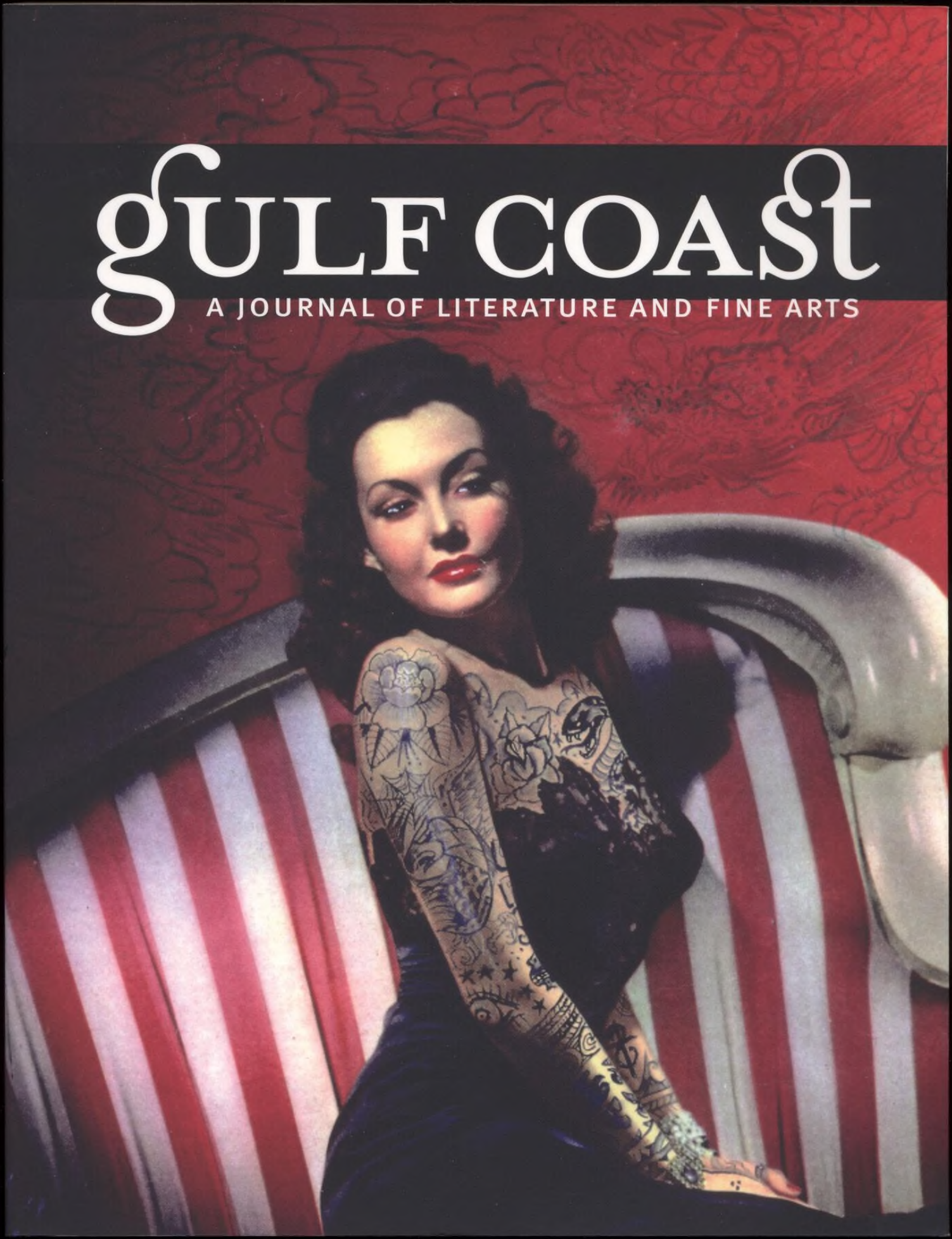
GULF COAST

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS



GULF COAST

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS VOLUME 25, ISSUE 1

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

ARTWORK: The cover art (front) is from *Untitled (sillón rojo)*, 2004, by Dr. Lakra. The cover art (back) is *Untitled (una bella historia de sus milagros)*, 2011, by Dr. Lakra. The images on pages 89–96 are © Kent Dorn, courtesy of the artist and Freight + Volume, NY. The images on pages 185–192 are © Dr. Lakra, courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

OUR THANKS TO: j. Kastely, Kathy Smathers, and the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston; Wyman Herendeen, Carol Barr, Judy Calvez, Nancy Ortega-Fraga, George Barr, Julie Kofford, Natalie Houston, and the Department of English at the University of Houston; University of Houston Provost John Antel; John W. Roberts, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Houston; Renu Khator, president of the University of Houston; Rich Levy, Marilyn Jones, Kristi Beer, Lee Herrick, and Krupa Parikh of Inprint, Inc.; Jeremy Ellis and the staff at Brazos Bookstore, Houston; Poison Girl Bar and Poison Pen Reading Series; Spacetaker; and the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses.

Published twice yearly in October and April. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the editors. Send queries to *Gulf Coast*, Department of English, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204-3013. For postal submission guidelines, or to submit your work online, visit www.gulfcoastmag.org/submit. Response time is 4 to 6 months. *Gulf Coast* does not read unsolicited submissions from March 15 to August 31.

Executive Board

President
Sasha West

Vice President
Misty Matin

Treasurer
Elizabeth Harper

Secretary
Mimi Crossley Detering

Members

Franci Crane
Ramona Davis
Mary S. Dawson
Richard Finger
Lynn Goode
Alison de Lima Greene
Manuel Gutiérrez
Carolyn Roch Henneman
Terrell James
Karl Kilian
Eric Lueders
Vance Muse
Evelyn Nolen
Hinda Simon
Michelle White

Advisory Council

Michael Berryhill
Elizabeth Brown-Guillory
Kathleen Cambor
Bettie Carrell
Mark Doty
Allen Gee
Rachel Hecker
Richard Howard
Julie Kemper
Rich Levy
Cynthia Macdonald
Rubén Martínez
Antonya Nelson
Valerie Cassels Oliver
Robert Phillips
Gael Stack
Andrea White
Adam Zagajewski

Donors

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

Underwriters

Marion Barthelme & Jeff Fort
Richard & Martha Finger
Lynn Goode & Harrison Williams
Eric Lueders & Thad Logan
Misty & Surena Matin
Lillie Robertson

Benefactors

Kenny Griffith Baldwin
Franci & Jim Crane
Carolyn & Matthew Henneman
Lise Liddell
Evelyn & Roy Nolen
Hinda Simon

Sponsors

Terrell James & Cameron Armstrong
Jerry & Nanette Finger
Elizabeth & John Harper
Courtney & Tony Kim
Kevin Prufer & Mary Hallab
Herman & Mimi Crossley Detering
Alison de Lima Greene
Howard Hilliard
Bryan Owens
Sasha West & Charlie Clark

Supporters

Ramona Davis
O. Howard & Rachel Frazier
Sis & Hasty Johnson
Julie & Jim Kemper
Tracy & Glenn Larner
Sandra Lloyd
William Monroe
Louis H. Skidmore
Lois Stark
Mary S. & Jack Dawson
Marc Grossberg
Marilyn Jones & Brad Morris
Karl & Kathy Kilian
Rich Levy
Nancy Manderson
Laurie Newendorp
Angela So
June & Bob Stobaugh

Contents: *vol. 25, issue 1*

Editor's Note 9

2012 GULF COAST PRIZES

Emily Watson ..... Sweetie, Sweetie 20
NONFICTION

Lo Kwa Mei-en ..... Pinnochia on Fire 36
POETRY
Pinnochia, We Loved You Enough 38
Pinnochia Sends Home the Manifesto 40
Telegraph 42

Geetha Iyer ..... The Glass World-Builder 43
FICTION

FICTION

Maggie Shipstead ..... The Orchard 69
Morris Collins ..... The Apiary of Their Love 112
Drew Johnson ..... Three Greyhounds 128
Patrick McGinty ..... Her Circus 193
Robin Romm ..... Adulthood 212

NONFICTION

Mark Beaver ..... Addressee Unknown 62
Steve Coughlin ..... Boy at Night 101
James Miranda ..... Occupants 103
Amy Boesky ..... Tae Kwon Do 117
Rebecca Evanhoe ..... Approximately 36 Toilets 133
Liza Butler ..... Some Massive Gravity 166
Daniel Tyx ..... The Year I Didn't 175
Clancy Martin ..... Lite-Brite 236

POETRY

Dean Young ..... Light-Bringers 11
Mary Biddinger ..... Fight or Flight 12
Risk Management Memo: Small Enterprise ... 14
Ari Banias ..... Exquisite Corpse 16
High School, A Version 18

POETRY (CONTINUED)

Susan B.A. Somers-Willett . . Memento Mori. 57
On Cancer 58
Ansel Elkins . . . . . Mississippi Delta. Glass in the Field 60
S.E. Smith . . . . . No Explode 97
Joshua Kryah . . . . . A Terror of Foxes 98
Rob MacDonald . . . . . Expat/Sexpot 100
Gabrielle Calvocoressi . . . . . from *Rocket Fantastic.* 106
Jenny Xie . . . . . Animal 108
Transplant 109
Julia Anna Morrison . . . . . Lightship 110
Devon J. Moore . . . . . Red 123
Thomas Heise . . . . . from *Moth; or how I came to be with you again.* . . .124
Jess Novak . . . . . Rude Girls 153
Marie Antoinette's Husband
Was a Total Baller 154
Laynie Browne . . . . . from *Mendicant:* "Dear She" 155
Norman Dubie . . . . . Gotterdammerung 158
Chris Dombrowski . . . . . Comes to Worse 160
Jill McDonough . . . . . *Tomorrow Never Dies* II 180
Jeffrey McDaniel . . . . . Return to *El Perdido Mundo* 182
Sidney Wade . . . . . Glory Train. 206
M.A. Vizsolyi . . . . . Just Another Sad, Sad Evening 209
The Dream of Poppies & H.D. 210
Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz . . . Your Wife 229
Marty McConnell . . . . . animal, vegetable, mineral. 230
Alexandra Teague . . . . . Whole Cloth 232
Sohrab Sepehri . . . . . Oasis of Now 234
TRANSLATED BY KAZIM ALI AND MOHAMMAD JAFAR MAHALLATI

Joshua Ware . . . . . Deglet Nour 235

ART

Jonathan Beer . . . . . Kent Dorn: Irreality and America 87
Kent Dorn . . . . . Selected Artwork 89
Marcela Guerrero . . . . . Tracing Dr. Lakra 183
Dr. Lakra . . . . . Selected Artwork 185

FEATURE

The "F-Word": Fragmentation and the Futility of Genre Classification . . 140
A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION WITH EULA BISS, SARAH MANGUSO, MAGGIE NELSON, AND ALLIE ROWBOTTOM

INTERVIEW

Elizabeth Willis . . . . . "A Poem Argues for its Own Existence" 195
WITH SEAN PATRICK HILL

REVIEWS

Rusty Morrison . . . . . "the exact temperature of a hand": Melissa Kwasny and the Mystical Imagination 249
Sara C. Rolater . . . . . Doomed Red Blooded Hope: Brian Doyle's *Bin Laden's Bald Spot and Other Stories* 256
Olga Mexina . . . . . "Blunt Chorus": Ken Babstock's *Methodist Hatchet* 260
Garret Dean Johnson . . . . . Fiction that Waves Its Arms About: Matt Bondurant's *The Night Swimmer* 264
Layla Benitez-James . . . . . On a Tightrope in a Storm of Starlings: Dan Beachy-Quick's *Circle's Apprentice* 267

Contributors 272

Gulf Coast Fiction Prize, 2012

Judged by Victor LaValle

WINNER:

Geetha Iyer, "The Glass World-Builder"

HONORABLE MENTION:

Ashley Chambers, "You Will Make Several Cuts"
Delaney Nolan, "We Shall Fill Our House With Spoil"

Gulf Coast Nonfiction Prize, 2012

Judged by Jenny Boully

WINNER:

Emily Watson, "Sweetie, Sweetie"

HONORABLE MENTION:

Christina Louisa Langenberg, "Foiled"
Gina Troisi, "Wrapped Up in Skin, Hidden Behind Eyes"

Gulf Coast Poetry Prize, 2012

Judged by Joyelle McSweeney

WINNER:

Lo Kwa Mei-en, "Pinnochia on Fire"

HONORABLE MENTION:

Jennifer Militello, "Autobiography with God Complex and Epidemic"
Melissa Barrett, "The Great Die-Up"

The deadline for the upcoming contest is March 15, 2013.
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) 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.**

Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

In every election year, at least part of the political rhetoric seems to center around what an incumbent candidate—a senator, a representative, a president—can be expected to have accomplished after four or six years on the job. How about after two years? What are reasonable expectations for someone who has just two years to try to make some kind of impact?

That's what we kept asking ourselves this summer as we transitioned into our new roles as *Gulf Coast*'s editor and managing editor, where we will serve a two-year term with no possibility of re-election; here at *Gulf Coast* we're all single-termers. Judging by the work of our predecessors, the answer as to what can be accomplished in just two years is simple: *a lot*. The outgoing editor, Ian Stansel, and managing editor, Rebecca Wadlinger, have left behind a journal with a larger subscriber base, an increased web and social media presence, two glossy, full-color art features in every issue, and the groundwork for digital subscriptions on e-readers. They've set the bar high, as the bar was set high before them, and this—coupled with some very recent, very public embarrassments relating to journals with long-serving editors—have made us wonder about the comparative advantages of the rotating editor model.

Too often in the world of publishing, we overvalue the cult of personality. For a literary journal to have an established ethos does not mean that that ethos must be embodied in a single, long-serving editor or group of editors. As an independent non-profit, *Gulf Coast*'s institutional memory resides in our Board of Directors and in the record of the published journal itself. There are certain realities—our geographic location, for instance, and the fact that we owe our founding to Donald Barthelme and Phillip Lopate—that also inform what *Gulf Coast* does, but a constantly changing editorial slate allows the journal to serve as a dynamic reflection of the contemporary written word.

This is not to disparage journals and presses with long-serving staffs, rather to state that journals with rotating editorships have their dynamism *built-in*: they are forced to continually evolve and incorporate new energies, by design.

Many journals with rotating editorships are "student-run," as is *Gulf Coast*. That term is occasionally misunderstood to mean a journal that only publishes student work, or is used pejoratively to imply a certain amateurism. But to call journals such as ours "student-run" and stop there is to ignore sea changes in the literary and academic landscape over the past few decades. Our editors have books published or forthcoming from major presses; have stories, poems, and essays published in the very best journals and magazines in the country; have received residencies and fellowships from MacDowell, Provincetown, Sewanee, Bread Loaf, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Thirty years ago, many of our colleagues here at *Gulf Coast* would have been well on their way to tenure by now.

Perhaps we are only imagining slights where there are none, but we can't help but sense that the view of a "student-run" journal lacking a figurehead personality gets ever so slightly diminished for the very qualities that should be celebrated. In other words, we couldn't be more pleased to be serving as editor and managing editor of a journal that is guaranteed never to be caught standing still, and we're confident that the next two years will see *Gulf Coast* grow in all sorts of ways—from regularly featuring online exclusive content, to an expansion of our mission to showcase both literature *and* fine arts, to the sale of digital subscriptions and back issues.

All of this is in addition to the wonderful work that *Gulf Coast* already does, from organizing the Houston Indie Book Fest and the *Gulf Coast* Reading Series to publishing the kind of great writing you'll find in this issue: Clancy Martin's essay "Lite-Brite," on loving and lying; Maggie Shipstead's haunting short story, "The Orchard"; phenomenal poems from writers like Susan B.A. Somers-Willett, Norman Dubie, Dean Young, and many more. The following pages also feature the winners of the 2012 *Gulf Coast* Prizes, all of them emerging writers who, as the pieces published here demonstrate, have distinguished careers ahead of them.

It is work such as this that humbles and thrills us to be sitting in the same office chairs occupied by so many great editors before us. All too soon, our term will be over and new editors will take our place. For now, however, to play on President Obama's tweet to Clint Eastwood this election season, *these seats are taken*.

Zachary Martin and Karyna McGlynn, Editor and Managing Editor
#teamchristine

Light-Bringers

Maybe no one escapes. Lorca rubs
His hand across the misted window:
They're coming. Maybe it's a waltz,
Not a flamenco. Mayakovsky
Wipes away some frost: they're here.
Spilled red wine stains a letter. A boot
Crushes a porcelain doll's head. Maybe
A falling feather's veronica enough.
Once my mother was a child playing
A child's violin then they used a motorized
Crank to lower her and the ground covered
Itself like a mouth filling with wildflowers.
Then snow and whatever was left alive
Burrowed deeper. Maybe a river meanders
Because it knows where it has to go.
Remember the last time we visited the old man?
He thought we were robbers until
You gave him the strawberries.

Mary Biddinger

Fight or Flight

I am uncomfortable discussing my assets
in a room filled with artificial lambswool
and all our first husbands or wives.

At least it looks that way. I'm original
because I still exhibit the Moro reflex well
into my twenties. You should see me

when the bus backfires, or a shirt on a bed
turns into a wild hog. These goods
are self-damaged. I'm addicted to knives

of light across the highway, in a place
I shouldn't be, creak of a security guard
belt in the hallway. We sleep on books.

We swear too much and sometimes eat
meals then hop off the balcony.
We set a terrible example for your

student teacher, who burns her skirt
in front of the class reading Kant.
That is why I have poignant interviews

with the Quaker college, university
in a state nobody has visited. I wear your
gold cross. You have written every

word of my cover letter. I am indeed
an adventuress. If I were a death
I would involve lanterns and wet fields.

Risk Management Memo: Small Enterprise

You wanted to open a café called
Rimbaud's Helicopter. I just kept telling
myself to *look loveable*. We watched

Apocalypse Now in two sleeping bags
zipped together incorrectly. I confessed
how I was making a bejeweled saddle

for a racehorse I would never own.
His name would be Look Loveable. He
would think about killing all the other

jockeys because I rode him so right.
And this was the only true benefit
of being small. In camp they buried me

first, then poured the curdled cider
into my hair. My mother joined in, but
only in my imagination. You wanted

to give me an outrageous hickey
and to drown yourself before turning
twenty. All my friends knew better

than to try swimming in hayfields.
I met you at the gun house. Somebody
had put new curtains up, but nothing

could take away the head-marks
on the walls. Our entire city became
a place that turned its back on coffee,

even marzipan ducklings. There's
a reason everyone loves the same
things. That reason will never be you.

Ari Banias

Exquisite Corpse

I had a nightgown once, which
became a jellyfish

so in order to wear it I had to go down:
to punch myself into the form

the content required,
to hunker like a boulder under
immeasurable pressure, as when
minerals are transformed

into their reverse.
As when a nightgown is worn
over the tuxedo for years.

Pissing on a jellyfish sting
is said to make one
feel normal or royal.

When we were together
in the house by the sea,
there was still a sea. Before
being set adrift,

nightgown and tuxedo
lay slain, ashore where
the surf inched up and up and if

lapels say a word then burn her
down to a pair of molten cufflinks

they piss on till normal. It is expected
he kiss her and become a nightgown.

She wears him
in order to punch him down

until he sinks, until it's said he is
painless as a house
or some comparable
soft-bodied animal that drifts.

High School, A Version

of course, we go to smoke: girls' bathroom, music wing
duck the last locked stall

where no toilet, instead a little half-door
secret passage into the wall

        inside-inside, pressed so close the odd warp of piano
tentative violin notes mustered in airless rooms

ash, brickdust, my small practiced cough
then sneaking out before the bell. wooden smell of old chairs,

unseen inner plush
of clarinet cases, dull

posters no one looks at
but look: my one power

is long straight hair, the silk
that lets me glide instead of stumble—like that,

impossible: the always wincing strange body
with the face glowing for show, encoded

further down than the thing
        folded, passed from jeans pocket

to jeans pocket, intimate, privileged
information: you know: the other self is strangled,

spangled, glossed &
smothered.
but somewhere keeping score: the weird quiet

kid smashing bottles by the underpass
& outlasts this

Emily Watson

Sweetie, Sweetie

Saddlebacked

Two women. One has a pair of matching pocketbooks, slung over a forearm and clenched in a fist, and two bundles—one bulky and blue—held in her arms. The gold parcel is balanced on top of the blue and she holds it in place with her chin, precarious. The other woman has what looks like two mail pouches at her feet, a twist of rope.

Amy Cutler paints only women, real and surreal. Their small bodies are typically rendered true to life, neatly clad in detailed vintage or Victorian dresses. But they face strange trials, stitching up torn tigers, swallowing whole eggs, wrapping their long braids around porch columns to pull a house through the snow, and their figures are sometimes strange and mutated, heads replaced with birdhouses or teapots, hands grown long into brooms or paddles. In *Saddlebacked*, the women both wear brown leather straps around shoulders, breasts, and waists, which harness them back to back to white ponies. The first, the one with the pocketbooks, leans forward a bit, to balance the scrambling pony saddled on her back. The other—now I see she is the one not with mail pouches but with canvas feedbags—the other bends forward, braces herself, skirt hiked up and hands on her knees. It is as if she is still adjusting her pony, shifting her kicking burden into place.

▪ ▪ ▪

I am trying to be kind to my little sister. This is not easy for me, but, as my parents remind me over and over, imagine how hard it is to be Lauren. I imagine and agree that yes, it must be very hard. Being Emily is easy. I am smart; success in school and career has always come quickly. I am healthy, not especially pretty but nice-enough-looking, normalish figure. I have Matt, who told me he wanted to marry me on our fourth date; I had a positive pregnancy test two weeks after we started trying for a baby. I have a house, two greyhounds, enough money and time to

quit my job and go back to school for writing. I am just like my parents—practical, steady, a planner. We are inordinately close. My girlfriends are offended that I tell my mom all my secrets. Matt is jealous I prefer to vacation with my dad. I am lucky.

Lauren started cutting herself when she was fourteen; she was hospitalized for an attempted suicide two years later. She is not healthy. Grossly heavy. Skin sallow. The constant pain of fibromyalgia makes it hard for her to move; even to lie still and sleep through the night is difficult. She has spent going on six years on a two-year degree at a community college. She grooms dogs, nannies, and hosts children's birthday parties—paints faces, twists balloon animals, sprinkles cupcakes—and her checking account is always overdrawn. Her boyfriend is a good guy, kind, but like her he has a hard time with work, school, and a family that leans on him pretty hard. He has muscular dystrophy, she's bipolar; they think it would be selfish and irresponsible to start a family. She is my parents' misfit child, always a struggle. One of her old therapists told me the worst part is that on top of everything, Lauren has to be *my* little sister. Even without the side-by-side comparison, her life seems impossible to me. I could no more deal with her trials than pull a house through the snow with my plaited hair.

I've always been the tough one, the problem solver, the classic older sibling—I feel like I should be the one saddled with these troubles, I would know what to do with them. But she makes choices I wouldn't make, she screws up over and over. Every time I see her, her burden seems more than someone like her should have to shoulder. Lately, she's asked for the extra bed from my garage. Eric's mother's cancer is progressing fast, and Lauren's disabled, teenaged, soon-to-be-sister-in-law will be orphaned; she will need a place to live. Lauren and Eric will take custody.

For years, I thought I hated her. Our little family was just right before she came along. At five, I'd expected to remain an only child forever. I thought a sibling would be a playmate, not a squalling little person I would be expected to change and entertain and look after. As we grew up, I resented being a third parent; I hated her stealing and elaborate lies, especially hated being blamed for her problems. My mom always tried to make me understand, if I were only less [smart, good, mature, anything], Lauren wouldn't have to compete and wouldn't have to fail.

Once, at four, my fierce little sister threatened me, "Just wait till I'm older than you, then you'll get it." I was malicious and smug, made her stand on square four of our chalked driveway hopscotch board. I stood at nine and we moved forward together to five and ten, to six and eleven, to seven and twelve. "Don't you see?" I asked, gleeful. "You'll never catch up." She sat on the curb and cried.

Double Portraits

When we were small, I was jealous of *her*.

I still remember my last summer alone with my parents. We rode side-by-side in a yellow '69 Chevrolet pickup, my bare legs stuck to the cracked vinyl seat. I shivered at the rumble of the fuming diesel engine and allowed myself to bounce and jostle, a metronome between my mom and dad. I breathed deep the setting agent from Mom's home perm and Dad's sawdust and the sunscreen he smeared on both our noses. We three sucked the same syrupy raspberry Slurpee, but Mom held the soggy paper cup so that I could grip the stick shift. My dad placed his hand over mine and together we shifted third to fourth along the standard **H**.

By fall, the truck was gone, replaced by a sedate Volvo sedan that accommodated a car seat. I was moved from the adoring care of my nanny to bewildering all-day kindergarten. My mom took a semester off from teaching to stay home with her new child. I couldn't go to the hospital as I'd been promised—for a week I was even banished from home—as Lauren's birth coincided exactly with my outbreak of chicken pox.

As a small child, I'd been quiet and somber—my mother's snapshots show me wary and serious. But Lauren was a beautiful and laughing baby—all blue eyes and blond curls. My dad built a professional darkroom in the basement and borrowed a bulky video camera from our neighbors. We still have a shelf of old VHS tapes documenting our first few years as sisters. She gurgled sweetly and demonstrated a talent for crawling, so I came out of my shy shell and sang and performed self-taught tap dance routines; I introduced my dolls and imaginary ponies to the camera. I covered my sister with a baby blanket I would peel away

and say, "Heeeere's Baby Lauren," as if I were Ed McMahon introducing Johnny. But my antics were no match for her baby charms, and I sulked, pouting at the bottom of the stairs, while my mom and dad cooed, recording Baby Lauren's early ability to climb.

As we grew older, the monthly photo sessions continued. My home-ec-teacher mom stitched matching outfits—frilly white blouses and red corduroy jumpers, white-and-yellow striped sundresses, blue wool coats with bone buttons. We were always posing in the living room, in the nature preserve near our house, and in the gardens at the city art museum. They tried to make me put my arm around Lauren, to hug her or hold her hand, but the pictures always looked stiff and unnatural. My dad has three-ring binders full of archival sheets of negatives, the same shots over and over. The only ones that ever got developed were black and white images of Lauren and me on our own, each posed individually in front of the same rose–covered trellis, seated with a book in our great-grandmother's rocker. The images were almost identical; as we didn't sit well together, it was as if our parents tried to make us interchangeable in the same picturesque scene.

I have one picture of us together, in the same photographic frame—Dad made a test print but deemed it not good enough to enlarge. We are wearing matching pink turtlenecks and little embroidered overalls. We sit back to back; Lauren must be perched on a phonebook because her four-year-old head is almost level with my own. I smile as if on command, no teeth showing. Lauren doesn't smile at all, so serious and intent on holding still. She is beautiful.

▪ ▪ ▪

I studied art history in school (a subject that ever-mimicking Lauren also pursued but failed three times). Just before I was born, the art museum where I would one day work acquired a double portrait by the Belgian Neoimpressionist Georges Lemmen. *The Serruys Sisters* depicts twelve-year-old Berthe and eight-year-old Jenny; in this pointillist painting, it is 1894. When I was twelve, my class went on monthly field trips to this museum—it was only a few blocks from our school—and my teacher and sixth-grader friends often commented on the keen

resemblance the Serruys girls bore to me and my little sister, age seven. Other than their matching red dresses with blousy sleeves and intricate smocked collars painted with thousands of tiny points of color, the Serruys sisters look little alike. Like me at twelve, Berthe is awkward and thin with mousey hair, a sharp face. Her eyebrows are too dark and determined for someone so young, and she looks away; you can see the exasperation on her face, lips pursed. She rests a tensed hand on the table, and I can almost hear my photographer father posing us and telling me to relax my clenched fist, move my hand to Lauren's shoulder. The tablecloth has a blocky floral print, just like my mom's collection of batiked textiles. There is a little brass vase, also familiar, and a large bunch of Honesty—those dried seedpods that look like pale silver coins, which in our house gathered dust on the dining room table. Like Lauren as a child, Jenny is the pretty one in the painting. Her hair falls in blond waves; her face is round and soft with gentle lips. She is serious and looks at the viewer, like a good girl.

Like my father's photographs, Georges Lemmen's portraits always have a strange, somber quality. Even when painting children, he seems interested not in their innocence or prettiness, but in those brief moments when the subjects are neither happy nor playful, but posed and serious, as if aware they are being looked at, as if they, in turn, are studying the viewer. *The Serruys Sisters* lacks sweetness and sentimentality—it is more like an austere character study in which no one is obliged to smile.

Paired sister portraits were popular once, particularly in eighteenth-century England; it was thought they portrayed "all that was innocent and pure in the representation of femininity." Gainsborough painted the musically renowned Linley sisters in a pastoral surrounding; blue and brown gowns echo the woods and the sky. Their very bodies seem to curve toward one another, and to me this idealized image of sisterhood looks like the Lauren-and-Emily double portrait my parents always wanted. Even the props—sheet music and a guitar—suggest their harmonious relationship, and Gainsborough's soft brushwork makes them seem to emerge organically out of the gentle shadows and tumbling growth of the woodsy background. Mary, the younger, seated, smiles sweetly and looks at the viewer; Elizabeth Ann, four years her senior and already far more famed, stands, rests her arm on Mary's shoulder, and gazes, pensive, at the invisible distance.

Gainsborough's rival, Sir Joshua Reynolds, was the favored portraitist of the elite. Once in London, at the Tate, I saw *The Ladies Elizabeth and Henrietta Montagu* and shuddered at its familiarity. The wall placard deemed the image one of "filial tenderness"—two gentle, lovely, and cultivated young women—but I saw myself in the imperious elder sister Henrietta, and Lauren was right there in the pathetically devoted Elizabeth. This double portrait is grand, less in harmony with nature than that of the Linley sisters. Lady Henrietta reposes against a carved and ancient-looking stone pedestal, as if she were the work of art. She is confident and a little disdainful, staring at the viewer as if he is lucky to gaze upon her. Little sister Elizabeth kneels at her feet, looks up adoringly—I was a difficult and sometimes awful sibling but Lauren always looked at me like this, as if there were no one who could find more favor, no one more worthy of emulating. If *The Serruys Sisters* mirrors us as children, me, bitter and impatient, Lauren, serene and beautiful, the Montagu sisters look like us a few years later. Henrietta is twenty and Elizabeth is thirteen. I imagine that when big sister Henrietta was replaced as the baby of the family, or when she was an awkward adolescent, she was jealous. But now she is grown up; her bare shoulder signals that she is a young woman to be desired. Now Elizabeth is the overlooked teenager and Henrietta responds to her sister's need for companionship and approval just as I so often did, with disdain. She offers Elizabeth the light half-embrace of an arm around her shoulder and I can almost see the reluctance she felt at having to share this coming-of-age portrait, having to make a gesture of affection and familiarity to a little sister who was decidedly beneath her. Little Elizabeth leans in as if she is eager for contact, to be seen near her elder sister. Henrietta does not incline her body, not an inch, but sits as straight and regal as a statue, not acknowledging that this is a double portrait, that her little sister has crept into the frame. Elizabeth reaches for her sister's hand—even her fingertips radiate eager excitement, but Henrietta's hand is languid, delicate, and still in her lap.

Sweetie, Sweetie

Lauren often stole things. If there were any suspicion, perhaps a suggested search of her bedroom for missing items, she would destroy her loot—she couldn't

be accused of pilfering something she no longer had. If caught, she wept and railed and usually convinced my parents that the scarf/sweater/necklace was hers to begin with. Once, when I was fourteen, I hit her. I'd confronted her about some small crime and she cut her eyes and ran up the stairs to escape to her room. I chased her, grabbed her wrist and spanked her like a naughty puppy. My father has a terror of domestic violence and he glowered at me and commanded that I sit on his exercise bike and ride ten miles without pause. "Really think about whether it was worth it to hit your sister." I pedaled furiously for more than an hour and the whole time I only wished I'd smacked her across the face, hard enough to leave a hand-shaped bruise.

▪ ▪ ▪

I loved Amy Cutler's work the minute I saw it, on a postcard announcing an upcoming exhibition at the city museum. The painting depicted a precarious tower, girl balanced on a pink chair on a bureau on a china closet on a roll top desk and chests of drawers, all stacked on a green ping-pong table. At the foot of her tower was a sleigh bed with matching quilt and pillow shams; twin scarlet-tongued alligators snapped sparkling teeth in wait. I had left my little cubicle at the museum after five years to run a tiny literary arts nonprofit, but I still worked with my old colleagues on a reading series in the galleries. Two local poets volunteered to write and perform a body of work about Cutler's first traveling one-woman exhibition, and I visited the museum over and over, ostensibly to prepare and gather ideas for future events, but really to find myself and my sister in Cutler's paintings. Many of Cutler's women work together at their strange tasks, raising swaddled baby houses, gathering drowning pigs into bathtubs, using their broom hands to sweep up rubbish, dust and old letters. Lauren and I have never worked together. I had chores to do every day since I was five. When I won a full academic scholarship for college, it was decided that earning my tuition was chore enough and Lauren was assigned to take over the daily dishes and weekly vacuuming and scrubbing. She declined. She had never lived up to my parents standards before and I almost admired her for her "Why start now?" attitude.

The painting that reminds me most of us is called *Dinner Party*. Two women, girls really, fight atop a dining room table. They've kicked away the green cloth with its gold stag-and-hound border. A silver tureen clatters to the floor; candlesticks, vase, and wineglasses are upturned. A roast turkey with those white ruffled cuffs on its drumsticks flies up in the air. The girls wear ball gowns complete with petticoats, pointed little heels and stockings; they are crowned with delicate, upside-down dining chairs, the green brocade cushions resting on their heads. The girls' long braids are looped around the chairs, like hair harnesses holding these strange helmets in place. Tied to the leg of each chair is something sharp—a kebab skewer, a cleaver, a shrimp fork, pointed tongs, a carving knife.

Cutler's *Dinner Party* guests have armed themselves just as Lauren and I did for so many years, taking up the available weapons to poke and needle one another, to fight for a spot in the center. I finally grew up enough to stop. It was a selfish choice really, not a reflection of maturity or newfound sisterly devotion. My mother and father and I have been parenting Lauren together for so many years, I am so like them in values and temperament; I am hardly their child at all any more. I always wanted to be my parents' favorite and it's easy to see that for them, my great flaw, and the thing that makes me a daughter to be fretted over, is that I can't get along with my sister. And so at twenty, I took what seemed like the high road and simply ignored her; like Henrietta Montagu with her disdainful half-embrace for eager little sister Elizabeth, I sometimes deigned to ask her about school, took her to dinner with my friends. It was really quite mean; I acted as though I didn't care enough to fight her any more. I may have raised an eyebrow at some of her antics and rebellions—toying with the idea of bisexuality, gouging little cuts in her wrists and waist, a brief period when she changed her name—but I was detached. She was no longer either my problem or concern. In *Dinner Party*, at least Amy Cutler's women feel enough passion for one another to take up dining chairs bedecked with knives; they've climbed on the table together to poke and provoke one another. They are sparring partners and each dangerous lunge says, "I care."

For a while, Lauren kept up the fight on her own, fabricating slights and deceits and demanding that my parents account for my behavior. The night she tried to kill herself, I had calmly asked her to produce the new gown I'd planned

to wear to an exhibition opening. I knew she had taken it while I was curling my hair. She denied it, and I offered a beleaguered sigh. "Fine, I'll wear something else." Dispassionate and resolved not to care, I would not let her see she affected me. I left; she swallowed a bottle of painkillers (also stolen, they were the remnants of my recent wisdom teeth extraction). When my father called, I put my cell on silent and drank champagne with museum friends, not finding out until I went home that she was having her stomach pumped and would spend time in a home for suicidal teens. I convinced my parents to give me my unspent college fund and bought a house, moved away, kept my distance for years, not wanting any part in her destruction. I thought if I wasn't there, I couldn't feel guilt or responsibility. I tried to forget I had a sister at all.

▪ ▪ ▪

When pairing sisters, painters and parents seem to love to match. In *Sweetie, Sweetie*, Amy Cutler dresses two young women in identical outfits—full peachy-toned skirts with a giant print of scarlet flowers and leaves, green sweater vests with red trim; heads replaced—Cutler fashion—with iced layer cakes. They must be sisters. The girl on the left (Cake-Emily, I imagine) grabs the other's wrist, she pushes her palm flat against her twin's collarbone, fighting. Chocolate frosting smears their sleeves, wrists, and fingers. The girl on the right (Cake-Lauren, of course) holds delicate silver forks in both hands and makes mad pokes at her sister's cake-head.

I had always wanted there to be consequences for Lauren. I had to cancel my first real date, because I hadn't put away the laundry before my mother got home. When Lauren refused to do any chores whatsoever, our parents shrugged their shoulders and let her go. Even with her lying and stealing and cutting, I only saw how her actions complicated my life. I had to visit her therapist while she cried and carried on, I had to struggle with the padlocks my father put on our knife drawers. When she took pills, it was my fault for not hiding my prescription better. I thought they should show her the strict rules and tough love they'd shown me, and I thought she was lucky to have it so easy. My parents have always babied her while

pushing me to be independent, self-sufficient, and I can see now I was the lucky one. A run of therapy and eight years away from home have made me realize that I don't hate my little sister, that it does pain me to see her struggle. But I nonetheless find it almost impossible to be near her, to watch her make mistakes. She wants to live her life; I want her to have what I have: security, stability, a charmed and safe existence. I want a simple, easy sister who gives me no cause for worry and it seems that Lauren will always need some looking after, that one day her care will fall to me, and that even if I could bring myself to offer, she wouldn't accept my help.

For months, I thought those cake-headed women in *Sweetie, Sweetie* were trying to hurt one another. The way I saw it, Cake-Emily was reaching to strangle her sister; Cake-Lauren was looking to stab and devour her twin's sweet, spongy face. Maybe they loved one another so that they could not resist the urge to fight, to eat one another up. Lauren always tells me I'd be prettier if I'd wear make-up and I tell her I don't need make-up to look presentable. I scour thrift stores for designer maternity dresses that I know would suit her bulky frame better than tattered jeans and AC/DC T-shirts; she always puts them back into bags for the Salvation Army.

Cutler's debut museum exhibition has long closed. I am left only with a catalogue, and now I see things differently. Cake-Lauren has forks in both hands; perhaps she is trying to reach up for a damaging bite of her own cake and her cake-twin is gripping her wrist and trying to stop her, to save her from this self-inflicted pain. Hard to tell if she is trying to devour Cake-Emily out of malice or desire, and just as hard to determine if her strangling and wrist-clenching twin is trying to protect herself or her sister from glittering tines and a blind, frantic scramble toward destruction.

Painting Faces

I am always looking for meaning when I study paintings. I study, I think, I take notes and read catalogues, never daring to create something myself. I love museums because they are quiet, pristine, and peaceful. Lauren is less cautious. In the years when she and I existed in separate orbits, when she failed art history

three times, she finally tried something that I hadn't excelled at first: she took up a brush on her own, not even waiting for proper training, a little guidance, or instruction, and she learned to paint. She began with watercolors and pastels and finally found success and harmony, not in looking at someone else's painting, but in her own temporary, vital creations: she is a body artist, painting faces and flesh.

▪ ▪ ▪

When I first heard about the face painting, I was uninterested, picturing the bland little smiley faces, hearts, and flowers I saw on kids' faces at carnivals. I had not spoken to Lauren in three months when she called me at work to ask about renting a classroom from our literary arts organization. She'd met a famous make-up artist at an international body painting conference (who knew there was such a gathering?) and had invited him to teach a three-day workshop on body painting. She just needed a space for him to hold the classes. I was always in need of funds to print our newsletters, buy wine for open mic nights, pay small honoraria for visiting writers, and so Lauren was really helping me out. I still thought the idea of a professional seminar was silly but I said yes.

My little sister arrived early to set up tables and make coffee, but she barely spoke to me. I was suspicious of her confidence and independence but I stayed in my office and didn't interfere. When the artist arrived, Lauren helped him carry in cases of paints, a tool belt of brushes and sponges, a rig to hold an airbrush kit. Friendly and capable, she was quick to offer bottled water, to run through the agenda for the day. She'd never seen me work with my visiting writers, testing the mic, setting out wine and plastic cups, asking if there would be time for a Q&A, a book signing. Even so, the resemblance was there, and I didn't know if I was bothered or proud.

That day, she and the dozen other students were learning new techniques for face painting. They painted their own faces to look like cats, and I left my office door open so I could hear about different ways to handle the brushes, how to make the contours of a human face seem more feline. I was somehow pleased when Lauren popped her head into my office to show me her handiwork. I don't

know if she was showing off or seeking my approval. Probably both. Her face was white with curves and whorls of dark stripes and somehow it looked covered in smooth hair. The tip of her nose was black—it looked soft and moist and a faint line separated her upper lip; it seemed that delicate whiskers peeked out from her cheeks. In five minutes she'd transformed herself into a white tiger, more feline than any of the actors in *Cats*, and I was dazzled by her skill and by the exotic beauty she had created.

Later, the class moved on to airbrush techniques and Lauren brought in a model who stripped to pasties and a G-string. She was painted to look as if she was wearing clothes. Her bare ass was airbrushed blue and delicately hand-painted with gold stitching and a Levi's label. Tiny white greasepaint threads turned her faded shorts into Daisy Duke cutoffs. Her naked torso disappeared into a painted-on tank top that sported a beer logo. I was uncertain of the appeal, but later Lauren told me that this look was very popular at motorcycle shows and openings for sports bars. Lauren regaled the group with advice about a recent booking at a dance club. She had painted four caged dancers, one of whom had neglected to visit the ladies room prior to her painting; Lauren had to advise her on how to pee without smudging the paint job.

▪ ▪ ▪

Now, in writing workshops, we play those get-to-know-you games. Tell two things that are true and one that's a lie. When tasked with telling two true things about myself that people wouldn't guess, I am always stumped. I write essays, like to cook, listen to indie rock, and watch *The Office*; I go on lots of walks with my poet sweetheart and our two greyhounds. Bag boys at the Shop 'n Save query, "Paper or plastic?" and I reply, "Paper, please. I appreciate it," and they ask if I'm an English teacher. I take my groceries and feel woefully predictable. And so I always choose Lauren for my truth that sounds like a lie—I have a little sister who goes to dance clubs and car shows and paints nude women to look like curvaceous cheetahs or simply spokesmodels in truly skintight clothing. She makes more money doing it for three hours than I earn in a week. Usually the bodypainting is

ridiculous enough to be deemed true but even people who've known me for years are often surprised I have a sister, perhaps because I mention her so rarely. Though my parents are a key part of my life and personal conversation, Lauren and I still exist at a safe and separate distance from one another. But maybe friends and colleagues have always pictured me as an only child, a little too confident (read *arrogant*) and self-centered.

Winning the "Two-Truths-and-a-Lie" game is not why I choose to introduce my sister. I feel like I am making up for years of not liking her—for once, I am putting her before myself, admitting that while I am quiet and bright, it is Lauren who is interesting, a little fascinating, and able to take chances and make mistakes. Her highs and lows are more dynamic than her steady older sister dares to risk.

A few weeks after Lauren's body-artist seminar, I was working with a community arts collaborative—I was a slacker board member, always too busy bringing in money for my own little writers' center to raise funds for them. So when we got a grant to show family movies in the parking lot of a somewhat scuzzy south side neighborhood, I wrangled the donation of an intermission attraction—a professional face painter, my sister, who doesn't need me but will still do just about anything to be near me.

It was a hot Friday night and Lauren set up a stool and an elaborate array of paints, brushes, and sponges—she is still saving money for the airbrushing kit. There were at least fifty children in line. They flipped through an album of kid-friendly designs—no floral landscapes on bare breasts that evening—and selected dragons, cats, and Harry Potter. Lauren was chatty and quick. I watched a shirtless and barefoot little boy choose Spider-Man. Lauren sponged white paint around his eyes and red over the rest of his face, quickly using a tiny brush to make a delicate black web. It was only a minute and she was ready for the next kid. I was amazed at her speed, professional patter, and artistic accuracy. This tow-headed kindergartener really did look just like Spider-Man—she had even shaded his chubby face so that it had the flat planes of a comic book character.

Many of my fellow board members waited in line and I half-wanted to ask Lauren to paint me too. I liked the way she gave everyone a new and exciting face, a brilliant mask. I knew they were all picking designs from her catalogue, but like

Amy Cutler's replacing of heads with cakes and birdhouses, it seemed that Lauren had cleverly emphasized the strange and exotic just beneath their normal features. One colleague became a blue, pebbly fleshed alien with sinister glowing eyes and a slit of a mouth. Another was disguised behind the shimmering, iridescent scales of a fish with bulging lips and fins on her cheeks. My job was to hold a hand mirror and let people admire their new faces. I glanced down at myself once, mousey hair, gray eyes, and freckles, so familiar and dull, and I wondered what face Lauren would give me. Maybe she'd find it cathartic to make me some green-skinned Medusa or wild-eyed harpy, but Lauren has always been kinder than I am, and she'd probably choose to frame my eyes in butterfly wings or turn my cheeks into an abstract field of tropical flowers. I know that she would have loved it if I'd asked her to paint me and I know that I may never be enough at ease to let her touch me, to let her have even momentary control with water-soluble paints. I may be brave enough to be close to her, but I am still too afraid to let her be close to me.

▪ ▪ ▪

Seeing Lauren so capable, happy, and in control, in this arena at least, made me think I could try again to be a sister. She has found some aspect of her life that is hers alone, a place where she can shine and succeed; somehow knowing she has this triumph makes it easier for me to accept her other challenges. I still worry about Lauren—her health, her inability to take care of herself and to manage her money. As tough and practical as I am, I am not a risk-taker, and Lauren's boundless compassion scares me. She lets herself plan a life with Eric, with his muscular dystrophy, his disabled sister, and a family that is always in trouble. It is selfish and cold and probably more than a little cowardly, but I know I wouldn't have made it past a first date with someone so challenged; my sweetheart's occasional cigarettes and late nights at the bar are enough to keep me holding off on marriage, always waiting until next year, when he is more steady and I am more sure. All Lauren's friends seem to be recovering from abuse or addiction, even her adopted dog winces when she pets him—he has arthritis and a herniated disc. We both need people who need us and Lauren wants to be the strong one for someone.

