian (indeed, Hopps was familiar with Marcel Duchamp's work through frequent visits to the Arensberg Collection, housed in Hollywood from 1921 to 1950). A similarly Duchampian maneuver is to be found in the contradictions that surround the operation of Syndell Studio, where the trappings of the gallery system are evident, even exaggerated, yet are at once undercut by the Beat nature of the enterprises they describe. The gallery had business cards (fig. 4), designed by Alexander, or "Baza" as he named himself and his small press. There were announcements and invitations to exhibition openings, designed by Alexander, Wallace Berman, and others, and the gallery was represented alongside more mainstream establishments at Barnsdall Park. Listings for a number of its exhibitions appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, and

15. Jules Langsner, "Art News from Los Angeles," *Art News* 53, no. 2 (April 1954): 52.

16. Henry Seldis, "Art Trends of the West Coast," in *Art in America*, vol. 42, no. 4, December 1954, 297-98; Barbara Rose, "Los Angeles: The Second City," *Art in America*, vol. 54, no. 1, January-February 1966, 111.

17. Peter Plagens, "Ed Moses: The Problem of Regionalism," *Artforum* 10, no. 7 (March 1972): 83.

Syndell Studio was even mentioned in the occasional review article. But exhibition runs were short, sometimes just a few days and never more than a couple of weeks. Furthermore, the space was rarely open to a visiting public, since Hopps was still a student at UCLA, and nobody could really be bothered to spend time on site all day. A flier advertising Gechtoff's exhibition at Syndell suggests that mornings in particular held little appeal: the gallery hours are given vaguely as "afternoons, evenings, & by appointment."¹⁸

Part of the difficulty in categorizing Hopps's project results from the way in which the set-up blurred the distinctions between art and life, between necessity and creativity, and between seriousness and play, a position epitomized by Syndell Studio's mock-earnest nomenclature. Syndell functioned not merely as a space in which to show art, but rather as a constellation of conceptual associations circling around the name Maurice Syndell. With the hindsight afforded by postmodernism, it is tempting to see in it the modes of masquerade, performance, and appropriation, although it stops short of any of these. More subtle than the overt institutional critique that would characterize art in the late 1960s and 1970s, Syndell Studio might more profitably be considered as belonging to the long tradition of the allegory of display: simultaneously a place of display and a meditation on the structures of display itself, highlighting the workings of the gallery system that others in Los Angeles tried to emulate.

As early as the mid 1950s, the Los Angeles manifestation of Syndell had mobilized the tropes of the playful and the pretend, the rural and the regional, as a means to comment on the peculiar position of Los Angeles and the loaded nature of its fledgling art world. At the heart of Hopps's project is a concern with the productive tension between high and low, configured as art world insider and provincial outsider. In merging the two in a state of humorous ambiguity, Syndell Studio signifies a turn to the pastoral, as Thomas Crow conceived it. In *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, Crow reads the pastoral through the 1930s English writer William Empson, framing it as a mode that levels the field, a process of "ironic

18. Flier for exhibition of work by Sonia Gechtoff, Syndell Studio, 1956, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2005.M.11.

reflection on the powers of the artist alongside those of the ruler or courtier; it comes to identify any work in which a distinctive voice is constructed from the implied comparison between an author's suitably large artistic ambitions and his or her inevitably limited horizons and modest strengths.¹⁹ The exclusivity that many fledgling Los Angeles galleries courted provided for Hopps not a model to be opposed outright, but a set of conditions in whose ambiguities he might find creative potential. While Crow identifies the postwar American pastoral in the work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg—in whose playful antics he finds artistic ambition figured through the surrogate of the child—the tension between expansive aspirations and limited horizons is pertinent, too, in the context of Los Angeles and Syndell Studio. Hopps's surrogate is a farmer, but one who becomes an artist. In a similar manner to Johns's flags, Syndell offered Hopps a means to rethink the rhetoric of American modernism through recourse to the vernacular, long before he steered Los Angeles toward its reputation as a city of Pop in the following decade.²⁰ Hopps would play no small part in the maturation of the L.A. scene, but Syndell represented his significant curatorial adolescence.

19. Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 177.

20. See Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2006). Hopps would be instrumental in the early presentation of Pop art in Los Angeles, mounting the first solo exhibition of work by Andy Warhol at the Ferus Gallery in 1962, and curating the group exhibition *New Painting of Common Objects* at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963. See "New Painting of Common Objects: An Interview with Walter Hopps by Jim Edwards," in *Pop Art: U.S./U.K. Connections 1956–1966* (Houston: Menil Collection, 2001), 42–53.

Power and Light

In our beekeeper gloves, boots, and masks cinched tight with twine, Mar and I dig a hole. Six feet long and three feet wide. Deep enough to fit the old man below the red clay's frost line. This is how I remember it beginning: the slowest two weeks of my life.

Middle of the day, late summer, humid as standing neck-high in a peat bog. No one comes speeding down the state road. That two-laner runs by our farmhouse, the walnut grove's twenty beehives, and the rest of our acreage in Yell County, Georgia.

The sun and the hives' droning boil the air. I already smoked the nearest colonies so they wouldn't buzz us. And we locked Lawless back in the house, though his barking rages on.

Daddy lies covered by the old blue tarp in our one wheelbarrow. His steel hive tool sticks out my pocket, his tin smoker hangs off my belt loop.

Mar isn't holding anything of his. She just keeps digging.

Beside the barrow we've piled the last twenty jars of his honey. We want the burying to last forever. We want it over with so we can go back inside the shady house with the swamp cooler and get to packing.

I've seen too many other folks hold on to their dead for weeks after, years even. They keep a seat for them at the table; they ask them to pass the butter. They never let go. I refused to go on that way: my hands grabbing the shirttails of Daddy's spirit so he won't leave us. He is dead and that is that. What he left behind is a bunch of honeybees. I have the uncommon sense that they will swell, and spread, and cover this land, and outlive us all.

I say, "Daddy's proud of us."

After she turns over another heap of earth, Mar stabs the shovel in the ground. She leans on it. Her whole suit heaves with each breath. She's moved slower, as if suddenly old, in the two days between his death and now. "We should be the proud ones," she says. "We're what's left."

The urge to take off her mask charges down my arms and into my hands. I keep digging.

When she pulled on the mask this morning, her blue eyes faded to gray and her sagging pumpkin skin became that veil of steel mesh. She looked much reduced. That's what flood plains Georgia does to a person. Living a month here is like living a year in softer places. It scrapes you away. Layer by layer, then speck by speck.

That's not what happened to Daddy.

After the storm two days ago, a downed electrical wire lay across the state road. Having worked with electric crews before, he thought he could clear it with a wood claw rake. That wire's live end jumped into his hands the way the dog always did.

The higher the heat rises in the grove, the more Mar and I hurry to put Daddy down.

With our income nil, we need to be out of this place in two weeks. We've leased our land from Jericho Trim my whole life. He owns a lot of Yell; he bought up the bankrupt Bates Sawmill where Daddy once worked and then left it to rot because he could. Now we owe him more money than we could stuff in a pillowcase.

I peel off the tarp. "What's electrified supposed to look like?" I ask Mar. His black hair's shiny wet, eyelids drawn down, mouth cracked open with dry brown teeth in the sun. The shock should have uncrossed his eyes, but I'm too chickenshit to check.

"Don't matter what's *supposed*."

The feeling I get is that we're of the same mind: let him be where he go.

"He was old enough," she says. "That's all matters."

What I don't know then—and do not to this day—is there ever an age when you aren't?

After we flatten the hole's bottom, Mar gets him by the shoulders and I get his feet. We lay him in. Then I pour the first jarful of honey over his thigh: my own little touch to the ceremony. I manipulate that honey into golden shapes: an X for the fallen, an H for the Harlan family name, a big old zigzag for I didn't have a clue. By the end, a thick mask of it goops down his face.

Mar's knees make a cracking noise. I expect her suit to suddenly cave in on itself, like she's given up when I need her most.

Instead of collapsing, she undoes the twine and flips her mask onto the ground. She looks most gorgeous. Years younger than when she put it on hours ago. Her slender blonde curls browned with sweat. Her cheeks shock-red and eager. Makes me feel young, but in a worse way. Like I'm only half of seventeen then, and understand even less. I keep my mask on. I'm thinking, I don't want to know what I look like. If I could, I'd wear this mask the next two weeks.

She sweeps the wet curls out of her suddenly green eyes. "You're Man of the House now, Em. You're Mr. Decision. I can't stay out here any longer. Day's too much for me."

Over her shoulder I can see the new For Sale sign tilted toward the road. "Decisions is all bad news."

"Get to Florida, we do fine."

"We're really moving, huh."

She's already headed inside. "Talk about a hot day."

Once I fill the hole back in with the clay pile, it doesn't look right. With the hive tool I tamp down a lump of beet-red earth. But it's the color that's off, the whole shebang. I stay out there. Not to prove I am tough or proud or anything great. Not to say goodbye to Daddy, either.

It's the hives have me fixated.

After the mill went under, Daddy used to spend all day in the grove. He'd hold a queen in his palm, palm to his chin. He let the workers dangle down his neck in a heavy beard of wings and stick-legs and stingers. With all those bees taken to him, he looked point-blank invincible, smart enough that the rest of the world bent its ear to him. He got so good he didn't need the smoker anymore, could do it blindfolded in the dark. I kept asking him to show me how. If you kill the queen, he told me, you've got to kill every last one—otherwise, they'll chase you to the ends of the earth. The way they crawled all over him gave off an electricity that leapt between his crossed eyes. The one day he thought me old enough to grow a beard of bees, I crippled the queen. He said some of us will never be the good and ready kind. But I want to prove I am.

• • •

The day Daddy died, news zipped through Yell faster than the power outage. Right through Stumbles Hardware, the post office with Old Fly's horse skeleton, the market selling fresh brown eggs. Yell was tough people on tough land. I once loved it all.

Cops came in their whitish cruisers. Mar'd already rolled Daddy onto the blue tarp and dragged him out of the road. The coroner, Mr. Jackies, drove up too. He handed out Marlboro 100s. Then he spread three certificates on the porch planks, his signatures still wet. We filed our papers of death.

Some neighbors brought pineapple upside-down cake and breads cut with crosses. They left cards of scribbled grief. Lots of folks drove by. Some slowed down to stare. Was there a mark? A scorch in the shape of his shoes? In his honor they poured out cans of Natty Light before they tossed their empties in the ditch.

While everyone smoked and talked on the porch, Lawless kept whining in the den. Smartest or dumbest mammal I ever met; I go back and forth on this. But the bee masks scared him. I put mine on and snicked the hive tool from the wall hook. Daddy's old black and white bulldog had bitten my legs before, but he'd not gash me today. I needed to quit him and his oven knob of a tail as badly as I needed to rid myself of any grief ready to hatch inside me.

Daddy's friends all put their hands on my shoulders and squeezed hard. They said to me: *you now, she can't, who else will*, like I was that Man of the House. But what had I done? Shooting a gator cow and crouching by her eggs doesn't make you that gator. It doesn't make those eggs your eggs. I kept thinking: Florida, where Mar's sister lived. *Florida*. Orange groves for miles on end. Palm trees wrapped in long snakes of Christmas lights. A whole coastline of plastic cities with green drawbridges and nothing I was prepared for.

Rather than stick around that evening while Yell spun its wheels about Daddy, I drove off in the pickup.

Ten miles down the state road I ended up at this transformer station. Little more than a chain-link square around two dozen breakers. Here, the county's powerlines synced up. You'd think, with Daddy not yet six feet under but headed there on account of that voltage, a boy'd steer clear of hotspots. But with him gone, I felt a difference.

At some early leap in life where you opt whether or not to be overcome with emotion, I had hauled myself up on the banks of *Never*. Fuck crying. With my hands on the chain-link, I felt composed of something grander, or forced to be. Part clay, part stinger, part power and light. The endless hum of those transformers—I sopped it up through my fingers. I listened to the same old mystery talk of bees. I even hummed along, my face a blankety-blank. The comforts of home are that only when it is home, and long remaining so. As charged as I felt, I had no way to let that charge out. Now I wasn't sure I ever wanted to, either.

• • •

Some days after we bury Daddy, Trim shows up. His twompy shoulders are all I can make out through the birdshit windshield of his blue Ranchero. I never met the man before—I've already made up my mind.

On the porch, I stay sitting with a full checkerboard in front of me and no one to play. All morning the corner of my eye has caught flashes of light from the grove: I keep expecting to turn and see Daddy's raised hive tool throw the big sun my way. With his death and burial, I realize that each day promises some kind of disappearance, this day to prove no different.

In torn shorts on top of muckboots, sporting a clean black button-up, Trim lumbers to the porch's corner. Into consideration he takes me and the chair opposite, empty but for my caved-in bee mask. "You any good?"

"Used to think so."

Unlike when Mar or me walk across them, the porch planks bow under Trim's steps. He casts a cornstalk shadow over the checkers. "This age? Smart boy like you ought to be a pro."

I fake a yawn.

I don't yet know how smart's supposed to look without involving a swarm of honeybees, but Trim sounds like it.

His boots are scuffed like someone's taken sandpaper to them. His rimless glasses? Scratched too. He smells like peat moss from poaching gators in the Okefenokee. From what Daddy told Mar, Jericho Trim is just a skinny Savannah cracker with big

plans and a bad back. No more dangerous than gator skin on the floor.

He tries the front door. Past few days, Mar's been locking the house. She's the queer kind of woman who sticks it out when the chips are down. Yet still: Florida-bound we are. I fear and count on her to give in at the exact wrong time.

From his car Trim fetches a second ring of keys and undoes the deadbolt. He locks the keys back in his car. He pulls a flattened liquor box from his open-air trunk. He grins at me with two front teeth whiter than his others. "Make yourself useful." He throws his chin toward the eleven other boxes before he steps inside.

I bring all but one to the porch. Inside his car: spare keys in the ashtray and a magazine flopped open on the passenger seat. In it, men and women are performing on each other with parts of their bodies I'd only ever touched myself.

In the kitchen Trim's hunching over by the sink real close to Mar. She's barefoot, wobbling there beside him. She wears khaki shorts like his and a blue homespun shirt. They both palm jars of tea. The storetag to his shirt peeks out the back of his collar. His other hand's snaking behind her waist.

"Saw your magazine, Mr. Trim." I wish I'd had the keys to steal it.

His head swings around like it hung on a hook and he lurches back against the counter.

I'm wearing the big gray bee mask.

Once recovered and with another gulp, he takes a seat at the table. "I read," he finally says. "Keeps me honest." He waves at the kitchen. "You all are still leaving, of course." The room looks same as it always had: jars on hooks, jars in the dryrack. Bare trivets and an empty egg carton lying scavenged on the counter. "What is it they say about the early bird?"

"It gets the worm," Mar answers.

"It gets the worm." Trim slugs back more tea. "I always wondered why there weren't enough worms to go around. Why can't all the birds have their fair share?" He polishes his glasses with his shirt corner. He takes on airs of professionalism that would never fit a bog howler. If he's here for the money, we know of none. "I suppose if there were enough worms, there'd just be more birds, and then we're back to square one." From the moment he stepped foot on our porch, he looked to be the kind of man brimming with contrary words. Sayings like that sound

good to folks because they tell the same old lie that the world is fair.

"You get all those boxes, Killer?"

Killer? "Yeah."

He cranes his neck toward the window facing the drive. "Trying to pull one, huh, Killer?"

I tell him the last one had a hole.

He leans in Mar's direction and talks lower, sweeter. "Emory's a sharp kid, Maris. Real sharp, thanks to your sharp teachings." He runs a finger along the table's iron rim. "I expect your late husband was quite prideful of the two of you." She faces the window over the sink. Her hair glows fresh-washed in the sunlight. She grips her glass so fiercely, her knuckles burn eggshell white. I swear I can still hear the bees humming inside the house. Trim can tell he's crossed some invisible line; he now folds both hands in his lap. "Emory's a good deal like myself at this age. I bet we even have matching scars." He winks at me.

I say to Mar, "We should tend the bees now."

When she looks at me but neither nods nor shakes her head, I know she's already picturing herself on a Florida beach, sinking into the sand. Sometimes I've wanted to lay her in the ground, too. I don't know what else to say.

"Never was a fan of honey. But this tea is mighty fine, Maris." Trim toasts her; she raises her glass but fails to drink. "Some might try to blame my aversion on the bees themselves. Loads of folks allergic to their apitoxins, you know."

"Api-what?" asks Mar.

"The juice they stick in you."

She makes the sourest face of an unhappy child.

"No allergy here. I'm merely a man conscious too late. Tongue too many sweets, find an equal number of cavities." He runs his tongue over his teeth. "Cavities are blessings, compared. Some have it so bad, one sting and they go into a state of total paralysis." He enunciates this last word slowly, like it might mean nothing if he didn't. "Then they'd, well—I don't need to say it." He looks keenly to Mar like he already knows what she'll say next.

She covers her mouth and looks to be holding it shut.

"Awful, yes. It pays to be a careful man. A careful young man of the house, right,

Killer?" Trim winks at me again. He takes to swirling his jar and admiring it in the windowlight. For a poacher, he has the cleanest hands. Thick and unwrinkled. His nails trimmed the width of a dime. A man with hands that clean must have as much impatience as hard grit. "Will you be needing any assistance..." This trails off as he second-glances the kitchen.

"Don't call me 'Killer.'"

"Be nice, Em. Go patch the last box." She sits down with her tea across from Trim. "And take off that mask."

In Trim's small smile, those two unlike teeth poke out like crooked hive frames. "Best do what she says. Your mother and I have some unfinished business." He tips back his tea. He wipes his mouth on his sleeve. "Get your dog to help—What's its name? Waffles?"

As if on cue, Lawless trots around the corner, gets one eyeful of Trim, and then takes a bite out of his calf. Lawless is half blind and his black spots look like fridge mold, but he can still surprise me. I'm sorry that Daddy'd not seen his dog do right for the first time. I laugh there in the kitchen until my teeth ache.

• • •

By myself the next day, I head into the grove in my duck cloth getup with the hive tool and wheelbarrow. I give a nod toward Daddy's grave, still dark red with overturned clay.

I smoke hive six. I admire its dripping combs. The bees do their busy wobbling. Sweating hard just standing still, I've already decided it's the right day to try on that beard of bees. With only a week left on this land, I figure I'm as good and ready as I'll ever be. I bend down on one knee. I am purring. I reach into the super core with too-large gloves stiffer than fence wire.

Before I can find the queen, tiny needles prick my shoulder.

One of the bees slipped inside my suit. I back up against the closest trunk to smash it. Already my shoulder burns with a match's heat.

Another hot barb, this time inside my elbow. Smack it until I can't feel the beating wings.

My arm throbs worse than my shoulder. Time I gave in. Thunked my tools back in the barrow. Before I know it, a hundred workers depart the hive. No special smarts needed; even the Man of the House can be wrong.

Next bits are a blur: haul hell out of the grove, mask blows off, bees lock themselves in my honest hair.

• • •

Thirty-six. One trip out there on my own and thirty-six stings is what I got. Mostly the neck and shoulders. My ears hurt the worst. Mar locked the front door, so by the time she heard my shouts and come out, I was gator-rolling down the porch. Cut to me, in bed: a big throbbing sack of poison. She used to put copper coins on Daddy's welts, but he never had it this bad.

Mar calls from the hallway if I've seen the packaging tape. I pretend to sleep. In my doorway for a while she hums a bright song. I'm mad at her for locking me out, I'm mad at myself for not taking hold of the queen, I'm mad at the world for being so damn fair.

Mar's humming soon goes away. When I peek, there she still stands in cut-off jeans with her shirt on backwards and inside-out. "Won't have you sick, Em. Packing's a two-man job."

"And we're two men short."

She snorts.

"Why don't you ask Trim? He looked more than ready to help."

She rolls her eyes. "That harmless little man."

"What makes you think I think he isn't?"

"I've seen you," she says. "You look at him like he's the biggest splinter in the world."

"And you don't?"

I'm the one with all the poison, but she's the one leaning against the doorframe, looking sicker and sicker and getting younger and younger. "For your information, Em, he's not all bad. He wants us out, no arguing there. But he's been kind, too. He's offered to clear our debt if—" Here she stops. One hand makes a fist at her

side. She pinches up her face as if she were holding on to something small and sharp, or squeezing the life out of it, I don't know. The only reason we're poor, I realize now, is because we aren't rich.

"If you what?" I ask. "If you marry him?"

Her laugh sticks me worse than all yesterday's bee barbs put together.

"Even if that'd been your Daddy's dying wish, I would not marry Jericho Trim." Her laugh gives way to several more snorts, then a too-long pause. "Marriage. No. Nothing so permanent as that." She toes an open crack in the floor. She looks like she doesn't know what to do next. I picture her crawling through that crack and asking me to bury her, too.

Once, Daddy told me that every pound of wax in the hive represented ten pounds of honey. And each pound of honey required eighty thousand trips. Eighty thousand times Daddy had lumbered to the grove. The clip to his step had always told me he believed the bees were building him homes of gold.

I tell Mar this.

"Words." She rubs her eyesockets. "Not money, not gold." When she opens them: wetly new green eyes. "Florida's only going to take one trip." In the hall light's low wattage, none of her early wrinkles or wormy age marks. She stands on her tiptoes and stretches and I expect her to sprout big iridescent wings.

"What about the bees?"

She soft-foots over and pats my forehead in the only place that doesn't hurt. "He's dead, Emory." Her right eye twitches like a leaf under rain.

I squeeze her hand. I do not let go no matter how cold it feels.

"Rest up, Killer."

"That doesn't sound good, even when you say it."

"Good." She laughs again. "Good's for kid books. Good's for—" but she never says what.

• • •

That night, Lawless keeps howling outside my window.

I throw my pillow at him.

I miss.

Lawless bays there until I force myself out of bed, down the hall for my shoes and keys, and into the pickup. I open my arms and he hops into them. Poison in me or worry or something more enduring and false, I still don't feel right.

We drive.

Weather station says temperatures are to drop. This tropical depression looms on Georgia's doorstep. The mention of "lightning" does not set my hands tight and root-white on the wheel. In fact, I laugh. In Florida we'd get more than our fair share of downpours.

"If you ever feel a storm coming," I say to Lawless, but where I am going? My thoughts fog up worse than the windshield. If I were smarter, I might have words for this bulldog I'm about to abandon. Instead, I hit the gas.

We drive past the transformer station.

We drive past Trim's house. Some room lights are on. I honk and give him the finger.

We drive far.

Bates Sawmill is this big wood hall left over from the forties. Back when it was operating, the longleaf pines floating down the Satilla were hooked in at the dock. These trunks got cut into thirty-five-foot utility poles that now stand all over southeast Georgia. The newest ones have a grain so golden it could be fresh honey. Every time a depression or worse rolled in, Daddy set out to work in a logger truck. I am ever proud of how his electric poles turned Yell back on.

I park in the lot. I roll down the window. Breeze already up. Place still smells of sawdust, tar. Of course Daddy would die when the bogs were low and the fireflies unnaturally bright, when everything between earth and sky gets angry—then worse: quiet. Lawless made no noise the whole ride. "Early bird," I say to him, and pop open the door on his side, prepared to shove that bulldog into the Georgia predawn.

He looks out the open door. Then he looks at me like he knows everything I'll ever think. This includes: you can put dirt back in the hole, but the ground never looks the same. "Go, Killer," I want to hear him say. Heat lightning sears the horizon over and over. I count the number of seconds before the thunder rolls to tell how many miles off.

• • •

Driving home, I let Lawless lie in my lap. "Better pray Mar keeps loving ugly faces." We pass back by Trim's. His floods are on, rooms dark. Fog covers the road. I drive straight through. For the first time since Daddy died, most of me feels genuinely collected—in Florida, we'll start over fresh.

With home in sight, a car approaches from the opposite direction. Nearing our drive, it shines its brights. I flash mine back. That other car stops in its lane. Then its turning signal blinks on as if to give me the go-ahead.

"What in the hell?" I flip my own signal on. I pull closer.

The other car's blinker keeps winking at me.

Our bumpers nearly kiss.

Then its blinker dies. It cuts its lights completely. The car lurches forward, peeling out through the fog in the direction I've just come.

• • •

The depression bullies in overnight and stays all day. Each lightning bolt jaggling out of sky courses through me like the county's electricity that killed my old man in the road.

Between Mar's humming and my shrieks of packaging tape and the hail scurries across the roof, the house threatens to cave in. I wouldn't blame it. I half-wish it would. Come evening, weather still pounding, I hear Lawless conjure from the front yard his highest whine yet. He hates thunder more than the bee masks. Always hides until it's gone. I didn't know we locked him outside. Even I deem that cruel.

Prepared to let a sopping wet bulldog run between my legs, I open the front door. There: Jericho Trim's hulking silhouette in a fancy trenchcoat. A sack of something dangles in his hand.

"Yours, I take it." The sack he lifts into the light.

Dripping, smeared in mud and blood, whimpering, Lawless hangs by the scruff of his neck. His back legs don't look right. The black blots in his fur, wiped

gone. And where is his knob of a tail? Trim shakes him once, and the bulldog's whine cuts short. "Still alive." He doesn't take off his wide-brimmed hat. He doesn't apologize. He doesn't do a damn thing. I reach to shut the door so Mar won't see but there she looms right behind me in her blue bathrobe.

Her face: already a faucet.

Trim tips his hat. "Evening, Ms. Harlan." He makes a big gesture out of bending to one knee and laying the bulldog down on the soaked planks. Lawless makes a sound. So does Mar. I have none of the right words.

Trim steps past me into the doorway. "Now, Maris, it's raining, hailing even, as you can plainly discern, and I simply do not see so well in the rain. Not the road, nor what's in it. I've been telling myself to purchase new specs for weeks. But you know how fair this world is: the things you keep meaning to do, well, they stay that way. Sometimes you're the only thing that ever changes." He takes off his glasses, shakes them, cleans them with his shirt corner. He keeps his head bent low. A big white flash, followed by a bigger clap. Everyone jumps but him. When he puts the glasses back on, I know then that smart doesn't need a swarm of bees. Smart just looks sharp as hell. "Excuses, yes, but also truths." He slips an arm around her shoulder. His dripping hat leaves black specks on the shoulders of her robe.

He's halfway down the hall before I say, "You ran him over." I will admit, this charge surprised even me. From one moment to the next, a suspicion turned into hard certainty, the way a dim light suddenly surges brilliant before burning out for good.

He stops. He swings his head to the side. His hat hides his face. "I ran him over." He appraises this idea. "I would do that? I am many things, but a liar? Honestly." Back he takes to guiding Mar toward her bedroom. "Now depressions, Maris, they got a dogged determination." Mar's sobs grow louder. "Oh, oh, I'm sorry. Did I say 'dogged'? Did I really just say that? Please come in. It's a terrible night."

On the porch, I squat next to Daddy's dog. Lawless tries to scoot toward me but can't. I lay the blue tarp over most of him to keep off the cold rain. At the same time, I feel a stiff cold tarp of something wrap itself around me. I can barely move. Specks of ice fall from the clouds and cover the ground like thousands of tiny, warped eggs.

The door to Mar's bedroom slams shut.

I go and peer through the slit between the door's hinges. I can't see anything but light and shadow. One shadow—Trim—is pacing, talking: "I'm surprised little Waffles was out. Not your fault, I'm sure. I know you loved him."

My chest squeezes up at this. His sweet-talk, his bog logic. Her crying sounds no different than a baby's. If she says anything back to him, her cries cover it. His foul, lingering peat smell is a swarm all its own.

To see better, I lie on the floor and press my face to the threshold's gap. Already, his hat and trenchcoat collapse in a heap by the bed. His boots hang a foot off the floor. The bite mark on his calf hasn't healed well.

"Relax," he says. "I know it's difficult for you and the boy moving some place strange so quick. A dog dies. It's not the end of the world. It's not even the end of today. The river runs just as the rain falls. I don't envy it. I wouldn't want just one path to go. I prefer these days of *decision*"—he said it like he'd said *paralysis*, all slow-like—"these days make you stronger, Maris. Take the dog as yet one more sign. Trust me, this move will be good for you and the boy." One of his boots lifts up out of sight. "And I'd like to make it as easy for you as I can."

The hail falls harder. Lawless whines from the porch. I wish him quiet a little longer. Now both boots are gone.

I remember what Mar said about Trim wiping away our debt. I remember Trim's magazine and the parts of those naked bodies that looked to work of their own accord. I'm reaching up to open the door, afraid of what I'll see, when thunder booms right over the house and all the lights wink out into total black.

I freeze, hand on the knob.

In the room Mar says, "Lamp's under the sink."

The sound of boots coming toward the door.

I roll away, knocking my knees together and cursing all my mistakes. Trim creeps quietly out of the room. He eases shut the door. He starts toward the kitchen. By the time my vision starts to return, it's only to see that he's stopped in the middle of the hallway. He doesn't turn around. I hold my breath. I clench every bee-sore muscle in my body. I keep praying for the thing that will not happen.

"I told you, Killer, I'm a careful man; a careful man is a patient man; and a patient

man, when presented with a locked door, will try every key on the ring." His voice sounds much rougher than moments ago in the bedroom. "But know this: the patient man never forces that door open. That's what makes him a patient, careful man."

His silhouette blurs into the kitchen.

"Killer," I say, and keep repeating the sour word. In the rain I creep out to Trim's car. All that talk of dogs and decisions brings the poison back up in me along with a kind of dark energy I've not felt before. He knows what he did. At the car, I will the door ajar. From the ashtray I snatch his second ring of keys and run back to the porch.

Lawless's breaths come short. Down on both knees, I scratch him behind the ear. "Sorry," I say. "Last night," I say. "Remember what I said about storms coming?"

Then I take the hive tool from the hallway hook. I turn it over and over. The clawed end I hold with both hands. I wish I could say it rose above my head of its own accord. I count the seconds after each lightning flash and time my blows with the thunder.

• • •

After the rain stops in the morning, after Mar kisses Trim on the porch and he leaves, I alone bury Lawless next to Daddy without ceremony.

I don't cry. Is this what good people do—let strangers inside, kill dogs, leave the only home they know for the Sunshine State? I want to say I thought of palm trees and oranges and sand dunes, but I didn't. I said I didn't cry. Lying's just one more thing you decide to do.

The hives' tin roofs now litter the grove. None of their nails held. I listen for buzzing but only hear the water dripping from the walnuts. Into some of the frames' combs I stick twigs. The insides come out gummy with scrambled drones. Their wings, their legs, bee young unborn.

No bee lived through the downpour except one young hive under low branches. Its workers mill about the waterlogged box—confused or working hard, I can't tell. I assume the queen is still somewhere inside, very alive, but I want no more to do with her.

• • •

Night before the Big Move, I can't sleep. Power's still out. I keep hearing cars drive past the house. In between them, I keep hearing silence. It's worse.

I get up. Some part of me wants to already be gone from this place, and some part wants to dig a hole in the ground next to Daddy and Lawless and sleep there because that's all the power I have left in me. If each day promised a disappearance, then I'd do my part. I leave the lamp in the kitchen burning and walk barefoot into the grove with the bee mask hugging my head.

Quarter moon. Muggy and breezeless. I'm up before even the earliest birds. I stand next to the last good hive, barely hearing it. I told Mar all the bees died.

What I mistake for the bees' dim drone is a distant engine. It grows steadily louder. The car's lights round a bend soon after. I hide behind a tree. The car slows in front of the house but continues on. I slump against the tree trunk and feel myself melt into the earth. I throw the mask into the tree limbs. Half a mile down the road the lights turn around. On its second pass, the long car pulls into our yard with only emergency flashers going. The lamp in the kitchen is a live spark.

The car waits.

I wait.

I will him no closer.

He reverses and wheels off the way he came.

As composed as perhaps I will ever be, I take the cover off the last living apiary. I slide out the comb frames until all that's left is the core. I do it slowly, carefully. By just the moonlight, I coax the queen into my bare hand. I lift her up and out. She feels huge and tiny at the same time. Her short wings tickle my fingertips. I expect her to glow on her own. I bend my ear to her and listen to all the world's mystery: past and present beaten against each other like wings until it's just one sound. Soon, the workers take to me. They swarm up in a big ball around my hand. They dangle down to my knees like honey off the end of a spoon.

With my arm commanding a beard of bees, I climb into the pickup and drive while the black powerlines chase me in my mirrors.

Trim's power is still out. In the driveway I touch the hood of his Ranchero. Still warm.

The silver key on the spare ring opens the back door like everyday magic. Trim's a common fool, no better than the rest of us. I keep praying the bees won't turn on me.

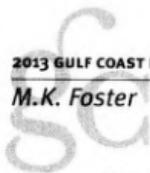
In his bedroom doorway my own feet stop. He's sleeping under the covers in a zigzag. He reminds me of Daddy laid out in the grave. It must have been how I looked to Mar laid up with the bee poison running all through me.

I hold out my arm. The swarm leaves me in waves. It spreads across the room in a dark, electric cloud. They coat the lampshades. They block out the dresser mirror. They riddle the wallrack of antlers. They blanket the doorknobs, the bedposts, the music stand. They infest the window drapes until the drapes look rotted. They crawl along the ceiling fan's still blades. They fill up the grandfather clock in the corner until its chimes hum. Their wings thunder off the walls. Their buzz fills the house. I picture them smothering all of Yell in the loudest, blackest hail.

They shroud the foot of his bed and more.

Before closing my fist around the queen, I hope that Trim's as ready for the end as I am now. The black spots of all my bees dazzle me so much that I want this to last, but I feel very tired and ready for home elsewhere, sooner. I've always wished that night went lightning quick.

M.K. Foster



Fugue for the Sky Burial of Your Father

Because he lived above the tree line, they could not
burn him. They could not

bury him because the ground would not break. So they
stitched him into his bedclothes,
carried him up the mountain, and let the *bodybreakers*
do the rest, let them

carve arm from arm from torso from arm from torso from
leg and leg and

leave the rest intact, leave his body broken beneath
the sky, and leave
and send word to you that, because a body is always broken in
more ways than the eye sees, someone you loved

had died and you need to collect the rest of his things, that you
need to solve for empty shirt, broken glass, empty
hands, fields of years

frozen silent in their sleep— If stasis had a better name,
you would know what to do.

If white noise meant any shade other than the stone dark of
a closed eye, you would
remember that a hammer can also build, a shoulder can also
hold, nightshade can wake,

you would remember the swollen song the body sings to itself
as it stitches itself back together

in sleep. And you would sleep. You would let the train
that carries you home carry you
past the forests that were not there to burn, over the ground
that could not break—

You lay your head against the window until it becomes
a glass chest breathing sky. You say,
if there is a chest, it is his chest.

Where We Went and What We Did There

We arrive from the south. We come to the end of a peninsula on a glacial bay at the edge of the western shore. We come for the open land, for the empty sea that stretches to Kamchatka and Japan. We come to forget we ever lived any other way, to see the red curtains ripple through the sky, to fight the forest fires deep in the dead spruce woods. We come for a summer and stay for years. We come for years and stay for the rest of our lives, and our children after us, and theirs after them.

We disappear into the wilderness, into tiny cabins and domes and homesteads. We disappear onto the sea, into boats with hulls made into houses where the tides rock us asleep. We build our retirement homes on islands where we are the sole inhabitants, where we go to spend weekends with our old friends and where we go to die. We disperse into lands without roads, unmarked on maps, our places only found on loam paths by those who know the way. We disappear into the town, along its quiet streets where the air blows fresh and cold from the sea.

We were strong before we came, and we grow stronger here. Our bodies grow larger and sturdier, our voices grow louder and deeper, our gazes grow steady over the ocean that tilts and smokes around us, over chunks of ice larger than houses that cleave off glacial cliffs into the sea, over the snow that rushes down hillsides to drown us. Our strength helps us disappear with the ice and the snow and the streams that disappear around us, gone to places no one has ever seen. We grow less conscious of ourselves. The land brims with all of us.

• • •

We drive along the water on a great sand spit that stretches seven miles into the sea. At high tide, the ocean laps at the banks of the road. At low tide, the sand flats stretch away to either side. Ahead, across the bay, a crescent of mountains rises. The sandbar opens wider and wider. We drive past curio shops, fishing charters, a

hotel. At the end, old pilings rise up out of the sand. On top of each piling huddles an eagle. The wind ruffles their feathers. We feed them bread. They fight for the scraps with vulture claws.

The wild eagles circle overhead, above the inland trees. We see their black silhouettes hunch in their nests against the blue white skies. The nests weigh more than the cars we drive. In the summer, the eagles hunt and grow strong; the land yields up more food than they can devour. In the winter the snow covers the ground. The eagles circle, hungry, above. We call our cats inside. The eagles take them. The eagles hover at the horizon. We keep our children inside and watch the sky. The eagles take the ones who stray from our houses without us.

At night, the moose drift through our yards to eat bark. They appear too late from the darkness before our cars. We kill them and they kill us. We eat their meat. The bears eat our garbage. We fly into the backcountry to see the bears, unspoiled by us, eat salmon. We step into the sea from small floatplanes, wade to shore in waders, hide behind a hill. The grizzlies dip their paws in the water. They pin the fish against the rock and rip its belly with their teeth until blood pours down from their mouths to the river.

• • •

We come to find something and we don't know what it is. We leave you behind in the places we come from. We leave you in your glossy cars that trickle through hive cities wrapped in smog. We leave you in suburbs that spill in viral tracts across the farmland. We leave you lost in cavernous stores and recycled air. We leave you confused about where we have gone. You have only seen where we have gone on television. You become what we would have become: young professionals, drug addicts, divorcées, drunks. Soon, we seldom write and visit even less.

We work in the spruce forests, where we cut trees and clear brush. We work in the coastal sea, where we seign for silver fish with nets. We work in the deep sea, where we haul pots packed with crabs up to the deck. We work in oyster bays, where we seed the sea with infant shells. We work in fish plants, hands numbed by knives. We work even when the power's not working. We work for others; we work

for ourselves. We work for our entire lives. Our children work for their entire lives, and their children after them.

We work until our clothes are filthy. Our clothes become stiff with dirt, with oil, with sweat and brine. We clean our clothes at the laundromat. We put them in the machines and take them out later to fold them hot and clean. We leave them behind the counter and pick them up later, folded and clean. We pay for a key at the counter and unlock one of the seventeen doors, we undress and step into the water, steam fills the room around us, we soap and shampoo, the heat soaks into our bodies, we emerge, hot and clean.

• • •

We stoke saunas with broken pallets, newspapers, beer crates, anything that burns. We pile into saunas together, we pile in naked, sweating, thighs sticking, we talk and laugh and pass a bottle, we throw more wood and water on, we choke in the steam. One of us opens the door and escapes. We breathe fresh air. We disappear into the brightness of the outdoors, we run into a field, we stand in a field of fireweed and look at the sky, the fireweed covers us to our shoulders, the day covers us in light. This is how we grow older.

Our daughters go south and come back changed, smaller, with sliced-off hair and silences they themselves don't understand. Our sons go south and east and west and come back sad, diminished, their dullness a pall on their faces. When they first return they sleep for days and then they forget they were ever away. We press them with snacks and six-packs as they disappear to bonfires at the beach and long hikes into the trees. They drive to the ends of roads and strike out in bands that camp in shadowed clearings for sacred rituals we remember from our youths.

Messages pass by word of mouth and we converge in the woods at night. Turntables and strobe lights appear among the sentinel trunks. We show up from all directions in the silver twilight that passes for summer darkness. Our bare arms gleam in the twilight. Sugary pills dissolve on our tongues and we disappear into each other and into flashes of light and into cold air that smells of spruce and frost. Our music connects our movements into one movement; our

faces pulse into sight and out of sight; the straight trees around us glow and fade until the morning.

. . .

We drive Subarus held together with duct tape and wire. We drive old sixty-four flatbed Fords, red Toyota trucks heavy with tools, blue Datsun trucks with mattresses in the back under the camper-tops. We fill our vehicles with kids and dogs and friends and blankets and firewood. When the engines go we sell them for two hundred dollars or give them to the body shop. The shop puts a new engine in them and sells them to new owners who drive them around town through the snow. We recognize them by the bungee cord that holds the gas cap on.

We hitchhike along the roads; strangers give us rides and we take them. The strangers who give us rides give us gifts: halibut fillets that drip with ice water, pressed by kind fishermen into our hands, a heavy flank of white meat caked with ice flakes to be baked in the oven with mayonnaise. We talk music with strangers; we talk travels to Prudhoe Bay, the Aleutians, Kodiak, the Interior, Whittier, the edge of town. Men lock their car doors and demand kisses we don't want to give; we say no to make them let us leave and they do.

We leave gifts at our friends' doors and they leave gifts at ours. Raspberries gathered on warm hillsides in August, fiddlehead ferns picked in the deep woods to fry in butter, salmon caught fresh with dipnets in the river. We slit the belly of the salmon, down its pale stomach, and open it wide as a woman's purse. Blue and purple innards coil inside, discrete and packaged. The flesh lines the flanks. We cut off a sliver of the red meat and place it in our mouths, translucent and glittering. It dissolves on our tongues with the taste of water.

. . .

Our husbands die young of accidents, heart attacks, and mistakes, leaving us in middle age in homesteads reached only by water. We take beautiful men half our ages, woodcutters, fishermen, handymen whose devotion lingers alongside

our loneliness for our husbands. We take them to the A-frames whose roofs our husbands raised with their own hands above the mossy ground in the spruce forest by the sea. We take them to the beds where we lay with our husbands. When we speak of our husbands, they circle us in their arms and lean us against their bare chests in the dark.

We make love in the summer in beach grasses, in tents in the woods, in cabin lofts, in the backs of cars and trucks parked at sea overlooks, in our beds high up near the eaves of houses, as the light pours in our windows at night. We make love when the light fades into so many hours of darkness that we curl in bed early, wrapping our bodies around one another in the quiet that covers the town. We conceive and if we're too young we have the children, and if we're too young we don't have the children.

This is where our children come from. This is where other people's children come from. We take the children to the playground where they mount wooden castles and shoot down slides in their snowsuits. We take them to the beach, where they run barelegged and swim in the sea of melted glacier ice. They shiver with glee in the wind, in the sun, in the water so cold it's almost frozen. We walk along the beach past others' children as they crouch at the edges of tide pools. We leave their shouts behind as we walk on into the distance.

• • •

In the summer dark circles appear under our eyes and we sleep very little. We lose focus and blink the graininess away from our sight with water. We shake our heads to clear them and lie down when the headaches come from exposure. We sleep for four hours a night, too lightly, as the brightness pours in our windows past the blinds. We come here for the sun, for the endless days. We walk about in the middle of the night, along the high bluffs above the sea, the gray brightness everywhere. Sometimes we jump off; sometimes someone pushes us.

In the winter we muffle ourselves in clothes made of wool, down, plastic, and animal skins. We shed our layers so our skin glows bare in the bars where we gather in the dark in the small hours. We talk politics, trade tips for tax refunds, advertise

that no one can find us in our homes without street addresses. We talk to others about what happened to us: our unusual intelligence, our preternatural strength and endurance, our recruitment by the military, how they replaced our bones with metal to make us even stronger, invincible in battle. How we escaped here.

We came here and left you far behind, all our friends and our families, all the people we had known who had known us in our youths. We talk to you on the telephone. You call us in the middle of winter; your voice cracks at our distance, at how we've made ourselves unreachable. We call you when we don't know what else to do, when our boss can't remember us any longer, when his hands shake so badly while holding a pencil that we write for him. You say to quit. You worry from afar. You never come visit.

• • •

We come to be as bohemian as we can be. We go on unemployment. We do odd jobs for the money to travel in winter. We squat in tents on the beach. We squat in youth hostels. We live in converted school buses, Airstream trailers, yurts we made with our own hands out of trees from our own property. We heat with propane, coal, and wood we chop in the yard in the early morning. We spend our cash on food and booze and heat and cigarettes. We choose this when we're young and when we're old it becomes habit.

We cover ourselves in patchouli and gather around campfires until smoke saturates our hair and sweaters. One of us breaks out a guitar and we sing folk songs by aging revolutionaries until three or four. Someone passes out Pabst Blue Ribbon and someone else passes the gold stuff that burns as we drink. Someone passes a bowl and we smoke until we smell of patchouli and burnt wood and weed. We make burritos with wood-fired jerk chicken, rice, black beans, cilantro, lime, and chipotle peppers. We eat the burritos around the fire. We all smile and nod at each other.

We are not all of us. Some of us have been here longer. Some of us have carved out palaces in the wilderness with decks the size of tennis courts overlooking rocky coves where miniature spruce grow in bonsai topiaries. Some of us go clamming

on the beach, digging in the sand as the clams burrow deeper, out of our reach. Some of us bear feasts of king crab to share, more precious per square inch than any other seafood, ambrosial meat wrapped in pink-white shell. Some of us believe we are going to heaven, to hell, to the worms.

• • •

This place takes our lives and gives them back. Our chainsaws slip and cut into our legs. Our feet catch in the chains of the crab pots and pull us down to the sea. Snowstorms blind us until our rescuers find us frozen in snow banks when the snow dissipates. Bears and bobcats maul us in the woods. Our snowmobiles flip and crush us beneath them. We fly over the fronts of our four-wheelers. Our horses throw us. Our cars collide on ice. Storms come up on the ocean and sink our ships; we survive only seconds in the sea.

Signs surround us here and we don't know what they mean. Flowers appear on our windshields in the early morning, bunches of multicolored wildflowers held to the glass by the windshield blades, whose givers we never discover. Love letters appear in the snow, scratched in the sand, etched in the bark of trees. Messages appear in our pockets on paper, on our phones in others' voices, inside our heads when God speaks so only we can hear. Frost filaments flicker in the windows, light filaments in the sky, bright filaments in the tide pools, on our skin, across our eyes.

Everything is bigger here: the ground, the sky, ourselves, our lives. We find ourselves dwindling around us. We see ourselves grow smaller under mountains seen from everywhere, clouds circling in weather designs at their tips. We see others who grow smaller too, relieved for their tiny selves to dissolve into magnificence. Everything is magnified by the thrum of polar magnetism, by the lines of northern latitudes that cross the globe below our feet with forces yoked to the solar system. Everything is magnified except for us, who grow smaller and part of it all as the world expands around us.

• • •

We come to find something and we don't know what it is. We go into the woods to walk alone on pathways walked by bears; we press on through columns of spruce that tower so high we become small. We cross ice rivers with water the color of milk, rapids so strong we would live for split seconds if we slipped from our slick footbridges. We follow the tributary upstream. The salmon returned this way and reproduced. Now their bodies drape over tree roots at the stream edge. Their bodies cover the bases of trees where they disappear into loam.

We walk across the river. Their bodies part around our feet. Their bodies become the stream all around us, thousands of bodies, inches apart, mottled black and gray and white with decay; they hover in droves just under the surface. Their bodies cover our feet as our boots touch down on the streambed. We can't see our feet for the layer of still salmon that lingers close and near dead around us. We reach the other side, step on the mud bank and pull ourselves out of the river. Salmon bodies gleam away from the water, littered in the brush.

We hear a sound in the brush. Bears appear from all sides, drawn by the smell of fish that rises from the stream, from the banks of the stream, from the whole region of the stream that runs to the sea. We rush back along the stream to the sea, to the water's edge. We look out to sea. A seal looks back. We sit on a log and look at the seal. It comes closer. Another appears, and another. Their heads bob in the bright water. We regard one another. The world appears around us. We disappear into it.

Lucie Brock-Broido

The Matador

The last I saw of him was on the final neurasthenic afternoon of his harmonica
When he lost his hair and said I did this to him with my grief,

As the pink halo of a monk's scalp began to shine up through his own.
My grief can cause male pattern baldness in a man!

This was his voyage, remember now, not mine.

In my own life's journey, I once found him, many laters, bewitched

Into a tiny iron matador (he wore a hat) on the folding table at a yard sale
In a small New England town, holding out

His midge of scarf— ridiculous and red,

Now overwrought with aching from the wind in Spain.

When was it that you say I loved?

Little Industry of Ghosts

How is it you can explain their living here with me, leaning
On their cellos, doleful and plenty.

In my single-person tax-bracket of one alive, there are more
Living here with me not alive

Than are. You are a good
Dog now. Rising, supposing, loom large for me.

Turn down all the rows of white sheets in the rows
Of white cots for your wounded

To settle in. Look, the boy with a cane walks

Three-legged down our Avenue, three-quarters
Of a cur, but he's as gifted limping as the elegy you wrote

For me and I am still alive! It was a poem clear, here
In hindsight, as flounder flesh unwrapped from

Its bed of newspaper, unspoiled. Would that you come home
Now, healed and appalled.

It could have been reparable; we would have gathered
Like a din of two nurses at the metal rails of vigil

At your impossible bed. Would that we, erstwhile, will.
Would that our Liam were living still.

Okay, Cupid

I admire you most, boldly
drawn boy in Bronzino's
Venus. Oil on wood. Where

you, Cupid, cup
your mother's breast & bend
your pale, putto's mouth to hers. How

disturbed they were
in Florence by your bit
of incest, as if

by your hips, by your thrust buttocks, Love
itself had been abandoned. Man
& god. Not

the doe-eyed child valentines
swoon to, you
know best the pleasure of the packed

fist, the full,
wrist-deep dark. Drive
hard, the heart is planted deep. Draw

your bent bow. So
do I love, under-
stand. Self-

summary— what

I did in the locked stall of the Chevron station made me
sick. Still,

what I want is

not Botticelli. Instead,
that any moment might,

like Christ— or like

you, Cupid— become,
suddenly, flesh. The fitness

center. The city

bus, or bakery. Make
the long loaves rise. I

am looking for— the throat hold, the hips
pinned to the mattress, & after

I have exhausted the present tense to let

my body fall apart

from some other's sucking
air. There

is a time for tenderness, yet

there is also the bite mark's mouth. The maimed
skin. Six

things I could never do without— how
many holes does a body have? Here,

Cupid, you came

to earth girdled in shame. You showed
the rest of us love
is plural. Pull

to your ear the arrow's
fletcher's. Message
me if—

Grasshoppers Need Peaches

I look at you and I hear Te Deum.

Quidquid agas, prudenter agas, et respice finem.

Hegemony oppresses.

I hear the walking and the shifting of steps.

Lines are incestuous, rough-hewn.

The spirit with apples.

The spirit with apples.

Hard heels.

Dark glasses dangle in the hand.

The service is the service with bombs.

The damp drilled eye fields in the potato,

I'm flooded by alchemical color which uses up my body.

There're nothing to lean on.

There are no armrests.

I touch you.

You run.

The scent.

The scent.

Alan Heathcock

Shelter

The fresh air turbine slowly spun, scraps of pale dawn light flashing through the blades and trickling down into the storm shelter. Mazzy Ottestad pulled the covers to her little sister's chin. She brushed the hair from Ava Lynn's face, watched the girl's eyes flit beneath their lids. Then Ava Lynn shifted and Mazzy carefully rolled off the bunk. Sleep had been elusive since Mazzy had been called home from the Army, just after the last storm, but night after night she lay beside her sister because the girl said she couldn't sleep without her there.

Another storm was coming. Bigger than the last. Mazzy eyed the shelter stock, one wall lined with canned goods, canisters of oxygen, lanterns and fuel, bucket filters to purify water, fifty-pound sacks of rice in water-tight tubs. She'd taken all precautions, but knew that meant nothing to a storm, and listening to the turbine's whir she imagined the shelter's roof ripped from it rivets and a great tentacle of wind stealing them off into the sky.

Mazzy closed her eyes. To still herself, she recalled a time last winter when she was home on leave, her mother still alive. There'd been a smaller storm, and they'd retreated from the house to the shelter. It'd been cold in that iron box in the ground, but the three of them snuggled on the same bunk, beneath a heft of quilts, and it was as if Mazzy was a child again, there in her mother's arms.

"You hungry?" her mother had asked.

"No, ma'am," Mazzy said.

"You warm?"

"Yes."

"You know that I love you?"

Mazzy remembered resting her cheek against her mother's shoulder, and her mother's fingers, like the hand of a blind woman, stroking her face. Now her mother was gone, killed in the last storm, the military approving Mazzy's discharge because her father couldn't be found and Ava Lynn had no one else to look after her.

Mazzy climbed the shelter ladder, hefted open the hatch, squinted as she stepped up onto the sundrenched land. Down the hill lay the battered stable. Farther down yet sat the house, morning's blush gleaming off its metal roof. It'd been a while since they'd slept there. Anymore, they barely ever went inside. Yet there it stood, having weathered so much.

Beyond the house stretched a long rocky hillside leveling on down to the wide river, sunlight glittering and the water like a belt of fire across the land. Mazzy told herself to remember this sight, as someday all of it would be gone and she'd need to tell others about open land and sunshine as if they were images stolen from a storybook.

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They drove the buckled road toward town. To the north rose black rock steps, sheer walls that fell into the river's canyon. To the south the sage flats extended to a horizon of sepia clouds. White light flashed in their folds. After the last storm, fish had littered the land. Chinook in the sage. Steelhead on hilltops. Sturgeon like logs in the road. Hordes of flies. So many flies.

Mazzy turned onto the gravel drive that led to the school. Where once had been a tamarack windbreak now lay a row of root craters and a massive berm of broken limbs. The school itself was being rebuilt, the building covered in sheer plastic that moved in the wind and made the structure seem alive.

The parking lot was flanked with trailers brought in as classrooms. Mazzy parked with the parents. In the next car, Olen Herzfeld motioned for Mazzy to roll down her window. Olen, a rotund woman who always looked as if she'd just been slapped, said, "You staying here with Ava Lynn, right? I don't trust them clouds."

"Gotta go to work," Mazzy said. She studied the sky to make the woman feel heard. "Supposed to hold till later."

"Says the weatherman," Olen huffed.

Ava Lynn moved to open the door, and Mazzy grabbed her sister's sleeve. Mazzy's appearance favored her father, but this girl was molded eyes, smile, and

spirit from their mother. Mazzy leaned and kissed Ava Lynn's hair. "Call if you need me."

Ava Lynn searched Mazzy's face. "Need you?" she said, and grinned. "Storm don't scare me none."

Mazzy smiled back but knew the truth, for she'd held her sister night after night. She loved Ava Lynn more than anything alive or dead, loved her in a way that left her fragile. It took all her dwindling courage to fight the urge to just drive them back to the shelter. But she let loose of Ava Lynn and the little girl was out the door, her pink coat darting between cars as she raced toward the trailers.

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Mazzy stocked the candy aisle, watching the minimart's owner, Randy, screw plywood over one of the store's windows. Two girls, the new check-girl, Kelsey, and her friend, leaned over the counter, laughing and watching some video on a phone. Kelsey wore pink pajama pants and fuzzy slippers.

Mazzy watched her and the other girl and knew they had no idea what was inside her. Things she'd seen in the Army during the last storm. Buildings felled by tsunami wash, concrete crumbled like crackers. A lone elephant stranded on a hilltop. Ten families adrift on a coal barge, mind-broke men, naked children nursing at the breasts of their grim ancient mothers. Add her own mother's death on top of it all. Things she'd seen and felt, things in her mind yet suffering.

The vet counselor had warned it'd be rough, said to go easy on herself, on others. They've lived in a different world, he'd told Mazzy. You have to understand that you know worlds they don't. You can't make them understand what they haven't lived.

Kelsey held the phone high as a song played, the girls dancing, giggling. *Oblivious*. That was the word the counselor used. This was not a bad thing, he'd said. Nor was it good. But Mazzy understood more than anything *oblivious* was freedom. Freedom was wearing pajamas and slippers at work, dancing while a storm crept toward them, while wars were being fought, while who knows what menace lay in ambush just beyond their sight.

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Mazzy heard the motorcycle before she saw it. Then he was there, pulling to the pumps like so many others did throughout the day. The rider wore a leather jacket embroidered with a bright golden eye rimmed with red and purple flames. Mazzy's pulse sprang. She knew that jacket. Knew that wild burning eye.

She dropped her inventory pad, hurried to the window. Could it be him? Mazzy tried to glimpse the rider's face, and then saw his long graying beard and crooked mouth. It was him. Her father. She stumbled two steps backwards before turning and pushing past Kelsey to stand out of sight behind the lottery machine.

"You all right?" Kelsey asked her.

Mazzy dared to peek out the window. Her father stared up at the sky and stretched his back while the bike's tank filled.

"Mazzy?" Kelsey said. The girl's eyes were tender. She smiled with glossy lips.

Mazzy glanced again out the window. Her father flexed each hand, balling each into a fist before shaking out his fingers. Then he stood stock-still, his back to the store. His jacket's eye studied her. Blood throbbled behind Mazzy's eyes. She felt nauseous. Then her father replaced the nozzle back on the pump. He mounted his bike. The engine rumbled. He coasted through the lot and onto the road and sped away.

Mazzy peered out at the empty road. She took off her smock, laid it on the counter. She walked between the girls and through the store and pushed out the front door.

The air was warm and wet, the burnt sky spitting. Randy, a potbellied man in an orange vest, stood atop a stepladder, bracing the plywood to the window with his shoulder, hammer in hand. He said nothing as Mazzy crossed between the pumps to her car. Only as she drove away did she see Randy come off his ladder and begin to holler.

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Mazzy drove out to where the river met the ocean. Her mind was a mess. She had to get her mind right. The beach was rocky and strewn with garbage. Waves lapped the land, breaking heavy farther out. Mazzy sat atop a rock and stared out over the water, straining to see the weather beyond the bend of the earth.

Mazzy struggled to remember her mother's face. All she could recall was the sound of her mother's voice, the warmth of a hand against her cheek. They'd found her mother's car in a canyon seventy miles away. Her body was never found. While on a patrol boat in the Pacific, Mazzy had seen a vast school of silver fish, thousands of them, separate but moving as one. She imagined her mother out in the ocean, a queen on a throne, carried along by a vessel of silver fish.

Mazzy waded into the shallows. The sand and water enveloped her feet. A year ago, her father had been released from prison. Seven years he'd been incarcerated, his fourth stint overall. He'd called her mother because a storm was coming and he didn't have anywhere to go. This was the best Mazzy could figure. All she knew was her father had phoned fresh out of prison, her mother had driven north into the storm, and Ava Lynn had been left to herself in the shelter. A parole officer told Mazzy he'd passed along news of her mother's death to her father, and then her father had disappeared. That was ten months ago.

The counselor advised Mazzy not to let things get too big in her mind, not to dwell in the past or the future, not to live day by day, but moment by moment, alive in the simple truths of the now. He'd make Mazzy say aloud her mother's questions. *Are you hungry? Are you warm?* The *now*. Mazzy felt the frigid water biting her ankles. She covered her eyes and listened to the breaking waves.

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The motorcycle was parked by the stoop. Mazzy sat in her car, trying to see through the walls to glimpse her father inside the house. She left the car and walked to the door. She felt heavy, her body like a sack of sand, as she stepped inside. The blinds drawn, she let her eyes adjust to the room's scant light. Dust coated every surface, a pair of her mother's brogans still beside the door.

Mazzy listened for movement in the house. Ghost noises flooded her mind: midnight yelling, an argument over hay, over keeping the horse, breaking glass, Mother crying, screaming. Mazzy pinched the skin of her wrist, fortified herself in the now.

She moved deeper into the house, into the room she and Ava Lynn shared. Posters of horses on the wood paneled walls, a red metal bunk, clothes strewn across the floor. Mazzy checked the bathroom, toothpaste open on the counter, the toilet seat up. She paused at her mother's room, stared at the closed door. She swallowed hard, opened the door. Daylight bled through faded curtains. The bed was made, an impression in the covers where someone had sat.

Nobody was here.

Mazzy circled behind the house and scanned the hillside. The stable up the hill listed a bit, slapped by the last storm. Mazzy trudged up the hillside and into the stable. They kept a goat and an old paint mare named Rilla. The horse snorted in her stall. Mazzy stepped to the gate and patted Rilla's neck. Through the stable's rear door, Mazzy could see up the hill, see the storm shelter's hatch thrown wide.

Mazzy pressed her forehead against the horse's neck. She tried to breathe, tried to steady her shaking hands, to still what trembled inside her. She stepped from the stall to the work-block, picked up a smithy mallet and a crooked gate pin.

She set the pin on the block, pounded it once. The sound made Rilla shuffle and snort. Mazzy hit the pin again and again, the mallet heavy, the strikes sharp. Between each strike, she glanced out toward the shelter, wanting her father to emerge. She turned the pin, pounded it straight. Mazzy set the mallet on the block. Her heart thudding all the more, she hollered out to her father.

Behind the stable the hill grass tossed and swirled. The wind reeked of ozone. She stalked up to the shelter, the lay of grass marked only by the metal hatch and the turbine's vent pipe.

Mazzy peered down through the hatch. The day's light leaked into the underground room. Again she called to her father.

"Mazzy?" a hoarse voice replied.

Moments later a man stood with one hand on the ladder, rubbing his eyes as if he'd just awakened. The man beckoned Mazzy with a hand. "Come on down here," he said, then slunk away into the darkness.

Mazzy did as told and descended the ladder. Her father sat on the bunk. Back against the wall, feet dangling, he lit a cigarette, its ash glowing bright. He blew smoke toward the roof vent.

"Don't smoke in here," Mazzy said.

The cherry brightened once more, then her father snuffed the cigarette on his boot heel.

"I come in peace," he said.

Mazzy didn't know what to say and just watched the man back in the shadows. Her father seemed smaller, thinner. He wore a blue bandana on his head, his beard hung nearly to his belt.

Her father picked up Ava Lynn's stuffed toy, a little green alien with three googly eyes. "Take me to your leader," he said, and bellowed that laugh folks always found so charming.

"Why you here?" Mazzy asked.

"To see my kids."

"To see our shelter, you mean?"

He grinned. "I bought this land, you know. Bought it long before you were a want or worry."

Mazzy tapped two fingers to her chest. "I pay the bills. Land's mine, legal deed and all. We can ask the sheriff about it."

Her father chuckled sadly. "You ain't changed a bit."

"You don't know nothing about me."

Her father hopped down off the bunk. He stepped into the light, hand extended. "I come in peace."

Mazzy stared at her father's tattooed arm, a fanged ghoul, a flaming ram's skull, a bracelet of barbed wire encircling his wrist.

"Come on," her father urged, softly. "I come a long way to be here. I ain't here to mess with you. Just wanna see you, see how Ava Lynn's doing and all."

"She's fine," Mazzy said curtly.

Her father let his hand fall. He nodded and stepped to sit on a folding chair by the ladder. He leaned over his knees. "I know I don't deserve nothing from you," he said. "Nothing. Don't deserve kindness or understanding. I've been terrible, and I know it. Been a terrible father. I was gone so much and gave you a hard life and I don't know what to do about that now."

"You missed mama's funeral."

He nodded. "Missed mama's funeral," he said, like a lament. "That, too." He put his forehead in his hands, hummed what sounded like a church song. His back rose as he breathed deeply, then he sat upright. His eyes sparkled as he peered up at the daylight. "I couldn't face it," he said. "Just couldn't. I got the news and just rode up to the highest mountain I could find. Just started climbing. Was going to find someplace high and throw myself off. I know you've had it rough. But everything I've touched has gone to shit." He lay back his head, stared up through the hatch at the weltering sky. "I was just thinking about when I was a boy my daddy wanted me to clean out the dog pen. You probably remember all them dogs Pappy kept. Well, when I was little he had all these hounds he kept in this pen no bigger than this room. Twenty dogs in that little place. All the shit they made. Shit up to your laces. Well, he called for me to clean that pen and I hid in the house so he couldn't find me. Hid in the hamper like I could stay there forever. Well, Pappy found me and pulled me out by my hair and shooed all them dogs out of that pen and took up a handful of that shit and held it under my nose. 'It ain't no different than nothing,' he told me. 'You pick it up, wash your hands when you're through, and it's like you ain't never touched it at all.'" Mazzy's father held a hand, palm up, before him. "Told me that's how life is. How it'd always be. Made me pick up all that shit with my own hands." His fingers closed into a fist. "You'd think I'd of learned something from that, but it just made me wanna kill him. Wanted to kill that man more than anything in my life." Her father pounded his thigh with a fist. "No, no," he said. "I wanted to kill myself more. I wanted to kill myself up on the mountain more than anything. But God came over me. God saved me. I know you probably don't believe such a thing possible, but I've been saved, and I'm here for reasons right."

"No, you ain't," Mazzy said. "You're here because there's a storm coming and we got a shelter."

Her father's glare burned over her. He shut tight his eyes like he was trying to break a bad thought. When his eyes opened again they'd turned somber, pliant. "These folks come across me up on that mountain. I was out of my mind and didn't know who they was and I tried to fight 'em but I was worn from the climb and they carried me off. They was living out there, deep in them hills. Some kids, mostly young folk, a few as old as me." He blew out a long breath. "I want you to believe this

part. I don't know how to make you believe, but it's important to me that you see it's true. Because I fell in by grace, you see. God's grace. Them folks took me in, and they didn't ask nothing about me, nothing about what I done. They must of known, too, my flesh all inked up from prison." He tipped his head, lifted his beard. A tattoo of a single wide eye covered the entirety of his neck and throat. A giant seeing eye. He lowered his beard, peered up at Mazzy. "They knew but didn't ask and that was the only time in my whole life I felt forgiven. To know someone for what they is and still take 'em in. That's a God kind of power, and they had it, and they took me in and put me to work." He smiled a little. "Them folks saved me and I ain't the same no more."

"They know you got two kids struggling to get by? They know you were gone in prison your kid's whole life? That you have a little girl who's hardly ever seen you? They know your wife was killed coming to find you, leaving your kids all to themselves?" Mazzy's chin quavered. "What do they know? Tell me what they know."

Her father nodded. "They know it all."

"You told them?"

"*They know*," her father shouted.

Mazzy turned toward the ladder, set a hand on a rung. "They don't know nothing about me. Don't know about Ava Lynn."

"I come in peace," her father said, his voice withering. "I saw the storm coming and wanted to come down here and see about you all. That's what they know. That I just wanted to see to my kids. That's why I come down on this day before the end of it all."

Mazzy leaned against the ladder. She studied her father's red, wrinkled face, his nose pocked and swollen. "Ava's at school," she said. "I should be at work, but I'm not. I had to quit the Army because Ava Lynn didn't have nobody."

Her father lowered his head. "You shouldn't of been out there fighting wars anyway. God don't want no wars."

"What you know about what God wants?"

"I've seen him," he said, stroking his beard. "Seen him close as you are to me. I've seen the devil, too. Now why don't we stop all this and go and get your sister from school and let me earn myself back to you." He brought together his hands, as if to pray. "That's all I ask. Let me earn myself back a little."

Mazzy felt suddenly exhausted, as if she'd humped a day in the desert carrying a fifty-pound pack. She knew he wouldn't go easily. How could she make him go? Mazzy gazed up at the churning sky, almost too tired to even nod. She didn't look back, but told her father to come on as she scaled the ladder to the land.

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They entered the classroom trailer. The rows of little faces turned, and Ava Lynn popped from her desk and ran into her father's arms. Mazzy's father carried Ava Lynn on his back through the school parking lot. They sat together in the back seat, Ava Lynn cuddled into her father. Her father said he wanted to get Ava Lynn a present, and Ava Lynn begged Mazzy to take them to Zoo Mercantile, a store in town, and though it bothered Mazzy she found she couldn't argue.

Once there, they poked around in the shop, her father and Ava Lynn laughing at t-shirts with crude sayings: *Save a Tree, Eat a Beaver*; *Old Enough to Know Better, Young Enough to Do It Again*. Ava Lynn asked her father to buy her a pair of earrings that were miniature bottles of suntan lotion. Her father bought the earrings, as well as a pair of purple cat-eye sunglasses for Ava Lynn. She wore the glasses and pretended to be on a red carpet, blowing kisses to fans.

Mazzy waited by the door, watching a young man with a black ball cap and gauged ears mount metal plating over the front windows.

"Where we gonna eat?" Ava Lynn asked, sassy, sunglasses low on her nose, hands on her cocked hips.

"Your call, sister," their father said.

"Harvey's."

Father whistled. "Fan-cy," he said. "Harvey's it is."

Mazzy stepped over and plucked the sunglasses off Ava Lynn's face. "It ain't sunny out," she said. "And we can't afford Harvey's."

Her father smiled, gently took the glasses from Mazzy and gave them back to Ava Lynn. "Ain't for the sun," he said to Mazzy. "It's for the flashbulbs." He held Ava Lynn's elbow. "Harvey's is my treat," he declared, and the two left off hand in hand.

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Mazzy sat in a booth in Harvey's, a buffet-style restaurant with white tablecloths and decorated floor to roof with old-timey knick-knacks. Mazzy's father stood in the far corner, talking on his phone. She watched him, wondering who was on the other end of the conversation. Her father stroked his beard, then patted the air with one hand, worry in his stance. Ava Lynn bounded back to the table with ice cream and three types of cake on her plate.

"You'll get a stomach ache," Mazzy scolded.

"I'm only gonna take a bite of each," Ava Lynn chirped. "Then I'll finish the one I like best."

"That's wasteful."

Ava slid on her sunglasses. "Daddy said I could."

Her father walked back over, sat down heavily and leaned his big elbow on the table, his chin propped on his hand. "This place is just like I remember." His eyes scanned the room. "Came here a few times with your mama."

"I love it," Ava said, mouth full of cake.

Her father reached across the table and pushed Ava Lynn's sunglasses up on her nose. "You're the love of my life, you know?"

Ava Lynn smiled, scooped ice cream into her mouth.

Mazzy couldn't understand his motives. She found she could no longer look at her father. She rose and walked to the dessert bar. All but one window in the restaurant had already been boarded over. The storms so regular now, less predictable, folks around here had gotten skilled at preparations. When she was a girl, all of town would've been closed and vacant days before a storm. Now they're eating prime rib and pie as if it were just any other night.

Through the one window she watched dust roil over the street, bits of earth clicking against the glass. The air turned opaque. Mazzy couldn't see the buildings just across the road. The wind howled off the restaurant. Plates rattled on the tables. Mazzy glanced back at her father. He calmed Ava Lynn, patting her arm, and gifted the girl a look of care Mazzy had never in her whole life received.

Mazzy felt she might weep. She turned to the wall and pretended to read an old cigar advertisement. She breathed and told herself it was just a storm, like so many others she'd weathered and would again. Mazzy closed her eyes, gathered

herself. Then she grabbed up a slice of pineapple pie. She wasn't hungry, but told herself Ava Lynn would be less afraid if she saw her eating. As quickly as it had come the guster passed, the dust already settling over the street, the movie theater's marquee shining brightly across the way.

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Her father told Ava Lynn to pick a movie for them to see. Any movie she wanted. When they left Harvey's, the road was a river of cattle. Four wide across, nose to tail, cattle lumbered up the road. Mazzy couldn't see the herd's end. She stood beside her little sister, her father holding Ava Lynn's hand. Dogs ran along with the cattle. The parade carried lowing and the noise of hooves on pavement.

Down a ways a man rode on horseback. Mazzy saw him sit up in the saddle and call out, only to realize her father had hoisted Ava Lynn onto his shoulders and was stepping into the cattle. The man was young and tanned, wore a ball cap instead of a cowboy hat. He didn't smile, and hollered, "You trying to get 'em running?"

He rode up and pulled the reins and the horse took one high step then edged into the road. Like a train halted, the cattle stopped.

"Ain't got time for this," the boy shouted.

Mazzy's father waved the boy off and sauntered across in a mocking way, Ava laughing and hugging his neck.

"Where you headed?" Mazzy called up to the boy, just to say anything to him, to smooth things over.

"High ground," he spat, like it was a stupid question.

Then Mazzy hurried through the gap of cattle to catch her father and sister. Once across, she turned to thank the boy, but he was already back downhill, several head peeled out of rank and wandering the walkways. Other folks had come out of the shops now, everyone watching the herd.

The air had taken a chill. Snow fell, little flurries whirling in the June air. The seasons meant nothing anymore. Nothing made sense. The clouds broke and a haft of sunlight fanned over the scene, the snow drifting like motes of fire, gray hides now tinted red. All the cattle took to lowing. Then the sun was gone again

and Ava Lynn yelled her name from in front of the theater, where she and their father now stood with a woman and a boy.

Mazzy approached the group. Ava Lynn stared at the woman, who was plain but pretty, her hair in an old-fashioned bun.

"And this is Mazzy," her father said to the woman.

The woman reached out a hand and Mazzy shook it. "Nice to meet you," the woman said.

"This is Naomi," her father said, avoiding Mazzy's eyes. "She's my wife now. And this is Gerald."

The boy was nearly as tall as Mazzy, but half her weight, pimples along his jaw and a dirty wisp of a mustache. She glanced at her father, trying to understand.

"We're family now," her father declared. "That's how it is."

The woman smiled down on Ava Lynn. "Your hair is so beautiful," she said, and stroked Ava Lynn's head. "I can braid it for you later if you'd like."

Ava Lynn's eyes smiled.

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The theater was old and shabby, the heavy fabric covering the walls faded and peeling. They sat in the last row, the rest of the seats empty but for a man in the front row who seemed to be asleep. The movie Ava Lynn picked was a horror film, *Uka, Lord of Ice*.

Mazzy sat at the end of the row, beside Gerald, Ava Lynn between her father and this new woman, a huge bucket of popcorn in Ava Lynn's lap. Mazzy fought the urge to study them, to see who these people were. She fought the urge to curl up in a ball and never move again.

There were no previews. The lights dropped and the film began. The opening showed a man on a slab of stone in an ice cave. Sun blazed through the ice. The cave dripped with melt. There was a great cracking, an earthquake, one half of the frozen land crashing into the sea, hurling tremendous waves against the screen. Mazzy pressed against her chair, looked away. Then the film went quiet, and Mazzy peeked to see a man's enormous face on the screen, a face she'd seen many times before as the actor had been a pop star she used to love.

Now he was a monster, ice frosting his cheeks. His eyes sprang open, stark in their sockets, and Mazzy's heart leapt. She glanced down the row. Naomi held her chin against her shoulder, eyes cast downward. Gerald sat stiff beside her, hands in his lap. At the far end her father propped his feet on the seat in front of him, while Ava Lynn leaned against his shoulder, munching her popcorn.

Mazzy wished her mind didn't churn so with worry. She thought of going to the movies with her mother, something they did often when she was young. They'd go to the matinee, then sneak into another theater after that. Some days they left after the last film, having watched four movies. Every time they snuck into another movie she felt troubled, and Mama would kiss her head and tell her that with all the pain in the world nobody'd much mind them passing a day in the theater. Only once she was older did Mazzy understand their days in the theater were all to avoid being home with her father.

They'd only ever left one movie before it was over. She couldn't recall the name of the film, but remembered a boy had drowned in a swimming pool while his mother talked on the phone. Mazzy's mother had cried, and then snatched Mazzy's hand, and they scrambled up the aisle and straight out into the daylight. Mazzy was very young, maybe only six or seven, but she remembered Mama sitting on the street curb, wiping her eyes and saying, "What kind of mother would let a child swim alone? What kind of mother is that?"

On screen, the iceman wandered a coastal prairie, coming upon a little house with a fence and barn. The iceman hulked into the barn to find a horse in a stall. The horse nervously shifted, banged against the stall boards. The iceman licked his feral lips, showing his fanged teeth, then rushed the animal. Mazzy glanced sideways to see Ava Lynn giggle. Then Naomi turned her desperate eyes onto Mazzy, movie light flickering on her face. Naomi said nothing, but held Mazzy's gaze for a long moment before turning back to the film.

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The iceman went on a string of killings, attacking animals, an old man, a blonde in a convertible, only to be befriended by an orphaned deaf girl. The deaf girl and the iceman sat at a table in a boathouse, a huge bowl of oatmeal on the table. The girl

heaped brown sugar on the oats. Pantomimed for the iceman to eat. He tilted his head like a confused dog, but lowered his face and tasted the oats. His lips smacked happily together. He pushed his bearded face into the bowl like a dog at his dish.

Mazzy thought of a day in the Army when they'd been looking for terrorists allegedly hiding in a village on the edge of a salt flat. She'd brought a white-bearded man out into the crumbling road. She held a gun on the man and made a translator tell him to take off his shoes. The man wore raggedy pants and a stained t-shirt. He'd looked frightened, pulled off his old velcro-strapped sneakers. Mazzy told the translator to say she was going to keep the shoes, then Mazzy walked off and once out of sight hid the shoes under a pile of stones.

Why did I do that? she wondered. Why am I this way? She glanced down the row at her father and considered how much of her was him. The counselor told her to not wish to be someone else or to have different thoughts or different feelings. He'd said to think of herself as a tree. "You can ask a tree to bloom in winter, but it doesn't, so you don't," he'd told her.

Mazzy wasn't sure what to make of that. Maybe all trees would soon bloom in winter. Maybe winter wouldn't happen anymore. There were parts of the world where trees never fell out of bloom. She remembered hiking an island jungle so thick you couldn't move without hacking a path.

Sirens sounded. Mazzy sat stiff, confused, watching the deaf girl and the iceman laugh, oats down the iceman's chin and neck. They laughed in the boat-house, not reacting to the siren's wail. Then Gerald was standing, pushing into her legs, and Mazzy realized the sirens weren't in the movie at all.

The storm was here.

Mazzy stepped into the aisle, waited to make sure Ava Lynn was coming, too. Gerald passed her, then Naomi. Once in the aisle, her father lifted Ava Lynn and carried her as if she were a baby. They filed into the lobby, the emergency lights flashing above the exits. Two young men waved them out, holding sheets of metal to be anchored over the doors.

Outside, the air felt charged. The wind stank of solder. Sirens blared from every roof of every building. Folks scrambled out of Harvey's across the street. Workers frantically screwed plywood over the one uncovered window.

They paused on the walkway long enough for her father to yell to Mazzy, "We'll meet you at the house."

As the four of them pushed away up the street, the future struck Mazzy in a flash. She could see them driving off, see them taking Ava Lynn and leaving. They'd be in the shelter and wouldn't let her in, and she took off running up the street, the wind pushing her along. She grabbed Gerald by the back of his shirt.

The boy whirled around. They all turned.

"I need him with me," Mazzy yelled over the sirens and the wind. "To help me see the road."

Her father waved a hand, hollered, "Take him."

Naomi lunged to grab her son's arm, but Mazzy's father, still carrying Ava Lynn in his one arm, shoved Naomi ahead, and they hastened away as the first blast of icy rain struck like a gale of pins.

• • •

Sleet rioted over the car and Mazzy struggled to glimpse reflectors marking the road's shoulder. They crept along the highway, Gerald in the passenger seat, not saying a word, waves of rain smothering the windshield, pushing the car from side to side. Then Mazzy heard a whimpering, and glanced at the boy. His body rocked as he sobbed. Mazzy stared into the storm, listening to the boy. She reached across and held Gerald's wrist.

"We'll be all right," Mazzy said. "I been in worse," she added, though that was a lie. "Can you help me see? Look out there for the reflectors on the side. Call them out as you see them."

The boy shook his head. "I seen elk leaping off. Just yesterday. Up on the mountain. Elk just running off a ledge and falling. Falling and falling. I seen it. I *did*." The boy quietly moaned. "He says we'll be all right," Gerald cried. "He says to be brave, but he didn't see them elk. He didn't..." The boy's head lolled. He yanked his arm from Mazzy's grip. "He was nice at first."

Gerald sat forward, wiped his nose. The boy watched rain lash the windshield and didn't speak another word.

• • •

It took near an hour to get to the house. Mazzy pointed up to the shelter's vent pipe, told the boy to run. Gerald pushed out of the car. The wind was against her and Mazzy had to use all her weight to open her door.

The pewter sky reeled, dropped a metallic sheen over everything. They raced up the hill. Passing the stable, Mazzy yelled that she had to untie the animals. If the boy heard her, he didn't turn. He ran headlong toward the shelter.

Mazzy ducked into the stable. Rilla neighed in her stall. The goat bleated unceasing. Water dripping down her face, Mazzy stared uphill to the shelter. She watched Gerald struggle to lift the hatch, saw light emerge from the ground. She thought of all the preparations she'd taken, of all she'd done to save them, the calculations of rations for two. Now it'd all go to hell.

Mazzy scampered back out into the rain, gritting her teeth, pumping her arms, willing her legs to speed. She wiped rain from her face and grabbed the hatch before Gerald could get it closed.

Gerald barely looked up, skittered down the ladder and disappeared into the shelter.

"Daddy," Mazzy screamed down into the hole. "*Daddy*," she howled, lungs bucking.

Her father appeared at the bottom of the ladder.

"I need your help," Mazzy called. "In the stable. I need your help with the animals."

Her father peered up at Mazzy, contemplating, unsure. He turned back into the shelter. Mazzy worried she'd have to go down after him. She'd get him if needed. She would. Then her father was there again, climbing the ladder.

Mazzy hurried down into the stable, her father at her back. Her stomach churned. Bile rose in her throat. Rilla reared against her stall gate, the goat bleating like something strangled. Her father pressed into the stall. Mazzy shrank away. She held herself up against the smithy block, watched the goat dart out from the pen, frenzied in the darkness. Her father led the horse out, but Rilla wouldn't leave into the rain. He screamed at the horse, grabbed a bridle and whipped her hind with the leather strap. Rilla broke into a wild gallop, bolted into the storm and was gone.

Mazzy eyed the mallet on the block, then took hold of its handle. Her whole body convulsed as she began to weep. Her father stood there before her, leather strap in hand, his beard wet and dripping, his wet jacket clinging to his bulk.

"You can't stay here," Mazzy managed to shout, without looking at him. "You gotta go. You can't stay." She held the smithy mallet at her side. "You ain't never been no good to us," she yelled, gripping tight the mallet. "You gotta go. You just get on out of here."

"No, no," he hollered. "We're family. We gotta look out for one another."

"You gotta go," she shouted.

"No," he said, stepping closer. "It'll be okay. We'll look out for one another."

Mazzy shook her head. "Go," she screamed, clutching the mallet.

His hand touched her shoulder. He said nothing. She glanced up to see his wet face, his tender eyes drawing her in. He moved as if to embrace her, and she felt her arm lift and the weight of the mallet strike her father's skull.

He staggered backwards. Stunned and blinking. He reached up a hand and blood came off on his fingers. Blood purled from a wound above his temple. His bloody hand shook. He made a quiet yelping sound, like a pup wanting indoors.

Her father seemed to shrivel, his shoulders slacked, his chin dropped to his chest. He tenderly peeled the wet bandana off his bleeding head. Bald beneath, the skin was furrowed with age, tattoos of wings spread over each side of his skull. "All our broken dreams," he cried, blood spilling down his cheek, darkening his beard. He backed against the horse stable, slid to slump in the dirt.

"All the cruelty," he said. "All the fear." With both hands, he clutched his head. "Ain't no salvation. Ain't nothing out there. Them people in the hills kicked us out and I had to sneak off in the night. We had to sneak off and I'm just so tired. It's just worn me out and I'm just so tired of being afraid." He wiped his face on his arm, tears and blood coating his wrist. "That's all. That's all. That's all..."

The gale shrieked through the stable walls. Mazzy watched the roof list and lean. She'd never seen her father cry and the last untainted part of her wanted to embrace him and tell him that she, too, was afraid, that she was terrified every day and understood the way he felt, and that she'd done terrible things, so many terrible things. The wind howled. Mazzy closed her eyes and she felt the mallet

drop from her fist, felt her hair whipping her brow.

Abruptly she was jerked backward off her feet, a leather bridle around her throat. Her father's knees drove into her spine. She felt the whole of her father's weight as the strap drew tighter. Mazzy couldn't breathe, couldn't get her hands inside the strap. She flailed and rolled, working her heels into the dirt, trying to shift the balance.

Slantwise rain fell in the gloam. Ava Lynn was there, the girl in her pink jacket there in the doorway. Naomi was there, too, and Mazzy gagged, unable to call to them. She reached out, stretching her fingers to their length, the strap crushing her windpipe. Then there was only rain. Rain and wind and a sky of hurtling stars. Mazzy gasped, her mouth wide in a silent scream. Her eyes fluttered and the world flickered out.

• • •

"It's okay." A hand caressed Mazzy's brow. "It's okay." It was Ava Lynn. The girl knelt above Mazzy, her face lost in shadow. "Come on now," Ava Lynn said, tugging at Mazzy's arm. "We got to get to the shelter."

Mazzy held her throat. Each breath was like swallowing fire. She took a knee to stand. In the dim light, she saw her father there on the ground, his body like it had no bones, his head in Naomi's lap.

Upon seeing Mazzy, Naomi seemed to realize she was clutching the smithy mallet and flung it into the darkness. She pushed Mazzy's father off of her and stood and grabbed Mazzy in a tight embrace. Mazzy hugged her back. Ava Lynn joined them, the three women drawn fiercely together, a circle of muscle and pain.

Lightning flashed. A detonation of thunder quaked the land. The women flinched apart. Mazzy glanced again at her father, prone and still, his face in the dirt.

A hand clutched her wrist. "*Leave him,*" Naomi shouted. "*Let the storm take him.*" The woman's eyes pleaded with Mazzy.

Ava Lynn took Mazzy's free hand. "*Come on,*" she hollered.

Side by side, the women dashed out of the stable. The ochre sky spun, the squall raging. They ran, Mazzy holding her throat. She saw the mare high up

on the hillside, circling and wheeling, chased by things not visible. Ava Lynn yanked Mazzy forward with surprising force. Then they were at the shelter. Naomi shouldered up the hatch. Ava Lynn pushed Mazzy forward, and Mazzy descended the ladder.

Above her came Ava Lynn, then Naomi closed the hatch and the wind went hushed. Stepping into the lantern-lit room, Mazzy heard sobbing. In one corner, Gerald sat beneath a wool blanket. Naomi rushed past Mazzy and took the boy into her arms.

"It's all right now," Naomi said, kissing the boy's head. "We're going to be fine now."

Ava Lynn put a blanket around Mazzy and led her to sit on the bunk. "You're okay now," Ava Lynn said boldly, her face directly in front of Mazzy's.

Her father was gone and a part of Mazzy was gone, too. The scared little girl was gone, the ashamed little girl, the loving and hopeful girl. It felt like a kind of death. But she didn't cry. Ava Lynn grabbed a towel and ruffled it over Mazzy's hair. She made Mazzy lie down. Ava Lynn sat on the bunk there beside her.

"Are you hungry?" Ava Lynn asked, and set her palm to Mazzy's cheek.

Mazzy peered into her sister's sweet face.

"Are you warm?"

Mazzy closed her eyes.

Typhoon Poem (Two)

The teacher can't hear the children
over all this monsoon racket,
all the zillion spoons whacking
the rusty roofs, all the wicked tin streams
flipping full-grown bucks off their hooves.
Everywhere there used to be a river,
there's a bigger river now. Every hard face
on the block is sopping. Even the court
where girls from St. Ignominius ran
the roughneck boys off to play
their own three-on-three in plaid skirts
and church shoes for cash? —forget it.
The whole city's a flash flood
with brawn enough to flush trucks
sideways down the capitol's widest drives:
the crushed tonnage bobs around a bit
at the foot of some Spanish bastard's statue,
before it stalls and pools on white church steps.
Brute pilgrims. Face it, paddling dogs won't
make it, so children got no shot. But quick
thinking, the teacher lashes her students,
two at a time, with wire and stray twine.
She binds them across their breasts
to trees and metal posts lining the street's
half flooded walk. *No goddamned way,*
she swears. She won't let one little one
be washed out, even if their wriggling
makes their armpits bleed, even if

the kids must watch a good wood chair
catch in an eddy, then swirl off.
They'll have to make do with the vision
of their uncles' and neighbors' blue
bodies bumping past before they fishtail
out of sight. You can't wish away
the deluge. You can't vanish
the bloated carnage-waters. But the tykes
in crew cuts and pigtails, still fastened
to shafts and trunks in ragged rows,
will survive. For now, their teacher
has made them safe by building an orchard
of them in the middle of a city road,
this small chorus of young hard fruit,
this little grove moaning.

You Cannot Go to the God You Love With Your Two Legs

And because you're not an antelope or a dog
you think you can't drop your other two limbs down
and charge toward the Eternal Heart. But
those are your legs too, the ones that have hauled
your strangest body through a city of millions
in less than a day, at its own pace, in its own pain,
and because you cannot make the pace of the one whom you love
your own, and because you cannot make the pain of the one you love
your own pain, your separate aches must meet somewhere
poised in the heaven between your bodies
—skylines turned on their sides—reminders
of what once was, what every man and woman
must build upon, build from, the body, the miserable,
weeping body, the deep bony awkwardness of love
in the bed. If you've kissed bricks in secret
or fallen asleep where there was no bed or spent time
lighting a fire, then you know the beginning of love
and maybe you know the end of it too,
and maybe you know the far ends, the doors, where
loved ones enter to check on you. It's not someone else speaking
when you hear *I love you*. It's only the nighttime
pouring into the breast's day. Sunset, love. The thousand
exits. The thousand ways to know your elbow
from your ass. A simple dozen troubled hunters
laying all their guns down, that one day
they may be among the first to step
into your devastated rooms
and say *Enough now, enough*.

a theory of orbital resonance

the fox body and another and the snow thicket. two foxes circling as bodies, the bodies rigid, the bodies circling in the neighborhood of a thicket rigid with bodies fox red. the foxes with tails passing like fire. the foxes circle the thicket in snow, *crisscross crisscross*. black fox feet in snow revolutions—the fire bodies' unstable passage. a fox pair spinning, a fox pair and the *crisscross* and collision of tails in the neighborhood of a thicket snow red. two fire bodies pushing as foxes push—two fox bodies tail-by-tail and the body collision and the black feet and the snow red. blazing foxes in the neighborhood of a thicket in disorder. blazing foxes and the bodies rigid. a fire chaos.

St. Julia of Corsica

I have a bird in my mouth. He can't get out. His wings and head keep struggling. Everybody notices bulges in my cheeks and asks what's wrong. *Rfjnmrmff* I say. I can't seem to open my mouth wide enough for him to get more than a foot or some feathers to poke out. I go to a doctor. I can't really breathe that well. The doctor believes in talk therapy. The doctor says bird why are you in this woman's mouth. The bird doesn't respond, but his head appears and I can see this all from a mirror on the wall of the office. The bird points its head at the doctor and opens its mouth and there is a bird in the bird's mouth. Apparently I am the largest Matryoshka doll. The doctor asks the bird in the bird's mouth why it is in the bird's mouth, but the bird is still so small, just a baby. He opens his tiny beak and inside there is a grain of rice. The doctor removes the grain of rice with a pair of tweezers, which I give him from my purse. My jaw hurts something awful by this point. The grain of rice has something written on it in a tiny, steady hand. I give the doctor a magnifying glass from my purse as well. He reads the inscription aloud and it says each of us is but a child of God.

St. Catherine of Alexandria

I am sewing a quilt in the shape of my hand. I am sewing a quilt in the shape of my arm. I am sewing a quilt in the shape of my body, a quilt that will cover me perfectly, so long as I lie stiller than anything. But my machine it keeps breaking. The flywheel keeps breaking. The needles keep breaking. I turn to you and say my dear, could you help me sew this quilt. This me-quilt. But I can't look at your face. Your face is the sun. Your body is the deer-colored sky of early evening in late summer. Are you the one who is breaking my wheel? Are you the one who told me rocks have feelings? The quilt-thread keeps tangling my fingers and now I have new fingers. Thread-fingers. The quilt-thread keeps tangling my arms and now I have soft, cotton arms. I can't look at your face. Your face is the sun.

Those Poor Drowned

This has everything to do with desperation, imagination, blowing bubbles into our Cream of Mushroom soup not because we're feeling playful, but because, in this cold, the snow fine as dust, it hurts to take air in, so we extend our exhales as long as we can, pretend that *history* and *nostalgia* are the same thing.

This has everything to do with a tater tot crust as blanket in our hotdish, as some golden brown storm cloud cresting the baking pan, yanked from failing oven after failing oven in the church basements of Arrowhead, along the shores of Lake Superior, in International Falls, Minneapolis, St. Paul.

This winter has depth, layers. This is winter as *casserole*, as the French word for *saucepan*. This is a season so freezing, it doubles back on itself and simmers. Sometimes, our bodies get so cold, they burn. Sometimes, in the blizzard, we overflow the pan's lip, stiffen on the element. Sometimes, like the drowned with ice in their lungs, we stick to the bottom.

In this weather, unlike the tater tots in our hotdish, we don't golden, but redden.

• • •

Uncle talks of his years harvesting sugar beets, raising turkeys in Todd County (*now the poorest goddamn county in the state*, he says) before he was forced by General Mills, Cargill, Hormel, and Schwan to retire, these same companies now producing the processed hamburger and frozen string beans and potato buds we heap into our hotdish, use to feed congregations. He lost so much of his body to the cold and to the thresher, he has a single finger left, *the important one*, he says, as he struggles to wrap it like a boa over the stem of his fork, sink it into the hottest middle part beneath the tater tots.

According to Hallie Harron's article, *Heating up the Heartland: Minnesota's signature hotdish combines heartiness, great taste, and adaptability*, our state casserole retains no official recipe, or rules, beyond economic and gustatory desperation. As

such, we have our hamburger-mashed-potato-string-bean-Cream-of-Mushroom-soup-La-Choy-fried-onion hotdish, and our hotdish made with canned tuna and Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, with canned peas or canned corn, topped with potato chips crushed to dust, or shoestring potatoes, or anything crunchy and sharp enough to remind us that we still have some fight left, even in all of this cold, that we're not all—just mostly—soft.

Harron says, hotdish was birthed out of hardship when “budget-minded farm wives needed to feed their own families, as well as congregations in the basements of the first Minnesota churches,” and she says that the Cream of Mushroom soup soon became so favored, so ubiquitous, that it became better known, in early hotdish circles, as “Lutheran Binder.”

• • •

Uncle finishes his hotdish, keeps breathing out. He stares at the palms of what he once called his “big Minnesota Mitts,” at what once killed so many turkeys without additional weapons, and if he permitted himself an inhale, however cold, surely the obscenities would drown out Martin Luther, proselytizing from the Great Beyond, “I have held many things in my hands, and I have lost them all.” Somewhere beyond this town, Lake Superior roars over a record number of drowned bodies this year, and its icebergs—even the little eyelet ones—creak against each other in the sound of steam escaping through some thick blanket of potato product. Uncle cracks his knuckle against the casserole dish, burns himself, finally breathes in, as, over his head, above the couch, the print of Matisse's *Goldfish*, painted in 1911, shudders against the sheetrock.

We imagine the goldfish are the peas. All of those poor drowned as the mushrooms with cream in their gills.

• • •

Uncle mentions hanging something from every fruit tree in the yard that now, in this kind of weather, bears no fruit. He wants, we think at first, to remind

himself of bounty. But, because he's muttering through a mouthful of hotdish, we can't tell if he wants to hang a can of soup, or a can of corn, or the last piece of unground meat he saw years ago, or the last fresh potato, or his own dumb body from the boughs of the tree that once bore things named Lady and Delicious.

In 1911, Minnesota abolished the death penalty. The Republican representative from Gaylord, George MacKenzie, championing the abolition bill, said, "Let us bar this thing of Vengeance and the Furies from the confines of our great State; let not this harlot of judicial murder smear the pages of our history with her bloody fingers," and Uncle says, *what does blood have to do with any of this?* and we don't know if he's speaking of hotdish, or ovens failing in so many cold Lutheran basements, or, of Lake Superior, which, in 1911, sensed perhaps a disruption in equilibrium and subsequently claimed more lives that year than it ever had before.

Martin Luther says, "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree." Uncle stares out the window, and the land is untilled and overgrown and undergrown and white, and there are no birds, and the goldfish on the wall breathe neither in nor out, and Uncle says, in the presence of no birds, swallowing the thick last of the amalgam, a crumb of perfectly gold tater tot holding to his bottom lip, *That's because that motherfucker never lived in motherfucking Minnesota.*

• • •

If there are no birds, the only song here is the steam escaping our hotdish, freezing in the air even before it can get to our windowpanes, blind us to the weather outside.

Uncle says, here, blindness is another kind of protection, and we think he means a kind of warmth, another sort of blanket, until we see something coagulating in his eyes, and remember that there are no rules to hotdish, that casserole is variously defined by necessity, that iris and ice, have only an R to separate them, the letter that's desperate to evoke a kind of growling, but here, today, in this living room, this winter, can only groan, overfull, digesting, but still so far from warm.

We think he's sleeping with his eyes open when he says, *Boy, you never think of Minnesota when you think of the Dust Bowl, but think of it now. Two fucking decades of no beets. All our farms cinders in the summer, frozen cinders after. Ha! That was the rotation.* So, of course, the canned, the bagged, the processed. The tubers now reduced to buds in a box, which sounds to us like some funeral for something floral, but which sounded to all those Dust Bowl "farm wives" like the perfect ingredient for a basement resurrection.