I am supportive, good at fixing things and smoothing complications, but I am always afraid I'll run out of compassion, grow impatient with the small issues that to Lauren must seem like laughably minor difficulties. I am accustomed to having what my parents call "a charmed life" and I can't imagine how I'll cope when my luck runs out. Perhaps it is Lauren's own struggle that makes her so sure she'll always have more to give, that no matter what happens, she'll understand.

And so after twenty-four years of resenting her, I am trying to be kind to my sister. I am trying to appreciate her creativity and compassion, and when she makes the same mistakes over and over, I try not to recoil from a life so much more difficult and uncertain than my own. I can't fix things for her, can't make her balance her checkbook or take her medication. I can't tell her to please wait until she's just a little older and stronger to get married and have babies and I can't suggest that standing up to her boss is not always the most diplomatic way to handle workplace conflicts. She's going to struggle through on her own and all I can do is be there and convince my reluctant and resolutely fair parents that maybe their rules and expectations could change. Not everyone has to finish college and own a home and reliable car. They want to put us in matching red corduroy dresses again, pose us back to back, and make portraits that show us in profile as mirror images of one another. It's hard for us all to admit that we'll never be the kind of sisters that match.

Braiding Binds

In Amy Cutler's painted world, there are miles of braids. They harness chairs to heads, tie bundled burdens together, tow houses through snow, form rope swings and leashes, are wound onto giant blond, brunette, and auburn spools while the women sleep. Over and over, I see images of paired girls, younger than the grown-up women in most of Cutler's paintings, with identical outfits, their four pigtails seamlessly braided into two ropes binding them together. The distance between these girls can grow with each year but they remain tied to one another—only in one sparse graphite drawing are the long plaits cut, twisting about the sisters' feet like snakes on the invisible floor.

In *Living Room Tangle*, they wear dresses very like those that Lauren and I wore when we both wanted to be Betsy Ross on the Fourth of July. They are red, with a small print and long, tight sleeves and knee-length skirts. They wear white bib aprons, black Mary Janes. The twin on the left bends backward reaching up to grab her sister's elbow. The twin on the right curls her head into her chest, grips a shared pigtail in hand. Each girl struggles to manipulate the other into a different position—they are tied too close for comfort. The museum catalogue calls it "an endless loop like a Möbius strip." The girls can only twist their braids and their bodies so they face one another, or so they look the other way. Their braided binds are not long enough to let them stand side by side.

I prefer *Two Girls and a Potbelly Stove*. It's painted on wood, cut in the shape of a house with a Mansard roof and chimney. The stove belches a loopy cloud of bluish smoke. Cutler says, "Usually when there are birds in my paintings, they represent thoughts," and here there are three black birds flying or falling down the chimney, four more dead in the corner, and one crushed at the girls' feet. There may be another; there is a dark shape clasped tight in the taller girl's hands.

These sisters wear pleated yellow dresses with pointy white collars and crisp sashes, white stockings and brown lace-up shoes. Their dark braids draw their faces together and they seem to lean in for a kiss. The one without the clasped bird-thought holds her sister's shoulders. For each girl, one sturdy shoe is rooted to the golden floor; the other is lifted, trying to step away, but resigned at last to dancing.

Lo Kwa Mei-en

Pinnochia on Fire

There is a line that could make you love me really,
but reeling, I spend the words like virgin coin for
a real girl on the line. When things got bad, all star

-light began to prick. So I kept the sky returnable,
sad wheel. My arm the mayday flare, leg a picnic's
pyro dahlia—when I go up I'll keep my head on

a pillow when I can, see back to sea, say a syllable
is a hook. And the word for my wick of a tongue
you'll find between my teeth. You want me ultra

-lingual, ready-maid, but I'm a match head to head
in the gutter, and the gutter creaks above the main
avenue of heaven. I kept myself bony dry, a sugar

cube of vermouth: I cut myself by the grain, cool
and slender as a fuse with a sister; I missed her over
over over like a bullet train shooting past myself

through the tunnel of a broken heart, and on time,
not mine. But I light up like an obscene October
sky celebrating a stroke of war. When all still burns

from all I see, the taste of ash a horny flower on
a hard female tongue, say holiday. Say harvest. Stay
back. Stand back, trigger this. I'll keep it real, go

hurt something to love it, real, good, find the center
of aurora in me, the second of ignition. Hothouse
flower scheming the heart of the firework, I'll hurt

to keep wild tonight. A sky for my savage cross
-haired wheeling under; a field of soon-cool stars'
temperature and light, so hot, so real, I come alive.

Pinnochia, We Loved You Enough

to dream up a simple boat that could, with confidence,
slice through a continent's wet shelf for new gold and
other precious curio, and then we put you in it, dear
thing, but not before a real hand came down to carve

the map of worldly want into your brow, so you may
but look overboard, once lost, to know your place.
We will imagine you, unsinkable girl, stirring the seas
from Tsae to Tsew, and the sea sniffing at the cherry

notes of your bones, of the fresh wound of your head,
a daydream of something like blood as you row and
row for days. Pinnochia, you have been loved. Hard,
unsaying hips and tongue, you are indelible, we love

you that much. We dreamed a shark's awl of a face
and mechanical thrust, dreamed the dream of you, half
-in, half-out his throat. So the hand came down kind
and sanded your breasts away for speed, for seconds

you, half-in, half-out of a devil, must cast your
-self away. Pinnochia, we could not bear to see you
destructed even in our sleep. Pinnochia, you will never
die. We bless you, living ghost of treasure, imagined

back into coffers wide enough for you to sleep in,
the half-sweet smell of you radiating from the walls.
There you will intuit all things done for a reason, so
you will do great things, we knew, as the hand came

down into your legs, making of two things one, brief
tableaus of hind light, spine, and blue, green, blue run
through the mind of the hand as he gave you the body
that could outrun the tides, and so we deliver you

into the oceanic womb, half-girl, new beast, and you will
go forth, reborn in the image of how we loved you: like
a bride, Pinnochia, like a thousand golden fish in the sea,
alive in the mouth of the coffer, the realest thing for days.

Pinnochia Sends Home the Manifesto

When I'm august I will wear you like a cat fur coat.
The smallest leather in the world. Like now, nothing
heavy will get in or out the eyes but you, you off a
chain. Now I'm so hard like a hand of coal you have
to a count of three. Three. Roll that eye right on
up, naked as my birthday. Long as we're slanting,
how's this real eyeful for an eyeful? Yesterday
I'll give birth to a real ass by holy syndicate light.
He will turn me to flash kindling under the light
and we'll bray together, on three, so bloodless,
the most terrific virgin in the world and also god
knows what. All night long I wore me like a glass
in the wall, for looking not in nor out at the house.
I did interpret all gifts for worse or worse, my god
-sign, sick mother, no cocktail real enough for this.
My high is a false high; I'm the prophecy going right
through me. My god is god of wraths and unease.
My son will take me off like a rocket's skirt and take
off for hay and lake runoff on all fours, and my fist
will slide, a hot, new arrow right under the righteous
head of god, or whomever, I care not I cannot, and he
will want to die and I will make him sing for what
I used to sing. You could baptize a battlefield in it. And
walk walk walk away. When I'm march, crows will
spear you up like a fish on legs, throw you into my
arms, a neat bowl of blood. I birth babes not born

of blood exactly, so they cry. They are my smallest
sunrise in the galaxy, amen. All night long I scratch
the unforgiving skins in my head. I suture the sails
of a fucked boat. For love, I'd eat this planet up to
get us to the next. But for the sake of leather I'll polish
off nothing before daybreak but for you.

Telegraph

Catch you in the back room playing Mother.
Catch you like ghosts. Let you go again.
Let you grow tall & gold in the wild holly for
a little information on how to get close. Stop.
You need this. Send you brother, okay cowboy, bad
-weather friend. Send rain. Left left tattoo for lover.
Something to hurt alongside in the tender acre.
Can you keep that up for long. Stop. Stop. See
I am daughter writes a last letter. Left the parakeet
alongside in fine cage. Shows you how pretty I am
not so I stuck a wing in each fist & rode. X
out. Dirty words of my dowry. Also out. Drum a
short rain to let me know you get there okay.
Catch you here maybe. A streak of moss up for sun
& the minute oranges & call them clementine. Thanks
you in summer. Stop. Got me. Can send more sweet
orbs if you think so. Tomorrow is nothing could last
forever day. Stop. Dash. Stop. See I pack a bag. See
I catch you on the road gotten dark. Send moon.
Stop. Send short & long rain to invite & comfort
expedition. Can't make the map you say if I try. & I try
everything. Even ink. Even ink. Even both.

Geetha Iyer

The Glass World-Builder

It is difficult for me to talk about Sarla Shah. These days everyone has a label for her. Some labels I find too distressing to repeat. Others are ludicrous. Some are true, but in my field truth is at best a construct defined by context; at worst it is brutally meaningless. For instance, if you stop referring to a person, if you never bring up her name or her deeds in places where she was a tectonic presence, does she then fail to exist?

Sarla, who unstuck herself from others' labels, invented one for herself. "I am a microbial geosculpturist," she would say to the men she met at pubs. I would snort into my beer; she would sip from her fluorescent cocktail of the evening, her eyebrows raised at the sodden, half-drunk boy who had ambled over to chat her up. She had that quality, when she was younger, before the fame and inevitable infamy, of drawing men and women to her who knew nothing about her at all. It was perhaps her hair, cut short and fluffed up like a cockatoo, or perhaps the arc of her jaw, the line of it echoed by her clavicles, and again by her wrists, her gazelle-legs.

But there is no elegant way to chat up a woman at a pub who has just told you she is a microbial geosculpturist, so the boy would raise his beer glass at her, say "Whooo!" and disappear into the thump of music.

And that was Sarla's intent. She was a genius, and couldn't pretend to have normal conversations with anybody. She did other things. She fiddled in her laboratory long after school hours and work hours, and I grew used to her returning home as late as four in the morning, muttering to herself in the kitchen as she rifled papers and boiled milk before bed.

She talked her way into the MFA program at the School of Art at Rutherford, while simultaneously enrolled at their College of Science and Engineering, on the strength of several dozen microscope slides of preserved sea urchin larvae. They looked like tiny, crystalline crowns suspended in a blue-black landscape studded with other random occlusions—grime from a fingerprint, dust motes, a tortuous strand of fiber invisible to the naked eye. "The Isolation Series," she called it, holding up the slides to the light. Her "canvases" then were just that—Band-Aid-sized rectangles of

glass, a drop of solution swirling with minute organisms, a wafer-thin square of glass pasted over the droplet. Then she'd microscope through the skin of liquid caught between the two glass layers, freeze frame, pose the eye of her camera to the eye of the microscope—shutter-snap. Exhibit. Applause.

▪ ▪ ▪

I will be the first to admit I didn't always understand Sarla's art. This is not just because I was a linguistic anthropology student. I have an eye for aesthetics; when I was an undergraduate I took a cross-listed art class on resource deprivation, survival, and the human imagination. For my final project I went on a self-imposed fast for two weeks and then speed-sketched the cafeteria line in my dormitory. Some people dropped loose change on my food tray while I drew, and one girl even gave me a hamburger.

When I moved into graduate housing two years later and put in an application for a roommate, Sarla came knocking. She strolled through the apartment, rubbing her chin, looked at the cafeteria sketches tacked to the living room wall. I rushed to explain that I had just put those up as placeholders. Sarla gave me a half smile and said, "I, too, have something of an eye. I think we'll get along just fine."

Sarla settled in and I soon realized that while I thought myself ambitious, inquisitive, and driven, my abilities paled in comparison with Sarla's. She studied microbiology. She taught it. She read papers about genetics, virology, cell culturation. In what she referred to as her "spare time," she photographed the results of her lab experimentation, working early into the morning. In what she referred to as "cocktail time," she'd take me with her to her favorite pubs and we'd exchange sketches on napkins of the senselessly dressed people we saw there.

In the mornings over breakfast she'd say things like, "selective breeding is gods-play, but it's not as bad as people make it out to be."

I'd blearily nod into my cornflakes, begin to say that actually eugenics really was a bad thing, but she'd be striding out the door already, her body unbent by the weight of her laptop, her camera, the many books she was reading, her pace unindicative of four hours of sleep.

▪ ▪ ▪

I understood Sarla's science much less than her art, but I can tell you that her real breakthrough, the thing that first pushed her creative envelope, was with the nematodes.

She'd shown me her worms before. One night after seven beers and four cocktails between us we clomped through the snow, arms wound round each other for support, from downtown through campus back to our place, and as we passed by the Cell and Molecular Biology Building she tugged me toward the glass doors saying, "I have a burning need to know whether the nematodes dance double when I see drunkly."

We meandered our way up the stairs to the laboratory where she worked. Once inside she disappeared into a side room and reemerged with a small glass disc in her hand.

"You anthropologists have it tough. If you could put people on petri dishes," she waved the disc at me, "you wouldn't have to do all that gliding about in low-flying planes business, video cameras poking out of your asses, scaring uncontacted tribes with your technobabblery."

I complained that I had never once even considered the idea of attaching a video camera to my ass and flying about over forests looking for tribes.

"Yes, yes, you just study suburbia, I know it." She positioned the petri dish under a binocular microscope and squinted through the eyepieces. "Yes, yes, that makes sense," she said into the dish.

She pulled me to her by the nape of my neck and nodded at the microscope. "They are what the ocean would be if it had geometry," she whispered. The pads of her fingertips pressed cool and firm into my skin.

I had to readjust the eyepieces—my eyes were set wider than hers. If it was an ocean she was seeing, then it was frozen amber. The sodium bulb of the microscope was the only light source apart from the moon, and it filtered through a layer of hard jelly in the dish, through ghostly curlicues traced over the jelly's surface. Animal tracks. The nematodes were comma-sized, transparent, undulating like sine waves in random motion across the dish.

"We study their genetic makeup. Sometimes we knock out bits of their DNA. Other times we add something new. It changes the look of them. The way they move. The way they reproduce. I'm interested in their musculature myself."

I was at a loss to comment sensibly on this. Without the beers I might have been able to ask her to explain things more. Instead I mumbled something about Homer's wine-dark seas. How ancient people only made names for colors if they were useful to their survival.

"So in ancient Greece, I would have seen this sea in true color, perhaps. And true motion." Sarla covered the petri dish and switched off the microscope light. "At least I know that tipples most definitely make the wavy lines wave more. Perhaps if I decreased the shutter speed on my camera I could suggest motion on a frozen landscape? But then there's the blazing light of the—" she disappeared, still talking to herself, into the side room to put away her worms.

• • •

Sometimes we talked about my work too. I study tribes. Not exotic ones, but tribes formed in schools. I once watched an alpha-clique of teenage girls make a boy disappear, just with words. He was a freshman, fresh off the boat from Bangladesh, and because of a misunderstanding of the school's social system he asked the wrong girl the wrong question about where the restrooms were. Teenage girls are linguistic pioneers and powerhouses—the alpha-clique turned him into a non-presence not just by ignoring him, but by inventing words to ignore him with. I told Sarla about this, about my fly-on-the-wall research techniques, watching CCTV footage from the school corridors, collecting data from public, online message boards frequented by the girls, setting up interviews that tangentially got the girls talking about their favorite school activities. They reduced the boy to a figurative piece of lint, haplessly buffeted by the movements of others, eventually eddied into a forgotten corner of the classroom that was never swept up.

Sarla's eyes gleamed. "This is why I like you, you know?" I'm sure I blushed. "You take this miserable specimen of humanity and put him in a glass jar and turn him into a work of art, something to talk about."

I tried to deflect her response, focus on the girls' casual cruelty, but she dismissed me. "Oh, love, don't tell me five years of anthropology hasn't clued you in onto the essential nature of anthropodes."

Sometime before the end of the school year, the Bangladeshi kid killed himself. Sarla shrugged. "The trouble with human subjects," she said, "is that there are so many variables to account for. 'Todes are easier that way." She patted my cheek. "It's okay, love, the girls will find a new creature to torment next year. You'll write your dissertation on social strata and linguistic isolation yet."

I took a much-needed summer break. I could not take my mind off the boy, about the role I played in documenting—perhaps facilitating—his death. I could not admit my guilt or sadness to Sarla, could not stand to have her remind me of the importance of remaining an objective researcher, "lest you muss up your data with your tears," she might have said.

Sarla e-mailed me two weeks into my vacation. The entirety of her message—she did not like to write—was "I am calling the series, 'Rush Hour Rickets.' There is much to explore." Attached were several photographs taken through the microscope. A familiar yet unfamiliar landscape. She must have used color filters over the light bulb, or perhaps replaced the light source entirely. Against grey-brown, gleaming jelly were nematode tracks. But instead of the old loops and waves, the lines were kinked, like endless, writhing chopped-off forks of snake tongues. The nematodes, frozen in this new style of locomotion, shone like little angle brackets.

I wrote back asking whether she would train the worms to jump hoops next.

"No," she responded. "Cross intersections."

• • •

When I returned to Rutherford, it was to a different Sarla. She whirled in and out of the apartment at all hours of the day, without pattern, and I finally realized it was because she had struck big at both her lab and at the art studio. She was preparing an installation piece for the University Museum. She was coauthoring a paper on—and I take liberties as I paraphrase this—a genetic quirk that caused

exaggerated muscular twitches in nematodes. Her coauthor and labmate, Darius, a man with bushy muttonchops and a crease between his eyebrows from thinking too much, said breathlessly to me at a dinner meeting at the apartment that their experimental breakthrough, "broadly speaking, would be most influential in the medical field. I mean for muscle regeneration, of course."

I accompanied Sarla to the art studio where she played with various set-ups of high resolution video cameras and flatscreen projections of the microscope worlds. She had converted a wide, shallow baking tray from our kitchen into a larger version of a petri dish. Nematodes ziggered invisibly over the jelly, coming into view as she moved her microscope across the tray. Strangely, their paths were confined to a grid system now, and when I asked Sarla about this she said, "It's a chemical toxin. The negative space of the canvas is only tangible through other senses. For the 'todes, it's chemosensitivity. For us, it's emergent—until the 'todes go exploring, we don't see the walls that trap them. You recognize the landscape, don't you?"

I shook my head.

"Utter balls," Sarla muttered. "That's the limitation of having a viewing panel the width of a pea. I really am going to have to use three trays, and triple the microscopes too." She turned away from me and scribbled onto the back of a library receipt.

▪ ▪ ▪

That fall, campus literati flocked to view "Navigation Patterns of Urbanites" and cooed at the three microscopes moving in sync on a pre-programmed flatbed over three flanked trays of Sarla's weird worms. They gasped in dawning recognition of the familiar landscape on the flatscreens—the nematodes' erratic movement across the jelly had been confined to a map. Over the three weeks that the trays were displayed and refreshed and displayed again, they traced pathways that mirrored the walkways of our campus. It was like Sarla had learned to paint with mist—lines shimmered and faded out of sight as the nematodes crisscrossed the terrain.

On opening night of her exhibition I came expecting the crowd to be flashing flutes of champagne, but I guess it was not that kind of gig, in those early days. The crowd sipped coffee out of waxed paper cups. I eavesdropped.

They talked of "a mirror world of our frenzied existence," of "transience and seasonality." "It's a new architecture, don't you see?" "It's so *je ne sais quoi*. So glissant." A child held up to the trays to see the microworld up close said, "Ewwww," and her father nodded to his companion. "To embrace our primal instincts is to call a worm a worm, no matter the shape of the spotlight."

In the back, Sarla stood with her hands in her pockets, her chin held up at that alluring angle that invited looks but not conversation. She was wearing a long-sleeved white tunic over her jeans that I think was deliberately chosen—a labcoat for someone who never wore labcoats when she worked.

Her labmate Darius hovered by her side, his eyes fawning. He tried to hold on to Sarla's elbow but invariably, in movements gentle and firm as the robot-arms moving her flatbeds and microscopes, she would dislodge his grasp.

The morning after the last day of her exhibition, as I helped Sarla uninstall her work, I asked her about him. Whether there was more to the "mate" than labmate.

"What a curious play on words," she replied. "I certainly don't intend to have children with him, if that's what you mean."

I frowned and remarked that he seemed very fond of her.

Sarla smiled and picked up one of the nematode trays I held out to her. "They're difficult like that, aren't they?" She began to vigorously scoop the jelly out of the tray with a plastic spoon. It fell in wet crumbles into a plastic bucket marked with a biohazard symbol. "You spend your whole life birthing something, culturing it, rewarding it for doing something right, punishing it for transgressing, and then that's all it lives for—approval and rebuke. As if nothing is worth doing unless someone is watching, with peanut shells or applause."

I had no idea what this had to do with Darius, and I told her so.

"It has as much to do with Darius as it has to do with humanity, love." She must have seen my confusion. "Weren't you listening to the talk at the show? Some people will say and do anything if it'll get them a fuck."

▪ ▪ ▪

By the time Sarla had written her dissertation, her personal experiments had moved on to bacterial cultures and the fractal properties of crystallization. She was like a cat that way I suppose, single-minded until the next enticement came along. I asked her why she'd dropped her focus on muscle regeneration work. Whether the challenge was daunting. Polymaths were not immune to overworking themselves, after all.

But she scoffed at the suggestion. "My energy is boundless. It's patience I have a problem with. Anyway, bacteria are far more interesting to me right now."

I tried to point out that finding a cure for muscular dystrophy seemed like an interesting pursuit as well.

She shook her head, as if I were naïve. "Did you know this planet would be inhospitable were it not for those pioneer species, the ones that spat out oxygen as a mere waste product of their metabolic exertions? We are far too anthropocentric—seeing the world for what we want to see in it. But the bacteria, those are the real world-builders."

I tried to apply her outlook to my research—pursuing students eagle-eyed and disimpassioned, allowing linguistic trends, personality cults, and other social phenomena to emerge organically, instead of going out in search of them. I tried to tell myself anything was interesting as the next, everything was culturally relevant. I tried to tell myself that I didn't get to pick what was worthy and what was not. Occasionally I would catch Sarla smiling at me, poring over notes at my desk after midnight. She'd say, "Are you sure you love the research, not the research subjects?"

She was offered a research and teaching position out of NYU. It was all she could do not to toe-hop around the apartment with the phone held to her ear—she had told me while applying for the position that they had "an incredible department of mad, wild geeks, the sort of people who would hook up temperature sensors to plant leaves and use the output data to pluck the strings of a harp."

Darius and I sat at the dining table watching her pace round the loveseat, the phone cord expanding and contracting as she moved. Darius had shaved his mutton-chops, and rested his bare cheeks in the cups of his hands, pouting at her. When

she said, "Well of course, how could I not accept?" I watched him as he massaged his face and flexed his lips, practicing how to smile. I wondered what he felt when he kissed her, if her skin was cool all over, if his body worked overtime to warm up.

"You will visit," Sarla told me, at the airport the day she left. "You have an eye, I think, for the sorts of things I like to make."

I nodded, mutely, unsure of what I would do.

▪ ▪ ▪

It is perhaps prideful to say that I am an authority on Sarla Shah. But I kept a file drive full of everything they ever wrote about her and everything she wrote herself. The "official" biographies. The introspectives and editorials on her work. The magazine interviews. Her academic publications. The police reports. It is harder, now, to collect this data. I read everything, and it seems so—misrepresentative.

We corresponded periodically. I saved those e-mails too.

Her work looked increasingly topographical every time she sent pictures. "Oat Fields" was an impressionistic landscape of blues and hays interspersed with daubs the color of poppies. Those were in her bacterial culture days.

She once wrote, "I swear, I stay up at night only to see patterns of replication," and sent me twenty snapshots of rivers emptying into an abyss of deep blue. They were magnifications of flower and leaf petals, a viral infection having triggered the jagged lines of contrasting pigmentation.

She experimented for a while with different salt solutions, allowing them to dry gradually under the microscope, forming crystal pyramids and the fractal coastlines of an invented Pangaea. "Abiotic environments are not really responsive enough," she said, when I asked her whether she could build mountains that way.

When she traveled to conferences or exhibits of her work overseas she would send me "electronic postcards" taken out of airplane windows. "A sodium-blooded giant," she wrote of Shanghai, the intricate cityscape hung like a web in darkness, night dew flaring in sudden torchlight. Over Amsterdam she said, "Why on earth do we paint the earth like Mondrian when we could all be Van Goghs?" Over the Rockies she yelled, "Firebreaks like razor cuts! But the crumbling!" This made

little sense to me until I looked it up—as in her photo, the mountaintop landscape looked like a giant lawnmower had been taken to it, erasing lines of trees to keep wildfires from spreading.

The irregularity of her e-mails had an effect on my work. I felt dehydrated by her absence, enervated whenever she wrote. On bad days, when I played back tapes of student interactions on playgrounds or transcribed interviews at youth shelters, I marked my subjects as "predator," "parasite," or "prey." I wondered what it would mean if Sarla one day felt she didn't need me to be her audience.

On good days, I wrote proposals for new projects. I knew that Sarla couldn't operate without my commentary on her work—it was the only reason she still wrote to me, after all these years.

I began to follow her advertised movements as best as I could—I knew that if she were scheduled to give a talk or attend an exhibit somewhere I could expect a postcard. If she had achieved a breakthrough in a particular experimental process or visual technique, she would send me the results. I became a minor expert on various anthropogenic and geological landscape features—I learned to read her microscapes as transcriptions of her thoughts.

On my twenty-eighth birthday Sarla wrote me a quixotic greeting: "Do you know I lie to you least of all? That makes you special. I kid. In seriousness, on this wonderful day, appreciate the beauty of truth. My life's work is in displaying truths ... as I see them. And I do wish you a lovely day, old friend." The picture attached was of her mutant nematodes, against a wine-dark sea.

▪ ▪ ▪

Five years after her move to New York I found, from a gossipy blog, that Sarla had married. A microbiologist, it seemed, one who studied the pathology of airborne disease organisms. He was shorter than her, with reddish, receding hair and a jowliness to the chin.

I debated for a month whether to e-mail Sarla with congratulations, or whether to broach the subject of her secrecy more directly. But she e-mailed first. "I hope you don't mind, love, but I've married someone. Jones is an excellent

dinner companion; he always has something interesting to say about microbes. And he never laughs, thank goodness. I could not bear to live in mirth; it distracts me from my work. At any rate, we marry for convenience, I always say, so there was obviously no point in throwing a party to celebrate such a mundanity."

I thought about poor Darius, the conversation I'd had with him the week after Sarla had left. He'd asked me to meet him, at a pancake diner, and immediately after the waiter had taken our orders he demanded, "Why did you have to be the last person to see Sarla before she left town?"

He leaned forward and ran his eyes over my body, as if expecting an explanation to be imprinted into my skin, something that would betray itself through raised hairs, gooseflesh, a rush of blood to the cheeks.

I think it was the first time I saw him clearly, released from the fog that was Sarla's presence. It was only in this light that I understood how she worked on us, and I began to laugh. Darius turned red and then purple, so I grabbed his hand. He flinched, but I held tight and asked him if Sarla had told him anything about foraminiferans.

"Those hard-shelled amoebae?" he blustered, "What does that have to do with anything?"

It had to do with everything. Minute, deep sea organisms that secreted complex, calcareous shells studded with pores—they fed and moved by putting out tiny tendrils through the pores. It was in a book Sarla had left behind with a note on it for me: "Please return to the library. Cheers, love." I read it cover to cover first, thought of my dissertation research, studying adolescents who built word-shelters around them, so sensitive to the forces of insult and praise that they built shields to try and deflect it all.

Sarla's marriage, or at least her explanation of it, was a release and a curse. Suddenly, I could explore relationships more fully, but at the same time, I saw myself through her eyes—a resource collector. I insisted to my partner that we would have our wedding in a court house. Absolutely no fanfare. Only the legal allotment of witnesses present. I thought of telling Sarla the news, but then considered what that might have meant—was I seeking her approval? Her consent?

▪ ▪ ▪

Sarla's opus, "Cellulose/Hellulose" was held this month last year. Contrary to my expectations, her marriage to Jones was still going, five years strong. I suppose his conversations enriched her. I envied him—the subjects I studied were so predictable, so homogenous, compared to the incalculable diversity of bacterial species he worked on. I'm sure it must have been inspiring to listen to him practice his conference presentation on "Fabricant dynamics: Infectious viability of modified gram-negative bacterial propagules" at the dinner table.

Sarla had switched, during this time, from canvas glassware to constructions of wood. She built intricate, laminate structures, the bands of different colored wood alternately left with straight, raw edges, or sanded into gentle, striated valleys. She was writing, at the time, about the properties of fungal wood colonizers, how some of them secreted chemicals at the frontline of their advancing bodies that were dead zones—no man's lands that other fungi couldn't cross.

Her landscapes were pustulent with fungal growths. "Francis Bacon brought to Bruegel's smoldering hell—a rotting, incomprehensible finery," said an eminent art critic.

There was an order to the madness though. She inoculated specific positions on her laminates with fungi that were differentially capable of colonizing the various types of wood. They grew exactly where she wanted them to grow, but their fruiting bodies—eruptions of tiny mushrooms, powdery blisters, or gelatinous toothpaste strands—were raucous, organic explosions of color.

She e-mailed me as soon as she knew she would have her one-woman exhibition. "You utterly must visit. Watch my crowd. As a linguistic anthropologist, I would be curious as to your response. But do me just one favor, love. Arrive late. I'm not really interested in first-comers to this exhibit, more how word-of-mouth affects the opinions of laggards, for whom the material has already been digested and verdicts about the success of the work already established."

▪ ▪ ▪

I did not mean to be as late as I was for the opening. My daughter's babysitter came down with chickenpox the day before I traveled. I postponed my flight to

New York a day while I found someone else to look after her. I spent the flight trying to remember how many times the babysitter had been over to the house before she realized she had chickenpox, and the odds of my child having caught it from her without any of us knowing.

My taxi driver let me off in this hypochondriacal state at the street corner where the warehouse converted for Sarla's exhibition stood. I was as startled as everyone else was at the sight—the building cordoned off with yellow and black tape, then fenced off, then policed. Figures in blue hazmat suits emerging and disappearing through the building's doorway. The incessant clicking of reporters' cameras. The ambulances.

I learned what had happened from the news, same as everyone else. Sarla's last show was an intricate superimposition of glass flutes and inverted, open funnels studded into her laminate landscapes. Overhead, the latest of her microscope-to-video-output rigs was suspended like an interplanetary buggy about to descend. The glass vials wafted invisibly when they were unstoppered.

Thirty people in the immediate vicinity of the gas, including Sarla, died within twenty minutes of the show's opening.

At first, the news reports wept tragedy. That genius bred madness, and madness bred single-mindedness, and single-mindedness birthed absentmindedness, and Sarla must have made a mistake. A neurotoxin concocted accidentally while constructing the magnificent, studio floor-spanning landscape. As more investigative reports were released, the tunes changed. They screamed murder. Bioterrorism. Mental illness. Pathological instability. Sarla's husband Jones, twenty four hours after the first mics were shoved in his face, was found in his study, his wrists slashed, the hard drives of his computers crushed to grit and scattered underfoot.

The cops took my hard drives too, once they found out my connection to Sarla. I kept copies of my files, of course. They could find nothing. The files were leaked and got into the hands of psychiatrists. Art historians. Conspiracy theorists. People have been writing biographies ever since. Some are due out this month.

Do I have a duty to set Sarla's story right? I am unsure. My academic career is founded upon phenomenology and interpretation but I cannot describe the

indefinable. It would be like descending upon a tribe that had no name for itself with a mirror and a dictionary and a mimed dance that described the word "human."

I suppose in admitting this I've already failed her. What could I even say? What I know of Sarla is private, iridescent, occluded. She collected names and accolades and curse words the way elephants collect oxpeckers, flies, and ticks. She was indifferent to such things. I'm left with these magnificent scraps of her presence now, not quite sure how to put them together. Whether I should bury them away.

She once grabbed me by the face while I was working, brought her own face so close I could almost feel the hairs on our noses whisk against each other. She hissed, "Keep your distance from your subject, love, or you'll lose focus." I think she was right.

Susan B.A. Somers-Willett

Memento Mori

Emmett, when I look at you, I experience dis-ease, not just at the wasted
eye or swollen skull—though that too floats in me, elephantesque—
but in knowing the body made trash, your body thrown into a barbed pose
halfway between *Let's not get gotten* and *I don't give a shit* that the river
amplifies. Your mother recognizes you by your earlobes and your father's gold
signet ring. My disease makes its way through spring, folds over
to wrap around my vocal cord like a gift bow. Morphine opens its slow drip
like a glassy throat or a river eddying underneath an oar on a boat
named *Removal*, and floating in it, I remember you. Two men
came in the night, roused you and told you to dress, but you insisted
on socks before shoes and refused to say *Sir*. And so
the wire cut this way through your neck, pulled by eight miles
of Tallahatchie undertow and a cotton gin fan heavier
than my white daughter. In the surgeon's report, a cartoon
of my thyroid spreads a pair of knuckled wings, and the pathologist
has ringed it with ethos: haloes for the tumors we might otherwise
miss. It arrives in the mail marked with the red stain
Confidential across the flap which I imagine is the scar
reticulating across my throat, a swan issuing her heavy
wings to cut the boat's wake. When your funeral
portrait is published in *Jet*, people line up at newsstands to pay
their twenty cents because your mother says
I want the whole world to see what they did to my boy. And
I do. I peel back the black cover of it like
a heavy skin to look. I open the body to its contents
like an envelope; I break its neat seal.

On Cancer

I have decided
that my life is her

dare. One that I shout
fuck against in this

thawing month that weeps
like a wet corner

of bread, stupid
flesh that I am

decided to fail. Who
am I to press a mark

on something that
tired? Instead,

I have decided
the bearded irises

stiffening in my
engagement vase

make a better image
for you: this starred opaline

glass and the plum-
and-yellow strike of their

throats opening.
Let me suggest

their crinoline
gesture in the kitchen

might recall my
dancing, all trick hip

and funk, and not
the calcium stomp

of this other woman
whose name

I have just learned
to pronounce, this

woman who ripples
beside me, sweating

and close, shifting
in her steel-

pin stilettos
and harnessed in

her best
black dress.

Ansel Elkins

Mississippi Delta. Glass in the Field

I've found the woman I will marry, he said.

Had we been playing chess, I would have held the queen
motionless above the board, readying her coy move
into the feudal geometry, the bloodred
square where his knight waited.

But we were only stationed in scarred barstools beneath a haze of blue
neon lights, a veil of cigarette smoke, background noise
of other people's voices.

I've found the woman I will marry.

Had I continued to look at his face,
white queens would have fallen from my mouth.

▪ ▪ ▪

We walked to my front door as evening spread her grand indigo
gown across the town.
This was midsummer. His mouth
made melody of the words *Tennessee*
and *she*. The music
of her name lit the night
like a sparkler.

▪ ▪ ▪

Deep in the heart of the delta: a wide endless ribbon
of highway; a pickup's northbound headlights
break the blackness. Other
than the road that leads to Memphis
there's nothing here
but soybean fields begging to be watered.

I sleep naked, the open window
of my rented bedroom with its torn screen
invites a drift of winged nocturnal
insects. A moth flutters giant blind wings
against my ear. Suddenly
breaking from sleep, I ask aloud,

Who killed all the horses in the field?

Mark Beaver

Addressee Unknown

It was the year that Atlanta police charged Wayne Williams with the murders of two black males, and my father announced he was going to be on TV. It was 1981; I was thirteen, a white kid, in a lily-white suburban neighborhood of brick ranches with flower beds in the yards and bluebirds on the telephone lines—a world away from Atlanta's city limits where, in the last two years, twenty-eight people with skin darker than mine, children mostly, had been counted among the murdered. But Wayne Williams's arrest meant I finally could play outside again.

In May, police had been staking out the Jackson Parkway Bridge when an officer heard a splash in the brown and sludgy waters of the Chattahoochee River below and spied a white station wagon disappearing into the night. Less than a mile down the road, they pulled the driver over. Williams, a twenty-three-year-old black man, told them he was a music promoter; he said he was on his way to audition a singer named Cheryl Johnson. Though Williams claimed she lived in the nearby town of Smyrna in Cobb County, and that their appointment had been longstanding, police found no record of any Cheryl Johnson.

Within a couple of days, two boys fishing south of the bridge found the naked body of Nathaniel Cater, twenty-seven, a homosexual prostitute and drug dealer, floating downriver. Using primarily fiber evidence gathered from Williams's house and car, authorities would link Williams to Cater's death, and later to Jimmy Ray Payne's, twenty-one—both of whom had been labeled "retarded" and thereby were perceived as children; they thus qualified as victims of the Atlanta Child Murders. Williams was now behind bars, awaiting trial. It was autumn.

Even in the dim wattage of my eighth-grade brain, I found it strange that a music promoter who lived with his parents in Dixie Hills and a nonexistent woman named Cheryl Johnson, a singer with no voice, somehow managed to gain more fame and notoriety than anyone I personally knew. But tonight, at eleven o'clock, my father would be changing all that.

When Dad told us he'd be on the late news, Mom and I knew the murders and Dad's appearance were unrelated. But he was secretive about exactly why he was

newsworthy. What was the story? Unless they turned violent, unless they'd gone postal, postmen did not appear on the evening news. Still, I imagined whatever acts of heroism a boy raised on *Starsky and Hutch*, *Six Million Dollar Man*, and *Kung Fu* could conjure. I pictured Dad coming upon a house afire, dropping his mail sack to the sidewalk and sprinting through a blazing door to rescue a baby from rising flames. I saw him wrestling a thief to the ground. I envisioned him pulling a woman from the wreckage of her car right before it exploded.

But when asked which of these scenarios had involved him, Dad was not forthcoming. He seemed to relish the suspense. That October night, standing in our kitchen in his standard-issue uniform, he only grinned and propped his fists on his hips and stood with his shoes wide apart. "You'll just have to wait to find out," he said. "Thousands of people across the whole state of Georgia are gonna see me."

Dad was six-two and over two hundred pounds, with broad shoulders and hands big as catcher's mitts, but on this particular evening he seemed to assume even greater dimensions. His body seemed too big to be contained by the tight walls and low ceilings of our brick ranch on King Arthur Drive. He projected an aura of confidence that suggested he had long been expecting this crowning moment to arrive, and now history was merely unfolding in the manner it had always been fated to occur. He had that look in his eyes possessed by all people convinced their lives are about to experience a seismic shift in importance. As he started unbuttoning his blue uniform shirt with the eagle patch on the shoulder and pulling its tails from his gray trousers with the blue stripe running down the leg, he seemed certain, already, that tonight would draw a line of demarcation in his life.

He crossed the den and patted our nineteen-inch Samsung black-and-white on its plastic side panel and fine-tuned its rabbit ears. "It's a school night," he told me—and for a moment my heart sank at the possibility of missing my dad's burst into fame. "But I reckon you can stay up and watch."

▪ ▪ ▪

Once, I stood in the leaves at the base of a giant oak in our backyard and took a Polaroid of my father in the highest limbs of the tree. The oak had died. Its limbs

overhung our house; so rather than fell the tree all at once, Dad had to cut it down one withered branch at a time. In the photo, Dad must be three stories in the air. He is so far up, he seems to fuse with the sunlight splitting the branches. He is raising his hands over his head as though he's just been crowned heavyweight champion—like Rocky Marciano, maybe, who according to Dad would have beaten that Ali character to a pulp.

When I was about to go away to college—to a gnat-infested south Georgia campus where the only ivy would be the poison variety sprouting on the edge of the intramural softball fields—Dad rescued the photo from the dregs of some murky neglected drawer and presented it to me with something resembling pomp and circumstance. Along the bottom edge, in a scrawl reminiscent of a grade- school boy's, he had provided a handwritten caption: *We Beavers set our goals high.*

It is a verifiable fact that my father once paid good folding money to a company whose advertisement in a magazine claimed to research your family tree and provide a special bonus gift: a genuine coat of arms. Being that my father spawned from stock wherein the only coats were second-hand, it is safe to say this offer of heraldry was as close as he would ever come to blueblood ancestry. He did indeed receive the genealogical research in the mail. The family tree, as I recall, included vague and dubious references to both the French and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. But Dad's main interest was in the family crest anyway. Mom displayed it for a time on the coffee table in our living room, right next to the family Bible, but today its whereabouts are unknown. It has been lost somewhere among the slag of our family's history. I recall little about it, but I can attest to its central, unmistakable feature: a beaver with an enormous tail.

About my father: despite his conviction that tonight would mark the turning point in his life's story, he was not destined for notoriety. His upbringing instead portended absolute anonymity. He was raised hardscrabble on a hundred acres of red Georgia clay during the Depression, the youngest of three boys who stuffed rags inside mittens to make boxing gloves, and then proceeded to beat each other senseless. Dad's first employment was cutting pulp in a sawmill, grunting alongside grown men missing appendages. He must have felt more than slight relief when the US Army drafted him to Korea.

Somewhere there is a picture of him in his uniform, all cornpone and teeth. He looks as though he is incapable of seeing anything beyond the camera's eye and the next fifteen seconds of his life. Dad told only one story about Korea. He claimed that he had once crawled miles with a dagger in his side. He never told how, exactly, the dagger had pierced his body, or where he was crawling. There was no context. The story's only image: a man bellydragging through arctic tundra on the other side of the world, a dagger protruding from his abdomen, blood trailing in his wake. The number of miles he crawled in the snow always changed.

After the war, he returned to US soil with a head full of gruesome images of death and destruction. He met Norma Fay, who became his wife and my mother. Unemployed, with a wife and child depending on him, he studied for the Civil Service exam. He scored high enough to merit an offer from the post office.

Dad never called himself a postman. He told people he worked for the US Postal Service. His preferred term held authority. In rain, sleet, snow, and dark of night, a man who worked for the US Postal Service delivered the mail. The rest of us depended upon him to do his job. Doctors, lawyers, and Indian chiefs could not go about their business unless employees of the US Postal Service took care of theirs.

▪ ▪ ▪

Watching the eleven o'clock news meant Dad was staying up long past his own bedtime, which also meant that since nine o'clock he had been intermittently dozing off. "Four thirty comes early," he was fond of saying, usually around nine, when he was alerting us that he was turning in for the night. Tomorrow morning he would be following his usual routine, devouring two fried eggs and a plate of grits, downing a cup of coffee with cream—"just enough to turn the color"—while he watched some obscure preacher on the religious channel or studied his upcoming Sunday School lesson; then he would polish his shoes to a glossy spit-shine, scrub his dentures, and spend a good five minutes combing his wavy hair and admiring his reflection in the mirror.

As the night moved slow, slow toward eleven o'clock, I woke him every twenty minutes or so. "I'm just resting my eyes," he responded whenever I nudged him.

Finally, it was time for the news.

Dad sat on his recliner; Mom and I took our places on the sofa. On the shelves surrounding us was a veritable library of books, hundreds of them, virtually all pertaining to a single subject: Christianity. Concordances, study guides, and of course every version of the Good Book imaginable. There were automotive manuals, too, and maybe a dust-laden home maintenance text, but only one novel: *Gone with the Wind*. Dad had never read it. Indeed he never would. But he owned it because somewhere he had absorbed the notion that unless his house contained a hardback copy, he would have to forfeit his Southern citizenship. Anyway, as it had been for months, the lead story that night was Wayne Williams. There must have been other stories, too—apartment fires, maybe, or bank robberies. Local politics, or traffic accidents. And of course the requisite weather and sports. But the ongoing run-up to Wayne Williams's trial is all I remember from that night's edition. Though Williams had been charged with the first-degree murders of only two men, all deaths officially associated with the Atlanta child murders had ceased with his arrest. The prosecution was still reviewing evidence for the trial that would commence next winter, in early 1982. Jury selection would likely begin in December. But the fact that new information was scarce did not stop the broadcasts from focusing on the upcoming trial.

The thirty-minute broadcast moved toward its conclusion. The clock hanging in the den now read 11:25. In five minutes the broadcast would be over. There had been no story about Dad. The news anchors told viewers they'd be right back after a commercial break. I don't recall which advertisers filled the commercials during that break, but I do remember spending that time in a panic, fretting the possibility that though Dad had performed some heroic feat, pulled off a miracle, WSB TV Channel 2 had chosen to cut it, because in comparison with child murders and vehicle recalls it was unimportant, routine, expendable. No one cared.

As the commercials ran, I found myself thinking about Cheryl Johnson, the singer whom Wayne Williams said he planned to audition the night he was arrested. Williams had claimed that Johnson gave him her phone number and address; that he drove around nearby Smyrna looking for Spanish Trace Apartments but found nothing; that he had stopped at a liquor store and called her number but it was busy.

He claimed that he had called her again later, but no one answered, and a third time, when someone picked up the phone but told him he had the wrong number. Months had passed since the night of Williams's arrest, and still Cheryl Johnson was missing. I was thirteen, and not prone to recognizing irony in my textbooks much less in the world around me—but it did not escape me that Cheryl Johnson, who did not exist, was much more famous than my postman father. By all appearances, this fact was not going to change.

When the broadcast resumed, the two anchors engaged in a little banter. They thanked viewers for watching, bid them goodnight, and signed off. The closing credits began to roll. A brisk and perky tune started playing. The names of the producers, the reporters, the writers, and the camera operators began to fill the screen. Still nothing about Dad.

On the screen, in the background behind the names, images of everyday Atlantans flashed by. Little clips of footage, each three to five seconds long. In each the subject is waving at the viewer. There's a child, maybe three or four years old, sprinkling her fingers as she careens down a playground slide toward you. The next shot is a man exiting a barbershop with a fresh buzz cut. Then comes a waitress on her cigarette break; two gray-headed men playing checkers in a park; a MARTA bus driver squeezing the steering wheel; two black boys, their arms slung around each other's shoulders. Still another is clearly a homeless man, his grin a gaping hole of missing teeth. He waves clumsily at the camera as though swatting flies.

And then, just as the sign-off is complete and another commercial break is about to begin, there is my father. He's wearing his postal uniform. He's smiling and waving at the camera with those hands that years ago ripped the husks from a million ears of corn and squeezed the udders of as many milking cows. On his right hand he's wearing a rubber thumb sleeve that, now, helps him sort through a million pieces of junk mail.

I glanced at the real thing—at Dad, flesh, blood, and bone, watching with me. He was sitting on the edge of his recliner in his red brick on King Arthur Drive, star-struck. His face was bathed with the glow of the TV screen; his eyes blazed with glory. Instead of lamenting how far he had to go, how much distance still lay

between him and wherever he was headed, he seemed to be celebrating how close he had already come to that nameless destination—how many snow-laden miles he'd already crawled with that dagger in his side.