Uncle mutes the television—the program perpetuated by the Minnesota Historical Society: a vaudevillian brew including this hour Yo-Yo Tricks with Dazzling Dave, Fancy-Dancing with Larry Yazzie—Member of The Sac & Fox Tribe, and Magic with Brodini. The show is newly called *The Big Wow Family Variety Show* (formerly known as *Global Hotdish*). Historical Society executives credit the renaming to a flood of viewer letters wherein countless Minnesotans expressed that in naming a variety show after the state dish, they were either trivializing their culinary cultural inheritance, or setting the bar too high.

• • •

The Minnesota winds blew continuously from 1934 to 1936. These winds whirled so violently that residents couldn't tell if they were coming off the lake, or from the land. Approaching winter, cold snaps were so abrupt that this pulverized dirt froze mid-air. The winds were so fierce that, according to some locals—especially farmers whose properties were so flat, uninterrupted by building or landscape—the frozen earth blew all winter long, pelted crops and windows and faces, pocked hands. This "black snow," during blizzards, embedded itself in the actual snow and collapsed roofs, industries.

The federal government paid Minnesotans to kill their emaciated cattle, encouraged the afflicted to hang wet sheets over their homes to protect themselves from the plague. But in Minnesota, wet sheets freeze; the ice sloughs to the ground in the sorts of shards with which so many Minnesotans—desperate, imaginative, dirty-mouthed and destitute—took their lives.

In this way, federal advice becomes mercy killing. In this way, we retreat to the basement and pour everything we have into our one remaining dish.

• • •

We know: 10,000 lakes is bullshit. An inefficient number. Here, in winter, we know: in these lakes, goldfish or fish otherwise colored—fish imperfectly baked—float not belly-up to the sky as we'd like to believe, but sink toward the bottom, to the depths that have so far frozen incompletely.

Here, the lowest of the church basements remains, if only in narrative, the last thawed-out thing.

We know: though in the Eastern Dakotan Sioux dialect, *Mnisota* means “sky-tinted water,” the Sioux did not mean that the water was blue. Given the weather here, Uncle says that's obvious, and is a common mistranslation. In the Santee sub-dialect, the name more accurately translates as “somewhat clouded water,” or “snow in the water.” We look out the window, the trees hunched under the weight, our breath producing on the glass the sort of frost that reminds us, when scraped off, of the white middles of the potatoes, the soft stuff beneath gold crust. If “farm wives,” we think, then farm mothers, and stare into the window—frost and wonder why, in this house, it's just us and our uncle.

We know because Uncle tells us. The Sioux demonstrated *Mnisota* to the settlers by dipping a hollowed gourd into a lake, then pouring, drop-by-drop, milk into the water. According to state legend, when one could no longer see to the bottoms or sides of the gourd, when the water was sufficiently unclear, the Sioux would nod to the settler, who wouldn't know what to expect when the weather finally turned, and whisper the name of our state.

• • •

Here is freezing rain and snow and sleet and storms we call Alberta Clippers and Panhandle Hooks, and the tornado embedded in the blizzard, the graupel in

the rime. Here, a front blows us from behind. Here, snowflakes cry into our ears and we can't tell if they are killing us, or pleading with us. It is all we can do to swallow, as if thermodynamically, our meat and starch and canned this and frozen that, to empty our bodies.

To appease the black snow of Minnesota, children were deployed to kill Bullsnakes and Fox Snakes and Rat Snakes and Racers, Garter Snakes and Milk Snakes and Hognoses and Smoothies. We hung their skins from rafters and clotheslines, next to frozen hornets' nests, and frozen blouses, tied them to bedposts, and to the middles of our kitchen oil lamps, by the orange light of which we ground the last of the snake meat. In summer, the skins would blister, crisp. In winter, they would retain their moisture, often freeze. Uncle, perhaps really sleeping now, speaks of hotdish and snakes, wet heavy centers, crumbly toppings. How the weight of all things varies with the weather. Occasionally, in winter, Uncle says, someone would try to hang himself with a length of snakeskin, and occasionally, the skin would be strong enough and he would succeed.

Here, success is convincing ourselves that heat is enough. Failing that, the snakes overtake us.

"Pray," Luther said, "And let God worry."

• • •

Uncle, in sleep, convinces us. Gravity is only weather, the inevitable sinking into the baked sludge beneath, and electricity is the closing of the oven door. Listen, he says, for the hiss in the blizzard, the rat sewn up, like all libido, in its belly. Listen for that ultimate drop of milk.

All toppings sink and become soggy. All heat dissipates and becomes the frost on the window, through which the goldfish freeze. In this way, everything can become smaller, mute, as if, televised. We look at all that white sky. All those dead beets. Let's stand outside in it, watch the snow revise Andromeda. Let's stand naked as potatoes, the puddle for the hail, become so agitated we have to leave the state, unzip the last things left on our bodies. Let's close our eyes and imagine obvious things inside of us—blood and fire and poverty and family, and something even hotter than that.

Rebecca

I have ended it five times. She forgets each day that it's ended. Each day, another patient or a nurse tells her that I've left. She calls me in a panic and wants to know if it's true. I say it's true. I tell her she knew yesterday that it was true. She apologizes for forgetting. *The ECT*, she says. I say I know. I say she doesn't have to apologize. I am gentle, again, and keep my voice low, as one might with a kicked dog or a frantic child. I repeat myself. I explain. I say it's for the best, tell her she knows it's for the best. We rewind to yesterday, the day before, the day before that. I sit in the same chair and stare at the same place on the wall and say the same thing. I tell her yes I love her. I tell her no there's no one else. I tell her she will be all right, I will not leave yet, I will find a place for her to go, it will be all right, all right, all right. I want to throw the phone at the wall, put my fist through a window. I pace my words slowly, almost sing-song my leaving, as if singing her to sleep. We pace through it again, pace back and forth, pace the narrow hallway of her mind.

• • •

She finds the ward a comforting place. She feels safe. She said this when I put her in. When I put her in, we were led through the series of doors. They put her in a gown to search her pockets and the things I'd packed in a small suitcase for her. They were gentle, kind. They sat her down and gave her toast. When she had finished the toast, she turned to me, took my hands. She clung to my hands so hard the nails broke my skin. Wide-eyed, she said, *I like it here. It's safe.* I said, Yes, it's very safe. You're safe. I sat with her a while, and then she was tired, and I took her to her room, and she lay her long body on the bed under the window and fell asleep, and I could finally leave.

• • •

I did not run. I walked slowly. I waited as they unlocked each door, let me out. I stared at the door of the elevator until it opened. I walked steadily through the hospital lobby and through the last door and into the winter light and I flinched.

• • •

It is the morning of the day I take her in. I unlock the door of her apartment, step in, shut the door softly. She looks up. She is wearing the purple stocking cap. Her face is wet with crying, terrified.

I sit down next to her on the red couch. The room is filthy, plants dying, papers and books everywhere. I ask again if she needs to go to the hospital. I ask her every day. She says no. I say all right. I tell her perhaps we should just stop by the doctor's to see if he's around, if maybe she could see him real quick. She nods, as if that makes sense, as if you can just walk into a psychiatrist's office without warning. I put her in the car. She slumps, stares at the floor, asks me if I like her shirt. She knows I have always liked her in blue. I want to crash the car, drive it off the road on the curve of I-94 that I've never liked. We park the car. I lead her into the doctor's office and tell them that she isn't feeling very well and could we possibly see the doctor just quick. They look at her and call the doctor, and then we are in his office, and he is a small kind man, and he looks at her, and then at me, and then at her and asks her how she feels. *Fine*, she says. I gently disagree. She stares at me. I have betrayed her. I have backed away. I am giving her to someone else.

The doctor calls the hospital and we go back to the apartment and I pack her a bag and we drive across town and are being led through a series of locked doors and then she is eating toast and is safe, and I am putting her to bed like a tall child, and I glance at her body and remember when it was a body that made love.

• • •

It is last January. We are in the house on Lake Superior. It is afternoon, and the water is brilliant, flashing sun. She wears a gray sweater, has fallen asleep on

the couch with a book on her bent knee. She is boyish, beautiful. I love her so hard I feel sick.

I cook meal after meal. We make love on the couch, the floor, the bed. We make love for days, from dawn until dark. I drown in her heavenly body. When we are done, I fall asleep like a man.

When I wake, she is staring at me in such a way that I feel sick.

Never leave me, she says.

I turn my back, look for my clothes.

I want to hear you say forever, she says, begins to cry.

I pull my shirt over my head, sit staring at the fireplace.

Forever, I say.

I stand up, walk away.

Behind me, she sobs.

• • •

She tried to kill herself for the first time when she was fourteen. They locked her in a building with bars on the windows. I don't know what happened to her there. We went to the now-abandoned building one afternoon. This was in South Dakota. She sat in the car and stared at it. This was before I knew she was sick. I held her that night while she stared into space. This was when I knew how to hold her. When I arrived at her house and she tossed me on the bed, grinning, and said, *This is going to be quick and dirty*. This was when I would wake up in the morning very early and sit on the couch and write, when I wrote one morning, *This is heaven, I'm fairly sure*.

This was when she'd wake up, walk her boyish walk into the living room, long legs in their striped pajamas, shy smile, and I would drop the notebook and the pen and rise and reach for her again.

This was when she was a woman, my lover. This was before I was her mother, and she a dying child.

• • •

The day after I lock her up, I go to a bar and am picked up by a girl in a backwards baseball cap and we flirt and dance low and dirty and I go home with her and have sex until dawn and I fall asleep in her arms as she runs her fingers through my hair.

At five a.m. I pull myself out of her bed. I do not want to leave. Her body is warm, smooth, fits into mine. I ache to stay. I leave because I am afraid I will drown or love or stay or say forever and lie.

• • •

She wrote a poem once, back when she wrote poems. It says, "My mother has torn the map to the left of Wisconsin, so the water goes and goes. There is no end to the water."

She dreams of things that do not end.

I tear the map slowly, softly, so she doesn't hear. I end the water. I am the opposite shore, or I am the swimmer reaching the opposite shore, climbing out onto the sand. The metaphor of course is that she screams behind me. The metaphor of course is that she tries not to drown.

No. She does not try not to drown. She has been waiting for this. She watches my back as I go. She stops fighting the water. She turns belly-down, stares at fish and waterweed. She unhinges her jaw, begins to swallow, to take on weight, to sink. She gathers strength, begins to swim downward, amazed by her powerful arms, stunned by her skill at drowning, as if she were born to do it, as if she was always headed here.

from *Trust*

i keep a valley on each side of my body
to let the water be there
for the purpose of earth
the memory of water
in place of the memory of texas
the bright wolves make hotels
in the earth the earth's
valleys are promises
where many animals cause tragedies

tumbleweeds in altitude
break like forests ahead of us
the horse caves many economies
crows in use moved along
highways in december
i put sugar on my lips
i hold one feeling all winter
it is california people walk through it
they imagine it to be something else
all day they spend preparing themselves
for what they imagine it to be
they come into the past this way

the function of place as follows
in three parts: this fear came into us
it was a great fear it scared us very much
what's here is everything
i thought had already gone
you say look up
there is a plateau when i do

i played this game where everyone
promised to change back
sometimes i ask only what can be
solved but this isn't like that
this is about uncertainty we listen
to what moves through us
it is the world it makes uncertain
what was already there
we think of everything that is alike
horse knees grass
the cosmos we are
what's left after we're done

Softer Atrocities: An Introduction to Mary Reid Kelley's *The Syphilis of Sisyphus* (2011)

For Americans, modernist French culture has long represented the height of sophistication: the nightlife of the demi-monde, and their louche world of cafés, brothels, and cabarets, or what art historian Hollis Clayson has called “the leisure mills and dives of bohemian Paris.”¹ Epitomized in paintings and prints by Manet, Renoir, Degas, Signac, and Toulouse-Lautrec, the gas-lit boulevards and the pleasures of absinthe have long been immortalized and celebrated for the better part of a century. These famous works have been emblazoned on posters, coffee mugs, mouse pads, umbrellas, and eagerly consumed by several generations of the American bourgeoisie, peppering many middle class American girlhoods.

The artist Mary Reid Kelley (American, b. 1979) exploits this deep love of Impressionist fare and turns it upside down, situating her own belle epoch, *The Syphilis of Sisyphus* (2011), at the end of the affair, so to speak, of the long nineteenth century. She undercuts the bohemian romanticism through the cautionary tale of a young naïf, known as Sisyphus, who is pregnant and impoverished, and is also infected with syphilis.

Shot by collaborator Patrick Kelley in a high-definition video in a stark palette of black and white, there is a mournful quality to the hand-drawn stage sets and highly stylized actors. Reid Kelley herself takes on the role of Sisyphus, yet all the characters are only recognizable as archetypes, hidden by bulging golf balls for eyes. This creates a persistence of studied expressionlessness. Tightly scripted in anapestic tetrameter, a now-archaic form, which combines metrical variations of quatrains and sestets, the text offers a seductive and rhythmic narrative arc that

1. S. Hollis Clayson, “Wicked Paris,” Lecture, March 29, 2009, Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.

is somewhere between a comic morality tale and a riveting Greek tragedy. Coy punning abounds in visually delightful ways, but the ambiguity is perhaps best received in script form, which follows in these pages. Reid Kelley's video has been shown at a number of prestigious contemporary art museums and exhibitions, including MACRO, Rome; The Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio; and the ICA, Philadelphia; as well as a solo exhibition at Fredericks & Freiser in New York.

This inaugural collaboration with *Gulf Coast* marks the inclusion of a contemporary art work with complicated literary credentials: it is written in a form of light verse more closely aligned with the nineteenth century rather than the twenty-first. The artist's ribald wit is dependent upon an unambiguous punning that is perhaps at its best when closely read. The images that follow in this section are stills from the video work itself, and the text becomes as glittering an addition as the vanity mirror itself, a way of extending the space for a video work in which the pathos and humor are so dense with allusions and intrigue as to necessitate a guide.

Reid Kelley's video is filmic, but it is not a film; her script is poetic, but it is not a poem; the sets and entrances are theatrical, but they are not staged. Rather, it is a masterful performance, once removed, set in a sketchbook-like universe of her own making. Her characters are hollow archetypes who trade in the histories of literature and art, and yet Sisyphus covering up the ulcerative lesions on her face manages to be absolutely contemporary: conjuring the late night infomercials of B-celebrities hawking Proactiv Solution. As Sisyphus learns, such treatments, of squid ink and rice powder, are short-lived fixes. Her condition is terminal, her baby on the way, and there is a Greek chorus that functions as a rather chilling alter-ego: it simultaneously mocks and reassures. Named the Saltimbanques—after a *mélange* of references which include Daumier's drawings of itinerant street musicians and acrobats, as well as Picasso's painting, *Family of Saltimbanques* (1905)—Kelley's circus clowns are also performers. They chortle and recite in unison and on command, and in sly double entendres, cover the history of the French Revolution (complete with its guilloteenagers), Enlightenment-era discoveries (Lavoisier's Gas, also known as oxygen), and in perhaps the wittiest moment, do battle over paternity with French bread, yelling, "I baguette you! I baguette you!"

If this witty physical comedy is more American-style riposte than French burlesque, Kelley's mockery of her subject is earnest. Anne Hathaway's Fantine is perhaps the pop cultural equivalent of Sisyphus, but *Les Misérables* is to *The Syphilis of Sisyphus* what mac and cheese is to a Camembert and Beaujolais pairing. That is to say, Kelley's video work has a biting, somewhat acidic quality. It does not come from a box that recycles previous cultural confections. The video is performed in three acts, with a rhythmic patter that is unmistakably theatrical, reminiscent of a modernist French farce in the manner of Genet or Ionesco. In this way, her characters are strategically devoid of depth so as to position them as simple representations that poke fun at the historical misunderstandings surrounding modern French history, and the overblown American romanticism that surrounds the glittering city of Paris. Yet her narrative, told from a female point of view, is a strategic feminism, giving voice to the paintings of the past: the hundreds of silenced barmaids, dancers, ballerinas, and nudes that once epitomized bohemian desire and yet still influence our own contemporary ideas of debauchery, because we think we know what theirs looked like: gaslights shining on cobblestone, the lit cafés, and beautiful women in rouge, dancing.



Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley, *The Sisyphus of Sisyphus: "Sisyphus at her Toilette,"* 2011. High-definition video still.



Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley, *The Syphilis of Sisyphus*: "We Stem from Shit," 2011. High-definition video still.



Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley, *The Syphills of Sisyphus: "Sisyphus on her Staircase,"* 2011. High-definition video still.



Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley, *The Sybills of Sisyphus: "Marat and Charlotte Corday,"* 2011. High-definition video still.



Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley, *The Syphilis of Sisyphus: "I Baguette You."* 2011. High-definition video still.



Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley, *The Syphilis of Sisyphus*: "Sisyphus at la Salpêtrière," 2011. High-definition video still.



Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley, *The Syphilis of Sisyphus: "Sisyphus addresses the Doctors,"* 2011. High-definition video still.



Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley, *The Sycillits of Sisyphus: "Sisyphus and Her Bachelors,"* 2011. High-definition video still.

The Syphilis of Sisyphus

Paris, 1952

☞ Scene 1: Sisyphus' Garret ☜

SISYPHUS:

Nature sold me a lie, and I've kept the deceit
On my face to remind me: Her falsehoods repeat
Like the seasons renew. Same advice every time,
Because Nature can counsel me nothing but crime.

Her Utopian swindles profess to be cures,
But infect generations. While smeared with manure
As a young, naïve milkmaid, in apron and braids,
I, too, was Revolting on top of the barricades!
Praising the Rustic, I fell to Gourmet
And my radical urges were lost, due to Neglige.

Shamed by this Lapse into Luxury's error,
I hid my defections, 'til this happy Mirror
Revealed a new cause for which Sisyphus shoulders
The burdens of charm, crying, "**Make Beauty Boulder!**"

Crush earthly pigments! Grind rocks to a dust! Flint
And waxes make Nature submit to adjustment,
While camel hair, sea mud, and squid ink ensure
That while fishing for Compliments, I use Allure!
My Cosmetics prove I won't be whipped by these rashes:
If Nature gives scourges, then Beauty gives lashes!

Strong discipline needed to bury these pimples
With inch-thick rice powder. Complexions aren't simple,
And nothing's so Gouache as to be badly painted!
Technique must be pure because Nature has tainted
Life's mortar with pestilence, desperate to wreak
Her foul havoc of impudence right on my cheek.

These sores burn with an anger so hot that I'm incensed!
With Incense still more fragrant than sweaty and hellbent
Provincials extolling fresh air, while they're scoffing
At Beauty's demands! Turn your head, and keep Coiffing!

The Toilette is noble! But taste's in the toilet.
If Art is a carrot, the masses will boil it
To jelly, while praising it's crunch and suggesting
I eat it! I'd rather eat shit and die jesting!

I've a horror of Vegetables, a hatred of Floral,
Nature's so foul she makes mushrooms A-morel.
Some mushrooms I know, when asked, will admit
That the root of their heartache is: **"We stem from shit!"**

Cruel Biology, rendering blemish inherent
To produce! I ask Nature, what kind of parent
Begets in the darkness, these sprouts in neat rows
Just to turn on a Blight! I hereby propose

Drastic measures that don't give an inch to Demeter:
This gift that's she's given so kindly will cheat her
Inadequate rations of one dried-up teat per Mouth!

(Sisyphus leaves her garret and descends the steps towards the street.)

Genius needs Nourishing Beauty to suck!
So I'll go into labor, while pushing my luck
That this child will put Natural regimes to the saber!
Make lumps, proletariats! Knock up your neighbors!
When pickets fail, propagate! Throw down the barrier
Methods. Hunt Nature down, bind her and carry her

Out on a rail. Give her breast a last squeeze:
See! Nothing comes out of her Wet Nurse's Parodies!
Her milk comes from cowards, and thus I instruct
Babies how to throw bottles, so Milk Ducts.

☞ Scene 2: The Streets of Paris ☞

SISYPHUS:

The incursions of Nature's expansionist empire
Convinces me: Venus's doctrine requires
Disciples, but Matthew and Mark are Lukewarm
On the subject of training a carbon-based life form
To modify God when his Archetypes falter,
To break them up, glue them, and worship the altered!

I fluctuate daily, a dogma enabled
when Jesus himself said:

**"This Manger's too stable!
The stalls are too crowded!
The stench here is terrible!
Give me a knife,
And I'll make these limbs Parable!"**

But who would you trust with that Blade? It was Nature's
Own children who grew into Guilloteenagers!
They told an armed mob: Just cut off your hand
And the wrist will be History! That stump speech was panned

Because rational girls prefer necklace to headless.
Thank vanity nightly for keeping the progress
Of history minimal. Hark! On the street
I hear the pitter-patter, Epater la Bourgeoise Feet!
Put yourself in my shoes, little Hounds, come to heel,
Show me tableaux of Beauty! Inflate my ideal

Type of learning! I'll rise, like Lavoisier's Gas,
And grade your displays from the top of the class.

☞ Scene 3: The Saltimbanques Perform ☞

SALTIMBANQUES:

*Twinkletoe, Twinkletoe,
Denis P. Diderot
Dreamed of a government
Led by his heirs:
Nightmares so ghastly, so
Anti-Enlightenment*

*Gave him the shock of One-
Hundred Voltaires!*

*Secretly, Secretly,
Queen Marie Antoinette
Studied her Algebra
All night in bed,
Scholars remarked at the
Mathema-Titian-Haired
Beauty's resolve to make
Knowledge Widespread.*

*Brainy McBrainyton
Maximilien Robespierre
Perfectly memorized
Jean-Jacques Rousseau;
Citizens bored by his
Hyperverbosity
Shouted in unison,
"Merde! Sans Chapeau!"*

*"Drown in a Tub of your
Cardiovascular
Blood, wretched Traitor!" screamed
Charlotte Corday.
Caught underwater, and
Covered in lotion
Jean-Paul Marat sputtered,
"What did she say?"*

*Jellytart, Jellytart
General Bonaparte's
Senti-Mentality*

*Worried all France.
He cried Saccharine tears on the
Banks of the Vulgar, while
Waterloo-Waterworks
Spotted his Pants.*

*Higgeldy Piggeldy
Two Young Hegelians
Spilled lots of ink as they
Struggled to Parse
Sequential crisis in
Historiography:
First it's a Tragedy,
Then it's a Farce.*

*Baron Unbearable
Haussmann, the Architect,
Told by Napoleon:
"Rip down the Slums!"
Systems of Boulevards
Incontrovertibly
Re-Parised Paris for
His Bourgeoise Chums.*

*"These Obsolete Beauties, how
Far they have fallen!"
"From Queens of the Evening, now
Deeply in debt to their
former Acquaintances' Charity!"
"Sad!"
"Don't You know your own Mother?
'Twas I who baguette you!"*

I BAGUETTE YOU!
I BAGUETTE YOU!
I BAGUETTE YOU!
I BAGUETTE YOU!

(The Saltimbanques beat each other with loaves of bread. Sisyphus enters the fight and is quickly arrested by the Morals Police.)

☞ Scene 4: La Salpetriere Hospital ☞

SISYPHUS:

(speaking to the Matron, and then to the Physicians)

You Lords with no manors! No border, no fence
Keeps my Spleen within bounds, 'cause I'm pissed off by Continence!
Bile International! Now Nature laughs
To see Beauty debased, getting drunk on this bitter draft:
Art For Art's Sake! I toast Nature's spite!

**"For the sake of those Philistines packed in your Samsonite!
Pull down their temple of health, brick by brick!"**

But I've never been life, all the days of my sick!
My blistering wit, and it's deep lacerations
Are signs of advanced forms of Syphilization!

A pillar of culture like me can dispense
With these Charlatan Quacks, and their Breeches of Confidence!
Such Elegance calls for a well-tailored speech
To solicit new Genres, and increase the reach

Of my own University's rhetoric! It's rated
With sterling repute! For my tongue's S'il-vous-plated!
So please, enroll now! For you well can afford
The tuition that flows through Unbillable Cords

To a cloister that's moister, a womb of one's own,
My Sorbonne in the oven is nationally known
For it's Queen of the Faculties, Tenured, Emeritus:
Draped in the garment of Beauty, I wear it thus!

'Till Polemic Dances help me to disrobe,
Because medical men need the Patients of Job!
And I make so much Beauty, that yes, I am prone
To stay friends with my Excess! Just like the well-known
Polyamorous Bride, who announced with a grin
After wedding the crowd:

"Goodbye Nature, and Hi Men."



Reprieve as Unlikely Baltimore

-Ecrit par L'Automate de Maillardet

From the bus's roof,
I see the dock cranes break the horizon,

rigid lines, all failed rectangles and rogue tangents,
as if one side decided this was untenable
and left.

They tower like the Brachiosaurus
that visited the Franklin for a month.

I used to break out of my exhibit,
climb its legs at night,

scale vertebrae one after another
until perched on skull,

I surveyed the hall.

Frozen figures of species long gone,
darker than the pale starlight that lost its way
and wound up here.

Up there, I didn't feel as alone.

The bus exits the highway. As it slows,
I slide off the back and land on a street

of row houses—boarded up, night still as a victim,
only one smoking manhole cover,

a lonely plume, curling around itself,
a zinc plate etched, but moving
languid like spilled ink.

Then, on the wind, I catch it:
among the waft of rotten saltwater,
just a hint of sugar.

Down one street to the next, a right, a left,

more row houses, more smoking sewers.

Another right, and the avenue opens into factories,
writhing chain link, and shattered chairs,
red brick everywhere.

Up a drainage pipe to the roof, the tar bathed in red,
a giant neon sign reads *Domino*.
I smell her, and then she is above me.

One unblinking eye, perfectly round, unblinking,
the palest gold, with a hint of green.

She is far to the north. I will go north to her.

Outskirt

—Écrit par L'Automate de Maillardet

From the long view, the wetlands stun me—

 patches of long grass sway

like dauphinesses lost in a troubadour's voice.

But up close, Mademoiselle,
 the green is sickly.

Old tires and gnarled rust protrude,
 orphan shrubs of oil and mud.

I lie in it anyway,
 for a little while,

feel the softness of earth.

Once the one-eyed girl whispered a story:

She found a garden behind a tenement,
 a small garden with a few sad carrots.

She lay among them and covered her face with soil,

then planted a single seed
 above her socket.

As she spoke, her blushing impelled me

to draw her a ship.

I hoped she understood I meant to take her away
one day, away

from this soot-black city
of regret and excrement

to a fertile land where from every branch,

like fattened fruit, hangs a single green eye.

The Light of Stars, Yes

My brother kneels in the back of the Chrysler. Leo Derais, eleven years old: he's skipped three grades: this fall he'll start high school.

He's just made the most astonishing discovery, has seen the evidence and understands at last how time moves at different speeds in both directions. (Was that a stone? Is that a rabbit?)

Appears to move.

Quickly now, before the light goes, he wants our father to see what he sees, the earth close to the car ripping backward (skull of a desert fox, bones of a missing child), everything lost, the past shredded and gone (blink of an eye, stuttering heartbeat) while at the same time, in the same world, a ridge of distant mountains unscrolls, quietly revealing itself, advancing slowly forward.

No matter how fast our father drives, the patient line of stone proceeds, always beyond, always ahead of us.

He's trembling now but can't speak. Time does not exist. Time is perception, the endless rearrangement of things in space, the infinite possibilities of their relationships to one another.

A word will shatter thought: skull, stone, star, rabbit: everything here, now, lost and still to come in this moment. There's no reason why he can't remember the future. Even now the light of stars long dead streaks toward him.

Our father, our pilot, delivers us into a night too beautiful to imagine: blue, blue sky, mountains deepening to violet.

Mother unbuttons her blouse to nurse the baby. Joelle, my sister, eleven months old, eight years younger than I am, my father's bewildered surprise, my mother's joyful mystery, Joelle Derais, so radiant strangers stop us on the street and ask to touch or try to talk to her.

If she were alive now, would she be like me, or still be tempting?

I remember her that day at the rest stop: cheeks flushed, lips rosy, the soft swirl of dark curls at the crown of her head (where I kiss, where I smell you), Joelle, my sister, heavy in my arms, heavy in my lungs, the sweet almond scent of you.

I remember the woman who gasped in the bathroom, whose fingers fluttered as she touched Joelle's warm shoulder. *My God is that child real?* She thought my sister was a doll, perfect porcelain, perfectly painted, someone else's real hair, someone else's silky lashes:

My God how porcelain shatters.

Mother wants to stop in Page, just south of the Utah border, high on this plateau of red rock where a pink neon sign blinks *EZ REST* and a green one warns *DESPERADO'S HIDEAWAY*.

Our pilot won't rest; our desperado won't take refuge.

If time does not exist, there must be a place where I can go, where I can find us, where my sister cries and my brother trembles, where bands of rose and gold and turquoise throb at the horizon, where my father turns back, and my mother forgives him. (Somewhere in the night, while I sleep, this happens.)

Forty years. I have these words. I know these numbers. The morning paper my proof: *Oil Spilling, Bees Vanishing, Five Illegal Immigrants Found Dead, Problem Bear Relocated.*

The headline never says: *Invasive Humans Removed from Bear's Natural Habitat.*

EZ REST: I almost remember the sign flashing all night, the room that smelled of smoke and ammonia.

No. We didn't turn. The blue Chrysler sped into the blue night while the light of stars streaked toward us.

Forty years. I remember the taste of blood and bone, tongue cut deep, front teeth jagged, the smell of gasoline and smoke, something burning in the distance. My father tried to stand but couldn't stand, tried again and then a third time. He disappeared as smoke and came back as fire. His face flared in orange light.

How can both legs be broken?

Yes, everything here, now, again, always: the blue Chrysler ablaze, our bodies flung in the desert, the rearrangement of things, the infinite possibilities, the light of stars, yes, I have never seen so many stars anywhere, an ocean of sparkling light, stars alive and dead streaking toward us.

The baby was gone, the baby was missing. I remember Mother crawling in the sand, trying to find her, saying her name, *Joelle*, howling her name into the blue night all around us, leaving *jo - elle* vibrating through stone and star forever.

My brother rose up white and naked from his twisted body. He was perfect, so thin and pale I could see right through him. He stooped to scratch the sand with a stick. Later I understood the stick was a bone, one he'd pulled from his body.

So fast, my brother! He drew a lovely looping line crossing and recrossing, no beginning or end, some strange magic: flight of the hawk or snake coiling, a wave of sound inside a stone, breath moving between bodies.

I don't remember the days in the hospital, the nights and days I slept, brain swollen. I remember waking in my bed at home, a deer under the mesquite tree by my window, the shadows of leaves fluttering across her body: a deer in disguise: I heard her breath in my breath, felt warm blood surge through me.

Alive, I was. Even now I believe the deer's blood healed me. Mother played "Clair de Lune" on the piano with her left hand, half a song; the deer breathed in fluttery time, and I breathed with her. Doves sang missing notes, but not the right ones, not Debussy's, some startling rearrangement of sound, every song endlessly new, no matter how many times Mother played it.

Alive, yes, my mother's one, my father's only.

Blood surges from the heart and soon returns or doesn't. Forty years. At the Mission one day I watched a man restore the wounds of Jesus, scraping away oil and dirt to paint the openings again, red so red it glowed, wounds so deep blood bloomed violet.

Such love! The painter looked thin as Jesus, scarred too, hurt and hungry. Yes, here, God alive, breath inside a starved brown body. He'd repaired broken thorns and broken fingers; now, as he touched the wounds with his brush, tendons beneath flesh flickered. In a looping line of blue vein, I felt the painter's blood in me pulsing.

So easily the body opens.

The shadows of leaves become the shadows of hands, doctors' hands inside my brother's body, stitching artery and bowel, touching the soft secret skin inside the belly, hoping to stop the blood, to bring him back, to reassemble a puzzle of bone, pelvis and rib from shattered fragments.

Mother played with one hand because the right hand was crushed, the right arm splintered: *Mother*: because she held Joelle tight in her left arm, and used her right arm to brace them.

Skull of a desert fox, bones of a missing child:

There is a place I can go on that road, a line I can draw on a map: a frontier, a border: my country before, my country after: *Joelle*:

Forty years, and just today, just this morning, the song of you, a wave of sound, a coyote across the arroyo howling: Joelle:

Tonight, in the light of stars, in the light of fire, our brother kneeling in the sand, drawing a lovely looping line, no beginning or end, crossing and recrossing, to catch the breath between, to hold, to save, to lift us.

Merry-Go-Round

We are waiting in line for the carousel. My mother's breath is short and shallow. The closer we get, the more I must support her. *I'm dizzy*, she says. *I have to lie down*. Her breath as if. In labor. When the man opens the gate, takes our ticket, everyone runs past, scrambling for a horse. Like a game of musical chairs, no one wants to be left standing in the lights, the mirrors, and organ music. I fall into an empty horse-drawn carriage that no one wants, cradling my mother, weightless and soft as a withered peach. She is naked except for a towel. Her legs across my lap, we are a pietà after the bath. No diaper, no oxygen, no false teeth, no, no, and we begin to turn. *There is the Capitol*, everyone cries. *There is the Castle, the Washington Monument, the Natural History Museum*. The horses jump invisible hurdles while we remain on the ground, going round. A few more turns and my mother is humming softly. Her *life is but a dream* ends and my *row, row, row your boat* begins, and we are a double helix gentling down the stream. The carousel is winding her backwards, from gray-cropped hair to a red braid. Gathering her into my arms, I stand up, steady on the spinning platform, and carry her to the palomino pulling us. I place her on it and wrap her hands around the pole. She does not look at me, not at the Capitol, not at the Castle, not at the Monument, not at the Museum. The steeds on either side, merrily all around, gallop up and down, but my mother's horse glides up, up, up. She is holding on, rising above the others, stirrups Mary Janes out of reach, her horse's blue mane rippling like a hoisted flag. No one can hear me shouting, *Stop! Stop the carousel!* My mother's head is about to touch the canopy, which I see now isn't a painting of clouds.

Montaigne's Lute

Piano. Originally *pianoforte*. But by the twentieth century the loud register had been dropped from the word. The idea of *quiet* was left to carry the whole bulky piece of musical furniture. Piano. Montaigne never knew one, never heard one. He was a century too early. His father, Pierre, would certainly have been an early-adopter. But lacking a piano, Pierre chose the lute, most medieval of instruments, to provide the sound track for his boy's life.

He hired a lute player to awaken his child every morning because, Montaigne explains, Pierre followed a theory he had picked up, probably during his military years in Italy, "that it troubles the tender brains of children to wake them in the morning with a start, and to snatch them suddenly and violently from their sleep, in which they are plunged much more deeply than we are." The lute followed him around the chateau—"I was never without a man to do this for me."

A very *pianissimo* childhood.

• • •

Though he reports that his nature was "gentle and tractable," Montaigne confesses he was "withal so sluggish, lax, and drowsy," that he was a poor student when lessons required memorization or serious application. No one, he claims, "could tear me from my sloth, not even to make me play."

There was fugitive genius in his indolence. "What I saw, I saw well," he says, "and beneath this inert appearance nourished bold ideas and opinions beyond my years."

The job description of a daydreamer. In his lethargy the boy displayed the requirements of his future as the particular kind of writer he became—disregard for received knowledge and a mandarin disdain for received form, coupled with acute observation and the punch and fluency of expression on the fly. He found his *métier* early—the essay.

Except the *métier* didn't yet exist. He found his talent, then. And awaited its purpose and its form. Waiting suited his temperament—*sluggish, lax, drowsy*. As it would suit the voluptuous unspooling of his apparently artless art, a mind awakened every morning not by command, not even by thought, but by a melody.

• • •

Piano, piano! The entreaty of the long-suffering Bernard Weiser. We sat side-by-side, he at his grand, I at mine, both of us enduring the weekly lesson in his cramped Scott Hall studio. Gently, gently! Every week he urged me down from my wrestling matches with Bach, with Scarlatti. But nothing could tame my melodramatic relation to music.

It was my single year as a music major, the year the jig was finally up. My high school musicianship (much indulged, much inflated) gave way in college to the truth of mediocrity, and late that year I skulked off to Vincent Hall to join all the other lost souls in the English Department.

But think of the years of piano practice that preceded that final descent from music into language, into sentences and paragraphs. Into this.

All the years alone in little rooms with music. The snug living room on Linwood where the baby grand crouched in its shiny chestnut coat, the biggest thing we owned except for our Ford. But even more, the studio cells of my girls' school, the cloistered nuns of an old French order presiding serenely, where one day a week in the refectory (not "the lunchroom" or "cafeteria") we spoke only French. *Puis-je avoir les cornichons, si vous plait, ma soeur?* And the little sour pickles in a cut-glass dish were handed over with an approving smile. *Bien sur, ma chère.*

The building, rosybrick with a soaring campanile, the nuns in their Renaissance gowns gliding from the cloister with its bewitching sign—ENCLOSURE—where students wearing our Madeleine uniforms, the entire atmosphere that the shadowy marble halls held in a fierce embrace—none of it would have been foreign to Montaigne. His religion, his nation, shades of his *ancien régime*.

But it's wrong to say that the embrace was *fierce*. It was *piano, pianissimo*. As if lute music followed us too, up and down the worn marble staircases. The

gentleness insinuated itself, wielding the power of assumption and custom, not crude might. Gentleness was the paradoxical strength of the place, the reason the word *fierce*, though inaccurate, comes to mind. There was no threat of violence in that muscle, but muscle it was. Nobody was a bully. An unchallenged chatelaine authority ruled. We, in our blue serge uniforms, formed a well-behaved estate.

• • •

The piano lessons started early, age eight—mine was another father determined to fill his child's mind with music. Not long afterwards, the Sunday dinner recitals begin, aunts and uncles sitting docilely with their coffee. I'm told to go to the piano, my father pulls rosin along the bow of his violin. *How about a duet for everyone, Patricia?* We seesaw our way along Dvorak's *Humoresque* #9.

These domestic displays were only the tip of my iceberg. Hours of practice, of daydream repetition, led me along the narrow creaking corridor of my convent school, to the little cell filled up with a grand piano. The window overlooked the cloister garden, a nun drifting below, reading her breviary. Angelus time, after lunch, everyone else playing softball, screaming madly in the distance.

I could hardly wait to get to that room. Not to practice. I just played, reinscribing errors and miscues and erratic tempi. Sister Mary Louise, preternaturally patient, did what she could. I was supposed to use the metronome, but I almost never did, maddened by its pedantic tic-tocking. It was interrupting me. Interrupting what, *ma chère*? Daydreams, the mind cantering over its landscape like an unbroken pony. The piano was a romantic sound track, not work I was doing. I was toiling elsewhere. Well, I wasn't toiling. That was the point, that was the pleasure. I was swooning. I was—how did he put it?—*sluggish, lax, drowsy*.

Music made these travels possible. My hands moved over the keyboard, my mind went...anywhere it wanted to go. Paris and New York were familiar destinations, all the more vivid for knowing nothing about them, not even anyone who had seen them. I also visited, revisited, the insides of certain books—the coach Becky Sharp throws Dr. Johnson's Dictionary out of, Tennyson's flower plucked, root and all, from the crannied wall, Blake's grain of sand, Ezra Pound's

petals on a wet, black bow—Sister Maria Coeli introduced all of them to us in English class.

They pulled me, pulled me back—or maybe they pushed me forward. I circled around them, kept circling. I also had to build a case against my brother who was a bully and against my mother who sided with my brother. I had to wonder why I wasn't one of the pretty ones. Or was I? Awaiting the right person to see beneath the surface (think *Jane Eyre*). I was busy. I wrote poems up there, and kept a diary.

I didn't think of any of these sketchy bits of writing as essays. I called them nothing at all. It wasn't writing. It was me. *Ainsi, lecteur, je suis moy-mesmes la matiere de mon livre*. So, reader, I am myself the material of my book. Montaigne's inaugural words are the motto of every diary.

Montaigne warned the reader against reading someone else's musings—his own—even while knowing very well he was going to publish his book, offer it for sale to the public. "You would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject," he says in his opening address to the reader.

But who has not been tempted to open a journal, a letter left on a hallway table—for those convinced of their honor, a postcard left face-up? Montaigne knew his essays presented a fascination, even a slightly illicit one. He knew his reader perhaps better than he knew himself—as writers do, being passionate readers before they become writers. And therefore knowing what allures, what enchants.

It had a lock and a key, the first book I wrote. A red leatherette five-year diary. The lock and key were the most important part—absolute privacy, the invitation to candor. A book that was a room to live in alone, speaking (my) truth to...well, to myself.

So writing was not fundamentally story-telling. It was attention. The hunting and gathering stage of civilization, the collecting of...what? Truth. Not "the truth" as it was purveyed in religion class, swanning forward, immutable, grandiose, the brittle carapace of dogma holding it aloft. This other truth was fluid, the mote in the eye, the sniff of the nose, the stroke of the hand reaching out. It was the truth of noticing, bits and pieces, the patchwork of reality. It had no superstructure, no system. Its order was the integrity of the eye, moving over chaos, but repudiating

chaos by the fact of its attention. The mind, displayed in a tumble of sentences, was the world's organizing angel, the companion of a life. To notice was to follow faithfully. A faithful companion. *Whither thou goest, I will go.*

• • •

Every few months Sister Mary Louise handed me new sheet music. I never knew exactly when this would happen, but it always renewed my flagging, entirely phony dedication to discipline. Getting new sheet music was turning over a literal new leaf. I hadn't mastered the earlier pieces, but I suppose Sister felt I'd gone as far as I was going to get, given my louché practice habits. New music might help. Her moist, protuberant eyes shone behind her glasses, radiating an unshakable trust in extending the second, third and ever-renewable next chance.

The new music, often from European publishers, was crisp and fresh. Sister's favorites—and mine—came from France, the cream pages of *Editions A. Durand et fils*, the publisher of Saint-Saens and Debussy. Durand employed a sinuous Art Nouveau font on its covers, its address printed at the bottom left. The words *rue* and *Paris* attested to its exotic bona fides, yet also to a real place you could go to if you ever somehow got yourself to Paris, unlikely as that was.

The paper was thin, so porous it attracted dirt and smudges. The willowy pages were taller than stout American sheet music. I knew from experience, it would soon lose its starch. The pages would go limp on the music stand, soften at the edges, wrinkle and tear as I hauled them back and forth from home to school. Before long, the luscious cream paper would be shabby, the allure lost.

But I always forgot this on the day I received the new sheets. On new music days, today was always the first day of the rest of my life of good intentions. Today I was a believer. Perfection was very near. I could touch it.

A Saturday morning in May, therefore, and I had biked on my blue Raleigh three-speed to the convent and been admitted by Sister Portress to the strangely empty halls, so busy during the week, up the dark staircase to the fourth floor where Sister Mary Louise awaited me. The room was spacious, but like all music studios it felt cramped, two baby grands bulging their big hips at each other, a

white bust of Chopin on one, a bloodless Schubert on the other.

The windows of the studio were tall, set so high the view was all sky and the ends of a few beseeching elm trees, freshly budded. The aerial view gave the odd sensation of being on a plane, though I had never been on a plane. No problem—mind-travel in the practice room had provided the experience of flight long ago.

On windy days the big panes of glass rattled in their sashes. This early day in May was very windy, overcast, clouds bundling their way from window to window in a big troubled hurry, the windows clattering.

Today we begin again. This is how Sister Mary Louise spoke on new music days. She too was a believer—what else?—she was a nun after all. She beamed at me. I was a good girl, and such a talker. I could make her laugh. I could surprise her just by saying how something struck me. When the rain hits the black asphalt of the street, I told her one day, it looks just like ballerinas *en pointe*. *How ever did you think of that?* She said in her mild, astonished way. Once I said I wished science would come up with a pill for breakfast, lunch and dinner so a person wouldn't have to stop reading for meals—and of course there would be no dishes to do. She looked appalled, as if I had suggested something shameful. *Some of us look forward to our dinner,* she said, abashed, her plump self settled under the black tarp of her habit.

Today we begin again. She rose from her chair and went to the tall oak cupboard along the back wall where sheet music was neatly stacked on shelves in a system known only to her. She returned, holding the unblemished folder of Debussy's "La fille aux cheveux de lin" in the delicious Editions Durand cream. The girl with the flaxen hair, one of the watery pieces she favored.

She sat at the other piano and played it straight through. The lilt of lyrical girlhood floated with aquatic ease from her capable hands over the light and dark waters of the Impressionists. She handed me the music. I opened the virgin sheets carefully while she reminded me that the metronome was my friend, and called out as usual, *count, dear, count*. She reached over and made several marks on the music with her soft pencil to indicate the fingering she wanted me to follow, sometimes overruling the printed fingerings of *Durand et fils*.

I didn't like these pencil marks. They marred the page. But at the end of

the lesson I closed the folder and placed the thin sheets carefully between my battered Bach *French Suites* and Schubert's sturdy *Moments Musicaux*, and everything was fine, though the flimsy Debussy extended beyond the heft of Bach and Schubert. But so what? The first day of the rest of my life of good intentions was still before me, still perfect, a matter of unbroken imagining. Downstairs, I retrieved my bike, and rolled the music gently, positioning it in the wicker basket attached to the handlebars so nothing would be jammed or damaged.

I jumped on the bike, took the curb with a frisky leap at the corner of Fairmount and Grotto (the monastic names of those streets!), and flew toward home, down the clickety-clack bumps of Fairmount's creosote paving. The streets still paved with these old blocks—only a few were left in the city—echoed with the memory of horse hooves when you rattled over them.

Have I ever been so happy for no good reason? A bolt of ecstasy shot through me. I was in New York—no, I was in Paris! On some rue just like *Durand et fils*. I rode a beam of invisible light straight to heaven—which (the *Five Year Diary* well knew) I didn't believe in anymore, but there it was, and I was in it.

The happiness arose from relief—I see that now. I hadn't been humiliated in the usual way by my lurching Bach, my careening Schubert. I hadn't had to face reality. Always a happy occasion. On new music days Sister did most of the playing. Nothing was expected of me. Now, on the bike, I skimmed madly downhill, demented with liberty. The girl with the flaxen hair was safe in the basket, my own brown hair blew in the wind. I considered trying to steer hands-free which my brother said girls were no good at.

How brief the bliss, how long the memory.

A dark dash of rain, as if targeted, hit the moss-colored Schubert, leaving a forest-green stain just as I reached the bottom of the hill. Then another, another, big jots splatting down lazily before the deluge, polka-dotting the sidewalk. I jumped off the bike at the corner of Victoria. Schubert could go, no problem sacrificing Bach.

But *La fille au cheveux de lin* must be saved. I couldn't leave the music in the basket and keep riding—Debussy's creamy edges peeked out from under Schubert's shabby overcoat like a delicate silk chemise.

I put the bike on the kickstand, grabbed the music, lifted my blouse, and stowed the bundle against my blessedly flat chest. And stood there, my arms crossed, the rain coming down now in earnest. Just stood there. I couldn't get on the bike—I needed both hands to hold the music in place. So my brother is right—girls are no good at riding hands-free.

Where to go? What to do? I was getting drenched. This rain was no ballerina *en pointe*. Furious sheets came down at a horizontal tilt. The music was sticking to my skin.

A car stopped, a man rolled down his window. *Why are you crying, little girl? Are you hurt?* I remember he said "little girl." I hadn't realized I was crying.

Never talk to strange men.

"The girl with the flaxen hair is getting ruined," I sobbed across to him maddened with misery, holding myself tightly around the chest, sniveling, snot out my nose. *Never call it snot.*

His kindly smile faded. I was a crazy child.

Did I know where I lived?

"Of course I know where I live," I snapped at him. *Never give them your address.*

Gently, tentatively, he offered me a ride home—he could fit my bicycle in the back, he said.

Nothing doing, mister. *Never get in a stranger's car.*

"My new music's getting all ruined," I sobbed, furious at him for being available and yet not available, enraged at him for being a stranger.

If I would tell him where I lived, he said sensibly, he could deliver the music safely, and I could ride home on my bike. Would that be OK?

I stared at him. Decision time.

I walked over to the car, fished the music out from under my shirt, thrust it in his window. The girl with the flaxen hair would have to go off with the stranger. I gave him our address.

Oh, that's just a few blocks away, he said. He smiled as if the problem were solved. He told me to ride home safely. *Stay on the sidewalks*, he said. *The creosote blocks get slippery in the rain.* A remark my father would make.

That's all.

Except for my mother's ferocity, the result of her heart-stopping terror when she'd looked out the window to see a man walking up the front stairs with my sheet music—the familiar Schubert and Bach. And no me. *I thought you'd been hit by a car. I thought you were dead.* She seemed exasperated that I wasn't.