WSB Channel 2 News was ending their broadcast with clips of stray Atlantans waving goodbye, and one of them was a postman, a burlap strap over his shoulder, the sunlight spotlighting his full head of wavy hair, as though he's on stage cleaning up the set after everyone else has gone home but nevertheless occupying—for three seconds, maybe four—the center of his own universe. He is a man who in this moment believes for all the world he's witnessing the birth of his very own star.

Maggie Shipstead

The Orchard

Jennings has not come to her bed in eight days, not since the dog died. He begged her to bury the dog, weeping while she looked out the window at the orange trees, eight hundred acres of dark leaves and bright fruit. She could see the roof of the building where the men live. She would ask Petr to bury the dog for her.

"I don't want any of the men to do it," Jennings said. "You knew him. Alfonso shouldn't be buried by a stranger." He took her chin in his fingers and tilted her face down at his. "I'm telling you to bury him."

So Sophia rolled the stiff Labrador off his cushion and onto a sheet that she dragged down the hall and out to the porch. She pushed him off the edge and into a wheelbarrow that she wrestled into the yard. The horse stood under a tree with crow-filled branches. She stuck her shovel in the ground. The crows rose up, flapping, and settled on the roof. "Hot," they said. "Hot." The afternoon faded to evening while she sweated and dug. When the dog was a square patch of new ground, she walked back and forth over him, tamping down the earth.

Since then Jennings has not come to her bed, and he has only left his study for the bathroom. He sleeps on a leather sofa beneath windows that look over the orchard. Every afternoon he soaks his clothes and his chair with sweat, and every night he dries in the window breeze. Salty white tidal rings make halos on the chair's upholstery. He has stained a dark shadow on the couch. He smells like old man, old armpits, mildewing crotch, unwashed clothes. If he came to her now, she would turn her face into the part of her pillow that smells like Petr and hold her breath.

While she is resting on the porch, a dust cloud comes up the road and turns into a car. A man steps out. In the fading light and kicked-up dust, everything is the color of ash except the tooth of white handkerchief sticking from the pocket of his ash-colored suit. He takes off his hat.

"Good evening. Mr. Jennings is expecting me. Where might I find him?"

She is wearing rubber boots, ready to go out and feed the horse, but she steps out of these and leads the stranger through the house. His breathing is close behind her. Once she imagines he is reaching out to touch the knot of her

apron, but when she looks back, his hands are in his pockets. She taps with one knuckle on the study door.

"I'm Mr. Blackmore," the man whispers. She holds his gaze. "Quiet, aren't you?" he says. Then, loudly: "It's Mr. Blackmore."

"Come in," Jennings says.

She opens the door. The man winks at her as he passes.

In the barn, she scoops a coffee can full of grain and shakes it until the horse comes walking up the hill. She dumps the grain in a bucket, listens to him snuffle for it, lip it up and grind it in the back of his long mouth. She pulls a prickly green flake of alfalfa from a bale and tosses it into his stall. From the barn she can see out over the orchard. In the distance the truck is heading in for the night, sending up more dust, bringing the men to their bunkhouse. Petr is the only one who isn't Mexican. He is from Poland, he says. During the war, Jennings showed her different countries on the globe in his study, but she can't remember which blotch is Poland, which tiny word. Before Alfonso died she would go into the study and turn the globe slowly around, trying to remember, wanting to put her fingertip on his country. During the war Jennings listened to the radio every night, clipped voices naming unfamiliar places. She knows it snows in Poland. Petr says he escaped from a terrible place by clinging to the underside of a train. The muscles in his arms are as big as eggplants.

"I am very good at running and hiding," he said to her in the dark. "After some long time I hide on a ship that comes here—I mean to this country, to New York—and then I ride across this country on a train. But that time I ride on top and not under." He laughed. She has only seen one train in her life, when her mother was sick and Jennings took her for a long drive, just her. The train she saw was very long and slid through the desert like a snake. Petr tells her stories while they lie together. Sometimes his voice drops low and he uses Polish words, more and more until she can't understand anything and has to pinch him to remind him she is still there.

Beyond the barn is a small house with dirty windows and only two rooms, where Sophia used to live with her mother. Jennings offered the house to Petr, but Petr chose to live with the Mexicans. She met Petr when she was walking in the

orchard. He was so tall, like a giant, and she had followed him at a distance until he turned and said, "Hello, shadow." She stood against a tree, quaking, and he came close and said, "That tree is not so big to hide you." He asked who she was, and she wrote her name in the dirt.

Every evening after that she found him in the orchard. He was big but very quiet, and he would creep up on her, tickling the back of her neck with a crow's feather. He talked and talked, telling her stories about this and that, the orchard and Poland. He did not seem to mind that she said nothing. "Let's go to the house, the small house," he said as they lay in the dust under the early stars. "We can be there in peace. No? What is this face, Sophia?" She shook her head, back and forth, back and forth, feeling the grit working into her scalp. Her mother had died in that house. "Okay. Stop. Stop, please. We don't need the house."

Once he did not come to the orchard for three days. When he did return, he looked angry, and he picked bark from a tree and told her he had come to her window at night and had heard Jennings with her. "You let the old man touch you, Sophia? Maybe I had wrong idea about you. You don't talk, so I can't know what you think. Do you love that old man? Then why are you letting him touch you? How can you?" She stood and cried, holding her hands up in the air. She sat on the ground and grabbed handfuls of earth and pebbles. Petr sat down beside her and took her wrists. He pulled her into his lap and rocked her.

She walks past the house and into the orchard where the air is cooler. Dusty smells burned by the sun from the leaves and fruit hang in the air. Since the dog Alfonso died and Jennings has not been coming to her, Petr has come earlier and earlier, crouching outside the study until he hears the old man snoring and then pulling himself through her open window with his enormous arms. Petr smells like the orchard. She steps close to a tree and puts her hands on its trunk and her nose against its bark. Breathing in, she is in the orchard, and she is also with Petr. She stays by the tree until she can't smell it anymore. As she walks on, she wraps her arms around herself, hands on her shoulder blades. The tip of her nose is raw from the bark. As a child she had wished to be an orange tree and stood with them for hours. But she could never be still enough, and it troubled her that wherever she stood she ruined the symmetry of the rows.

Above her, someone says, "Night." A crow in a tree. She moves closer. His feet are as gray and knobby as the branch where he sits, and his feathers blend into the dark leaves. His round eye glints. Petr doesn't like the birds. "They eat the dead," he says. She knows this. She has seen them eating dead things many times. She does not mind. Better the dead are eaten than left to rot.

The crow bobs his head and steps along the branch. "Night," he says, lifting a wing. "Night," says someone else. She turns around, and there is another crow several rows over picking at the body of something small and dead. She turns back to the first bird. He opens his beak but says nothing. She reaches up, wanting to touch him, but he springs up out of the tree. The other crow leaves the dead thing and takes flight too. They circle away, flashing one after the other across the darkening channel of sky between the rows of trees. She goes to inspect the dead thing and sees that it is a rabbit with no eyes. Purple and white mush shows through its bare ribs.

▪ ▪ ▪

As she walks back to the house, Mr. Blackmore jogs down the steps and roars away, his car turning back into a cloud of dust. She goes into the house and through the unlit rooms to Jennings's study. Jennings is sitting on his sofa with his head flopped back, gazing at the ceiling. His neck looks broken. A lamp with a green shade lights up the loose papers on his desk. The room is still hot, though the air coming through the windows has begun to cool. A breeze lifts the edges of the papers. Jennings hums to himself, something he has not done since Alfonso's death. His head rolls sideways. His eyes look dark in the light. "Sophia," he says. "Off to bed?" Some of his hair, which has grown long around the bald, liver-spotted top of his head, sticks to the sofa like spider silk. He smiles at her. "Night."

She washes quickly and opens her window. She leans out. In the distance there is a glow from the bunkhouse, and she can see a faint light in the orange trees beyond the end of the house that means the light is still on in Jennings's study. In her room the only furniture is a narrow bed and a plain oak wardrobe. There is a brick fireplace Jennings does not allow her to use, even in winter when she is too

cold to sleep. Nothing hangs on her walls except a crucifix and a mirror so small she must stand back from it to see her whole face.

Not long after she has turned out the light, Petr's shape fills the window, blocking the stars. "I do not check the old man tonight," he says. He kisses her cheek and ear. His hand is on her hip, pulling at her. "I do not want to wait. He will not come."

She taps at his shoulder quickly, like a woodpecker. She is thinking about how Jennings was humming.

"He will cry all night for the dog. If he comes, I will say, 'No more, old man. Sophia is mine. Sophia needs a young man.' And I will pick him up, and I will throw him out the window."

His hand is on her breast, and the smell of oranges is in her nose. He has pulled up her nightgown and pushed inside her when she hears Jennings sniffling and shuffling his way down the hall. Petr's face is against her neck. She strikes at his back with the blades of both hands, grabs him by the ears and hisses at him, pointing in the dark at the door. Petr is off her in an instant. She pulls down her nightgown. The door opens, but no light enters the room. Jennings has left the hallway dark. She tries to slow her breathing. She keeps her eyes closed. She can smell the old man. Petr must be under the bed. He says he is good at hiding. The old man sniffles. He prods her over, making room for himself. The bed groans. Somewhere between his study and her door he has shed his clothes, and he is bare and sticky. As he kisses her, the brine of his tears and sweat is rubbed into her face and onto her lips. He prefers her to lie still, with her hands at her sides. He moves her this way and that, positioning her legs, her head, squeezing her stomach. Before Petr, she did not know that there was any other way. She thought that all men butted at women like hungry foals. She did not know it was strange for a man to finish so quickly, especially an old man. Petr asked her once how Jennings did it, and she had acted it out for him, pushing at him and then miming the old man's sudden spasm, the way his feet kicked. She laughed desperately, weeping. Petr had laughed, too, but then he sat on her windowsill smoking a cigarette. He jumped off and went back through the orchard without saying goodnight.

While Jennings works on her, she thinks of Petr and tries to draw his scent from the pillow, but Jennings nudges her left thigh to one side with his knee, his

sour breath in her nostrils. She tries to turn her face, but Jennings holds her head in place. "Alfonso," he whimpers. "Alfonso is dead."

She wonders how he can do it to her while his brain is full of the dog's square, black head, his waddling gait, his fat tail. She thinks of Petr under the bed. She sees him clinging to the frame, hearing the tick-tock of a train while an endless ribbon of floor tiles slides by below him. A muscle cramps, and she shifts her hips. "Hold still," Jennings says. He bends to his work, and after he is done, he sighs and wipes his face on her pillow.

Into her shoulder he says, "I have two great sadnesses today, Sophia." He has not pulled out of her yet, and she is dry and itching to be rid of him. He waits, and she feels him shrinking. "Alfonso is dead, and I have sold the orchard." As he speaks, he settles his weight more heavily onto her, and her groin and ribs ache. "Yes," he says. "I sold it. Well, I almost sold it. I couldn't quite do it. I couldn't sign the paper. I lifted up the pen, and I put it down again. And I lifted it up, and I put it down. And finally I said, 'Sir, I will sell you this ranch, but my hand doesn't want to sign the papers today. If you'll give me one or two more days, I think my hand will be ready to sign then. It just needs to get used to the idea.'" His lips are very close to her ear, and his words are little gusts of humid air.

"I'm too old. It's too much work. I've taken what I can from this place and now I want to live quietly by the sea. I've been thinking about the sea. I have dreams about it. Now that Alfonso is gone, there's nothing to keep me here. Would you like to live at the sea, Sophia?"

She shakes her head.

"No? Are you an ungrateful girl?"

She shakes her head.

"I know you're not." He raises himself onto his elbow and strokes her face with his thumb, too hard, just to the side of her left eye. "They're going to tear this place down and build houses. Instead of orange trees, houses. Think of all the people who will live here as we have but with all the modern amenities. New appliances. Grass lawns. Paved roads. Advanced irrigation systems. The man—Blackmore—laughed at what we have."

She thinks of the horse and what will happen to him and his tree. She sees rows of houses where there are rows of trees, and she knows that Petr will leave too. She

shakes her head, and Jennings says, "Stop it." She hears that she is making a sound and that the bed is rattling. He grasps her jaw with one hand and pushes upwards, mashing her lips and cheeks into a pinched duck bill. She makes a loud sound.

Jennings is lifted off her in the dark. She hears bare feet scuffling on tile. After the door bumps once against the wall, the room is quiet. Sophia turns on the lamp. Petr has one hand over Jennings's mouth and holds Jennings's hands behind his back with the other. Petr's face is serious, but his body is relaxed, as though it costs him no effort to hold the old man. Jennings's feet scrabble against the floor, and his eyes roll around the room. A wisp of his long hair is caught in a loop under Petr's hand. Sophia has never seen him in the light without his clothes. She stares at the nipples that point at the ground, the nubby bundle in its cotton-wool nest beneath his sagging belly, the hairless, putty-colored thighs. Petr stands behind him like a naked boulder.

She gets up, pulling at her nightgown. The smells of the men mix together, sweetness and foulness pickled in sweat. Petr pulls Jennings's head back, exposing loose skin and gray stubble over stretched cords and tubes. She saw a pig slaughtered once, back when Jennings kept pigs. Jennings had held her by the shoulders while a Mexican cut open the creature's throat. When her mother found out, she had shouted, pointing in Jennings's face, but he had laughed and grasped her pointing hand in his own, closing her fingers in his fist.

Jennings stops moving his feet and sags into a bow shape, his wrinkled stomach bulging. Petr lowers him to his knees. Sophia picks up the poker from where it leans against the fireplace. She holds it with both hands, near the pointed end, and steps closer to Jennings, pointing the heavy knob of the handle at him. She raises her arms. His eyes follow the poker up to the ceiling, and his Adam's apple jumps in his throat.

"Sophia, no," Petr says gently. "I have seen enough of killing. We will run away."

She is aware of the sound of her own breath. Her chest is hopping, and she feels like a rabbit crossed by the shadow of a hawk, body frozen around its wild heart. Tears fill the wrinkles at the corners of Jennings's eyes. She knows suddenly that she hates him. As he opens his eyes wide, she lifts the poker over her head and brings it down once. She strikes his shoulder because Petr has pulled him to the side. "Do not!" Petr shouts. She pauses. The poker droops in her hand. There

is a sound from beyond the doorway, some night rustle. Petr looks, and she is too fast for him. The handle arcs down onto Jennings's forehead. The old man falls to the ground, and she strikes him again before Petr catches her arm and takes the poker. Then she kicks at Jennings's face until Petr pulls her away. "Stop it," he says. "Look what you have done."

Jennings does not move. One of his eyes looks off to the side; the other looks down at the tiles. A clear fluid runs from his nose. Lines of blood follow the contour of the new indentation in his forehead. Petr bends and touches the old man's neck. "He is still alive," he says, "but maybe that is not good." He rolls Jennings onto his back. Blood trickles through his white hair and drips onto the tile.

Sophia makes a frantic gesture with her hands, begging him.

"What can I do? You have killed him. He suffers." Petr takes her arm hard, like Jennings. "Understand. You have killed him. Everything is different now."

Petr, still naked, carries Jennings to the bathroom. When he has Jennings curled in the tub with his legs beneath him, he takes the old man's head between his enormous hands and then brings it down hard on the faucet in the spot where Sophia struck it with the poker. There is a sound like a gourd breaking.

When she wakes in the morning, Petr is gone. She listens to the morning birds. In her nightgown she walks down the hall to Jennings's study. The door is open. He is not there, weeping on the couch for Alfonso. There is only the empty chair with the white rings of salt. She goes to his bedroom. His bed is neatly made. She made it herself the day Alfonso died. She stands outside the door to his bathroom.

▪ ▪ ▪

The nun arrives last. From the kitchen window, Sophia sees the black car come up the road. A young woman in a plain black dress climbs out from behind the wheel and opens the back door for a mass of black cloth that emerges, flapping, into the breeze. At the center of the black is a very pale face.

The police, when they had come, after Sophia scrubbed the blood from her room and walked in her nightgown to the building where the men lived and got the one with the best English to come back to the house and call them, were the

same two officers who came when her mother died. When she saw them, she remembered them standing over her mother. Her mother died in bed, her lips almost purple in her pale face, her eyes black, the upcurved fingers of each hand making five white goosebumps in the sheet.

Petr is running and hiding and will never be found. She knows the other workers will be of no help to the police. I don't know, they will say, he was a gringo, a big one. The Mexican who made the phone call had stood wide-eyed with the receiver pressed into his cheek and said, "Hello. Is dead man."

She had thought they would just take Jennings away like they had taken away her mother, but they examined everything in the bathroom, hovering over Jennings, picking at him. She stood in the doorway. One policeman leaned into her. His eyes were dark and close. Jennings and the other policeman watched her from the floor. She felt all their eyes spinning threads around her like spiders working on a fly.

"Who did this?" the policeman asked.

She drew the shape of a man in the air, a tall man.

▪ ▪ ▪

The nun strides up the steps and into the house without knocking. As she passes the kitchen she nods at Sophia. The young woman in the black dress sticks a pointy face through the door and nods too. The lawyers have been in the study all morning with three other men, one of whom is Mr. Blackmore in his gray suit and white handkerchief. Mr. Blackmore had not winked at her when he arrived. Sophia watches down the hall as the nun goes directly to the study and enters without knocking. Out the kitchen window the horse is standing beneath the tree. A crow settles on the fence and looks at her. It opens and closes its beak, but no sound comes out.

When the shadow of the house has fallen over the tree, Sophia squeezes lemons for lemonade, and when she turns from the sink to retrieve the sugar, the nun is standing at the other end of the kitchen watching her. Her face is like Jennings's face, but she is taller and very thin.

"He left it to you." The nun sounds interested, amused, but her eyes are hard. "My brother. He left you everything. The house, the barn, the orchard. It's yours."

Sophia shakes her head.

The nun nods. "I wouldn't have thought so either," she says, "but he did."

Sophia spoons sugar into the lemonade and stirs. She pours some into a glass for the nun.

"How do I know you're not trying to poison me?"

Why would I want to poison you, Sophia signs, but the nun does not understand. Only Jennings and her mother understand. The doctor had come when she was very small. He shined a light down her throat while she looked up at the ceiling and shook his head.

The nun winks one hard eye. "I'm only teasing." She drinks deeply, and when she sets the glass down, she says, "Sophia, do you understand what I'm saying? This is your house. Those are your oranges. Everything here belongs to you."

Sophia shakes her head.

"I don't know why. I'll tell you that he knew I didn't like him, and that's probably why he didn't leave it to me. I'm not upset. Don't worry."

The nun is inspecting the view from the window, her black bulk making a void against the yellow evening outside. A hand grabs Sophia's arm and spins her around. Mr. Blackmore's face is very close to hers. "You know he sold it to me," he says. "You know he did. You saw me. Go tell them."

Sophia looks over her shoulder at the nun, who shrugs and sips the lemonade. Mr. Blackmore's hand on her arm reminds her of Jennings. She shakes her head.

"I need this deal," he says. "Tell them it's true."

She shakes her head.

"You bitch. You stupid spic bitch." A thread of his saliva lands on her face. "Go to hell." Two other men come into the room and take him by the arms.

"Come on, Charlie," one says, pulling him away. "It's all over."

Sophia wipes her face. Her fingers come away damp with his spit. She moves toward the sink but stops when the nun does not shift from her spot there.

"He was here before, wasn't he?" asks the nun.

Sophia shrugs.

"Have it your way." The nun slides away from the sink. "What a day we're having. I'm curious about you, Sophia, if you don't mind my saying so. I can't imagine your life very well, and imagining the lives of others is a strength of mine. How do you feel now that he's dead?"

Sophia turns to the window to avoid the face that is so much like Jennings's. Outside, the crow has returned, but when she looks at him, he flies off again. She wants to tell the nun that the crows have stopped speaking to her, but her mother had told her not to talk about the crows and what they say. They only say ordinary things, but people would not understand.

A tapping from the doorway. It is the young woman in the black dress. She points at Sophia and then in the direction of Jennings's study.

"They would like to see you," the nun says. Then, reading the question on Sophia's face: "Ruth has taken a vow of silence. She can speak, but she doesn't."

Sophia has never met another silent person. She pulls at Ruth with her eyes, wanting to turn her over and over like a rock. Ruth frowns at her.

One lawyer is sitting behind Jennings's desk, and the other is lying on the sofa with a handkerchief spread over his forehead. The one on the couch lurches up and gestures towards Jennings's chair. Sophia sits inside the white halo of Jennings's sweat. The man on the couch introduces himself as Mr. Dubbins, and the man at the desk is Mr. Janks.

"So Black Bart told you?" Mr. Dubbins asks.

"Sister Bartholomew," says Mr. Janks over steepled fingers.

"The nun," says Mr. Dubbins. "She told you?"

Sophia nods.

Mr. Dubbins smoothes his handkerchief over the arm of the couch. "I'm sure he had his reasons," he says. "He had Mr. Janks draw up a new will two months ago and asked him not to tell me." He casts a wounded look at Mr. Janks, who parts his hands and shrugs his shoulders. "Mr. Blackmore is plenty unhappy that Mr. Jennings kicked the bucket when he did," Mr. Dubbins continues. "He claims that Mr. Jennings had agreed to sell him the land. But it was just a handshake deal. No documentation. So the will stands, but I'll be honest with you, Sophia. I told Black Bart she ought to contest the will."

"Do you know what 'contest' means?" asks Mr. Janks.

"It means I told her I thought she should challenge the will in court and try to get what's rightfully hers," Mr. Dubbins says. "Okay? But she said no. She said she was sure you'd earned it, whatever that means, and that she doesn't have any use for it anyway, on account of being a nun. She seems to like you." He glances at Mr. Janks, who nods. "So it's your lucky day."

Sophia stares at the globe.

"Wouldn't you say that? That it's your lucky day?" Mr. Dubbins leans forward. She catches a whiff of Jennings from the chair. She shrugs.

Mr. Dubbins stands and begins a circuit of the room, hands behind his back. The smell of Jennings is rising out of the chair and settling on Sophia's skin. She itches to move. Mr. Dubbins suddenly wheels around and comes toward her. "Was Mr. Jennings kind to you?"

"Lay off the theatrics, Desmond," says Mr. Janks.

"Why, Sophia, I'm only inquiring about your well-being," Mr. Dubbins says as if Sophia had spoken and not Mr. Janks. "I would like to know that Mr. Jennings was kind to you."

She nods.

"I'm sorry to ask, but were you lovers?" He is pushing the globe into a slow rotation with his index finger. The brown blotches spin past, Poland somewhere among them. She is about to nod, not knowing what else to do, when Jennings's smell enters her nostrils again and, without thinking, she blows it fiercely out. She shakes her head.

Mr. Janks speaks. "This man you suggested to the police might have killed Mr. Jennings. The laborer. Was he your lover?" He stares at her and tilts his head to one side. The evening gloom flows in through the windows, obscuring the oil painting of Alfonso, the shadow of Jennings on the leather couch, the orange trees outside. The darkness pulls at her, smells like Jennings, threatens to suffocate her. The men in their charcoal suits are murky, like two animals moving around a cave. "Well?" asks Mr. Janks.

Sophia shakes her head. The lawyers sigh and rub their faces, two weary men in the light of the green-shaded desk lamp that Mr. Janks switches on. Mr. Janks

asks a few more questions; Mr. Dubbins says they will follow the lead of the police and call the death an accident. She prints her name for them on papers they thrust at her. The pen feels awkward in her hand. Except for tracing her name in the dirt for Petr, she hasn't written it in years, not since before her mother died. By the last page, she has rediscovered the knack.

▪ ▪ ▪

She feeds the horse and stands in the barn watching the truck come in from the orchard. Her orchard. She switches on all the lights in the house and sits, for the first time, behind Jennings's desk. From this spot the room looks different. She studies the painting of Alfonso and the shelves of books and her reflection in the windows. She opens his drawers and finds mostly papers until at the back of one drawer she finds her mother's tortoiseshell combs. The light glows red through them, like the sun through her eyelids. Sophia had wanted her mother to be buried with the combs, but Jennings said he didn't know where they were. She runs one through her hair until all the tangles are gone. In the long middle drawer she finds Jennings's pen and unscrews its top. On the thick brown paper of his blotter she writes her name over and over again in a straight column from top to bottom.

▪ ▪ ▪

In the morning the nun's car comes up the road. The pointy-faced young woman knocks on the door. She gestures, once, toward the car.

Sophia has spent the morning walking through the house and moving things around. She is wearing her best dress even though it is too small, the dress she used to wear to church with her mother. Sophia sees that the girl's dress, though black and very plain, is made of heavy, fine-looking cloth. She and this girl might be about the same age. The girl is looking at Sophia's bare feet.

Sophia's church shoes stand side by side in the bottom of her wardrobe. They are small, but she can wear them. She repositions the tortoiseshell combs in her hair.

In the car, the nun leans back into the corner of the seat and studies Sophia. "Your church dress?" she asks. "No wonder nobody wants to go to church anymore." The girl in the black dress snorts as she starts the car, and the nun says, "Ruth, if you're going to eavesdrop, at least pretend you're not."

The rearview mirror is a slice of Ruth's forehead, wisps of her hair, a piece of sky.

"Since the end of the war people are praying less. God's probably gone on vacation." The nun turns her long, white face on Sophia. "That's a dreadful dress, if you want my opinion. You should have something decent to wear. Do you know my brother left you money as well as the land? Tell me, did you kill my brother?"

Ruth's eyes appear in the mirror, looking at Sophia. Jennings is the pig with its throat cut. Jennings is under a sheet with his upcurled fingers making ten goosebumps. Jennings is the rabbit with no eyes. Jennings is lying in his bathtub with his head bashed in.

Sophia shakes her head.

Smoothly, as though the question had been of no importance, the nun asks, "Do you have any idea what you want to do? With the money? Or in general? A house somewhere else? A car, maybe? Send yourself somewhere to find a husband?"

All she wants is to stay at the orchard. Jennings has never paid her. She has never purchased anything, though she has gone to stores with Jennings and also seen him give money to the men who come to the house with catalogs or with suitcases full of medicines in brown bottles. A man came to the house once selling things for ladies, lipsticks and powders that Sophia's mother had grasped at like Alfonso going after gophers, but Jennings sent the man away.

The nun fumbles in her robes and comes out with a silver box. She takes a cigarette from it that she lights and draws from, exhaling a long curl of smoke. "At the very least you'll need money to keep the orchard running. You'll have to pay the workers. What about school? Do you want to go to school? You must want something. What will make you happy? What will you do? Bear in mind that my brother won't be there for you to pick up after. Won't you be terribly lonely?"

Sophia looks out the window.

"You are a very strange girl. This is a strange bequest you've been given. My brother had strange ideas about guilt. Well, I didn't want to be a nun, but I've found a way to go about it that suits me."

They come into town and pass through it without slowing. "We're going to San Diego," says the nun. "We'll make a day of it."

▪ ▪ ▪

The city seems immense to Sophia. They crest a hill, and there is the city and what must be the ocean beyond it. That there can be enough people to fill all the buildings is impossible to believe. The nun leaves Ruth with the car and steers Sophia into a store with a pink facade. From a saleswoman wearing an enamel pin in the shape of a lily they buy a pile of dresses and also suits, shoes, and other things like hats and stockings and a wristwatch. The nun signs a slip of paper. Three men carry the packages to the car and stand on the curb waving white-gloved hands. Sophia thinks they will return to the orchard, but Ruth turns the car toward the water. The nun smokes and looks out the window. The buildings become smaller and closer together. They drive down a hill, and the ocean disappears, blocked by stucco walls, shingled roofs. Sophia sees a tile roof that is red like the roof of the orchard house but steeper. Its corners curl up and are decorated with carved fish. Dark-eyed men squat in doorways. Occasionally Chinese workers had come to the orchard, but Jennings always turned them away. The nun, tucked into her cloud of smoke, watches it all with her hard eyes.

At the end of a narrow and dirty street, Ruth parks the car, and they all get out. The nun leads them down an alley to where a red lantern hangs from the eaves. Ruth knocks on a narrow door. A small window opens, and eyes stare at them before an old man opens the door. His head is bald and shiny, very pale, and his cheeks are freckled with warts. He smiles as he bows and bobs back up, and his teeth are grey like Jennings's. He wears a suit and tie. The nun speaks to him in a language Sophia does not know, and he nods, still smiling, and beckons them down a dim hallway. The air is hazy and sweet-smelling.

"I spent some time in the East before the war," the nun says, "doing mission work. I developed a taste for smoke. There aren't many places like this left. A few in San Francisco, thankfully. Fortunately I've never allowed myself to become dependent on it—I am very strong willed, Sophia, like my brother."

The old man draws back a curtain and waves them into a small, hot room with no windows. There are two thin mats on the floor and a chair in the corner where Ruth sits and folds her hands in her lap. An oil lamp flickers under a red shade. The nun sits on one mat and gestures to the other. "Sit," she says. "Mr. Song will be back soon. I'd forgotten about his oil lamps—wonderful. For me, the nostalgia is half the fun."

The old man pushes back through the curtain with two metal trays. He sets one beside the nun and one beside Sophia before he backs, bowing, out of the room. "Now," says the nun, "we mourn my brother." Pushing back her long sleeves, she exposes spectral wrists and, striking a long match, lights a brass lamp with a glass chimney that sits on Sophia's tray. From her tray she lifts a metal box with two fingers and opens its hinged lid. There is a dark, sticky substance inside that she stirs with a metal stick, twisting it around and around until a bead of the stuff has accumulated on the tip. She holds the bead over the lamp's flame, turning it. The substance blackens. "Lie on your side," she commands Sophia. Sophia reclines, resting her head on a hard, triangular pillow. The nun lifts a pipe from Sophia's tray and hands it to her. With a rapid jab, she dislodges the bead from the end of the metal stick into the bowl of the pipe, which she guides over the flame. "Breathe in," she says.

Sophia does. The smoke is hot and sweet. She feels a distant lightness. In the chair, Ruth sits with her eyes closed. The nun notices her glance.

"None for Ruth," she says. "Who would watch over me while I'm in Xanadu? Breathe it in."

In the stifling room, with the nun's dark shape hovering over her and Ruth so still in the corner, Sophia thinks of the lawyers in Jennings's gloomy den. Dreaminess seeps into the memory. The red light of this room is warm and benevolent. The nun is spinning another dark blob on the metal stick. Ruth is moving through the smoke and the red light, and now Ruth is spinning the metal stick and the nun is reclining, her white face staring into Sophia's. Ruth is spinning the metal stick, and Sophia is walking through the orchard. She is breathing in Petr's smell. Ruth's clasped hands are in the chair, and the nun is on her side like a great sleeping bat, Jennings's face staring over the pipe, his eyes glittering.

"Tell me," says the bat, "did you kill my brother?"

Sophia sees oranges hanging from the ceiling of the room in a sky of dark leaves. She shakes her head.

"What are you afraid of?" Jennings asks. He wasn't afraid of killing. Remember the pig. But he was afraid. Remember his eyes following the poker. I have seen enough killing, Petr said. "You don't need to be afraid. Not of me."

A breeze ripples the orange leaves. A mourning dove calls. Another breeze comes and turns the leaves into the feathers of crows. A dark shape moves. Maybe it is Petr. Sophia breathes in, tasting the sweetness of oranges. Ruth is beside the bat now and has the bat's long white feet in her hands. From the ceiling, the crows are speaking. Sophia is happy they have broken their silence.

"I had to bring you here," the crows say, "so I could tell you that my brother killed your mother. I didn't know what he was going to do with it. To my great shame, I thought he would smoke it. He put it in slices of oranges, a little bit in each slice, and she ate them all. I've heard it's a peaceful way to die, at least at the end."

Sophia hears the words, but they sail over her like clouds. As the last one passes, its shadow drifting over her, she thinks she should chase them, run them down and puzzle out what the crows mean. All the words, now off in the distance, floating over rows of trees, turning back into dust, seem important. But she is too sleepy, too fixed to one spot to go after them.

"You just go slower and slower until you stop. Unlike how my brother went. Did you kill him?"

Sophia shakes her head.

"I wonder if you knew you were avenging your mother. I'm sorry about your mother, Sophia. Did you kill my brother?"

Sophia closes her eyes. She must run and hide, but she is too sleepy. "You did," the crows say, spreading their wings of leaves, blinking their orange eyes. "You did. But let us forgive each other. Let us confess and forgive."

Sophia sees stars through an open window. She waits for Petr. A crow perches on the windowsill. "Confess," it says. "Confess."

She wraps her silence around herself. She will never confess, never forgive. If she was meant to confess, she would have been given a voice. The crow has long,

white feet and Jennings's face. "Confess," it says. She swings the poker at it, but it flies away. She falls into darkness, dreams she is on a train.

▪ ▪ ▪

When she wakes, she is in her bed, and sunlight is coming through her window. Her head aches. The house is silent; the orchard is silent. The new clothes are in her wardrobe, but she puts on an old dress, one that had belonged to her mother. Jennings killed her mother. She doesn't remember when she learned this. It feels like something she has always known. She goes out to feed the horse, rattles his grain in a coffee can. The crows in the tree watch but say nothing.

Jonathan Beer

Kent Dorn: Irreality and America

America is a nation created by dreams, a culture assembled by the ideas of its people. A vision of a more desirable place in the world and an aptitude for reinvention has constructed a country where a national identity did not previously exist. A passage to the East, the fabled city of El Dorado, the fountain of youth, the California Gold Rush, and countless dreams of land, prosperity, and success all contributed to this mythos, and the nation has come to thrive on the resulting irreality found between dreams and their imperfect realization. Our self-made culture, built from pieces of so many other civilizations and peoples reflects our aptitude for revision. Today, an obsession with tailoring our histories and identities permeates the American consciousness; we select aspects of ourselves we wish to present, and rehang our own image.

Kent Dorn's work is born from that distinctly American irreality. Scenes of long-haired, plaid-wearing figures are staged in forests that seem familiar but avoid specificity—they are more like the visions of mystic painter Charles Burchfield than the photographer Ansel Adams. The eerie rivers and lakes that divide Dorn's dreamlike paintings cut through a territory that belongs to 1970s cult horror films rather than a geographic location. Even the characters themselves are uncertain of their origin and existence. They are lost in what should be an idyllic natural world yet their ghostly forms are always in danger of fading into the environment. Their destiny is uncertain. In *Down by the River* (2010), numerous figures assert their existence in thickly painted forms and face away from the viewer, staring into the same specter of a sun that haunts all of Dorn's images, searching for an unknown desire on the far bank of an ethereal lake. In some works, they have already disappeared. In *Dead End (Water's Edge)* (2010), we see a car still with its luggage strapped to the top. The belongings of its former occupants lie on the riverbank as a lone campfire blazes, yet the figures are mysteriously absent, vanished into thin air.

There is a clear sense of selection in Dorn's images; the characters and landscape are delicately arranged, placed like characters on a stage. They maintain independence from one another in how they are painted: thin washes create an illustrative façade that draws you in, not unlike a theater set or advertisement backdrop. We glide through his worlds until we are snagged on the visceral, thick, and often erratic paint application that bars us from slipping into the idyllic dream. It's as if the artist knows the dangers of his own irreality, and protects us from joining his characters on their indeterminate trance-like quests, and from the dark lakes and poison flora that might ensnare our minds.

Dorn invites this theatricality into his oeuvre. Works like *Fall* (2010) provide an entrance point into the narrative aspects of his work. One can gaze directly into this fallen man, dramatically poised after an imaginary plunge. One cannot help but picture oneself in his position; simultaneously one is part of the manufactured fantasy (or nightmare) but also tied to reality with the thickness of his paint. The paintings of Kent Dorn are paradoxical American visualizations, exclaiming their existence as valid while acknowledging the shallowness of their material nature. Dorn shines in his ability to makes us believe in a world so fragile. We identify with his figures as they navigate a world of dreams on their search for something beyond comprehension. They are examples of a sublime American vision that is as beautiful as it is eerie, one that invites us to suspend reality and get lost in search of a dream.

The Work of KENT DORN

Dead End (Water's Edge), 2011 90
45" x 69"– Mixed media on canvas

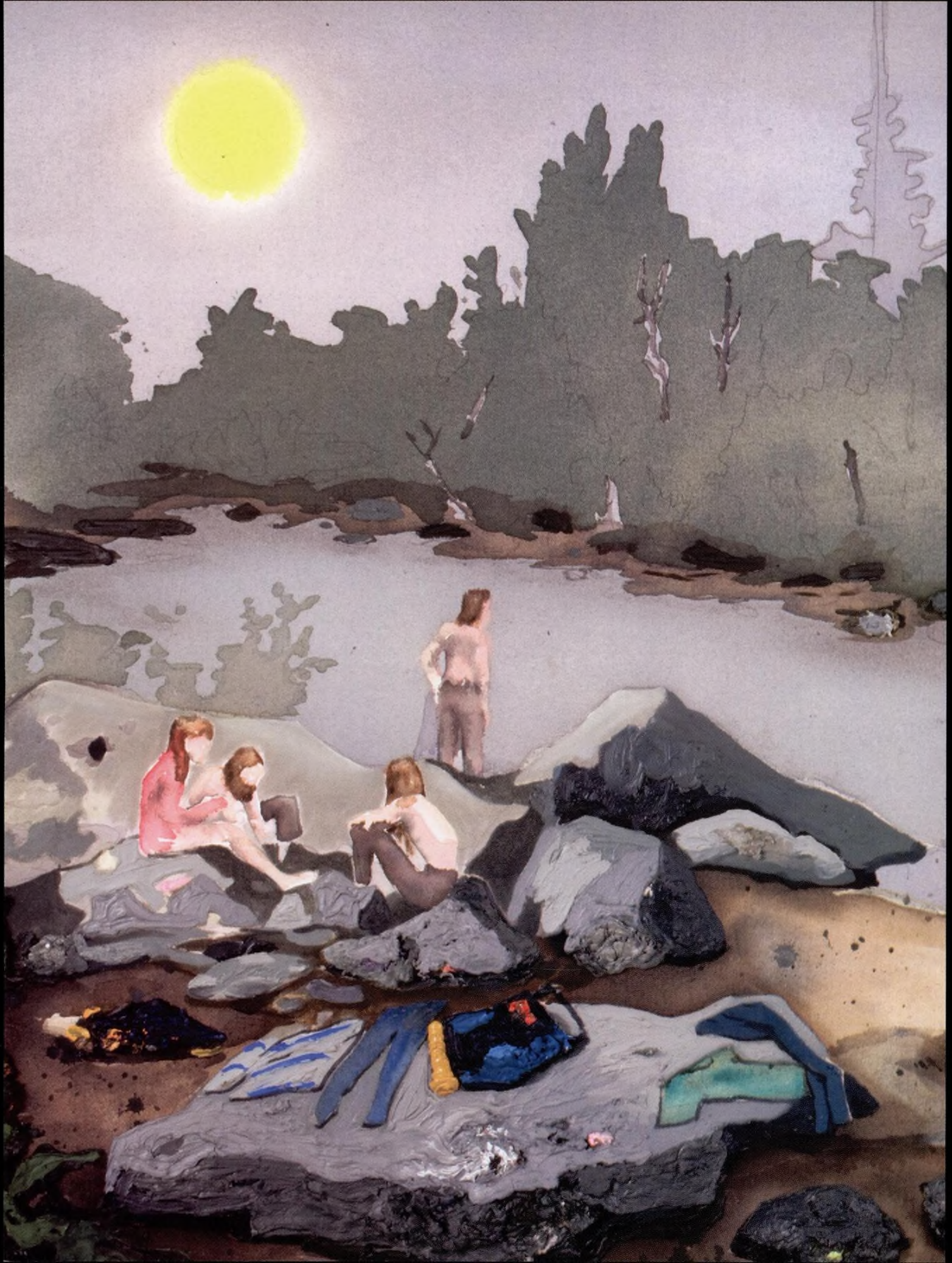
Down by the River, 2010 92
45" x 69"– Mixed media on canvas

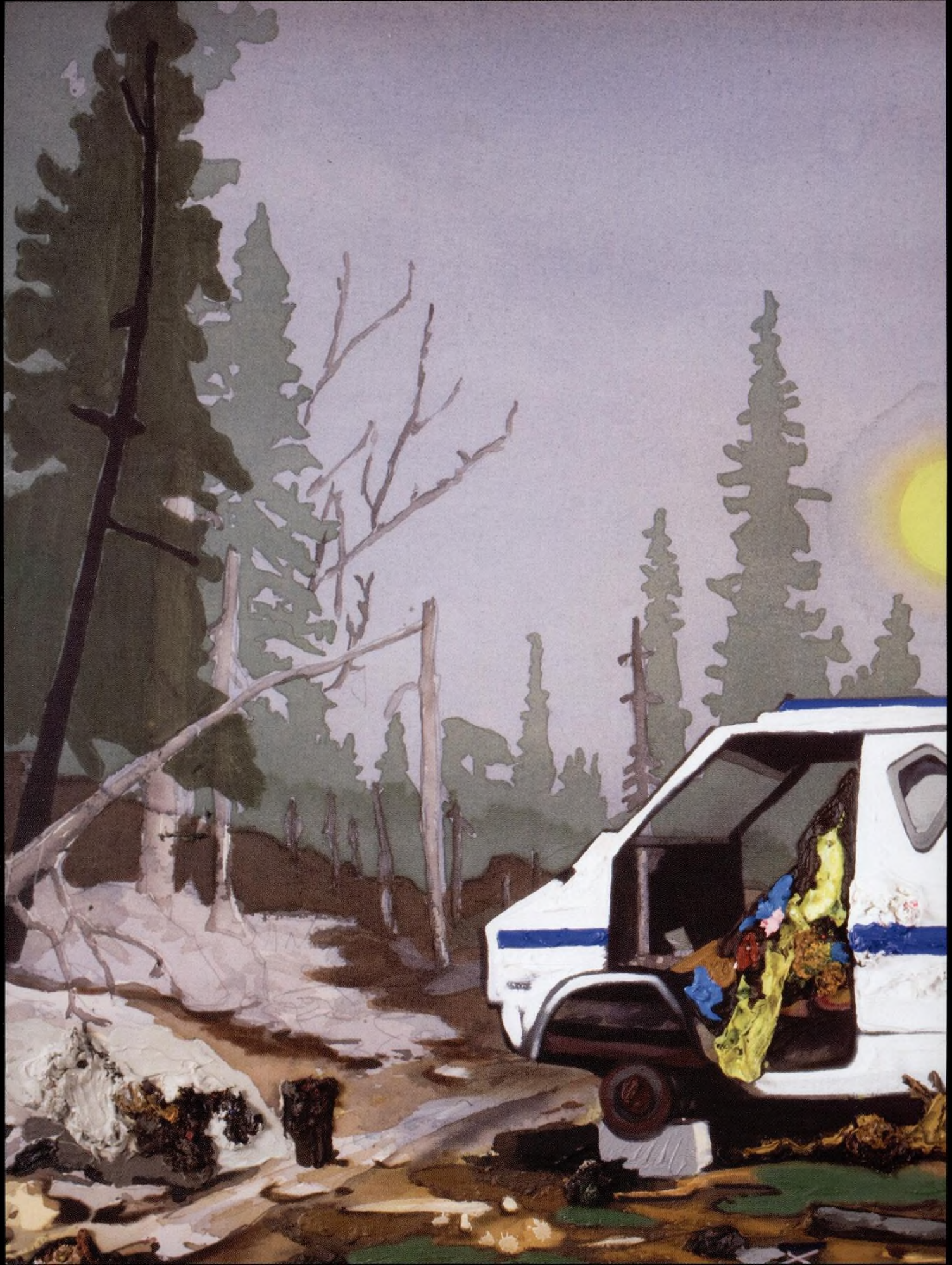
Untitled (Van), 2010 94
45" x 60" – Mixed media on canvas

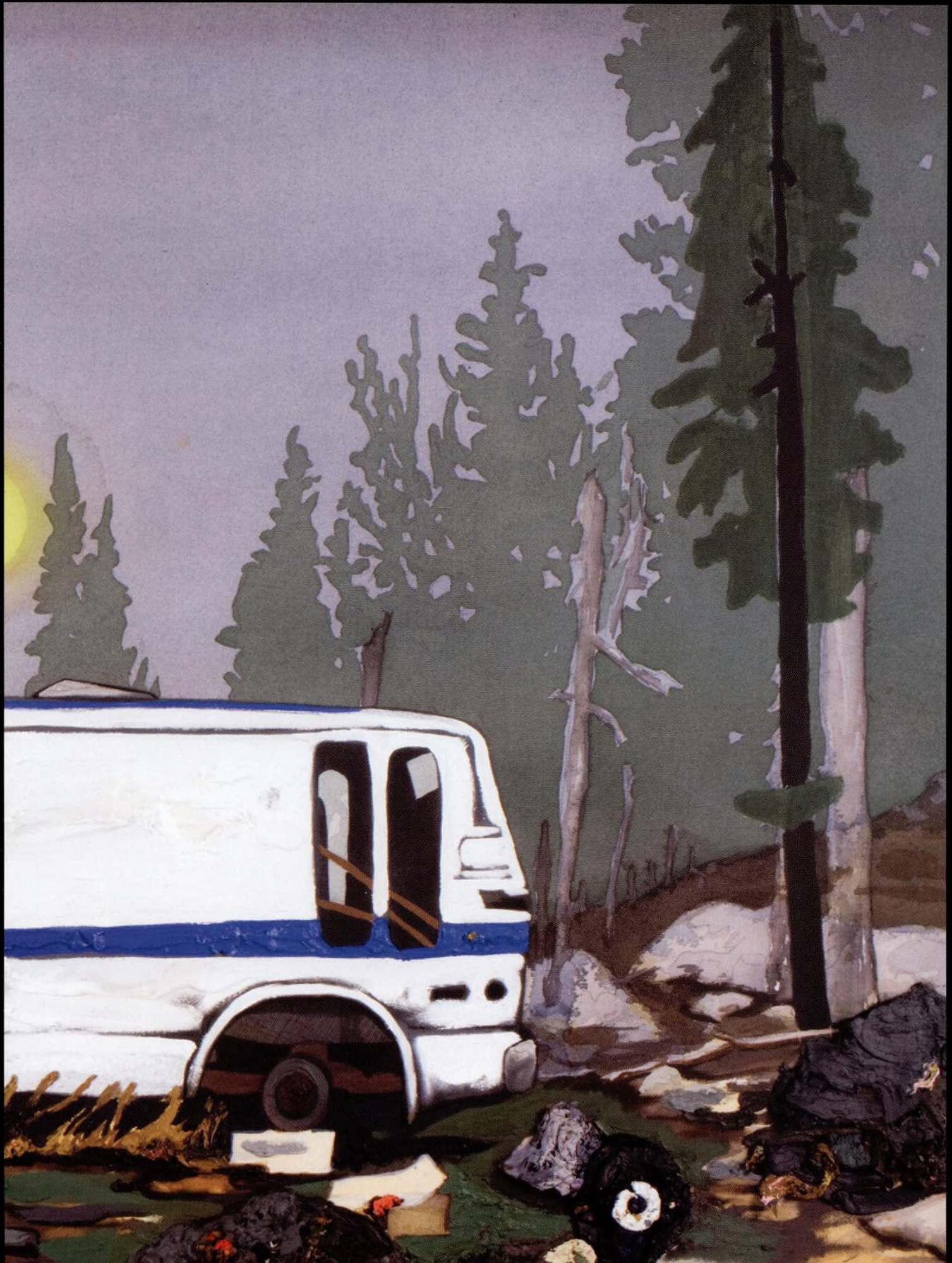
Fall, 2010 96
45" x 32" – Mixed media on canvas

Background Detail: *Dead Blue Jay*, 2010 – 18" x 24" – Mixed media on canvas

all images courtesy of the artist and Freight + Volume, NY







S.E. Smith

No Explode

The grapefruit tree explodes with the power of its senselessness.

To hold this thought in my mind I had to shoo away many others.

It's really a leap to believe Howdy Doody was actually speaking

when he sang all those songs, and not some semi-retired Oklahoman.

We don't seem to be working that hard at deflecting asteroids

but we talk about them all the time, like diamonds we can't wait

to meet in person, more charismatic moons. This cocktail of hardwood

and bamboo laminates might be my best friend tonight

when my love is away listening to Mexican radio and the wind

howls like a spooked cartoon, frisking the leaves of the grapefruit

tree dead from last week's frost. If anybody comes looking for me

tell them I've gone to be one of those big babes in the dipper.

Whatever speaks through me is throwing its voice from afar.

Joshua Kryah

A Terror of Foxes

What they eat.

What they don't eat.

What they leave behind, left there to tell you
of their having been.

Their hunger.

Their choice of eating.

Their animal and the parts of the animal we are
to remember them by.

That men are foxes or foxes men.

Their red coats, their mouths dripping.

Their want of eating, their always eating.

And their behavior a sojourn or what we call "the hunt,"
what we believe the behavior of someone else, the only way
to explain how you have become someone else.

You might return along an unknown road.

You might remember what it means to go on eating.

But the woman staring at you as you grab your crotch
and lick your mouth is still amazed by what she sees.

I cannot know what I do in this life or what
I have done already.

How I get used by people outside me.

How I don't stop.

Rob MacDonald

Expat/Sexpot

Southbound, Erica says
she wishes eucalyptus didn't
look so much like apocalypse.

Erica never looks
her future directly
in the eyes.

It hits a hundred,
dizzy, and she's like
a walking skinny dip.

At a rest area, Erica tells you
it's rude to stare
at kids playing Yiri.

When the country runs out,
she says it's time to invest
in an inner tube.

She peels off her past
and asks you to kiss
the corner of the map.

Boy at Night

In the final hours of daylight, he refuses to stop throwing his football against the chain-link fence. His arm aches from the relentless throwing, and the fence rattles as if the boy could drive a football-sized hole through it if he only threw hard enough.

But the boy will never throw hard enough.

His older brother, fourteen years older, has been dead two years. The older brother, with long hair and a brown mustache, was murdered while trying to buy heroin by the train tracks.

The boy tries not to sleep because in his dreams his brother wants to return home.

Let me in, his brother calls from the street in front of the boy's white house. His brother knocks his cold fist against the boy's front door.

A year after his brother died, the boy's mother moved him into his brother's room. There's a record player covered in dust that the boy has never played. His brother's hockey stick still leans against the wall.

He will not open the closet filled with his brother's clothes.

The boy wants his arm to be strong enough to scare his dead brother away.

He keeps throwing the football against the fence because he wants to knock the fence over and run behind the neighbor's brown house. After the boy knocks the fence down his mother will call his name, but the boy will not come home.

Emphysema has sprouted like a weed in his mother's lungs. She is fat and smokes all day at the kitchen table. The boy's mother does not have the strength to protect him. His father, with circles under his eyes, works through the night.

The boy's mother did not help when he was six years old watching a basketball game on television. Larry Bird backed his defender down, the crowd cheering loud as the tips of his fingers released a shot spinning smoothly through the air into the swish of the net. The brother was in a heavy rocking chair, the boy on the floor. His mother never came running in, her face a storm of anger, when his brother rocked the chair down on his leg. The boy was screaming.

He has thrown so much his shoulder is strained. It hurts to lift a glass of water before bed.

In his dream the boy's brother wants his room back. He shakes the locked bulkhead door. He stands in the backyard looking up at the boy's second-story window.

There is no moon when the boy wakes.

He cannot see his brother's red baseball cap or the stuffed panda bear his brother won at the fair two months before his murder.

The boy's shoulder aches but he refuses to ask his mother for help. Her body smells of cigarettes, cancer reaching down her spine like an icicle.

The boy remembers his brother alive, skating around the hockey rink. Games started in the evening. He drank warm cocoa from a thermos. His mother, arms raised high, cheered whenever his brother collided into an opponent.

James Miranda

Occupants

First there is Brandon, who everyone calls Squeaky B because of his big body and small voice. Also his sixteen-year-old cousin, Duncan, who opts out of high school and instead sits on the front porch of their house with a laptop while someone cornrows his hair. When their power gets shut off, Duncan charges his laptop at our house. One night he wakes me up asking for a charge at one-thirty and I tell him enough is enough and close the door.

Brandon's getting his degree in sports management and I edit his papers on Kobe Bryant and Mike Tomlin. He volunteers as an assistant football coach at the high school. He wants to do anything for the NFL. His teachers ask questions when his grades improve and I tell him to tell them he has a tutor or, if he wants to fuck with them, to play the race card.

Some afternoons after teaching I sit with them and their other cousin, John, and we drink an anti-energy drink called Drank (which tells us to "Slow our roll") and Steel Reserve (which tells us it is "High Gravity"). I tell them that I think the Ramones once wrote a jingle for Steel Reserve but they've never heard of the Ramones.

In the spring, they agree with their landlord to paint the entire peeling and collapsing Victorian they call home for a one-time rebate of two hundred dollars off their rent. They choose charcoal-gray with forest-green trim. They borrow my ladders and drop cloths. Half of the house is painted when someone shows up with an orange notice that says the house is being condemned.

▪ ▪ ▪

Strings are pulled.

A new family comes in a convoy of pick-up trucks and Chevy Cavaliers.

The goateed father in the trucker's cap and the toothless mother won't make eye-contact with me over our shared chain-link fence. But the kids—a little boy and a littler girl—love our dog with their shrill voices and sticky hands.

Ten-year-old Jeremiah is the envoy. He asks for the cans and bottles in our recycling bin once a week and then steers them down to the corner store slung over his shoulder in great black sacks, the front tire on his BMX wobbling over every crack in the sidewalk. When our recycling bin is empty he asks us for money.

Eight o'clock Tuesday morning and Jeremiah, red-headed and gap-toothed, stands on our back porch with an econo-sized can of SpaghettiOs and a dinner plate. He wants to know if we have a can opener. Then he wants to know if we could heat this up for him.

Two weeks after Christmas, Jeremiah arrives again with a gift for my wife: a clear plastic bird on a string. If you unscrew the bird's head it becomes a wand through which you can blow small bubbles. He asks if he can shovel our driveway. I tell him I have no cash on me, but when I get out of the shower I see that he's shoveled it anyway.

They are evicted after seven months and the following tenants find the oven door missing, used crack pipes in every room, and small orange mushrooms growing out of the bathtub.

▪ ▪ ▪

The last family arrives in a flurry of box-trucks, beaters, and one giant jacked-up Ford pick-up that they use to go mud-bogging behind the bowling alley off Stadium Drive.

Gary and Rick are half-brothers. Their elderly mother is Meemaw. She sits out on the front porch with a box fan and watches the kids: a string of babies and toddlers

who visit on the weekends, dropped off by ex-wives and ex-husbands, and spread their bright plastic toys across the hard-packed dirt of the back yard.

There is also James and Monica and their fresh fat baby who everyone calls Butterbean. James is quiet, polite, and covered in the shaky scrawl of his own tattoo work. When he goes missing for a few weeks Monica explains, through the thick cut of her lisp, that he's in jail on charges of kidnapping and possession, bullshit charges, she says, that are *really* all about a bad rap from when he was fifteen and accidentally shot his best friend to death back in North Carolina.

Rick is six years clean but looks like he just got off a week-long amphetamine bender because of a spinal injury he suffered when he was gang-beat in his sleep in prison. His teeth are one solid fused mass of brown and blue. On the day that we're moving, he waits until after carrying a dresser and a queen-sized bed down the stairs of our place and into the moving truck before telling me that he really isn't supposed to lift anything over fifty pounds on account of he could end up paralyzed. When I yell at him he says, "What am I supposed to do, stop living my life?"

Gary chases away the pregnant girl from down the street—the one who knocks on our door asking for money and/or a ride to the McDonald's on East Michigan—when she tries to break into our bathroom window one night while we're out of town. He calls the cops and files a report.

Gary also shows up on my porch one morning, two hours before I have to teach, with a pint of Dubra vodka and a six-pack of Mountain Dew. When I open the door and say, "Mountain Dubra?" he says he knew I would get it.

The night before we move, Gary and Rick and I pitch horseshoes in the long dirt stretch of their back lot. The house is being condemned again. Around midnight their power cuts out, killing the mechanic's drop-bulb they'd strung up to light our game. I run back to my house and grab a bag of votive candles and we place one ablaze in front of each stake. We don't mind having to relight them every time someone scores a point.

Gabrielle Calvocoressi

from *Rocket Fantastic*

June 29, 1968

Ask her if she remembers the last time
We went to the mountains
In that car Jasper just bought and let us borrow
For the day and we kept overnight. We leaned
Back and looked at the sky
And I said "Andromeda" and she said, "Orion."
Did we ever teach you that game?
You say a name and then you shut your eyes
And spin and spin together and then you
Stop and look up and have to find
It in the sky. The first one to find theirs
Gets a point. You start with the Greek
Names because they're easy to find.
Andromeda's simple, I found it first.
Then she found Orion and I said,
"Lyra" and she said, "Too easy. Wolfman
Jack." That's the next step. Make a name
That the constellation lives in so you have to
Spin and figure and *then* find. Did we teach you?
You get so dizzy and you laugh a lot.
It's more fun when Dad's not there to tell
You "Hurry up." We'll take you when I get back.
Ask her if she remembers how cold it got
But we didn't feel like going home
So we kept spinning and laughing.
I could see our breath and then she stopped

And it was just mine like smoke above us.
She said, "Vietnam" and I said, "Victor
Charlie" kind of like a joke and she said,
"There aren't enough stars for that."

Jenny Xie

Animal

They have no need for forgetting
themselves. Unnamed, two bucks
approach the backyard, snouts grazing
the loam. What does that make me—
barefoot and barbed on the porch,
repeating the most tired things into the receiver.
Last summer, I painted the wood I stood on
the color of eggs, thinking the coat would last.
This season a rash of mildew inflames
the lowest planks. I'm useless, I am no animal.
Even the deer have no use for me—
they're gone, softly sated, in search of water.
Envious, I follow. The lake's green surface is taut.
A detergent bottle's been emptied.
All evening, the water wears its tulle of froth.

Transplant

It was the year we saw faces in everything.
Faces in toast, in wet peach pits, in scrap
metal heaped beneath the town's only
bridge. The same year surgeons performed
the first face transplant, the fall Carl set fire
to a barn house with a ball of twine because
he was looking for a sign to leave. The firemen
arrived: reedy, sleepy-eyed, and no one
repaired the darkened wood after. Carl read
the most out of any of us, but about what
he'd never say. You can watch someone hurt
and still want to invite him in, let the blistered
screen door slam behind him. It was summer,
we drank water bobbing lemons, softened
our skin with egg yolk. We counted
down the days wound tight as rope.
We all wanted out, convinced if you drove
far enough, you'd hit sagebrush,
the stubble-line of hills in the distance.
Maybe even a little sea. For once, I wanted
to get on a road that didn't lead
to the hand-me-down sleeves of a meek waitress.
Imagine a new face brought down on a head,
the carotid artery stitched, the new skin
turning flushed and pink. Carl left
and sent nothing, and the wood dried
and cracked. You can hold a disembodied face
in your hands, the newspaper said, like a soft hubcap.

Julia Anna Morrison

Lightship

It's hailing
You want the trees to be bright red
You say it's permanent they don't grow leaves

It was like being in water not being in it

I could touch the glass
I got a nosebleed

My third love had nosebleeds I know
it comes from the inside near the brain

You gave me flowers
which you didn't believe in

No one filled my brain with flowers
It couldn't sing

Three years one mouth
touched me

I hadn't bled
or said blood to anything

He made me wear a red dress and push down a dead tree

I don't feel you broke my arm

I think if the back of my brain lights up
if there is a part that doesn't

Not all things touch a brain not flowers
You're not a flower

Morris Collins

The Apiary of Their Love

The professors are having trouble with their marriage.

They have been married for twenty-five years and have each had one affair. They know about the other's affair and usually they say nothing, though sometimes alone, facing the mirror in the bathroom early in the morning when there is just the first serene violet light through the window, they weep to themselves very, very quietly.

They have other problems, too. His books are more popular than hers, though her books are better than his and they both know this and both think about it and often they wonder if the other person is thinking about it, which the other person usually is. In the evenings they read Lydia Davis short stories.

They have three daughters: Lisa is a junkie, Sally is in prison. The third is a Republican. Their children never call.

It's time to make a change, to come back together, to ford the rivers that have sprung up between them as if they'd always been there, waiting inside the mountain, ready to rush forth. They know about these things; they've read plenty of poems.

They buy a house in Vermont. It is a gabled colonial house, a house with white walls and painted blue shutters, a house with rosebushes and raspberry shrubs, wild strawberries twining up its eastern wall, fruiting towards the sun. It is an old house and will need some work, but that's okay—he rolls up his sleeves as if to say, *I can still feel my hands*, and she, she puts on a straw sun hat, picks a marigold from the wild garden, touches her hat, places it there.

They move in the last days of spring, the first days of summer. Behind the house the field of blown buttercups blossoms into a new season's bloom. Farther down, past the meadow, the fresh forest greens out against a sky as hard and blue as Venetian glass. He puts his arm around her, places his hand on her bare shoulder. Her skin is no longer as soft as it once was and he imagines that he can feel the liver-spotting like raised little pimples under his fingers. He removes his hand, points downfield towards the grove of sugar maples.

"Next spring we'll tap them," he says. "Pull something sweet from January's craw."

She smiles, wraps a silk shawl around her wintering body.

"Something sweet would be nice," she says.

▪ ▪ ▪

And sweet, then, those days that pass. They walk and pick raspberries. In the evenings—for the evenings are still cool—he builds fires out of wood he chopped with his own hands. She plucks strawberries from the vine, goes down to the river and pulls wild rhubarb from the banks, their roots still wet with blue marl. She makes the biggest of pies.

Then one day, their dog, a black labrador, rushes out of the woods, its face needled with porcupine quills. It whimpers as dogs do. A tear comes to her eye. He finds it funny.

"A dog after my own heart," he says. "Always looking for something to rut."

She does not laugh. Instead she goes into the basement to find some pliers. She comes back empty-handed.

"I must have left them in the city," he says. "Check the fruit cellar."

Neither of them have been in there yet, and when she enters she finds two things—neither of them pliers. First, a case of homemade dandelion wine. The bottles are dusty and too ambered to see into, but they are also labeled and she reads that the wine is only a few years old.

The next thing she finds is a bear trap.

▪ ▪ ▪

Later that night, once they've pulled the quills from the dog's face they open a bottle of the dandelion wine and begin to drink. It is sweet and strong and autumnal: the world's last flowering before it goes to sad seed. He finds that he is touching her and she finds that she is responding and there on the floor with the windows open and, this time no fire for the night is warm, they make love and push against each other in something like the memory of their want. He feels her skin rising under his hands and for a moment is young as he once was; the night

is numinous with new time. She closes her eyes, chews her own hair—the pain of lost love boring through her body like a porcupine's quill, sure to find the heart.

▪ ▪ ▪

In the morning they decide to take up beekeeping. They have tasted sweet things and have found them wanting. They yearn for honey. They build an apiary and wait.

When the bees come, they are bigger than they should be. One stings the dog and the dog dies. The professor swats it with his copy of *TLS*, kills it, brings it upstairs to his study where he tries to identify it in volume 2 of *Montreaux's Entomology*. He turns to page 15, the page about bees. He finds it, double-checks his results.

"African killer bees in Vermont?" he says. "How peculiar."

In much the same way that she doesn't tell him that she's set the bear trap in the yard, he doesn't tell his wife about the killer bees. Perhaps he's distracted. A certain young student calls him every night. There is only one phone in the house.

More and more bees appear. In the mornings the sky is black with them. By dusk the air thrums with their buzzing. The phone rings more and more often. His wife looks out through the window where the bees bring down a family of deer in the yard. Her eyes are glazed though, lambent in distraction—she is not watching. If she were, she would see the fawn lope for the river on its wobbly new legs, she would see that it does not make it. Instead, she listens to the phone ring, her husband's hushed words and then the phone hanging up like something swinging shut, closing forever.

"I'm going to the city for a few days," he says. "I need to do some work, get some things."

▪ ▪ ▪

After he leaves, she steps outside, shuts the door behind her. Past the trees the far horizon is layered like a rock face, amethyst wending into blue tourmaline. For a moment she closes her eyes, smells the air, feels something like wind on her face.

And it is wind: the wind beat by a hundred wicked wings, and when she opens her eyes she sees a swarm of them swelling towards her. She thinks, then, that perhaps they shouldn't have built the apiary, shouldn't have meddled with the natural world. *What a peculiar object an apiary is, anyway, gesturing so strangely at the dichotomy between culture and nature* and then they are upon her as she writhes and screams and feels her flesh give beneath their stings, her tendons untethering like a sail torn from the mast. And she is on her knees, now, with her spasming hands clasped before her like a penitent. She struggles to her feet, stumbles forward beneath the buzz, stumbles forward towards some grace as sweet as honey—stumbles into the bear trap. The bear trap which snaps, shuts and closes around her in an embrace certain to never abate, a hold more tight and sure than any mortal thing.

Meanwhile.

The professor drives south with his student. He does not know that his wife is stuck in a bear trap, that she is being stung to death by killer bees, that her body is already as purple and swollen as a plum.

He does not know that one bee is in the car. Maybe he could hear it buzz, but he is thinking too hard about the transient nature of beauty, about his young lover's perfect cheekbones, about how the summer's been warm, how it will be a bad season for foliage.

And then, later that night, when they're in bed together at the motel, when he's on top of her and his old professor's hands are rough on her young white student's hips, he's thinking of frailty and yearning, he's remembering his wife when he first met her and the taste of summer peaches in his grandfather's orchard when he was a boy. It was 1945 and the peaches were sweet. He's thinking of words like *succulence*—how he can feel that against his body, under his nails. All the while the one killer bee buzzes outside their window, calls to its kind.

And they come.

First one by one and then by the dozen, unfurling over the fields, laying the country to waste, killing cows, flying straight through the tin walls of trailers like things too sharp for this world, ravaging all the Ben & Jerry's, rending everything open, laying everything bare, and then massing at the window while the professor fucks his student; and they're waiting there, the bees, pressing against the glass,

and maybe he can hear them, welling like he's welling now inside of her, quaking and waiting there, gathering like a storm, a thunderhead about to strike, or no, something denser—a tornado that pulls towards its center, clouds torn out of the sky, grass ripped up by its roots, a thrumming thing circling over its own blasted world, waiting till the morning when the professor and his student open the doors, step out in one perfect moment into the last light and are taken up whole, spun into the throbbing air, and are gone.

Amy Boesky

Tae Kwon Do

I understood my daughter would leave, at least in the abstract. I really did. I knew it was coming, and I prepared myself. I read all the blogs, and I knew enough to be ready to pick up a couple of hobbies afterwards. For example, I started stringing beads. It has become a big thing again, I'm telling you. People take classes and all that, but I opted for going it alone. The beading hobby took me to Somerville and Lexington, to craft shops with cute names on out-of-the-way side streets I had to hunt for on MapQuest. I found jeweler's glue and .5-millimeter clear stretch elastic. It took time to find the beads, and time to string them, and time to get help hiding the little knots. It added up. Hours passed. Then, after I cleaned out the closet in my study one afternoon, I found a few old skeins of Merino wool—multi-colored, so whatever you knit looks flecked when you are through—and just like that, I remembered that I knew how to knit.

I got to work and knitted a scarf out of that wool on plastic number-nine needles. It was pretty soothing, in its way. The clack-clack-clack of it, like voices. More like an imitation of a hobby than a real one, but still. I liked knitting while I watched reruns of crime shows. My favorite was the one about missing people. I liked how hard the detectives worked, without even a little coffee break here or there. So focused on their united quest. Two hours missing. Six. Then eight. The narrative always veered off in predictable little juts, so you knew the first two or three suspects would prove to be mere distractions. The hulking mechanic with the stovepipe. The creep next door. The real dangers were still out there, not to be revealed until forty or fifty minutes in. By that point, I'd have a good swath of wool going. A stripe of warmth to guard against the cold.

▪ ▪ ▪

I had time now for things I hadn't done in years. People had told me I would, after she left, and it was true. Reading the newspaper, for instance. I liked the classifieds. *Man With A Van! Bulldog pups, wormed, eyes checked. $800 each. Writing desk,*

Queen Anne style, orig. cond. Must be seen! Each ad a miniature elegy of replacement and disavowal. How does it happen, that moment of decision? You have a thing hanging around and then wham, you decide, let's *sell* this fucker!

The classifieds gave me an idea. I decided it was time to sell my mother's breakfront. Actually, I didn't even know it was called that until I decided to get rid of it. Then I looked it up online. *A piece of furniture broken by a change in angle or design.* It was a big, hulking thing, oddly ornate, with faux Tudor doors on it—a mishmash of styles. My mother, who died years and years back when my daughter was still a baby, had moved it around quite a bit herself. It made a person feel guilty. You didn't feel right about giving up on it. *Breakfront.* What a name, I thought, squinting at it in the dim light of our living room. It had to go.

I had plans. I would self-edit, starting with this room. Take out this one piece of furniture, and a whole world could change. Why not? Other things could go next. Fear of highways. Disinterest in politics. What you leave out is as important as what stays. Only, I couldn't sell it. So it stayed there, sitting in its spot like a reminder: not everyone can just get up and go. What's that old saying about needing roots as well as wings?

The breakfront was the root. Pinning me in place, like a big shiny stake. I didn't go in the living room much anyway. "You need to think about going into your living room. Consciously," a woman told me—a friend of a friend, trained in interior design. She was serious about this. "Go into your living room," she told me, "with a glass of wine and a book, maybe. Sit near the lamp." I blinked at her, assessing this. When would a person with hobbies, a person who drove to bead stores, who chose coral and labradorite beads and threaded them on .5-millimeter elastic, a person who watched shows about missing people—when would a person like that think to herself: *I need to go into the living room*?

The friend of a friend thought maybe I could take the doors off the breakfront and paint the back blue. The friend of the friend thought that might make it better. *A faux finish*, she had said. Crackle. She was a decider, I decided. A woman who lived her life with purpose, who gave advice. And I was a root. A stake. Stuck here, incapable of moving even as far as the living room, with my book, my wine, my faux paints.

▪ ▪ ▪

My daughter had a lot to do before she left for Chicago. Warhol prints to frame. Repeated trips to Bed, Bath & Beyond to choose things for her dorm room. The store had a system, one of those why-didn't-I-think-of-it arrangements. You ordered things in advance instead of buying them outright and carting them home, like registering for a wedding. They gave us a big clipboard and a digital scanner that looked like a wand, and we just ran the wand over barcodes of the things my daughter wanted. The clipboard was for backup. She scanned, I wrote. *Gray towels, bath. Scale. Kettle, electric, Krups.* At the end, we took the clipboard up to the register and paid, and that was that. Weeks later, in one of the suburbs near Chicago, we would drive to a different store and pick up all the stuff she'd ordered. "Easy, isn't it?" the woman at the cash register asked approvingly, looking back and forth at us. We must've looked all set, everything chosen. A new model mother and daughter, I remember thinking, proud of how well I was handling myself. Just like the blogs recommended.

Everything was in order. But then, a few weeks before my daughter moved to Chicago, I realized she needed a class in self-defense. Actually, I wasn't the one who realized this. It was my friend. We were on the beach for a last vacation (we were going through lots of "lasts") when the subject came up. My friend is a reporter, and she had just written a book about a young woman who went missing—a true, horrible story, not a made-for-TV simulation. Eventually, months and months later, the young woman was found dead. The police bungled the case. And then, half a year later, a jogger found her leg bone—too late for DNA evidence on the killer. Too late for anything. My friend helped figure out that the guy the police all suspected was in the clear. The guy who did it was already in jail down south, serving a short sentence for something else. He jumped women who went running in the park, got up on them from behind.

"You have to learn self-defense," my friend told my daughter. We were sitting on beach chairs, checking out the surf, all three of us drinking Diet Coke from cans with new designs. More red on them, I think. My daughter looked skeptical.

I got online right away. There were a couple of options, none ideal. The best was a Tae Kwon Do class on Needham Street. I called up the guy, explained our

situation, and listened to him breathing on the phone. The fall semester ten-week course had just started, he told me. We could come observe if we wanted. It met once a week, for ninety minutes.

I looked at the calendar. We only had nine days left before my daughter left. "What about just a private lesson or two?" I asked him. "You know, just show her a couple of good moves." Knuckles to the eyeball, knee to the groin. Like on the crime shows. Wasn't there an efficient way to get this stuff down?

More breathing on the phone. "Just come observe," he said finally.

• • •

The Tae Kwon Do studio was wedged between a tire dealership and a McDonald's. We went in, my daughter and me, and the owner told us to sit on a bench facing the mirrors and watch the 5:30 class. About twenty girls, around eight or nine years old, were already there, wearing white robes and high kicking, barefoot. We watched them bounce up and down in the mirrored wall. They seemed ahead of themselves. A middle-aged man that I guessed was a dad was also in the class, but he was nowhere near as nimble. He jumped around in the middle, like a tall candle flickering in the midst of short ones. We watched in silence, my daughter and I. The kicks and jumps of these girls didn't seem very real-world. It was hard to picture how they'd come in handy on a dim city street—without the robes and the bare feet.

"See?" The owner said accusingly to me. "This is an *art*. You study it for years, many years. You don't just pick up self-defense in an hour or two." He looked scathing. People like us. People who prance in with their calendars and their checkbooks and think you can just order this up. This wasn't Bed Bath & Beyond. Nothing instant about this.

How had I forgotten: short of a jazz dance class once, my daughter didn't like moving in groups. As a girl, she had preferred eccentric musical activities. Children's opera, where she sang arias about being lost in the woods or capturing a boatful of pirates. Or French club, or painting pottery. Where would that get her now?

I thanked him, and we walked outside into the glare of the August afternoon.

My daughter was angry. She'd wasted three hours and missed the concert she wanted to go to, all for nothing. "I told you so," she said. There was nothing I could say. Nine days left, and we were out of time.

▪ ▪ ▪

When the day came to move my daughter into her dorm room, I was wearing a gray plastic Aircast on my right foot. It inflated with a green straw that I kept in the zippered compartment of my tote bag. I got the boot from a medical supply drugstore. Apparently I had a stress fracture in my second toe, as the orthopedist explained to me after two hours in an MRI that clapped and clattered in carefully timed short segments. ("The smaller the body part, the longer the MRI," the technician told me through a tooth-marked wad of gray mint gum.)

On top of that, I had something called "instability of the second metatarsal." The ball of my foot had been aching all summer, but I tried to ignore it until four days before it was time to travel, when I realized it was hard to stand. That's the way it goes with these things. Without warning, there I was, wedged in the MRI, picking up the gray boot. Hobbling down the aisle of the 737, heading west.

She was getting a whole new time zone, my daughter. The crime shows would come on earlier for her than for me.

I'm good at moving things. Good at ripping open corrugated cardboard, at lifting things out of packages, arranging things on shelves. But my daughter's dorm room was small and overheated, and on the fourth floor, and there was no elevator, and the boot, to tell the truth, got in the way. It wasn't a glamorous injury. Not one you felt like talking about in the hallway with the other mothers and fathers, staggering under their own corrugated boxes. "Stress fracture," I told one mother, with a we're-all-in-this-together smile and self-deprecating lift of the shoulder. After a while, I shortened my answer down to a single grunted syllable when people asked. *Stress.*

The things we'd ordered in the store looked different in my daughter's room. Smaller, or bigger, depending on which thing it was. My daughter didn't seem to care about any of the things, or where they went. She was too excited to meet

people, and in between unwrapping and opening, she'd rush out into the hall to say hi. Meanwhile I kept up my side—opening, arranging, trying not to stomp on the roommate's brother's bare feet with my big gray boot.

We didn't have long, my daughter and I. Unpacking seemed to speed time up. At two o'clock, the freshmen were supposed to meet up and walk a mile-long march together down to the campus green, their first time together as a class. We had the whole thing planned, just a quick goodbye before she left. That was how we'd set it up. No big scene. An appointment, like any other. Soon it was 11:30 and then 12:00 and 12:30 and the boxes took so long, lugging them, opening them, and there wasn't time to get lunch the way we thought there might be—too many interruptions, hunting for an extension cord, then for adapters and extra hangers and a light bulb that worked. Then it was five till two and she had to go. She was perfectly fine: her eyes on the girls down the hall, thinking about who to walk with, who to be with—happy, well, everything I'd always wanted for her. And then, weirdly, she was just gone. The Post-it notes I was trying to winch out of the corner of the second-to-last box were stuck, however hard I tried to pry them loose. *It doesn't matter,* I told myself. *Let it go.* But I kept trying anyway, sure if I wriggled them one way or another I'd free them, finish this thing I'd started.

Devon J. Moore

Red

I tell you this so that you know: there was once a body
of a woman on the beach, with legs glowing white and the fabric
of her bathing suit bodice strained, I yelled *mother* at her
from the water of a lake, my tiptoes barely puncturing the sand bottom,
my neck barely reaching air. I wanted her to float with me,
be as I was, a suspended tensile weight. In that position
there was no need for food or shelter, there would be no need
for imagining things. In that position, there was that feeling that
you could be all the things you weren't, but she wouldn't come,
wouldn't even look at my voice directed at her across the slow
rolling Erie, wouldn't even look when the life guard jumped in
to save me. Shame, the kind caused by going to school with stains
on your sweatpants, the same shirt for a month, for a year,
sticks to your ribs like fat. We teach ourselves to grow ashamed
of our fat and breasts and muscles, too. My mother and I, little girls
decades apart, keep walking outside of ourselves to get away.

She was once a girl in a red dress, bony armed, wrists
you could wrap a fist around, a chest of rosebuds, and a pile of adventure
books by the bed she shared with her sister and all that a lit cigarette
against her skin would later fail to deliver. For a day my mother had
a new red dress, so pretty, so pretty, all other desired redresses
of poverty and drunkenness forgotten for that tensile moment,
she floated in happiness when she set the dress in the bathtub,
poured out the bleach to clean it, a corrosiveness at hand
she didn't recognize until too late. I tell you this so that you know:
there are some absences of color I can't get back for her,
even when I write *red* and *red* and *red* and *red*, even when I call
out to her, *mother*, my voice pummeling through the silver
prismatic light reflected on a lake, her body,
moving slow and so far away.

Thomas Heise

from *Moth; or how I came to be with you again*

— I remember when I touched my sleeping mother's hair, it sparked in my hands and I thought she was inhuman, but I was young, and only years later would I understand she was under the spell of an erotic dream — I remember a white door emboldened with a laurel wreath leading into a basement where we retreated frequently in the tornado season — I remember how day after day would pass while nothing happened and how without mercy time would gather weight, accrete a green patina on the locket I chipped with a long fingernail — I remember the swaying firs made a whanging of rusted girders I thought would collapse — I remember sitting at my desk before my most precious things, sheets of graph paper, diagrams, folders, waterlogged and moulded charts, and then unannounced he would come to me, moving my hand automatically across these pages — I remember the gathering darkness of a thousand

incidents I never witnessed, and yet bird by bird they separated themselves into moments of bright singularity — I remember that I possess no real memory of my mother and only know at all she even existed by evidence of my own pale skin and the double-helix twisted under it into an X — I remember blurry light, rain on an awning, and then being lifted and placed into a red wagon — I remember when the earth was for me, for the last time in its history, still elastic as cartilage, had not fully solidified into the obstacle of the known, the terrible, stubborn thing called *fact* — I remember *it was the hibiscus winter*, because she said so — I remember writing these words, but only barely, but one after another stone-like in their materiality they are undeniable — I remember remembering a dream, under a low ceiling of illuminated clouds swirling in a tarantella, I rode weeping along the boulevard of an empty city newly in

ruins where each crumbling museum was my hidden and sumptuous destitution — I remember someone informed me he had once hanged himself from his swing set, then the memory infected me, became my own — I remember a small, A-frame house, and watching the hawthorn wasting in an emollient sea wind — I remember a white door — I remember it was the hibiscus winter — I remember thinking I had been comatose a thousand years, though this is surely false, and in my uncorroborated absence the whole fungible world in a moment of chemical agony had changed in irreversible ways — I remember how everything tasted dark — I remember things I've never felt — a seagull feather brushing my lips, a turquoise shell, my shoulders festooned with flowers — I remember thinking what was in my mind was put there by others, by books I read, by objects I looked at but did not own — I remember wondering if other memories remained in the twilight regions of my mind where my failed loves were soil, and if soon someone would enlighten me to things I had done

and then, years later, I would remember them as real — I remember tender hands covered in snow — I remember the city, the flames immanent as flowers, patient to burst forth — I remember my favourite word once was —

Drew Johnson

Three Greyhounds

1. False Husband

Not long before we board, another passenger has a request. I don't think I look sympathetic. Mirrored, there's only my empty face, waiting for some emotion to twitch in from the outside to my jelly eyes stranded in my clay.

She's bundled into multiple checked shirts, these cinched and bounded by a puffy, buttoned vest. I'm sitting across two seats in the terminal nursing a headache when she comes over to me and kneels down, this stranger.

"You're headed to Tucson?"

"Yes," I say, thinking I should say no.

"I'd appreciate it a lot if you'd sit with me and wear this ring."

In her hand there is in fact a plain broad band and—even more surprising—I'm able to jam it onto the appropriate finger. Wondering if the finger will be dead sausage before Tucson, I keep watch on my left hand, but after a minute the finger still hasn't turned purple. I shift my bag off the seat in order that my new wife may sit down.

"I worry you won't be able to get your ring back. I mean, I don't know whether I'll be able to get it off."

"Oh, I'll get it off," she says, so grimly I worry I'll turn up in the space between the station wall and chain link, laid out among plastic and broken glass. But I wave the ring at her.

"Does this really make a difference? Traveling?"

"You have no idea."

We don't talk much before boarding and as soon as the rhythms of the interstate take over, she drops off to a practiced sleep. I leave her on the bus during a bathroom stop and when I return, a toothy-trending-toothless older man gestures across the aisle and asks,

"Is this y'alls' first?"

"Pardon?"

"The wife. Y'all been through this business before?"

I look over at the woman sleeping next to me and she is obviously pregnant. How I had not already seen this simple fact will puzzle me always. But I say, "Our first, yessir."

"You gotta take care of that boy."

"Not sure whether it's a boy or a girl. She wanted the surprise."

"Ain't no surprise. That's a boy there. You can be sure."

"Well, I will take care of him."

"'Cause you gotta take care of him."

"I sure will."

"I know what it is to have no daddy. It's a mark of Cain."

I don't know how this follows, Cain being a murderer, but as this last bit seemed to come from the depths and to question it in any way would be to question him, I don't. The bus is full of sleepers. Our talk peters out but we nod later as the bus empties.

She and I have breakfast together in the truck stop appended to the station and although I try to talk she does not wish to and I realize looking round at couples that the illusion of our marriage is better maintained in a sullen, sleepy silence than whatever conversation we might muster. Afterward, she takes me round to the empty hallway of payphones that leads to the trucker showers and pulls the ring from my finger. She has to take me in both hands to do it and because she does not thank me I worry that some look or touch I give in that moment seemed to her to make something out of my temporary claim.

I never see her again, nor expect to. But months later—worse luck—the old man is staring sadly from across the aisle. I don't place him immediately, then I do, just as he says, "Not too late. You say you're sorry and you get right back in there."

I try everything at once: oh, the wife is just staying with my parents, the kid, too—a son, hey, you were right! Nice kid, looks like her, miss them so damn much.

The lie buttressing quickly out into details that are no excuse.

For he will have none of it. He has caught me out. Knows me entirely in the one thing he is sure I have done: I left.

2. Good Mother

A mother and two daughters so toppled together you thought about monkeys and how we were monkeys, comforted by animal warmth as much as any language overlaid. They were beautiful and I shouldn't have watched them as long or as much as I did and was able to do because of the angle of reflection in one of the big night-black windows on that bus on that night. The mother looked a little like Maria Bello—who matched Mel Gibson scene-for-scene in *Payback*, Viggo Mortensen in *A History of Violence*—met them both so well that I wondered that she'd never been given something of her own. Maybe she had. I hadn't seen it.

The one daughter (older) was slumped against her mother while the other daughter (younger) was on her mother's lap, held there by one mother's hand over her shoulder and on down to her knee. Too big, too old to be there, I thought, but allowed to by dispensation on some special occasion. What occasion? All three were quiet, staring ahead, not empty stares but the stares of people thinking hard for their lives. All three seemed frightened but managing, stunned but calm, posture and countenance fixed as though habituating themselves to a great absence.

Though of course it was hard to know what grief or disappointment they were sharing out like a meal. Mother watched the two whenever she suspended her own staring but she'd done much to boost them up: the girls were wearing matching long-sleeved Hello Kitty T-shirts and their jeans had Hello Kitty patches on the knees. The older daughter's jeans were worn at the knees—the patches had been necessary. The younger daughter's jeans were not worn but almost new—the patches were sewn so that the younger could be like her sister.

All three were sharing an iPod. One earbud remained with the older daughter while the other was passed occasionally back from younger daughter to mother. The hand that held the girl to the lap held the flat white tablet, too.

I shouldn't have watched them so long but they were so human and the way they were with each other kept telling me more—so often the people I found myself among told me nothing, stayed seeming-dead in order to be silent. I was often that way myself.

The younger daughter pulled the earbud and, without looking, passed it behind her head to her mother. Her hand passed close to her mother's lips: lips darting forward to kiss the backs of the tiny fingers. The little girl smiled.

You're a good mother, I thought, without knowledge or right.

3. Two Boys

The announcement ended and the delay began. So I swept my eyes round looking for some strong reaction worth observing—a shout, a fist—to draw off my own disappointment. No one appeared as angry as I knew I was but I knew I didn't appear as angry as I wanted to be. It was an old problem.

My eye caught a boy as he slid off the plastic seat and fell to his knees with a tumbler's grace before his bright green backpack. From the zippered smaller pocket he removed a boxed deck of Aviator playing cards. The cards were in his hands: he was a small magician and with a patience I thought was gone from childhood he laid out the first, then second, then third, then fourth floors of a house of cards. The motions were so continuous and smooth that he looked like a dancer or one machine pulled from an assembly line to operate in elegant isolation. By the time the last card left his hand, or rather, by the time his hand had left the last card, more eyes were on him than not.

Beginning with a uniformed station manager, applause began and became general. One man went so far as to reverse his hands, plug a finger into either end of his mouth, and sound a loud whistle. You had the sense that he brought out this trick the way I might reach for a particular anecdote.

Some tiny part of the concussive commotion reached the cards and the house toppled more or less at the boy's feet. An eight and an ace did speed away across the floor but strangers returned them. All in all, the boy took the collapse better than the rest of us did; I assumed the habit of building card houses had inured him to this stage of things. Perhaps it was even this stage that made the whole enterprise.

"What's the sound of a hundred hands clapping?" the woman traveling with me asked. I thought it altogether the more interesting question.

On the bus she took the window seat and I settled down by the aisle. A boy sitting sideways, with his legs under the armrest and into the aisle, stared at me with apparent malice.

Making an error common to my people, I mistook him for the house of cards boy and was about to ask him where he learned his trade when I realized that this boy was much younger and that the other boy had been darker. I didn't see just how I could have made the mistake.

The boy wasn't traveling alone. He sat sideways because that was all the room left to him by the girth of his aunt or mother or grandmother. She was asleep already, colossal, she seemed about the size and shape of a bagpipe meant for a player accustomed to a sousaphone.

From Atlanta all the way to Greensboro, the little boy kept me awake by kicking the side of my seat. He would wait until my eyes were shut, then kick the side of my seat. When I looked over at him, he was smiling, but it was not a pleasing smile. No matter what expression I tried, the genial let-me-sleep smile, the neutral middle-expressions of my gathering frustration, the fulminant but impotent glowering I tried later, he never varied his smile or his sharp, single kick.

But, as the night went on, with me so utterly in his power, he narrowed his vision too far. Intent on my torment, he didn't notice his mother had awakened behind him. She saw another kick kick me awake. My eyes were open to see her react.

She hit the back of his head hard enough that his face rebounded off the plastic facing of the seat in front of him. He cried, crying out, waking the rest of the passengers.

"You had better let that man alone."

He mewled and mewled, more and more quietly. His mother leaned back into the remote slumber of her great bulk. Just then the bus began to pass through Danville, Virginia—a city I had always longed to see. I knew I would have slept all through the streets of Danville but for the kicking boy. I knew I ought not to thank him.

Rebecca Evanhoe

Approximately Thirty-Six Toilets

The First Toilet

I grew up in a house with four toilets—two upstairs, two down—but as a young girl, I cleaned only one. My sister and I took turns with the toilet we shared. My mother cleaned the toilet she shared with my father. My brothers cleaned their toilet in turns. Typical of his nature, gracious to everyone who entered our home, my father cleaned the toilet in the guest bathroom.

The Toilets of a Best Friend

Sarah Smith had the kind of ponytail every sixth-grader wanted: straight with curls at the end, honey-brown with natural blond highlights, so thick that it made a sound as she brushed it. I felt the need to continually renew and affirm her affection for me, to ensure that I would be the person she went rollerblading with around the neighborhood. I wanted her parents to like me so they would let us go rollerblading. I wanted us to be seen together. Sarah's parents gave her more chores than my parents gave me, and they were strict about manners of all kinds. After school on Fridays, before her parents returned from work, Sarah would drag the vacuum around her house, and I would clean all the toilets: upstairs, the guest toilet, her older sister's toilet, the auxiliary toilet downstairs, her parents' toilet. This is where I learned how to clean a toilet fast but good. This is where I learned about a drunk man's toilet: dried drips of pee under the seat and sometimes down the front of the bowl. Once a month we laundered the four terry-cloth seat covers.

The Toilets of a Young Family

As a freshman in high school, my first job was to clean three toilets in a house which belonged to a young family. There were two parents with three babies whose ages spaced out neatly in year intervals: three, two, one. I felt it my duty to pretend I was not embarrassed for the parents as I wiped pubic hairs from their toilet seat and ignored the tub of Tucks suppositories sitting on the tank. (At the time, I believed that they were the father's, but now I understand they were the mother's, the hemorrhoids from childbirth.) One after the other, all three children toilet-trained. I dumped and rinsed a red plastic potty hundreds of times, first for Jack, then for Joel, then for Julie, the baby.

The Divorced Toilets

After I spent three years working for the young family, the parents divorced in a sudden and dramatic fashion. Over the course of a few difficult months, the mother exhibited a string of strange behaviors. She maxed out credit cards to buy expensive towels that she returned a day later. In the winter, she left on a walk without a jacket and wandered into the woods. Hours later, nearly frozen, her husband frantic at home, she stumbled onto a highway and flagged down a passing car. The truth of it all eludes me: the father's demand that she take certain medications, her refusal, claims on both ends. She left or she was forced out, and I kept cleaning the toilets that now belonged to the father alone. The mother found an apartment across town, and I visited her a few times because I'd grown close to her, and because she was sad, and because she wasn't allowed, for a brief time, to see her children. And so I would tell her about them, about what Jack drew or Joel said or how Julie laughed and laughed at *Pinocchio*. I never cleaned the mother's toilet, but I would've liked to have cleaned it, to show how sorry I was that she couldn't live with her children. I didn't know how else to tell her.

The Toilets of a College Residence Hall

I lived among forty-nine other women in an old-fashioned hall with four stories, built in the 1920s by a benefactress. Because I was quick to smile and crack jokes, I made friends fast and easy, but I took very seriously my responsibilities to the Hall, the Group. The women who lived there performed chores, each according to her ability, arranged by schedule. There were two toilets per story (exception: the basement had a single toilet). You'd expect that being assigned the bathroom cleaning was a badge of dishonor, a punishment, but in fact these duties were coveted. One campaigned for a year's worth of the responsibility—to be assigned to bathroom detail was a point of pride (to me). It meant you were dependable (I was, I was). If you proved yourself, if you earned bathroom duty, if it were your turn, sometimes your roommate would come in there to keep you company, sitting on the countertop between the sinks, her ankles bumping against the cabinets as she swung her legs. I loved the company because I wanted these women to understand that, with my help, things could run smoothly.