Why on earth, she wanted to know, didn't I just keep riding home in the rain? I was so near. We could put the sheet music on the radiator to dry. No harm done. Everything would be fine. I was making a mountain out of a molehill. As usual.

And her sensible sigh. *Don't act like a sausage. It's nothing to cry over.*

But mother, there's always something to cry over, to think over, muse over, fret and fume over. Crying is only part of it, not even the important part, though the most theatrical. The little red book with the lock was getting an earful tonight.

The Debussy had absorbed a little of Schubert's green. Ruined. Nothing is perfect for long, though sometimes it's perfect for a little while. It can only be pried out of the moment, sequestered between the red leatherette covers where it begins its career as a memory. Bits of reality are pressed to the pages like wildflowers, flattened and faded, but *there*.

Perfect register between self and world—it does sometimes occur, fugitive, fleeting. There it was in the wicker basket on the handlebars of the Raleigh three-speed for its nanosecond. Worth noting.

The exquisite moment when the music flowed from Sister's fine old hands, and then my body braved the wind, the blond girl and I taking the turn deftly at Grotto, the horses of history clattering under the bicycle wheels. All of this in a mind full of future, revved with good intentions that would turn—I swear, *ma soeur!*—into good deeds. I will practice, I will give a perfect performance next Saturday.

Happiness can hold a lot of freight, and I was overloaded with joy that day, the hooves of the Raleigh clicking on Fairmount before the deluge.

It was nothing. Nothing to cry over. Nothing at all, really. But how many times has it floated me over despair? Just to think of that moment. The music and the speeding blue three-speed I commanded, hair whipped in the wind, the clattering old paving stones. I rolled this inner photograph gently, *molto pianissimo*, into the kit-bag of consciousness. The ground-beat of being, pounding like a heart, *forte, forte*.

"It is an absolute perfection and virtually divine to know how to enjoy our being rightfully," Montaigne says. He's thinking of the naked men his simple crude fellow has told him he saw in the New World. There's a touch of envy, maybe simply admiring wistfulness. To be so perfect in your being. To enjoy rightfully.

Utter joy is rare. Divine almost, he's saying. Of course it's a new world. It always is. He would strip naked, he says, to display his entire self in his essays. It is the purpose of such work, its glory, its humble task.

The moment lies somewhere ahead—not far—when, surely, everything can be said. Perfect register between the instrument of the self and the mysterious machine of the world.

Stand in the rain, protect the girl with the flaxen hair, the fierce, fragile lyrical self. Not to hide her, not to control her. Just to keep in reserve the alert intimacy of the ardent heart. Just wait. There's waiting to do, always. Lucky I'm *sluggish, lax, drowsy*. The job requires laziness. Big part of the job—being lazy.



Thinking in Comics

a roundtable on the present and future of the graphic novel featuring Matt Kindt, Hope Larson, Nate Powell, Dash Shaw, James Sturm, Jillian Tamaki, and Will Wilkinson

*Two decades ago, after Art Spiegelman was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for literature for *Maus*, there prevailed a sense that comics had finally grown up, that the graphic novel had arrived as a serious form of narrative art, equal to theater, film, and literature. The graphic novel has thrived since then, but its story has not been one of inexorable progress. Comics creators have weathered some booms and busts, and now struggle with a shrinking publishing industry and a fragmenting market. As in so many fields, the rise of the Internet has introduced new formal and commercial possibilities, while laying waste to traditional modes of production and compensation. This roundtable brings together a diverse group of outstanding graphic novelists to discuss the state of the form, its development and potential, as well the challenges, economic and artistic, that face comics creators today. As a bonus and enticement, Gulf Coast is proud to offer a taste of their striking work, both interspersed in this roundtable and on pages 198-200. Excelsior!*

—Will Wilkinson

Will Wilkinson: Tell me a little about yourself. How did you come to making comics? Was it something you always wanted to do? What's unique about comics as a form of expression that drew you in and keeps you wanting to make them and not something else?

Hope Larson: I started reading comics when I was seven or eight. My dad is a professor, and the whole family moved to France for a year while he was on sabbatical, translating a book. Comics are much more widely available over there, so I read a ton of *Astérix*, *Tintin*, and Disney comics. They had My Little Pony comics and Glow Worms comics, which I devoured. After we came back to the US I didn't really read comics again until high school,

“Comics don't require much—just pen and paper and focus. Poor people can make comics. Socially inept people can make comics. They don't even need much physical space...”

when I discovered manga and, later, indie comics. I was an anime nerd, too. I thought I wanted to be an animator or a cartoonist, and I ended up in the Film/Video/Animation track at Rochester Institute of Technology.

I wasn't comfortable with filmmaking—I was shy and insecure in my artistic and storytelling abilities. After one year I transferred into the illustration track. Then I transferred to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and took a hodgepodge of painting, printmaking, and anatomy classes. I spent a lot of my time making digital illustrations and putting them on my website. I wasn't thinking in terms of story or sequential anything at this point, just stand-alone images. Scott McCloud saw my illustrations and publicly encouraged me to try comics. I was so hungry for encouragement that I thought, “Okay! I'll try it!”

At the beginning of my senior year of college, I did an abortive stint on Girlamatic.com, a web comics collective. Then I hooked up with Neil Babra, Kazu Kibuishi, Kean Soo and the other kids in the *Flight* anthology. After graduation, I moved to Toronto with my husband. I couldn't get a job until my permanent residence card came through, so I drew a graphic novel about a girl and her imaginary friends, *Salamander Dream*. Kean Soo was also living in Toronto, and also working on a graphic novel about a girl and her imaginary friend, so we joined forces and put our comics online on a website we called the Secret Friend

Society. *Salamander Dream* was published by Chris Pitzer at AdHouse Books, and one thing has led to another.

I've run hot and cold on the medium throughout my career. I love comics, but making them can be lonely and frustrating. I work mainly with book publishers now, and the publishing industry isn't in great shape, so the business side of things is tough, too. I've been dabbling in screenwriting and filmmaking for the last few years, but some stories are just meant to be comics, not novels or films or TV shows or web series. I

"I saw no real difference between the diligent study of an Arthur Adams page and that of an Anthrax album."

love writing comics, exploiting the interplay of words and images. I'm taking an extended break from drawing, but I've been working with artists, and that's something I really enjoy. I'm currently working on a book with an artist who's relatively new to comics, and it's gratifying being able to pass my tips and tricks on to her.

Matt Kindt: I became aware of comics because of my older brother. He started bringing home *X-Men* comics from the grocery store, but I had to sneak into his room to get a look at them. So I tried to find some comics of my own that I'd like. I picked up *Daredevil* (the tail end of Frank Miller's run on the series) and liked it immediately because the main character shared my first name. It didn't hurt that the writing was pretty groundbreaking at the time.

My parents also bought us a bunch of *Tintin* books and I remember taking those on our long car trip vacations because it took forever to read them. As I grew older, I read pretty much everything Marvel and DC put out, all the way through high school. That was when I started writing a lot. I was drawing, too, but sort of independently. I would write a story and then do static illustrations to go along with it. Or I would illustrate my English reports. I wasn't taking any art classes and I'd never really considered it until my English teacher showed my reports to the art teacher, and she recruited me in the hallway between classes. That's when I really put it together: comics was the one occupation where I could both write and draw.

By the time I got to college I was burned out on superhero stuff and wasn't really sure what I was going to do. I liked art and writing pretty much equally. At

a comics convention in Chicago I randomly picked up *Eightball* #2 and #3, by Dan Clowes, and everything came into focus. I vividly remember reading those two issues while my brother was driving us home. I realized that this was what I needed to do. Comics. You could make comics that were fun, and weird, and had pulp elements to them, but were also for adults, with literary elements. From there I plotted a course to where I'm at now—*king of comics!*

I've been driven to make comics since that one day, really. I literally think in comics. I'd hate to work in film because I don't want to have a thousand cooks in the kitchen, and I don't like prose because it's not immediate enough and doesn't let me draw. When you put opposing words and pictures together, there really is a magic you can't get anywhere else. I love every aspect of the process, especially the design of the books. It's one of a few art forms in which the artist can get his vision out there without any interference. I think that enables comics to really produce some of the most honest and exciting work in any medium.

Dash Shaw: My dad read comic books, so they were always around. I started making them very early and kept going. I never took any breaks from it, really. The comics just changed as I became a different person, growing up, doing different things.

Comics activate so many different parts of your brain. They cross over into so many disciplines—writing, drawing, set-decorating, composition, acting. It's a collage medium. A good comics page does ten million different things at once.

Comics don't require much—just pen and paper and focus. Poor people can make comics. Socially inept people can make comics. They don't even need much physical space, if you draw at a small scale. It's easy to generate ideas through them. You can keep chasing things, following different ideas.

Jillian Tamaki: I always drew, because I enjoyed it, but also because I got positive feedback and attention for it. Like Matt, a sibling got me interested in comics. In my case, it was my younger sister, who loved *Archie*, *MAD*, and *Cracked* magazines. We liked to cut out the speech balloons and tape them to other pictures to create funny juxtapositions. I didn't rediscover comics until I was in my last few years of design school, when I discovered indie things like *Ghost World*, *Bipolar*, and *Optic Nerve*.

I made my first minicomic after I graduated in 2003. I had moved to a new city by myself and was learning to do adult things. Suddenly I had something personal to say, and comics seemed like good way to record it. Around the same time I started making more narrative comics with my cousin, writer Mariko Tamaki, because she suggested it, and I thought it would be a fun thing to do together.

It's hard to explain why I gravitate to comics. I think we just gel. I never found comics "difficult" to make, but the potential and depth of the medium is endless, which is fascinating. I have always been interested in harmony and discord between words and pictures. I think it creates humor and tension and beauty. I also like the comics scene, which I have found to be generally very stimulating and nurturing.

Nate Powell: Well, the Powell family legend is that I spontaneously began reading for the first time out of a Fantastic Four activity book when I was three, and I was hooked on comics shortly thereafter. That's about when I started drawing as well, though it wasn't until I turned 12 that I finally combined the two interests. My best friend Mike had been making comics for a couple of years already, and suggested

"I don't think an auteur comic is 'better' than a collaborative comic, but I do think it's perceived as being more authentic."

that we start making them together. Within a few weeks, I knew I'd found something I wanted to do forever, and I simply never second-guessed it. Comics were, and remain,

very empowering to me. The accessibility of the form was key, especially for a 7th-grader in Arkansas. It was such a thrill to discover that I could go to our shoddy arts-and-crafts store and actually find the tools I'd been looking for to make comics happen. Yes, all it takes is a pencil, some paper, and dedication. That still amazes me.

The power and inspiration from new musical frontiers must be addressed. Earth-shattering perspectives were revealed to me through speed-metal and punk bands. This made a circuit of sorts. I saw no real difference between the diligent study of an Arthur Adams page and that of an Anthrax album.

As I became more exposed to punk in the early '90s, I began to see zines floating around. I started self-publishing my comics in 1992 without first examining the mechanics of these photocopied zines. Once I started printing my own zines in

1994, I finally understood some things about layout and pre-production, and now had an outlet for weirder and more personal comics.

Comics' secret power is the subtle contract they make with the reader. Good narratives allow the reader to bring their own experience and perspective to the plate, leaving room for each reader to imprint their own content and sense of relevance on the comic.

Sometimes this takes the form of kids working through homophobia or racism in their lives via an *X-Men* comic. Sometimes

it's discovering the endless possibilities of our world within Ben Katchor strips. In return, comics require the reader to trust that the creator will take them somewhere else safely, for ten minutes, or two hours, or four days—to be transported in the hopes of being transformed.

“The average sales on graphic novels that aren't Marvel and DC isn't even a blip on the radar of mainstream publishing. To make it viable, you have to start young and run the marathon...”

James Sturm: My first career ambition was to be a paleontologist. By third grade I wanted to be a cartoonist! I started reading comics in the local newspaper. *Peanuts* was my favorite but I was also drawn to other strips, like *Agatha Crum* and *Quincy* and *B.C.* Each strip seemed to have such a unique personality; each world seemed to be so consistent and self-contained. By second grade I was reading Marvel comics. I enjoyed being able to recognize the artists who penciled and inked any given comic before even reading the credits. The idea that actual people made these things was exciting. So much of the media we consume is mass produced. Comics, or at least the comics I like, feel very intimate. Every mark, from text to image, is hand drawn.

WW: All of you are writers and illustrators both, and often work solo. Comics critics have come to call such creators 'auteurs', borrowing from film criticism. The artistic vision of an auteur film is supposed to be more or less under the control of the director, in something like the way a literary text is under the sole control of the author. Yet even filmmakers who write their own scripts depend heavily on the creative contributions of *many* other artists and technicians. In that sense, the solo

graphic novelist resembles the literary author rather more closely than does the auteur filmmaker. Still, writing, illustrating, and visual storytelling are all different skills, and there aren't many people who do them all equally well. Do you think that the scarcity of writer/artists has slowed the development of the graphic novel as a form? Although collaborative assembly-line production remains the norm for mainstream tights-and-capes comics, few aesthetically ambitious graphic novels seem to be produced in this way. Why do you suppose that is?

HL: After drawing my fourth graphic novel *Mercury*, I hit a point where I felt like I'd gone as far as I was realistically going to go as an artist. I was starting to hate drawing, and I was convinced that if I kept drawing my own scripts I was going to handicap my writing by shying away from stuff I didn't want to draw. I wrote *Who Is AC?* while telling myself, "You don't have to draw this," and it was liberating. Then I brought Tintin Pantoja on board to draw it. Meanwhile, I was drawing *A Wrinkle in Time*, which I scripted, but obviously didn't write. I spent a lot of time trying to understand my role in both situations, and it was a struggle because that idea of the auteur is so prevalent in literary comics. I don't think an auteur comic is "better" than a collaborative comic, but I do think it's perceived as being more authentic.

As for why there aren't many "aesthetically ambitious" comics produced this way—at least domestically—I think a lot of it has to do with the personalities involved. When Tintin and I were working on *Who Is AC?* I interfered as little as possible with her process, because that was what I would have wanted if I was the artist. Now I'm working on a new book with another collaborator, and I'm keeping a firmer grip on things, imposing more of my vision, or at least offering more feedback. Part of the reason is that I directed a short film last year, and the experience exploded everything I thought I knew about collaboration. It's important to be open, to listen. You don't want to squash people, because they won't do their best work. But if you aren't steering the ship, it can get away from you. It's a balancing act.

NP: I don't necessarily think that there's a drought of writer/artists today who can bring it together. I think we're seeing the practical and economic realities of creating comics since the 2009 publishing shrinkage.



Hope Larson, from *Mercury* (Johannesm Books for Young Readers 2010)

I've been doing comics full-time for about four years, but the only way I can make ends meet is by always pulling double-, and sometimes triple-duty. While writing and drawing my own graphic novel, I simultaneously draw someone else's book for hire. Publishers—the quasi-indies with corporate ties, who keep food on our tables by paying real advances—have been taking fewer chances on single-creator “literary” graphic novels. There's simply less money to go around. Does this mean the books in our heads won't get made? No, but it does mean a return to the cave—to a world where we work day jobs, or do illustration, or for-hire comics work, and draw our own graphic novels over the course of a few years, without decent advances. Splitting an advance two or three ways leaves you with enough money to live off for maybe six to eight months, and that requires you to make ends meet elsewhere for the remaining two years you need to finish the book.

It's frustrating, sure, but working with wildly different writers on *Silence of Our Friends*, *The Year of The Beasts*, *Sweet Tooth*, and *March* has also greatly improved my clarity, visual shorthand, and attention to what makes a story tick. Working

from someone else's script illuminates what is *not* described or defined, which determines my role both as a storyteller and as a creative voice, though I'm just the hired hand. Collaboration has made my solo work stronger, but I miss the utter weirdness that I've shied away from a bit.

DS: Lots of great comic books have more than one artist involved. *City of Glass*, *Watchmen*, and *Lone Wolf and Cub* spring to mind. Hergé, Roy Crane, and Tezuka

"Would I enjoy getting an MFA, teaching, and just drawing my own books whenever I could? Yes, except that I have zero interest in actually going back to school. I've got shit to do."

are all clearly "aesthetically ambitious," and they had lots of assistants. They used an assembly-line production process, but the assistants just weren't

credited. To pick a recent example, you can tell Alison Bechdel's latest book used a lot of photo reference. Someone had to pose for those pictures, or take those pictures, and that obviously affected the whole book.

I don't think you have to do all of the different skills well. You just have to cartoon well, and that's in a space that has something to do with all of those different things yet isn't all of those things. I can paint backgrounds for comics and cartoons, but I can't paint. I write comics, but I could never write a prose book. The list of things I can't do is very long!

JT: I suppose I disagree with some of the assumptions in your question. I have never heard of cartoonists being called "auteurs." To be honest, I feel there is less of a connection drawn between cartoonists and filmmakers than between cartoonists and writers. Maybe that has something to do with the similarities in the form of the "finished products," namely books. "Creators" seems like the go-to word, and even though it can feel a bit heady, I suppose it does encompass the weird, multi-headed aspect of the cartoonist skill set.

I don't think you need to do "everything" equally well to be an effective cartoonist. There's a reason why people love *xkcd* and Ryan North, etc. Has the graphic novel form really had a slow development? If anything limits graphic novels or the making of graphic novels, it's the pure economics of the endeavor.

It takes *so much time* to make these books that it must be a supplemented or subsidized activity for most people, even if they're very successful. Most people, even those who like making comics, don't have the temperament to endure the herculean task of producing a graphic novel. And the production period is so long for creator-driven books that logic dictates there can't be so many of them pumped out by any given person.

MK: The short answer to this question is economics. Making a living by writing and drawing your own comics is hard to do. I've been making comics full time in various ways since 2001, and it took me until 2011 to reach the same standard of living I had working "real jobs." So there's really two hurdles that keep creators from flooding into the comics industry. It's a very specialized skill set—to be able to not only write and draw, but also to put those together in an interesting or unique way that capitalizes on the art form. And it also takes a lot of time, and either a tolerance for low income or a spouse who can carry the financial load until comics start paying bills.

The average sales on graphic novels that aren't Marvel and DC isn't even a blip on the radar of mainstream publishing. To make it viable, you have to start young and run the marathon until you've created a name and body of work, or catch the lightning in a bottle and create a topical book that the mainstream media picks up on.

Personally, I've made it work by running the marathon, leaving a trail of books behind me and slowly building a career that can sustain itself without freelance design and illustration. I've also found that being the sole creator has allowed me to control the media rights to my work as well, and that has become a fantastic source of passive income (from movie options, etc.)

I don't mind collaborating "for fun" when I work on work-for-hire projects for Marvel and DC. I enjoy just writing and letting the artist do all the hard work. But for me that's the cherry on top of the awesome job of making my own comics all day every day.

"I have friends who say to me 'How can you expect me to work on comics? Really? I'd have to be insane. They pay me nothing and they take up all my time.' And my answer is 'Go insane.'"

There have been times over the years when I thought about quitting comics. Whenever I got to that ledge, I'd look over and wonder, *What else will I do?* And the answer was always, *Nothing*. I don't know when it happened, but at some point over the years I shaped myself into this crazy comic book making machine, and now I don't want to ever do anything else. Everything I do is filtered through the medium.

Ultimately, I think the scarcity of creators who can afford to make comics, and have the skill set to make them well, is what sets comics apart from other mediums. It makes those few books that rise to the top that much more exciting. It is a pure vision from an individual—something rare in any other medium. Prose would be the exception, but prose has been thoroughly explored over hundreds of years. Comics are a virgin landscape and we're still just scratching the surface.

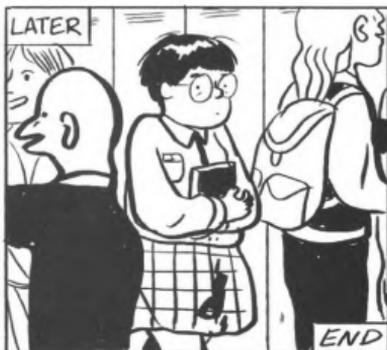
JS: I agree with Jillian, that a creator doesn't have to do "everything." What I love about comics is that the sum is greater than the parts. Hope is right when she says that there is a prejudice towards a single creator ("the auteur") in literary comics. However, I think this view is warranted.

Are there some great comics and graphic novels created collaboratively? Of course, but historically the best work has been done by a single creator. This may hold true for children's books too. Margaret Wise Brown and others wrote a lot of classics that others drew, but a larger percentage of the all-time great books are written and illustrated by creators with names like Steig, Sendak, Burton, Seuss, and Willems.

It's hard enough for a single creator, no matter how talented they are, to make a great book. When there are several collaborators and a publisher/editor—each offering a competing vision—the end result is usually one big compromise. Most graphic novels made by a collective feel compromised in one way or another.

When the bigger publishing houses started embracing comics ten or so years ago, there was a sense we'd see comics come of age. They have, in one sense, as a far wider range of material is now being published. But along with comics' newfound maturity there is the dysfunction that comes with dealing with the publishing industry. There are a few creators who can navigate this terrain and come out the other side with solid material that finds an audience. The majority of the cartoonists, however, get mauled by the process.

SUPERMUTANT MAGIC ACADEMY



If a cartoonist really wants to make “literary comics” (and I’m defining this odd term as work made with the intention of creating something true and honest and uncompromised) than I would suggest they don’t do this with any expectation of actually making money.

Yes, the economics of comics suck, as Matt and Nate so accurately detail. But is it really different in any of the other arts? My friends who write novels and paint and make documentary films are all in the same boat.

WW: Clearly, it’s tough to make a living in comics. How do you think the economic realities of the comics market affect the form and content of your work? Does the need to produce quickly affect your process? Are there projects you’d

“When young people ask me about applying to comics programs I suggest they draw a few hundred pages of comics on their own and figure it out as they go, and if they still want to study, *then* apply to school. It’s an awful gamble to spend so much money studying the craft when all you really need is a copy of *Understanding Comics...*”

like to undertake, but can’t? Many writers now earn Masters of Fine Arts degrees and go on to support their creative work by teaching creative writing in universities. MFA programs focused on comics and cartooning are beginning to spring up, and some of you teach in

them. How do you think the development of a full-fledged comics MFA system would affect the character and quality of comics and graphic novels? Do you think that would be a good thing?

JS: Figuring out how to sell and distribute the work has always been a secondary consideration. Though my comics account for a chunk of my income now, I’ve never had the pressure to earn a living by making comics. I always considered comic a calling and not a career. I’ve been fortunate that my “day jobs” have been rewarding both in term of flexibility and income, so that I could always devote a lot of time to cartooning.

It’s only now, well into my 40s, that I’m trying my hand at some more commercial work. This is less driven by the finances (I could make more an hour assem-

bling sneakers in Taiwan) than a genuine impulse to return to some of the genre material I loved as a kid. Plus, it's a blast to be working on content that my kids can not only enjoy, but also provide inspiration and feedback for.

The desire to produce quickly comes more from some internal sense of urgency than anything else. When I speed up too much, the work suffers. I really don't have the skill set that would allow me to thrive in a commercial environment. When I was just starting out, this realization was depressing. Now I think that not having that skill set saved me from a lot of bullshit.

There are a million projects I'd like to undertake! It's not the market that stops me. Even if I had billions there's the basic fact that there are only so many hours in the day.

A "full-fledged MFA system" sounds frightening. The *Poets and Writers* website lists 217 MFA writing programs. Only a small handful of these programs consistently graduate writers who have a profound impact on the art form. I don't think we'll ever see even a fraction of that many MFA cartooning programs. Cartooning takes special talent.

One of my motivations for starting a cartooning school (one that does offer an MFA) was my dissatisfaction with what was out there. My hope is that CCS [the Center for Cartoon Studies] will be regarded as the Iowa Writers' Workshop of cartooning.

Yes, you can get a how-to book and pull yourself up by your own bootstraps but what I see at CCS are driven and talented students who push each other much further than they would go if they were on their own. They are all in, fully committed, and cover a lot more ground over the course of two years than they ever would working in isolation. Is cartoon school for everyone? Of course not. But for some, in the right program, it can be quite useful.

NP: Rather than affect my solo books, the economic realities just determine that I've got to draw other people's stories to make ends meet. Most of the structural and stylistic changes in my work over the last few years have been lessons learned from doing work-for-hire and applied to my own comics. Pitching book ideas to publishers has generally underlined how happy I am with my current publisher, Top Shelf, with our family dynamic, and Chris Staros' role as editor.

I've had my share of book-industry editors pass on my book, but then encourage me to create one revolving around a hot social issue, of their choosing, that will move units. What's amazing about this is the ignorance it displays of how many years it takes to create a solid book. "Hot," relevant books aren't the ones produced in reaction to a blip in the news cycle; they're the ones that reveal something about the world we live in, and they emerge in sync with a larger social conversation.

My need to make comics quickly doesn't actively affect my process, as I'm already pretty fast. Having a baby is the major factor, and has slowed me from a rate of about 10 pages-per-week down to about five. Since I can only draw during naptime most days, I work seven days a week, and I'm basically "on call" to draw at all hours. It's the only possible way to get the work done.

Are there projects I'd like to do, but can't? Yes: my own books. My last solo graphic novel came out in 2011, and I currently have four for-hire books to draw, back-to-back, before I'll have enough time to finish my own. Until I can finally sit down to work on that story, something vital will be missing from my existence, and I'm aware of its absence every day.

The push for a creative-class-centered comics MFA path illuminates the pressures American comics creators are feeling, from our eternal legitimacy issues to our survival strategy of joining the book industry. Would I enjoy getting an MFA, teaching, and just drawing my own books whenever I could? Yes, except that I have zero interest in actually going back to school. I've got shit to do. Grad school is often a way to delay the crushing realities of daily life outside the academic bubble.

HL: The economic realities of the market *definitely* affect the form and content of the work I create for my primary publishers, which are book publishers. I started out writing work that was young adult in nature, but I've started pitching it younger, toward kids and middle-schoolers, because that's what publishers are buying. That probably makes me sound like a sell-out. Usually what happens is I'll write an idea and send it to my agent, and she'll suggest I change the age of the main character by a couple of years. If it's not going to mess up the concept, I have no problem doing that—especially if it's an outline and I haven't done the mental heavy lifting yet.

I write constantly, a wide variety of stuff—horror, mystery, romantic comedy, sci-fi—because I like a challenge. I'll try anything once! Most of that stuff doesn't

fit anywhere, so it sits in my drawer. There have definitely been books I wanted to do and was unable to sell, although in pretty much every case I look back and think, "Thank God no one bought that! It has major problems!"

I don't know that the need to produce work quickly affects my process. If someone isn't setting deadlines for me, I set them for myself. I thrive on deadlines. They force you to keep moving and stop you from getting too precious about things. Before I start a book, I make myself a bunch of little deadlines and checkpoints, so I know exactly how much I have to finish per day, per week. I'm always rethinking and streamlining my workflow. I'm not a heartless machine. I'm passionate and obsessive about my work. But I am methodical. I'm never totally happy with my work, but at least I hit my deadlines.

I never studied comics in school, and very few of my peers had any formalized instruction in comics. Based on my experience in art school, most people in those programs are never going to make it as professionals. My dad is a professor and he was always pushing me to go for an MFA. I got my BFA and said, "Screw that, I'm outta here!" I couldn't think

of a reason to get my MFA unless I wanted to teach, and I have no desire to teach. When young people ask me about applying to comics programs I suggest

they draw a few hundred pages of comics on their own and figure it out as they go, and if they still want to study, *then* apply to school. It's an awful gamble to spend so much money studying the craft when all you really need is a copy of *Understanding Comics* or *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures*, some paper, a pen, and a computer. Some people need a little push to get going, but I'm skeptical of anyone who isn't self-motivated. I'm skeptical of people who seek permission from the world. If you want to draw comics, go for it. No one's stopping you.

DS: I basically do two things: comics and animation. Sometimes one of them pays me. Sometimes something seems like it would pay me, but it doesn't. I did a music video for Sigur Ros and ultimately I lost money on it. Other things seem like

"Most people I know picked up a pencil and made a comic, showed up at a convention, went home and made another comic, went to the next convention, and so on. Those are the people who have pushed the medium forward."

they wouldn't pay me anything, but they end up making me money. I drew a web-comic called *BodyWorld*, serialized it on my site, and Pantheon paid me for the publishing rights near the end of it. I don't believe "Do what you love and money will follow." Lots of people do what they love and money doesn't follow. I don't even think that the work you do out of love will necessarily be your best work, or work done for money your worst. I only know that making work is *always* a better financial decision than not making work. When you wait for someone to pay you to draw a comic, you stop drawing comics.

I have friends who say to me "How can you expect me to work on comics? Really? I'd have to be insane. They pay me nothing and they take up all my time." And my answer is "Go insane." This section of comics that I'm in—alternative comics or whatever you want to call it—they're only for crazy people to make. Even doing things through book publishers is really only for self-motivated people.

I don't know much about an MFA system, but I went to SVA [the School of Visual Arts] for a BFA. I've visited places like CCS and MCAD. The teachers at all of these places are great, real-deal cartoonists. None of them are hucksters. You meet other students interested in comics. This all must be having some positive effect. People who worry that comics will get stodgy and academic don't realize that the teachers are people like Steve Bissette and Gary Panter and Zak Sally.

JT: Because I don't view comics as my primary means of making money, I feel like I have the freedom to become involved only in the projects that I want. I have come to peace with illustration—the commercial aspect, the compromise, etc. But I view comics as something I do for myself. I can't see that changing and I'm comfortable with splitting my time. Comics take too much time and effort for too little money to be miserable.

I started a web comic in 2010 because I wanted to make something quick and fun and instant. Previously, I had only worked in print, which has a long lead time, involves marketing, and seems more "monumental." I wanted to make something that didn't hinge upon aesthetics and wasn't answerable to anyone. Publishing something for free, instantly, seems like it could be a subliminal response to that traditional system. I certainly don't view it as any sort of savvy career move, but how one actually makes money off of a web comic is an entirely different discussion.

Time doesn't really factor in. I budget the time I need. Again, not relying on comics to sustain you is really freeing. While making my current book, a 300-plus-page graphic novel, I have had to turn down other jobs I would have liked to have done, but they weren't comic jobs.

As for comics MFAs, I'll give you a little background here, to demonstrate where I'm coming from. I got a BDesign at a Canadian art school, I teach in a BFA illustration program, I taught briefly in a cartooning program, and I have served as thesis advisor for both illustration and cartooning students. I am extremely ambivalent about art schools in general, but I continue to teach in them because I feel that they can be beneficial to certain students.

I think these new cartooning and illustration MFAs are evidence of a certain vitality. When I was a teenager, I didn't know illustration or cartooning was a thing

“The last few short comics I've drawn have been nine-panel grids. There's something about working within a strict form that appeals to me; it's economical, and the rhythm is built in. You could liken the appeal to that of writing a poem with established formal rules...”

one *could* do. Now, there is a demand for these programs, and they're being provided. People want to learn how to make comics and to study them in an academic setting. An MFA program in illustration/cartooning is most

appropriate for students who feel the experience would enrich them personally and artistically, and won't use it as a delay tactic to avoid hard decisions.

The Internet is having a much more profound effect on the medium than MFA programs. Online communities are bringing people together, helping people improve their skills, and platforms like Tumblr make it ridiculously easy to share your work. *There are virtually no barriers to entry if you want to make a comic*, and that's perhaps the reason cartoonists tend to be a bit skeptical of academic programs. To echo Hope, I don't know any professionals who studied comics in school, other than Dash. Most people I know picked up a pencil and made a comic, showed up at a convention, went home and made another comic, went to the next convention, and so on. Those are the people who have pushed the medium forward. There is something kind of scrappy about comic artists. A lot of them are going to eschew a formal setting anyway.

WW: Innovation in the literary novel is rare. Authors and critics alike often feel that everything has already been done to death. In contrast, the graphic novel is a relatively young form. What do you think remain the greatest unexplored creative possibilities for the graphic novel? What have you been exploring in your work? Are there any trails you'd like to blaze, or are you more interested in working within the constraints of a relatively well-established form?

MK: If I knew the answer to this question, I'd probably stop making comics. Part of the thrill of making them is coming up with a story and then sitting down to figure out how to tell that story in a way that can only be comics.

It's not just the "magic of words and images combined" that draws me in, but the entire package, from the cover

"Trailblazing is usually done with little awareness of its own trailblazingness. We're each stuck at the table, drawing all the time, like we're stuck in *The Shining* or something."

to the page numbers to the page margins. The ability to control exactly what the reader is holding in their hands is unique to comics. All of that, and figuring out how it can feed into the telling of the story, is what keeps me interested.

JT: I think I can envision a lot of potential for digital comics. The idea of "iPad comics" is the butt of a lot of jokes, but if you want to just talk about form, I think digital platforms—the web, handheld devices, etc.—expand the possibilities infinitely. Take Dash's *BodyWorld*, a comic that used the parameters of browser windows in a really interesting, creative way. To take it maybe even further, something like *Homestuck*, an interactive web comic I barely understand, is fascinating because it is very elastic and responsive since it's being created and published on the fly. Those things are not just about taking comics and putting them online; "Online" is baked into the thing itself.

Most of my work has been quite traditional. I made a few things when I was starting out that were more stream-of-conscious, non-narrative, aesthetic exercises. I love art comics. But the accessibility of a more traditional story is appealing to me, and making one is really, really challenging to do well. That's my focus, for now.

HL: Like Jillian, most of my work these days is quite traditional, increasingly so. I started out making a lot of wacky, surrealist stuff, and book-arts projects with cutouts and popup elements, and flaps and things. A lot of accordion folds. As I've become more interested in storytelling, I've switched to more straightforward methods. I appreciate structure. The last few short comics I've drawn have been nine-panel grids. There's something about working within a strict form that appeals to me; it's economical, and the rhythm is built in. You could liken the appeal to that of writing a poem with established formal rules. I love reading more esoteric, arty work, but it's been a long time since I was interested in going that direction myself.

MK: I'm with Hope on this one. I think having a pretty uniform structure works great because the layout eventually disappears as you read. You're sucked into the narrative and less distracted by bells-and-whistles layouts and tricks. Those are fun, from a formal perspective, but I think they definitely distance the reader. There are plenty of ways to break new ground with sequential art without trying to re-invent everything.

NP: Trailblazing is usually done with little awareness of its own trailblazingness. We're each stuck at the table, drawing all the time, like we're stuck in *The Shining* or something. My formal interests vary, depending on the book. I consistently play with panel borders, vignettes, word balloons, gutter and margin space, and white-black negative space. There's plenty of extra room for content, and even meaning, in these basic structural elements (day/night, indoors/outdoors, internal/external, past/present/future/parallels, etc.).

My for-hire comics are a bit more visually conservative, but in some ways they're more fun for that reason! I enjoy the limitations and parameters of script direction, and of the comics object itself. My formal approach changes a bit with each new book, and sometimes "progress" means reassessing the older stuff we take for granted. A creative path is not linear. It's more like choosing your alignment in D&D, tweaking attributes, working on permutations of influence from all directions.

To feel obligated to only look and move "forward," as we sometimes do, is laughable. Just listen to *Tales from Topographic Oceans* by Yes, followed by the first Ramones album. The latter is distinctly part of a conservative musical reaction to

the first half of the '70s. But rather than coming across as 1950s retro-rock, which it kind of was, it's an "obliterating moment," instantly making everything before it seem irrelevant, at least in that time and place. We cartoonists read each other's stuff, absorb and grow together, slowly weaving something that can be viewed for what it really is, in time—a movement of comics storytelling that spans decades.

JS: I'm interested in comics' formal possibilities only to the extent that they help express the story I want to tell. Comics whose content is only about formal exploration leave me cold. What excites me to no end is when an expansion of formal possibilities is absolutely essential to the story being told. Chris Ware's *Building Stories* is an example of that for me.

In my own work, when I consider too many formal options, it's easy for me to get lost at sea. I cling to the grid like a life preserver. When I stare at a page I just started—after I finish ruling the panels, but before I fill them in with words or pictures—I find it oddly comforting. Each panel is like the sound of a metronome, and the blank panels collectively provide a steady visual rhythm to build upon.

DS: I want to read stories I haven't read before. I'm excited when there's a new perspective, something that doesn't fit comfortably into a mold. Obviously, certain tropes make sense to repeat. People naturally want to tell stories about the same things—romance, adventure, etc. But something can be new inside of that. I'm working on a comic now called *Doctors*, and it's about doctors who travel into people's afterlives to bring them back from the dead. I think of it as an afterlife story, a very old type of story, but it's new to me somehow. It's about what I think dying would actually be like.

I love trying to draw different sensory experiences, or trying to draw things that I think are "undrawable." It forces me to think about the experience, what it's actually like, and how I could accurately communicate that. In *New School*, I have a sequence where the main character gets drunk. I did the drawings, warped them on the computer, then printed it out and re-drew the warped drawings. Everything is there, but slightly "off" or tilted. I guess that's a formal exercise, but I don't think of myself as a formalist, or even particularly interested in formal possibilities. It sounds so boring!

WW: Who's doing work right now that you especially admire? Why? Do you have a favorite classic?

HL: I'm always blown away by Gabrielle Bell, who elevates autobiographical comics to art. Lisa Hanawalt is incredibly funny and clever. And Sloane Leong is one of the up-and-comers to watch; I think she's going to be everywhere in a year. My favorite classic comic, hands down, is *Gasoline Alley*.

JS: Work I especially admire: Chris Ware, Seth, Jaime Hernandez, Richard Thompson, Dan Clowes, Rutu Modan all come immediately to mind. I could easily list another 100 names, including my fellow roundtablers. There are just so many fantastic cartoonists working today.

I'll always love *Peanuts*. I read Art Spiegelman's *Maus* every year. William Steig and Robert Crumb are on my Mt. Rushmore of cartooning.

JT: Here's the part where I sheepishly admit that I don't read very many comics. That said, I think Michael DeForge is going to become a major figure in cartooning. His work is incredibly confident and clear for someone only in his mid-twenties. I feel I have learned a lot from reading his work and, actually, observing his career choices.

My favorite comic is *Ghost World*. Maybe not the most earth-shattering choice, but it was the first comic I really emotionally connected with. It inspired me to make comics myself.

NP: I was blown away by what I've read so far on Brandon Graham's *Prophet* run, regardless of artist, all of whom rule so far. Then there's Lilli Carre, Thomas Herpich, and Genieve Castree, whose new book I haven't read yet, for their ability to produce the kinds of comics storytelling I wish I could do all the time. I think Becky Cloonan is the best inker in comics, and is hands-down among the best storytellers too. I also eagerly await anything by Gabriella Giandelli, Katie Skelly, Ethan Rilly, Dash, and Jesse Jacobs. As for classics, I learn something every single time I look at Alex Toth's work, and I owe both my desire to draw comics, and my social conscience, to Chris Claremont's *X-Men* run.



Millian Tamaki, from *Skin* (Groundwood Books 2001)

DS: I like all of the cartoonists other people mentioned. I'm going to try to answer the "why?" part for a few of them. Lisa Hanawalt: Juxtaposition between "tight" drawing and really funny writing makes this collision that's like the absurdity of reality, like life! Stupid stuff taken seriously, serious stuff taken stupidly. Michael DeForge: So smart to do a comic about ants. They fit into small panels so perfectly! It's really hard to make design-drawing so completely 100% "readable." He does it. Very funny. Thomas Herpich: I was a freshman at SVA when Tom was a senior and I vividly remember he was interviewed by the school magazine and they asked him "What are you going to do with your comics after you graduate?" and his answer was, "I'm not going to do anything with them. They're for myself." Changed my life. Now he's warping kids' minds on *Adventure Time*. My classic pick: *Buz Sawyer*.

MK: I find that the older I get, the less I read comics. The creative field is relatively small compared to prose and film, so I think it's actually possible to catch up on

all the great comics. With prose and movies I keep discovering authors and creators I'd never heard of, whole bodies of work I've never seen. Comics has a much more shallow pool. Which is why I think it's important to teach comics in school, if you can, to get more people choosing comics as a way to express their pure vision without any interference. That is to say, I currently don't read many comics. Chris Ware, Dan Clowes, and Grant Morrison can't be beat. For pure cartooning, I think Jeff Smith and Brian Hurtt tell a story like no one else. I'd put Zander Cannon in that same category. I love *Black Beetle* by Francesco Francavilla. He's my modern-day Alex Toth candidate. Dave McKean's *Cages* is timeless. David Mazzucchelli is an all time great, one of the few cartoonists to work in several different styles and genres and able to master it all—from *Daredevil* with Frank Miller up to *Asterios Polyp*. I can't think of anyone with a wider range of work that is all equally amazing.

As for classic stuff, I've always loved Dick Tracy, Alex Raymond, Jim Steranko, and Jack Kirby. And I'm on board with Alex Toth! I could study his stuff all day long.

END

Tim Riggins Speaks of Waterfalls

You want to know what it was like?
It was like my whole life had a fever.
Whole acres of me were on fire.
The sun talked dirty in my ear all night.
I couldn't drive past a wheatfield without doing it violence.
I couldn't even look at a bridge.
I used to go out in the brush sometimes,
So far out there no one could hear me,
And just burn.
I felt all right then.
I couldn't hurt anyone else.
I was just a pillar of fire.
It wasn't the burning so much as the loneliness.
It wasn't the loneliness so much as the fear of being alone.
Christ look at you pouring from the rocks.
You're so cold you're boiling over.
You've got stars in your hair.
I don't want to be around you.
I don't want to drink you in.
I want to walk into the heart of you
And never walk back out.

Tim Riggins in Midland County Jail

Billy Billy

Why won't they ever

Turn out the goddamn lights

Tim Riggins Imagines Heaven

It's a great sea of stupid people.
An ocean of idiots.
Everyone just sort of bobs around
And bumps into each other.
A lot of the stupid people are kids.
Fat kids, ugly kids.
Short kids without any talent.
Kids that can't even successfully
Fuck something up,
Like water.
How are you not able to
Fuck up some water, kid?
I'm not even kidding.
All these kids that can't microwave a burrito
And their short, fat, ugly, stupid parents.
Everyone's got on water wings.
God the water is nice.
You take a wave in the face.
It stings a little.
Everyone laughs at you,
Real dumb and happy.
You laugh too.
You're a complete moron.
It's miles to the ocean floor.

Tim Riggins Invents a New Number

I love you so much

I want to bury my fist in your chest.

Eleventeen.

Fauxbade

I teach all day, get a weak signal at night,
Malbec, Idol, pasta, peas, cherries. Night, night.
Wake at three a.m. to wind-streaked dark, I know
death thinks about me, like a dog: we are present
to each other, afraid sometimes, but the relationship
is complex, without words, mostly wild, not fit
for inside a house, night. So I read the walls. Walk
the empty rooms like a vine. I begin, begin, begin, begin
nothing. Yesterday, I was rushing, signed an e-mail
Live, Heather, hit send, saw then, how I uncommanded
my death. Days are slow-coming, wide as
waves. The phone rings! My neighbor sees my light
at six in the morning, calls. It's about the tree. I watch him
from my kitchen window, at his kitchen counter, phone
in hand. Will I give my blessing to take down the old
maple tree on our lot line? My neighbor is ninety-two
years old. The tree is in its eighties. Outside, at dawn,
we three meet on the lot line, look up, into the sky,
up into the heavy limbs, laced with vine, the deaf
branches, the darkness, the streaky light, the depth, the black
tree, the lines; we do not touch.
We do not touch any of it this morning.

I'm Not Crazy About You

You warn me you'll be wearing a suit. Don't.
Warn me if you're going to be naked, killed, careless,
in flames. Sometimes I sleep in my dress.
Sometimes I wear a nightgown as a dress and not
just down to Shell to refuel. I wear pajamas to class. You don't
own a vehicle, or a child, or a novel, or time.
You were a gymnast in the Ivy League. You still do
the rings. I can't wear a ring for more than an hour
or I feel bonded. Why don't you smile *open*?
Your teeth are in your mouth. My teeth are mouse dominoes,
scattered, shining. But I don't hold back. I let laughter
come out of my mouth, my pancreas, my thighs.
Have you seen a dog laugh? It's not like that.
I can fake a dinner party. Your vision is blurred. Since
the Eighties? What are you not looking at? Can you see me?
I'm next to you on this bench. That's my leg on your lap.
You are a vegetarian. I am not made of radishes.
You've lived by Central Park two decades and have never seen
the fountain, Columbus, the angel, or the elm zoo? Attracted
to the green and blue, with whitecaps, I arrived on earth in September,
1964. My first words: "Where's the park?" I grew up in a house
with snakes and vines creeping in through cracks of their making.
I'll be buried in a park where I'll continue
these love letters, mailed by pigeons.
(That doesn't really work but it's important to send paper
into the sky in a *mouth* of some kind. It's shouting and biting
which is also exactly like love.) I planted an ash sapling—a yearling—
in my bed. Yes, it struggles there. But I like a park because it's not wild

but it's still nature. You are a park: maintained, strange,
with seating. If you're France, really France, not just working
for France, I'm a potato. You can give me anything.
I soak it all up. You are a small strong man. I want
to misunderstand you and be on you. When I'm in a pool,
I like to be dragged about by my hair. Is this the humidity
or are you sticking to me? I'm not
going to warn you. That's all I know about love.
No warning. We lie down, panic, lie, down, extend our lives.
It's like dog years. I'm not crazy about you.

Stop warning me. I'm not crazy about you.
Put me in your mouth. Touch my roots. We can see.

How to Be Chinese

Take pleasure in the surprise on people's faces when you say, "My name is Mackenzie Altman." When they ask, explain that yes, your mother adopted you from China; no, you don't know your birth parents; no, you don't speak the language. Smile politely when they say you have no accent.

At eighteen, accept a place at a small liberal arts school in Ohio, four hours away, just over the state border. According to the website, the incoming freshman class is 450. Its average Asian population is three percent. Do the math: thirteen and a half Asians in your class. Try not to think about who the half is. Announce to your mother that you want to get in touch with your heritage: make it a going-to-college resolution. She will be delighted. "Kenz," she will say, "Oh Kenz, I'm so proud." She has wanted this since you were an infant, since she carried you off the Beijing-Detroit flight swaddled in a Minnie Mouse blanket. She has taken you to a Chinese restaurant on your birthday every year; she has always bought you panda teddy bears, the Asian Barbie. Your mother will kiss you, her eyes glossy with tears.

Don't bring up the difficulties of learning to be Chinese in the middle of Michigan. Don't remind her that except for the waiters at The Pearl of the Orient, you have never met another Chinese person. Don't tell her you have no idea where to begin.

• • •

Begin with a false start. In your first week of college, join the Chinese Students Association. At the introductory meeting, in a conference room in the union, there are fourteen of you. Look around and think, "This is what China must be like." Then blush. Look around and think, "My god, we all *do* look alike." This meeting's get-acquainted activity is mahjong. The other students are all international, from Beijing and Shanghai, with vaguely British accents. Pull a chair up to the corner of a table. "Watch," one girl says. "We'll teach you how." It is glamorous, like *The Joy Luck Club*. Prop your elbows on the table and feel porous, ready to soak up culture.

Except you have no idea what's going on. In the middle of an English sentence a patch of Chinese will pop up, sudden as switching the station on the radio. "My boyfriend, you know, he *m-m-m-m*. And I said, you know, I don't think *m-m-m* really *m-mm*, but it's like *m-m-m*." Parts fall out of the conversation like paper snowflakes you cut out in kindergarten, mostly holes. You want to ask the girl next to you to translate, but you glance at her name tag and don't know how to pronounce what's there. *Xiaoxia*. She looks over at you and smiles.

"Do you get it?" she asks. Four pairs of hands stack mahjong tiles into brick walls. Suddenly the table is a tiny fortress with you on the outside. Nod and smile. Tell her you have to go. Forget to say thank you on your way out the door.

• • •

Begin again, in that most American of all places: McDonald's. October. You're at the register waiting for your Big Mac when a voice behind you says, "What would you recommend?"

"What?" you say, turning. This is a question you associate with steak houses, with restaurants that have specials. The boy behind you is Chinese too, hands tucked into pockets, a soft doglike expression in his eyes. Wonder if this boy is screwing with you. You get your order and the cashier turns to the boy, who points to your tray and says, "I'll have the same."