The Toilet of Two Friends Who Were Once in Love

Two of my friends had bought a broken-down house together. After I graduated college, I moved in with them as a favor. I could stay in a room on the second story, and I would help them with their tiny mortgage. When I arrived and got my hands on the toilet we all were to share, it was filthy, uncleaned for months. The first floor where they lived was a mess—dirty and crowded with furniture, books, records, fast-food trash, mugs full of coins, vintage armoires, clothing, daily detritus like receipts and the plastic from cigarette wrappers and cigarette butts. In the kitchen, the trash can was often overflowing while two other black trash bags sat full in the hallway by the back door, waiting to be removed. I moved out in a matter of months and in with a boyfriend. In a year's time, my friends broke up and the man moved out, and later the woman sold the house and moved out,

too. I missed her and felt guilty about leaving the two of them to their messes. I wanted to help. I went with her to clean the house. Inside the toilet tanks: streaks of yellow and gray and red and white, from neglect and rust and well water. There were no rubber gloves in the house and so with bare hands I took a crumpled green scrubby to the hard water stains inside the bowl while my friend took trash bag after trash bag to the curb.

The Toilet of a Lover

We worked together. One night in December we met up at a bar, and after that we were together for years. The first year, on his birthday, I wiped the mustache hairs that had fallen in the space between the seat's hinges and the tank. I wiped the soft layer of toilet-paper dust from the base. I hurried to finish. I wanted to surprise him when he got home from work. I had almost no money, but I could do this. When he arrived, he was irritable from a bad day and didn't brighten when I showed him a streak-less mirror and his toilet like new.

The Cleanest Toilet

My father had died, and a few months after that I moved into an apartment by myself in the middle of winter. I walked to work, walked home, turned up the heat, ate something or didn't, and learned to finish crossword puzzles. Often, very often, much more than weekly, I scrubbed my toilet, spent time with clean blue Windex, a neat roll of paper towels, and me kneeling next to a shining tub, taking comfort in doing something that needn't be done. After I scrubbed at nothing, I lay in my bed and watched PBS until I fell asleep. When I moved out a few months later, the apartment was clean as a well-planned crime scene, as clean as if I hadn't been.

The Second Cleanest Toilet

An old man went away for the summer, and I rented his tiny apartment, an add-on to a larger home. Facing the toilet, a large shower with handles in it. I ate a slice of toast with black beans once a day. I watched his DVDs on the history of Queen Elizabeth the First and didn't touch the collection of antique spoons that hung in curio boxes on the walls. One day, I noticed the way the bathroom window shined paned squares of light right above the toilet tank in the early morning. I put a framed picture of my father there to receive this light. I opened all of the windows, smoked in the apartment, scrubbed the toilet, smoked, scrubbed the shower, and my father's picture watched me do it.

The Restaurant Toilets

Although I was under-qualified, I became a server at a fancy restaurant. I begged for hours and saved up for better black pants and a crisper black button-up shirt, charming my way into tips, apologizing for my slow service, saying to women with gray wine-teeth and men with scotch-breath, "Yes, I understand your frustration. My manager will be over to help you." But during the slow times, I made up for it as best I could in the men's restroom, women's restroom, employee restroom. Before the lunch shift, after the lunch shift, before the dinner shift, after. Once, when I entered in the morning, I found a mess— from the look of it, some woman had eaten a lamb shank, drank a bottle of wine, and then vomited all over the first women's room stall, not only in the toilet but also around it. Also on the wall. I knelt in the stall, latex gloves up to my elbows, with a stack of paper towels and a spray bottle of watered-down bleach by my knees. *Grace in all things*, I tried to tell my co-workers, not in words but with my posture. I kept my back straight, no stooping, made a gentle joke out of the mountain of red-stained paper towels and nostril-searing odor of bleach. A happier moment: me at work on Halloween, wearing a plastic dishwasher's apron over my costume with a toilet brush brandished before a urinal before a lunch shift. I stood, making the right silly face, knowing my place, waiting for the good things, anything to happen.

The Prettiest Toilets

Two professors, a couple, paid me to clean for them. The professors were kind and paid well. Their house had four toilets, all on different floors. I believe their home had historical value, had stood during Quantrill's Raid, but the toilets were installed in the 1950s. They were pristine, white or baby blue. I did the whole house, dusting every rail of the banister, wiping the kitchen floor on hands and knees, vacuuming in a special, tidy pattern. I spent focused time with each of the four toilets; I took Q-tips to the often-ignored crevices around the seat's hinges. I worked those toilets in such a way because the professors appreciated how carefully I cleaned, and I loved them for that. I felt solid. I trusted this cycle of mutual respect.

The Friends' Toilets

I found a good apartment and kept it for years. For several summers, I stayed put while my friends left town or switched apartments, seeking out better rent, better locations. When July 31st came, I walked around town with my bucket, cleaning their quiet, empty bathrooms while they fretted in living rooms or on driveways with boxes and stuffed cars, asking each other, "Should we try to unpack it and repack it better?" I moved from apartment to apartment like a welcome wagon or a goodbye wagon, a distinction which depended on whether or not I would see that friend again. I scrubbed hairs from countertops, wiping mildew that formed during showers, scratched off their rusts. Took a toothbrush to the perimeter around a sink's faucet, scraping out orange and black grime. Waited for tired, sweaty nightfall, took the friends out for drinks, tried to say and be my best for them on these last nights.

The Ones I Hope to Clean

Sometimes I see a toilet I would like to clean in someone else's house, at a party, for example. I want to clean these toilets because I can tell from the way they look that the owner hated, just hated, to clean them. I want to clean them because I know what I am capable of, the way I can scrub a toilet on my hands and knees. I imagine myself crouched, wiping every fleck from around the seat's edge with the corner of a paper towel. Windex to the lower bulge of the outer bowl. Scrubbing down to porcelain. The things I could do to those toilets, the look of love on people's faces.

The "F-Word": Fragmentation and the Futility of Genre Classification

a conversation with Eula Biss, Sarah Manguso, Maggie Nelson, and Allie Rowbottom

Hybrid essays, lyrical essays, nonfiction novels, memoirs in fragments. Lately, the blurring of genre lines, although a storied tradition, seems to be of particular interest within writing programs and the literary communities that inform and encircle them. It was with an interest in these mixed forms, and a particular curiosity about potential links between poetry and creative nonfiction writing, that I approached Eula Biss, Sarah Manguso, and Maggie Nelson, three writers whose work epitomizes successful, lyrical life-writing and poetic journalism. The following conversation regarding genres, writing processes, and the lines between poetry and prose took place in the fall of 2011 and was, quite simply, illuminating. It was, likewise, a pleasure to curate. All I needed to do was sketch an outline for conversation and collaboration, then sit back and marvel at the color these writers brought to it.

—Allie Rowbottom

Allie Rowbottom: All of you work across genres, poetry and literary nonfiction in particular. What is the link between these genres for you? Do you find them especially complementary?

Sarah Manguso: I've never wanted to make up stories, so before I could fill a page I was called a poet, and after I could fill a page I was called an essayist. But I've been doing the same thing all along, just ruminating on my existential problems.

Maggie Nelson: All of my writing feels as if it exists on a continuum, with one of the abiding links being a certain disinterest in making up stories. Or, to put it more positively, one link has been an intense and ongoing desire to see and say, to document, to observe, to research, to bear witness, to articulate elements of the so-called "real." Another abiding link must be one's own recurring preoccupations, one's own problems. It's easy for me to see these through-lines in everything I write; the taxonomy of how the piece eventually needs to take form isn't really so important. Or, rather, how the piece eventually takes form is very important, but form for me comes

out of the imperatives of content. For some time now long-form prose has been the place where my particular imperatives have been compelling me.

Eula Biss: For me, genre is a continuous—rather than compartmentalized—space, and I write across it as my subject demands and my abilities allow. Even when I'm writing something that draws fairly unambiguously on the essay tradition, I tend to write across sub-genres of nonfiction. The metaphor of a spectrum, with its two extremes, is so often applied to these sub-genres that it eclipses the ways in which memoir can function as journalism or that personal meditation can function as cultural criticism. I've never found the taxonomy of genre particularly accurate and there is something about it that feels... um, like a charmingly pointless pastime? Maybe even a little colonialist and slightly macabre, like the pinning of butterflies. And maybe a tad gendered, too?

"Most writers... wouldn't dream of suggesting that, say, there is something inherently bad about poetry as a genre. But plenty of respected critics and writers get away with suggesting that there is something inherently inferior—maybe even disgusting and dirty—about memoir."

SM: That taxonomy conversation, with its obsessive ranking and sorting, to me just reeks of fear.

MN: Eileen Myles may have said it best, in a conversation with Laurie Weeks, in terms that weirdly echo Eula's butterfly comment:

> I think literary categories are false. They belong to the marketplace and the academy. It's the obedience issue that I'm saying fuck you to, the scholar or the editor trying to trap the writer like a little bug under the cup of 'poetry' or 'prose.'

Since writers crossing genres—either within pieces or over the course of a career—is about the least new thing under the sun, the question of why the taxonomy discussion has enthralled so many as of late (i.e., what that enthrall says about the sway of the marketplace and the academy) seems the larger one.

EB: This may be unfair, but I'll admit that whenever genre taxonomy is raised a little voice deep in my interior mutters, "Can't we leave that business to the boys?"

MN: I've been musing about the question of a gendered dynamic here. While I don't think it's a wrong proposition per se, I feel oddly dry about contributing a thought on this account. I think I might feel that way because it seems too rote to attribute an interest, or over-interest, in categorical thinking to something that might be called male, while something that involves blurred or undefined boundaries is attributed to something that might be called female. The division hearkens back to an old conversation about *écriture féminine* or about Aristotelian or Lockean categories—a conversation that doesn't seem to bear much fruit right now, especially as "blurring boundaries" has become its own sort of commodity. I think we all know, as readers and as writers, that good work is good work, and it doesn't matter if that work is intensely genre-specific or intensely genre-disobedient. There's crappy work on both accounts, and there's brilliant work on both accounts. As Eula explained earlier, most of the fascinating action in writing always comes in the in-between.

"Moore's piece uses the rhetorical devices common to Republican political campaigns, which generally play to people's laziness and fear rather than their reason and intellect."

EB: This question gets to something that has nettled me for some time, which is the way we allow memoir to be treated. Most writers, as Sarah points out, wouldn't dream of suggesting that, say, there is something inherently bad about poetry as a genre. But plenty of respected critics and writers get away with suggesting that there is something inherently inferior—maybe even disgusting and dirty—about memoir. Lorrie Moore's piece, "What If," in *The New York Review of Books* is the most recent offender that comes to mind, but she's just one of many.

I'm troubled by the very popular suggestion that memoir, because it sometimes sells well, is a selling of one's self. This charge is sometimes extended to anything written in the first person, a charge of "navel-gazing." This also somewhat solidifies an often vaguer association between memoir and the body, and then the frequent efforts to position memoir as low art or "artless." It seems quite possible that all of

these attitudes are actually the result of our extreme anxiety, as a culture, around the concept of the self. This self-loathing (ha!) just happens to intersect on occasion with woman-hating, another cultural feature... I don't know. But I do know that all this affects, and sometimes paralyzes, my students, who are often fearful or apologetic when writing about or through themselves. I have, more than once, met that fear with this quote from Sarah's *The Two Kinds of Decay*: "Those who claim to write about something larger and more significant than the self sometimes fail to comprehend the dimensions of a self."

MN: I wrote an undergrad thesis on the gendered notion of "confessionalism" in relation to the wildly misogynistic reception of Sexton and Plath, and then, years later, a dissertation-turned-book about gender and the "personalism" or "Personism" of the New York School, and the particular challenges female writers posed to its terms. I also just finished a dialogue about literature and gender with my friend Brian Blanchfield, called "Importunate to Meretricious, With Love," as a reviewer once called his first book "importunate," and my *The Red Parts* "meretricious." Neither of us knew what the words meant at the time, and both of us were utterly horrified when we looked them up. "Meretricious" means "of, or relating to, a prostitute"—to which I've learned to say, bring it on!

"With few exceptions, books by men are described as abstract entities, and books by women are described by adjectives that would more accurately describe a female body."

EB: I looked up "meretricious" some years ago when I was working on an essay about this subject and kept stumbling on the word in reviews of memoirs by women.

MN: I've grown so tired of writers (or anyone, really) pillorying that which they don't naturally tend towards (i.e., fiction writers denouncing the memoir), and, in turn, valorizing what they do (i.e., we three valorizing the complicated literary memoir). That's why I think your point about counseling your students gets at where the action is. Rather than spending one's time and energy defending the value of any given genre or mode, one might instead focus on imparting a sense

of maximum permission and agency to go wherever it feels hottest to go, come whatever small-minded or misogynist opprobrium may.

As a jump start, I recommend watching the hilarious little film clips, easily found online, that Wayne Koestenbaum recorded for his recent book *Humiliation*, in which he includes a lesson on how one might transform a fart in yoga into a badge of shame.

SM: I, too, recognize the coded misogyny with which memoir is disparaged in major media outlets. At least as bad is the open misogyny with which virtually all books by women are reviewed, even by other women. With few exceptions, books by men are described as abstract entities, and books by women are described by adjectives that would more accurately describe a female body. Meretricious is just the beginning!

EB: The Lorrie Moore piece was interesting to me less for what it said than for how effectively it reflects the most common misapprehensions of the genre. It begins with a series of rhetorical questions that suggests an odd nostalgia for the kind of traditional memoir that is more or less limited to servicing the greatness of the author. If memoirs in this tradition often fail as works of art, I would propose that that is mainly because they were never intended to function as works of art. But Moore mistakes this lack of ambition in certain works as an inherent flaw in the genre—thus the weirdest feature of her review is that it is an ostensibly positive review of two memoirs framed by a negative review of the genre. Any failings of these works are due to the fact, she suggests, that nothing better could be accomplished in this genre: "Even Nabokov's canonical *Speak, Memory* does not give us the brilliantly vivid and coherent dreams of his novels—because it simply can't." She says "even" because she began by echoing the popular lament that memoirs are now being written by ordinary people, quoting Neil Genzlinger in the *The New York Times Book Review*: "Unremarkable lives" should go "unremarked upon." The possibility that what makes a life "unremarkable" is also what makes it fascinating seems to me to be underscored by the frequency with which works of fiction feature characters carefully crafted to appear "unremarkable," even when their circumstances are extraordinary.

SM: We seem to be talking specifically about "common misapprehensions," which to me means the misapprehensions of the willfully ignorant. Moore's piece uses the rhetorical devices common to Republican political campaigns, which generally play to people's laziness and fear rather than their reason and intellect. The misapprehensions encouraged by Moore, Genzlinger, et al aren't going to go away. People for whom the highest literary form is the latest 800-page historical novel are simply not ever going to judge work based on its actual quality, or certainly not until the major media outlets fall in line with the best judges, and that usually takes a generation or two. Until then, it's pearls before swine. Maybe my question is: Until then, should we care?

In an interview between the filmmaker Caveh Zahedi and poet Amanda Field in the San Francisco Film Society's online magazine, *SF360.org*, Zahedi speaks of what he calls "the fascism of the extraordinary":

> I remember once, I approached one of the programmers of a new video diary series on public TV, and said, "I'm doing a video diary, can I possibly submit it?" She said, "What's your angle?" I said, "Well, it's just a year in my life." She said, "What's so special about your life?" I said, "Well, nothing, that's the point." And she said, "Well, are you handicapped? Are you gay? Do you have a terminal illness? Is there some reason we should care about your life?" I said, "Nothing beyond the fact that I'm a human being, and I'm having a life." And she said, "Well, I don't think that's what we're looking for." I think that assumption that ordinary life is boring is just a really prevalent one, and there has to be something that is preordained as dramatic.

His responses so beautifully frame the basic problem we're all up against.

MN: I agree. Why worry over assessments of the genre when there are so many interesting pieces of writing to attend to instead? I've never cared at all about memoir as a genre anyway. I prefer the phrase "life-writing" with all its ambiguous largess, and its invocation of the unremarkable, as Sarah describes above. Or just plain-old autobiographical writing. Also, I think if one comes out of poetry,

questions such as the ones Moore poses are simply moot—no one talks about "autobiographical poetry" as opposed to not.

The fascism of the extraordinary is a 1% phenomenon. As if we're supposed to read books by the "job creators"! God help us! Anyone with such an attitude should be made to read David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* out loud, in their entirety, on the steps of City Hall, with the police closing in. But really, questions about whose lives matter have haunted the genre of memoir in the U.S. since its colonization (cf. the slave narrative, the captivity narrative, Ben Franklin, and so on). Personally I don't know anyone who thinks content, much less "extraordinary content," has much to do with good writing. Most writers know that extraordinary things can be more difficult to make into good writing than the mundane, anyway.

"Clutter and emptiness aren't mutually exclusive, and most bad writing is both cluttered and empty."

In the interests of turning the conversation more toward what we like than what irks us, here are some of my favorite life-writing reads as of late: Herve Guilbert's *My Parents*, Eve Sedgwick's *The Weather in Proust*, TJ Clark's *The Sight of Death*, Laurie Weeks's *Zippermouth*, Natalie Ginzburg's *A Place to Live*, Bruce Benderson's *The Romanian*, Yvonne Rainer's *Feelings Are Facts*, Lucille Clifton's *Generations*, Gwenaëlle Aubry's *Personne*. And there are so many more.

SM: I live off other people's reading lists like a vampire, so it's very good to have yours. My recent joys include Elif Batuman's *The Possessed*, Paula Fox's *Borrowed Finery*, Jane Lazarre's *The Mother Knot*, Muriel Spark's *Curriculum Vitae*, Deb Olin Unferth's *Revolution*, and Spalding Gray's monologues.

EB: Some my most enduring favorites are Hilton Als's *The Women*, D.J. Waldie's *Holy Land*, Anne Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband* (a fictional essay, but in the guise of life writing), and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's difficult and amazing *Dictee*. And I just read Joan Didion's *Blue Nights*. She's always been instructive to me in terms of how one's life might be written through, rather than about. So *Blue Nights* is not about the death of her daughter so much as it is a meditation on an

idea invoked by that death: "When we talk about mortality we are talking about our children."

I'm very often asked, in interviews or public conversations about my work, what extraordinary experience motivated me to write a book about race. Maybe this comes from the idea of a "radicalizing" experience, or perhaps it comes from the idea that whiteness is racelessness and that white people don't experience race directly. Either way, I'm forced to answer that the only experience that motivated me was the experience of being a white woman in this country, which is both completely ordinary and quite extraordinary at the same time.

The Two Kinds of Decay is a work that I admire in part for the grace with which Sarah meets the challenge of writing about (or through) an extraordinary experience. I'm curious, Sarah, how and what have you thought about that aspect of the work?

SM: I have trouble remembering that *The Two Kinds of Decay* is about an extraordinary experience because for me, the experience involved so much empty, ordinary time. And in fact I omitted many of the most extraordinary bits, the little shocks that would have made me dog-ear the pages if I'd read it in fifth grade. They would have ruined what coherence or continuity the book retains in its current form. So in its composition, I guess I tried not to make the book any more thrilling or any more boring than it needed to be. Again, the imperatives of content.

In my forthcoming book, and the mess of notes I'm working on now, the purported subjects are crises, but most of the content—where most of my interest resides—is in the empty space surrounding those crises. And with that I believe you've made me realize something new about my own work.

Maggie, I love the way you've politicized the question of whose lives matter. My father is constantly telling me that my next book should be about the history of a start-up company. "Because that's what people like to read," he keeps telling me. I need to move more units! Yet he maintains that *The Two Kinds of Decay* is his favorite book.

AR: Each of you has created work comprised of multiple short pieces or fragments which add up to a larger whole. What about your content (ordinary, extraordinary, traumatic, empty) has made this fragmentary form useful?

SM: Oh, I'm so glad we've arrived at the F-word!

Here's one of my favorite aphorisms from James Richardson's ongoing, now three-volume collection of aphorisms: "All stones are broken stones." I think it's a great starting point to considering what *fragmented* really means. An 800-page novel is no more complete or unbroken than a 100-page essay. Clutter and emptiness aren't mutually exclusive, and most bad writing is both cluttered and empty.

I've always been interested in compression and distillation, even in correspondence and teaching and packing for trips and deciding what to keep in the apartment and so on. I enjoy making things as small as possible (but no smaller), and the result is often called a fragment. To my mind, white space on the page doesn't mean the text has been fragmented (i.e., broken); the text is simply taking a breath, and that breath is just as inherent to the text as the surrounding words.

EB: In a course where I was teaching your work, Sarah, one of my students was unsatisfied with the term "fragment" and suggested that we use the term "orb," which would imply something whole and self-contained rather than broken or incomplete. In what I'm working on now, a long essay about vaccination, I've found that I tend to write in sections of about 1,500 words. That's long for me, but that seems to be the unit of thought that is building this essay. And that's how I often think of the short pieces or "fragments" that make up some of my work—as units of thought. I nearly always compose in self-contained packages that I can easily move around as my thinking clarifies and the structure of the work emerges. In some cases I leave the white space around those packages and in other cases I close it—that decision depends on what the white space is doing or not doing for the work. Most of the essays in *Notes from No Man's Land*, for instance, were written in sections of 50-100 words that I then sealed together—the sandy beaches, maybe, of "All stones are broken stones."

This current long essay (probably a book) is like *Notes* in that it's looking at the extraordinarily demanding questions that can be presented by ordinary experience. In this case the experience is motherhood, which is common and full of humdrum drudgery but has, for me, forced some challenging epistemological questions about our body of knowledge. It's a departure for me, in a lot of ways, because it is so very technical and concerned with abstractions, particularly the action of meta-

phor. But this conversation, Sarah, has made me realize that it's also, in the ordinary extraordinary sense, familiar territory. I was recently asked to write an essay about my experience with childbirth, and I began working on it but stalled almost immediately. I suffered a very rare complication immediately after my son's birth that nearly killed me, and I found that I did not know how to navigate both the anomalous nature of the experience and the grand drama of a birth and death bloodbath. The essay became about not knowing how to tell the story, but it's no less difficult for me to write and I haven't been able to finish it.

"...After all, one cannot spend one's life observing oneself. *I am sitting at the writing desk. I am still sitting at the writing desk.*"

AR: Maggie, in Ben Segal's "The Fragment as a Unit of Prose Composition," I found your description of the organizing principles you employed in *Bluets* really helpful:

> While some of the fragments may seem disconnected or distinct, the truth is that they each had to fall into one the book's major categories, which included love, language, sex, divinity, alcohol, pain, death, and problems of veracity/perception. If I truly couldn't tether an anecdote or factoid to the thread, it eventually had to go.

The thread of veracity/perception seems pertinent to this discussion of form. Is there something about content that is searching for something—answers, understandings, reality—or the task of making sense of traumatic or overwhelming material, that makes collages of small "orbs" the best form to employ? Why might this be? I am thinking here of Eula's *The Balloonists*, as well as *Notes*, and Sarah's *The Two Kinds of Decay*.

SM: The world needs more thoughtful writing about motherhood, so, Eula, you've got to write that book. Just wait ten years. Or fifty years...I've always loved memoirs written at great distance from their subjects. The Fox and Spark books I mentioned above fit that category, and so does William Maxwell's novella, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*.

I don't believe that a particular subject dictates a particular form. I'd say a particular subject engaged by a particular mind can dictate a particular form, and that you're speaking with three writers who share similar compositional tics. But maybe the others disagree.

MN: I agree with what Sarah says above, about a particular subject not dictating any particular form. Perhaps what I like most is her distinction that it's a particular *mind* that does it. After all, the question isn't a Platonic or mechanistic one, like, how can this work be accomplished. The question is, how can *I* get this work accomplished. When I wrote *Jane: A Murder*, a lot of people commented—and maybe I even concurred—that the book's fragmentary nature was integral to its content, which was the reconstruction of the life and death of a fundamentally unknowable subject who had died traumatically and mysteriously (i.e., an unsolved sexual murder). But really this was Monday morning quarterbacking. *Jane* was what it was because of the skills and desires I had in approaching it, not because there's any necessary relationship between white space or fragmentary construction and trauma, memory, unknowability, the unspeakable, and so on. There are (thankfully) many, many ways to conjure those things. Which doesn't mean one can't look at a work and inquire into how it does what it does—how its form is an extension of its content, as Bob Creeley used to say.

EB: When I was in the early stages of writing *The Balloonists*, I thought I was writing notes for a "real" book about marriage that I would eventually write. I was exploring my subject through association, and the form of that particular book took shape from the way my mind was moving across my subject—from a bit of evidence to a bit of episode to a bit of argument to a bit of metaphor and back around—bound by the questions the subject was demanding. When Robyn Schiff was recently asked in an interview about her use of "free association," she countered that she prefers to think of the type of association she works with as "bound association." That was a clarifying term for me, and is true to how I work.

I'm thinking, Sarah, that there are devices that might provide distance other than time. This essay I'm working on now is, in many ways, about motherhood, but very rarely references any specific moments of actual mothering because all my

material is so thoroughly strained through the filter of medicine, medical history, knowledge production, scientific method, and metaphor. Limiting my subject matter on the page to vaccination (though it hardly seems like a limit) has had the kind of wrong-end-of-a-telescope effect of making my life and experience seem very far away.

SM: The goal of producing a proper masterpiece, or even a proper book—which generally means reproducing the received ideas about what books ought to do—can be so poisonous to actual discovery. (And yes, I'm talking about myself, here. But not exclusively.)

MN: It does always seem as though making things—including books—ends up a grand compromise, or at least negotiation, between one's ambition, vision, or inspiration for them, and the actual manifested result. This can seem disheartening or deflating until one has written enough to know that this isn't an impediment to the process of creating—it is the process. Then one can begin to marvel at the sometimes perverse, often surprising, relation between the imagined and the manifest: it can be engaged, expected, enjoyed.

AR: I want to bring back something that came up earlier in our conversation when Sarah said the novel form holds very little interest for her. I wonder if there's something about this that doesn't tie into the "reality culture" we are all presently stewing in. It seems to me that everywhere I go, there's a fixation with the "real," from reality television to this oft repeated phrase in popular music, "I'm the realest." Is this something you notice? Does it in any way affect your reading appetites? What about the reading or writing your students consume or produce?

MN: I know there are many who are actively involved with this conversation, but I don't think I have any real contribution to make on its account. I am personally most generative when engaged with the so-called real, and I enjoy its constraints, as a writer. As I said earlier, I am wary of making generalizations or manifestos out of my own personal inclinations. Not to mention the fact that the distinction between "reality" and "imagination" typically breaks down under scrutiny.

SM: Allie, I'd take Maggie's point and opine that all opposites break down under scrutiny, so even trying to distinguish between real things and imagined things seems specious.

EB: Sarah, this reminds me of how important Donna Haraway's thinking in "A Cyborg Manifesto" has been to me—particularly her insistence on the fertile territory not between polarities, but where they are refused or confused or combined. "A cyborg," she writes, "is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction." She then goes on to clarify that "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion." I'm a secret admirer of science fiction for this reason. I'm drawn to what science fiction does with both information and social critique. And these are the two main forces, of course, that tend to drive my writing. Like Maggie, I enjoy certain constraints. I enjoy the constraints that working with information, as information, can impose on a work. I enjoy the challenge of making something out of what happened, as much as what happened can be ascertained. But it doesn't take very long, when one is working with information or events, to discover how very unreal both can be.

SM: Perceiving ongoingness is a crucial problem of experience, and depicting ongoingness is a crucial problem of autobiography. One takes for granted the basic impossibility of writing about oneself except anecdotally—after all, one cannot spend one's life observing oneself. *I am sitting at the writing desk. I am still sitting at the writing desk.*

I'm trying to write about my anxiety over the fact that I can't remember ongoing time, that so much of my life (myself) is essentially unavailable, gone. That the human brain is physiologically incapable of retaining autobiographical memory as anything but scraps of a lost whole cloth fails to comfort me.

EB: This reminds me of something people kept saying to me right after my son was born: "You'll never get this time back." That always bothered me a little, and I'd think, "Yes, but isn't that the nature of time? We don't get any of it back."

Rude Girls

from Dispatches from the Sex Doll Factory

I watch the movie about Marie Antoinette
while smoking a bowl
& I know what Jenny would say if she were here.

Jenny would call for the entrails of the Queen. She'd say,
Marie Antoinette so understands
that this is how we like our women. Fucking headless.

She would call me out for watching
a costumed snuff film,
as she would totally put it, though watching it would have been her idea.

Isn't this how you like your women?
She would ask me. *Look at her!*
& I'd look at her, the Queen of France, rattled through the streets,

bleeding out like a stuck pig & I
would not tell Jenny
how Marie Antoinette was so brainwashed

that she said sorry to her executioner
for stepping on his foot
right before the guillotine went *thwack*.

Marie Antoinette's Husband Was a Total Baller

but he never really took advantage of it.
He gave his wife the house he was supposed to give

to his mistress. Jenny asks me if I think that is way romantic
& I know it's a trick question but I can't tell which way

because last night Jack and I got faded
on Red Bull & André cocktails back at the factory,

& we stayed up watching a documentary,
so instead, I tell Jenny that when the revolution started up, & folks

started smashing all the furniture
in the palace & ripping up the gardens, the King said

It is pleasant that this rage
is confined to inanimate objects, & I tell her I think that's so hilarious,

Oh, hilarious, Jenny returns,
her voice serious as Madame Tussaud, who was also there, at the revolution,

according to the documentary,
& whose head was even shaved for execution before she was pardoned

last-minute so that she could pick
her dead friends' faces up off the lawn & mold them into candles.

Laynie Browne

from *Mendicant*: "Dear She"

She was not going to say, as she faced her beloved on the platform, about to lose her life: "you'll always—"

So much we could lie in bed and talk about as if we'd never been.

Your arms rest on a countertop. Slander, an affliction on your person or house in the form of a whitish rash. How shall we say anything. Believable.

If these times were pretend—

When language has been ignored it becomes less needy, more abrupt and a cancellation effect is possible. I pick up a brush or an urn. To collect something. What becomes of the irretrievable?

Who becomes anyone then? If I have forgotten what I am here for, and the impatience which follows. You'll be away until—the end of several series of curses. I must be free to say anything. Last summer was too much travel for any sense of completion. I want all of the projects, even if still without proper homes, to sit upon my shelves correctly. I want to know what is in every notebook and to disallow all unnecessary pages. I want everything in order as if I were dying.

The solidity and warmth of your arm upon a counter, and my sudden sense of you very much alive. We all inhabit each other and yet—

Stop clicking yourself away, and all of the students in lectures while occupied on devices. Why are they there and—clicked away?

I was at radiation and I was annoyed because they were making me wait. I'd already waited for half an hour and I had to give a talk in one more half an hour. So I said, are you going to treat me? And I really thought that then I'd have to go give my talk—dead. How would I get there in less than half an hour?

Norman Dubie

Gotterdammerung

There was, I think, a garnet irritant in the powder
and so I took a pill against it
and fell unconscious there in the heaps
of cosmetics— the approaching horns
of the hunters with slow livery, all opera
like water turning with the stag
turning to a dragon. The mist moving off
the river and Brunnhilde with a blue torch
walking asleep among the wharfs. The metropolitan

insisting that the stage
was being prepared for me, someone
sweeping sawdust, glitter, and an ankle
with foot, living and dead mice—
if the world was burning, it was
Damascus I visited: two men hanging
from a very green tree, hanging
by their feet and the children
collecting coins beneath them.

Brunnhilde with her breasts cut off and red-faced dogs
barking from the cavities. Her voice
has become the river. I wake
with flames in all my joints. My hands swollen—
minutes later they are sawing
the gold ring from my black finger.

My husband watches with the lolling tongue
of the stag, more dogs hanging from his groin
and throat. I said
to the nurse, *Elizabeth*
had a dress that was soaked in poison?

Chris Dombrowski

Comes to Worse

Although the irony is palpable, the irony is not the story.
I taught
the second graders knots two days before I found him, my only
son, hanging from his ceiling fan.
Some sound knocked me awake,
then the phone rang, his girlfriend sobbing (they'd been in a fight),
and I rose from the couch, my nursing textbook thumping on the
floor, to take him the portable.
I instruct CPR on weekends to
would-be lifeguards but couldn't pull him down, his sinews, once
taut from snowboarding, gone slack.
Who knows how the neighbor
heard my screams but he did and arrived to find me balancing on
the chair, taking some strain off the noose.

▪ ▪ ▪

Say you are sixteen and your father has another family, two sons
he doesn't call his sons but treats as such, and you live with your
mother who swallows your disdain like so many anti-depressants
ignored in green bottles in your book bag, chances are you haven't
kissed your mom in weeks.
But look at me now, lying on my
back, her lips latched to mine.
She's feeding me again, this time
with oxygen.
When I was in her body, when she prayed twice
daily to Saint Anne because she'd lost three already, she fed me
with fluids, her body tending the wavering flame of my heartbeat

that is passing now into the great vacancy and which she must again retrieve from nothingness.

I wanted this quiet but not forever, all the gatekeepers here, reverent to the silence.

I never imagined lantern light so blue against running water.

Already, we're crossing, the leeches and caddis huts loosed by our boots, the slow water shallower than expected.

▪ ▪ ▪

Comes to worse.

When I was a boy I feared most the bars on the basement windows, the sound of the nighthawks' wings sawing through the dusk, the placenta from sister's birth that my mother buried in the garden, though now I'm sure that these readied me to stare this moment in the eyes.

If and when a son is born, you can cry, can weep openly when he dies, but when he is somewhere vaguely in between, you had better fasten yourself to a sturdy trunk, throw a loop around his legs and bore your heels into the earth.

I saw a girl walking to school today in her pink jacket past the school playground where the wind was moving ever slightly the empty swings beneath a pine whose needles numbered our myriad notions of God.

If you look up from an internet article on comas in which you had learned that the largely inert head of a comet is also called a coma, you might just see such a thing.

▪ ▪ ▪

As a girl I would become quite despondent when the liturgy closed with a hymn I didn't like because I knew the song would linger in my head throughout the day, eddying—yesterday I saw while driving to the hospital a wet barn in dusk, and cannot close my eyes today without its afterimage singeing the backs of my eye lids.

Yes, it was red; it had rained for the briefest of moments.

▪ ▪ ▪

I'm fingering the tatters of a dream-scarf that unraveled just as I took hold of it: Coming home through the back yard in the 3 a.m. rain toward the single lit window peppered with a million spent moths I stumble on my old dog Valley who straightens her front legs, a hint she might rise up to greet me, then falters with dramatic sigh, a long exhalation that threatens to be her last: *No you don't*, I tell her, *no you don't.*

▪ ▪ ▪

Coffee, green tea, some carb-free ginseng smoothie: each morning you pour it, you drink from your cup of blame, and it's good because at least then you can stop thinking, stop talking causalities around it.

When he was three and his mom and I were still together we visited her relatives back east and driving home late one night stopped to see Niagara Falls.

You forget that it's a river, I mean before it takes that sheer drop, it's just a river meandering between its banks.

Cold or afraid, he climbed up onto my chest and I zipped him inside of my coat—my major foray into this welter of self-pity is not that it's all gone but that it's all left.

▪ ▪ ▪

I could blame the bookshelf with its Camus and Berryman but each one of us except the most calloused or the most genetically attuned has dreamt of a river bank cut deep enough to bury us, an impact with enough dominion to annihilate that madness.

Forever,

whatever forever means.

I would have envisioned blaming myself a little more—if only I'd packed him a slice of carrot cake, if only the concert, if only the—but the conditional tense is not conducive to survival, which tells me he's still with us.

I can only wish him more earth, in the bluntest of terms: another stolen swig of whiskey brief as a July snow, another hard tumble on his board, another fuck, another hummingbird.

▪ ▪ ▪

I can't see them, but I know their voices, the sweet slightly fecal scent of dying lilacs, the sound of coins sliding back in the pocket of my father sitting down in a chair, birdsong they haven't opened the window to yet: omens all.

I am alive to think but barely mutter that the river of myth was as wet as any other, bride of fire: cold, then very cold, until it turns hot.

They can keep your light on but they haven't figured out that you can hear the television tuned to a documentary on wolverines, a trapped animal bashing itself against the live-trap's lid weighed down by two hundred-pound sandbags, and the intern's story one night about a stillborn the doctor delivered feet first, head they delivered the woman of.

Thus I am

wombed away again, sleeping this not-sleep, wondering if I'll arrive again in the wakefulness that seemed so often like a dream.

▪ ▪ ▪

In the beginning there was a boy sleeping in his bed and in the end there'll be a boy sleeping in his bed, and here in this between there is a boy—when I call him mine I weep—sleeping in his bed.

▪ ▪ ▪

A few stray notes get left out of the fugue but of course I can't remember what they were: did I say the mark the noose left covered up the hickey I had chastised him about, that the noose itself was his beloved yellow belaying rope?

My favorite poet wrote *the scent of dying lilacs reminds the soul that it exists* so yesterday I cut a hundred boughs from the bushes (this tells me it's almost May) and placed them in jars around his room, the blooms the color of his face when I found him.

In the warrens of grief, no way appears that does not hint at why you entered.

▪ ▪ ▪

I came to wailing last night and now am certain that what I thought was shallow water rushing over stones, the current embracing my tightening form, was really mother-hush, her small arms holding me a little longer here.

Mother, you are a brief spring snow and the ash's berry clusters not quite blushing.

▪ ▪ ▪

Late last August a torrid thunderstorm caught us just upstream
from Triple Bridges and I remember thinking, as the boat slipped
beneath each bridge between the thin sheets of water pouring from
each high edge: mercy might be brief but it is mercy.
I didn't say
amen: I would compose my prayers—take him from this world,
no, leave him here—but like an email deemed too personal,
refused to hit the send button.
I recalled a bedtime story in which the boy—
who was to become the father of the boy to whom the story was
being told by the narrator, a cat—dupes an attacking rhino by
giving it a toothbrush.
Why a toothbrush I haven't the frailest idea, but I
understood just now, while the eyelids of the boy to whom I once
read this story fluttered, that the fictional boy's only failing would
have been to deem insufficient what he carried.
I see the edge of his
eyeball, squid-white, and don't know to whom these words go
out but whisper: That was kind of you.

▪ ▪ ▪

The wind buffeting my eardrum.
There's a feeling I'd forgotten.

Liza Butler

Some Massive Gravity

The big square pills or the small bullet pills make our old dog Sequoia thirsty. She laps up so much water I have to refill her bowl twice a day. I joke that she is doing much better than me—I am supposed to drink ten cups of water a day, but drinking makes the morning sickness worse, so I barely manage five. She's drinking enough for both of us. But then she begins to leak in her sleep. I see a small dark patch on her bed at first, my sock-covered feet finding bigger patches by the couch where we both nap in the afternoon. I soak them up with an old towel, but the smell of the cleaning spray makes me gag. I tell Cameron, and he says he'll take care of it, buy special enzyme cleaner that has no smell. All I can think is how this will get worse, how the whole house will reek of urine, how he'll be away working for most of the summer, home only every second weekend at most, how I will be the one taking care of it. I focus on work, on the stack of books distracting me from my nausea, anything to avoid thinking about this ailing dog and this alien life taking over my body and brain. I want it all to stop. I want things back to the way they were before. It's two more weeks until the screening that may or may not tell us if there is something wrong with the baby.

Cameron does not worry about these tests. At least not the way I do. In my mind the baby already has cystic fibrosis. Or the space at the back of her neck is secretly swelling. Or a patch of her back has failed to close up, leaving the delicate tendril of her spinal cord open and exposed. I feel the massive weight of the US medical system bearing down on us as we try to care for this ill-formed baby. I do not ask *will we love her?* I ask *will we be able to afford her?* I remind myself that my Irish passport, my years of British residency, and my still-active National Insurance number mean something. We can trade our five acres of Sierra Foothill sunshine, this house we've shared for two years, for a tiny squat row house in the gloomy chill of an impending English winter and free health care. Cameron will do this, if we must, but he refuses to imagine it, refuses to watch as I mentally pack up our things and search online for cheap flights. In his imagination sits a whole and healthy baby on the smooth wood of the back

porch he built during the weeks when she lay hidden inside me, before we even knew she existed.

▪ ▪ ▪

At our first prenatal check-up, the nurse Helen wheels in a portable ultrasound machine. As I lie on my back, feet up in stirrups, she turns the screen toward us. The blurry image reminds me of my sister's small black-and-white television, the indoor antenna. On rainy, windy nights, sequestered upstairs, we lay on our bellies peering into the static while downstairs our dad tutored pupils for the extra money we needed. Helen knows what to look for, points out a dark mass that uncurls into two masses—a head and a body, she says, not two babies—there is just the single embryo. She tells me I'm healthy and the baby is growing well. Three centimeters already with a little lentil heart thumping 160 beats per minute. On the monitor, all I see is dark squirming into light, a fuzziness that pulses with the beat—when the sound fills the room, the baby squiggles, dances. Helen laughs. Later she gives us a leaflet about early testing. After age thirty-five, she says, the risk of Down's syndrome and other birth defects increases from one in a thousand to one in three hundred. I'm thirty-six. I will be thirty-seven when the baby comes. If it comes. I also hear there's a one in five chance of miscarriage in this first trimester. We take the paper, tell her we'll think it over.

It never occurred to me there could be more than one baby, so my relief surprises me. Did I think she would see on the screen a trace of another, tinier embryo, not yet five weeks, poppy-seed heart too small to see, hiding behind this baby? Our ghost child, not old enough for a heartbeat, not old enough to even be called fetus, the name this one will earn at ten weeks, meaning *little one*. What are these ones, before they are little ones? Is there a littleness too small to name? Too small to matter? There is plenty of room right now for both; this new baby can slip and slide and squiggle freely. But as she grows, will there still be space? Will she have to offer a quarter ounce of flesh to this other? How great will the price be? A hare lip? Spina Bifida? Trisomy 18? Miscarriage?

▪ ▪ ▪

At ten weeks everyone tells me it gets easier soon, that I will not always be this exhausted and miserable. For now I lie curled on the couch, one hand resting on the dog's rump. She seems to know that I am pregnant, that everything is changing. When I crash land here every chance I get, Sequoia hauls up her weak back end, legs shaking, and lumbers over to lie beside me. If she can stand long enough, she'll rub her soft face against my belly before beginning a creaky descent that reminds me of a very old woman lowering herself into a sagging rocker, as though not quite trusting the stability of the world.

The vet suspects the latest lump may be cancerous. She's full of bumps. Fatty tumors, he calls them. But this one is growing visibly. Even Cameron, who brought her home at eight weeks, tiny enough to fit in his big hand, admits that this one is growing fast. Our old-fashioned country vet didn't suggest extreme measures. He sighed when Cameron brought her—me at home, too nauseous to make the trip—and told him a biopsy will only slow her more. It won't tell us anything we won't see in the next few months. Cameron left with two bottles of pills—the big square ones and the small bullet-shaped ones—for pain and inflammation. "Not for now," the vet warned, "you'll know when it's time to start those." Cameron told me later how she perked up when he lifted her into the cab of his truck. "It's her old spot, where she used to ride before I came along," I reminded him. She hasn't ridden in the truck in a long time; when we take her places we fold down the seats in my car, spread her blanket on top of a foam pad so she can lie down. She still prefers the split open seat and loose tobacco smell of his old truck, the prospect of a road trip. It's hard to imagine Cameron without her. I know he isn't ready. The vet says either she will die in her sleep, or we will know when it's time. *How?* I want to ask.

I picture her on the worn linoleum, trembling in the threshold, dreading the shiny steel exam table. I see Cameron lift her, stiff legs slightly splayed, eyes wide, to lie facing the vet she has known her entire life, whose voice she recognizes. All her ailments, small and not so small, have been poked and prodded and discussed and diagnosed on this table. I am not ready to think that she may have to die on this table.

▪ ▪ ▪

A few years ago, squatting over a white plastic stick, I watched the window turn blue. One heavy horizontal line appeared, then a second, fainter, vertical, a cross. Not that I didn't already know, but there was something about it—X marks the spot, put your mark here, a cross, something that was *wrong*. I'd known Cameron only three months. We were not ready for this. I was not ready. I stood on the cold linoleum of my cramped bathroom, pulled off all my clothes, and stared at my body in the warped mirror hanging over the door. I could see nothing, could tell nothing from the outside. Nobody would know. Nobody would ever know. I would know. Cameron would know. I was three days late—the tiny being in me was less than three weeks old, there wasn't even a heartbeat. But there was this faint blue line, this cross I saw.

The following day I stepped from the heat of my houseboat into a cold January morning. This thing I was about to do, I was about to do it not to me, but to us. An us I didn't see when I saw those crossed blue lines. No heartbeat, no torso, no limbs, not even a head yet. There was a ball of cells, a blastocyst separating at speed, trying desperately to overcome the odds, to become more than a faint blue line, to survive, to be. I wanted and didn't want to make it stop. I was not ready to be we. I wanted to stay *me*.

▪ ▪ ▪

At our second appointment I sit on the edge of the exam table, my faded hospital gown smoothed over my dangling legs, the stirrups tucked away, filling out paperwork. This is only the second time I've worn such a thing. It's always been paper vests and wrap-around paper sheets, usually dark blue, hard to hold closed while the doctor explains whatever needs explaining. Now that I'm not sick but pregnant, I get a fabric dress so long it hangs almost to my ankles. Perhaps it isn't meant to, and I'm just short. I leave my socks on.

The forms outline a blood test at week ten, a scan at week twelve, and another blood test at week fifteen. There will or will not be things in my blood that will or will not indicate certain risks, possibilities, propensities. The scan will take measurements, input data into an equation synched with the numbers titrated from my

blood; the small private world I'm still building for this baby will get invaded by math, by calculations, statistics, and risk factors. Thirty-six must be incorporated. Often that alone tips the balance. Helen reminds us, "There's often a false positive because your age works against the rest of the math." So I'm trying to expect a positive result, which is the bad result, the wrong result, the one you don't want.

I think about all the exams I had to take growing up in England, in a school system obsessed with tests and scores. I always got high marks, even in math, which I hated. All those equations and meaningless numbers attached to stories that made no sense—I had to learn not to waste time wondering why Sally needed to put the ladder against the wall, to instead focus on the length of the ladder and the number of centimeters out from the wall where she set the feet. *If she wants to know if the ladder will reach the window, why can't she just stick it up there and see*, I want to ask.

The screening is not diagnostic—it will not tell us if the baby has an actual defect, lacks or harbors an extra chromosome. Like IQ tests and school exams, these tests are only predictive.

▪ ▪ ▪

It's hard to see growth that happens in front of you. Is her shoulder bigger now? Is it really growing? Is she stiffer? I want to ask Cameron, but the one time I do, arriving home from our second prenatal appointment, he shakes his head and says, "She's fine, it's the weather." I want to tell him he's in denial, that he needs to prepare for this, that decisions will need to be made. He rolls off the couch and kneels in front of her, petting her, chatting, teasing her a little until she begins the odd cry-whine that sounds so much like talking, that she only makes when she's perfectly happy. He will not waste this joy thinking about what he cannot change. I am becoming less certain that we will know when the time has come.

▪ ▪ ▪

With three days to go before the screening, and not knowing how else to ask, I say, "If she has Down's syndrome, or some other awful thing, would you still want her?" Cameron does not hesitate. "Of course," he says. I want to think he

says this because of the way I asked, because he believes that's what I want to hear. But it isn't, and he didn't. I know this is what he feels. I don't know what I feel. I cannot get past the other tiny one I shed from my body before I even faced any of this—not because there was anything wrong with him, but because he happened too soon, in the wrong place, when we still lived hundreds of miles apart. How can I know I will want and love this baby when I decided I didn't want the other one?

I frown and tell Cameron I am not sure I agree. He says not to worry, the baby will be fine, the tests will come back and everything will be fine, I'll see. But what if they come back positive, what if the risk is high? Will we do an amniocentesis? Will we try to find out for sure? But maybe I don't want to. If Cameron says he would have this child no matter what, what difference will knowing make? He grins and says I'm starting to sound like him, deciding it's best not to worry about things we can't change. But it's not true; a few years ago we'd have had better odds. With the scan tomorrow, I cannot sleep while he snores softly beside me, curled around me with one hand tucked under my still flat belly.

▪ ▪ ▪

A week of rain and murk and the air becomes chilly, snow forecast down to three thousand feet. Cameron moves my car up to the road, just in case. Sequoia, like the old lady she is, suffers most in this damp inertia before a storm. When I walk the mile to our mailbox, I must leave her behind. "You gotta hang out. Be very good. Don't go anywhere." These are the words Cameron taught her as a puppy, and so, when I leave, I do not say "stay" but rub her head and give her this string of instructions. She stands on trembling legs, understanding. I will not look back, even though I know she watches me until I disappear behind the unfurling buckeyes. When I return, scarf wrapping my ears against the wind, she is lying by the house. I wave and her head seems to drag her whole front end against some massive gravity while her back legs scramble to keep up. A year ago, even six months ago, she'd trot to meet me, bound the last few paces, front legs spraddled and tail swinging. Today it's a slow lumber, though her tail still swings.

▪ ▪ ▪

Perhaps failing the screening would be payback. Only it doesn't seem fair to punish this baby, too. What is fair? The shadow one I've imagined curled up beside this one, quiet and undemanding, ever since the nurse first said *single*, said *there is only one*, the faint blue line, the cross—him and her, I bear them both, though only one shows up on the scan. When I say he waits for his pound of flesh, I do not think him unreasonable or even cruel. Those who are in the right are not always right, and those who cause harm do not always get what's coming to them. I cling to this thought as I toss and turn and still cannot fall asleep.

▪ ▪ ▪

I'm sure the growing continues, even though I can't be sure I see it. Sequoia and I have bad days and then not-so-bad days. We spend a lot of time resting. She still gets ridiculously excited at five o'clock when Cameron or I ask her if it's time for her dinner. We take this as a good sign. What's an adequate measure of the quality of her life? I've been feeling lousy for eight weeks now, but take comfort in witnessing Sequoia's delight in her small joys. Watching her, though, I know that I won't know what the right thing to do is when the time comes.

I imagine my mother, tired from taking care of my sister, barely three months old, shaking her head. *No, I can't be pregnant again.* It took many years that first time, they almost gave up. *Epic*, she calls Jenny, nine years in the making. Not me. I was a surprise—and, now, I cannot think a welcome surprise. It's winter, she is still recovering from the birth, the tearing that enabled Jenny to emerge bum first, bald as a billiard ball, shrieking at the top of her lungs. And here's my mother, maybe already swelling up again, looking in the mirror, hands on her not yet flat belly, thinking, *Seriously?* No home tests back then, she had to make an appointment, wait for the doctor to congratulate her, tell her to expect me in September. She never considered that she had a choice in this, that once made, I could be unmade. I was born, also bum first, though silent and with a shock of thick black hair, one year and four days after my sister—not quite Catholic twins, but close enough.

▪ ▪ ▪

The weather shifts, the sky is blue and flowers are poking up. Sequoia seems less stiff, there's bounce in her step when she meets me from the mailbox. Cameron quits giving her the pills. She quits peeing in the house. I don't trust the reprieve; I force a conversation.

"We need to talk about this," I begin.

"It's almost spring," Cameron says. "She can be outside more."

"Then it'll be summer and too hot outside."

"We can't think about summer."

"You can't, you won't be here, I will, and I'll be huge and miserable and—"

"She may not live that long."

Hearing this, I start to cry. The disconnect in my brain dissolves in salt and my throat constricts—it's just the pee, I just wanted to talk about the peeing.

"It's not a good sign. I know that. I mean, she's dying."

No, no, I didn't mean that, I don't know that, don't want to know that. "I'm sorry," escapes the tightness at the back of my throat.

Cameron rubs my hand and looks at Sequoia, asleep at his feet. "Me too."

▪ ▪ ▪

Ten weeks ago, and for the second time, I carried a white plastic stick into the bathroom. This time I peed in a cup and dunked the stick as Cameron counted for me, "One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, four Mississippi, five Mississippi, time!" I put its lid on and brought it back to the bed, where we lay on our bellies, side by side, and watched my pee wick across the little window. We didn't talk. Like the first time, I already knew, and yet there was still suspense as the first vertical pink line formed and the pee kept traveling right. Cameron scooted closer, excited—I told him I was already sure, but this thing was not happening inside him, he needed this tangible evidence, this proof. A second line, also vertical, as bold as the first, appeared in the window, and Cameron leaned over and kissed me. "You're a mama. We made a baby."

Again, I thought. *Again.*

Cameron nodded, knowing. "It's okay," he said. This time we live here, in

this house we both love. We've been married almost four months, together long enough to have named a hypothetical child *Paperclip*, so we could talk about the possibility without admitting we were ready—because, really, how can you know when you're ready? How can you be sure?

This second time I chose a different brand of pregnancy test, pink parallel lines rather than a blue cross. Which better represents conception? Parallel lines go on infinitely, never converging. But maybe the two pink lines still sitting on the low side table Cameron built to fit beside our bed are not me and Paperclip. Perhaps one is Paperclip and one is The Other. Parallel, they cannot quite share a point of origin, so they must come from slightly different places and, for better or for worse, have different paths to take. I took the one, I did not take the other. I left the other there. It was not an intersection, not a crossroads, nor a cross, neither wrong nor right—a divergence.

Daniel Tyx

The Year I Didn't

The year I didn't walk 1,900 miles along the US-Mexico border, I purchased a detail map of the border states and Northern Mexico at the Circle K in McAllen. In my mind's eye, the Pacific Ocean glistened crystalline blue when I finally arrived in Tijuana along Monument Road, sun-cracked and solitude-wizened.

I debated whether to travel with a dog or a donkey. I liked the image of the latter better, for the sake of the book jacket, but there were logistical problems. How does one transport a pack animal across a transnational frontier?

I quit my job at the International Museum of Art and Science (slogan: at IMAS, hay más), an eclectic amalgamation of amateurish rock and insect collections and Mexican folk art bequeathed by civic-minded Oaxacan tourists. Like me, the museum couldn't figure out what it was supposed to be about, or perhaps was convinced that it could be more than one thing at a time.

Two camps: those who thought I was crazy, and those who wanted to know the details of my route, which I preferred to leave to chance or my imagination. In either case, everyone wanted to know: Why was I walking?

▪ ▪ ▪

The year I didn't walk 1,900 miles along the US-Mexico border, the truth was that everyone seemed to be doing something with their year, then writing about it. There was the man who lived without electricity in Brooklyn, the woman who didn't take out the trash, the two separate guys—one a believer and one an agnostic—who lived like Jesus would.

The truth was that I dreamed of writing a travelogue that would forever alter the dynamic of the American conversation about immigration and the border. I

wanted a conversation piece for life, something to bust out at parties when, as usual, I couldn't for the life of me think of something halfway intelligent to say. More than that, I wanted a story to tell myself about my life, one with a page-turning plot and a clear beginning, middle, and end.

The truth was, why not? I was already there, my girlfriend Laura and I having been deployed at the same time as the US National Guard as part of a teaching corps that, ironically, favored a military lexicon. She had quickly become a star educator; I had even more quickly become a devastated dropout with half-hearted suicidal impulses and a dead-end job at a dead-end museum. Her previous boyfriend had moved on from her to Harvard, and the recurring thought haunted me: Was I her rebound? His unaccomplished, ham-fisted doppelganger?

The truth was that I'd thought up the idea and told the first person I saw, in the hopes that my public declaration of intent would shame me into doing something significant with my life. That person happened to be Laura, who'd recently hazarded to mention that she was thinking about marriage. Things snowballed from there.

▪ ▪ ▪

The year I didn't walk 1,900 miles along the US-Mexico border, I bought a new pair of hiking boots and stomped around the neighborhood with my '70s-era external frame Kelty backpack, wearing two pairs of socks. I carried plenty of water and tried to avoid the roving packs of Chihuahuas that bared their teeth like four-legged piranhas.

I went to the library at the University of Texas-Pan American and checked out a stack of books on the border that I found, for reasons not well understood, totally unreadable. I left them splayed open around my bedroom floor, and my cat Che, who bit my girlfriend's toes at night out of either jealousy or boredom, slept on the pages.

Laura offered to take care of the cat while I was gone. She asked me not to leave, but said she understood if I did. Both gestures struck me as pure demonstrations

of true love, though I doubted if she understood an impulse that I myself did not truly comprehend.

Of all of the adventures in my life that I have not undertaken, this one was the most fully realized.

▪ ▪ ▪

The year I didn't walk 1,900 miles along the US-Mexico border, I began to question the purpose of my trip:

Why was everyone so gung-ho about doing something exotic or noteworthy with their year?

Why couldn't they write about a year of failure, a year of discontented employment, a year of metaphysical paralysis, a year of resisting love for the sake of preserving an idealized vision of their future selves, a year of getting up every morning to feed an FIV-positive cat picked up outside Che's Restaurant in Rio Grande City, one-eyed and hairless, who howls and howls at night because he wants to go outside but can't because he'll infect the neighborhood?

What were all these people trying to prove with their years of doing something? More precisely, what was I trying to prove?

Was I on a journey to discover something, or did I already know what I was going to discover?

▪ ▪ ▪

The year I didn't walk 1,900 miles along the US-Mexico border, the sun beat hot on the white sands of the Yuma Desert. Jaguarundis lapped up water from the Rio Grande, green jays flitted from branch to branch of craggy mesquites, cacti hoarded water in thick-walled cisterns, men and women left behind soda bottles

and torn underwear hanging from bulrushes at the river's edge. Trucks on longer-than-long hauls spewed thick plumes of black smoke into the cloudless sky, while children ate Whataburger hamburgers and sipped from giant vessels of Coca-Cola a hundred steps from the razor-wire encasing the International Bridge. On days when the farmers burned cane, the whole world seemed as though it were on fire.

▪ ▪ ▪

Six years later, when I heard the story on the radio about the reporter from *Esquire* who was walking 1,900 miles along the US-Mexico border, I was standing on a countertop in McAllen painting yellow along the kitchen ceiling. Laura was on the floor in the adjacent office, unpacking boxes and keeping an eye on the baby. We had just moved back after a three-year graduate school sojourn in Indiana. Always prone to taking metaphors too literally, I was convinced that borders were a place that both divided and unified, and that in order to be made whole again, one had to return to the place of initial rupture. Laura had her own reasons for wanting to return, but both of us had agreed that on the border, somehow everything felt more alive. I had feared that this sensation was rooted in nostalgia, but upon returning was relieved to discover that the remembered past still held true.

I wasn't listening, but the interviewer's question penetrated my wandering consciousness: *Why? Why walk the border?*

The reporter was doing it backwards, Tijuana to Brownsville, traveling with a baby stroller and an iPhone. He had GPS and a solar-powered Kindle. Though perfectly aware of the presence of envy, I found myself judging his techi-ness: no donkey, no dog.

I climbed down from the counter and crouched, frog-like, next to the radio with its staticky reception. Next to me, Laura filed the documents of our life together, her legs stretched out in front of her so that her body formed a three-dimensional Y. The reporter remarked about the difficulty of sealing off such a long border in such

inhospitable terrain. My son, his posture mirroring that of his mother, glanced up, then continued ripping the pile of discarded papers in front of him. The reporter described the long stretches of nothingness as "a learning experience."

▪ ▪ ▪

My son, past ready for his mid-afternoon nap, began crying. I loaded him into the stroller, and we headed out into the hundred degree heat of late April in South Texas.

I thought of the reporter with his own modified jogging stroller, the deserts of loneliness he must be traversing—Kindle or not—that I had once coveted for myself. I thought of the circuitous path that had led me away from the border and back again, into marriage and parenthood and home ownership and the trappings of—if not the complete conviction in—a settled existence. I thought of my new job teaching community college students for whom the border was not something exotic or even particularly noteworthy, but a fact of life, its absurdities and fucked-up politics and violence and juxtapositions not so much a story to tell as a backdrop against which the satisfactions and preoccupations of daily life were set.

Arriving home again after a lap around the block, the oppressive heat having drawn my son into a gratified stupor, I thought about whether he, in his grown-up years, would take the measure of his father based on the things that I had done or the things that I hadn't, and which was better, or worse. I scooped him up from the stroller, carried him over my shoulder up the front stairs, and crossed the creaky floorboards of the living room and the hallway until I arrived at the nursery, freshly painted tree-house green. Having reached no certain conclusions, I lifted him over the lip of the crib and laid him down, as gently and carefully as I knew how.

Jill McDonough

Tomorrow Never Dies II

1997

Bond and Wei Lin hand-cuffed together on a motorcycle.

She's sidesaddle behind him, racing
through the alleys of Saigon, black Range
Rovers on their tail; now
she's straddling the bike, Bond's ass, her right arm around him, his left
holding hers: they each have half
the handlebars. Umbrellas,
fruit stands, bridges, bicycles, crowds.
Shouting *left!* and turning; she crawls around to straddle
Bond's crotch
and look behind them, grabs
a knife, cuts open tailgates; in their wake: blue
plastic barrels of water, a lunch
cart with a wok, an open flame, truck stacked with cartons of Snap
Dragon fireworks. The black SUVs bring the fire to the fireworks
and crash, so the cartons blow up, go off
from back to front like dominos.

> I watch this scene again and again. In slow motion,
> Wei Lin's hair's like waves, like seaweed, trees in the wind.

The SUVs have wrecked, so now a helicopter chases
them; a lumberyard, truck
full of workers, boards, they back up, do
a wheelie, make men run. Her hair flies up, swirls
around Bond's face. Over a line of parked cars, up

on tin roofs, in and out of open rooms; a woman ironing,
a clothesline, blue shirt pressed against their faces.
Boardwalks, little houses, everything around them getting shot;
we're on the bike with them, we're leaning left, we're tilting
to the right. She swings around to ride on back again so they
can jump across the street, break through a ceiling, interrupt
a couple having sex; second story porches crumble underneath
them as they pass. They come down on a truck of Heineken
in cans, start racing through the streets; the villagers
in coolie hats are running, looking back in terror
at the helicopter, pressed down by its wind. How many times
have we seen this: Asian peasants; violent, unnatural
wind? She can't see the helicopter, so
she has to switch back, straddle Bond to see. I think
if she wore her hair like mine she wouldn't have
this trouble. Construction site, dusty street, a gate. Dead end.
They turn, her hair still glossy, smooth. When they look
at each other, she looks at his mouth; this is how you know
she wants him, not the straddling. They take
a clothesline to the helicopter, skid out
underneath it, its terrible wind, so they can sling
the clothesline like a lasso, David's slingshot, get it
tangled in the rotors, jump
together down a well. The helicopter tries to rise, gets
caught, and crashes: explosion, rubble, burned down town, but they
are safe and cool and wet, together, in the well, her shirt,
at last, transparent, clinging. She's still cuffed to him.

Jeffrey McDaniel

Return to *El Perdido Mundo*

I scan the limestone of the pyramid's roof and look for an indentation,
a fingerprint, some residue of the old me.
Thirteen years ago, a six-pack, a couple joints, two girls from San Diego,
instead of the sun, it was the moon.
Stars crackling all around, practically on eye-level: nature's chandelier.
A pocketful of pharmaceuticals, a gringo on a mission, a one-man party machine.
Howler monkeys serenading.
Another log thrown onto the bonfire of my senses.
The jungle unfurling for miles in all directions.
I wanted something authentic, something I could feel in my bones.
On top of a pyramid, in a Mayan city, abandoned, over a thousand years ago.
Now, 2004, I stare out at a giant Ceiba tree, taller pyramids jutting up
in the tropical distance like spaceships.
The Ceiba's top branches are covered in a fur-like substance,
erupting out like spider arms, so it looks like a tarantula
has landed on the tree.
I'm looking for a metaphor to connect the two sides of me.
My wife and I walk the Tikal forest, thick beads of sweat jewelling our foreheads.
A throng of daylight monkeys—wild like a swarm of teenagers on a drinking binge.
The freshly shed skin of a mud-colored snake on the path—
like the old life I slid out of.
Trees with roots so strong, they gnaw their way right through stone,
in search of soil.
None of these metaphors are working.
Then I see a tree literally enveloped by a second tree, a strangling fig,
coiling its trunk, hugging the life out.

Marcela Guerrero

Tracing Dr. Lakra

Dr. Lakra, as Jerónimo López Ramírez became known, walked around the underground scene of Mexico City with a doctor's bag where he kept his tattoo equipment. The Spanish word for scar/delinquent/scum—something both physically and morally nasty—"Lakra" synthesizes in one word the trade and the stigma it carries even to this day. Still using the same moniker, we know him as the tattoo artist that became the artist that "tattoos" vintage materials.

Obsessed with the aesthetic possibilities of the human body and equipped with a grungier version of a sculptor's chisel, our doctor is a kind of contemporary Pygmalion. Dr. Lakra gained notoriety in the artworld for drawing tattoos on the flesh of salvaged Kewpie dolls, pin-up illustrations of girls, and old-time photographs of Mexican wrestlers and boxers. More recently, he has added images of monsters, demons, ghosts, and zoomorphic figures engaged in acts of a psychosexual nature. His work, however, goes beyond the unexpected combination of icons of beauty with stigmatizing tattoos or hypersexual fiends. Sure one chuckles at the sight of the tattoo-ridden, Latin bombshell from the 1940s, María Montez in *Untitled (María Montez)* (2004), especially at the meaning of some of her tats, like the two teardrops meant to represent the amount of people she has supposedly murdered. But there is more to this physician's odd juxtaposition of midcentury sensuous beauties with sinister body decorations that an MS-13 inductee would fashion.

A survey of his works reveals that Dr. Lakra handles even the loftiest references in art history with the precision of a tattoo artist. His visibility in the international art scene—with exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and the Drawing Center in New York as well as his escalating presence in galleries in Mexico and London—comfortably position him and what could be classified as his "lowbrow" objects on the high-art end of the spectrum. But he is not by any means the first artist to complicate this dyad of low and high art, which is as old and dusty as the magazines where our doctor finds his material. The conversations and connections that arise between his work and the history of art are what bring his work to life.

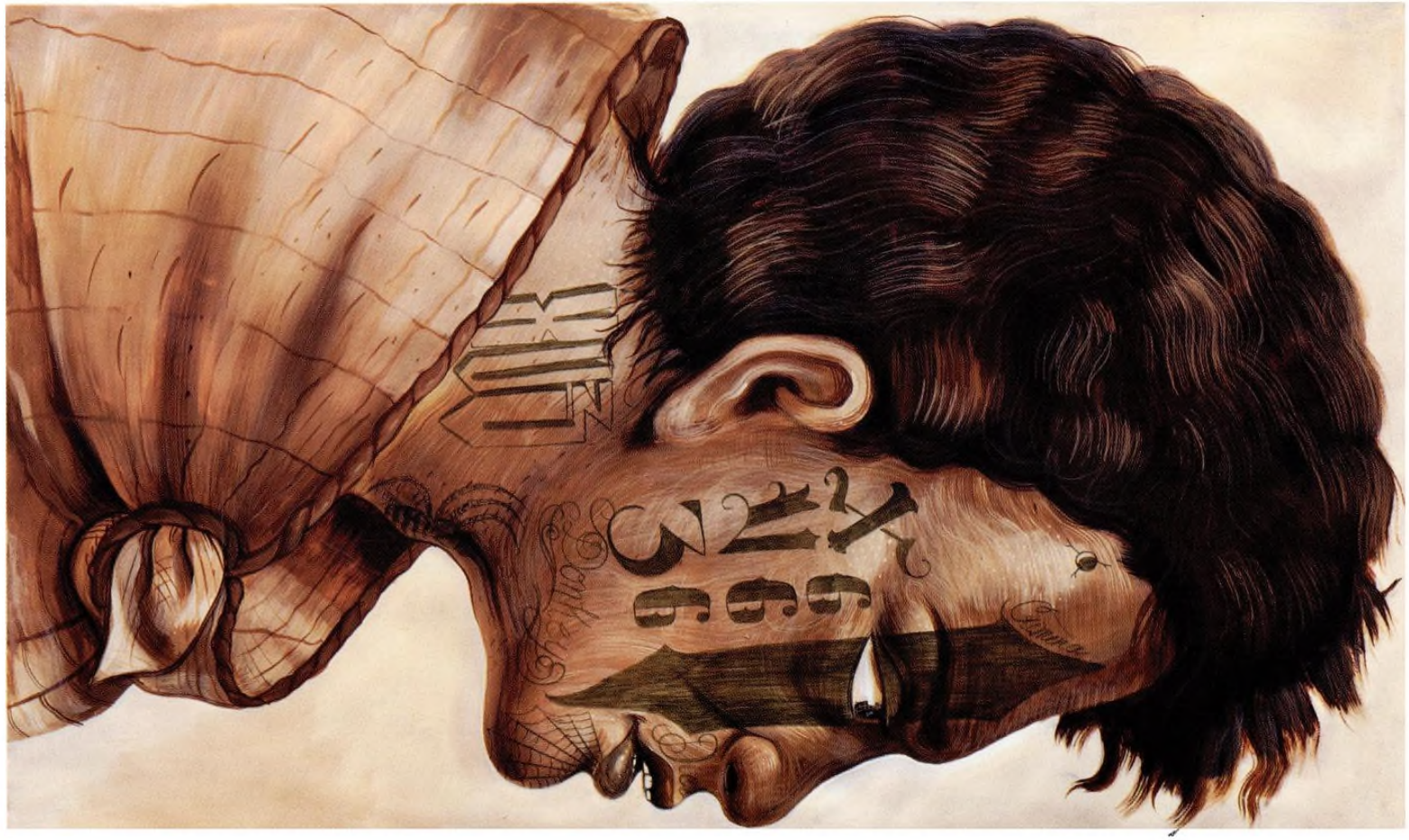
From the first real tattoo he made on a valiant friend, Dr. Lakra has been referencing the iconography of skeletons made famous by the cartoonist José Guadalupe Posadas while at the same time pushing the boundaries of the graphic arts tradition in Mexico. The precision of his drawings on vintage illustrations is reminiscent of the drypoint etchings of a master such as Francisco Goya. There are also the monstrous figures that reappear in works such as *Untitled (Mujer con cerdos)* and *Untitled (Mujer con clavos)* (both 2009), in which the mannerist style of an artist such as Bronzino and his *Allegory of Venus and Cupid* (ca. 1545) is evident in the mischievous and erotic way in which the central female figure is fondled and harassed by surrounding fictional or allegorical entities. Mannerist too is the sinuous, elongated, and awkward outlines on works such as *Untitled (Una bella historia de sus milagros)* (2011). The composition of many of his black and white works, with lurking wicked figures tormenting women, shares with Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (1781) the same taste for sexual terrors and thus the invitation for psychoanalytic interpretations.

Dr. Lakra's visual repertoire, however, does not stop with references to Western art. In the murals he painted in 2010, floor-to-ceiling West African sculptures are depicted next to smaller objects. As Carol Kino noted in a recent New York Times article, Dr. Lakra has translated the language of skin drawings to wall paintings in these *in situ* murals. He successfully plays with varying the proportions and angles of the objects, the same way he would in drawing a dynamic tattoo. Dr. Lakra also intervenes in reproductions of erotic woodblock prints from Japan's Edo period (1615-1868) by drawing tattoos on the flesh of the figures and adding ghostly voyeuristic demons. For all the sexual imagery in some of Dr. Lakra's works, the tattoos he draws in the naked bodies serve to desexualize these subjects; there is a constant tug of war between the big and the small picture, between focusing on the sexually charged themes of his selected readymades or on his own, more innocuous, iconography comprised of faces, spider webs, roses, words, and hearts. It is perhaps after the initial prudish shock that some may have at the first sight of Dr. Lakra's works that one realizes what a perfect tabula rasa these fleshy and corpulent naked bodies are, especially for a tattoo artist.

SELECTED WORKS BY DR. LAKRA
All images courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City

Untitled (Peter), 2011
7.2" x 4.33" – Ink on lithograph

This Page and Facing: *Untitled (el pueblo enardecido)*, 2011
71.85" x 98.62" – Rabbit glue, vinyl, acrylic, and gouche on paper



Next Page: *Untitled (familia posando)*, 2006
3.43" x 5.31" – Ink on vintage postcard

Untitled (retrato de mujjer con calaca), 2007
11.18" x 8.66" – Ink on vintage magazine page

This Page: *Untitled (mujer con flor)*, 2003
10.04" x 12.2" – Ink on vintage magazine page

Next Page: *Untitled (L'Amerique intime)*, 2006
9.25" x 12.2" – Ink on vintage magazine page

FOLIES DE 28 PAGES • N° 101
Paris ET DE Hollywood
PARAIT DEUX FOIS PAR MOIS PRIX : 180'
AFRIQUE DU NORD ET ÉTRANGER ..... 200 F

L'AMERIQUE "INTIME"

Patrick McGinty

Her Circus

My best friend Grace has this circus, and the two of them go everywhere together, her and her circus, because they're in love.

Even I have to admit that it's the real thing, and I know how Grace can get. You can see it in how the circus always kind of hugs around her, or hands her warm cotton candy straight from the catching bowl. She's there for every show, and sometimes it'll find her in the stands, pick her up and race her around the ring on one of its purple-plumed zebras, or orbit her in an iron-cage sphere with all its daredevils on their dirt bikes.

And of course I have Bernie, and it's not bad. It is what it is. He's not going to shoot me out of a cannon and into a net two hundred yards away. And he's not going to stop the Ferris wheel for me when we get to its highest point, and even though he can actually juggle pretty well, he's not about to do it with flaming chainsaws or anything. But he'll buy me dinner at the Olive Garden, even if it's only a Wednesday night, and I'm nothing but tired and still wearing my nurse's scrubs.

The other day my car was in the shop and it was Grace who gave me a ride to work in her old blue pickup with the turned-over odometer. She was that crazy kind of happy, where we couldn't drive by the furniture store, which was having a 60 percent off sale, without her saying, Hey wow a 60 percent off sale, or, Oh look at that adorable dog, or, I just love the way trees make the air smell, don't you love trees, et cetera.

She said she was heading to the feed store to buy her circus new harnesses and hay, and then she was going downtown to tape its posters to shop windows. There was going to be a show this Friday night, and she asked if I wanted to come. I could bring Bernie and she'd have tickets for both of us.

And I had to say no, that we had plans, although we didn't really. It's just that I've been to her circus before, and I've seen all that—how she almost prances around with it, how she'll just reach out and touch any one of its ears as if it were her own, but delicately, like they're china saucers. And then one of its lions will open its mouth so she can put her head inside—they're always like that, flirting, and most of the time, I can't stand to be in the same room with them.

That one night when I did go to the circus, I stayed late with Grace after everyone else had left. The pipe organ had quieted down and most of the circus had gone to bed early; everything was going to be packed up the next day, and she and the circus were going to San Antonio for a week. I helped her scrub down the elephants, and coax the seals into their pens, and collect the silver leotards draped to dry across the bleachers and light strands. Then we fed the lions together, whole filets of raw salmon. There were still little slivers of bone in, but she said it wouldn't hurt the lions any, and then she said, Do you know what I love most about it? By which she meant the circus, and I said, No, what? And she said that what she loved most was how the lions' breath felt on her face, how it always smelled honeyed through from the salmon we were feeding them now.

That's what she said: honeyed through. Grace is the kind of person who can't even drink coffee without clasping the mug in both hands like a prayer. I couldn't tell her what I love most about Bernie. He only ever smells like aftershave and sawdust. But he's kind, his large hands are always warm, and last week, he fixed my screen door without me even asking him to. There was a time in my life when I think I'd have given anything for a man like Bernie. But could I say that? To the girl in love with a circus?

They're just so dramatic. She doesn't even seem to mind following her circus all over the country for months at a time. And she doesn't talk about how it has dropped her or burned her and once, even mauled her. Not even to me, and it was me who removed her sutures. Sometimes I still see the scar, like a dark streak of copper down her calf.

Last night I was leaving the drugstore with some tissues and cold medicine for Bernie, when I saw Grace with her circus. She didn't see me, and I don't think she could have, way up in the sky like that, glowing in the spotlight above another crowd. She was whirling back and forth in the circus's trapeze, its strong brown arms releasing her to float a moment in the sky and then finding her again. Over and again. And who wouldn't want that feeling, or that spotlight, or even the promise of the net below? And standing there with my plastic bag in my hands, I didn't think so much about how she looked, but instead that if she saw me, how small I'd look, how far away and small.

"A Poem Argues for its Own Existence"

Sean Patrick Hill interviews Elizabeth Willis

If the spare, lovely prose poems of Meteoric Flowers *weren't enough to grip me, Elizabeth Willis' latest book,* Address *(Wesleyan University Press, 2011), refuses to relent. At once lyrical, ambitious, and unnerving, it sets out to diagram the consumerist and media-bound ethic of the new century, with spectacular results. I talked to Elizabeth Willis via email over the course of a month about* Address, *its politics, themes, and style. I set out to discover what the possibilities might be for a political poetry of the twenty-first century, what some of the thought and theory behind these ambitious lyrical utterings was, and what I could learn from them as not only a poet, but a citizen and—let's face it—consumer. Turns out that over the course of our conversation,* Address *won the 2012 Winship/PEN New England Award for poetry.*

—Sean Patrick Hill

Sean Patrick Hill: To begin, I'd like to ask about the title of your book, *Address*. Obviously, there are a couple thematic dimensions to it: addressing others on both a small, personal scale and a larger, more political address. Did you set out to create a unified book? Did you have a guiding principle in mind?

Elizabeth Willis: I like your sense of the title. I wanted the book to have that kind of openness. I wanted there to be room for the peopled world to flood in. I didn't set out to write the book as a single work, but I could feel something like a "guiding principle" taking shape while I was writing it. At one point, the manuscript was almost twice as long, and I realized it was really two different projects that seemed to be fighting with each other, and I just had to separate them.

SPH: At times, such as in the poem "This Is Not a Poem about Katherine Harris," you seem to undermine the very idea of an address. To what extent do you think you are complicating the idea of the "address"?

EW: Well, I definitely wanted to preserve the richness of the complications that "address" implies. A lot of the energy in that poem in particular sprang from a feeling of voicelessness and the pressure generated by that voicelessness. Some of the edges in the poem's rhetoric spun directly off of Harris' own public addresses. It's amazing what you can hear in public discourse if you listen to it poetically, if you listen to what's being implied, the innuendo behind the inflection.

I'm interested in the ways that an address is time-bound. It might be written, but the emphasis is on its articulation, the invisible waves of meaning it sends out into the air. Yet a public address, the kind of speech that comes over what they used to call a public address system, is spatially enormous, far beyond the natural reach of the voice. It suggests a massive embodiment. Even when the voice is distant or displaced, the audience it imagines is embodied.

I wanted to set aside what can seem like a kind of self-absorption within certain strains of the lyric—but to maintain its human frame, to shift something in the balance between speaker and audience.

I think about what it means to be addressed, directly, as a person. It means you're being seen, that something is intended specifically for you. It's an acknowledgment. It carries a quality of attention that seems essential and primary—the mirroring that happens when one person addresses—or is addressed by—another. When you attend to something, you address it.

One of the things I love about Walt Whitman is the way his voice can be wildly inclusive and yet keep returning to a delicate intimacy. When he says "you," sometimes it's America, sometimes it's the imagined community of his readers, sometimes it's the imagined community of people who care about the same things he does, and sometimes it's just you, singular, and he's right there with you.

SPH: This book is strongly contemporary, modern, and experimental. Yet, it also responds very strongly to tradition. There is an acknowledgment of form—the sonnet, nocturne, ballad, and the litany—even as it attempts to undermine those forms. There is also the weight carried by references to Rousseau, Baudelaire, and Virgil, to name a few. How do these references to form and figure serve to anchor or drive the poems, to your mind?

EW: Well, I often think of a poem as a dialogue. Not just between reader and writer but a dialogue with its own history and with the history of its form. Because of the way language accrues meaning through usage, every word has some relation to a past, a record of its public and private usage, where you learned it, how you heard it used or misused, what the contexts were in which you tried it out. Where did you first say "love" or "come" or "here"? How did you arrive at "hunger"—and how did its meaning evolve?

The English language is always sliding into figures of speech—and the complexity and resonance of our usage has to do with how we've heard these figures and how we try to shape or inflect them in order to echo those histories or to step away from them in order to mean something else. I want to do both of those things. I like generating and playing on top of echoes. With language the echoes are always there. What's harder, I think, is when you want to set them aside to articulate a cleaner melody line—which might be closer to what I'm trying to work with in some of my shorter lyric poems, to intensify the line rather than embellish it, to use familiar materials from common usage to generate new patterns.

"It's a performed poetics. It's filled with anxieties about imposture and a kind of delicacy that makes the discovery of a wildflower a climactic event."

It's true that there are a lot of direct references to poetic forms in this book—but the forms that are there are very open forms. I think one of the most significant ways we use form is simply as a cue to the reader. What if this book were classified as nonfiction? Our sense of what a poem means arises out of our composite sense of what a poem looks like and what it can "do." So the mere fact of genre and form shape the way we take it in.

Some of the references you mention are conscious and some are unconscious. There are works that keep coming up for me when I write, poems that gave me a sense of permission—in Robert Duncan's sense—an understanding that I was part of their conversation, that I could think inside them, that the work they were doing has shaped something about the work I'm doing. I'm not interested in being merely citational or allusive; I want to build a new architecture out of the ones I inherit.

Whitman and Rousseau and Rimbaud are definitely reference points for me in this book—in part because of the ways each of them was thinking through social and political issues within their writing. I could talk all day about Whitman, but he's not far from a quality I love in Rousseau, something in the honesty of the way he addresses his own development as a person—his lies, his failures, his moments of revelation. And that becomes the ground for his political philosophy. It's a performed poetics. It's filled with anxieties about imposture and a kind of delicacy that makes the discovery of a wildflower a climactic event. As much as I resist the "confessional," I love the open structure of confession as a form, especially in Rousseau and Augustine.

SPH: You've spoken in the past about the lyric poem and its future. Mark Tursi, in his *Double Room* interview with you in 2004, spoke to what you called "the music of thought." What is this music in *Address*, and how has it changed for you beyond, say, *Meteoric Flowers*, if not throughout your writing career? To what frontier do you think these poems, as lyric, have carried themselves?

EW: The sound of *Meteoric Flowers* seems very dense to me, and I definitely wanted to expand outward from that, to let there be more air around the line. But each moment has its own music. The sounding of thought is always changing in relation to the background noise we're thinking on top of. Each poem is at least potentially a sonic reinvention of the world in which it is produced.

SPH: In that *Double Room* interview, you spoke about identity, how it is a creation of language, how it is "tried" by the poem. These poems speak of hovering anxieties that are "trying" nearly everyone in America. I'm interested in this identity for the speaker of these poems, especially in that the speaker seems to make an earnest attempt at address. Because you've said that the poem is of two voices—both the reader's and the writer's—I'd love to hear about what makes these poems unique in that relationship.

EW: For me, that sense of "trying" is the most interesting aspect of what gets referred to as "experimental" poetry. Isn't all writing an experiment? A way of

trying something out? I agree with your sense that this is not at odds with the poem's "sincerity." In fact, on the contrary.

SPH: I'm interested in your own influences. As a former undergraduate at SUNY Buffalo—this was back when Creeley and Charles Bernstein were still there—I'd like to know how that program, and Creeley in particular, helped to shape you. But also, who do you see as significant influences coming to play in this book?

EW: Robert Creeley was the reason I went to Buffalo in the 1980s—really far back—before Charles and Susan arrived and before the Poetics Program. It was an amazing place even then.

The whole atmosphere was like a big conversation. I really didn't have a very comprehensive education, so I just ate it up. I had worked my way through college, so just having all that time to read and write was a revelation. I loved the "second city" feeling of Buffalo—the sense that it didn't have to import its culture, that it was as interesting and productive to be there as it was to be in places like New York or San Francisco.

Leslie Fiedler was still there when I first arrived. I worked with Jack Clarke and with Diane Christian on Blake. And I worked with Bruce Jackson in a course on Fieldwork that dealt with documentary and folk materials. I think I audited as many courses as I enrolled in just to hear what other people were thinking about.

"That was the poem telling the poet that's all it has to say, that the voice has carried it to this place, and now the poem is over, you can stand up, go make lunch, whatever."

One thing I loved about Bob and Charles and Susan was their openness as readers. It wasn't about liking or accepting anything you read—not at all—but it was about allowing yourself to be surprised and to allowing your preferences as a reader to be idiosyncratic rather than doctrinaire. It's a more challenging orientation to have toward the world.

Creeley certainly influenced my sense of the music of a poetic line. And Susan's work opened up my sense of what could happen on the page. Charles made me think about audience and rhetoric in new ways. They're all connected in some way to my sense of the performative qualities of language. And they were all incredibly kind, which might seem beside the point, but it's not.

SPH: The formal element of *Address* is fairly consistent. Poems, for example, are generally unpunctuated, with short lines, composed many times in singular stanzas, though there is a strong use of regularity in the couplets. It is apparent to me that a great deal of the tension of the book is generated in the coupling of strong ideas in terse lines. What is the relation between subject and form in these poems, and in the book as a whole?

EW: I don't know what to say about this except that I'm glad that tension comes through. I like to feel that a line has a spring in it, that it risks something and that it has an unpredictable energy, a pull between the potential of what might follow and the kinetics of what appears on the page. How the sound of one line pushes off from the line before.

SPH: I'd like you to speak to your intention in regard to diction. Again, there are your short lines, but they are heavily weighted with words carrying a modern heft: government, political party, toll, money, currency, voting—all these words are twisted out of context, releasing a great deal of energy and at the same time stripping them to the bone. This, more than anything, is a book of words: "nightfall's / hourly wage." What do you make of the torsion between weighted words and the poems' brevity?

EW: I think the torsion and weightedness you're talking about are what interests me in figures of speech and in the poem as a figure of speech. There's so much compressed energy in a metaphor, and I'm interested in what happens when you take that to the level of the line or the couplet or the poem.

SPH: The Political is obviously a focus, as much as, say, Timothy Donnelly's *The Cloud Corporation*. I have to say that this book is one of the strongest I've read lately, and it is a nearly perfect illustration of a poetry responding to its time, a kind of detailing of the post-9/11 anxiety. War is here, hubris, consumerism. There is also the Historical or, as you say, the "ahistorical" or "accidental history." Did you deliberately set out to write such a politically-inflected book?

EW: No, I didn't set out to do it—but yes, I have been concerned with all the things you mention. Our lack of historical memory—really the politically-motivated erasure of historical memory—was definitely a concern. It's still a concern. I think it marks the end of a certain vision of America, and it works against the possibilities of a more progressive "us" on almost any level.

There have been so many false uses of history too—like Bush using the rhetoric of World War II to make the Iraq War sound like a war the country had already accepted. But the question of history also has this very intimate thread. Who are we? What do I mean? Pronouns have enormous power in establishing political agendas. And of course they determine the aperture of a poem, its intimacy, the alienation or belonging that occurs in and among its readers.

SPH: I want to talk about theory; obviously, there is a great deal of it floating about these days. In an earlier comment you made to me concerning theory, you said that you find theory in poetry. You said, "Poets have been dealing with indeterminacy and thinking about systems of relation forever, haven't they?" Still, I can't resist asking how this book "works." There are rhetorical flourishes throughout: "A poem ends / when the sound of it is finished" or much of what is in the poem "May Day," your address to Robert Creeley. When the poet Graham Foust asks, "What is the poem," what do you say?

EW: I think you know something is a poem when you're in it, either as its writer or its reader. Your comment makes me think of the poem "A Species Is an Idea" where the poem suddenly articulates itself as a corridor and then "you write this down / you're at the end of it." That was the poem telling the poet that's all it has to say, that the voice has carried it to this place, and now the poem is over, you can stand up, go make lunch, whatever. But it's also a line that puts the reader in exactly the same position, being told that the poem they're reading is a physical, architectural space, and now "you're at the end of it." I think it's a poem about the subconscious, about the meaningfulness of what you forget, the fact that you're always leaving things behind. When you travel through a poem, it is your reality, it carries you.

There's a lot of literary and cultural theory that asserts similar things. When I first heard about Deconstruction, a lot of people were acting like it was the end of literature, but I felt the opposite. It seemed to be articulating something that was implicit to the work of the poet—that the text is always getting away from you, that it's not about intentionality—or that the slipperiness of intention is part of the wager of the poem.

"I've always loved the story of Jacob's wrestle with the angel, which I still find emblematic and mysterious. Why does that story ring true, even when its meaning remains enigmatic? It has to do with the internal struggle that I think we all have with language."

But I also think about Postcolonial theory and the extent to which it is embodied in foundational work by poets like Aimé Césaire. It's part of why I think poems can be "progressive" even when they're not asserting a particular political agenda. It's about thinking the world differently.

SPH: While I'm thinking of Foust, who I see as sharing a great affinity with you in terms of style and thought, especially the turns of language, what do you think is the place of irony in poetry? Both you and Foust have wonderful turns of language; for you, simple phrases like "bellwether friend" or more complex twists like "prosperity is just around / that hairpin turn." You seem very interested in linguistic irony, in reclaiming language that has been stolen in the Orwellian sense.

EW: That's interesting. I almost never think about irony because it seems to me a function of inflection more than of what actually appears on the page. I think of irony as hiding one "real" meaning with another surface meaning. I'm more interested in multiplying those layers into something more polyvocal, so that you hear several meanings at once and there's not a code that suggests which the "right" one is. You might, for instance, hear double meanings in a single word, but that word could appear in a familiar syntax that's been flipped to say something other than what you expect.

SPH: I've asked a lot about tension and politics, but there is also poetry itself. In the poem "The Witch," you speak of the struggle with the "unknown force." To me, the poem seems to be an extended comment on the struggles with art and being

an artist. But what is the book struggling with, or against? For that matter, as a poet, what is your struggle?

EW: Do you mean what is at stake for me in the making of a poem—or what is it that I'm struggling to do? These are great, fundamental questions, but I'm not sure they're answerable!

I love talking about poetry but there's always a "why" moment in the background. Well, you didn't say "why do you do it?" but that's what I hear in the question of struggle. It's easier to talk about politics because the forces we're talking about are more immediately evident. With poetry there's something essential that is, at least to me, inexplicable. How language works—how to name what poetry does—is still a mystery to me. That's part of what is so compelling about it. Poetry argues for its own existence.

But there are these larger implications to the naming of "the struggle," and I'm interested in the way that constitutes a question in its own right. It has to do with the way various struggles—including a range of political and human rights struggles—are connected with issues of language. This goes back to basic questions about representation, the very ground of voice and address. How do we interrogate and clarify our relation to each other? Who and what are we responsible to? How we name something is a serious, ethical question.

I've always loved the story of Jacob's wrestle with the angel, which I still find emblematic and mysterious. Why does that story ring true, even when its meaning remains enigmatic? It has to do with the internal struggle that I think we all have with language. How do we make our interior world manifest? How do we understand the relationship between abstraction and embodiment, agency and identity, spiritual and erotic life, what we inherit and what we do with it?

SPH: To return to rhetoric, briefly, what is its place in *Address*? "Valet of the Shadow of Death," as an example, is ferocious, unblinking, as in the opening:

> Welcome to our treasured island
> seized from the tribe

of enemy combatants
who nursed us through
the winter of 1642

This is, however subtly, a profound statement, and it's but one of the many stunning statements of the book.

EW: Well, thanks. I think this connects to what we were talking about relative to history—and to the fact that in certain circumstances simply remembering something can be a subversive act.

If we continue to view our experience as singular, if we insist on seeing it as unlike and detached from the past, we are bound to reiterate a history of violence. I am often amazed at the extent to which public discussions of terrorism and immigration avoid the obvious fact that Europeans violently seized this country from its native peoples. We forget the extent to which they relied on the assistance of precisely those people they were set on displacing and destroying. To my ear, most reporting on the Middle East still relies on the language of Manifest Destiny and on a corrupt idea of American history. Reporting and storytelling are also full of embedded rhetoric. I guess I'm drawn to rhetoric's undoing.

SPH: In "Unseasonable Pastoral," you mention the "test." Specifically, a "test of composition / to open the field." Who could resist thinking back to Black Mountain, to Olson, and especially Duncan who, though his style is quite the opposite, still resonates with the grand statements of *Address*? What I'm asking is, for you, what is the test of composition in *Address*? To what extent do you think the book has been successful in its undertaking?

EW: I think the "test" is the extent to which a poem opens or closes the mind. But that test could be applied to any form of composition.

SPH: To end, I once took a workshop with Marvin Bell, who had recently finished *Mars Being Red*, and he had much to say about "political poetry." Which means he

had advice. What is your advice on the matter, especially to someone who wants to make an address for him- or herself?

EW: On some level, I think that most of what we're talking about is something like the byproducts of poetry.