Ask him about himself as you peel the paper from your burgers. He tells you his name, Winston Liu; that his family moved to the U.S. a few months ago from Hong Kong and lives half an hour away; that he's a freshman too. Marvel in unison about how you haven't met until now. Listen to Winston's voice for a trace of an accent, but don't find one until he says the word *strawberry*. After that you can hear it everywhere: a faint Britishness in the vowels, a slight mingling of *L* and *N*, the hard *ch* when he says *Chicago*. It's sexy, the way the voice and the face don't match; like artfully clashing clothing, like mussed-up hair.

"Say something in Chinese," you tell him.

"Like what?"

"Like anything."

He thinks for a moment, then says something. English words lurk in the sounds: *Jaw, deem, naugahyde*.

"What does that mean?" you ask.

"Pardon me, miss, my hotel room is full of monkeys."

Lean across the speckled plastic table and kiss him. His lips taste of salt and ketchup, which you find strangely exotic. Don't realize that this is the taste of your own mouth as well.

• • •

For your first date Winston takes you to dinner. There are two Chinese restaurants in town, in strip malls across the street from each other. Peking Garden is the one you know. It has tasteful, smoky watercolors of mountains on the walls, and each sugar packet teaches you the name of a Chinese boat: sampan, junk. But the food comes on pink and white Corningware; the waiters bring coffee after the meal without asking, and they're all students, white kids with the same flat midwestern tones as you and your mother and everyone you know. Winston takes you to the other one, Happy Buddha, which is tucked between Office Max and the Home Depot. Everyone says it's much more authentic and, as a result, when you go in on Saturday evening, you're the only customers there.

Look around to see what it's like in a *real* Chinese restaurant. The tablecloths are pink and the napkins maroon. The teacups don't have handles. Honeycomb balls of red paper and gold plastic bats dangle from joins in the ceiling tile. Worry that your people have bad taste. A woman croons in Chinese over the speaker system. Sit in a corner booth and imagine you're in China. In a minute you recognize the tune being piped in: it's the theme from *Titanic*.

The waiter at Happy Buddha is the age your father would be, if you had a father, with skin the deep tan of tea. He has an accent and needs a haircut. When he asks if you want ice water, his tone is almost an accusation, and it takes you a minute to understand what he's said. Say, "Yes please," and smile brightly. Try not to be disappointed when he doesn't smile back.

Winston skips the moo shu and the lo mein and the General Tso's chicken, all the things you and your mother love, and orders dishes you've never heard of.

"You sure?" the waiter says. He looks at you out of the corner of his eye. Then he says something to Winston in Chinese, and Winston looks at you and nods. Nod too, as if you understand. The waiter finally scrawls a few characters on his notepad. After he goes off to put in your order, ask, "What did he say?"

"Oh," Winston says, "he wanted to know if you were Chinese."

The food, when it comes, isn't bad, but it's strange. Its textures unnerve you: blocks of tofu the consistency of your mother's flan; crispy yellow noodles and brown gravy and knuckles of spareribs that are mostly bone. The waiter watches you eat from across the room, sitting at another table and smoking a cigarette. Try not to catch his eye as you put sugar in your tea, as the spareribs slip from your chopsticks again and you reach for a fork.

When dinner's over, Winston pays with a fifty-dollar bill. Then he goes to the bathroom, and the waiter says something to you that you can't quite make out. Say, "Hmm?" and miss it again. You can't understand until he says, quite clearly, "Do you want to take this home?" and you realize it isn't the accent: he'd been speaking Chinese. Say, "Yes, please, wrap it up," and hope he doesn't notice how red you've become.

While you wait for your doggie bag, look at the placemat, now stained with grease and drops of brown sauce. Find your birth year and learn that you are a dragon. It makes you think of yourself as sleek and powerful and assured, not small and traitorous. It says: *You are determined and passionate, a quick learner.* Look the waiter in the eye when he returns and tell yourself that the look in his eyes isn't pity.

After Winston drives you back to your dorm, wait for him to leave, then slip across the street to Pinocchio's and order two slices of pepperoni. Clap them between two paper plates and smuggle them back to your room to eat alone, with a rerun of *Friends* on.

• • •

A few weeks later, Winston calls and asks if you'd like to meet his mother for Sunday brunch. She comes down to visit, he says, every couple of weeks. Hide your surprise. You've gone out a few times—to a safe PG-13 comedy, and to the first football game of the season, where you held his hand in the pocket of his coat

and tried to explain what a blitz was. You haven't even mentioned him to your own mother yet. Is it time, you think, to meet parents?

"She really wants to meet you," Winston says. "She thinks it's wonderful that I'm meeting other Chinese students." Feel a rush of warmth, like a deep hug. Wonder about this woman: a Chinese mother. What does she look like? You can picture only your mother with her hair dyed black. Say, "All right, what time?"

Winston decides on The Vineyard, the wood-paneled restaurant everyone takes visiting parents to. By the time you get there, two minutes early, he and his mother are already seated at a white-clothed table. Mrs. Liu wears a fur coat, dark and sleek, and two gold necklaces. On her left index finger is a circle of jade the size of a dime.

"Mackenzie," she says. She holds out her hand but doesn't shake yours, so that you end up grasping the tips of her fingers like the corner of a wet dishcloth. "You so thin," she says. For a moment you think she's going to pinch your cheek.

"Thank you," you say after a pause, and she smiles at you with her lipsticked lips closed, as if you've made a mistake. She orders a cup of fruit salad and a croissant, and you feel vaguely disappointed at the Europeaness of it, though you and Winston have both ordered waffles, with bacon.

"What your mommy do?" Mrs. Liu asks.

"An architect," you tell her.

"And your daddy?"

You have a stock answer, a stock tone for this.

"Oh, it's just my mom and me," you say. "She adopted me as a single mom. Just the two of us girls."

"Mm-hm," she says, as if you've said something fascinating.

Winston's mother is a feng shui expert. Feng shui, as far as you can tell, is good luck through interior design. She doesn't work. His father is some kind of businessman, in China a lot. This week he's in Shanghai. Mrs. Liu asks what your major is, and you tell her you haven't decided yet. When she lifts her eyebrows, add, "But I'm thinking of East Asian Studies."

"You want to learn about your culture," Mrs. Liu says. "That's goooooood." She draws out the last word like she's spinning a thread of silk. Then she smiles, a real

smile this time, and slices a chunk of cantaloupe with the side of her fork.

"You adopted?" At your nod, she says, "Very important, you learn about your culture." The way she says it, like an edict, makes you feel entitled. *Culture* glistens in the distance, like the prize in a scavenger hunt.

After that, brunch follows a pattern. Mrs. Liu speaks to you in Chinese. You can pick out only your name, which comes out like three words: Ma. Ken. Zee. Smile blankly while Winston says, "Mom, remember? Mackenzie doesn't speak Chinese." Mrs. Liu apologizes, patting your hand with hers, which is pale and cool and soft, like a little satin cushion. "You keep listening, you pick it up," she says each time. "You born with it, inside you understand it. In here." She taps her chest.

Don't tell them about the package in your mailbox last month, the eight-CD set of *Introductory Chinese* from Barnes & Noble, the note from your mother saying, "Picked up one for myself too—we can learn together." Lesson One: "How are you? I am an American. I speak a little Chinese, but I don't speak well." In your mouth the words tasted strange as gravel. Don't tell them how Lesson Two bewildered you, how you forgot the word order, how you jumbled the words for "eat" and "is," the words for "buy" and "sell." How when your mother called last week, sounding like the woman on the tape, you understood nothing until she spoke in English. "*Do you want to have a drink at my place?*" Lesson Eight: Meeting People." After a moment: "Are you not there yet?" Try to forget the care package that arrived yesterday, chocolate-chunk cookies, hot cocoa mix, tortilla chips and salsa, a note from your mother that read, "I promise to stop propositioning you." Focus instead on Mrs. Liu's eyes, the same deep brown as yours. Chant her words in your mind: *you born with it, inside you understand it.*

After the meal, say goodbye in the parking lot. Mrs. Liu takes your hand and the jade in her ring presses into your fingers. She says, "Mackenzie, I buy a lot of art for our new house, Chinese art. Maybe you want to come and see it? Learn about your culture?"

"I'd love to," you say. Behind her, Winston beams.

"Good," she says, and gets into the car. Winston pecks you on the cheek and whispers, "Call you later," and they're gone in a streak of pale gold Lexus.

• • •

That night, go over to Winston's room. Kick off your shoes and sink down onto the bed. Like you, like most other freshman, he has a single; the university believes it prevents rooming conflicts. But the rooms in his building are older, and awkwardly shaped: the desk has to go in the niche in the wall, the bed in the corner, with the closet at its foot.

"So that was my mother," he says, looking at you sideways from the chair.

"She's nice," you say.

"She likes you. She wants you to come by the house. Next weekend, maybe."

You feel a tingle in your shoulders and feel his eyes resting on you. Don't meet them. Survey the built-in mirror on the closet door, the cinderblock walls painted dingy off-white.

Winston says, "So your mom adopted you alone?" Tell him yes. Tell him, "Nowadays that's not allowed. Nowadays there are more rules. You have to be married. You have to be straight. You can't be blind, or hard of hearing, or have a wooden leg or epilepsy or someone else's kidney. Nowadays they screen you to make sure you're not a criminal, or a crazy."

Don't explain that she'd always wanted a baby but never found the right man, that when she read that China was opening its orphanages she'd cried right there in the coffee shop, tears spotting the newspaper. That when she came to China to pick you up she had horrible stomach cramps all sixteen hours, threw up three times into one paper bag and another and another, as if her body were atoning for the lack of labor. Don't tell him that when she first picked you up in her arms, she whispered, *Hello beautiful, where have you been all my life?* These are private stories. Push them to the back of your mind and give Winston your biggest ironic smile. Say, "Good thing my mother acted fast."

• • •

From the outside, Winston's house looks like all the others in the development: biscuit-colored and irregularly shaped, the kind described in the brochure as both "dramatic" and "homey." Every hedge is groomed to the same eggplant shape. When Winston wheels his car into the driveway, wonder how he can tell them all apart.

"Do a lot of Chinese people live here?" you say.

He looks at you as if you're crazy.

"Are you kidding?" he says. Laugh, as if you are, and turn away as he pushes the gearshift to park.

You expected rosewood furniture and paper screens, but there's only a tan leather sofa, cream-colored drapes. It could be your house. The only thing different is the art: ink paintings of mountains on long cloth scrolls, watercolors of fish in cinnabar red. Move around the room, murmuring admiration. Your favorite is a sculpture of a running horse, three feet in the air like a still frame of a movie.

"This one very famous," Mrs. Liu says. "From the Han Dynasty. You know the Han Dynasty?" When you shake your head, she frowns. "Your mommy not teach you about your culture?"

Know that you should explain, that your mother did what she could with books from the library, encyclopedia articles, photo-rich coffee-table books. Think of the backyard planted with bamboo and Chinese maples, the Jackie Chan movies, the teapot and cloisonné chopsticks from Pier 1. Try not to laugh and find yourself teetering on the edge of tears instead, your eyes growing hot, threatening to melt. Focus on the horse, the insouciant tip of its head, the way it's running so fast it looks like it's flying. What you thought was ground is really a tiny swallow, the horse's hoof balanced on its back. Mrs. Liu reaches over and pats your hand. Fight the urge to clutch her fingers, to press them to your cheek.

She serves you cookies, shallow tan and brown-striped cones. They remind you of hats you've seen in National Geographic, on the heads of women in rice-paddies. Cow ears, she says they're called. "Winston not like these," she says, looking at him out of the corner of her eye. "Winston like Oreos better." He rolls his eyes and sips his tea, and she smiles. Understand: this is a joke between them. She pushes the bowl toward you. "These ones my favorite. Ever since I was a little girl." When you put one in your mouth, they are surprisingly hard and crunch between your molars and have almost no taste at all.

Ask her where she gets them, and she says, "At the Chinese grocery. You like? You can get some."

Tell her there was no Chinese grocery where you grew up, that you don't

even know where there is one. "You never go to a Chinese grocery?" She snaps her lips shut like a pocketbook. Swallow. Swallow again. Ask, "Could you take me sometime?" Feel your heart pound. Hold your breath, sit very still, press your palms, which are suddenly damp, against the thighs of your jeans. Then Mrs. Liu nods slightly.

"Next weekend," she says. "We go Saturday. Okay?"

She leans across the table and tops up your cup of tea. Her hands are sure and steady, the tea rising fast and stopping just shy of the cup's brim. Pick up her habit of laying one hand over the other, as if covering something private. Search her face for signs of resemblance: the bow of a lip, the flare of a nostril. She could have been your mother, this woman.

• • •

Back on campus, spend the night in Winston's room. Don't take your clothes off. When Winston curls up beside you, notice the faint incense-smoke smell of his skin. Lean into his neck and breathe deep, as if you can take him in through your breath.

The next morning, back in your own room, your answering machine blinks. Press the button and release your mother's canned, staticky voice into the room. *Hey Kenz, it's me. Just wanted to say hi. Talk to you soon.* It's Sunday. You picture her at home, alone now, doing the laundry, starting the crossword. She likes to do it over coffee, racing the spin cycle, trying to fill in the last square before the dryer buzzes. She will be waiting for your call.

Wait until lunchtime, when you know she'll be out at the store. *Hi Mom. Guess I missed you again. I'll try back later.* Don't try back later. Spend the night with Winston, and the next night, and the next. Talk about his life in Hong Kong, about his mother. When he asks you about Michigan, tell him you want to hear more about Victoria Peak and Stanley Market. When he asks you about your mother, press your face close to his and kiss him until he's quiet.

• • •

Next weekend is parents' weekend, just after midterms. The idea is to resuscitate the students with restaurant dinners and Tupperwares of cookies from home. When your mother calls the Thursday before, she says, "Kenz, I expect a guided tour of campus. And maybe you'd like to invite some friends for dinner? There must be some fancy places you've been dying to try."

"I'm really busy," you blurt out, and there's silence on the other end of the line.

"Of course," your mother says at last. "You must be tired out from midterms. Well, you'll be home at the end of the month for Thanksgiving, right?"

"Of course," you say. "Thanksgiving, of course."

"Take care of yourself," your mother says. "Rest up. Don't get sick."

Hang up the phone. Tell yourself she can visit some other time, that you're sparing her crowded university hotspots and bad cafeteria food. Tell yourself that your mother doesn't know when you're lying.

• • •

That Saturday, Mrs. Liu picks up you and Winston and you drive the forty-five minutes to Cleveland. The grocery store was once an auto dealership and you can tell: the huge front windows overlooking the registers; the two-story ceiling; the refrigerated section in the back where the repair shop must have been. Wander the aisles, stroking cellophane packages with your fingertips. You never knew there were so many kinds of pickled vegetables, so many varieties of seeds. Everything is labeled in English, but the words tell you nothing: fourteen bags are labeled "Rice Stick"; a jar holds "Essential Sauce"; one box has no English except a small label reading *Ingredients: Dried black fungus*. Think of your senior history teacher quoting Charles de Gaulle: "How can you govern a country which has two hundred and forty-six varieties of cheese?" Think, *My culture is one with seven hundred kinds of black fungus*. Wander into a back area that reminds you of an aquarium: tanks of turtles, noses and shell-tops above the water; blinking, mud-colored frogs stacked atop one another like cheerleader pyramids. Wonder if this is the pet section. Then realize no one sells pets by the pound. Back quickly into the noodle aisle, where only the ramen looks familiar.

Pick up safe things: a package of candies, some ramen noodles, a bamboo plant. Mrs. Liu, her basket full of vegetables, nods. "Good feng shui," she says. Her words feel like a pat on the head.

"Thank you so much for driving me," you say as you and Winston step out of the car. Mrs. Liu waves a small hand.

"No trouble," she says. After a pause, she adds, "Winston talk about you so much, like part of the family, right?" Surprise yourself by leaning in and kissing her on the cheek.

Cook the noodles for dinner; eat the candies for dessert. Put the bamboo on your dorm room windowsill. There's no dirt, just a handful of tiny white stones holding the jade-colored stalks upright. But the plant grows anyway. Two weeks later it has put out waxy new leaves. Every day it gets taller. Cover the pebbles with water and wonder how it grows with no soil, no roots.

Later, you'll realize the answer: it consumes itself.

• • •

All month, your mother sends you clippings to make you laugh. They're the kind of stories the newspaper prints in little boxes at the corner of the page: A woman text-messages her stolen cell phone until it reappears on her doormat with a note: *I'm sorry I stole this, I'll reform and become a better person.* A Virginia man leaves his money to seventy people selected randomly from the phone book, instructing that his relatives receive nothing. Across one, *Madeover Ken Wants to Win Back Barbie*, your mother writes, "I didn't even know they'd split up." Another, *Feral Shib Tzus Roam Georgia Condo Complex*, needs no comment. They smack of America, of soda-pop culture, bubbly, calorie-free. Leaf through them at the breakfast table, nibbling a croissant and a slice of honeydew. Then fold them up and slip them into the recycling bin's slot. Pretend to laugh when your mother asks if you got them.

• • •

For Winston's birthday, just before Thanksgiving, make him a mobile of old CDs, glued label-to-label, snipped into half-moons, dangling from driftwood. He hangs it above his desk where it catches the light from his goosenecked lamp. Take him to dinner at the Outback, his restaurant of choice. Don't even glance at the waitress when you order a Foster's apiece. Hesitate just a moment over the menu, as if deciding which beer you feel like tonight, and she'll bring you the tall can and an iced mug and a coaster shaped like Australia without asking for ID.

That night, back in Winston's room, try out your phrases. "I am an American," you say in Chinese. "I speak a little Chinese." "Shut up," Winston whispers, and kisses you. In the mirror at the foot of the bed, you can almost make out the shapes of your bodies under the blanket, darker against the dark of the room. Slide a finger beneath the waist of his boxer shorts. When you press against him, feel his body hesitate for just a moment, your body insist.

Close your eyes and think of China. Try to imagine your other mother, as you sometimes think of her, what her life might be like. Picture the curve of her lip, the jade ring on her finger. Imagine the spark of you flaring in her belly. Afterwards, when you roll away, feel like an empty glove, hollowed out and limp. Curl against Winston's back, counting the warm knobs of his spine against your chest. Practice to yourself: *Are you Chinese? No, I am American. But you understand Chinese so well!*

• • •

In the morning, the knocks on the door will awake you. Rub jagged bits of sand from your lashes as Winston leans over the edge of the bed and tugs at the pile of clothes on the floor. "Ignore it," you say. "Pretend we're not here."

"It's my mother," he whispers. "I forgot. She said she'd come to celebrate my birthday."

Roll out of bed. In the night your socks have worked their way into the sleeves of Winston's shirt, your blouse is threaded through his boxers. At the dresser, Winston's already pulling on jeans and a clean t-shirt. While you pull your sweater over your head he smooths the covers over the bed and turns on the desk lamp.

"Mackenzie," Mrs. Liu says when he finally opens the door. "You are visiting so early."

Smile without looking her in the eye.

"Thanks for dropping off those notes," Winston says, and this, you know, is your cue to exit.

"No problem," you say and shoulder your bag. The words hang like cheesecloth in the air, flimsy enough to see through.

"Talk to you later," Winston says as you slip past his mother and into the hallway.

But he doesn't call you, not that night or the next, not before you load your duffel onto the bus and head home.

• • •

At Thanksgiving dinner, shred your turkey and fork furrows in your yams. Your mother says, "Kenz, is there something you want to talk about? Are you worried about your classes?" When you don't answer, she says brightly, "Cheer up. Did you know that the Chinese word for crisis is the same as the word for opportunity?" Glare at her and slice a round of cranberry sauce into slivers, so that you miss the look she gives the back of your bent head.

• • •

When you come back to campus, notice that the mobile in Winston's room is gone. Winston's mother claims it's bad *feng shui*—too shifting, too unstable—and has wrapped it in a tight bundle and taken it away.

You don't see her again, inventing twenty-page papers and study groups whenever she comes to campus, but every visit leaves a trace. She positions a fishbowl with two bulbous goldfish on his windowsill. She moves his trash can from one end of the room to the other. She sticks flowered contact paper over the mirrored closet door at the foot of Winston's bed. He tries to explain: the goldfish draw good luck into the room, the mirror reflects bad luck onto you while you're sleeping, *feng shui*, his mother really believes it; you know, it's a Chinese thing.

Nod as though this makes sense to you. Trip over the trash can on your way to the bathroom. At night, close your eyes so that you don't see the goldfishes' knobby eyes glinting in the dark. Winston doesn't seem to mind. He combs his hair in the bathroom now; he feeds the fish before heading to class. It's something he's grown up with, something he has to think about to notice.

• • •

Just before finals, dial his cell and get a recorded message: *This number has been disconnected. Please try your call again.* Try your call again. Get the same message. Finally, pull your coat on over your sweats and cross campus to his dorm. When he opens the door, framing his face in the slit between door and jamb, hold your phone up and glare.

"My mom made me change it," he says. "Too many fours." Why are fours unlucky? Because in Chinese they sound like the word for death.

"I don't understand," you say, and he pushes open the door further to reveal his mother sitting there on his bed.

"It is not personal," she says finally. "It is not personal. You understand. I want my son to end up with a nice Chinese girl."

Understand completely. Realize you should protest the obvious. Realize the word *But*— should fly from your mouth like spit. But understand completely, and realize that your complete understanding means you see yourself in the same way, you and this woman.

• • •

Buy a ticket home on the last bus of the night. Lean your head against the window as you cross the border into Michigan just after midnight. Ahead of you, in the headlights, the road glistens like silk. Each shorn cornfield, covered with snow, looks the same, every one familiar. When you get off at the bus station, you'll hail a cab and tip the driver with your last dollar bill. You'll walk up the long driveway, leaving concrete-bottomed footprints in the snow.

Unlock the front door with your key and shut it behind you. Strip off your shoes and your bags and your coat and breathe in the smell of home.

Upstairs, push open the door to your mother's room. She'll be sleeping there, curled on one side of the bed, face turned to the door, as if just waiting for you to arrive. Kneel beside her, breathing in her sleep-breath, which is sweet and heavy and slightly sour. It reminds you of bread baking, of feeling full and content. Remember something that you had forgotten: when you were a child and couldn't sleep, she would sing to you until you dozed. Simon and Garfunkel, the Doobie Brothers, the Mamas and the Papas. It didn't matter what she sang, as long as you could feel her breath on your face, the warm in-out of her life. Lie down beside her, back-to-back, so that from above you look like a pair of wings. When she wakes in the morning, she'll turn and find you there, like her reflection.

In Transit

My father calls me from a business trip, in a rental car. I do not ask what state.

She's passing in class, he says.

By which he means not that she is getting good grades. By which he means that her teachers are calling her "he." I think about how hard I worked for high marks in high school, how it simply didn't matter in the end. To pass, I think, the phone against my ear, my father babbling on, means simply to enter the state of being overlooked.

He said each time they said it, the word touched him in the bottom of the gut. *He*, my father told me, and I sat down on my couch. He, I mouthed voicelessly to myself. I thought about the base of the bowels. I thought about the place where the skin of the stomach ends and the folds of "he" or "she" begin.

Your mother won't stop smoking, he tells me and there is only air between us on the line. Her hands are turning orange.

I'm sorry, I tell him and I'm sorry when I do. There's no room for apology in the rhetoric of the end.

The rest of the conversation is about the domestic: my bills, what I am eating, how late I am making it to bed.

We are never really young, I think as my mouth speaks to him. We are born and then it is all just growing old.

Before he hangs up he sighs loudly.

Shouldn't we tell them the truth? He asks. *Her teachers, I mean.*

I mean, shit, he says and I can hear his car door slam shut; he has arrived at where he needs to be.

Haven't we always taught her not to lie?

The Puppy and Kitten Channel

Remember the night I passed my test and the Thai place where you took me brought my rice pressed into the shape of a heart, a maraschino cherry bleeding sweetly on the top? It's an old story—once there was an atom who wanted to be a molecule. I've thought a lot about innocence since then—the sleeping otters floating on their backs in the aquarium pool, paws linked, the human presence behind the animal videos on the Internet—intimate laughter, murmured words in Russian or Norwegian while puppies lick each other's faces or a baby deer eats from someone's hand. I've watched the puppy and kitten channel. At the Origami Club, you can learn to make a whole paper world—origami strawberry shortcake, origami waterbug, origami chicken hatching from an egg. *Do you ever feel completely ruined?* The man with no arms and no legs takes an egg into his mouth and drops it into a bowl, takes a whisk into his mouth and scrambles, takes the bowl into his mouth and wheels to the stove, takes a spatula into his mouth and lifts the egg onto a plate, bits of shell and all. Takes a fork into his mouth. Turns and grins. *Do you feel ruined now? Yes, still ruined, and guilty.* Click again, and a couple laughs gently as a kitten and a bunny tumble across a flowered rug. The otters float apart, then back together. The origami bride smooths a wrinkle in her immaculate dress.

I am not Gertrude Stein

This pleasing or displeasing you,

I curl my hair into a ball of strays. Something
outside of this reminds me

of why I would. Why wouldn't I?

A bit of chicken fat or chalk & strings
collected for their making—

I want to make those too.

I am not all Elsie and Elsie again

(because maybe I am and Elsie)

isn't a spot in my head, in my whole goddamn spotted heart.

Of course, when you bury something, you dig what dirt

and tree roots and worms there are out

and you dig deep, otherwise bones return to the surface.

Daniil Kharms

Old Ladies Are Flying

An old lady fell out of the window because she was too curious. She fell out of the window and was smashed to pieces.

Another old lady stared down at the remains of one who was smashed. She stared at them, out of her excessive curiosity, and also fell out of the window, and smashed.

Then the third old lady fell out of the window, then the fourth did, then the fifth.

When the sixth old lady fell out of the window, I got bored watching them and went to Maltsevitsky Bazaar where, it was announced, they gave woven shawls to the blind.

After Warhol's *Rorschach*, 1984

Too easy
to say Shiva

or Janus
or butterfly
effect or tree

of life or
Christmas

wreath because
it is December
or hood ornament

or Pompeii
or ball mask

or Burgundy
masque or drop
zone or topo map

or gilded intestines,
Barneys, Wall Street.

Instead, please see a honey
P scribbled inside a Wonder
Bread fold-over.

Sidewalk People Are Street

[A] street performance intervention in which I staged a crawl at a location which had just been the site of police violence against the homeless. Dressed in a wool suit and holding a small potted flower, in temperatures measuring 98 degrees and upwards, I attempted to crawl as far as I could until I could go no further.

—William Pope.L¹

In 1991, William Pope.L crawled down a street in New York City's East Village, followed by a videographer. Instead of lying tucked along the sidewalk or under shade, he crawled in the street, next to parallel-parked cars.

Wearing an Armani suit and tie, Pope.L lay on his stomach, moving forward on his elbows or pushing off from his toes. Sometimes he turned on his side or on his back. Occasionally he rested, breathing heavily. The work is now called *Crawl (Tompkins Square Park, NYC)*—or sometimes *Tompkins Square Crawl*—and is available to viewers today through its video documentation by James Pruznick (see plates 1 and 2, page 193).

The documentation's first shot establishes the crawl's location, showing a sign hung on an iron fence that reads "Tompkins Square Park." The park is closed—that's clear from a chain-link barrier in front of the fence—but as the camera pans out, it pauses to include the "closed" sign left of the park's nameplate before it finally moves backwards to include street and cars, then Pope.L's legs, and then his full body.

Tompkins Square Park was closed for a year beginning June 3, 1991. Pope.L's crawl occurred sometime within a few months of that closing, and Pruznick's documentation emphasizes its closure as a means of evicting the homeless population.²

In the late 1980s, Tompkins Square Park was notorious as a "tent city" overrun with homeless people. Citizens within the surrounding neighborhood

1. Unpublished statement about *Crawl* (1992), quoted in Darby English's *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007): 274-275.

2. The crawl occurred during Pope.L's two-month 1991 residency at Franklin Furnace, as part of *How Much is That Nigger in the Window and other projects*, which included another crawl in Times Square, *Selling Mayonnaise*, and *Writing/Sleeping/Living on the Flag*.

rioted in 1988 in response to an aggressive police attempt to evict the park's inhabitants; yet a year later the "problem" had turned too ugly for the dwellers of the park's surrounding apartments. "Smoke drifts from fires set in trash barrels. Clumps of raggedly dressed people mill about," wrote John Kifner for the *New York Times*.³ Portraying the park as nearly apocalyptic, Kifner went on to detail the neighborhood's waning support for the park's homeless inhabitants.⁴ More measured, gentler, and ultimately more effective attempts to remove homeless from the park followed in 1990, and by the time Pope.L crawled a year later, the tumult had vanished.

The Suit

"The suit is an icon of privilege," Pope.L noted later. People who can afford to wear Armani suits rarely appear horizontal in public; wearing the suit Pope.L made himself "a person who has a job, possesses the means to remain vertical, but chooses to momentarily give up that verticality."⁵ He ripped the Armani suit from its conventions and displaced it. It is a simple but loaded gesture.

Orienting a man horizontally in the city, *Crawl* refers to the homeless—people in stained clothes, lying tucked in an alcove or under a bench or bridge, attempting to be inconspicuous so not moving much. Yet it remains clear that Pope.L isn't homeless. For one, he wears an expensive suit; secondly, he crawls *in* the street, next to parallel-parked cars instead of lying unobtrusively along the sidewalk. Third, a white man with a camera moves around him and records his movements.

An Armani suit conveys privilege and power; crawling in the street conveys the opposite. A sign of considerable wealth clashes with an extreme representation of abject poverty, all in one black male body. These things—wealth and poverty—that one might assume as antitheses, become in Pope.L's performance not so oppositional. "To compare two objects as far distant from one another as possible, or, a quite different method, to confront them brusquely and strikingly—this remains the highest task to which poetry can lay claim," as André Breton once

3. John Kifner, "Neighbors' Attitudes Shift as Park Declines," *The New York Times*, December 7, 1989.

4. Perhaps this had something to do with the area's rising real estate prices as well as greater numbers of homeless park residents in the wake of a massive housing shortage.

5. Martha Wilson in conversation with William Pope.L., *BOMB* 55, Spring 1996.

argued about poetic affect, “[...] It is a matter of breaking down the purely formal opposition of these two terms: what it is a question of getting right, is that their apparent discrepancy is due only to the imperfect, infantile idea that we entertain of Nature, and of the externality of time and space.”⁶

Take a work from Pope.L’s *Skin Set* series: *White People Are Crack*. It is a metaphor, a poetic equating of two otherwise unrelated objects. White people are not *like* crack here, which would be a simile; they *are* crack, which is a metaphor. “White people are crack” might signify any number of things, based on the reader’s determination of a shared attribute between the two objects. Perhaps white people are white like crack, or white people are addictive, or white people will slowly degrade your health over repeated consumption.

Pope.L’s “white people are crack” holds many possible meanings, which is not like Shakespeare’s famous metaphor “Juliet is the sun,” where the conflation is quickly legible. Pope.L’s joining of white people and crack remains open longer, particularly when it is one of many other similarly-structured metaphors:

Black People Are My Deft Side
Red People Are The Tip For Which The Iceberg Has Been Waiting
Yellow People Are the Bee’s Knees
Black People Are Crossover
White People Are The Future
Blue People Are The Future
White People Are Crack
Red People Are Boner Cosmic
Black People Are The Window And The Breaking Of The Window

So read nine of Pope.L’s *Skin Set* series, each in the form “X People Are Y” (see plates 3-5, pages 194-6). Across eight color peoples and several hundred drawings so far, the work becomes a series of metaphors, that is, an allegory. *White People*

6. Andre Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, trans. and ed. Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris (Lincoln, Nebraska and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990). Originally published in the French as *Les Vases communicants* by Éditions Gallimard in 1932.

7. An ongoing project begin in 1997 with a projected number of 3500 drawings.

Are the Future might make a kind of sense, but pair it with *Blue People Are the Future* and it is no longer clear which type of people are the future, what the future is, or what “white people” or “blue people” even mean. At the level of allegory, these raced equivalences unhinge. Whatever blue and black people “are” flips and twists as Pope.L defines each again and again. Black people are pride, are guilty, are for rent, are the window and the breaking of the window, and so on. The equations between X peoples and Ys in Pope.L’s metaphors are looser than Shakespeare’s “Juliet is the sun.” Shakespeare’s is a tightly-rendered metaphor and it takes little time to gather what Shakespeare meant when he equated Juliet with the radiant sun. Each of Pope.L’s x-people-are-y constructions holds more possibilities, and takes longer to consider—a trait that the entire series’ allegorical construction emphasizes.

The allegorist pulls objects from the world and joins them; they do not represent the world but rather re-present its objects. Pope.L’s crawl by Tompkins Square Park can be seen a form of allegory, which in the visual arts might also be considered as collage. Its shifts in placement—vertical and powerful man to horizontal man, prostrate man to center instead of periphery—refer to everyday sights and actions even as they are not quite of that everyday. Both are simple gestures, single reorientations or repositions, yet they change much of each sign’s original meaning. A man in a suit is not automatically weird, but lay him out on the street. A homeless person in a city is also not uncommon but move him from the sidewalk’s edge to its middle. Pope.L’s crawl occurred in everyday life, outside of a gallery or museum space, yet he made concentrated breaks, switches inside the fabric of reality.

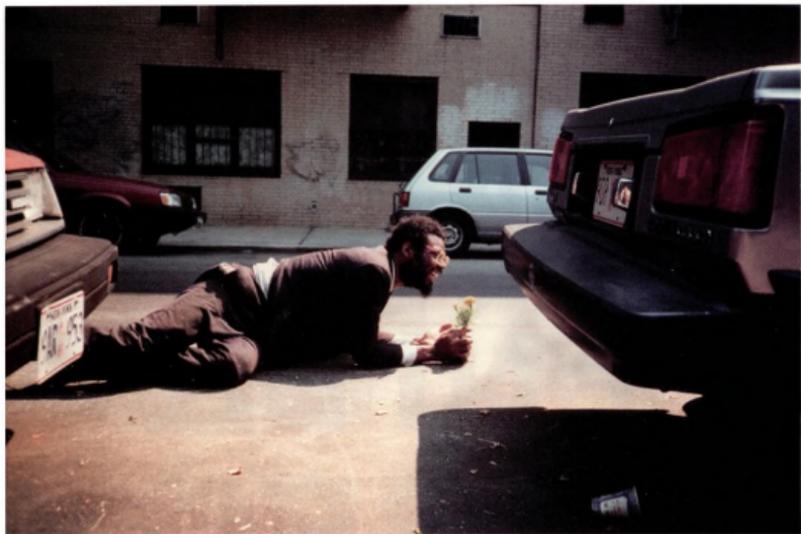
Pope.L’s suited and horizontal body is a metaphor that conflates two opposite positions on the spectrum of urban power. Yet the crawl holds another symbol—the flower—and it is not clear why Pope.L chose to include it. But the flower’s emptiness as a sign is important because it keeps the relationships between the crawl’s other components looser. Pope.L’s blackness becomes not only a fact of Pope.L, but a sign that slips between the work’s other symbols. It affects the reading of homelessness, it affects his wearing a suit, and it affects interpretations of the crawl. But there is no unified meaning applicable to his blackness.

"I decided to *literally* put myself in the place of someone who might be homeless and on the street," Pope.L recounted to artist Martha Wilson. Placing himself in another position, Pope.L treats his own body as a collage-element that might be easily moved from one context to another, as well as continuously resignified:

I wanted to get inside that body. Like, what does it feel like? In certain yogas there are body-memory exercises. By treating your body in a certain way, by putting your body in a certain physiognomic situation, you can force it to experience in ways it normally wouldn't.⁸

By moving himself into certain physiognomic situations, Pope.L creates a break between his body and its environment, estranging his body from its conventions. Doing so, Pope.L submits his body to a complex system of signification, even as he reorders the symbolic system that surrounds his everyday experiences.

8. Martha Wilson in conversation with William Pope.L, *BOMB* 55, Spring 1996.



Plates 1 and 2. William Pope-L., *How Much is that Migger in the Window*. Tompkins Square Crew, 1991. Street performance, New York, NY. Photo: James Hyzinski courtesy of the artist.

**BLACK
PEOPLE
ARE
SLICK**

WHITE PEOPLE
ARE A
DESALINATION
PLANT
IN PUERTO RICO

not white
just unneeded

The winter of the
brown paper
in a hand
That's not my
prob lem w/
what ever...



Plate 5. William Pope.L, *Skin Set Drawing: Purple people are the rhyme in the sky out exactly against the red against the blue against the black against the glass against the sun*, 2006-2007. Mixed media on graph paper. 8.5 x 11 inches.



Plates 6 and 7. *The De Luxe Show*, 1971. Installation photographs by Hickey & Robertson, Houston. *The De Luxe Show Archives*, The Menil Collection, Houston, TX.



MY HEAD LEAVES THE CLOUDS AS I MERGE
WITH HUNDREDS OF OTHERS.



Plate 8. James Sturm, from *Market Day* (Drawn and Quarterly 2010).

NOW PART OF A PROCESSION I MOVE MORE QUICKLY. PERHAPS IT IS THE SMELL OF FRESH BREAD OR BOILED CHICKEN THAT QUICKENS EVERYONE'S PACE.



FOR ONE WHO SPENDS THE MAJORITY OF HIS TIME WORKING IN SOLITUDE, THE MARKET IS INTOXICATING.





As Long As You're Able

Jerusalem, early February. Michael and I walk from West to East, past the Rolex store, down the old road to the Arab bus station. There are sparrows flying in circles above us, frozen avian bones alighting through the sunlight. Calling to each other. I try to imagine the business of it: gladness for the sun-warmth, insufficient as it is.

Michael is visiting for three weeks. The first night, sitting happily in my apartment on the roof, our glasses fogged from the chardonnay, he looked at me, his head tilted slightly to the side. *This is the worst I've ever seen you*, he said. I gave a bitter smile, lifting my glass to him. *It's nice to see you, too*, I said.

He takes my hand to pull me toward the bus then, its door open, the driver waiting for seven shekels for the passage to Bethlehem. My head in the clouds, so to speak.

• • •

At the Wall, the taxi driver tells his bottled stories. I haven't eaten in more than a day. Michael points to a watchtower, the dark pillar like a concrete ballast against a worrying tide. *It's okay*, the driver says, *there's no one in there*. We look at the copper windows, reflections of the sky. My heart pulses like an intermittent warning. *Once*, he says, *they shot many children from that tower*. We're silent. *Come now*, he says. *Come and I'll take your picture in front of it*.

Across from the Wall, on the other side of the narrow patch of grass we walk on, is another wall. Much older. I marvel at the pattern, a thousand stones, a slate-colored quilting. We take pictures with our phones. This is the wrong wall to photograph and yet it is, at least, beautiful. The driver seems confused by our interest but he humors us just the same. *That wall is very old*, he tells us. *They built it to keep out goats*. I turn to the new Wall, covered by a sea of graffiti. *Make love not walls*, it reads in one corner.

The driver takes us further into Bethlehem. *Here is the famous graffiti by Banksy*, he tells us. *Here is a good view for your photographs*. We take pictures again, duly

ordered. The image, now pedestrian: a bandana-wearing man, angry, protesting, hurls a bouquet of flowers. Only the flowers are in color. This work is on the side of an auto shop, sprayed onto its enormous wall, beside a gas station. A small bus drives by and the children on it watch us, here to document their walls.

• • •

Michael is one of my oldest friends. I fell in love with him in middle school and stayed that way for many years. Fifteen years later, we've seen much of the world together. We've stayed very close. He lives in England with his boyfriend and I'm living in Jerusalem for the year.

He stands in the Western plaza, looking up in confusion at the Wall. *You're supposed to write a prayer*, I tell him. *Then put the paper in one of the cracks*. He takes the paper and writes something secret, walks toward the Wall, places it high above him. His hand grazes the stones that remain unwashed; three feet above him the color of it changes, the last space where anyone can reach. Only three feet makes all the difference: there it shines like the morning. Small outcroppings in the uneven stones make a home for white poppies. I imagine what he's written. Maybe that verse from Malachi, the one they blessed us with long ago: *The sun will rise with healing in its wings*.

We walk the ramparts. All across the distance is the city of the Great King. *Look that way*, I say, pointing to the south. *There's Zion*. He looks at the far mountain, indistinguishable among the many hills from where we stand. *Which one is it?* he asks. *I'll show you*, I say.

We keep walking, farther to the east, farther toward the hills dotted with apartments and monuments. We come to Damascus Gate. Ten stairs to climb and we can overlook the bustling Arab market, the street vendors who sell pomegranates and lemons, the women seated on small mats, calling out the prices of cabbage and tomatoes. I climb slowly, my eyes unfocusing, growing dizzy from the exertion. Michael, already at the top of the stairs, waits quietly.

From there we move farther along the walls. All around the ramparts there are metal railings to keep us from falling down into Jerusalem. Soon we come across an almond tree, the first blossoming of the year. Its white flowers transfix him.

He kneels to smell the low branches and I remember how I loved him when the azaleas would bloom in March. We were teenagers and didn't know that life could change. But there are white flowers every spring.

• • •

I live on the roof. Outside my front door is a wall. Its white paint chips off a little more each day, revealing the tan undercoat. A small awning provides shade in the afternoons. I come back from running, weak and exhausted. My legs are shaking because I've eaten so little. This happens every day now. I stagger up the stairs and reach for the key, then put my hand against the wall. I'm dizzy, catching myself before I fall. I'm starving myself and I don't know how to stop.

In the morning, I get out of bed and feel myself tumble even as I rise. I'm stumbling into the door. All the walls in my house are white. I'm falling and I can't distinguish one from another: I'm hurtling toward them all, my hands outstretched. I'm standing and walking to the bathroom. I take off my clothes, dark blue sweatpants and a shirt. I read the label on my sweatpants: *For ages 11-12*. I weigh myself, keeping my balance on the scale carefully. It's lower than yesterday. I put my clothes back on and go for water, slowly, triumphant. My goal this year: *For ages 9-10*.

• • •

When we were teenagers, our church was a house of prophecy, our preacher a man who could name our sins and lay them out before the congregation for our own protection. We had services five nights a week.

The prophecies came unexpected. They poured from him in long, incantatory exclamations. Sometimes they were recitations from Isaiah, sometimes they were bleak exhortations against specific sinners in our midst. But his warnings for Michael and me stayed muted, at least, until the end. *There are others in this room, he'd say, struggling with a demon so dark I won't name him.*

There's a great deal I can't remember from that time, but one thing remains: the knowledge that the body, its insistent and polluted desires, must, above every-

thing, be battled. The body, that site of transgression and damnation. The body, that valley of the shadow of death. The body. The body. The body.

• • •

Sometimes, he says, I wish that you'd just eat like a normal person. I've heard this before, though not from him. I love eating, I say with a smile. I do it almost every day.

• • •

We go to Ramallah. At Arafat's grave there are three soldiers standing guard, so close that their knees touch the granite headstone. We wait in the silence, a bright mausoleum with dried-flower wreaths laid against the floor-length windows. The limestone walls reflect the yellow topaz of the uncovered sun. There is no music, no martial triumph in their eyes. Michael takes pictures after we ask permission. Soon they are very proud. They raise their heads, postures up, guns glinting.

From there we walk back to town, past the just-opened Kentucky Fried Chicken. *You should try our new restaurant, a man tells us. It's American food. You'll like it.* Families line up through the door, waiting to order. I smell the vats of oil through the breeze when the door opens. Now an alarming chill of hunger. It's in my blood. Michael is hungry, too, but he won't suggest this, not to me. Now there's the smell of baking, of bread in the air. *We need to hurry, I say to him. We start to walk away. We need to hurry.*

We walk back to the center of town and take a taxi to the checkpoint. The watchtowers there are manned.

• • •

Our preacher was obsessed with many things. But my favorite was always Zion. One Wednesday night he began our prayer service, as he always did. *In your eyes, he said, you see a mountain.* Our eyes were closed. Snow-covered peak, great cliffs, blue sky surrounding. Small clouds hanging quietly in the distance. *In your eyes, he said, you see the throne of God.* Great golden throne, rubies in the

headrest. *For out of Zion, he said, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth. He leaned forward, speaking to us loudly, with great intention: For the Lord says: This is my rest forever, here will I dwell, for I have desired it. The throne became a mountain, the mountain became a throne. Zion, he said, the joy of all the earth, the city of the great King.*

• • •

I take Michael, on his third day, to Zion. We walk across the city and go out the gate toward the hill, climbing past the Russian tour groups and the clusters of American families. Everyone is taking pictures, speaking quietly.

He's surprised, maybe disappointed. Zion is not a mountain, after all. It's a small hill, speckled with old buildings and younger trees. There's even a parking lot. I watch him look out toward the olive groves, the walls of Jerusalem behind us. He looks to the north: valleys and hills and a wind rising out of Judea. I say it, the phrase he also remembers: *Here is the joy of all the earth.*

• • •

When we were teenagers, Michael and I would walk on the beach, shoeless in the August breeze. Our friends would make a bonfire and we'd head off, together. Across the water there were casino towers, rising behind the bridge, the Biloxi skyline firing the horizon like torches in a graveyard. We were always in danger somehow, frightened beyond description, that the others would realize what we felt.

But what I remember most about that time is what it was like to wake up, always without him. Hope and regret would combine. Hope that a new day offered something more of him. Regret that I'd have to leave him again that night.

I say this because it's how I feel today, though not about Michael. I wake up in the morning and the sheer panic of it is almost the same as it was: *What did I eat last night?* There's a half-second when I don't know the answer. The promise of everything lies out before me then. Maybe I ate nothing, maybe my day will begin with dizziness and famine. Or maybe I gave in. Maybe I succumbed, my day left to this aftermath of disaster.

It's hard to explain, this feeling. The uncertainty of it is what I crave. This is how it was when I was sixteen and in love. *Stay with me today*, I want to shout. *Just stay.*

* * *

In Tiberias, in our cheap hotel room, our beds pushed far apart, Michael and I drink Cabernet. Outside the window, the Galilee laps quietly against the dark brown shore. We've brought food for our weekend trip: peanut butter and oranges, sandwich bread and chips, a package of pita. I eat an apple while Michael tells me about his life, the things I know so much about but love to hear. Like how his family envies him, his leaving home and moving to another country. How they sometimes hope he'll marry the boy he lives with, the one I also adore.

I feel the apple-weight in my stomach while he talks. I'm looking at the half-an-apple in my hands and thinking something. It's hard to say quite what. Something like regret, something like pleasure. This is the first food I've eaten today and what I know for sure is that my arms are tired from holding it.

Tell me how you're doing, he says. We both know what this means. I'm eating, here in front of him. With his own eyes he sees my tiredness and so we can't pretend. *I think I'm drinking too much*, I say, raising my glass of wine with a smile. *What else is new?* he asks.

What I want to say is that I'm losing control. What I want to say is that I've pushed my bed against the wall because my sleeping at night has gone erratic. I could sleep, before, almost without moving. But now I wake up halfway across the bed. Before long the falling won't stop.

* * *

It's shorter than I want, but finally Michael's visit is over. He goes back to England, back to his job, his life. To distract myself, I take a trip, with other friends, to Petra, several hours' drive away in Jordan. The rose-colored city, great wonder of the earth. A sandstorm comes on us in the day and the sky is red. *It's like being on Mars*, I tell my friends. It's as cold.

I walk through tombs carved into the mountain, rock faces hollowed out to house the dead. Whole cliffsides spun like threading into a sandstone graveyard. I step into a temple, dark and solemn. I look to the roof and its colors are like tiled sediment, dreams petrified for our browsing. I turn and look out the mouth of the cave, the dark clouds gathering in the sky, the light still shining somehow through them, and the old sensation returns. Falling, the whole mountain falling. *You need to eat something*, one of them says. *I don't know how you're still standing*.

But standing is the easy part. It's thinking that gets hard. My voice trails off sometimes when I lose track of my words. I think my mind is fading.

I reach for the wall and hold myself up before one of them comes to steady me. *It's nothing*, I say. *Just a little vertigo*. Standing in the center of the rose-colored city with my hands against the wall of a temple-cave. Inside the stone heart of a perished world. So hungry that my eyes have trouble focusing. Staggering out into the shielded sunlight while a man tries to sell us key rings. *I need some coffee*, I tell them. *Just something to wake me up*.

I see the last of the Nabataeans, Petra's ancient race of sculptors. I see them starving, huddled in their mountain graves, Roman soldiers marching through the sandy roads below. They carved a city from the stone and it has outlasted them.

Starving in their graves.

• • •

My dreams are turning frantic. One night I'm on a train, dark sky all around. The window turns into an open door, the open door an open wall, and through it I see a dark field of wheat, illuminated though there's no moon. Running beside us is a red horse, riderless in the black night, the sheer scale of him outrageous. I turn to another passenger and ask for the meaning. Which of the four horsemen rides in red? *Is this the symbol of famine?* I ask. He answers: *This is the symbol of war*.

• • •

Back in Jerusalem, the grocery store is a five-minute walk from my house. Michael and I went shopping there when he visited. He looked at our basket,

frowned at the few items I'd added: bananas, coffee, soy milk, a package of crackers. *Is that all you're planning to eat?* he asked. Less than this, but I couldn't say it. *I don't always eat at home*, I said. Truth can have a thousand meanings.

The checkout clerks know me well. I don't speak Hebrew, but they know my basket: a dozen eggs, diet coke, pita. But it's starting to change. The back wall of the store has the products I'll buy now: diet coke with lemon, soda water with lemon, diet tonic water with lemon. At the other end of the store are more things I'll buy: apples, spinach, carrots, cucumbers. I kneel down to pick up a bag of celery I've dropped and stand up too quickly: and it's spinning, the world once more on its hurried axis, electric lights in a hastening rotation. *Are you all right?* The clerk knows to ask me in English. She puts her hand on my arm. *Just a little tired*, I say. *Thank you.*

Between the walls are the forbidden foods: things with sugar, anything with fat. Each month I take away some food I love: this month it was bread, all told. When Michael came I was still experimenting with a life with bread. There were three days when it was the only thing I ate: two pieces of pita a day. *Man can live by bread alone*, I told him, feeling clever and very tired. But now I've switched to vegetables. They're filling, fibrous, difficult to eat quickly. I can spend thirty minutes eating a spinach salad with two carrots and half a cucumber. Lately I've taken to slicing up a ripe tomato. Its juice spreads among the dry leaves, which I enjoy. This month I'm giving up salad dressing.

• • •

I go to Yad Vashem, the original Holocaust museum. I've been to the Holocaust museums in D.C. and Paris several times. The experience, of course, is always brutal, though somehow necessary. But today I'm going as a punishment. Last night I broke down, ate most of the sourdough loaf I'd been keeping in my freezer. I've run six miles this morning already—a small penance for a great sin—but now I'll travel the corridors of the Shoah without eating. Perhaps by the end of it I'll be absolved.

It begins: the history of anti-Semitism in the Middle Ages, the rise through Europe in the modern age. The Nazis and the camps. A survivor speaks of her

death march through the forest, 800 kilometers in the snow. *The women fell one by one*, she says. *Each day we were weaker, until soon there was no strength left.* It's wrong, it's wrong, but I listen with more urgency as she describes her hunger: *We were rooting through the garbage*, she says. *We found a rotted potato and we ate it.*

I think of my kitchen, full of food, enough to feed them all, perhaps. I keep it full because it feels more virtuous to have the food within reach and then deny it. I should feel guilty. But there's another reason. I have friends who come over often, friends who would ask questions otherwise.

So, for example: I keep hummus in the fridge. I carry it home from the store, worrying that the fat is seeping into my skin through the bag. At home I open the package. The scent of it nearly buckles my knees. I take a few scoops and inhale, then toss them in the garbage. When my friends visit, they'll see it's opened, partly eaten. I do this with a lot of food. *See, I'm eating.*

The survivor continues her story. One of the German soldiers came by. *Why are you doing that?* he asked the woman. *Do me a favor, she told him. Kill me now. Kill me.*

All those years later and what she remembers most is the starvation. The full, blood-level fatigue.

• • •

That night I dream I'm in a classroom. The teacher is an old professor of mine from graduate school. She's teaching French grammar, verbs I already know. But then she introduces a new word, a verb that comes from the word *autumn*. *It means*, she explains, *to decay, to wither, to fall away.* The conjugation is strange, unfamiliar, like no other verb I've ever seen. I try to write the forms as she explains. Only before I can finish, a siren is sounding in the distance: outside the sky is colored a deep shade of blue-gray, rain falling in heavy sheets. *The world is flooding again*, she says, and suddenly I know she's right. We hurry to a dry space beside a fallen bridge: now there are hundreds of us, waiting to be rescued. And then in the air above us we see them: a dozen black bombers, airships flying low toward us, their steel wings tearing down trees as they approach. Before they reach us, she turns to me: *The world*, she says in French, *is autumning already.*

• • •

Sometimes I prepare large meals. My kitchen fills with the fragrances of it: onions browning in the pan, pasta cooling beside the stove. I add butter and garlic to the onions, then fresh peppers and oregano. I stir in the tomato sauce. I'm going to eat all of this. And sometimes I do. But lately I've taken to opening my windows, fanning out the aroma of sautéed mushrooms to the neighbors. *I'm eating, I'm eating.*

When I start cooking like this, it's from a place of biological panic. A ravenous need for food. I would eat everything, all of it, except it takes time to cook. This is my strategy. I talk to myself while the noodles are boiling. *You can eat all of this, if you want.* I'm not the type to try to shame myself. *You can eat it all, and feel sick for a full day, if you want.* This slows down my stirring. *You can eat it all, and wake up tomorrow ashamed and angry, if you want.* I turn the stove off, leaning heavily against the counter. *Or you can throw it out.* I put the sourdough slices back in the package. *You can do what's easy, or you can do what's right.* What sense is there in fighting?

I have to hurry. I throw the pasta in the trash. I scoop the vegetables and the sauce in after. I have to hurry. *Take it to the dumpster, now.* Otherwise I'll be too tempted, waking up at midnight, pacing the house after another dream of the red sun firing its insatiable furnace, to eat it: cold, rooting through the garbage in the dark.

• • •

Two months before Michael came, I visited Bethlehem for the first time, with American friends who were also spending the year in Israel. There were too many pilgrims to count, swarming in the center square. An enormous Christmas tree was lighted as night fell; cheering ensued. We wandered away from the others, up the narrow streets slicked by the light rain.

The road was very steep. Manger Square was behind us, below us. We climbed the watery road and the crowds thronged in noise and adulation behind. We could hear them singing for a mile. *Ob come, ob come, Immanuel.*

Soon it was night. Before us was an open door, inviting us in from the rain. We went in and then there was another door: great iron engravings on a portal-

threshold. A man opened the door. Inside we saw worshipping, embodied. *Please*, said the man, *come in quickly*. We went in quickly and he closed the door behind us. Then incense and strange chanting and the buzzing of true believers. *Look at that script*, we said quietly, as we sat on a pew in the back, pointing to markings on the walls. *I don't think it's Hebrew*, I said, *but the letters look similar*. The service continued and we stared at the wall, its ancient language holding our gaze while the priests rang hand bells for hymns that everyone else knew. *All our services are in Aramaic*, said a man to us afterward. *The Syrian Orthodox use Christ's original tongue*. And so it was, far from the balmy Decembers where I grew up on that beach in Mississippi, far from the world where I first met Michael, singing carols of Bethlehem with him before the church, our great fear only that they would solve the poorly hidden mystery of our loving each other: far from this, I finally heard the utterings of Christ on the night of his birth.

It was a moment to hold onto, something sacred to keep with me. But I remember very little of it. My mind was running blank. I hadn't eaten in two days.

• • •

On the walk home from the grocery store, bag of diet coke and rice cakes on my arm, I have to stop. There's a bench around the corner from my house where we sat one day. Michael marveled that there were olive trees even here, so far from the mountain groves, clinging on as if with a given mission to persist, deep inside the concrete skeleton of the city. There is life, tenacious, everywhere.

And there were evenings, there were sunsets with him here when it seemed like the sky might keep on burning coral for the rest of our lives. He brought something with him that I didn't know I needed. It seemed the earth could be arrested on its axis, that for all our remaining years, from this balcony, at least, the color of the sky would never change.

I almost believed it. And then the sky settled into its deeper shades. Nightfall and the stars' coronation.

There was hope, I can't explain. He brought hope. But now I stop at the bench without him, put the bags slowly on the ground, pretend to look for a new song on my iPod. It's too tiring to go on. When he was here he would take the bags when

I was tired. We'd walk up the stairs slowly and I would crawl into bed, afternoon sun shining on me like a lamppost from the gates of heaven. Now I lean my head against the wall behind the bench and look up at the mottled sky: clouds that shine like white phosphorous in the afternoon. *I just need some coffee*, I say to myself. *Something to wake me up.*

• • •

When we made it to the Wall, to the checkpoint in Ramallah, we saw an enormous painting of Arafat. He was wearing a keffiyeh, his portrait in the green and black of the Palestinian flag, smiling down on us. There was writing below it, in Arabic. *I wonder what it says*, Michael said. Neither of us could read it, but somehow I knew. *Keep going*, it said. *Keep going for as long as you're able.*

Jake, I Don't Know the First Thing About Desire

So how could I teach it to you. I think the body's a hub and bodies are spokes and there are things worth setting the house on fire for, but hard to know what things they are plus they may shift and then you're left with a burned-down house, you know? The things I've wanted most had to do with light, or with my head's infernal whirring. Sometimes my chest grows full like milk, but no milk, but sore from my breast in a man's mouth. A little teeth. A little teeth is maybe what I want to tell you. Three nights I've spent trying to get across the way the sore looked on a man's leg. I want that, Jake, but fail. I want to return to the mountains when all the while they're right here, now blue, now faun... I think that maybe when you ride, your soul desires to eat the horse, I think you can taste her marrow, I think you dream her fur between your teeth and that's why you wear the braided hide of an animal around your wrist like so many men I've known. Of desire I finally don't know more than this: sore thighs; strange light; what I cannot say.

Evening Prayer

When you think of me, don't think of me wooing
the bed all thick-tongued with vodka.

O God, come to my assistance.

Don't think of me baby-
oiled in a green bikini with dirty feet.

Don't think of me grabbing the shrimp,
wet and pink, from the bowl,

seizing the whiskered face
in my fist and yanking hard. Think of my jaw.

Think of the secret I told you that scared you
into prayer. Think of the cardboard graves

for fake babies I kicked over
on spring break in St. Augustine.

O Lord, make haste to help me.

I don't want your forgiveness. Nobility bores me—
so does shame. I watched as that girl

in a blah cardigan called me *sieve*,
code for *slut*, code for no one ever told her

what you really thought of me. Beautiful.
Once, so were we. Sometimes I still scan

the night sky for a blood ring
around the moon just to feel again

that winter lying on our coats outside
the Blues joint in a fried catfish dark:

everyone kicking up their feet
and everyone drinking PBR and everyone

getting high in cars were merely dust spun into shapes
and we were the ones on tenterhooks.

O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me.

We were the ones inscribed in black
oak dirt like a vesper that would haunt

my nights for years, that would lift your new love's
skirt and murmur *envy* in her ear

as she lay sleeping in your bed.
When you think of me, let me think for you.

Remember how every time I see smoke above
the trees, I believe that my house is on fire.

Bastille Day

There are many unplanned ways to say
goodbye: stealing away, making a show,
lying drunk and intertwined in lawns. Against
the washing machine in our friends' sunroom,
this may be the last time I will feel your hands
rub down my legs, even if just to use up
the last drops of bug spray. You touch me
as though I were piebald with bruises. Rebels,
we were too rancorous to celebrate the Fourth,
too jaded for the rural comforts of white bun
hot dogs and watered beer. No matter, I leave
you in a week's time. It has been a day
of crepes and heavy cream, cigarette smoke
dressing the humid air, the evening's marvel
smack against clear and green wine bottles.
We eat escargot and frog legs, each their own
rubber squeal. I do not understand love's
cruel assemblage: how from across the room
your face still brightens to me like the rainbowed
coin of sunlight sweetening up a blank wall.
Why on earth am I still pretending? What good
is free will when all the fiddlers inside my chest
are causing such an uproar? How desperate
am I to leave my mark on you even when this day
already feels as distant as a history lesson,
pressing and surreal as a briny mouthful of stars.

Caravaggio's *Beheading of St. John the Baptist*

Caravaggio too knew
that violence and murder underlie religion, eroticism, all
civilization. See

how in this dark, poorly lit picture—the largest canvas he ever
painted, which takes up
nearly the whole wall above the altar in the Oratory

at St. John's Co-Cathedral
in Valletta—the executioner has botched the job. He's dropped
the sword that wasn't sharp

enough to sever the spine and neck tendons completely
and reaches behind
his back to pull out of the leather sheath that hangs

from his belt
the dagger they call a *misericordia*. "Have mercy upon me, O God,
according to thy loving-kindness."

He lifts St. John's long hair in his left fist to clear the neck
for one clean stroke
and hack through the last stubborn sinews. He's workmanlike—

his forehead furrowed
with concentration, concerned with getting the job done right this time
around. The jailor wears yellow

tights and a fancy ultramarine jacket over a brown tunic. Four
large skeleton keys
dangle from his sash, phalli that won't fit into his ample

codpiece. He offers quiet
advice to the executioner and points with his right forefinger, caught
in the shaft of sunlight

penetrating the dim courtyard outside the jail's gate, to the gold platter
the young maid
holds. She's bending low to make it easier to hoist

the severed head
onto her serving tray and bear it, as ordered, to King Herod
and Salome.

Postprandial palate cleanser. To please her lustful stepfather
on his birthday, Salome
did a lap dance and got him to grant whatever she desired.

She said what her mother,
Herodias, told her to ask for—the prophet's head upon
a platter. Easy

as a pig in a blanket. Herod waved one hand, and it was done.

But in Caravaggio's
canvas, there remain these technical difficulties. The old woman

to the left of the jailor
clasps her head in both hands and closes her eyes at what occurs
next. She'd thought

that during her 85 years on earth she'd seen it all and couldn't be
surprised by anything
else. She's wrong. The painting is understatement and silence.

The artist's famous
light, his chiaroscuro, plays on the executioner's strong bare back,
ribs, and left shoulder,

the deltoid Caravaggio would have liked to kiss and run
his tongue along.

It also underlines the underside of the maid's

frail upper arm.
Beauty and terror converge, as always. Caravaggio would have heard
the stories of how

during the Great Siege of Malta, 40 years before he painted
this beheading,
La Valette, Grand Master of the Order of the Knights of St. John,

for whom the new city
of Valletta would be named, had ordered the dead Turks
to be decapitated.

The knights then stuffed those heads into their cannons and shot
them back as cannon balls
against the Sultan's forces massed below the ramparts

of Fort St. Elmo.
The gunpowder-seared skulls would have been unrecognizable.
John the Baptist's face,

eye-level with the celebrant at the Oratory's altar,
is tranquil,
beautiful. His hands are still bound behind his back with a length

of rope that undulates
from under his legs like a snake slithering quickly away.
Evil is erotic and always

with us. Inveterate brawler, Caravaggio had killed
Ranuccio Tomassoni
in a duel in Rome. He fled to Malta, via Naples,

with a *bando capitale*
issued against him. If he had been apprehended, he would have been
beheaded. To keep

their heads intact in combat, the Knights of the Order of St. John
wore tempered-steel
helmets with cabled combs, plume holders, visors, upper and lower

bevors that swiveled
on pivot nuts, sight slits, riveted gorgets to protect
their necks,

and breath holes. They had their helmets engraved with acanthus leaves,
fleurs-de-lis, coronets,
coats of arms, rams locking horns. If they died, they died

in style. John the Baptist
didn't. He wore only a loincloth of mangy fur and a crimson
cloak that's slid

from his shoulders. The executioner's bare dirty left foot
stands on the cloak.
From a large barred window, two speechless prisoners watch

the executioner prepare
to finish the beheading. Caravaggio has signed the painting
with the prophet's

blood pooling below the half-severed head. He had only two years left
to live. He wrote
his name in the blood of men he loved, murdered, and would have died for.

Anne Carson

Merry Christmas From Hegel

It was the year my brother died. I lived up north and had few friends or they all went away. Christmas day I was sitting in my armchair, reading something about Hegel. You will forgive me if you are someone who knows a lot of Hegel or understands it, I do not and will paraphrase badly, but I understood him to be saying he was fed up with popular criticism of his terrible prose and claiming that conventional grammar, with its clumsy dichotomy of subject and verb, was in conflict with what he called "speculation." Speculation being the proper business of philosophy. Speculation being the effort to grasp reality in its interactive entirety. The function of a sentence like "Reason is Spirit" was not to assert a fact (he said) but to lay Reason side by side with Spirit and allow their meanings to tenderly mingle in speculation. I was overjoyed by this notion of a philosophic space where words drift in gentle mutual redefinition of one another but, at the same time, wretchedly lonely with all my family dead and here it was Christmas day, so I put on big boots and coat and went out to do some snow standing. Not since childhood! I had forgot how astounding it is. I went to the middle of a woods. Fir trees, the teachers of this, all around. Minus twenty degrees in the wind but inside the trees is no wind. The world subtracts itself in layers. Outer sounds like traffic and shoveling vanish. Inner sounds become audible, cracks, sighs, caresses, twigs, birdbreath, toenails of squirrel. The fir trees move hugely. The white is perfectly curved, stunned with itself. Puffs of ice fog and some gold things float up. Shadows rake their motionlessness across the snow with a vibration of other shadow moving crosswise on them, shadow on shadow, in precise velocities. It is very cold then that too begins to subtract itself, the body chills on its surface but the core is hot and it is

possible to disconnect the surface, withdraw to the core, where a ravishing peace flows in, so ravishing I am unembarrassed to use the word ravishing, and it is not a peace of separation from the senses but the washing-through peace of looking, listening, feeling, at the very core of snow, at the very core of the care of snow. It has nothing to do with Hegel and he would not admire the clumsily conventional sentences in which I have tried to tell about it but I suspect, if I hadn't been trying on the mood of Hegel's particular grammatical indignation that Christmas day, I would never have gone out to stand in the snow, or stayed to speculate with it, or had the patience to sit down and make a record of speculation for myself as if it were a worthy way to spend an afternoon, a plausible way to change the icy horror of holiday into a sort of homecoming. Merry Christmas from Hegel.

Mount Holyoke, 1992

*How good it's been to slide back
the heart's hood awhile, how fortunate
there's a heart and a covering for it,
and that whatever is still warm
has a chance*

—Stephen Dunn, "Loves"

I was out planting tomatoes in my garden when the phone rang. When I heard my father's voice on the line I knew it had to be bad news. My mother was the only one who ever called, and she called often, and she would fill my father in in little bursts during the conversation while he kept his eyes trained on whatever golf tournament was on TV.

She had died in bed, the night before, right beside him. She had complained of feeling poorly at about eleven, and he had asked her if she wanted to go to the hospital, and she had said no, and they had gone to sleep, and when he woke up the next morning she was dead. She was eleven years his junior, active, athletic, young for her age. She was an anorexic, and an alcoholic, and was taking Viioxx, but if there was anyone who knew how lethal a combination that was in those days, it wasn't us. She had been and would always be the good parent. None of us, me least of all, had expected that she would die first.

I was in Pennsylvania early the next morning. We buried her the day after that. My father and I were both in shock, I see now, and we had never really learned how to talk to one another. When I was a child I was afraid of his anger and his occasionally violent outbursts, the most serious of which left me with a broken femur when I was four years old. In the years since I'd been old enough to "take him," as one close friend put it, I had made no effort to understand his conservative values, and he had made no effort to understand why I had dedicated my life to the arts.

On my second morning in Pennsylvania, I went around town collecting menus from restaurants that offered delivery, and educated him in using the

washing machine, the dryer, and the dishwasher (he was shocked to discover that if you put glasses in the dishwasher right side up they wind up full of water). On the third morning, I loaded up my mother's now redundant car and drove to Holyoke, where I'd been invited to teach at the Mount Holyoke Writer's Conference, as if this detour home had always been part of the plan.

It was only when I saw the giant bouquet of lilies sent to my Mt. Holyoke dorm room that I realized it was probably strange that I hadn't cancelled the teaching engagement. I am a workaholic from a family of workaholics and our first commandment was always that if you have been hired to do a job you show up on time and ready to give it everything you've got. My father felt the same way about work, and would never have suggested I stay and help him get his bearings. *No one had cut off our legs*, was one of his favorite expressions, and I was in the classroom, ready to go when the conference began.

My editor, Carol Houck Smith, was also in attendance that week. It is only at this moment that I realize what amazingly good timing that was, to have my surrogate mother—an inimitable woman—on hand the week after my real one passed away. To say nothing of Stephen Dunn, and Gerald Stern—whom Carol also edited—and Jack Driscoll; all broad-shouldered soft-touches, all men well acquainted with the labyrinths of grief.

The next morning, out of the blue, my father showed up in Mount Holyoke, the first of several drop-in visits over the next decade and a half until his death. These visits always occurred at writers' conferences, usually somewhere lovely—Squaw Valley, Taos, Provincetown—never at my home, and always without warning. He would show up in one or another Cadillac convertible dressed in yellow slacks and a fleur-de-lis tie, expecting to be fed and watered and included in the parties. But this time, no one raised an eyebrow, no one asked if I had known he was coming. The conference simply absorbed him, and made him feel at home. Stephen and Jack played tennis with him each morning. Gerry entertained him with stories of the old neighborhoods of New York. I don't know if my father realized how lucky he was to be in the company of men who were so particularly articulate in the language of sorrow, who were so skillful at offering solace absent of pity, but none of their kindnesses were lost on me.

I had gotten to know Stephen through Carol. It is commonly known that her writers were her family, and she loved to pull various groups of us together whenever she could. She had introduced me to Stephen's poetry when we first started working on my first collection of stories together, three years before, and I had devoured his poems, reading the books so many times I could recite many of them from memory. Even at that age, I knew enough to appreciate his quiet authority, his gift for aphorism, his knack for speaking my own, most private thoughts about the world back to me, as if he had been given some kind of road map to the ever-shifting thing it means to be an adult. I read "Decorum" at the beginning of every class I taught because of the way the teacher in the poem manages to be both the authority and the fool; I read "Something Like Happiness" to my fellow PhD students, mired, as we often were in Foucault and Derrida, as a reminder not to take them, or ourselves, too seriously. I read "The Woman With Five Hearts" to all potential suitors to gauge their reactions because I was so bad at choosing in those days, and the woman in the poem was not; and I read "Some Things I Wanted To Say to You" to everyone I loved, because it contains the line: "Tell the dogs and the horses / you love them more than cars." I believed that Stephen had written "To My Friend In Love With The Wrong Man Again" for me, even though we had not yet met when he wrote it, and "Missing" was surely written from the point of view, not of the woman I was, but the one I wanted to be. I was fluent in Stephen's work, more fluent than he might have expected a barely thirty-year-old short story writer to be, and I say with all humility, I think he was at least a little charmed by my fluency.

It is easy to see now that at Mount Holyoke that summer, everyone was looking out for me in ways I may have been too much in shock to fully recognize at the time. Carol came to my room every night and asked me to tell her stories about my mother. Jack Driscoll sat with me for an hour while I showed him the stills I had brought from my mother's Broadway—and more often—off-Broadway days. Gerry Stern teased me endlessly about everything, including my habit of showing up at events with my hair still wet. And though I assured him it was because my hair has always been too dry to tolerate a blow drier, he insisted I did it only to be sexy, something I think of to this day, every time I walk into a

public space with my hair even slightly damp. I hadn't asked for any of this care, would have said I didn't need it, but no one ever asked if I needed it, they just showed up for me day after day.

Which brings me to the remarkable thing Stephen did that week: he allowed me to choose all the poems for his reading, not only which poems he would read, but also the order in which he would read them. I asked him if I could do it, and, after laughing a little taken-aback-sort-of laugh, he agreed.

It's hard for me to understand, twenty years and a whole writing career later, not only why I made the request, but how on earth I had the nerve to do so. I was a baby writer, who'd had unexpected success, with a book that had, of all things, *Cowboys* in the title, and Stephen, at that point, had published eight books of poems. I had immeasurable admiration for his poetry and poetry in general, having studied at the University of Utah under Mark Strand and Larry Lewis, two of the finest poets who have ever lived.

Maybe something in me understood, in spite of my denial, that losing my mother would untether me from the earth in a way that would take years to comprehend, and choosing Stephen's reading gave me, in that instant, some small measure of control. Maybe I was looking for approval from someone vaguely parental, in the same way that, when I was ten, I would memorize all the individual player stats of the Philadelphia Phillies to try to impress my Dad. Maybe I thought, as I have so many times when life deals a blow, that a deep intimacy with a particular body of literature would save me.

Stephen didn't ask me why I wanted to choose his reading. He didn't ask me who I thought I was, or what I thought I knew, or whether or not I'd considered that there might be new poems he was dying to try out on the crowd. He didn't ask me if I was finally losing it, as anyone might, four days after the unexpected death of her mother.

"I would be gratified to see what you came up with," he said, in his most gentlemanly undertone, and so I sat at his sunny table and made a play list for his reading, which he studied thoughtfully before tucking it into the front of his book.

I don't believe my father had ever read a poem in his life prior to his arrival in Mount Holyoke that year, but he attended Stephen's reading in the chapel, where

Stephen read all the poems I had requested, in more or less the order I requested them. He ended the reading, as I had asked him to, with the poem "Loves."

When the reading was over, my father said, "You know, I never would have thought of poetry as much of anything at all, but the way he put things together was so powerful. I was," and at this he sounded frankly bewildered, "actually moved." I did not ask him what he thought I had been doing with my life for the last two decades. I did not invite him to come live with me in Colorado so that we might read literature together and make up for lost time. I bought him a copy of *Landscape at the End of the Century*, and had Stephen sign it for him, to take when it was time for him to go back home alone.

Conflict With A Childhood God

By evening, everything changes to
a startling non-color. A clock chimes
in the hallway. I sit down at my desk
and try to write the letter to my brother.

Then he dies.

Everything I should have said
sinks back down inside. Wild things continue
to form. The body sounds of no vowels,
kept with no tongues on it ever, found

by dragonflies rushing through hollow reeds
always, somewhere, it is summer. Someday,
I will ask,

Mother, when did it happen
and there will be no one there. I teach a group

of children that in sleep, the body glows
so bright it extinguishes all pain.
With no hands, glove. With no gloves, hand,
the boy's face but a pale cut of frozen

grass, captured in photographs. I accept
that this, too, is given and leave the warm
relief of god and such to others. Else
what is this ache, the barbarous shape it takes?

Bees

Every day I pass,
in the tangle of roses,
a hum,

a rise and fall
just itself,
no beginning or end.

My scent, too,
must linger.
I must be

under observation,
a passing
sweetness

or maybe
so big
they will have me

done in by a thorn,
the traditional
procedure

for bringing down
fabulous
monsters.

Monsters

When I was twenty-six, I sought out my professor and asked to be chosen to accompany him on the prison creative writing workshop for reasons I couldn't even articulate. The first thing that happened was I got warned about walking the yard.

In this particular prison—a medium-security outfit in central Iowa—I entered from the parking lot and put everything on my person—pens, bobby pins, jackets, credit cards—into a locker in the lobby. I passed through a metal detector. I was escorted by a guard through one door into a small holding room while the tower guard assessed the situation before opening the door that allowed me out of the glass pen into the yard.

I had already been told what not to wear. None of my group was allowed open-toed shoes, or anything blue, as the inmates at this facility wore blue jeans and navy t-shirts. They had to make sure they could tell us apart: the free and the caged.

But there was more detail for me, the woman. No bare arms. No skirts. There were 1,200 men I had to walk past and my skin would simply be an invitation towards harassment. No heels: I wouldn't be able to run in them.

When the second door opened, I stepped out into the yard. I had been sure it wouldn't be as bad as everyone said, but I began walking carefully, eyes studying the dusty ground, making sure to stay close and engaged in conversation with one of the three male writers. I tried not to hear the whistling. I pretended not to notice the cheers and head-swivels and the way a guard hissed *don't even think about it* when he noticed a pack of three men walking far too casually, trailing our group.

When I made it inside the far building, where the library was, I relaxed, but only slightly. I met the row of thirteen men with whom I'd spend the next six weeks writing, and I realized this was worse than the yard. Here, I could see their faces.

• • •

In the late eighteenth century, philosopher Jeremy Bentham designed the institutional building type known as the Panopticon. The design consisted of a circular structure, with an inspection center at the hub of the outer buildings, from which a manager of an institution could theoretically observe inmates, stationed around the perimeter—without the inmates being able to tell whether or not they were being watched.

Bentham described the Panopticon as “a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind,” and while he spent most of his efforts designing a Panopticon prison, he also envisioned the plan as being applicable to poorhouses, madhouses, and schools.

No true Panopticon prisons have ever been built. The legacy of Bentham’s notion exists largely as a notion of power and control, as analyzed by Michael Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. The real advantage of the Panopticon is psychological. By creating what Foucault calls “a consciousness of permanent visibility,” the Panopticon exercises power without the need for any concrete form of domination such as bars, chains, or heavy locks.

If you can never tell whether you are being watched, you are always being watched.

• • •

The division and distribution of power between us—the visiting outsiders—and them—the prisoners—was a constant source of push-pull during the creative writing workshop. In some cases, when walking across the yard, I was hyper-conscious of being watched, and its inherent danger.

At other times, sitting in a circle, facing the men who were there to learn from us, I felt myself watching them, as an outsider. I wanted to guess what they had done. I wanted to know whether they regretted their actions. I wanted to study them, to find the answers in their patterns of facial hair. I wanted them redeemed.

Beginning the first week, most of our workshop sessions involved a discussion of a certain craft element—character, dialogue, setting—and a short writing period, where we produced brief reflective pieces the inmates would expand during the rest of the week. We opened the next week by hearing some of the writing from the group.

During our third week, my professor told us to write about a song that reminded us of an important time in our lives. As we broke away from the group, I again found

myself under the gaze, sitting at a table with four men—despite there being three empty tables in the library. I vacillated between feeling uncomfortable, knowing that my youth and femininity had the potential to make me a target for inappropriate connections, and feeling self-important, berating myself for imagining I was so lovely, for imagining them so unsavory as to be unable to tell where to draw the line.

Tense and self-conscious, I dove into the writing prompt. Our professor had instructed us to write about a memory in which music played a key role. I focused on my adolescence, perhaps as a time in which I often felt exposed. I wrote about being seventeen and lost and finding something cruel and beautiful in the harsh, gear-grinding soundscape of Nine Inch Nails. I wrote about painting my nails black and listening in the dark, feeling submerged and safe, feeling protected by the darkness of the sound.

After ten minutes of private writing time, we reconvened as a group to read some of our work out loud. My professor asked me to share my work, noting that, in three sessions, I hadn't yet read anything to the group. When I read the piece out loud, several of the inmates—who were all hardened, addicted, tattooed—were very impressed to learn that this quiet little girl listened to Trent Reznor. For a few moments after class ended, as we slowly milled out of the library, before the men were escorted back to their cell blocks, a few stood around talking to me, asking how I got into the band, whether I'd ever seen them perform live.

I stupidly allowed myself to leave the prison that day feeling triumphant, feeling like I had begun to forge a connection to this group of foreign men. I thought *maybe we have something in common after all*. I was comfortable for a moment with seeing, and being seen.

Part of the success of the Panopticon as a prison system is the pervasive inescapability of the gaze of the manager—the inmates reside in cells flooded with light, constantly available and constantly aware of their availability to the viewer.

There is a world of difference between this and allowing yourself to be seen.

• • •

We weren't allowed to ask directly about the crimes for which they had been incarcerated, nor were we allowed to touch. We could only look.

After four of our six sessions, our group was down one participant: a big man I'll call Joe who had short black braids in his hair and always carried a red lollipop. He called me Sugar.

We weren't allowed to ask the question on our minds, to know why Joe had disappeared. But over beers after that workshop, Lou, our prison liaison, alluded to a hypothetical in which, if an inmate was accused of orchestrating a shower gang rape, he would probably be banned from attending extracurriculars. Especially if this hadn't been his first such accusation. Sometimes the power of looking blinds you.

Two weeks later, at the last session of our six-week workshop, each participant was asked to bring two pieces: one to read, and one that he would hand off to me, to contribute to a booklet of collected works we would type up and send back to the prison as a memento. We spent the entire session, four hours on a cold December Friday, hearing from the participants who wanted to share—which was nearly all of them—hearing stories of addiction-addled bad decisions and fond memories of childhood pets and detailed descriptions of the children whose birthdays they had never celebrated.

One of the inmates—Bill, I'll say—a thirty-something who looked forty-something, a man whose previous writing had hinted he may have molested children or stepchildren, a man with a long brown ponytail and a thin mustache, told us he had tried his hand at a piece of fiction and asked to be allowed to read last. With fifteen minutes to spare, he began. The first line of his story: "*You know, John, I love this song,*" Marissa says out of the blue.

Everyone in the room immediately tensed, with no idea of what my name was doing in the story, or where it was going, or whether there was anything at all we could do to stop it. We had no choice but to listen.

He knows Marissa's love for music, how it kind of gets her high. The cavity of Marissa's chest palpitates rhythmically with the beat of the song.

The story devolved quickly, involving a reference to a talking pig, a disappearing sheriff, a field of lilies. But a part of me stayed frozen in that chair after Bill finished reading, remembering the description of the character John's hand massaging Marissa's leg, John's hand pulling a snub-nose revolver from his suit coat pocket.

The story became a running joke in the car on the way back to our university that day, and then spread through my department at the university: the prisoner who had a crush on Marissa, who wrote a story about Marissa.

I laughed, too. What was I laughing at? Of course, I was dissipating my fear by brushing it aside. But wasn't some part of me laughing at the ludicrousness of it all, at the idea that a man like him could ever have a romance with a girl like me? Weren't we all really laughing because we thought him a little pathetic?

For a moment, I knew what it was like to be unable to control how I was viewed—by whom, as whom, for what purpose, and endlessly. I was haunted by the knowledge that Bill could, if he chose, think about me in this way for the rest of his life. But I was also haunted by the knowledge that this was terrifying for me, in large part, because of how I viewed Bill, because I had chosen to see him as a prisoner, first and only.

• • •

One of the participants, Bryce, never spoke until that last meeting, the same meeting in which Bill read his story about me. Bryce volunteered to read one of his pieces, titled simply, "Friday." The short piece followed a nameless narrator as he wakes in his cell, walks to the bathroom, lines up for morning count, all constantly aware of the limitations of his existence.

Bryce wrote eloquently of the pressure of this constant awareness—a narrator without any sense of day or time, without any human sensation, referring to himself and the other inmates as *animals* being fed, a narrator cut through with endless anger, looking at the face of every person and thinking, *what an asshole*. As the narrator progresses through his day, he realizes it is Friday, the day of his creative writing workshop, and he has a story to write. Throughout the day, he puts the story off, brushing aside the one instance of retreat, writing as a source of privacy or internality. As he moves through meals, forced labor, lifting weights in the yard, he thinks, *Fuck it, it'll write itself*.

As the narrator of the piece enters his weekly creative writing workshop, he thinks of those he sees there, those he calls *the outsiders*:

Out of the six, the motivations of only a few are apparent. He doesn't understand what could possess any sane person to want to witness bottled misery trapped behind fences, hidden anguish, hatred, hostility in the mind and hearts of all who reside here. Why is the question he asks himself. What is the real motivation? Why waste time with the wasted?

The narrator called the workshop *the face-off*.

We were unable to offer any feedback more than wow, a solemn head nod. He had caught us. He had asked us a question we couldn't answer.

But he also saw us. His gaze upon our motivations was raw and bruised and harsh but none of us could say it was inaccurate. Mostly, it was uncomfortable because the observed had become the observer. He had turned the floodlights of the Panopticon back to the center.

• • •

Over the course of six weeks in the prison, there were moments when the men in that room laughed a certain way, or wrote about the guilt they felt for having let down their families, or offered an insightful comment about a short story, moments during which I thought, *He seems like a good guy*. And there were moments—when they read work that confessed to a crime, or harbored violent thoughts toward a cellie, or expressed a lack of regret or remorse—when I thought each one seemed like a monster.

But on the last day of the workshop, when I crossed back over the yard as the sky darkened in early December, when I pulled my coat out of the locker and climbed back into the minivan in the parking lot, I averted my gaze from the prison that I could leave. I drove home, and went to the bar to get drunk with my friends, and I regaled them with stories of the six-week workshop as if those stories belonged to me. I laughed with them about Bill's crush, and furrowed my brow at the impressively meta nature of Bryce's monologue. Over the three years since that fall, over nights in bars with friends or strangers, I have used that workshop, taken it into my writer's arsenal as a series of anecdotes to demonstrate how brave I am, how open-minded, how progressive. When I catch myself doing it—always smiling, a beer in my hand, drawing on the prison workshop to make a point, or to embellish the story of my life—for a moment, I am a monster, too.

Somehow, We are National

Whoever designed holes must've designed love overnight in a brash moment when someone who said they would occupy their mouth didn't occupy their mouth because they were out occupying Wall Street or the rain or a pastrami sandwich on rye and whoever said to dream this big must've thought dreams want us back they don't want us back it's like we are businessmen in a garden and the garden screams get out of my beautiful space so we wing it in our suits and walk to Wall Street and for a moment all the people are a collective monument and it is remarkable it slays us and we can't be part of it because we are wearing suits but we never asked to be businessmen or to dream and we realize we love each other but in the corporate sense where one is a giant and the other a poor rat and nothing is ever equal and that is why love is a revolt your bones are not magnificent they are bones all we can do is hold our hands in the air until we can't anymore and watch out for holes in the street and not get sucked in but sing to halcyon skies and purple mountains and grace your body is not a bell but let's swing it your body is something to ring and I'll ring it.

Sol in Leo

Shooting a .22 is perversely
gentle. There is no real

kickback, it is simply an insistent
digging in the shoulder,

trailed by the sour smell of burnt
gunpowder, shells sputtering

from the magazine in a ticking
of brass. When I buy a pass

to the basement rifle range,
my instructor advises me

to conceal my gun on the train
in a guitar case. Aiming at paper

torsos, I see it is foolish to wait
for winter days to lengthen.

How weak a dependence
on light is; like a body easily

betrayed, it can kill a man.
In the Persian miniature,

Sol in Leo, the lion is its own
composite of animals

eaten by the lion: plaited
in the mane, woven in the tail,

folded inside haunches like
contortionists in an open-

walled box of hide. Uncover
enough of what you are

and the world won't think
to look for anything else.

Revisiting *The De Luxe Show*: Black, White, and “Hard Art” in Houston, 1971

*This curious and complex exhibition may be like a quiet underwater explosion,
the shock waves of which have not yet hit.*

—Jan Butterfield, “The De Luxe Show”¹

In 1971, Peter Bradley, artist and associate director of New York’s prestigious Perls Gallery, curated the exhibition titled *The De Luxe Show* in Houston (see plates 6 and 7, page 197). The exhibition presented abstract painting and sculpture made by New York-based artists who were black, white, and Latina. Even today, the list largely remains a who’s who of abstract American artists. Arguably, such diversity in an exhibition not focused on a racial theme is rare even *today*, but in 1971 it had never been done before.

Indeed, *The De Luxe Show* has been historicized as the first major exhibition of contemporary art by both black and white artists—a racially progressive intervention into business as usual in the racially exclusive art scene. Bradley considered the exhibition an opportunity to create a new model for the post-Civil Rights Movement—one that would include both black and white artists.² He has stated,

This selection breaks down the barriers that create this whole theory of black shows and white shows. *The DeLuxe Show* marks the very first time that good black artists share the attention and the tribute with good white

1. Jan Butterfield, “The De Luxe Show,” *The Texas Observer: A Journal of Free Voices, A Window to the South*, September 14, 1971 [unpaginated from Menil Archives Folder]. A note on variations: The correct title of the exhibition is *The De Luxe Show* as printed in the accompanying catalogue, however the capitalization and formatting varies in the subsequent press about the exhibition.

2. Author’s conversation with Bradley, February 9, 2013.

artists. The black artists look good with them simply because they *are* good.
All the artists in the show certainly have paid their dues.³

His project was to open borders beyond the narrow paradigm of black and white race relations and let the art speak for itself. Ultimately, *The De Luxe Show* fulfilled three purposes: first, it responded to art patron John de Menil's request to Bradley to present what contemporary black artists were making; second, it presented an exhibition of work by notable artists in a non-museum space in order to prioritize the viewership of Houston's economically poor and dilapidated Fifth Ward neighborhood; and third, it challenged the logic of a racially exclusive exhibition.

The De Luxe Show appeared in a particularly contentious time in the racial politics of American museum exhibitions. In the 1970s, black artists in New York primarily exhibited their work in a small yet dedicated infrastructure of galleries and the Studio Museum in Harlem. This network was forged through a history of key protests in the late 1960s and early 1970s around exhibitions at mainstream art museums, most notably *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America* (1969) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and *The 1930's: Painting and Sculpture in America* (1968) and *Contemporary Black Artists in America* (1971) at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Black artists also labored as activists, founding art spaces and protesting the exclusion of black curatorial expertise and the absence of art by black artists in exhibitions. Even in the geographically distinct context of Houston, *The De Luxe Show* participated in this discourse. *The De Luxe Show* was organized in response to the *Some American History* (1971) exhibition curated by white artist Larry Rivers at the Institute for the Arts, Rice University. What Menil offered to Bradley was an opportunity for black self-representation in response to Rivers' depiction of Blackness. By commissioning both exhibitions, Menil supported conflicting understandings of the roles of black people in the art world.

In 1969, Rivers was commissioned by de Menil to organize an exhibition that would address black men's life in America. The subject matter was Rivers'

3. "Conversation with Peter Bradley, Curator of 'The Deluxe Show' in *The De Luxe Show*. Catalogue. Menil Foundation, (Houston: Texas, 1971), 67.

idea inspired in part by a 1967 trip to Africa from which he felt an “eagerness to become involved in a work about Black people.”⁴ The show had several names up until the final title, *Some American History*, including *The History of Afro-Americans*, *This Black History*, *History of the Black American*, and *The Black Experience*.⁵ Rivers’ further explained his impulse to create an exhibition about black people,

Now as then I thought I was especially equipped for the task. Why...Some as yet unfigured out notion that my life and my sense of a Black person (sic) life in these United States its peculiar tragedy its exhilarating specialties & white people & that there resides in me some essential talent to be able to act upon it all Rah Rah Rah.⁶

Rivers reluctantly decided to include black artists in his project. He resolved that their inclusion was “necessary” but “presented difficulties,” and the de Menils were not enthusiastic about a group exhibition.⁷ In 1970, Rivers invited Bradley to be one of the black artists in the exhibition. He did not tell Bradley the title or theme of the exhibition, but requested that Bradley create an artwork based on a black hero. Bradley chose Marcus Garvey and thought of the grand automobile he rode in during his street parades in 1920s Harlem. Bradley found an old railroad cart to use for the car and created an abstract geometric sculpture from wood laminate to represent the horse in front of the car. After shipping *Marcus Garvey* (1971) to Houston, Bradley did not see it again; neither was he invited to the exhibition opening. Later in 1971, Bradley acquired a photograph of his work in the show and saw that Rivers had pasted photos of Marcus Garvey all over it. Infuriated by this outrageous act, Bradley confronted Rivers in his 14th Street

4. Letter from Larry Rivers to Dominique and John de Menil, May 1970. Unless otherwise noted, all correspondence from Menil Archives, Houston, Texas.

5. Letter from Larry Rivers to Dominique and John de Menil, May 1970, Letter from John de Menil to Larry Rivers, May 5, 1970, “Black Experience Exhibit Originating at Rice,” *Houston Chronicle* (November 5, 1970).

6. Letter from Larry Rivers to Dominique and John de Menil, May 1970.

7. *Ibid.*

studio and punched him in the mouth.⁸

Rivers' vandalism of Bradley's work indicates his desire to have final control over the creation and presentation of all the works in the exhibition. Even more than that, changing *Marcus Garvey* [fig. 1] indicates Rivers' discomfort with Bradley's choice of abstraction, and objection to Bradley's non-figurative approach to visualizing Blackness. Rivers' addition of photographs formed a layer over the wooden carriage platform. They lined the surface with two reproductions of photographs of Garvey: a studio portrait, and an image of him in his elaborate Harlem street parades of the 1920s. These



Figure 1. Peter Bradley, *Marcus Garvey*, 1970–1971 (shown after Larry Rivers pasted the photographs on the sculpture). Photo by Hickey & Robertson, Houston. *The DeLuxe Show Archives*, The Menil Collection, Houston.

images make the work visualize the reference to Garvey's activities through explicit representation. Rivers took away the pleasure of exploring the signifying possibilities of the abstract form and denied the participation of the work in the abstract minimalist sculpture style of the day. Instead, the original work was destroyed and transformed into a didactic illustration of Garvey's regal processions—more of a documentary artifact than abstract creation.

Cultural critic bell hooks has addressed the fear of black people engaging in and producing abstract thought as a way to maintain racial hierarchies. Hooks writes,

8. Five other black artists participated in Rivers' exhibition, but Bradley's was the only one that was modified by Rivers. The other five artists were Ellsworth Ausby, Frank Bowling, Daniel LaRue Johnson, Joe Overstreet, and William T. Williams.

racism is perpetuated when blackness is associated solely with concrete gut level experience conceived either as opposing or having no connection to abstract thinking and the production of critical theory. The idea that there is no meaningful connection between black experience and critical thinking about aesthetics or culture must be continually interrogated.⁹

Rivers literally transformed Bradley's manifestation of abstract thought into a figurative work by illustrating it with images from Garvey's life experiences. He redefined Bradley's "meaningful connection between black experience and critical thinking about aesthetics" into a work that Rivers decided was more appropriate for Bradley to produce. Equally remarkable is that Rivers' addition made Bradley's art appear to be more like his own. Known for his collage-effect style of painting and crude approach to representing the figure, the act of gluing paper onto a finished sculpture places within the sensibility of the artist. However, gluing paper onto another person's artwork without permission is quite another matter and a true artistic transgression.

After the *Some American History* exhibition was at Rice, de Menil approached Bradley directly to create an exhibition on what contemporary black artists were doing. At first, Bradley refused to curate the show. De Menil explained, "[Peter Bradley] said that no serious black artist today would accept to be included in an exclusively black show which has a patronizing flavor, and that he wanted the exhibition to include white artists as well."¹⁰ Bradley was not an aspiring curator. He had already found success in the mainstream art world as associate director of Perls Gallery on Madison Avenue since 1968.¹¹ He refused payment to curate *The De Luxe Show*. His conditions for agreeing to curate the show were twofold: one, that it not consist of exclusively black artists, and two, that a catalogue be published to document the exhibition. He was fully aware of the limited opportunities for black artists in the art world, and wanted to work outside of

9. bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," *Postmodern Culture*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (September 1990).

10. Menil Foundation Inc. Memorandum: DeLUXE ART SHOW and THE BLACK ART CENTER, July 1971. It also states that Bradley wanted the show outside of a museum or gallery and in a poor section of town. Poor is synonymous with Black in this memo.

11. Bradley was associate director of Perls Gallery from 1968 to 1975.

the mainstream museum and gallery system to cultivate a new space. *The De Luxe Show* was presented in the De Luxe theater, a formerly racially segregated theater for Black Houston that Bradley repurposed for an interracial art exhibition.¹² *The De Luxe Show*, therefore, offered two paradigms for the Fifth Ward: a space to exhibit visual art, and interracial cooperation.¹³

The Menil Foundation anticipated three results from *The De Luxe Show*:

1. It will show the black community in Houston that there are black artists of quality who compete on equal terms with white artists of their generation.
2. It will have given a stimulus to black art activities in town and challenge the black community in supporting them.
3. It will have initiated a co-operation between the Black Art Center and the Institute for the Arts, as also the Media Center.¹⁴

It is notable that there were not any black Houstonian artists in *The De Luxe Show*, a criticism that emerged from community discussion. Community activist Mickey Leland who helped organize Fifth Ward residents to renovate the theater reported, "The show was titled 'Hard Art at the DeLuxe' and it was hard, it was over my head. But they did enjoy it, there is a definite sentimental attachment to the theatre itself."¹⁵ As a Harris County Community Action Association employee explained, "Nobody I know who went to the show was even able to describe what was there. To me it showed a curious absence of a sense of cultural relevance. Everybody knows the ghetto mood has changed over the last few years. The people know now why they wouldn't necessarily have a feel for all the white man's art they've been seeing. If it was really for the people there, then

12. An earlier example of this architectural repurposing is the Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture in South East Washington, DC. It began in 1967 as the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in a converted movie theater. Stephen Weil "From Being about Something to Being for Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum" in *Daedalus*, Vol. 128, No. 3 (Summer 1999): 249.

13. The Menil planned to turn the De Luxe Theater into a free clinic with black doctors after the exhibition. Foundation Inc. Memorandum, July 1971.