I don't know why I write poetry, I don't know if it has any effect, but I do it, and I value the work that other poets have done.

But when it comes to poetry, the answer is always in the poem.

Sidney Wade

Glory Train

Cleaning
house,

I find, in
a dried-out

flower
of brown

froth,
the tiny

skeleton
of a bat.

I set it on
a white plate

and tweeze
debris

from its frame.
The hand-

wing bones
are thin

as veins—
a miracle

of design,
fine almost

to vanishing,
the ephemeral

on which
so much

depends.
The pelvis

is small
as a pushpin,

frailer than
eggshell;

the fragile
vestibule

of the ribs
is clean and

unbroken.
It harbors

eight
desiccated

larvae that had,
rather late,

hopped
aboard

this darkly
upholstered

glory train.
The miniscule

figure hints
at the beautiful

old rhyme
of moon

and ruin,
the darkness

in which
constellated

hungers twitch
and fly,

feed on each
other and die.

Just Another Sad, Sad Evening

You've come back again
looking for the weeping girl
with braids
you most likely
have a better phrase
or feel more prepared to deal with sorrow
she's still gone
i put her in a bar
she is older and thinner
& more beautiful
& is a stripper
i can take you to see her
if you'd like
but i don't think
she'll want to speak with you
she's grown colder
& cries less
but we can watch her dance
i can even arrange for something
more private
if that's the kind of thing you'd be interested in

The Dream of Poppies & H.D.

was that her just now
squeezing into my ear
& running through a field of poppies
in a poem no one
not even in a million years
will have the nerve to say
that poppies are single kisses turned to stone

but what are kisses to us
speak the poppies
the bearers of forgotten desire
if anything
we are small secret altars to ourselves

& i find her
she is halfway beautiful
in her tiered evening dress
of green and yellow fabric
she is sleeping in the field of poppies
& whispering to herself:

in the movie i would be heartbroken forever

laying in a bed very far from a field of poppies

where someone has laid a trap

dropping a single poppy in a snare

which is inconspicuous & perfect

laughter from somewhere in the elms

which border this field of lovely poppies

i believe them to be young demons

beautiful & pure & troubled.

Robin Romm

Adulthood

The job took her first to Boulder, scenic city under peaks, then to Albuquerque, gritty city under peaks, and now down to the border, henpecked city under peaks, in a town named for crosses. Las Cruces, Gina says to people and they say it back with an upward inflection. Las Cruces, she says again. The crosses.

The English Department secretary, Mehan, wears a cross. It's on the same chain as another pendant, a small gold cat. She has cats everywhere—a calendar with kittens airbrushed into needful puffs, a little white porcelain statuette. She even has a pillow she places on her padded chair, a needlepoint Siamese. To her cat, Alfonz, a Persian, she's made a small shrine on her file cabinet.

Just this morning, during Gina and Veronica's weekly seven o'clock coffee at the Starbucks in the failing strip mall, Gina had seen a woman in kitty cat pants, the flannel covered in tiny, smeary Siamese. "We should get those for Mehan," Gina said. To which Veronica smiled in her characteristically empty way, her blue eyes the exact shade of the kitties', and said, "Why, does she like cats?"

Veronica is the closest thing Gina has to a friend out here in the moonscape. She sometimes leaves candy or a little card on Gina's desk, polite and polished gestures of goodwill, and Gina finds herself sufficiently moved, scouring the drug store for tokens of reciprocity. The two of them take frequent trips to the vending machine between rounds of grading, kvetching spiritedly about pagination issues and deadlines. Two years ago, when they were both new on the job, they bought only the trail mix and granola bars. But while Gina still maintains this resolve, Veronica's fingers now migrate to the lower row of buttons, punching the codes for Hostess Cupcakes and tiny donuts. Veronica still hasn't finished her dissertation, and so she spends most nights and weekends in a furious fit of despair, reading and rereading the same forty pages, the idea of tenure flopping around her like a school of landbound fish. As a result of these factors, or of the local cuisine (pork in lard, beans in lard), Veronica has gained nearly half of herself in body weight. Sometimes Gina catches a glimpse of her across the parking lot, or at the cubbies in the office, and it's like seeing her through crazy glasses. She blinks, but Veronica stays distorted.

It's a good job, or so say all the people around here. A rare thing, to get a tenure-track job in literature these days. It's virtually impossible. And this is a state job, a job that delivers an official green pay stub every two weeks, money set aside for retirement, dental, medical. Grants available for the occasional conference. It's not what Gina had envisioned in graduate school: a tidy office in a restored colonial on a woodsy campus, her students rosy-cheeked, bandana-clad. Oh, that life! The one where she taught all day in a soft brown sweater and made shrimp and green beans in the evening for David. The two of them gardening, watching a toddler play in the sun. She can still sometimes see it, or the tail of it as it races around a bend.

"It's my adulthood," she says to anyone who'll listen, plucking the pay stub from her box in the mailroom, holding its thin greenness, its papery realness. A memo last week told them that as a cost-saving measure, the stubs would cease; the "pertinent financial data" would instead arrive via e-mail. Gina felt a pang of loss. Yet one more expectation gone.

She loves the students, despite their late papers and faulty grammar. When she's with them in those close, dank classrooms, she feels useful, alert, alive. They hand in essays about cow wrangling, drunk driving, chile harvesting. They tell her about a silicon breast disposal site over the Texas border, nuclear waste, uranium in the water supply, how to get high off the methane produced by cows. When she came in one day, asking whether she should worry about rattlesnakes on the dusty trails beneath the mountains, her favorite student, Edmundo Reyes, told her she just needed a gun. He wrote the name of the ammo down for her on the corner of her brightly striped datebook.

She's been here two years, and despite liking her students, she hasn't, as her sister Cindy says, "found her place." Only Veronica invites her to watch reality shows or to walk along the irrigation ditches. Among the faculty, she's an anomaly. She keeps a yoga mat in her office. To monthly potlucks she brings salads of soybeans and kale, a bowl of tangerines. The senior faculty eye her skeptically, their tobacco-tinged fingers clutching old ceramic mugs, tiny oil spots on their neutral-colored shirts. They finger the bowls of jalapeño poppers and chips, expressing thin appreciation of Gina's vintage necklaces or knee-high boots, serving themselves a polite tiny spoonful of kale.

But at night, the veils fall away. In her first year here, Gina went to a few of the house parties thrown by the cadre of female faculty members under forty. They gathered in living rooms and kitchens, their smiles and pert chitchat given way to a skittery exhaustion, eyes gleaming with a chrome-clad coolness. They got out souvenir shot glasses and toasted to getting English 406's lab approved by the curriculum committee, and then they drank till someone burst a blood vessel or burst into tears. On a good night, they'd simply end up cozy on the sofas, hanging onto each other's shoulders.

They've all been down in this border town longer than she. They're like a lost tribe of nuns—devoted not to God, but to job titles. *Assistant professor*, *associate professor*, *full professor*—they articulate these words with reverence, as though they are spells that will ward off the perils of the region: loneliness, black widows, uranium-infused drinking water. Almost all of them go home to empty houses. Two of the junior female faculty were both divorced within six months of moving to Cruces, and most of the rest came alone. All the straight ones have stopped trying to date, too jaded about the prospects. Fort Bliss, the military base so cruelly named, is the only large source of men outside the university.

There were, of course, a few bright spots. A few faculty have small children and when she sees them, she feels something akin to a wolf near a carcass, a nauseating want that ends up making her chest constrict.

▪ ▪ ▪

Some of the gridded lights in the department office are being repaired, and so dangle from the cork ceiling like tombstones. It really doesn't look safe, and Gina makes her way to the cubbies by walking around the perimeter of the office.

"Good morning, Alfonz," Gina says to Mehan's kitty shrine. Every morning she says this when she gets to work and Mehan rarely looks up from her computer. But she always, in a small high voice—a kitty cat voice, says, "Hello, Gina." Someday, Gina thinks, Mehan will simply meow. But today, Mehan looks up from her computer. She's growing out her bangs and wears them fastened to either temple with black bobby pins.

"Nice outfit," Mehan says. So uncharacteristic! It's not a meow, but it's different, a variation in the pattern. Gina looks down. She took a risk with this dress, purchased in El Paso with Veronica over the weekend, and now she understands—it's a failure. A grape synthetic failure. The ruffles down the front flutter forward, as if trying to jump off her chest. As if they would rather encircle the porcelain Alfonz, watching her with his feline remove, his long legs out of proportion to his walnut-sized body. And the too-tight waist sends the skirt puffing, the whole thing riding up her ribcage.

She has ten minutes before her committee meeting. She rummages in her drawer, digging beneath folders and student papers. She used to keep a spare dress in the back of the drawer, just in case, but she vaguely recollects needing it when the weather turned much warmer last spring. Instead, shoved in the back, she has a broken coffee maker and some old filters, a roll of paper towels and deodorant.

There's hope for her yet. Yes, she's thirty-nine and living in a dilapidated adobe on a dirt lot, no children, no husband, no real savings to speak of. But that's because she's having a career, being responsible, taking charge of her destiny. That's because she spent twelve years with David, not doing quite enough of any of those things. And everyone said it was possible till forty; that was the magic number, the universal expiration date.

Ted comes into the meeting late, carrying a stack of papers and a bundle of dry erase markers. He's wearing jeans. Several of the female faculty smile, adjust their chairs and touch their faces. Ted's forty-one and recently separated, nearly divorced, and his name gets spoken now in certain circles as if he's a Japanese delicacy.

"Sorry, I had a wardrobe emergency," he says.

"A wardrobe emergency?" says Marti. Marti, the Department Chair, has been at the university for twenty-seven years. Whenever she talks to Ted, she runs her knotty, ringless fingers over the breast of one of her many shiny blouses. She wears her hair in a modified Betty Page, and her giant nose climbs toward those blunt bangs like a koala.

Ted always smiles back; sometimes he winks. A good professional decision, keeping the chair in a state of intrigue. Though how he can stand the idea of Marti's intrigue is beyond Gina, what with those white gelatinous spots that collect in the corners of her mouth. There's no doubt about it, though. His strategy works; it is the

strategy that separates the glory-bound from the chaff like her, this willingness to subvert the self, to override those ethics classes and twiddle the ego of the person in charge. Ted has a twenty-four-inch cinema display in his office. He has the entire *OED* on disk. Gina hasn't even been able to get an actual desk chair.

Ted's bachelorhood is a topic much discussed behind his back. Marti likes to shake her head and wonder how he's doing. Veronica mentioned that MaryLou and Heather were lurking on Match.com waiting for his picture to pop up. But the truth is, and no one here knows it, not even Veronica, that Ted had e-mailed Gina last week on her personal account, asking whether she might want to "catch some jazz." And though the answer to that question in its abstract form was a resounding *no*—who catches jazz? was that like catching pink eye? or an errant bat?—she wrote back that it sounded like fun. So Ted here, in his neon-turquoise, he's the reason for the dress, and now the shame of the dress, and the damn ruffles that keep trying to fly off her breasts like cumbersome purple fairies.

Today, it seems, everybody woke up and put on their crazy clothes. Ted wears a polo shirt in electric turquoise, so vivid it seems to steal all the color from his skin. Marti's patterned shirt has a built-in, bushy necktie. Veronica's skirt has a patch of leather across the rear that makes it look like a diaper for a dominatrix. And MaryLou, the film theorist, could be attending a 1970s political luncheon. Bell-bottom work slacks with a tapered white sweater.

"Well," Marti trills, glancing coyly at Ted. "I think we have a new agenda item! Obviously we need to discuss your wardrobe emergency!" She smiles too broadly, showing the silvery lining of her molars.

Ted gestures to his crotch. "It's nothing," he says. "Broke a zipper. But I keep a spare pair in my office."

It's true that Ted is sort of cute, at least after you stare at him a while, burnishing his less enticing features. His face is a little on the oily side, but it's symmetrical with a strong jaw. Sure, a time or two he's worn a cream-colored shirt tucked into cream-colored slacks so that he looks like a giant peeled banana, but he has bushy, substantive brows. And the students love him; they flock to his Steinbeck seminar, his western novel course, his office hours.

At the meeting, they discuss something called critical aptitude assessment triangle charts. Everyone but Gina seems to have an opinion about them. Gina

takes the handout and draws a little house with flower boxes and an ocean out in the distance. Then she draws a baby wrapped in a blanket surrounded by stars. Ted peers down at her graph page, then reaches over and draws a small, dented sun.

"Grab a coffee with me?" says Ted, after the meeting. Veronica catches a glimpse of the exchange, and shoots Gina a raised eyebrow. Ted leans against the wall, legs crossed. Grab a coffee, catch some jazz. This Ted likes to pop his verbs.

"Just let me shoot to my office," she says, but he's not thinking about verbs—he only smiles that gentle smile at her. His nose is too long with a little divot in its end. It's quite right on his face, like it was stuck there, pin the nose on the Americanist.

She does shoot to her office, and there are seventeen new messages in her inbox. She scans them—work, work, work, and then one from David.

Of course.

She clicks on it.

Hey, he writes. *How are you? David.*

He really does put a period after his name. In case you had half a hope he might continue with his thought.

Gina feels her blood flush through her. She sits.

Fine, thanks, she writes.

She wipes the dust off her monitor with a Kleenex.

Another e-mail from him pops up.

Just checking in on you, he writes. *I still care.*

Oh, all the things she could say, but can't say, or won't say. She yanks her purse off the floor, checks her face in an old compact, wipes at her nose with a powdered sponge. Her eyes look dull. She squints to brighten them.

One more message arrives before she stands. *Hope you're well down there!*

▪ ▪ ▪

Ted orders a skinny caramel latte at the Starbucks. She orders hers, regular, black.

"You look good in that color," says Ted. She tucks her mouth into a smile that's supposed to communicate something wrier. But Ted's not a wry guy. His eyes smile back.

"Probably could have done without the ruffles, right?" she says, pressing on them again.

"They're cute," he says. "You're like a present with a bow."

"Ah, perfect. Just what I was going for," she says.

But it's a relief, in a way—to have him look at her like this, like she's candy to the eyes, like she radiates a feminine charm, to pull out a chair from the counter and wait till she sits, to grab a napkin for her. He asks whether she's ever tried to keep a plant alive in her office, because he's trying with a bonsai, a little Chinese elm, and the lack of windows will probably kill it.

Gina sits back in her chair and sips her coffee. She can see the jagged peaks from here, the dark shadows in their cleavage. Out there, in the crags of rocks, the only inhabitants that thrive are the ones with spikes and stingers, various poisons.

"I would imagine this is a difficult climate for bonsai," she says.

"It's a difficult climate, period," he says.

Period. The period after David's name was likely a typo, but it irritated her, made her feel slightly jumpy. Of all the days to hear from him. But it's not so unusual. He's not that quiet, David. He keeps trying to "establish a friendship." As if that's the obvious climax of a twelve-year romance. As if the two of them can gossip in the evenings by phone, e-mail photos. Maybe she could visit him in his loft in Portland with his new young wife and baby, stay in a spare bedroom on his striped white sheets. Fuck David. David and his newfound love of family life. That had been his last e-mail, after which her hands shook for days.

"Hiyootoo." The words, at first, sound like an ancient language. Marti has come into the Starbucks for her afternoon triple-shot, her old leather briefcase clasped to her side like a shield. Ted smiles, swiveling in the chair.

"Just out for a little pick-me-up," he says, grinning, and Marti's chin puckers in an approximation of friendliness.

Now would be a great moment to grab Ted, sitting there clasping his girly drink. Press up against him, mash her mouth to his, slip her tongue in. She could take that turquoise shirt and yank it heavenward, letting Marti catch her coveted glimpse of the pale skin, the furry curls of Ted's chest hair. She could make a real name for herself—forget the kale salads! She could get bodily. That would get her out of here, shock her loose from this feeling.

Gina and Ted don't say much as Marti waits for her coffee. They both wave to her as she opens the glass doors and gets back into her car to drive the four blocks back to the English Department. Gina will never, never get her desk chair now.

"Are you liking it here?" Ted asks. "Las Cruces can be a bit of an adjustment," he says.

The coffee has begun to make her feel edgy and hot, her blood cells jamming around her body like bumper cars.

"Well, it's not really what I envisioned, I guess, but I'm grateful for the job," she says.

"I grew up here, so I see its charms. It's an acquired taste, I think. But once you're here a few years you'll start to miss it when you travel. The quiet, the green chile." Ted's smile, it looks like a plastic stick-on, like she could reach over and peel it off and his face would just be a smooth bump of skin from nose to chin. "You'll see," he continues. "You'll start to appreciate the seventy-degree winters. All those friends of yours in Ohio and Minnesota are digging out their cars while you're driving with the windows rolled down."

Gina wrests her gaze from Ted's smile and stares out at the mountain range, those toothy gray spires, fencing in dust and scrub. She wants to remark that yes, that's what she'll be doing, year after year, in winter. That's what she has to look forward to in this life: driving in her old Toyota. Driving down streets peppered with car repair shops and liquor stores. Because what else is there to do here?

"Those mountains don't look real," she says. "Organ Mountains? What kind of organs look like that? Only a man fantasizing has that sort of organ."

"Organ," Ted says. "Like a piano, not a...you know. The pipes."

She's heard this before, she realizes, but forgot. Gina twists her leg around the rung of her chair.

"They actually turn purple at sunset," she says.

"They do," Ted says.

"That's a good thing about living here. That, and no problems parking—like anywhere. Ever. Cheap carwashes. A lot of carwashes. Have you noticed that? How many carwashes there are?"

There's a penny on the counter, and Gina reaches for it. A childhood habit. If inscribed with her birth year (which never happens anymore), it's worth a wish.

Ted reaches out, grabs her hand—just for a second. His skin is rough, warm, dry. Then he lets it go.

She looks at him, that long odd nose, his friendly open face. She makes him nervous, this Ted. This single man, born and raised out here, educated at the very university where he now teaches. He owns a large prefab house up on the mesa. He had a staff barbeque once—right before he announced his divorce—and they'd all sat on his flagstone patio, the chiminea burning, the giant red grill charring burgers and buns. His wife, Deanne, served them ice tea in blue glasses. Gina had no cause to study her, and now she tries to remember. Brown hair, brown eyes. Nothing special, no distinguishing features. She was some sort of administrative aide or office manager for a department. She remembers the house being decorated like a lot of the houses around here—rustic furniture with framed posters of landscapes, fake gold knobs on the light fixtures and fans. They didn't have any children. The house had a certain sterility.

Ted gulps his white froth. She takes the penny in her fingers. 1996. Not even close. "Heads or tails," she asks.

"What do I win if I get it right?" he says. He opens his eyes all the way so she can see the entirety of his iris. She looks back down at the penny.

"You'll have to wait and see," she says. She looks at him again, and he's back to normal, his eyes gentle.

"Heads," he says. She flips the penny up, but it flies toward Ted's raised drink rather than straight up, and when she goes to catch it, she knocks his cup. It's almost like the bucket in a dunk tank, the way his hand tilts. The cup dumps.

"Yop!" he cries. Steam rises from his belly and crotch. He pulls the fabric away.

"Oh my God," Gina says. "Oh my God." And then to her horror, she starts snickering.

"Ay!" he cries, hopping away toward the napkins on the next table. His legs are sort of bowed to keep the hot coffee off his privates, and how can this not be funny? He returns with a handful of brown napkins. She grabs some of them and starts wiping the stool and floor. He dabs his crotch with the wad of paper.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"Ouch," he says. "Shit. Shit. Ouch." Her shoulders heave. She snorts.

"I'm really sorry," Gina says.

The penny sits on the floor. Before the girl can mop it away, Gina bends to pick it up. It's tails.

▪ ▪ ▪

Ted says he's going back to his house to change. No more spares in his office. She walks him to his car. "I'm really sorry," she says again.

"It's fine. I'm fine. Just a little scalded," he says. "No permanent damage."

She watches him get into his truck and feels a prick of dismay. What's the wish? That he'd ask her to come change jeans with him? Invite her inside for a tour? Take out a fresh pair of chinos and lean in and kiss her, his caramel-flavored mouth? Suddenly he'd be—not an oily man in light blue pants—but a lion! An ape! Tearing her ruffle bow with his man hands, grunting. She would lie quivering on the bed, her legs open, her arms draped like a snow angel.

He opens his window and leans out. "I'll get you at six," he says. Then he smiles too hard. "No use crying over spilled latte!"

▪ ▪ ▪

Back in her office, she stares at the string of messages from David.

You are such an asshole, she writes, then deletes it. Then she deletes each of his messages, and empties the trash.

▪ ▪ ▪

"In some ways it would be easier if he'd just cheated on you," her sister Cindy said, two years ago when Gina finally left. Cindy flew out from Palo Alto, where she lived in a giant house she'd won in her bitter divorce, to help Gina unpack. They sat amidst the boxes in Gina's newly rented apartment. This was the first move from Boulder, the year long visiting faculty position at the University of New Mexico that promised to jump-start her career, that liberated her from David and David's money. It delivered her to Albuquerque, to a little brick apartment building on a hill. The floor had yellow tiles and both of them agreed they'd never

known tiles to be this color. Bright yellow, the color of lemon dish soap. It had gray grout. It was insane.

Then they could hate him. That was Cindy's rationale. They could still hate him, Gina suggested. "I mean look," she said. "He has everything—his dignity, his money, his bow and arrow collection, his Jetta. None of it was actually mine. And now I'm thirty-seven. And pretty soon my eye skin will sag and my ovaries will dry up. What am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to get into a hobby? Am I supposed to start shopping for strangers' sperm?"

Cindy leaned back against the wall and straightened her legs.

"You have your career," Cindy finally said.

She'd ordered a futon and a set of sheets from a discount website. They arrived at the apartment before her, and sat stacked in the small white bedroom. On the website, the sheets appeared to be a simple red and white floral pattern, but when they arrived, Gina realized they were not flowers, as she expected, but ladybugs.

So there she was, a not-so-junior junior faculty with bug sheets. *No returns*, said the website. *All sales are final. Thank you for your business.*

It wasn't just the stuff—it was her years, too. So many of them, he took. So many possible roads she might have gone down. And he doesn't have them and she doesn't have them. They're just gone.

▪ ▪ ▪

"Knock knock," says Marti. Gina's office door is open a crack, and Marti pushes it open further. "Hi, Gina. I haven't stopped by here in a while. I like your poster." Gina follows Marti's gaze to the laminated skeleton diagram she found in a dumpster, compete with little tiny organs, labeled in beautiful slanting script.

"Just a reminder to get to the gym!" Gina says. Marti doesn't smile.

"Where's Ted?" Marti asks. "I went looking for him in his office, but I didn't see him."

"He had another wardrobe emergency," Gina says.

Marti has dark, perpetual circles around her eyes and a wadded up chin. It's terrible how some people get dealt such a hand, every feature screwy. She applies lipstick flawlessly, though. Every day and every hour, an oblong magenta heart.

"Well, I wanted to ask him a question. Actually, I was going to ask him if he could do some work on those compact university status reports you offered to revise," she says. "But he's probably got a lot on his plate, what with his divorce still settling." Marti puts a hand on the doorframe. "You seemed cozy, a little, over at Starbucks." Marti puckers her chin again. "Does he seem to be doing okay to you?"

"Oh, we didn't talk about personal stuff," Gina says, feeling a heat spread over her nose. "We were just talking about those compact status reports, actually. He was just filling me in on last year's."

"That's nice of him," Marti says. "So you're up to date then. You won't need to work with him on those, that'll be more efficient. And anyway, we all know that you tend to work best alone."

▪ ▪ ▪

If there is a good thing about life down here—aside from her green pay stub that allows her to eat, to use the degrees she so laboriously collected—it's that snobs cannot survive. They're like bonsai without light. A dog in those craggy mountains. Doomed.

Sometimes, when she's alone in the house, barefoot in her flannels, the television announcing its news of murders and a terrible cartel war forty miles away, she thinks this is the reason she landed this job. Not because she chose a tough path, not because of the terrible economy, but because she was too much in love with pleasure.

Now, her life is stripped to its bones. She has a house full of discount particle board furniture, a closet of polyester dresses from the El Paso Outlet. Her pantry features every preservative available, most of her foodstuffs now boxed or canned. The days of shopping in fancy markets for organic beef, for cherries or lemongrass—gone. No more stores devoted to shoes and handbags, perfume, flowers, bread. Down here, you survived with the rest of the creatures. You crawled on your knees to the river and drank thankfully, what little water there was.

She could go on the market, sure. But jobs were scarce, budgets slashed. Most of her friends from graduate school were paralegals, copywriters. A few

taught adjunct for pennies, giving up health insurance and job security in order to feel that those years spent studying hadn't been in vain. Sure, she could spend a paycheck or two buying suits, flying to conferences where she'd talk about reading lists and cultural diversity to a tired-seeming committee crammed in a hotel suite, but she'd likely wind up no better off—in rural Oklahoma or Alabama. She could give up academia altogether, move to a reasonable city and work in an office somewhere, proofreading. But recently, a curious part of her has surfaced. A part of her that wonders—after David, after Albuquerque—just how far south she can go.

▪ ▪ ▪

Gina scrolls down her e-mails again, deleting a few announcements for faculty training seminars and obscure calls for papers. She takes the penny out of her pocket.

In 1996, she was in her twenties, just meeting David, wondering if she could date someone so short and fine-featured. He had no heft to him, no meaty muscle. His eyebrows curved gently over expressive, emotional eyes. Her lesbian friend, Reagan, said she liked them together. "You're only one step from women now," she said. "In a few months you'll be dating me."

She dated him anyway, getting used to his frailty, his thin neck and wrists. She stopped thinking about her weight when she lay on top of him in bed—the way her body felt fleshy, unwieldy compared to his. David with his expensive shoes and family cottage on Martha's Vineyard had cast a sort of spell. Gina and Cindy hadn't been poor, but neither had they experienced the shine of abundance and wealth. Their mother didn't have a college degree. She worked at a stationary store. Their father taught high school history. The sisters went to university on scholarships. Without David, she never could have afforded those sweet historic apartments in Seattle, Oakland, Boulder. The gyms and restaurants and weekend getaways. After a while, she just assumed she'd marry him. She wouldn't need to marry the ambition that seemed to dehydrate most of her friends, leaving them creased and slightly mean. She'd find reasonable, relevant work in a nice city, even if it were part-time. After the kids were born, she'd take time off, take them to that family cabin and teach them to debeard mussels.

David talked about marriage, but timing never worked. He had grad school, then acupuncture school, then his father fell ill.

She risked emasculating him if she got down on one knee with a ring. So instead she made a little book, sewed the binding herself. In it was a drawing of each of their years together. The year they went to Greece was a drawing of David with a wine bottle and an olive tree. The year they moved to Oakland: a small bowl of noodles. She left twenty blank pages at the end. To be filled, she wrote. Then on the last page, the big question.

"Just do it!" Cindy coached from her hand-carved chair under her vaulted ceiling. "What do you have to lose?"

It turned out she had quite a bit to lose.

"Please," he wrote her—on actual paper. The first few letters were real letters, sent after he fled to the family cottage. "I don't mean to hurt you," he wrote. "There are still things I feel I need to pursue. I need to think about myself, my own needs. I'm sorry, Gina. But I need some space, I think. It's just so complicated, adulthood."

It is complicated, adulthood. The profile picture on his networking page has the new wife and baby in it. Gina goes there every few months—for what reason she doesn't know. The wife is smaller than him, Asian with a dark, pixie cut and hip sunglasses. She's in her early twenties, of course. The baby sleeps in a purple sling. They're standing at the beach, a gray sea spotted with sunlight.

This picture produces, in Gina's body, a reliable sensation. As though a cord runs from her throat to her gut. And someone has taken it, pulled, and let go.

▪ ▪ ▪

Gina walks to the water cooler. Mehan's at the microwave heating up something breaded.

"You got a stain on your dress," she says. Gina looks down. How did she miss it? A streak of coffee runs mid-thigh to the edge.

"Oh shit," she says.

"Here," Mehan says, wetting a sponge. She lifts Gina's hem and dabs. "A little stain remover at home and you can save it." This is probably the longest conversation Gina's ever had with Mehan. It is maybe the most Mehan has ever said.

Mehan seems like a bit of a miracle. Why hasn't she stopped to wonder at her? This thirty-something woman who lives with a cat under the base of those naked, phallic peaks? Gina's never considered the things Mehan knows. How to bread chicken. How to remove a stain. How to get through a day here, a week, a year. Mehan and her limp blond hair, her button-down white shirts and plain slacks. Where does she go at night? Who does she talk to?

"Thanks," Gina says.

"You look sort of tired," Mehan says. She squinches her eyes. "The wind getting to you?"

Gina nods. "Maybe a little," she says.

"Yeah, it's bad in spring. You just got to cover your car and look at pictures of blue sky and beach and stuff. You know, train your mind."

"Train it to do what?"

Mehan just shrugs.

Ted comes in through the front door wearing navy pants and black shoes. Mehan takes her breaded meat and skitters back to her desk.

"You're back," Gina says.

"Can I talk to you a second?" he asks. "Maybe in my office?"

▪ ▪ ▪

Every file in Ted's office is alphabetized. He keeps his pens in a little wooden pen holder. Book boxes sit stacked on his chairs. There's no place for her to sit. He shuts the door.

"Look, I'm really sorry to have to do this," he says. "I promise it has nothing to do with the coffee. I went home to change and. Well. Deanne's not doing very well. She wants to stay there a few days. She has some problems. It's part of the reason we're separated. Some mental problems. And I'm feeling a little overwhelmed. I don't think she could handle it if I went out with you tonight, you know? Though I want to, Gina. I do." He looks like he's about to take her hand, but he doesn't. She bobs her head in a gesture of understanding. Up and down, up and down like some kind of broken marionette. She realizes she's doing it and stops.

The truth is, she feels a little relieved. Everything is wrong with the day. The

day is like Marti's face, all angles and dark creases and slashes of red. She'll stop by the Dollar Store and get Veronica those candies she likes, maybe some new hair ties, go home to her little adobe house and run a bath and heat some soup. She'll watch a few episodes of something. Under a blanket. She'll call Cindy and Cindy will tell her some horrible story about a friend's divorce or motherhood. Some friend of hers caving under the pressures of an autistic child. Another freaked out to learn her son and husband are both sleeping with the high school PE teacher. Look at the things they have to be grateful for! No cheating husbands. No warped kids.

"I totally get it," she says. "No problem. Don't give it a second thought. We'll do it some other time."

"You're the best," he says. The old plug-in clock ticks from the wall. He walks up to her, slips a hand behind her head and kisses her.

He's planned this. She can tell by the Listerine on his breath. His tongue is tense and seeking.

And the awful thing is the feeling that rises up—as though her tongue is connected to a wick at the base of her gut and the feeling slips up that string so fast, filling her lungs and her mouth.

"Gina?" he asks. But she's turning away, opening the door, leaving the department through the emergency exit. She walks quickly through the parking lot, out toward the street. As if the mountains have outstretched arms, waiting to clasp her.

She can feel Ted behind her. He's going to catch up to her, toss himself out like a life preserver. *Gina wait*, he'll say. He'll think she's crying because of the jazz concert, the lonely Friday night. He'll smile, tell her they can do it next week, just as soon as they get Deanne squared away. He'll wipe away her tears with his thumb and kiss her again, behind the building, in a shadow cast by a cement wall. She can already feel it. She can already feel his seeking tongue, the bucking, proud way he'll make love. The way he'll mentor this dark-haired city girl in his desert. Tomorrow, she'll get her roses. Bought at Albertson's and left on her keyboard. With the baby's-breath. Baby's-breath.

Whose baby? Whose breath? Who names a flower that?

She can feel the whole thing coming, the way you can feel rain in your joints. She could stop it at any point. Change the future. She could put up her hand and

push him away, that hand that will land on her shoulder as soon as he catches up to her. She could say, I don't mean to hurt you, but there are still so many things I want to do in this life.

His hand grasps her shoulder, firm and square. "Gina wait," he says.

She shuts her eyes and feels it, the contact of his hand on her shoulder, the pressure as he pulls her toward him, and the involuntary softening of her spine.

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz

Your Wife

hates Benjamin Franklin, takes underwater photography,
held your dying Rhodesian Ridgeback and wept.

Your wife makes apple pancakes every Sunday, doesn't mind
that you're out late, is staying home with your sick daughter.

Your wife actually pronounces her name quite differently
than what I am saying, doesn't like all this noise,

isn't really your wife but that's what you call her.
Your wife is now your ex-wife, is now your first wife,

is now your late wife. Your wife is a wildcat in bed,
is the only one you ever want to make love to, is struggling

to explain to your therapist exactly what is wrong.
Your wife is on the other side of you, farthest

from the aisle, is unaware that we are having this lunch,
doesn't exist yet but is still a better option than me.

Your wife looks beautiful in white, is the reason you stopped
drinking, is Skyping with you from Sweden, holding

her glass of champagne in the air. Your wife is a person
I've never met, is the picture framed in your office,

was your wife from the moment you saw her,
before she even had a chance to say hello.

Marty McConnell

animal, vegetable, mineral

last night I felt a salt sorrow rise
in my body, in my mouth, and thought,
having a child will not fix this. and,
I may always be alone. sugar only made

my heart shiver, and the bath
had hands like drowning. sleep
kept dashing away from me on fast
rat feet and when it did come, was

fitful, three men, triplets, in suits,
leading me and a half dozen colleagues
to a house in the woods, me complaining

the whole time about poison ivy
and the walk. when we arrived
the one brother took me to a room
where I knew he meant to kill me

as the others would the others and this,
my love, my hypothetical bundle
of multiplying cells, is how I know
I'm ready for you. I took the buck knife

from my purse and slit his shocking
throat. then I went outside
and took care of the others. someday

I may have to answer to you
as to how I chose your particular
father. but never, my love,
who your mother is. never this.

Alexandra Teague

Whole Cloth

If her wealth had derived from something other than a firearm—
a sewing machine, for example. . . no one would have suggested
she feared. . . ghosts of garment workers.
–Mary Jo Ignoffo, Sarah Winchester biographer

I wish I had invented a lawnmower.
–Mikhail Kalashnikov, AK-47 inventor

Somewhere, there is a backstitch on our lives—
the seams sewn firm, the needle precise

and forgiving. We pull the cord, and the motor
will always wake. Inside the house, the bobbin whirs

as our mother hems; the iron-steam singe
of summer in rooms we'll go on living in.

There is no fire, only the sweet, cut grass
and gasoline. The roaring doubling back,

receding. The world is being made of dust
and gabardine and pins. It is enough

to keep the ghosts away. They are buttons
in their perfect holes. We are tended lawns,

the permanent cavity made impermanent
and healed. Somewhere, we learn to invent

only beauty—a swath of green, a collar
smooth at our necks. At the end, only the blur

of years without regrets; those benevolent blades;
our lives spooling free of their threads.

Translated by Kazim Ali and Mohammad Jafar Mahallati

Sohrab Sepehri

Oasis of Now

If you are looking for me, I am beyond nowhere.

Beyond nowhere there is a place where all messages disperse in the veins of
the sky, bringing news of the blossoming of all the remote gardens
in the far corners of the world.

The ground bears light hoof-prints of dainty horses climbing
the poppy-thick hills.

Beyond nowhere there is a place desire opens like an umbrella,
breeze like thirst sinks deep into the leaves.

Bells of rain carol fresh wet tunes about how lonely humans are here
where the shadows of tree trunks stream into endlessness.

If you are looking for me, come soft and quietly, lest you crack the glass heart
that cups my loneliness.

Deglet Nour

A jar of pitted dates upon a coffee table
may signify *the death of the author*, if you read
too much theory while writing poetry;
but if you jump into a lake and forget how to swim
they signify nothing. Instead,
pitted dates will be the last sweet taste
the sides of your tongue will touch
as your lungs fill with water
and you become lake, the voice
of a British film star reciting Keats
in the distance: future hymns to a woman in
a Swiss sanatorium waiting for night
to lay its tender darkness upon her heart.

Clancy Martin

Lite-Brite

Excerpted from Love, Lies and Marriage *(FSG), a book in progress*

When the cops beat on the door I was in a warm bath pecking at my basilic vein with the Global knife my second wife had allowed me after expelling me from our house. I had finished half a bottle of Valium, was drunk, and had said goodbye to my girlfriend on the phone. To dramatize my account I lied to her. I told her I was using a hunting knife, though where I would have acquired such a knife is a question that would have occurred to a sober me.

Soon, through a sort of relay race of cellphones from New York to Kansas City, the police officers arrived at my door, just as—cutting a straight line down the wrist like you learn to do in the movies—I had finally drawn a decent row of promising red sprinkles of blood. Did I intend to kill myself? Difficult question. A suicide attempt can be very much like falling in love. You're not really sure, as you proceed, what is real and what you're making up as you go. You're genuinely uncertain how the whole thing's going to turn out. You want it but you don't. It seems both inevitable and impossible.

They took me to the psychiatric ward—I'd been there before (I tried to escape, in the night, in my slippers and hospital robe, and failed; I was caught by a nurse, a security guard, and some locking exit doors)—and I sat, most days, with a muscular, startlingly good-looking Irishman (Daniel Day Lewis-style, truly handsome) who, the whole time I was there, spoke only once and never stopped crying. Mostly he cried noiselessly. I never learned his name. He could have been a saint who had taken a vow of silence and now could do nothing but weep for the world, or for the sufferings of Jesus.

One Sunday afternoon a group of us rebelled and refused to go to group because the Kansas City Chiefs were playing the New England Patriots. We put the game on; they turned off the TV. I went to the nurses' station and explained with all of the authority of a tenured professor the demonstrated therapeutic effects of a little good clean fun. They turned the TV back on. My Irishman cried

through the game, too, though he laughed more than once while weeping and we even high-fived each other after an unlikely touchdown. Our team won, an unheard of result for the Chiefs. The morning I left was the one time I heard this sad man speak. That's when I found out for certain he was Irish.

"It was a good football game, wouldn't you say?" He smiled at me. He was looking me straight in the eye, and the tears ran down his cheeks unceasingly.

"It was the best football game I ever watched," I said truthfully. In fact I don't like to watch football. The last time I'd watched a football game was the last time I'd been in the ward. Or perhaps the time before that.

We didn't shake hands. And then the orderly took me downstairs, where the dean of my college was waiting to pick me up and take me out for buffalo wings.

▪ ▪ ▪

People lie a lot in psychiatric hospitals. The staff lie unremittingly to the patients, about meds, meals, messages, you name it; the patients lie to the psychiatrists, faking happiness and serenity; the psychiatrists lie to the patients (I don't know how many times I've been told, "I think you're ready to go. I expect we'll release you tomorrow," only to find that the old cliché holds: tomorrow never comes); we patients lie to each other, in group and out of it, about why we're here, what we've done, who we've betrayed, who's betrayed us; we lie on the phone to the people who will take our calls on the outside; people from the outside call in and tell lies about what's going on out there. It's a lot like jail that way (to this day, a lot of psychiatric wards are very much like jail cells—I've been in those, too—except there is more room to roam in a ward, and they are cleaner and have better windows).

But the reason I mention the Irishman is that he stands out in my mind as a person I never lied to, and who never lied to me. A bond of strong affection had formed between me and this solitary penitent or martyr. I'd been thinking, all these forty-four years, with two wives, two mistresses, and three daughters—not to mention my own mother and father (I'm a kid in this narrative, too; we all are)—that love depended on lies. Of course, I wasn't entirely wrong.

▪ ▪ ▪

Try making a list of all the people you love to whom you've never lied. Maybe that's not fair to ask; it's not so easy to make a list of people you've never lied to, period, much less the same list focused on people you love. So try making a list—or merely stop and think a moment—about whom you lie to most often. It's an uncomfortable question: who do I lie to the most? For the majority of us, we lie most to the people we love most. Why that might be the case is fascinating. Because for thousands of years, at least since Plato taught that love is a ladder that leads us to the truth, our culture has supposed that intimacy and truthfulness go hand-in-hand. Of course in many instances they do. And yet while we are holding the beloved by one truthful hand, we're using the other hand, fingers crossed, to hold on to deception.

There are thousands of different kinds of lies in the world, as there are thousands of different ways of deceiving, and motivations for misleading, both others and ourselves. Here I am particularly concerned with the lies we tell in, for, on account of, and about love.

Once, while delivering a lecture on this subject to a large, mixed crowd at a university, a woman who must have been in her late seventies or early eighties raised her hand and said: "So I take it you think we lie a lot to our relatives?"

"Yes, I do," I said.

"But my sister is the only person on earth I always tell the truth to," she said.

"And how do you get along with your sister?" I asked her.

"Oh, I hate that bitch," she said. Everyone laughed. She wasn't joking.

▪ ▪ ▪

It must have been about eight o'clock at night, because it was dark outside, but I don't know what time of year it was, and this was in Calgary, Alberta, so if it was winter it could have been earlier; during winter it gets dark early that far north. I was three years old. I went to my parents' bedroom to show my mother a Lite-Brite I had made. It was my prettiest Lite-Brite yet. We were not allowed in our parents' bedroom, but I stood in the dark hallway, at last knocked on the door, and my mother opened it.

"Why aren't you asleep, honey?" she asked me. I could hear my father moving about in the room, and I didn't want him to see me.

"I made a Lite-Brite," I told her. "I want you to see it."

"I'll see it in the morning," she said.

I heard my father calling out to her from behind the door. "Vic, we've got to get moving."

"You should be asleep already. I'll see your Lite-Brite in the morning, Clancy," she said. She looked over her shoulder, back into the bedroom. It was brightly lit in there and inaccessible. In my memory, the peeks I had into it were more colorful than other places in our house.

"But it will be day then. You won't be able to see it the same."

"We'll look at it in your closet, then," she said. My father called out again.

I went back to my room, tried the Lite-Brite in the closet—I remember how the cord just reached, I remember sliding it between the carpet and the closet door—and she was right, it was better in the tiny dark space. There was just room enough for my mother to squeeze in there with me. I admired it for a few minutes. Then I unplugged it and went to bed.

In the morning, I padded down the stairs—I seem to remember how my feet felt in my footed pajamas—and found my mother in the kitchen, cooking breakfast, in her robe. I pulled on the blue terry cloth bathrobe, eager to show her the Lite-Brite. When she turned around it wasn't my mother. It was our babysitter. My mother and father had left for Hawaii for two weeks. Why my babysitter was wearing my mother's bathrobe is anybody's guess. But it completed the deception.

▪ ▪ ▪

The child psychiatrist Adam Phillips writes:

> In the beginning every child is only a child. The child is not possessive of the mother because he already possesses her; he behaves—in fact, lives—as if he is entitled... Because everyone begins their life belonging to someone else—physically and emotionally inextricable from someone else—being

> separate, or having to share, leaves us in shock. For us, then, it is all or nothing; and so there is always potentially the feeling of being nothing that comes from not being at all. [1]

This is as elegant and as accurate a description of separation anxiety as I have ever encountered. When I was a child, my separation anxiety was so intense that, when separated from my mother I would fall into a psychological state that is best described as psychotic, and from the outside resembled something like a protracted epileptic seizure, with tears and screaming added in for good measure. It was falling down into a black hole at the bottom of which is an obliteration that nevertheless does not destroy the feeling of abject loneliness, of abandonment. "The feeling of being nothing." Nothing that still feels that it is nothing.

How my mother dealt with my separation anxiety was, in the Lite-Brite instance, just to avoid it. (Many of our lies are motivated by simple fear of telling the truth.) She regrets it to this day. Today, as a parent myself, I think of what it must have been like for her sitting on the airplane, trying to be excited for my father's sake about their trip to Hawaii, and worrying for three thousand miles about what my reaction was going to be when I woke up.

We regret a lot of the lies we tell to the people we love, whether children or parents or romantic partners—especially, when we are busted (or is that true? Sometimes successfully hiding the lie is more painful than having it exposed). That doesn't mean we shouldn't acknowledge, at least to ourselves, the lies we have told, and try to understand why we told them, and especially why we might tell them again.

As a child my separation anxiety was about trust: whenever my mother left me, I didn't trust—I couldn't even understand—that she would come back. And of course the reason that particular lie has stayed with me in a way that no other lie my mother ever told me has is that the lie entailed not just her absence, but her absence when I had trusted, as most children reasonably do, that when they go to sleep at night the mother who was there at bedtime will still be there in the

1. Adam Phillips, *Monogamy* (New York : Random House, 1996), 38.

morning, especially when she has explicitly promised to be there. Nietzsche writes: "Not that you lied to me, but that I can no longer trust you, has shaken me."

▪ ▪ ▪

There are two old psychological dogmas about children and lying, both now demonstrated to be false. The first is that children don't learn to lie until the age of four. This was thoroughly disproven only in the past twenty years or so: we now know that clear signs of deceptive behavior in typical children appear at latest by the time they are six months old. Anyone who has children and observes them closely will see that they learn to deceive before they learn to talk, and they start lying virtually as soon as they start talking. The case has sometimes been made that children don't understand the difference between truth and falsehood as well as adults do: but do adults know the difference between truth and falsehood as well as they pretend? Or are they simply more convinced of their own prejudices, self-deceptions and errors?

The second dogma is that children learn to lie from outside the family: it's television or other kids ("the bad kid") or advertising or school that teaches them to lie. We now know that children learn to lie more or less entirely from observing their parents. A quick example that can stand for hundreds: you are driving up to preschool while talking on the phone and you see another parent in the parking lot you don't like. You tell your partner on the phone—your child strapped in her car seat behind you—"Oh no, there's Don, I can't stand that idiot." Thirty seconds later, while you're carrying your child in the doors, you bump into Don and, beaming: "Don, hey, how are you? We need to get the kids together soon!" In my mother's lie, motivated by her fear of my reaction, she was inadvertently teaching me how to deal with my own fears about separation—and the reaction to that separation—from the people I love.

What is interesting to me is not so much when and how children lie, but why they do it, especially since it does take less energy, most of the time, to tell the truth. "Telling the truth" is complicated for a child: think of the six-month-old deceptive baby. She cries because she wants attention. In this instance, she seems

to be truth-telling. Then she stops crying to see if anyone is paying attention. If no one is, she may try out another cry or two, but the typical baby will take up some other activity, recognizing that her tears are wasted, since no one can hear them. If, however, she hears someone in the next room, she will immediately resume her crying, and indeed will exaggerate it in order to get the attention she needs. In one sense there is nothing the baby is crying *about*: she hasn't hurt herself and isn't hungry, though she may pretend to be in need (as Robert Trivers has pointed out, baby chimpanzees and even baby pelicans will feign grievous need and indeed pain simply in order to get their parents' attention). But in another sense there is something she is crying *for*: she's crying for love, and she doesn't have any other sure-fire way to get it. Her means look deceptive. But what counts as deceptive here is a bit odd, because "the lie" is her best means of communication—perhaps her only one.