14. The De Luxe theater was not part of the Black Arts Center located several blocks away. However, the Menil Foundation believed that it would stimulate interest in the arts and the Black Arts Center would benefit. Menil Foundation Inc. Memorandum, July 1971.

15. Menil Foundation Inc. Memorandum, July 1971.

their involvement, the existing arts efforts should have been supported first.¹⁶ She also believed that the exhibition should have included local artists "who are just now taking off on the aesthetic of Black art."¹⁶ Ayers makes a good point about the gap between the economically impoverished residents of the Fifth Ward and the mainstream New York art world, but the strategy for the show was designed to involve local residents through a different approach.¹⁷

Bradley was not interested in an exhibition that fulfilled the expectation of what was expected to be Black Art.¹⁸ As he stated,

Art exists everywhere around us. The colors and shapes of paintings and sculptures are seen in our daily lives. The artists in this exhibition depict in their works the urge for complete exploration. These works carry a particular clarity: a window into a new art. Their art is honest and wide open, not burdened with gestures and other clichés. This art should be like the new world we're all striving toward, free of obstruction.¹⁹

The De Luxe Show was not curated to present figurative representations that reflected the community. It was, instead, a conceptual project that was as much about freedom from the expectation of what art by black artists should look like, as the freedom to make art without content and explore a phenomenological experience of the object.

Butterfield's article offers a liberal perspective on the role of race in the exhibition:

The exhibition includes some of the most important artists around who use color as structure, and some solid sculptors, but even more importantly *it happens* that roughly half of the artists included in the exhibition are black.

16. D. J. Hobby, "DeLuxe Art Show in Ghetto Met With Mixture of Reactions." *Houston Chronicle*, October 1, 1971. [unpaginated from Menil Archives Folder].

17. Bradley curated an exhibition of artists working in abstraction, and John de Menil approved of it. Further, an exhibition of art by Black Houstonians was not part of Menil's design. In a letter to Robert Hobbs, de Menil made his opinion clear, "A show by local black artists would have been a pacifier because they are mediocre to bad, and it would have been endorsing something in which we don't believe. Instead we are showing good artists of the younger generation, black, white and brown together." From Letter from John de Menil to Robert Hobbs, August 17, 1991.

18. Jan Butterfield, "The De Luxe Show."

19. "The Deluxe Show: Art Goes to the People." *Southwest Art Gallery Magazine*, September 1971, 14.

The point of all of this is that a point is not made of it—except through the Fifth Ward grapevine where for many it is the only factor that gives the show credence.²⁰

Later in the article, Butterfield makes this point of not making a point of race again, saying,

[*The De Luxe Show*] is instead a “mainstream” exhibition which *happens to* have some black artists in it. It is relatively easy to choose up sides and argue the relative merits of “Black Art,” “Black Artists” and the influence of African Ancestry—it is a convoluted dialectic. The critical literature of the past three years is full of pros and cons and heated disagreements. Suffice it to say my personal interest lies primarily in the quality of the art. The rest is politics and sociology. That point having been made, I choose not to discuss the blackness or whiteness of any given artist from here on out [italics mine].²¹

Her liberal gesture toward colorblindness denies the work that must be done consciously and purposefully to make an intervention into racially exclusive exhibition practices.

The De Luxe Show was the first of three exhibitions held at the theater before it shut down.²² Through his exhibition Bradley was able to hire many residents of the Fifth Ward to refurbish the theater and offer something unexpected to the community. The exhibition also helped counter the representation of black artists through Rivers’ vision of Black American history by offering cutting edge art from New York by a black curator. Bradley’s exhibition also modeled how an interracial group of artists can show their work together. However, it was disappointing to Bradley that only two white artists, Kenneth Noland and Larry

20. Jan Butterfield, “The De Luxe Show.”

21. *Ibid.*

22. *The De Luxe Show* (August 15–September 24, 1971) the exhibition was extended beyond the September 15 date published in the catalogue; *Joe Overstreet* opened at Rice University (May 14–July 3, 1972) and later at The De Luxe Theater (August 15–September 30, 1972); and *Tribal Art of Africa* (April 22–May 20, 1973) was the last art exhibition at the theater.

Poons, were enthusiastic about participating in the exhibition. Noland's hands-on involvement with installing *The De Luxe Show* was critical to its preparation. However none of the artists attended the opening. Bradley's friend, art critic Clement Greenberg, was present for the installation and opening of the exhibition. In an interview that appears in the catalogue, Greenberg summarizes the immediate impact of *The De Luxe Show* experiment:

Well, here was a quantity of "hard" contemporary art in a newly resplendent interior behind a dilapidated exterior in what looked like a poor neighborhood. And the "hard" art—the presence of it—seemed to be animating that neighborhood. Rather the interest in the art that the neighborhood people were showing did the animating: the grave and quiet interest which had all the more effect on an outsider because it was so grave and intent. People were really looking. They were taking the art seriously. That was what was the essential factor in the exhilaration....And the "event": well, whatever you might have expected to be incongruous in the situation failed to materialize. Sophisticated art was being exposed to presumably unsophisticated tastes, and yet the juxtaposition turned out, in this case, to be anything but incongruous.²³

Much appreciation to Philip Maysles and Franklin Sirmans for the suggestion to look into these Houston exhibitions. Thanks to Geri Aramanda, Lisa Barkley, Mary Kadish, and Michelle White for their assistance at the Menil, and Peter Bradley for his willingness to speak with me about Houston and the art world back in the day.

23. "De Luxe Interview With Clement Greenberg" in *The De Luxe Show*. Catalogue. Menil Foundation (Houston: Texas, 1971), 65.

Spontaneous Human Combustion

You can't mask the scent of sulfur
once it sets in the upholstery.

That's as far as we've come in understanding.
Someone was here, and now he's not.

Sometimes your insides want to become
your outsides, and you have to tell them "No."

I remember *cbaud*, but have forgotten
the French for cold, the sensation

of needing to burrow, of nosing dirt aside
to bury myself in the basement's crawlspace.

There's a sound like swing-set chains
unwinding. Not like the time I snipped

my ring finger while maneuvering scissors.
Blood pooled, and there was no way

to test for tetanus. The great chasm of years
since inoculation weighed on me. Lockjaw:

as if a key went missing along with the ability
to tell someone, "Look out!

The sky hasn't looked friendly for days."
I do not like to argue, even with people I love,

but there's only accident out there in the flatlands,
bright as any phenomena, cruel as any store-bought pyre.

Disguised Weapons, Everyday Objects

With the right combination
of numbers, a phone discharges

.22 caliber rounds, and that's enough
to silence the witnesses.

Bedposts fall under
"less spy, more convenient"

and can be wiped clean.
All the women line their eyes

with kohl, let the points extend,
and this is only dangerous in cases

of mistaken identity, doppelgangers.
If you meet yours, kill yours,

even if your fingers resist,
refuse to break the windpipe

of yourself, but it's not yourself,
only a mirror-image

with a better job, boyfriend,
Labrador Retriever to your mutt.

We hunt a wild boar with spears
made from brooms and cut mason jars.

If the beast spoke, he would tell the story
of three little girls who used their pinafores

as leashes and nooses.
Marigold left school one afternoon

and came back a suitcase,
complete with destination stickers

for Barcelona, New Guinea,
and the Arctic Circle.

It's hard to gauge the recoil
without television shows

that compare Apaches
to Maori Warriors

as if this weren't as awful
as little moon-faced killers,

you and me if we could disappear
as easily as we mind the gap, afraid

to have our bodies severed
by oncoming trains.

Pietà

It was the end
of an era, the end of
to be, Michelangelo's name
chiseled between her breasts

on the strip crossing her body
like the shoulder strap of a
seat belt, holding her
back from

the thrust of
grief. *I think he was*
thinking that I thought of
aspens shaking in full sunlight,

how noon is known when it casts
no shade. *What a difference*
a day makes, the old
song goes,

but what about
the difference an *I*
makes? You could have a
whole word or the entire world

except, of course, the sky above
Sangre de Cristo mountains
just after sunset when
the clouds line up

as if someone had
taken a black marker,
blocked out the parts we're
not supposed to read. In Hokusai's

painting, Li Po admires the flowing
wall of the world, a waterfall
so vertical that, turned
on its side, he sees

the horizon—
a blank sea in its lap
that cannot fold, envelop, or
wrap a body, lap over it the way the tide

urges its soft, rolling slaps. Gertrude Stein
said the sound of a paragraph
is emotional, her dog
lapping water

from a bowl:
like love, she says,
*a paragraph is not pressed
for time.* The highest form of divine

communication Dante calls *visibile
parlare*, visible speaking,
so Mary and Christ
continue in

conversation:
robed peak with a
flop of flesh in its lap, *V*
rising like the vowel of a coyote.

Darryl Strawberry

Kidd Fenner steers the snowplow around the bend by the Daly Mansion, toward the pale humps of the Sapphire Mountains. He sees Ricky Towner's boy's booger-green Chevy Celebrity out in a field about twenty feet off from the road. The boy is doing his best to dig his back tires out of the fresh snow that fell in fat, packing-popcorn gobs last night. At the edge of the field, mailboxes wobble in the wind, and spilled flyers and envelopes dance in the ditch by the sharp, splintered edges of broken fence. Boy must've been hauling ass around the curve and hit some black ice, Fenner thinks. The boy is bent at the knees, throwing snow between his legs hound-dog style. He's not wearing a jacket, just a hooded sweatshirt. He pauses, looks around, blows on his hands, rubs them together. He played baseball with Fenner's kid. Outfield, maybe third base. Wasn't as good as Henry, but no one in Hamilton was. This, of course, was before the trouble. Fenner shakes this thought off—work is the one period during which he's trained himself not to think of his son.

The sound of the plow reaches him; Towner's boy sees Fenner and begins galloping unevenly through the lumpy snow. He wants Fenner to stop, give him a lift to school, Whitman's Towing, home, but that's not what Ravalli County pays Fenner to do. It's Fenner's task—for nineteen years now—to push the muck toward ditches and drifts and drop a little salt and gravel behind him for good measure. It's not perfect, but it's as close as you can get to it in February in Montana. Towner's boy is close now, jumping and waving like an idiot. The sky pushes down over the valley like a gray lid. More snow will fall tonight. Fenner can tell just by the look of the clouds, the way they loiter so close to home, how puddle-black veins run through their center. Fenner shrugs, shakes his head at the boy. Sorry, he thinks. Don't come out in this shit if you can't take it.

• • •

A week earlier, Chinook winds blew in and melted the snow and gave the valley a false sense of spring. Teenagers shed their parkas and drove around with the windows half down. The owner of Chapter One Bookstore rolled the discount rack outside to tempt foot traffic. The sun even broke through the clouds. This was also the day the police showed up with a warrant for Henry—the second one this year—because he didn't pay his fines, though Fenner gave him the money to do so. He'd been coming in late and sneaking out sometime during the day, while Fenner was out plowing the roads and Nora was teaching at the high school, but he hasn't been home since the cops showed up.

Since the warm winds kept Fenner inside the shop servicing the plows and watching daytime television and thinking, he's theorized that somehow the weather and Henry's momentary disappearance are connected. This is Nora's fault—she always finds messages in nothing. Still, she's been right a time or two: when they were living in Missoula while she finished up her degree and she found a blue ribbon stranded in a tree branch outside the spare bedroom and was convinced they'd have a boy; six months ago when the two of them saw that wreck on Ricketts Road and she turned to Fenner and said, "Henry's in trouble again."

As he twiddled his thumbs and watched Maury confront teen gangsters on TV, Fenner wondered if Nora's powers were somehow transferable—did she give them to him? Even stranger was that last night he found a curled note under the windshield wiper: *I'm sorry. Can you meet me tomorrow at american legion field at six?* He read it twice, crumpled it, smoothed it out, stuck it in his pocket. Later, after he said nothing about the note to Nora and brushed his teeth, through the window he saw snow falling. That seemed about right.

The note sits sandwiched between the visor and the plow's roof. He will not—repeat, will not—pull over and read it again.

• • •

A silver Taurus with a blue tarp in place of the back passenger window pulls out of the Town Pump on First. Fenner's seen Henry in that piece of shit before, months earlier, though Henry denied it. Fenner squints, trying to see if he can

spot Henry's slumping frame, but there's too much snow on the trunk. The car takes a left on Desta; Fenner shakes off the urge to follow it—if he follows it, then he'll wonder whether or not Henry will show up tonight; whether or not Nora called in sick again so she could search the trailer park by the river or the apartment complex behind the hospital for any signs of her son; whether or not she'll continue to wake up in the middle of the night and wander around the house like a ghost looking for someone who won't be coming. Hell, Fenner thinks, I might even call her, spill the plan about giving him the fine money again. So he keeps the truck straight, focuses on the scraping of the shovel against the road and the shape of the flakes as they swirl across the blue-tinted air.

• • •

The radio plays the same songs Fenner's heard for twenty years or more: Allman Brothers' "Ramblin' Man," "Big Shot," by Billy Joel. He's parked with his back to Safeway's brightly-lit parking lot; all he can see are the shadowy outlines of the bleachers, the dugout blocked by clumps of snow, the skeletal cyclone fence that runs parallel with the first base line. On nice days, he and Nora picnicked by the fence and gave Henry encouraging fist pumps before he stepped onto the mound. Christ, Fenner wonders, how long since then? No more than two years ago, which might as well have been forever.

Fenner's phone vibrates in the cup holder.

"You check the P.O. box yet?" Nora asks. Nora is hoping for a postcard from Omaha or Los Angeles or Honolulu from Henry: *Don't worry! I'm happy and sober and not wanted by the police!*

"Nothing," Fenner says. "Sorry, babe."

There is a flick from her lighter, the quick inhale as she takes a drag. She'd quit for seven years but took smoking back up a month ago. She hasn't mentioned it, but she doesn't hide it, either. Every morning Fenner finds her butts on the corner of the porch. He's thought about asking her, about mentioning that she smells like smoke, but he doesn't know how. He used to, but lately all they do is smile politely and nod to one another like strangers washing their hands in a men's

room. Instead, he kicks the goddamn butts into the yard and buries them in the snow with the toe of his boot.

"He'll call," Fenner says.

"Did you pay the fine?"

"Yup," Fenner says, touching the jacket pocket that holds the money.

"Good—I want to get to him before the cops do."

"What are you going to do with him?" Fenner asks, but he knows her plan. She wants to ship him off to a boys' ranch in Kalispell, where he'll bunk with kids worse than him. The same type of backward-capped, spine-bowed bastards Fenner has chased off their front porch. He's been trying to rid Henry of these creeps for two years, and Nora wants to hand him over freely. Fenner's own father checked into a half a dozen of those kind of places throughout his miserable life, and all they did was make it harder for Fenner's mother when it didn't stick, when Pop showed up drunk and angry, looking to take out everything on her. Nora's idea is the worst Fenner's ever heard.

"Coming home for dinner?"

She's inside now. Fenner can hear the whir of the dishwasher, the cackle of canned laughter from the TV. He sees her now as if perched on the windowsill above the sink. She's in Henry's old Montana Grizzlies sweatshirt, the one with thumbholes chewed into the left sleeve. She's got her left hand up to her head, tugging on her bangs—something she does now and then when she can't figure something out. She did it for six months after her father passed. He'd been on the wagon for six years. She never lets Fenner forget that fact. Now Fenner sees her how she was the night before last: curled in the tub, slick, snail-like lines from tears down to her neck. She wouldn't come back to bed. She told him she kept dreaming that Henry was in prison, or dead, or never existed at all. She went into the kitchen and dusted every glass in the cupboard. For a moment, Fenner wants to tell her where he is, what he's going to do tonight, how it really is the best thing for Henry, for them.

"I'm meeting Mitch at the Gold Nugget," Fenner says. "I told you earlier."

"I'll leave you something in the oven."

"Where you going?"

"It's Thursday." This means she'll be at the Parents of Teens in Crisis meeting. She'll hold hands with strangers as they cry their makeup off. The pastor will say "Stay tough!" and "Be a rock!" They'll sip burnt Folgers and talk ghosts. The pastor will show pictures of his fat daughter, clean for a decade now, the one who spent three years strung out on heroin in L.A. The one time Fenner went, they pointed their chins at him and gave encouraging, coffee-stained smiles. They wanted him to share about his father, Fenner knew, the one who, flushed from whiskey, left a window open when Fenner was two days old. It gave him pneumonia—he still can't weather a cold without it turning into bronchitis. And that wasn't the worst of it. They wanted Fenner to confess, to wobble his Adam's apple, let his eyes leak. He hasn't been back.

"Might wanna stay in tonight." Fenner ignores the click his wife makes with her tongue. "The roads are slicker than cow shit. I saw four wrecks before lunch."

"If I wreck you'll have to come rescue me."

And then she hangs up, leaving Fenner with the dead line, nothing but dead space in front of him. It's thirty-seven minutes after six.

• • •

Henry emerges from the black of center field, kicking rooster tails of snow. He watches the snow for a few seconds before taking the next step, sending up a bigger cloud than the last. Fenner remembers that when Henry was younger he loved to run through the yard after a fresh dusting, displacing thousands of defenseless flakes until he grew exhausted or bored. These were the days when he didn't steal from Nora's wallet but needed her to guarantee he'd be able to sleep each night. He couldn't get a wink without her.

At the pitcher's mound Henry stops and pretends to toss a scorcher to an imaginary catcher. Fenner cranks down his window.

"Hurry up, for chrissake," Fenner shouts. His voice isn't strong enough to push past the cold and reach Henry; he goes into another windup. For a second, Fenner thinks that Henry, in his beautiful nostalgia, is too distracted to hear. That perhaps this is something he still gives a shit about, something more important

than wrecking everything around him. Get real, Fenner thinks. He's too doped to give a good goddamn.

"Sorry," Henry says as he gets into the car.

"Knock the snow off your shoes," Fenner says. "You're late."

"I'm sorry."

Even in the dull light Fenner hates the way Henry's face looks. His cheeks are sagging more than an eighteen-year-old's should, bags under his eyes bulge like a toad's throat, and loose skin hangs from his chin. He's wearing an orange beanie, the kind bums wear. Thick globs of snow stick to its fibers. Christ, Fenner thinks.

"Did you pay your fines?" Fenner asks.

Henry puts his seatbelt on, runs his fingers along it.

"They're going to throw you in the can again."

"I'll pay it tomorrow."

"Still got the money?" Fenner asks. Though he knows the answer, he wants to hear it. Henry needs to start owning up to his own bullshit. This is why he must pay the fine himself. Nora doesn't understand this, and she never will.

"I loaned it to a friend," he says. "I want to pay it, Dad, I do." He seems sincere, but Fenner can't be trusted to make this judgment. For fourteen years he believed his father every time he crawled back sorry, even after his mother started throwing the deadbolt when she saw him limping onto the front porch.

"It's your ass."

"Where's Mom?"

"You're too skinny," Fenner says. "Hungry?"

Without waiting for an answer, he puts the truck in gear and pulls out of the slushy lot.

• • •

They pass Crazy Mike's Video, where Fenner's spent countless hours reading the backs of cases, trying to decide whether or not Henry was mature enough to watch the movie in question. A few blocks later they pass the Dairy Queen, where on many summer nights they celebrated Henry's victory or had a consolation cone

after a tough loss. Henry seems oblivious to these places. He keeps his head down, scratching at a stain on his jeans.

In the beginning, when they could pretend Henry was just sowing oats or acting out, Fenner and Nora walked the river trail every evening the weather held. She'd talk about how her students were finally getting a handle on quadratic equations, how Mrs. Brown slipped in the parking lot and broke her leg, bless her old heart. When they got home, they watched Henry's old games on video. "This'll pass," they said to one another. Back then, Fenner was convinced that come spring, once baseball started up and Henry fell in with the right kids again, the ones who brushed their teeth twice a day and woke their parents up to prove they were in before curfew, everything would be fine.

• • •

Henry keeps coughing. Wet, bottom-of-the-lung ones.

"Got a cold?" Fenner asks, pulling into BJ's, the restaurant the two of them always eat at when Nora isn't around.

"Naw, just not getting enough sleep." Henry fakes a yawn. "Last night I stayed up 'til three watching an old Dodgers game from '92."

"Need to start taking better care of yourself." Fenner pulls into a spot by the front, backs up to straighten out.

"They show old games in the middle of the night on one of the sports channels. So, Darryl Strawberry was up, right? The announcer was all 'Strawberry hasn't hit anything since June,' and right as the asshole finishes his sentence Strawberry shot a fucking triple into the left-center gap."

"Watch your mouth."

"He stole home on a wild pitch." For the first time in months, maybe years, Henry is looking his father in the eye. "He knocked in two more runs and made a catch at the warning track in the ninth. It made me want to play again."

Since he was a kid—no matter how hard Fenner tried to hook him on Henderson, Jackson, Ruth, Gehrig, Mantle—Henry's favorite player has been Strawberry. Fenner tried explaining Strawberry's troubles to Henry, but he didn't

care. This, too, seems like one of those messages Nora finds in things, but on this matter Fenner stands alone; the one time he brought it up to her, she patted him on the cheek and said, "You're overreacting."

Fenner opens his door and snorts. "Strawberry's luck lasted longer than he deserved. He's a scab who happened to be alright at ball. He had a .260 average over sixteen years. Big deal."

Henry opens his mouth to reply, but Fenner cuts him dead. "I don't want to hear it."

• • •

They both order burgers with fries, Cokes. Henry picks up a pack of saltines from the container at the edge of the table and crushes it, then pours the crumbs into his mouth. When he was younger Fenner corrected this, but this time he's just happy to see the boy eat.

"You know better than to wear a hat at the table," Fenner says. Henry pulls off his beanie. His hair looks thin and sparse, exposing pink patches of scalp all over. A cut oozes above his right temple. Fenner looks away for a moment; across the room a man wags his index finger at a sullen boy whose head is tucked into his chest. Fenner looks back at his own son, who's trying to stifle a muddy cough. Christ.

"That looks bad," Fenner says.

Henry dabs the cut with his frayed sweatshirt sleeve.

"Does it hurt?"

"It's irritating as hell is all."

"Need to go see Dr. Brandt?"

Henry waves the comment off. "It's just a zit I picked too much."

"Quit picking it."

Fenner doesn't know anyone in the restaurant—another good thing about BJ's. Of the local places, it's the worst. Its paneled walls give it a Moose Lodge feel. The waitresses are ugly in both ways. Still, it's a sentimental place, where Fenner remembers evenings spent sipping hot cocoa after a long day sledding up Skalkaho Pass. Not once has he seen a cop in here—they all go to the Coffee Cup.

Henry opens another bag of crackers. "I'm serious about wanting to play again. Maybe I could go to Western Washington. I screwed up that scholarship, but they might let me be a white shirt freshman or whatever."

"Red shirt," Fenner says. Henry's eyes are wet from something—shame, sincerity? Fenner hopes it's a little of both. "You need a high school diploma to get into college, no matter how good you can pitch."

"I'll get my GED. They give prep classes at the library."

This could be as sincere as steaming elk shit, but is it? There's something in Henry that hasn't been there before. Any time Nora thought Henry might be full of it, she put her hand to his forehead like she was checking for a fever, then she'd squint the same way she did when trying to decipher her student's chicken-scratch handwriting. But this never worked for Fenner; Henry always could get his dad to believe anything. That's what Nora always said, anyway.

Fenner clears his throat, takes a sip of Coke. "If you're serious about this, Mom'll help you."

"How is she?"

"Worried to death," Fenner says. "Probation officer called yesterday. You've got to see him pronto. Might have to do a weekend in jail, but they won't remove the suspension on your sentence if you take care of this mess quick."

But Henry's focused on something above Fenner's head. In the glassy reflection of his eyes Fenner sees little cubes of color. Henry's watching television.

"Goddamn it," Fenner says. "You're up shit creek without a boat or a paddle."

Henry gives his squint, the look he always has when Fenner's proposed something reasonable he doesn't want to hear. "The food's here," he says.

• • •

The waitress brings the check. Fenner's cell phone vibrates in his pocket. Nora. "Excuse me," he says to Henry. He puts a twenty on the table, then steps over toward the bathroom, keeping Henry in sight.

"Hey."

"You eaten yet?" Her voice is cheerful, like Fenner's caught her at the tail-end

of a laugh. She's about to go into the meeting; the sound of obnoxious gabbing in the background makes Fenner pull the receiver away from his ear.

Henry keeps his head turned toward the TV and traces his fingers around the base of his water glass.

"Yup," Fenner says. "Got a burger."

She pulls away from the phone to talk to someone else.

"Hello?" Fenner says.

"Your heartburn'll keep you up all night."

"Where are you?"

"I'll probably be gone when you get back. I'm going to look for Henry after the meeting."

Through the restaurant's back window, Fenner sees the snow's still falling steady.

"You don't like driving at night in good weather, babe," he says. "I'm telling you it's cruddy out here."

"I'm going," she says. The laughter has deflated from her voice.

Enough's enough, Fenner thinks. Tell her. Hell, call Henry over to the phone. When he looks over at his son, he sees Henry glance at the waitress, who's bent over another table sweeping crumbs into her hand. He pockets the money for the check. Exactly what Fenner was testing, what he was afraid of.

"Fuck," he whispers.

"Don't talk to me that way." Nora's voice has turned cold and sour, the way he's used to it sounding these days.

"I'm sorry," Fenner says. "I jammed my finger. Where you going to look?"

"I've got to go. The meeting's about to start."

"Nora."

"I washed your work clothes. There's a cup of coffee waiting for you in the microwave."

"Just head home after the meeting," Fenner says. He tries to sound concerned, but it doesn't come out that way.

"I'm trying to find my son," she says.

"Listen," Fenner says, but it's too late. She's already clapped her phone shut.

• • •

Outside, he finds Henry scraping ice off the back window of the cab. The windshield and hood have already been cleared. A cigarette hangs from the corner of his mouth.

"How's Mom?" he asks.

"Give me back my goddamn money."

Henry smirks, pulls his cigarettes out of his pocket and takes the money out from the pack. "I was just screwing with you."

"I ought to call the cops and let them deal with you."

Henry flicks his butt toward a coffee can with a muffin top of snow over its mouth. He lets out a couple of forced coughs, wipes his nose with his sleeve. "Let me come home."

And what if Nora walked into the house and saw Henry on the couch, showered and shaved, eating ice cream and watching *SportsCenter* with his old man? She'd hug him for a long time, put him to bed. Then she'd be on the horn with her Parents of Teens in Crisis pals in a heartbeat. He's sick, they'd say. These things take time, sacrifice. Call the police. Drive him to rehab. Hang him by the ankles in the town square for all to see.

And she'd believe them, no matter what Fenner said, because it worked for her father, the pandering docs and back-patting shrinks. Fenner's father was a monster who died in jail. The plan to make Henry pay his own fines to teach him some responsibility, teach him how to tame the tides of his bad blood like Fenner has, wouldn't mean shit to Nora.

Henry takes his pack out again and lights another cigarette.

"Don't smoke so much," Fenner says.

"I'd like to see her."

"Pay your fines tomorrow, then maybe you can see her."

He pulls at his beanie and coughs into his elbow. "I don't have the money."

Fenner pulls the fifties out of his pocket and hands them to his son. "Now you do."

• • •

Fenner turns into the parking lot of the ball field.

"Here's good," Henry says. He opens the door, sending a yellow shaft of light across the falling flakes. It's coming down as steady as before, but it feels colder. He turns to his father. He looks scared, childish. "You could just take me home."

Fenner inspects his steering wheel for a moment, runs his fingers over its grooves. "Nothing would change if I did," he says, and he knows it's true. He'd be back here tomorrow, doling out fifties and slaps on the back. It's too much. The dam's got to break. This, he realizes, may be the last time he sees his son. He's mulled it over for hours on his shifts (though he knows he shouldn't think of Henry on the road), and he's come to terms with it, or part of him has. Another part wants to yank Henry over to his side of the car and slap him on the face 'til he gives, wants to drive him up to the Parents of Teens in Crisis meeting and turn him over to Nora.

"Pay your fines," Fenner says. "It'll kill your mother to see your name in the police blotter again."

Henry's standing now, leaning into the car, waiting for Fenner to say something else. Fenner clears his throat. "If I bring her tomorrow will you be on time?"

Henry nods distractedly, turns toward the diamond, as if something important was about to flash across the darkened field.

"I mean it, not a second late."

"I'll be here at six exactly."

"Wash your hair and clean that cut." Fenner pulls Henry's head close to his face. He smells like cigarettes, oniony sweat, mildew, but there's something else—a hint of the old Henry, well-oiled leather, something Fenner can't describe. His son pats his shoulder and ducks out. Fenner watches for a few minutes before he gets out, too, leaving the engine drumming.

• • •

The sound of snow under his feet is unreasonably loud, as if he's crunching over tin cans or old bones. He waits every time Henry takes a step in front of him, looking up to see if he's been noticed. He hasn't. Even so, Fenner lingers, slinking

like a cartoon burglar, terrified the groan of frozen ground under his feet will send Henry prancing into the darkness like a frightened whitetail. He limbos through a hole in the fence near center field and maneuvers around the ice-stiffened bushes on the other side. He's in a cul-de-sac of aging, snow-heaped trailers. Henry's out of sight; Fenner can only hear the sound of sneakers on snowpack. He jogs ahead until he sees someone go into one of the trailers.

It takes a few seconds for Fenner to build up the courage to venture across the lawn, stepping over the caved-in trash can and crumpled dog food bag, and it takes him even longer to look through a gash in the blinds.

A man sits stretched on a brown, triangle-patterned sofa. He's wearing a black t-shirt with "Born to Spawn" stamped above a badly drawn picture of a salmon. His pants are pink and checkered and remind Fenner of the tablecloth Nora uses in the summer. The man stares at someone Fenner can't see but guesses is Henry. The man shakes his head and rolls his eyes. Fenner can see his son's shadow above the couch. Go to your room, son, walk to the bathroom and take a shower. Sneak out the backdoor and never come back, please. Instead, Henry takes a seat next to the man and hands the money over. The look on Henry's face isn't the same look Fenner saw on Nora's dad when Fenner and Nora picked him up in Butte, drunk and weeping, the day he dried out for good. It isn't the look Fenner's own father had when he'd wake Fenner up in the middle of the night and drag him out to the living room so he'd have an audience as he slapped his wife around 'til she gave up every dime she had in the world. No. Henry has the same look he had when he'd come into Fenner and Nora's bedroom, dragging Pete the Panda behind him, tug on the comforter 'til Nora woke up and say, "Ma, do you promise I'll be able to sleep tonight?" Nora would pull him up, kiss him on the forehead, feel for a temperature, and hold him until his body went slack.

Fenner walks away from the window, carves a snowball out of the powder in the yard, throws it as hard as he can at nothing. There were nights early on in his marriage—before Henry—when he'd come home too drunk, and Nora would light into him about his father, hers. He'd yell back at her that he was different, and he'd be convinced until she turned out the lights and sent him to the couch, where he'd think about whether or not he'd ever punch Nora in the mouth if he

was drunk enough, or if he was capable of siphoning Henry's college fund down to nothing as Nora's father had done. These questions held Fenner captive 'til dawn snuck up on him. But then he'd go about his day. He has a drink now and again, gets drunk every now and again, pays his bills on time, comes home every night. He is not his father.

Just go home, Fenner thinks, you fucking moron. He goes back to the window for another look. The man's gone. Fenner almost elbows out the window, wrangles through it, yanks his son out of the trailer by the ear. But he's too slow. The man's back with a sheet of tinfoil held with pliers. Henry pulls out a lighter, holds it under the foil. He sucks in a cloud of coiling smoke. He lets loose the mouthful like he's blowing out a birthday cake. Fenner pulls out his phone, then puts it back, not sure who to call.

• • •

At second base, he sees a car parked next to his truck. He feels the urge to scuttle spine-bowed back to where the parking lot lights can't find him.

Someone looks through the open driver's side door as Fenner crunches forward through the snow.

"Hey," he says, his voice quivering like a child's.

"This doesn't look like the goddamn Gold Nugget to me," Nora says. She takes a drag from her cigarette. A blast of wind sends her hair dancing behind her. Fenner shivers, but not from the cold.

"Well," Fenner says. In a town this small, he should've known that Nora wouldn't have to try very hard to catch him in the lie; she has to pass both the ball field and the Gold Nugget to get home. His alibi, he realizes, is as flimsy and fragile as the ones Henry's given over the years.

"Where is he?" she asks.

For some reason, Fenner thinks of the time he found a joint in Henry's snowboard boot. Instead of telling Nora about it, he climbed up to the roof, smoked half, then listened to the radio in his shop with the lights out for three hours, feeling high and ashamed.

"You're smoking again," Fenner says.

She shakes her head, drops the cigarette in the snow but doesn't stamp it, just lets it sit on top for the world to see.

"Nora," Fenner says.

"I don't want to hear it."

Behind her, Fenner sees a snowplow—must be Ernie. He's at the intersection of Main and First, where the asphalt's glowing clear under the streetlight. Black ice. Bad news. Soon, after the snow settles thinly over everything and everyone starts creeping their way toward whatever, they'll be in for a nasty surprise. There's not a thing you can do about it—no amount of salt or sand or shovel-pushing will fix it.

"Pastor Gildner called Serenity Park in Missoula," Nora says. "They've got a bed open."

"We haven't talked about this," Fenner says. Nora puts her hand over her eyes, as if trying to block out the sun.

"We haven't talked about anything," she says. "You won't talk about a goddamn thing with me."

She struggles to light a cigarette. The flame dances in front of her. Her hand's quivering from rage or fear or too much Folgers. Fenner cups his hands around her lighter. After she gets it lit, she brushes snow off of his jacket. He puts his hand on top of hers; she pulls away.

"He's not your father," Nora says. "He's not you." She's turning, walking toward the baseball field, toward Henry. But she turns around, says, "You don't know what's good for him."

"I know," Fenner says. She stands there facing his direction, and though he can't see her eyes, he knows she is looking at him. He hopes she'll stay like that, smoking her cigarette, ignoring the snow, for just a moment longer.

Dropping The Moon

Three small beanbags rest in my right palm, waiting flight. They are meant to be globes in our spinning solar system: moon, Earth, sun. The moon leans against my middle finger, the Earth rests in the hammock between my thumb and forefinger; the sun, built of bright yellow burlap, rimmed in floppy orange triangles, hangs on the edge of my palm, halfway gone. I shift the sun to my left hand, close my fingers around it, turn my palm up; both arms are poised at right angles.

"Ready?" Uncle Joel asks.

I nod, nervous, but I am ready—Uncle Joel has trained me for this moment.

The moon leaps first; the moon arcs a foot over my face. The moon swaps with the sun for my left hand. The sun launches towards the Earth, the Earth escapes and leaps over the moon. One-two-three, one-two-three—I can hear Uncle Joel counting under his breath. I have to make it to thirty. Thirty cycles of the one-two-three; only after the moon returns to my right hand thirty times will he grant me the title. *One who can juggle.*

• • •

Uncle Joel juggled fire: giant matchsticks, ignited; skinny logs, aflame. We watched, transfixed, sitting in the dark parking lots of hotels that hosted our family reunions. When he juggled, Joel wore high-top basketball shoes, mesh shorts, and a tie-dyed T-shirt. He had short hair, an earring looped in his left lobe. He stood in the triple-threat position; he stood like an athlete. He still looked healthy then; his knees were supple and sprightly, his stomach flat and full. While my cousins gazed at the bleeding trail of light that followed the firesticks, my eyes watched Joel's. He looked beyond the firesticks, past the light to a spot in darkness. His head didn't bob up and down as the others' did, following the spinning bursts of light. He stayed steady, gaze fixed ahead, and he told me he had to lose focus on each firestick in order to see them all.

Was it that summer or the one after—was I eight or nine?—when my hair dripped wet onto loose pajamas. My hands wanted to juggle, but my dad wanted to talk. I sat on my palms so that they would not flutter in one-two-three. H-I-V, my dad said. I nodded. The letters floated as unanchored and abstract as three beanbags that are meant to look like a miniature solar system.

• • •

Joel taught fifth grade and he made art. Strong clay sculptures and solemn acrylic faces. Joel created; he pulled from thin air things the rest of us didn't see.

H-I-V floated through his body for years, four-five-six and then I don't know when exactly, the V spun the wrong way. The V pivoted, mid-air, and landed face-down in a sharp pile of A. He could have, but he didn't drop the I and the D, didn't slip into a tangle of stringy S. He juggled until his fingers became too brittle, his reflexes too slow, his attention too vague.

"Megan," Joel asked me once, after he retired from teaching, already an old man at fifty-four with throat cancer and no immunity. When he retired from teaching, I was in college and he started calling me, in the evenings, just to talk. "Are you straight?"

I said, "Yes."

"Okay," he said. "You know, no one ever asked me that."

"Did you want them to?"

"I guess I just wanted the chance to say no."

When Joel retired, he started making sculptures out of his leftover vials. Long needles shooting skyward, translucent prisms of plastic. When Joel retired and I told him I was thinking of going to South America after college, he said he'd meet me there—he had always wanted to travel the world.

• • •

One-two-three, one-two-three. I make it to thirty-seven before I drop the moon. Joel was fifty-seven before he became one of the thirty million dropped.

By that time his body was brittle and out of place, knobby like the inside of a beanbag. By that time I imagine he was ready, ready to be dropped or ready to be held somewhere else—in some other body, on some other planet. The moon drops on the hard tile of my parent's kitchen, but maybe Joel was caught, swooped out of the air at the last moment and cradled in someone else's palms.

Exodus

When you talk about the sea you call it a cradle
and cry in it. Do you love the sea? You love
the sea. Do you know this love even when
the sea is a temple in exile? When
the sea is a sacrament that changes you.

The book mystified love, or else gave up on it—
the sea was written full of predators
stuck with happiness at hurting the sea.
Did you close the book then?
You did not close the book: mackerel fangs,

sunken ships with bully ghosts, a dirt the water
had no choice but to contain. Because the real
sea stood miles gone, you started to believe
things could get so bad: volcanoes, baskets
of wet snakes, the undersea edge the earth drops

off of. Do you still love the ferocious sea?
You love the sea more. The colossal havoc.
You love that when you remember the sea now
it is holding onto you with a shadow's insistence.
What was the sea you loved as a cradle?

It was a cradle, it kept you afloat for a while.

Of the Swan

The luck of it: an ordinary body
Soothed once

Under God. No night ends his
Care, how

He finishes a fixed field, how he
Hollows

A low tunnel. He released me
After. Why

Else would I pray like a woman
Who's ruined

A man's ever-bitter extremity?
Men die,

But God's soul rises out of its black
Noose, finds

Bared skin a landscape prepared
For use

Where worship makes for immortality,
And I am

The Lord's opening, a woman
On earth

With pluck, with sting, with feathers
Left round my hide.

Osip Mandelstam: A Lyric Voice

When a great singer sings, the skin of space and of time go taut, there is no corner left of silence or of innocence, the gown of life is turned inside out, the singer becomes earth and sky, time past and time to come are singing one of the songs of a single life.

—John Berger¹

*And if the song's in search of earth, and if the song's
Ensouled, then everything vanishes
To void, and the stars by which it's known,
And the voice that lets it all be and be gone.*

—Osip Mandelstam

“I have no manuscripts, no notebooks, no archives,” wrote Osip Mandelstam, “I have no handwriting because I never write. I alone in Russia work from the voice, while all around the bitch pack writes. What the hell kind of writer am I!? Get out, you fools!”²

To introduce this voice, one must first ask what is a lyric poet, and what is a lyric impulse. A lyric poet is a self-professed “instrument” of language who changes that language. And a lyric impulse? Here is Marina Tsvetaeva, a contemporary of Mandelstam’s:

My difficulty (in writing poems—and perhaps other people’s difficulty in understanding them) is in the impossibility of my goal, for example, to use words to express a moan: nnh—nnh—nnh. To express a sound using words, using meanings. So that the only thing left in the ears would be nnh—nnh—nnh.³

1. John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

2. Osip Mandelstam, “Fourth Prose,” *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 23, no. 1 (Spring 1970): 49–66.

3. Marina Tsvetaeva, *Dark Elderberry Branch: Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva*, trans. Ilya Kaminsky and Jean Valentine (Cambridge, MA: Alice James Books, 2012).

• • •

January 3rd, 1891, Warsaw. To Emil and Flora Mandelstam, a boy is born.
Mandelstam:

My father had absolutely no language; his speech was tongue-tied and languagelessness. The Russian speech of a Polish Jew? No. The speech of a German Jew? No again. Perhaps a special Kurland accent? I never heard such...speech...where normal words are intertwined with ancient philosophical terms of Herder, Leibniz, and Spinoza, the capricious syntax of a talmudist, the artificial not always finished sentence: it was anything in the world, but not a language, neither Russian nor German.⁴

• • •

When as a boy Osip Mandelstam brings his poems to a venerable journal, the editor observes:

Mandelstam did not feel the Russian language as his own; he observed it lovingly as if from a distance, finding its beauty...listening into it, flaming from mysterious victories over it. . . . The Russian language itself was beginning to sound anew.⁵

I bring these testimonies not because they have to do with Mandelstam's father—and, to some extent, with the poet himself—being a non-native speaker of the Russian language. I bring them because I believe that no great lyric poet ever speaks in the so-called “proper” language of his or her time. Emily Dickinson didn't write in “proper” English grammar but in *slant* music of fragmentary perception. Half a world and half a century away, Cesar Vallejo placed three dots in

4. Osip Mandelstam, *The Prose of Osip Mandelstam*, trans. Clarence Brown (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1965).

5. Sergei Makovskii, *Portraits of Contemporaries (Portrety Sovremenikov)* (New York: Chekhov Publishers, 1955): 377–398.

the middle of the line, as if language itself were not enough, as if the poet's voice needed to leap from one image to another, to make—to use Eliot's phrase—a raid on the inarticulate. Paul Celan wrote to his wife from Germany, where he briefly visited from his voluntary exile in France: "The language with which I make my poems has nothing to do with one spoken here, or anywhere."

• • •

But how to show this *privacy* of Mandelstam's Russian language while we discuss him in English? What is an English equivalent for *this*: "Voronezh; / Uronish ty menya il' provoronish, / Ne veronish menya ili vernesh, / Voronezh – blazh, Voronezh – voron, nosh." Reading these aloud, we cannot help but recall Gerard Manley Hopkins's internal rhyme, alliteration, and other sound structures. The comparison with Hopkins also brings to mind Louise Bogan's claim that "many effects in Hopkins which we think of as triumphs of 'modern' compression are actually models of Greek compression, as transformed into English verse." Substitute "Russian" for "English," and she comes close to describing Mandelstam. Here is what Mandelstam's Greek instructor remembers:

He would be monstrously late for our lessons and completely shaken by the secrets of Greek grammar that had been revealed to him. He would wave his hands, run about the room and declaim the declensions and conjugations in a sing-song voice. The reading of Homer was transformed into a fabulous event; adverbs, enclitics, and pronouns hounded him in his sleep, and he entered into enigmatic personal relationships with them... He arrived the next day with a guilty smile and said, "I haven't prepared anything, but I've written a poem." And without taking off his overcoat, he began to recite... He transformed grammar into poetry and declared that the more incomprehensible Homer was, the more beautiful...Mandelstam did not learn Greek, he intuited it.⁶

6. Konstantin Mochulsky, *Vstrecha*, 2, (1945), 30-1, quoted in Clarence Brown, *Mandelstam* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978): 47.

He *intuited* it. From the inarticulate comes the new harmony. The lyric poet wakes up the language; the speech is revealed to us in a new, unexpected syntax, in music, in ways of organizing the silences in the mouth. “You have no idea what kind of trash poetry comes from,” Anna Akhmatova wrote of her own process. From the very beginning of his literary life, the readers of Mandelstam saw his ability to remake the Russian language. They said he saw Russia with a stranger’s eyes. They said he wrote of an “imagined Russia.”⁷ They said, sometimes disparagingly, that he was lost in his “own language, his own *Russian Latin*.”⁸ But you could say this about any great lyric poet.

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A few years after Osip’s birth, in 1897, the Mandelstams move to St. Petersburg, where Osip’s mother, Flora Osipovna, has “an almost manic need”⁹ for relocating from one apartment to another. One wonders how this movement affected the poet, who later travels all over the Soviet Union, as if possessed, from Moscow to Kiev to Armenia to the Crimea, looking for a home, an apartment, a room—and yet when the apartment is finally granted to him, later in life, no peace comes:

I have lost my way in the sky—now, where?

• • •

Mandelstam’s life is full of dualities, arguments, contradictions. A Jew born in Poland, he was Russian poetry’s central figure in the twentieth century. Though a Modernist, he openly defended strict classical forms. He wrote in rich, formal verse structures. Then sometimes he didn’t. He rarely titled his poems. Sometimes he did. He kept more than one version of the same lyric, and sometimes inserted the same stanza into different poems. He composed aloud and recited to his wife, who wrote the poems down. Mandelstam was Russia’s “most civilized poet,” “a

7. Vladimir Markov, quoted in Brown, *Mandelstam*, 14.

8. Brown, *Mandelstam*, 13.

9. Evgeny Mandelstam, *Vospominaniya*, 125.

child of Europe,"¹⁰ yet he found his "fullest breath"¹¹ not in worldly European capitals but in exile in the provincial town of Voronezh.

Perhaps such duality and contradiction, too, lie at the heart of a modern poet's lyric impulse, which brings together the rawest opposites to produce that "divine harmony." But what *is* a lyric impulse in a time of war and revolution? Is it an individual voice? Could this voice speak for the nation? Can one person's voice speak of the epic events of his time? Can, indeed, those events be channeled through the lyric voice?

• • •

1911. Mandelstam publishes his first poem. In St. Petersburg a group of young poets form "The Guild of Poets," naming themselves "craftsmen of the word." Nikolai Gumilyov is the "Master" of this guild. His wife, Anna Akhmatova, is "secretary." Mandelstam becomes the Guild's "first violin."¹²

They call Shakespeare, Villon, and Rabelais their mentors, suggesting that Western European, not Russian, culture is their north star. As time will show, little unites their poetry except for a shared aim at precision. Mandelstam:

Everything has become heavier and more massive; thus man must become harder, for he must be the hardest thing on earth; he must be to the earth what the diamond is to glass.

In 1912 they call themselves Acmeists.

• • •

Like St. Petersburg itself, Acmeism is a longing for clarity of architecture, is a jump from darkness (of national poverty, of ignorance) that surrounds it, is—as Mandelstam famously said—"a nostalgia for world culture." Their opponents? The Symbolists. Yes, it is the old question of fathers and sons—Gippius, a leading

10. George Ivask, quoted in *Poems from Mandelstam*, trans. Robert H. Morrison (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1990): 12.

11. Akhmatova's statement

12. Akhmatova's phrase

Symbolist poet, was Mandelstam's grade school teacher. Symbolists believe that the visible here-and-now is illusory and that everything is in any case fated to shatter or decompose—a prospect that fills them with fearful presentiment. In this world of visions, the language is blurred. Opposed to this, Acmeists demand “classical” precision of language, formal elegance. Mandelstam:

One often hears: “That’s fine and good, but it’s yesterday.” But I say:
Yesterday has not yet been born. In reality, it hasn’t even taken place yet. I
want Ovid, Pushkin and Catullus all over again—I am not satisfied with the
historical Ovid, Pushkin and Catullus.¹³

Mandelstam's first book, *Stone*, appears in 1913. He is 23. The Great War is about to begin. In three years he will meet Marina Tsvetaeva. In four years the Russian empire will fall.

And, what is happening around this little bubble in St. Petersburg, this little café where young poets meet, the Stray Dog? In Russia, Chagall is emerging as a painter, Rachmaninov and Stravinsky are changing music, Stanislavski and Meyerhold are revolutionizing theater, Diaghilev is changing the classical Russian ballet.

And, abroad, in France, Apollinaire, inspired by Whitman, is leading the same revolt against the French Symbolists. Pound is swashbuckling through tradition, taking what he wants and throwing out what he doesn't.

• • •

Yet, a comparison with Pound or Apollinaire is misleading. Both French and American bards come on the heels of *centuries* of poetic tradition. Mandelstam and his generation are the poets of the Silver age of Russian literature. Pushkin, the father of the Russian poetic tradition, was the Golden Age.¹⁴ And Pushkin died only a few decades before them.

13. Mandelstam, *Slovo I Kultura* (Moscow: Sovetskiy Pisatel, 1987) 203.

14. Three well known poets before Pushkin—Lomonosov, Trediakovsky, and Derzhavin—are universally accepted as minor, compared to Pushkin. The beautiful, and very moving early epic, *Lay of Igor's Campaign*, is only available in a nineteenth century copy; a number of scholars argue that it was actually written in the nineteenth century.

And what was before Pushkin?

Darkness.

• • •

Pushkin:

Russia long remained alien to Europe. Accepting the light of Christianity from Byzantium she participated in neither the political upheavals nor the intellectual activity of the Roman Catholic world. The great epoch of Renaissance had no influence on her...[Enslaved by Tatars] for two dark centuries only clergy preserved the pale sparks of Byzantine learning...But the inner life of the enslaved people did not develop. The Tatars did not resemble the Moors. Having conquered Russia they gave it neither algebra nor Aristotle.¹⁵

Russia had no history, said Chaadaev, the nineteenth-century public intellectual who left Russia and was either brave (or crazy) enough to return. But when Chaadaev declared this, he had overlooked language. Russia had no history and no literature, but it had its language. And soon enough Chaadaev's contemporaries, Pushkin and Gogol among them, began to develop one of Europe's youngest—and fieriest—literary traditions.

• • •

This astonishing youth of the Russian poetic tradition is the true reason for Mandelstam's generation's "nostalgia for world culture." While Westerners such as Pound were looking elsewhere to *remake* the poetry of their time, the Russians, surrounded by the darkness of centuries devoid of literature, looked to classics of other languages to *create* their country's poetic line. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were able to write epics as late as the last half of the nineteenth century because there

15. *The Critical Prose of Alexander Pushkin*, ed. and trans. Carl Proffer, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968).

were no great epics in the language before them. Creating classics was a modern project for the Russians: it had the urgency of the time. Mandelstam:

Classical poetry is perceived as *that which ought to be*, not that which has already been...Contemporary poetry...is naïve....Classical poetry is the poetry of revolution.¹⁶

1917. At the height of the Revolution Mandelstam, without much money,

having by some miracle got a room in the Astoria [*the* most elegant hotel in St. Petersburg], took a tub bath several times each day, drank the milk that had been left at his door by mistake, and lunched at the Donon, where the proprietor, out of his mind, extended credit to everyone.¹⁷

What is an image of a lyric poet in the days of the Revolution? A young man taking baths several times each day and drinking milk while bombs explode outside his hotel room?

In a few months his best friend, the poet Nikolai Gumilyov, will be shot. Mandelstam will run from city to city for several years during the Civil War that follows the Revolution. He is imprisoned many times: Reds think that he (an intellectual) is a spy sent by the White Army; Whites think that he (a Jew) is one of the Communists.

In those days, "Mandelstam was always ardent and always hungry, but as everyone was hungry at the time, I should have said even hungrier than other people. Once he called on us wearing a raincoat and nothing else."¹⁸

• • •

16. Mandelstam, *Slovo I Kultura*

17. Artur Lourie, VP, III (1963), quoted in Brown, *Mandelstam*, 71.

18. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Retrospectives and Conclusions* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1969): 237.

1919. Kiev. He marries Nadezhda. From this date until 1938 they are never apart. For years he and his new wife will walk through the ruins of an empire, like a modern Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

After the Revolution he applies to Gorky (through the Union of Poets) for a sweater and a pair of trousers; Gorky refuses the trousers.¹⁹

• • •

Antonio Machado suggested: "In order to write poetry, you must first invent a poet who will write it." Whether Mandelstam was inventing himself, or being forged by the pressure of his times, one thing is obvious: some of the best writing comes in his darkest personal hours: hunger in Crimea, the restless life in Moscow, exile in Voronezh. "Restlessness was the first sign," Nadezhda wrote,

that he was working on something and the second was the moving of his lips...His head was twisted around so that his chin almost touched his shoulder; he was twirling his walking stick with one hand and resting the other on one of the stone steps to keep his balance...When he was "composing" he always had a great need of movement. He either paced the room or kept going outside to walk the streets."²⁰

Perhaps not surprisingly, his view of the poetic vocation is rather close to that of his contemporary, W.H. Auden:

Whatever its actual content and overt interest, every poem is rooted in imaginative awe. Poetry can do a hundred and one things, delight, sadden, disturb, amuse, instruct—it may express every possible shade of emotion, and describe every conceivable kind of event, but there is only one thing that all poetry must do; it must praise all it can for being and for happening.²¹

19. Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Abandoned* (New York: Scribner, 1981): 63.

20. Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope* (New York: Modern Library, 1999): 186.

21. W.H. Auden, "Making, Knowing, and Judging" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).

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What is around him? The Russian Empire is now the land of Five Year Plans, with political purges, kholkhozes, starvation in the Ukraine (where he and Nadezhda were married). He is working at a journal, he writes children's books, he translates. He is falsely accused of stealing another's translation, and there follows an ugly public trial. He slaps the face of Alexei Tolstoy, *the red count*, the venerable novelist of that day. A scandal.

He asks the secretary at Litfond (a financial foundation for supporting Soviet writers) about the costs of a coffin. Why? He doesn't want a coffin of his own; when he dies they can bury him without one. A scandal. He wants to be paid for his death up front.

• • •

Why repeat these anecdotes? "I live for two things in life," said Akhmatova, "gossip and metaphysics."

We tell these stories because we want an answer to the question: what is the lyric poet's response to the epic events of his time? Here is Mandelstam's friend, Ilya Ehrenburg: "Poets greeted the Russian Revolution with wild shouts, hysterical tears, laments, enthusiastic frenzy, curses." Mandelstam "alone understood the pathos of the events, comprehended the scale of what was occurring." Brodsky: "[Mandelstam's was] perhaps the only sober response to the events which shook the world...His sense of measure and his irony were enough to acknowledge the epic quality of the whole undertaking."

Is this the same man who was drinking milk in the bath of the expensive hotel while around him the city exploded? We can't resolve his contradictions, but perhaps noting them can give us one way to speak about his lyric impulse.

• • •

Most twentieth century Russian readers would argue that the poet, any poet, *does* have a moral responsibility to his people. In that country, as a saying goes, a

poet is a great deal more than just a poet. In pre-fifth-century Greece, “the poet was still the undisputed leader of his people. . . . The Greeks always felt that a poet was in the broadest and deepest sense the educator of his people.”²² Many a Russian poet shared this feeling during the first twenty years of the twentieth century.

But what does it mean to speak for one’s people? And just who *are* one’s people?

• • •

When the government demands poems about collective farms, Mandelstam writes about Greek myths. Later, when they demand patriotic songs for the working class, he writes an ode to “my necrotic, psychotic age.” “I want to spit in the face of every writer who first obtains permission and then writes,” he says. “I want to beat such writers over the head with a stick. . . . placing a glass of police tea before each one.” And thereby speaks for his people. In one single human’s voice. In a tone that is direct enough, playful enough, to be understood by his people’s ears.

While Akhmatova, in her *Requiem*, wrote what is probably the only lasting epic cycle of that time, Mandelstam offers us something entirely different: a voice singing outside of the people, a voice laughing and cursing, praising, asking for a Reader! Adviser! Doctor! and waiting for the arrest, and jumping from the second story window out of desperation, and asking a friend in the street for cash. It isn’t the voice of a country, it is the voice of one human, a voice so naked in its feeling and rich in its music that it could be spoken by anyone:

I have lost my way in the sky—now, where?

He writes:

An heroic era has opened in the life of the word. The word is flesh and bread.
It shares the fate of bread and flesh: suffering. People are hungry. The state
is even hungrier. But there is something hungrier yet: time.

22. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture: Volume I*, trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986): 35.

Such is a lyric poet's relationship to his time. He is both inside and outside of it; he suffers its immediate circumstances in the context of centuries. *The noise of time*—the title of his prose memoir—can also be translated as the hum of time, and humming was a part of this poet's writing process—almost as if the very substance of time were transformed within him, by means of him. "For an artist," Mandelstam writes, "a worldview is a tool or a means, like a hammer in the hands of a mason, and the only reality is the work of art itself."²³

• • •

Why speak of him in quotations? Why fragments? "Destroy your manuscript," he writes, "but save whatever you have written in the margins."²⁴

• • •

Scholars rarely speak about the radical changes in his poetics over the years. Beckett, they say, decided to write in French because his English was getting "too good," too poetic.

And Mandelstam? He begins as a shy Jewish boy writing in a voice of high culture with numerous references to Homer, Ovid, and ends, in the 1930s with lyrics that often explore low styles, are able to be surreal and down-to-earth at the same time. It is as if Tennyson suddenly began to write in the style of Emily Dickinson.

• • •

Not long before this he reads his epigram to Stalin ("We Live") to a few friends, one of whom is the informer. Exile. Where he jumps from that window. A new exile, Voronezh. Where he writes his best poems. Return.

He was a "Holy Fool," a *iurodivyi* of seventeenth-century Russia, a "bird of God" (he loved swallows and identified himself with the goldfinch);

23. Brown, *The Prose of Osip Mandelstam*, 180.

24. *Ibid.*, 187.

he was one of those imitators of Christ, God's fools, who were during Russia's times of troubles alone privileged to criticize the State. Like Ovid, he was an exile dreaming of Rome; like Dante, he wrote poems to "the measure and rhythm of walking." All poets were exiles, "for to speak means to be forever on the road."²⁵

Yet another exile: Death in the camp. Unmarked grave.

• • •

After his death his poems are memorized by his wife and a few friends. They don't keep originals in a written form. They write poems from memory, burn the paper, write poems from memory, burn the paper, write poems from memory, burn the paper. This continues for some decades.

What are we to do with it, this voice, in another language? Here, listen, again, to these lines:

Pusti menya, otdai menya, Voronezh;
Uronish ty menya il' provoronish,
Te veronish menya ili vernesh,
Voronezh – blazh, Voronezh – voron, nosh.

• • •

And, again:

Pusti menya, otdai menya, Voronezh;
Uronish ty menya il' provoronish,
Te veronish menya ili vernesh,
Voronezh – blazh, Voronezh – voron, nosh.

25. See Sydney Monas' introduction to *Complete Poetry of Osip Emilevich Mandelstam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1973).

You don't understand? He, too, once, heard a language he didn't speak:

I experienced such joy in pronouncing sounds forbidden to Russian lips, mysterious sounds, outcast sounds, and perhaps, at some deeper level, even shameful sounds. There was some magnificent boiling water in a tin teapot, and suddenly a pinch of marvelous black tea was tossed into it. That's how I felt about the Armenian language.

And, another poet said: "The language with which I make my poems has nothing to do with one spoken here, or anywhere."

Another poet said: "my difficulty (in writing poems—and perhaps other people's difficulty in understanding them) is in the impossibility of my goal, for example, to use words to express a moan: nnh—nnh—nnh. To express a sound using words, using meanings. So that the only thing left in the ears would be nnh-nnh-nnh."

Meanwhile, in Canadian Poetry...

Adam Dickinson, *The Polymers*.

House of Anansi Press, 2013. Paperback, 114 pp, \$19.95.

Nicole Brossard, *White Piano*. Trans. Robert Majzels and Erin Moure.

Coach House Books, 2013. Paperback, 109 pp, \$15.95.

Elizabeth Bachinsky, *The Hottest Summer in Recorded History*.

Nightwood Editions, 2013. Paperback, 76 pp, \$18.95.

Part science project, part linguistic experiment, part culture jam, Adam Dickinson's *The Polymers* should be read by anyone interested in poetry that makes raids not only on the inarticulate but on the artificially synthetic—namely: industrially produced and culturally consumed plastics.

Plastics, as Dickinson explains in his introduction, are made of long chains of polymers which are themselves “giant molecules composed of numerous repeating parts.” This is important, as many of the poems and the book itself take on and even mimic these structural dynamics. Revealing the book's conceptual bent, Dickinson goes on to state that “plastic marks both the presence and the absence of natural objects, embodying tension between the literal and the metaphorical, as it recreates the world as an alternate or translated reality.” Moreover, the ‘book’ itself is an interstitial object. The introductory page, for instance, is part sculptural, signifying on the level of its materiality as a thin see-through sheet of plastic. (The text is printed on recto and verso sides so that depending on which side of the page you are looking at, one of the paragraphs will be backwards.) Beyond these slippages between categories, what's at issue in *The Polymers*, what's both hidden and on display, are the tensions that exist between disparate and often quarrelling discourses—especially between science and art, both of which have claims to what and how we know of the real.

The book extends the logic of the polymer on many levels—often to skull-cracking absurdity. Molecular diagrams appear as the book's section breaks, although the models' typical function has been replaced: instead of the names of chemical elements, the titles of upcoming poems are mapped out. Implicit in these visual texts is the idea that the book's poems can be mentally ordered, 'read' together, and comprehended as a synthetic whole just as monomers can be seen to combine and repeat to constitute plastic molecules. While such visual metaphors provide an elaborate and novel framework for understanding the poems, they also threaten to contain us within this "translated reality" of an aesthetic derivative of the plastics themselves. Better living through chemistry? *The Polymers* is perhaps, in part, an environmental warning.

Even as individual poems flaunt their artificial exteriors, their methods and procedures—often bizarrely constraint-based—are obscure or at times entirely clandestine. Much hilarity ensues as cultural and scientific contexts resist, subvert, and interpenetrate one another. Conversations overheard in line-ups, Google map directions, and American State license plates are all reconstituted as linguistic polymer chains. A "silicon based polymer" is construed as the basis for The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and other human rights documents. The chemical model for tetraiodoallene enjoys a new status in its visual resemblance of a "first-person singular normative case personal pronoun." There are poems about syntactical, grammatical, and punctuative mix-ups, including a mini-treatise on the use of hyphens where "laughing-gas/makes it clear the gas/ is not laughing." Another joke involves mathematical variables recast in a bad romance where "X and Y have decided to see other people." Misreadings, code-switching, catachreses, malapropisms, and even puns abound—all of which work to foreground differing contexts and means of signification while testing and interrogating the familiar boundaries between 'literal' and 'metaphorical,' 'natural' and 'artificial,' 'living' and 'nonliving,' 'poetic' and 'scientific.'

The potential implications and applications—artistic, philosophical, industrial—contained within *The Polymers* are as varied as the polymers themselves. This is an important cross-over work, a veritable hybrid poetry, and as such a must-read for chemists interested in the plastic limits of culture; for poets interested in the

cultural limits of plastics; for environmentalists keen on linguistics; for lovers of the weirdly incongruous; and for all of us denizens of the not so distant future—whether it be utopian or dystopian, real or hyperreal.

• • •

Although she is one of Canada's most prolific and acclaimed poets, perhaps there are still some who are a little afraid of Nicole Brossard. Her *oeuvre*, which includes more than thirty books of poetry, ten novels, and four books of essays, is coterminous with visions and themes such as Québécoise identity and independence, the political underpinnings of language, the limits and possibilities of translation, feminist consciousness, and lesbian utopia. Revolutionary, theory-conscious, and erotically transgressive, Brossard's texts instantiate the moral imperative to refuse patriarchal modes of oppression, while re-visioning how words mediate our relationship with reality. Those uneasy with descriptors such as *avant-garde*, *feminist*, *lesbian*, or even *Québécoise*, might turn away from Brossard's work in search of something a little safer, easier, or more familiar. Those unwilling to see the politics in aesthetics or the aesthetics in politics might deny themselves an uncanny experience of the nature of how language operates.

Brossard's recent collection, *White Piano*, dexterously translated into English by Robert Majzels and Erin Moure, is both disobedient in its forms and operations, and generous in its capacity to collude with its readers in the processes of generating meaning and beauty. Poems circulate through and among various pronouns, persons, feelings, ideas, stories, and locations in an aesthetic of 'repetition with variation' that privileges the Eros of tautology over the linearity of teleology.

In "Eyelids₂," a fragment from a series called "Piano Frontera," the recurrence of the word "eye" presents the disfiguration of this "eye" as a stable signifier:

the eye's no longer shaped like an eye
neither yours nor hers
her eye moves like an eye
as soon as you compare
it's no longer an eye

Metaphorically construed, the eye is not “like an eye” in shape, but it is when individuated as belonging to “her” and described in movement: “her eye moves like an eye.” Abetting and complicating these ambivalences, the two disembodied yet intimately/sensuously linked pronouns seem to be nothing other than divergent consequences of the sight organ itself, of ‘seeing.’ Yet under the pressure of assessment, of seeing with the ‘mind’s eye’—“as soon as you compare”—the two pronominal figures, as well as the eye itself, dissolve into the singular negation: “it’s no longer an eye.”

The ambiguity of articles and pronouns and the shifty semantic play makes it impossible to extract any specific truth-kernel from this fragment. Rather, each subsequent exploration of the text yields new ways of seeing. As the “eye” of the poem breaks down, the ‘eye’ of the reader must intervene and partake of the poem’s altering certainties.

This small text—in a mode typical in Brossard’s poetry, which simultaneously allows graphemes, words, phrases, and whole lines to exist as autonomous units of meaning, and to recombine and fluidly reconfigure—this text, by transgressing the certitudes typically embodied in rules of rhetoric, syntax, and punctuation—this text activates the reader’s creative agency: participation is necessary in both the production and reception of its materials. Notice too how the use of the second person ‘you’ dares to breach the two-dimensional surface of the page, drawing the reader’s literal eye down into the figurative “eye’s” various transformations.

Brossard’s poems open up generously, and her language, even in translation, is replete with anxious pleasures, which are a joy to discover. Yet when the poems are read with careful attention we discover there are significant responsibilities that go along with the production and reception of linguistic meaning. If this kind of poetry is fraught with indeterminacy and paradox, it is a generative kind of indeterminacy and paradox, one that tricks language into revealing its conventional limits, thereby delineating the frontiers of new expressive possibilities. Readers of *White Piano*, particularly readers new to Brossard’s work, are likely to find themselves on this very frontier, where they must renegotiate their role as language consumers, and refigure their understanding of poetry’s relation to subjectivity, beauty, and especially truth.

• • •

It is fair to say that Elizabeth Bachinsky knows a lot of poets and is herself known by a number of poets, as in evinced in her latest collection, *The Hottest Summer in Recorded History*. Although what is on display isn't merely a penchant for name-dropping, instead it resembles a further foray into "personism," reprising that whimsically transcendent Frank O'Hara mode which places the poem "squarely between two persons instead of two pages." Let's agree that in the right hands such a poem, though its ostensible function is to act as an intermediary between two friends or lovers, can affect a wider readership.

For a younger poet, Bachinsky has achieved some well-deserved success, and as her star has risen so her connections to other artists seem to have extended and deepened to the degree that her most recent poems are saturated with their presence. In a lesser poet, this obsession with obscure personages could easily turn into a kind of narcissistic menagerie. Thankfully, Bachinsky's poems are archly constructed to generate a mood of intimacy consonant not only with the addressees and dedicatees of her poems, but with her readers as well.

It's risky to publish a poem titled "I Drop Your Names" wherein the names of two poets are not only dropped, but the speaker ironically beseeches: "I am moved /to tell you please stop/ putting our names in poems." Yet this seemingly fatuous memorandum actually gestures towards a fascinating conundrum vis-à-vis poetry and its enduring nature as Bachinsky theorizes a reader outside the insular company of poets and the feedback loop of poetic practice: "What do you think it will be like/reading this, or those, years from now/when you and I are gone,/or all but gone?" It's an old theme: confronted with the inescapable passage of time, these friends' tender—yet expressly fleeting—concern for one another is subsumed and recuperated by the poem's potential for persistence. Indeed, if a name is placeholder in a poem, what remains or arises long after those named have disappeared? Perhaps only absence itself—and it is this absence, with its disquieting sense of loss—"your faces... fading/ from my memory like the periodic/ table of elements or the/ lyrics to some song I learned /while driving the Island Highway /one month I can't remember"—which the poem ultimately invites us to explore. As readers we are asked not only to witness this loss but also to redeem it by imaginatively participating in poetry's power to transfigure "gone"

into “almost gone.” As our empathy succeeds this sense of absence, so the poem is renewed—that is, it is imbued with a new presence: our own. So the poem, like all good poems, must genuflect before the caring attention of its readers, who, along with the poet, can recall past affections and attachments “well enough/ to feel their absence and know/ what’s already gone.”

The book as a whole is similarly adept at charting this troubled course between the poet’s personal relationships and her poetry, and between the necessary self-absorptions of the writing life and the self-effacement required to present one’s writing to the public. As if energized by this challenge, the collection swerves through a virtuosic variety of moods, perspectives, modes of address, and received forms, just as individual poems move quickly and fluently through registers of irony and wit. One of many poems dedicated to another poet begins with the inverted, and vaguely indelicate, echo of Whitman: “To dislike this poem, to dislike me.” At first the tone and the level of self-mockery is hard to gauge. However, the speaker soon pivots, adroitly shifting tactics, clarifying “I would like this poem to be present,” and upon closer inspection the poem is present. It is present in its cunning rhyme play, and in its contrast of the ego’s insistence—“I like this word. I’ll use it again. Astonishing!”—with the final conflation of this egotistical “I” with something the speaker calls detachedly “this thing,” insinuating the poem itself. The ambivalence is palpable, the subject matter complex, yet the performance is seamless. Like many of Bachinsky’s best poems, this one discloses even while the speaker enacts her own disappearance, judiciously giving way to art rather than sentiment.

Throughout *The Hottest Summer in Recorded History*, it is this continual devotion and attention to the presence of the poem—even as the lives and loves of the poet and her circle of friends are on display—that Bachinsky privileges and performs with artful attention. Although the book is inscribed with the dedication “To Friends,” these poems will speak to almost anyone.

Knowing and Naming

Mark Irwin, *Large White House Speaking*.
New Issues, 2013. Paperback, 68 pp, \$15.00.

In these short poems—few measure more than a half-page—Mark Irwin contemplates the paradox that poetry, despite all its specificity, can never mean for the audience exactly what it means for the writer. He describes a reader who “runs [...] but in some poems never / returns. It’s like watching the rain. We see, and see through / to something else. What I wrote, you will never / read, a kind of parable” (“Once Out of Nature”). But Irwin does not retreat into know-nothingness, nor does he line his poems with language lead to evoke the opacity of texts. Rather, he puts real emotional content into what could easily have been, in the hands of a lesser poet, a mere demonstration of overripe critical theory: “I was a boy riding, writing the feelings down / for which there are no words, writing them with a brightness / by which it is impossible to read” (“Of the Body,”). The writer is sometimes frustrated by the struggle to say what he means, but there is also joy to be found in the effort. It may be impossible to gain complete knowledge of a subject, or even to express an emotional state in all its detail, but for Irwin’s speaker it is more important, perhaps more instructive, to *get at* meaning rather than to *know* it. In a prayer called “Brief Father,” Irwin thanks God “for these forays into words,” and for every “minute on the threshold where stalled, sniffing, / poking like a dog, I wanted only the opening or closing to linger.” Reading this book, I was reminded many times of Tomas Tranströmer’s lyrics; Tranströmer and Irwin are both poets of uncertainty, yet both take as a central subject the act of striving to know and to name.

Let it seem that Irwin is concerned only to range within the zodiac of his own theoretical musings on language, I hasten to stress that his poems revel in sensory information. Irwin catalogues—in addition to his quest for ontological certainty—his many desires, as in his poem “Hungry”:

I'm hungry for the leaves, their ochre and blaze, hungry
for their evening and the sun's
hammer. Hungry
for the dusk filled with musty scent of apple and grape, hungry for the trill
of crickets, and for the first stars.

A surrealist seam can be found here and there in Irwin's imagery, for instance "a tinsel bag to hold the seconds spun / from years" ("Paperclip"). More often, his project is estrangement, the mild-mannered cousin of surrealism that prefers to show us something new about the world instead of putting us in a new one. As the title "When I See This X-Ray of a Hand's" connects to the body of the poem, Irwin describes the "long, jointed bones, floating like a bird's, prehistoric, knuckling / in their brightness, as if to perform some magic trick, to pull / a kerchief from the debut of darkness."

Although these poems are short, they contain no lack of thought, experience, or surprise. I found many of them to reward savoring and rereading. The book's frequent reflections on language and the writing process may not appeal to the general reader, but for anyone who has ever tried a hand at artful written expression, Irwin's poems are well worth the time.

The Vast Lacy Decay

Laura Kasischke, *If a Stranger Approaches You*.

Sarabande Books, 2013. Paperback, 147 pp, \$15.95

Leave it to poets to write the strangest fiction. In her first collection of short stories, Laura Kasischke transplants the imaginative mystery of her poems into narrative form, shining a lucid, bare bulb upon her strange world, one you don't walk into without a knife in your pocket, looking over your shoulder. It is a world in which anything can happen, two staggers away from self-realization or downright disaster, where seemingly familiar scenes—a daughter's birthday party, an ailing grandmother's hospital room—render the world conspiratorial, underlain by a disturbing logic eclipsing your own. Remember how the peculiar slant of childhood fantasy (or its adult equivalents: obsession, neurosis, denial) managed to bend reality, make everything new and weird? That's what Kasischke's world does. It's a place "...in which, every ten years or so, something horrifying might happen. A kiddie-porn ring busted up. A body wrapped in plastic left at the edge of the driveway for the garbage man."

While Kasischke's stories begin in ordinary, often domestic settings—a woman taking her dying father for a boat ride, or a mother looking through her teenage girl's dresser drawers—they quickly descend into the uncanny, the macabre. You find yourself looking around, wondering how your beloved character suddenly lost an arm. Likewise, her story titles are chilling. Consider: "You are Going to Die"; "I Hope This is Hell". With these stories, Kasischke invites her readers into her normal-looking house, flower boxes lining the sills, and while pouring us herbal tea, lets us notice the cracks in the walls, the just-discernible smell of dead leaves and rust wafting from adjacent rooms, the sound of someone taking a last, beleaguered breath.

At first—I'll admit—I read the book with skepticism. As an enormous fan of Kasischke's poetry, part of me searched her stories for evidence that she is more

a poet than a fiction writer, as though I wanted to preserve her that way, flitting around beautifully in a jar on my windowsill. But Kasichke's poetic tools are precisely what illuminate her fiction—her penchant for description, ability to paint an atmosphere with subtlety and credibility—as if yes, you had always been there in that crumbling house. Most importantly, Kasichke's stories employ all the metaphor and parallel story-telling you see in her poems, without inching over into artifice. The reader never says, "Oh, that's what she's trying to do." She just does it, and we follow her with one hand loosely held. Her metaphors are inventive but dark. They seem to come from a store-room in the back of the house where all the keepsakes have been left to rot in boxes, and then one night, against better judgment, someone goes in there, starts rooting around. In one of my favorite stories called "The Barge," a girl throws her eyeless doll over a bridge onto a stuck barge. The doll suddenly comes to life, allowing all the men on the barge to handle her as she is passed from one lap to the next, the men "grabb[ing] at her small breasts, [as] she just laughed and let them—and then she was gone, and then she was gone, down in the bowels of the barge."

In hindsight, some of Kasichke's metaphors—a cast-away doll symbolizing the loss of innocence—might seem obvious. But it is the kind of "obvious" you feel when retelling a dream aloud, suddenly wondering how you could have ever missed the elephantine point. You do miss it, though, because you are too busy following Kasichke's wild, imaginative leaps. The leaps spiral onwards and downwards, reeling us through a series of nested narratives, but with an assurance that all of these diversions lead somewhere, will come back around to an idea humming at the story's core.

As in her poetry, Kasichke's stories paint an atmosphere of feeling through inventive imagery (e.g. "Her breath smelled like a trashcan full of old leaves that have gotten wet" or "The expressions on their faces were like car alarms that had been screaming for days and had just that moment gone silent"). The language is beautiful, with a poet's lyric and rhythmic sensibility (e.g. "the vast lacy decay"). Her characters are utterly believable, most often people who do or think despicable things—a man who tackles his ex-wife to the ground at their daughter's birthday party; a dying old man remembering he once raped a

girl; or a woman spitefully telling her sickly father at a traffic light he is about to die. The collection is deeply psychological, exploring a space where recessed memories, doubts and desires surface, bringing with them a riptide of unsettling, human sentiment. What makes this collection a particular pleasure to read is Kasischke's prescience that—for all its poetic possibilities—a good story tells a story. If I ever searched for evidence she was more a poet than a fiction writer, Kasischke never let me find it.

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Lucie Brock-Broido's new book of poems, *Stay, Illusion*, will be published by Knopf in October 2013. Previous books include *Trouble in Mind*, *The Master Letters*, and *A Hunger*. In 2010, Carcanet brought out her selected poems, *Soul Keeping Company*, in the UK. She is Director of Poetry in the School of the Arts at Columbia and lives in New York City and Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Jericho Brown teaches at Emory University. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in journals and anthologies including, *The American Poetry Review*, *The Best American Poetry*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New Republic*. His first book, *PLEASE*, won the American Book Award, and his second book, *The New Testament*, will be published by Copper Canyon in 2014.

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Angie Estes is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *Tryst* (Oberlin College Press 2009), one of two finalists for the 2010 Pulitzer Prize. Her fifth book, *Enchantée*, is forthcoming from Oberlin in 2013. Her awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Pushcart Prize, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Poetry, and the Alice Fay di Castagnola Prize from the Poetry Society of America.

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JR Fenn was born in southwestern Virginia and has since lived all over the world, including a long stint in Alaska, where she worked as a public radio reporter. Her writing has appeared in journals in the U.S. and abroad, including *PANK*, *Versal*, and *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*. Currently, she lives in England and teaches at Birkbeck College, University of London.

M.K. Foster graduated cum laude and as a member of Phi Beta Kappa from Birmingham-Southern College in her hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, and holds degrees in English Literature, Creative Writing, and Leadership Theory. She has studied writing at the New York State Writers Institute, the Atlantic Center for the Arts, and Hedgebrook, and her creative work has appeared or is forthcoming in *H.O.W. Journal* and *Breadcrumb Scabs*. She is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Maryland, College Park, where she teaches Academic Writing and Creative Writing. She lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, with three plants and a piano.

Brandel France de Bravo's first book of poetry, *Provenance*, won the Washington Writers' Publishing House prize in 2008. She is co-author of *Trees Make the Best Mobiles: Simple Ways to Raise your Child in a Complex World* and the editor of *Mexican Poetry Today: 20/20 Voices*. Her poetry and essays have appeared in various anthologies and magazines, including *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Seneca Review*. She has received the Larry Neal Writers' prize and two artist fellowships from Washington, D.C.'s Commission on the Arts. She works for an FDA watchdog group.

Matthew Gavin Frank is the author of the nonfiction books *Pot Farm* and *Barolo* (both from the University of Nebraska Press); *Preparing the Ghost: An Essay Concerning the Giant Squid and Its First Photographer* (forthcoming 2014 from W.W. Norton: Liveright); the poetry books *The Morrow Plots*, *Warranty in Zulu*, and *Sagittarius Agitprop*; and the chapbooks *Four Hours to Mpumalanga* and *Aardvark*. Recent work appears in *The New Republic*, *Field*, *Epoch*, *AGNI*, *The Iowa Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Seneca Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *The Normal School*, *Quarterly West*, *The Best Food Writing*, *The Best Travel Writing*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Gastronomica*, and others. He was born and raised in Illinois and currently teaches creative writing for the MFA

Program at Northern Michigan University, where he is the Nonfiction Editor of *Passages North*. This winter, he prepared his first batch of fried trout ice cream.

Henrietta Goodman is a recent graduate of the PhD program in English at Texas Tech University. Her first book of poetry, *Take What You Want*, was published in 2007 by Alice James Books as winner of the Beatrice Hawley Award. Her second book, *Hungry Moon*, is forthcoming in November of 2013 from the Mountain West Poetry Series. Her poems have recently appeared in *Massachusetts Review*, *New England Review*, and *Field*. She lives in Missoula, MT.

Kimberly Grey is a Wallace Stegner Fellow in Poetry at Stanford University. Her work has appeared in *Tin House*, *A Public Space*, *Boston Review*, *The Southern Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Poetry Daily*, and elsewhere. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Patricia Hampl's most recent books are the memoir *The Florist's Daughter* and *Blue Arabesque*, both included the *New York Times* "100 Notable Books of the Year." In 1990 she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship for her work as a memoirist. She is Regents Professor at the University of Minnesota and on the permanent faculty of the Prague Summer Program.

Alan Heathcock's fiction has been published in many of America's top magazines and journals. *VOLT*, a collection of stories, was a "Best Book 2011" selection from numerous newspapers and magazines, including *GQ*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Salon*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and was named as a *New York Times* Editors' Choice, a Barnes and Noble Best Book of the Month, and a finalist for the Barnes and Noble Discover Prize. Heathcock has won a Whiting Award, the GLCA New Writers Award, and a National Magazine Award, and has been awarded fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Sewanee Writers' Conference, and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. He is currently a Literature Fellow for the state of Idaho.

Marya Hornbacher is an award-winning journalist, writer, and the bestselling author of five books, including the *New York Times* Bestseller *Madness*, the Pulitzer Prize finalist *Wasted*, and the *New York Times* Editor's Choice *The Center of Winter*. Her work is published in eighteen languages and is taught in universities around the world. Shortlisted for the 2012 Pushcart Prize in both poetry and prose, and the recipient of a host of awards and fellowships for her work, Hornbacher's writing across genres appears regularly in literary and journalistic publications. She teaches at Northwestern University and is currently at work on her sixth book.

Pam Houston's most recent book is *Contents May Have Shifted*, published in 2012 by W.W. Norton. She is also the author of two collections of linked short stories, *Cowboys Are My Weakness* and *Waltzing the Cat*; the novel, *Sight Hound*; and a collection of essays called *A Little More About Me*, all published by W.W. Norton. Her stories have been selected for volumes of *Best American Short Stories*, *The O. Henry Awards*, *The Pushcart Prize*, and *Best American Short Stories of the Century*. She is the winner of the Western States Book Award, the WILLA award for contemporary fiction, and The Evil Companions Literary Award, and multiple teaching awards. She is the Director of Creative Writing at U.C. Davis and teaches in The Pacific University low residency MFA program, and at writer's conferences around the country and the world. She lives on a ranch at 9,000 feet in Colorado near the headwaters of the Rio Grande.

Canadian expat **Chris Hutchinson** is currently a PhD student in Poetry and Literature at the University of Houston. He is the author of three poetry collections, most recently, *A Brief History of the Short-Lived* (Nightwood Editions 2012).

Ilya Kaminsky is the author of *Dancing in Odessa* (Tupelo Press) and co-editor of *Ecco Anthology of International Poetry* (Harper Collins). He lives in San Diego.

Christopher Kempf lives in Oakland, where he is a Stegner Fellow in Poetry at Stanford University. He received his MFA from Cornell University, and his work has appeared recently in *Indiana Review*, *Ninth Letter*, and *Prairie Schooner*, among other places.

Daniil Kharms was born Daniil Yuvachev in 1905 in St Petersburg, and survived the Russian Revolution to perish in Stalin's prisons. He was known as one of the co-founders of the Russian absurdist movement, OBERIU.

Stacy Kidd's poems have appeared in *Boston Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Columbia*, *Eleven Eleven*, *The Iowa Review*, and *Witness*, among others. She is the author of two chapbooks: *A man in a boat in the summer* (Beard of Bees Press 2011) and *About Birds* (Dancing Girl Press 2011) as well as the forthcoming book of poetry *Red House Over Yonder* (The National Poetry Review Press).

Megan Kimble is the managing editor of *Edible Baja Arizona*, a local foods magazine based in Tucson and serving the borderlands. Megan has written for the *Los Angeles Times*, *High Country News*, the *Bellevue Literary Review*, and won first place in *Sage Magazine's* Young Environmental Writer's Contest. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing (Nonfiction) from the University of Arizona.

Matt Kindt is the Harvey Award-winning writer and artist of the comics and graphic novels *MIND MGMT*, *Frankenstein: Agent of S.H.A.D.E.*, *Revolver*, *3 Story*, *Super Spy*, *2 Sisters*, and *Pistolwhip*. He has been nominated for 4 Eisner and 3 Harvey Awards (and won once). His work has been published in French, Spanish, Italian, and German.

Kristin Marie Kostick is a poet, nonfiction writer, and medical anthropologist. Her recent work has appeared in *Blackbird*, *Forklift*, *Ohio*, *H_NGM_N*, *Open Letters*, *Muzzle*, and *Drunken Boat*. She curates a monthly reading series in Houston and is a graduate student in the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program.

Marissa Landrigan's work has appeared in *Creative Nonfiction*, *The Rumpus*, *Orion*, *Guernica*, *Diagram*, and elsewhere. She is a regular nonfiction contributor to *The Nervous Breakdown*. She received her MFA in Creative Writing and Environment from Iowa State University and currently lives in western Pennsylvania, where she teaches writing at the University of Pittsburgh-Johnstown.

Hope Larson is the *New York Times* bestselling author of five graphic novels, most recently a graphic novel adaptation of Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). Her short comics have been featured on the Op-Ed page of the *New York Times* and in several anthologies, notably the *Flight* series and Image Comics' Tori Amos-inspired *Comic Book Tattoo*. Hope has been nominated for cartooning awards in the US, Canada, and Europe, and is the recipient of a 2006

Ignatz Award and a 2007 Eisner Award. She holds a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. When not drawing or writing comics, Hope enjoys hiking, going to the movies, and drinking overpriced coffee. A native of Asheville, NC, she currently lives in Los Angeles.

Alexander Lumans received his MFA in Fiction from Southern Illinois University Carbondale. He has been awarded fellowships and scholarships to the MacDowell Colony, Blue Mountain Center, ART 342, Norton Island, RopeWalk Writers Retreat, as well as the Sewanee and Bread Loaf Conferences. He received 3rd place in the 2012 *Story Quarterly* Fiction Contest and the 2011 Barry Hannah Fiction Prize from *The Yalobusha Review*. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Cincinnati Review*, *Blackbird*, *The Normal School*, and *Surreal South '13*, among others. He is co-editor of the anthology *Apocalypse Now: Poems and Prose from the End of Days* (Upper Rubber Boot Books 2012). He currently lives and teaches in Denver, CO, but he will be the Spring 2014 Philip Roth Resident at Bucknell University.

Jacob Newberry is pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing at Florida State University, where he is the recipient of the University Fellowship and the Kingsbury Fellowship. Winner of the 2012 *Ploughshares* Emerging Writers' Contest in Nonfiction, he has received fellowships and scholarships from the Fulbright Foundation, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and the MacDowell Colony. He was recently awarded the McGinnis-Ritchie Prize for Best Fiction from the *Southwest Review*. His poetry, fiction, and nonfiction have been published or are forthcoming in *Granta*, *Ploughshares*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Southwest Review*, *The Colorado Review*, *The North American Review*, *Best New Poets 2011*, *Poetry Daily*, and *Out Magazine*, among others. Originally from the Mississippi coast, he received his MA in French Literature in 2009.

Celeste Ng's debut novel, *Everything I Never Told You*, is forthcoming from Penguin Press (2014). Her stories and essays have appeared in *One Story*, *TriQuarterly*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, and elsewhere, and she has been awarded the Pushcart Prize, the Hopwood Award, and a scholarship to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. She holds an MFA from the University of Michigan and teaches writing at Grub Street in Boston. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is currently at work on her second novel and a collection of short stories.

Matthew Pennock is the author of *Sudden Dog* (Alice James Books 2012). His poems have appeared in many journals and periodicals, some of which are *Western Humanities Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *New York Quarterly*, *LIT*, and *Guernica: A Journal of Art and Politics*.

Donald Platt's fourth book of poems, *Dirt Angels*, was published in 2009 by New Issues Press. He has been awarded two Individual Artist's Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and three Pushcart Prizes. His poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Salmagundi*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Ecotone*, *Shenandoah*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Seneca Review*, and *Southern Review*. He is a professor of English and teaches in the MFA program at Purdue University.

Nate Powell was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1978. He began self-publishing at age 14, and graduated from School of Visual Arts in 2000. His work includes *March*, the graphic novel autobiography of Congressman and civil rights icon John Lewis; *Any Empire, Swallow Me Whole* (Eisner

Award winner for Best Graphic Novel 2009), *The Silence Of Our Friends*, and *The Year Of The Beasts*. From 1999 to 2009, Powell worked full-time providing support for adults with developmental disabilities alongside his cartooning efforts. He managed the DIY punk record label Harlan Records for 16 years, and performed in the bands Universe and Soophie Nun Squad. He currently lives in Bloomington, Indiana, with his wife and daughter. Powell is currently drawing a graphic novel adaptation of Rick Riordan's *The Heroes of Olympus: The Lost Hero* (Hyperion 2014), writing and drawing his next book, *Cover*, as well as the short comics collection *You Don't Say*.

Lia Purpura's most recent collection of essays is *Rough Likeness*. Her awards include a 2012 Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, NEA and Fulbright Fellowships, and three Pushcart prizes. *On Looking* (essays) was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her poems and essays appear in *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *Orion*, *The Paris Review*, *Field*, and elsewhere; she lives in Baltimore, MD, and is Writer in Residence at The University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

Mary Reid Kelley was born in South Carolina in 1979. She studied Art and Women's Studies at St. Olaf College and received her MFA in Painting from Yale University in 2009. The videos she makes in collaboration with her husband, artist Patrick Kelley, have been shown in New York, Los Angeles, and London. Other exhibitions include The Wexner Center for the Arts (2012); Bard CCS (2012); MACRO Rome (2012); Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (2010); and ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art, Karlsruhe, Germany (2010). Mary and Patrick completed a commissioned video for the 2010 SITE Santa Fe Biennial, *The Dissolve*. In August 2013 the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston will present an exhibition of the video work. The videos have been reviewed in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Artforum*, *Flash Art*, *Frieze*, and *Art in America*. The making of *The Syphilis of Sisyphus* (2011) was documented in Season Six of *Art21*, episode "History." From 2011 to 2012 Mary and Patrick resided at the American Academy in Rome as, respectively, Visual Arts Fellow and Visiting Artist. They now live in upstate New York.

Patrick Rosal is the author of three full-length books of poetry. His most recent, *Boneshepherd*, was named a notable title of 2011 by both the National Book Critics Circle and the Academy of American Poets. His previous poetry collections, *My American Kundiman* and *Uprock Headspin Scramble and Dive*, have won the Association of Asian American Studies Book Award, Global Filipino Literary Award, and the Asian American Writers Workshop Members' Choice Award. In 2009, he was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to the Philippines. He is currently on the faculty of Rutgers University-Camden's MFA program.

Sam Ross's poems have recently appeared in *Tin House*, *Bat City Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, and *Sixth Finch*. He is the Managing Editor of *Circumference*, a journal of poetry in translation, and has taught in New York City public schools, the College of Staten Island, and Columbia University, where he was a Teaching Fellow.

Tomaž Šalamun lives in Ljubljana, Slovenia. He taught spring semester 2011 at the Michener Center for Writers at The University of Texas. His recent books translated into English are *The Blue Tower* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2011) and *On the Tracks of Wild Game* (Ugly Duckling Presse 2012). His *Soy Realidad* translated by Michael Thomas Taren is due by Dalkey Archive Press in 2014.

Heather Sellers, a Florida native, is the author of three volumes of poetry, *Your Whole Life*, *Drinking Girls and their Dresses*, and *The Boys I Borrow*. Her award-winning memoir, *You Don't Look Like Anyone I Know*, was Editor's Choice at *The New York Times Book Review*, and an O Book of the Month Club selection. She teaches poetry and nonfiction in the creative writing program at the University of South Florida, where she is at work on a collection of poems, *The Vine*, and a new memoir.

Dash Shaw is a cartoonist and animator in Brooklyn, New York. His graphic novel "*New School*" comes out in April, 2013, from Fantagraphics Books. His recent books include *Bodyworld* and *Bottomless Belly Button*. His animated works include the Sigur Ros video "Seraph," "Wheel of Fortune," and the IFC series "The Unclothed Man in the 35th Century AD."

John Sherer recently completed his MFA in poetry at the University of Houston. He is now a PhD student in English Literature at the Ohio State University. His poems have appeared in *Hot Metal Bridge*.

Dr. Jenni Sorkin is Assistant Professor in the History of Art and Architecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara. From 2011-2013, she taught contemporary art history and critical studies at the School of Art, University of Houston.

James Sturm is a cartoonist and educator. His graphic novels include *Market Day*, *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, *Satchel Paige*, *Striking Out Jim Crow* (with Rich Tommaso), and *Adventures in Cartooning* (with Andrew Arnold and Alexis Frederick-Frost). James is also the co-founder of The Center for Cartoon Studies, a two-year MFA degree granting cartoon school. James' writing and illustrations have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and on the cover of *The New Yorker*. James is also the co-founder of the Pulitzer-Prize-winning Seattle newspaper *The Stranger* and one of the original contributors to *The Onion*. James was a MacDowell Colony Fellow, Xeric and Eisner Award winner, and can still defeat small children and senior citizens in basketball and ping-pong. James has conducted cartooning workshops and lectured throughout the world—most recently at West Point, The Ringling School of Art and Design in Sarasota, FL, and Bahrain. James lives in White River Junction, Vermont, with his wife, the artist Rachel Gross, and his two spirited daughters.

Jillian Tamaki is an illustrator and cartoonist who lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Michael Thomas Taren was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. His poems have been published in *HTMLGLANT*, *The Claudius App*, and *Fence*, and are forthcoming in *Bestoned*. He spent 9 months in Slovenia on a Fulbright Scholarship (2010-2011). His manuscripts *Puberty* and *Where is Michael*, were finalists for the Fence Modern Poets Series in 2009 and 2010, respectively. His book *Nile* is due by Vagabond Press in Fall 2013.

Melanie Rae Thon's most recent books are the novel *The Voice of the River* and *In This Light: New and Selected Stories*. Originally from Montana, Thon now lives in Salt Lake City, where she teaches in the Creative Writing and Environmental Humanities programs at the University of Utah.

Adam Vines is an assistant professor of English at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, where he is editor of *Birmingham Poetry Review*. He has published recent work or has work forthcoming

in *Poetry*, *Southwest Review*, *The Literary Review*, *Redivider*, and *Drunken Boat*, among others. His collection of poetry is *The Coal Life* (University of Arkansas Press 2012). He has won awards for his teaching from the University of Florida and UAB. The Alabama State Council on the Arts awarded him a 2013 Individual Artist Fellowship.

Kerri Webster is the author of two books, *Grand & Arsenal* (University of Iowa 2012), and *We Do Not Eat Our Hearts Alone* (University of Georgia 2005). She currently lives in Idaho.

Robert Whitehead received his MFA from Washington University in St. Louis. His poems have previously appeared in *Asaracus*. He lives in Brooklyn.

Will Wilkinson is an MFA student studying fiction at the University of Houston, and a nonfiction assistant editor at *Gulf Coast*. His nonfiction has appeared in *The Economist*, the *Boston Review*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and many other fine publications. He blogs about American politics for *The Economist*.

Russ Woods is a poet living in Chicago. He is the author of the chapbooks *Speckled Flowers* (Persistent Editions 2013), *Warm Morning* (The New Megaphone 2013), and, with Carrie Lorig, *rootpoems* (Radioactive Moat 2013). With Jeannette Gomes he edits Love Symbol Press and runs the reading series Poetry Made of Diamonds.

Erica Wright is the author of *Instructions for Killing the Jackal* (Black Lawrence Press 2011) and the chapbook *Silt* (Dancing Girl Press 2009). Her debut crime novel, *The Red Chameleon*, will be published next year by Pegasus Books. She is the Poetry Editor at *Guernica Magazine*.

Annabelle Yeeseul Yoo hails from Alabama and is currently situated in northern Colorado. She is the recipient of the 2009 "Discovery"/*Boston Review* Poetry Prize and a 2010 fellowship from the Saltonstall Arts Colony. Her poems can be found in such venues as *Drunken Boat*, *Denver Quarterly*, *jubilat*, *LIT*, and *Western Humanities Review*.



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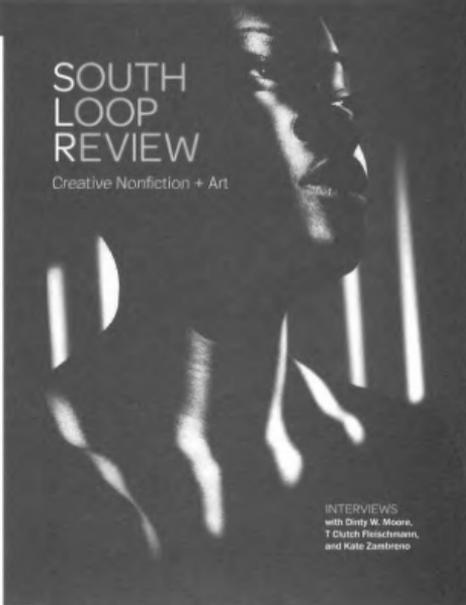
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