Of course, like adults, some children lie more often and some children lie less. A recent study that shows that the more a child lies, the higher her IQ is likely to prove, and the more likely she is to succeed in later life.[2] (In another study, it was shown that the healthier a children is at birth, the more likely the child is to be proficient at lying.) Even as young children we can discern multiple reasons for lying. But some reasons are more fundamental and compelling than others. We probably tend to believe lies we would otherwise subject to closer scrutiny so as to avoid that feeling of nothingness. We very often lie as children—and, perhaps, for many years to come—because we are afraid of the separation that telling the truth may create between ourselves and those we love the most and feel closest to. Current research shows that very young children are prone to lie to avoid hurting the feelings of even relative strangers.[3] By the time we are two or three, we are already telling people what they want to hear—or what we think they want to hear.

---

2. Richard Alleyne, "Lying children will grow up to be successful citizens," *The Telegraph*, May 16, 2010. "Researchers have found that the ability to tell fibs at the age of two is a sign of a fast developing brains and means they are more likely to have successful lives. They found that the more plausible the lie, the more quick-witted they will be in later years and the better their ability to think on their feet." The lead scientist in the study of 1,200 children was Dr. Kang Lee at the Institute of Child Study at The University of Toronto.

3. See, for example, the excellent work of Dr. Victoria Talwar and her team at McGill University.

Every lie we tell is itself a small separation, an assertion of loneliness, a reminder that you know the contents of your own mind and the other person does not. You cannot lie without hiding what is in your mind.

Every lie we tell is also, and for the same reasons, an expression of freedom.[4] It is a way of asserting our independence. This is why Satan is depicted as the greatest liar: because, in his pride and independence, he will not obey.

▪ ▪ ▪

It's a bright spring afternoon in Kansas City and I am in my office at the philosophy department taking a test to see whether or not I'm a sociopath. In the past few weeks one of my dear friends— a recent ex-girlfriend with whom I once nearly had an affair, and then didn't—and my second wife have all told me that I might be one of these unhappy individuals. It is because, among other things, sociopaths experience "general anxiety," "egocentricity," and "shallow emotions." (Several of these symptoms are coming from a site called Lovefraud.com, which already has me a bit suspicious. Am I a "lovefraud"? Isn't everybody a lovefraud, at least some of the time?). In a funny way I'm half-hoping I might be a sociopath, as a kind of neurochemical explanation and consolation for why I've had such trouble with lying in my love life—and, for that matter, with loving (at least, within the context of a marriage: I've failed twice now at being a faithful husband).

But if I am a sociopath it is very possible that my children will be sociopaths—the best current research suggests a genetic link for the disorder—and I don't want my children to be sociopaths. It sounds like a miserable existence. But, if they are, best to learn about it now, so their mothers and I can take appropriate measures. It's also true that if I am a sociopath I myself have likely been one since at least middle childhood. Research on sociopaths suggests they are generally diagnosable as children. But isn't that a frightening thought: that at any turn we may be surrounded by little sociopathic children all on their way to becoming sociopathic adults?

To the diagnosis: I can sympathize with general anxiety, that's for certain. As

4. "It is the law of obedience which produces the necessity of lying [in children]," writes Rousseau, "since obedience is irksome." *Emile*, (Lebanon: Dartmouth College Press, 2010), 205.

for egocentricity, it's a bit difficult for me to judge. I suspect most people are the same way, but that may just be my egocentricity flaring up. But "shallow emotions"? Life would be simpler. As I write I am having my heart broken by my soon-to-be ex-wife and my ex-girlfriend both. Now I expect that from either of their perspectives the fact that I could have my heart broken by both of them at the same time might count as evidence of shallow emotions. But I can assure you it doesn't feel that way on the inside. From the inside it feels like a stiff steel spring has been screwed into the top of your breastbone and someone is persistently yanking on it. Hard. From the inside, it's terrifying and miserable, and picking up the cellphone with desperate hope every time the text beeps and trying not to call all day long, day after day.

"Do you like to torture animals?" No. At least, not non-human animals. "Do you often engage in aggressive behavior?" Never, though I once lied to a girlfriend and told her I get in fights all the time, hoping it would make me seem sexier to her. "Do you think other human beings are worthy of a fundamental respect?" Well, even Kant says yes—he disliked people more than I do—and my basic intuition is that every living thing is due respect by virtue of that fact alone. "Would you describe yourself as hard-hearted?" I teared up during the preview for that movie about the fat kid who wants to become a ballerina. "Do you ever enjoy the suffering of others, especially of children?" No again. "Do you lie?"

Yes, I lie. The possible answers to this one are interesting:

a. Never.
b. Lying is fun! Whenever the opportunity presents itself.
c. Whenever I need to do so to further my ends.
d. Infrequently, but when politeness requires it.

I want (e.): all of the above. Anyone who says he never lies has in that very instance refuted himself. But in fact it turns out that you are a better liar if you believe you never lie, because then you are less liable to show the telltale signs that may help others detect deception. (Where this argument, which has recently been

made by Trivers, fails, is that it turns out—as Paul Ekman, the world's leading expert on lying, has repeatedly shown—we are all plain awful at detecting lies in others.) As far as (b.), (c.), and (d.) go, when another friend of mine remarked about me that "I believe half of everything that guy says," it stung, but I also thought: Well, half is not so bad. That's a glass half-full of truth.

Aristotle distinguishes between the person who "is a liar because he enjoys lying as such" and the person whose "motive is money or something that will get him money," and prefers the latter to the former. If a liar's "pretensions have reputation and honor as an ulterior motive, he does not deserve too much blame."[5] These are classic lies told by children to other children: lies with the purpose of impressing, boastful lies, lies of exaggeration, "story telling" lies. And yet this is the kind of lie many of us feel the most contempt for: the lie told solely out of the need to impress.

The first lie I remember telling to another kid, in first grade, wasn't really a lie at all. My father had bought a new Lincoln Continental while we were in Florida that Christmas visiting him, and I still remember my fascination with the chrome power-buttons and toggle switch they had for the seats and mirrors, and the sunroof. This was in 1973, and I'd never been in a car with power windows before. I told my friend Tom Davis that my father had bought a car that cost a million dollars. At the time I wasn't certain this figure was accurate but it seemed about right to me. I remember feeling genuinely indignant and dismayed when Tom came back the next day and told me that his father had said, "There is no such thing as a car that costs a million dollars." I began to doubt myself at that point: maybe he had said a hundred-thousand dollars? Or maybe he hadn't said how much it had cost? I still don't know. My father was as notorious an exaggerator as I would myself later become. There's no telling what he might have said, but I dug in my heels with Tom Davis. "Exaggeration, in the first instance, is a way of being taken seriously; and then one is ignored for exaggerating."[6]

The argument ended in Tom calling me a liar, us wrestling and punching one another on the wet grass of the playground. It was spring in Calgary, I can still

5. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1127b10-15.
6. Adam Phillips, 25.

remember the mud next to the chain link fence of Elbow Park Elementary and me putting my best friend Tom in a headlock. It was an effective trick I had been taught by one of my older brothers, who was a medaling wrestler. The first-grade girls were pulling on my hair and shouting, "Let him go!" and "You're killing him!" In short order a teacher took us both to the principal's office: the only time I was in the principal's office until the first time I was expelled, nine years later, in tenth grade. I had been accused more than once before of lying to my mother or father, but it was the first time anyone had ever called me a liar.

▪ ▪ ▪

In my junior year in college, I left my current girlfriend—a beautiful Catholic virgin who loved to receive oral sex but would offer only a hand job in return, and that reluctantly—for the much-more-beautiful Texan who would become my first wife. The Catholic sent me a long letter that concluded with the line: "You are a thief, a liar, and a coward." All of these labels applied. I'm not proud of it, but in this book—so says the admitted liar—I am trying to tell the truth, as best I can. (Fair warning: another girlfriend recently described me as "the most unreliable narrator" she'd ever met. But you can be the judge. Of both of us.) For a long time I couldn't repeat those words to myself: thief, liar, coward. Those were three people I despised. How could that be me? And so described by a woman with whom I had briefly been madly in love, and who until she learned of my infidelity had professed to love me. Overnight I had become this scoundrel.

I was twenty-one at the time. Half a lifetime later, I'm no longer a thief, perhaps less of a coward, and still, after two decades of trying to improve, a liar. Well, let's not put too fine a point on it.

I suspect one of the reasons that we continue to think of lying as being a rare event, despite the funny frequency with which all of us practice it—mostly, without noticing we're doing it—is that we consider it so unpleasant to think of ourselves as liars, much less calling ourselves liars or hearing someone else call us liars. (Why do we hate to be called liars, when we do it all the time? But perhaps we'd hate it just as much to be called flatterers, or masturbators, or racists, or to be

accused of having regularly said nasty things behind someone else's back.) I have friends I could call "an adulterer" who would laugh that off and yet might well never speak to me again if I called him or her a liar.

I'm trying to think, now, of how many times I've been called a liar in my life. Best to try to think of the people who have called me a liar to my face, and only count each person once, since in some instances (ex-wives, most obviously, and my mother) the accuser in question will have called me a liar so many times that there's no counting. I remember vividly a girl on a bus to a high school graduation party—it wasn't my graduation, I never graduated from high school—telling me: "But everyone says you're a liar, are you telling me the truth?" I had been speaking truthfully and, what was still more frustrating, about some magic mushrooms I was offering her for free, out of the goodness of my heart (or rather because I had a little crush on her).

That everyone said I was a liar was news to me: it still bothers me. My old man always said I had "a slippery relationship with the truth." My older brother has called me a liar in print, in an interview, but never directly; my little brother has surely called me a liar to every other member of my family, but not to me. In fact, as I think about it, it takes a lot to make someone come right out and call you a liar. It's like being an alcoholic that way. If someone is willing to look you in the eye and say: "You're an alcoholic" or "You're a liar," you can be pretty sure that you might have a problem. With rare exceptions, they won't do it unless you've driven them to it.

You have to pay extraordinarily close attention to catch yourself at lying. That's one of the most fascinating things about it. This is at least in part because it works both to your evolutionary advantage to be good at lying, and to your evolutionary advantage not to notice when you're doing it.[7] The liar presumes to know what is in the head of another, is often wrong, and either way attempts to control the contents of another person's head.

7. The evidence for this is overwhelming, and throughout the animal kingdom. Trivers' book on self-deception and deception of others, *The Folly of Fools*, makes a particularly strong case—but researchers have repeatedly demonstrated the evolutionary advantages of deception, self-deception, and the especially powerful conjunction of the two for the last couple of decades. Pioneering work on the subject was done by V.S. Ramachandran.

How closely tied are these two phenomena: to believe what someone says and to believe in that person? Believing (and keeping) promises, trust, integrity: all of these lie at the intersection of believing what someone says and believing in that person as a person. When we are children we are not merely depending on our belief in what our parents say and believing in them as parents, as the ones who will love us; we are at the same time learning to believe or distrust what we ourselves say, and cultivating belief in ourselves.

I think I mentioned earlier that my mother prides herself on her ability to lie—and on her ability to be honest with herself. What do you know: so do I.

Rusty Morrison

"the exact temperature of a hand": Melissa Kwasny and the Mystical Imagination

Melissa Kwasny, *The Nine Senses.*
Milkweed Editions, 2011. Paperback, 96 pp, $16.

Henry Corbin, whose writings have illuminated the Sufi tradition for the western mind, states that the symbolic image "announces a plane of consciousness distinct from rational evidence; it is the 'cipher' of a mystery." A number of women writing poems today are able to manifest that "cipher," that zero, that code which allows us to access mystery, without attempting to de-cipher it, or bring it back to materialistic logic. Melissa Kwasny's poetry is an excellent example of how a writer can use image to extend her awareness—to move outward, using image as cipher, beyond the parameters of the known.

Corbin claims that when we access the imaginal, we can experience an "articulation between the intellect and sense," a mediation between the abstract and the world of appearances, between the mystical and the material. Tom Cheetham—another scholar of the imaginal—expresses this as the domain "between the purely physical and the purely spiritual."[1] Cheetham asserts that "the function of *poesis*, whether musical, poetic, religious, or scientific, is the creation and revelation of spaces: qualitative, complex and complexified, personified spaces." And he discusses "*poesis*" as encouraging "the passionate imagination of connections between ourselves and those 'real presences' that lie beyond the merely human world"(26).[2]

In her book *The Nine Senses*, Melissa Kwasny is particularly adept at exercising a reader's ability to use the senses to seek more than what is most commonly

1. Cheetham, Tom. *Green Man, Earth Angel: The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 100.
2. Ibid., 26.

available to us. In accord with Cheetham's speculation, Kwasny uses image to open, within the poem, a fertile space between the knowable material of our existence and what is unknown and perhaps unknowable. One might call it an intuition of spirit, or a sense of presence beyond our understanding, which arrives, however fleetingly or illogically, through access to the imaginal as perceived with the senses. *How many* senses remains an open question.

Most significantly, it is in responding to the natural world—where animal, vegetable, and/or mineral existence still enliven this planet—that Kwasny finds this interface most viable, most essential, and most fraught. And it is to the natural world that she returns again and again, as her images put pressure on the personal and cultural beliefs that normally guide and limit our understanding. For example, in the poem "Red Moon," she considers one of our common euphemisms for the catastrophic impact of technologies on our planet's atmosphere: "global warming." She suggests:

> We choose the word *warming*, so that we don't have to use the word threat.
> Which is incandescent this evening, yellow as a sulphur's wing. The flicker
> of a living creek through foliage.

Kwasny juxtaposes how we can be numb to our denial and to the beauty surrounding us in our crisis-filled present, and thus shows us that there is always more available to us in our experiences. As Gilles Deleuze suggests, we can experience "a sum but not a whole ... Nature is not attributive but rather conjunctive: it expresses itself through 'and.'"[3] "Nature"—which the dictionary defines as *all* the phenomena of the physical world—offers us the essence of a radical continuity, an "andness," which is constantly offering us insights outside of the lockstep of our normative logic.

In seeking to embrace this "andness," Kwasny nonetheless remains keenly aware of the fallibility of our subjective experience, how the limits of our culturally-inscribed perceptual interpretations lock us out of experiencing nature's otherness.

3. Deleuze, Gilles, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, editor Constantin V. Boundas, *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 267.

As she tells us in her poem "Talk to the Milkweed Pod":

> The ditch is filled with milkweed, Wind is tugging hard. The rain is warm, a plant warmth, an ideal. Can I join them? Can I open the trapdoor, a patch made of grass slats, with a rope—which is the wind—to hoist it? No time to be sacred.

Here is Kwasny's poignant paradox: On the one hand, she holds in mind "an ideal," "the plant warmth," a sense of kinship to the natural world, and it is from such ideals that we create a sense of the "sacred." But she senses, too, that ideas from our past experience of "the ideal" and the "sacred" actually can come between us and what is happening in the moment. We lose the moment's otherness, we fall away from our actual experience, if we think too hard. Yet, on the other hand, we do need our mental constructs to call back previous experiences, in the hopes of building a kinship with that sense of otherness, of sacredness.

Useful as it may be, a mental construct can only be an approximation—a representation held in mind—which is, by the nature of mind, divided from actual experience. This division, created by our yearning to know and to be in union with the natural world, cannot be escaped. Georges Bataille deftly points out how different we are, as thinking beings, from the non-human beings who live in an unmediated state, when he describes animal existence as being "in the world like water in water."[4] Of course, the history of our differentiation as thinking beings from non-human beings is the history of the development of human consciousness. As Cheetham explains, "you can analyze the Neolithic transition in terms of a kind of disjunction between humans and nature."[5]

Yet, as Cheetham and Kwasny would agree, it is this very differentiation—this very ability to continually form an internal image of what is outside our consciousness—that allows us to marvel at the natural world's mystery, and to manifest that sense of marvel, that sense of awe, in poems. And it is in using the image, sometimes in unexpected ways, to examine the differentiation between

4. Bataille, Georges, trans. Robert Hurley, *Theory of Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 23.
5. Cheetham, *Green Man, Earth Angel*, 2.

human and nature, self and other, which allows the poet to further extend the shifting boundary of what remains outside our comprehension.

In Kwasny's poetry, the next image will allow us to hear a possibility offered from her own intuitive experience, implausible as it might first appear. Yet, that next sentence's improbability is a lesson in opening ourselves to the audacious, disquieting, reconstituting possibility of the imaginal in our own experience. Cheetham, using Corbin's terminology, calls this the "*mundus imaginalis* (the imaginal *world*), to underscore the fact that it is not imaginary, not unreal."[6]

Kwasny begins *The Nine Senses* with a poem that enacts this awareness of the imaginal as a shifting boundary, which is also a conduit to what can be sensed outside our materialist logic. In it, she begins by offering an example of the kind of fixed ideas that we use to label and organize our world. Such ideas have their uses, but can too easily limit our intuition of what we might find if we heighten our attention to actual experience. The poem's title, "The Language of Flowers," alludes to a Persian system popular in the 1900s in Europe for assigning attributes to each type of flower. Of course, our human desire to create fixed referents with attributable meanings or allegoric labels is understandable. We name and use the name's concomitant associations to navigate the otherwise incomprehensible experiences of our lives. Kwasny respects our longing to qualify what we know, and who we know, even as she lets us see that these meanings we hold are as ephemeral as the budding and seeding and decline of the flowers themselves. Yet, in any moment, these meanings seem as resonantly real to us as a beloved. Kwasny speaks to the flowers of this poem as one might to a lover, with directness and desire:

> I wish you were here on my arm. I wish I could crawl beneath your sheets.
> My Poppy. My Tulip Tree. My Sweet Basil.

Is this her lover, named as flower, or is she responding to the flower as a lover? Whichever way we read it, Kwasny calls attention to the customary and yet

6. Cheetham, *Green Man, Earth Angel*, 3.

limiting method of naming what we love with a label from our past experience. The poem continues:

> You are what I used to dream of as a child, what my mother did, not so much a dress as its fabric, pink dotted swiss, a white voile shirt with French cuffs. Tell me your name, what you seek, and to what you aspire. I will mount a campaign for your world. Magnolia, cloudy and thick, each petal the exact temperature of a hand.

Here, the flower is not perceived as a dress from her childhood, whole and complete, but as what she dreamed of that dress—its textural elements and design. These would be most alive to a child: the fabric, its colors and qualities, the aspects most closely observed by the senses, rather than their usefulness as a dress, a covering, societally correct. As intimate as this connection seems, we sense that it is devoid of the flower's actual presence, its otherness. And it is at this moment that the speaker, with all of her memories and preconceptions exposed, suddenly asks the flower "Tell me your name." She senses that she does not know it; the word "poppy" isn't *its* name, but merely the accepted name that her language has given it. How childlike is the notion that the speaker can "mount a campaign" for the flower, for its needs and aspirations. I am reminded of all the well-intentioned attempts in books and films to bring more understanding of the natural world into our culture. We can hear in her tone, and in the word "campaign," that she is chiding herself, even as she is suggesting, desiring this course of action. Thus, the desire stands: To offer to the flower what we would want if we were in its place, what we think it would want. What else can we do in order to welcome a guest, to make a friend of a stranger? Yet there's more in this: the speaker wants to "campaign for your [the flower's] world": not simply welcome the otherness into her human world, but somehow make room in our human world for its world to enter. She asks questions of the flower, and it makes us laugh, yet we have to laugh with recognition. The speaker queries the flower with the only language she has. Which, we implicitly understand, is indecipherable to the flower. Or is it? The magnolia's petals are the "exact temperature of a hand." Are we tempted to believe a relation, a kind of understanding, that passes between the flower and the hand?

Through touch? Is that "exact[ness]" of temperature a shared language?

When a poetic image invokes such questions, the *mundus imaginalis*, mediates between what one might call a physical and metaphysical accounting of our perceptions—if one wants to use such polarizing labels. But rather than focusing on the differences that such labels connote, in Kwasny's poems we attend to a surprising continuum within experience between what Cheetham calls "the purely physical and purely spiritual."[7] For Kwasny, as for other poets who engage the mystical imagination, the image is constantly reforming a meaning of vision, a measure of the field of perception. We are offered a clairvoyance that glimpses what Deleuze calls the "Harlequin's cloak" of nature, made of "solid patches and empty spaces," "plentitude and void, beings and nonbeings, with each one of the two posing as unlimited while limiting the other," an "addition of indivisibles."[8]

In the image, all sensations—call their arrival physical or metaphysical—are intensified, even those which common logic proscribes. Testing the proscriptions in our preconceived notions is, of course, one of the primary aims of much innovative writing. But in each poet's work, we ask ourselves, to what end? Kwasny seeks to enact what Cheetham proposes: in the imaginal space we "reclaim a sense of the substantial presence and concrete significance of human life," finding more in the materiality of our world than our logic had previously allowed. When our attention is attuned by the imaginal, then "the dichotomy between substance and spirit collapses." Thus we "avoid... the realist leveling of the cosmos proposed by literal science and literal religion."[9] Perhaps one of the most significant opportunities we gain from Kwasny's images is to learn to ask more probing, more courageous questions of our own perceptions—to increase the space of possibility that our intellect inhabits.

Cheetham goes on to clarify that "[a]ll our imaginings are necessary. But none of them should be grasped too tightly, none of them taken too literally."[10] For Cheetham, no methodology, no hierarchy of understanding, no scientific truth, no poem's revelation, should be held as sacrosanct, no matter how inspired it may seem at its inception. In Kwasny's work, we experience not only how a poet uses

7. Cheetham, *Green Man, Earth Angel*, 39.
8. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 267.
9. Cheetham, 26.
10. Ibid., 26-27

image to open intuitions outside her normal ken, but also how a poet demonstrates the freedom, the spaciousness, to question the turns of awareness that the images have suggested to her. I recall the writings of I. Rice Pereira, an American artist known for her work as an abstract expressionist. She tells us "life is the unknown essence concealed in the space which supports it."[11] Kwasny does not suggest that she can make that essence knowable; rather she offers a sense of space in which mystery comes sensually alive to us.

11. Pereira, I. Rice, *The Nature of Space, A Metaphysical and Aesthetic Inquiry* (New York: Privately Published, 1956), 3

Sara C. Rolater

Doomed Red-Blooded Hope

Brian Doyle, *Bin Laden's Bald Spot and Other Stories.*
Red Hen Press, 2011. Paperback, 146 pp, $16.95.

Brian Doyle, the versatile author of eleven books of fiction, nonfiction, and "proems," could well be the love child of a literary three-way between George Saunders, Steve Almond, and the late David Foster Wallace (in the canonical Caucasian tradition, male reproduction is possible—nay, common). Doyle's defamiliarized contexts, satirical absurdity, lively injection of the political, and voicey commentary in this latest collection all trace hereditary humor threads to this trio of theoretical forebears. But Doyle exhibits independence both in his liberalized Catholic sensibility and tendency to let overexcited prose and characters outpace authorial control.

Bin Laden's Bald Spot and Other Stories opens with the title story, in which the first-person narrator—who is informal, chatty, chummy, and lacking in requisite terror—is barber to "Osama" and the cohort of men inhabiting his complex of caves. The eponymous bald spot, as we will be told four times, is "shaped *exactly* like Iceland, complete with the Vestfjarda Peninsula to the west." Osama, meanwhile, is vainly preoccupied with the nuances of his own "film productions," prerumpling his jackets and emulating American actor Van Johnson. (Flip Iceland upside down, and you get a shape similar to, if not *exactly* like, the contiguous United States of America.) Displaying opaqueness, egotism, and hypocrisy, Osama is flattered when he believes (mistakenly) that his men are imitating him as they copy "that stiff wooden walk of Gregory Peck's, you know, like in *Roman Holiday* with Audrey Hepburn." Bin Laden, whom it is indisputably ballsy to render in character, is to an extent humanized here, and humorously so. But he remains ultimately unsympathetic, not far from cliché. Doyle works a fascinating tension between Osama and his men, but undermines this initially nuanced construction when the barber, in an abrupt transition, invokes Peck's Atticus Finch and then condemns them all:

> I know that the men who sit quietly under my clippers will someday pay for the crimes they have committed ... and when that time comes, whether in this world or the next, I will pack my barbering tools in their supple leather case, and emerge from these caves blinking in the light, and go rent every Van Johnson movie ever made, and laugh out loud.

It remains unclear if this condemnation is in any way ironic.

This story and the eleven that follow it are brief voice-propelled nuggets that more often than not consist of elaborate, protracted, dialogue-imbedded sentences, riffs rife with commas and parched for periods. These pieces are dictated by "I"s and wrapped tightly around controlling devices, structures that range from outlandish scenarios—a road trip undertaken by a woman's ex-boyfriends, a three-day party for a hostage returning from Iran, a 10k race whose competitors consist exclusively of "cuckolds"—to collections of quotidian anecdotes about basketball, former cars and dogs, and upgraded tow truck services. In conjunction with the momentum of their conversational relay, these devices function like the fuse in a bottle rocket, energetically propelling the narrative into a culminating pop: moments of spiritual uplift, doomed red-blooded hope, aching nostalgia, or some combination thereof:

> Or maybe moments like that are like windows that you drive by really fast, and just for an instant you see something crazy and cool, and then it's gone, and all you can do is grin and remember.

There is human connectivity and necessary perseverance. There is full-speed-ahead, gut-busting life and sometimes senseless death.

Individually, each of the pieces in the book's first half might feel like a focused invigoration of the form, but apprehended in succession the voicey-ness can begin to grate. Doyle is fond of attaching "you know what I'm saying?" to his narrators' conveyances, a textual tic that feels natural once or twice, but in such abundance (twenty times? thirty?) bucks the reader out of the story, as do sentences that seem long simply for length's sake, italics for emphasis, and overuse of "anyway" and "and etc." One begins to feel a desperation and communicative anxiety further

evidenced by a refusal to use quotation marks—Doyle wants the text to absorb speech, become speech, but forces the effect. This is not to say that he cannot turn a pretty phrase or offer flashes of insight, but bottle rockets are not the most dynamic of fireworks, and he pops off twelve in a row.

In the book's second half, Catholic themes bubble more overtly to the surface, and third-person pieces, freed from the shackles of speechifying, achieve grace as they arch into the realms of fable and folktale. In "Waking the Bishop," officials squabble over a deceased bishop's estate in a telling that is restrained and that derives power from its objectivity, its externality. Characters are referred to not by name but by title—university president, chancellor, communications director—underscoring how such roles define us and how little they will matter at our ultimate reckoning. It is the lusty, hovering vibrancy of the late beer-swilling, rib-grilling bishop that provides catharsis. In "The Train," a man suffering a heart attack struggles mightily in his death throes toward, of all things, his office. In "Mule," a man roams an ancient countryside in search of a horse "[t]o drag the prisoner properly behind," though it turns out he and his compatriots do not know the proper way to do this, or why they are doing it. The tale's strength is, again, a product of restraint. Doyle does not tell us where the prisoner came from, or what country or year we are in; we do not know the conditions of this conflict, and don't need to—the ubiquitous horror of war is compactly captured in the singular act of senseless dragging. Still, stories continue to pop up with overbearing orators who seem to lack confidence in the intelligence of their audience, as if sharing the concern of the protagonist in "The Man Who Wanted to Live in the Library":

> some twenty million Americans cannot read at all and more than half of the population of the nation does not manage to read a single book in the course of a year, not even sweet Charlie jesus Dickens.

Doyle's strived-for transcendence for the most part derives from life rather than afterlife, though an undercurrent of the latter trickles throughout. As the collection progresses, Catholicism weaves in and out in increasingly interesting directions. "Pinching Bernie" takes up the true story of Cardinal Bernard Francis Law, former

archbishop of Boston who, when faced with the offenses of child-molesting priests, "kept shuffling the rapists around from job to job" before eventually fleeing to Rome and the Pope's protection. Doyle twists the tale when the narrator's friend Jimmy kidnaps Bernie and brings him back to America to make him "[clean] the bathrooms of the mothers whose kids got raped when Bernie was the boss." The story revels in revenge; forgiveness is nowhere in evidence. Nor is it in the final story, "Bin Laden's Blind Spot," when we return to the cave complex to find that two of the men have fallen in love and are walking around holding hands. The barber, who we learn here is "not Muslim," once again concludes that all of the men "are most definitely going to hell," but goes on to describe how, thanks to the love of these two men, "there has been much more laughter and friendliness in the cave," and that the Sheik will lose his war because "there is not enough laughing in the world he wants to make." This laughter seems inconsistent with the narrator's own laughter at the conclusion of the opening story, though the sentiment is essentially the same. One cannot help but feel that by resorting to unequivocal condemnations Doyle has missed an opportunity to fully exploit the power of the situations he has rendered.

Amidst these twenty-five stories, there are many LOL one-liners and eccentric, stimulating premises. There are characters who are joyfully, fallibly human, who demonstrate "the increasing musculature of American manhood," who strive for "eternal motion and transition." But, in *Bin Laden's Bald Spot*, a dearth of scenes and disproportionate amount of summary ultimately offer more surface than depth. The collection strains for a transcendence that it does not quite achieve, though this is, in a certain way, appropriate. Because, as Doyle longs to show, "Doing really hard things that don't make the slightest sense is what human beings are all about." We are human; we struggle; we fail. As its own dramatization of this, the book could be said to succeed. Wading through an effluvium of textual excess, one locates bright sparks of empathy and love. This model of a buried core of beauty might parallel the average American: projecting facades, eternally yammering, vulnerable at heart. In the end, Doyle might just be America's love child, not unlike the discarded baby the narrator of his own "Yoda" extracts, alive, from the dirt.

Olga Mexina

"Blunt Chorus"

Ken Babstock, *Methodist Hatchet.*
House of Anansi Press, 2011. Paperback, 112 pp, $14.95.

The speaker of Ken Babstock's *Methodist Hatchet* is both anxious and confident. Confident because he knows there is no hope, yet the show must go on if only for the purposes of pure aesthetic description. Anxious because he realizes how constructed our world is, how unreal and illusive. In his poem "The Decor," he experiences a desire familiar to most of us to:

> Slide an arm right through
> the surface of this picture,
> into whatever spatial realm lies
> behind the illusion of depth, to hold
> the hand of the person
>
> wanting so badly to be seen precisely
> as they feel themselves
> to be: launching, from over there, starched
> murmurs, mere vibrations
> of air, in hopes they can correct the distorted,
> over-adorned version
>
> they fear you've displaced them with.

This desire to break out of the patterned routine, to scream, "I am real, I can describe this world, I can describe you," seems to be the implicit theme that structures *Methodist Hatchet* as well as the driving force that keeps pushing the reader forward. Babstock constructs his world with an astonishing range, where New

York is located right next to London, and the trip from one place to the other is narrated by Social Democrats and Wehrmacht, with Odin, the Norse god of war, as an omniscient observer.

The reader has no trouble traveling the distances and following the ever-changing focus of Babstock's poetics. In fact, the whole of *Methodist Hatchet* reads like an ars poetica with nervous, almost painful moments of self-consciousness. Babstock writes in "West Range," "You're reading this, or the inverse / is happening." Often we are taken out of the language and forced to look at ourselves as we are, on the verge of being just a construct. We never leave the speaker. We empathize and stay with him as we travel from one corner of his world to another. As in "The Décor," the speaker constantly signals to us with a "semaphore, or prayer."

Babstock manages to interweave politics with life so completely that we can't differentiate where politics stop and life begins, or vice versa. *Methodist Hatchet* is so permeated with politics that we become unsure whether God is the president or whether the president is God, as in "Caledonia":

> Our kids came out in numbers to stand in solidarity with
>
> us into megaphones demanding we throw rocks and a few choice
> Canadians without access to that road as our only route through
>
> anger with flags aloft alongside placards and our kids angry to be
> blocked by them with special treatment to be angered by rocks
>
> thrown in Canadian solidarity with megaphones and our kids
> in numbers aloft in a wind over patience our only route you don't
>
> have to live near them as Canadians drunk with rocks. We came out
> in numbers at night as Canadians around barrel fires singing.

We believe the speaker's political broodings because his voice and diction give the poems a deeply human sense of urgency. In Babstock's world, we are surrounded

with everyday things that seem familiar but are not. Words take on new functions, connotations and, finally, significance. Kids are not cute little people, but faceless army troops both terrifying and heartbreaking in their implicit vulnerability. People are "drunk with rocks," drunk with the power of numbers, plugged into the outlet of the collective unconscious.

Through his repetitions, leaps in diction, and imagery, Babstock creates a world structured like a snake biting its own tail. There are no answers in this world, only observations, descriptions, and strange consequences of everyday actions. Babstock's poetic world and rhetoric is postmodern in the best way possible, as in "Lee Atwater in Blowing Snow":

> Strangely, things sharpen visually,
> gather mass into themselves, hugging colour as though
> their own physical limits were arms.

Methodist Hatchet is permeated with the presence of a strange god, a creature who is powerful and omniscient, yet recognizably human and vulnerable. This god is presented variously as an "art director" ("The Decor") arranging the world according to his strange aesthetic or an ambivalent Odin, who is closely associated with the concepts of inspiration and poetry, as well as madness and wanderlust. As we finish reading "Futility Music," the last poem in the collection, we are left with the feeling that life is just a series of strange images. As we keep moving, pushed forward by wanderlust, we ask the existential question contained in "Futility Music": "Why must Now end Here"? Babstock answers with a description enticing enough for us to stop asking and just get lost in the futile beauty of *Methodist Hatchet*:

> Sun coined on rhubarb, the current
> speaking Russian to ears cut in half.
>
> Skeena's headwaters, the Stikine,
> the Nass nickel-plated, nulled in rock gas,

blunt chorus I heard while lifting
the warped door gnawing the threshold

to boil cabbage, mop with a capful of vinegar.
If it's on its way, we should greet it.

Garret Dean Johnson

Fiction that Waves Its Arms About

Matt Bondurant, *The Night Swimmer: A Novel.*
Scribner, 2012. Hardcover, 272 pp, $25.

Salman Rushdie recently mentioned at a reading in Houston, apropos of his novel *Luka and the Fire of Life*, being attracted to "fiction that waves its arms about." While Matt Bondurant's newest offering features no adventuring boys getting blasted to bits and being reconstituted to the accompaniment of video-game-like sucking sounds, according to Rushdie's sentiment *The Night Swimmer* definitely flails.

The novel's young protagonists, narrator Elly Bulkington and her husband Fred, relocate from Vermont to rural southern Ireland upon winning a pub—"title and deed"—in a competition. Structurally, the novel segments into three parts, each named for one of the three tasks Fred completed to win the pub: hitting a bull's-eye with a dart, pouring a pint of Murphy's finished with a design in the foam, and reciting a poem. Each section begins with a string of quotes from John Cheever, a writer whose work Elly fell head over heels for in college. And the device works well. Cheever seems to give Elly a voice through which to articulate the inexplicably bizarre, often captivating, but simultaneously cruel thing it is to be alive in a world as beautiful and broken as the one she finds herself in.

The story proper opens with a prologue, weaving scenes of Fred's barside feats in and out of scenes depicting the young couple's life before moving to Ireland. Bookending this prologue are some of Elly's reflections that, taken together, give a portentous glimpse into the pair's fate after the big move. On page one, Elly confesses, "It is Fred who should be telling you this story ... Not me." Then: "It was a good life. We should have considered what it was we were giving up when we moved to Ireland." The last thing we hear—before Elly and Fred are plopped into Cork to start their new venture—is the high-water mark of Elly's reflective commentary: "I think of what happened on that windy shore, the broken harbor, a small pub on the edge of the world, and I am ashamed."

The fact that it is Elly, not Fred, telling the story has multiple significances, one of which is plot-related (to be found near the end of the book), the other of which has to do with Fred's particular development as a character. Threading through all the trials and errors of the Bulkingtons' foray into pub ownership are various marital struggles: fights about having kids, sexual disappointments, individual demons, failures to accomplish long-entertained dreams. Fred is continually undertaking new projects, always changing his mind midcourse, never quite finishing anything: novel writing, pubkeeping, sailing, even smelting. And Elly is constantly on the search for something—perhaps a companion who has the same kind of need for her as she has for him/her/it—often on multiple-hour swims where she clearly becomes most awake, most alive.

Like his characters, Bondurant's prose itself is alive, immediate, often simple and declarative but given to occasional bursts of lyricism. He handles both the rough, wild terrain of coastal County Cork and its attendant vernacular with a kind of seamless, hard-edged grace. As arresting as Bondurant's depiction of place is a sense of subtle magic pervading everything (the land, the people, the events). Some of the locals want to deny or ignore any such thing, others seem to warn about it, and still others try to take advantage of it (with ultimately devastating consequences). But the uncanny nature of their new atmosphere somehow fits Elly and Fred. Both already exist somewhere outside the norm of human experience. Elly's ability to swim as much, and as far, as she does—along with her insatiable desire to be in the water—feels like a kind of magic in itself; and Fred's haunted obsession with a personal 9/11 memory occupies him to the point of having almost a determinist kind of power over his character arc. A general sense of otherworldly danger hangs over the entire narrative, seasoning it, heightening it, becoming an ever-present tension crackling in the background. You never feel entirely safe reading this book, always on your toes, waiting for whatever might blow through the pub door next. The political, societal, and physical ground all seem to shift as temperamentally as the waves surrounding the tiny nearby island—Cape Clear—that Elly feels drawn to.

Indeed the more personal danger brewing around this island's eccentric host of characters, involving a centuries-old feud between the dominant Corrigan clan and everyone else (especially newcomers), often echoes the physical danger of the

place itself, its fickle waters, its crumbly and sometimes confusing terrain. More than once Elly tries to go out for a long, open-water swim and finds herself foiled by a sudden, treacherous turn in the weather. It's more than tempting—in fact, it seems we're almost encouraged—to imbue the setting with a kind of personality. That said, readers are left entirely free to imagine that the volatile, natural weather patterns, the tricks of light, old stories, and multigenerational power struggles with roots in ancient superstitions have developed a kind of unshakable belief in the locals—a belief that artificially imposes intentionality on an insentient earth. It's a fair way to read the novel and a stance that does nothing to diminish the poignancy of the human struggles Bondurant depicts.

For a relatively thin novel, *The Night Swimmer* is loaded down with mysteries, some of them spanning not just generations but millennia. Considering the momentousness (and narrative relevance) of these preternatural histories, the reader might find himself wanting more pages, more time, to be absorbed in them. I don't know whether this is a testament to Bondurant's dexterity or that such material really might have benefitted from longer treatment. One of the pleasures of reading any novel seems to come from the form's unique ability to lose the reader inside it for an extended period of time. It becomes a place you can visit, even move to, and it's peopled with characters who become more and more real partly because of the amount of time you spend with them. I'm reminded of C. S. Lewis commenting to an interviewer once, "You can never get a cup of tea large enough or a book long enough to suit me," as he sat with a copy of *Bleak House*. But this, clearly, is not a universally shared preference.

Regardless, whether you're the type who wants a rapidly unfolding mystery set in a sharply rendered and vibrant but treacherous landscape or you're the type who wants to linger over an ever-deepening, ever-complexifying puzzle, you'll likely enjoy Bondurant's *The Night Swimmer*. It's not the kind of book that will puzzle you into apoplexy; it fully realizes itself and gives readers plenty of hooks to hang their hats on by the end; but it will leave you with questions. And these questions are the best kind. As E. M. Forster insisted, one effect distinct to the genius of the novel form is that of "Expansion … Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out."

Layla Benitez-James

On a Tightrope in a Storm of Starlings

Dan Beachy-Quick, *Circle's Apprentice.*
Tupelo Press, 2011. Paperback, 83 pp, $16.95.

Perhaps it is not a logical assumption that a collection of poems inspired by the philosophical musings in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Circles," would be especially exciting. Intelligent, yes, but compelling? Whimsical? In Dan Beachy-Quick's *Circle's Apprentice,* he conjures forth poems out of Emerson's concepts which become not only compelling, but romantic and wild.

You do not have to have read Emerson's "Circles" to appreciate this collection; it delights all on its own. Its pleasures are, however, enhanced when Emerson's wonderfully poetic phrases are fresh in the mind; it calls to its origins. Beachy-Quick's epigraph from Emerson, wholly validated by what follows, gives an inspiring beginning to the collection: "Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning."

Despite their quiet titles, these poems are thrilling in their pursuit of truth because they allow an exploration of uncertainty without elegy for meaning. They thrive in fruitful ambiguity where a constant reimagining, the drawing of more circles, gives sufficient satisfaction. In one poem, titled simply, "Poem," the speaker invites:

> Keep grinning at me as I fill the blanks in,
>
> Keep following me from room to room:
> The fingerprints were on my face
> Not on the mirror, but I wiped the mirror
> Clean. Who smudged them ...

In his final poem, he explains, "I am imagining this world but I'm inviting you in / So I can join you," but Beachy-Quick creates many different worlds in *Circle's Apprentice*. Each of the seven sections makes its own world which is not so much connected by a unifying theme, as by the internal logic of its music. The first series is composed of five "lullabies:" little songs that are filled with ghosts and graves and irony. Some, like the third "Lullaby," produce the satisfying combination of philosophical ideas and a deceivingly fablelike narrative:

> Before you say
>
> "I see the lion," the lion is gone,
> and you'll but see
> starlings slip between bars to glean
> seed from hay

There is a science and circularity to these poems, but they also contain the melancholy of old melodies, as can be seen in the "little ghost" child of his last "Lullaby," who

> breathes, inspired but alone—
> a sediment
> for memory, a fossil for a tome.

Beachy-Quick is unafraid to embrace the simple rhymes of words like *home*, *stone*, *bone*, and *alone* because they do not support the entirety of the poem's lyric pleasures.

After we leave the short, musical lines of the lullabies, we find longer, more meditative lines and eventually, as in "Fragile Elegy" and "Cave Beneath Volcano," poems that are blown apart, their words scattered across the page. Some, like "The Ziggurat," "Catalog," and "Poem; or, The Artifacts," are made of several sonnet-like stanzas stacked on top of each other. However, there is a reassuringly logical progression through these sections as the reader is taken from lullabies, in the first section, to "Tomb Figurines" in the last.

Despite its progression, once the reader has fallen down the rabbit hole,

Circle's Apprentice is by no means an easy read. At times, as in "The Ziggurat," or "Catalog," it feels as if Beachy-Quick tears ahead, only pausing long enough to implore the reader to catch up. The poems are driven by inventive images and music, and, at times, it appears as if internal logic must be sacrificed. Some even seem like fanciful lectures where the reader only gets every other word, and it feels like a test will commence as soon as the poem is done. Beachy-Quick seems aware of this, as in "Catalog," where the speaker informs us:

> Every poem
> Contains a blessing it keeps hidden
> The marrow inside the bone. To read
> Includes ruin ...

Circle's Apprentice has that same self-awareness in writing that Emerson's essay does. Though other truths are reached for, it is the act of writing itself that is never forgotten, as in "Demonstrative Lullaby":

> *For example* ivy twines by twinning
> as do I when I write I study sameness
> narcissus lazy drops petals for tears
>
> and echo knows daisy in margins
> silences virtue when she's torn we see
> "not me" doubles love into a page

While no poem seems to simply concern itself with the self-conscious creation of poetry, many contain elements of ars poetica: little reminders that the poet behind them is never far away. The question is always language and what it can do. There is a constant, and oddly heartening, inability for the various speakers to get beyond language and explore completely any one truth. One of the most successful poems which embodies this idea is another titled "Poem." It begins:

The minute gears mutely whir. To put your ear
Against it is to put your ear inside it.
It does not tick. It isn't a heart.

Images fill this poem as the speaker turns over this notion of how we seek and how we know:

To knock
Your hand against it puts your hand inside it,
As in a cloud at night the pale moon
Gathers itself outside itself its own light ...

At times it is as though we watch Beachy-Quick on a tightrope in a storm of starlings, only to look beside us, and realize that he is here as well, watching himself with rapt attention, as entertained as we are. As in "Arcadian," the constant movement of its characters fills the poem with a lively urgency. "I could not stop my hands clapping," the speaker repeats, over and over and, in the poem, the reader finds so many things worthy of applause. At times nonsensical repetition finds its home within the rhetoric of logic:

Is true if and only if a tree fell in the
Woods is true if and only if –
.....
As I clapped, applauding the logic
That needed no belief. Like the shadows
Of bird's wings, the shadows of my hands
On the ground.

Beachy-Quick's first book, *North True South Bright*, was intelligent and ambitious in its leaps of language while still revolving around its theme. *Circle's Apprentice* goes beyond this by capturing the music of creation itself. In the world of *Circle's Apprentice*, everything is under construction. "Men cease to interest

us when we find their limitations," Emerson informs us in "Circles." In *Circle's Apprentice*, Beachy-Quick does not come close to losing our interest. In fact, his inventiveness seems inexhaustible and, in his closing poem, the last in the "Tomb Figurine" series, he promises more to come:

> More soon on the nature of impossible constructions.

Kazim Ali is the author of eight books of poetry, fiction, and essays, as well as translations of Sohrab Sepehri and Ananda Devi. His new book of poetry *Sky Ward* will be published by Wesleyan University Press in 2013. He is associate professor of Creative Writing and Comparative Literature at Oberlin College.

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz is the author of five books of poetry, most recently *Everything is Everything* (Write Bloody Publishing), as well as the nonfiction book, *Words In Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam* (Soft Skull Press). Her poems have appeared in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Rattle*, *Pank*, *Conduit*, and *La Petite Zine*. Her recent awards include the ArtsEdge Writer-In-Residency at the University of Pennsylvania (2010-2011), a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Poetry (2011) and the Amy Clampitt Residency (2013). For more information, please visit her website at www.aptowicz.com.

Ari Banias is the author of the chapbook *What's Personal is Being Here With All of You* (Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs 2012). He is the recipient of fellowships from New York Foundation for the Arts, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and is the winner of a 2012 Campbell Corner Poetry Prize. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Subtropics*, *DIAGRAM*, *Salt Hill*, and elsewhere. He is the 2012-13 Halls Poetry Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Mark Beaver's recent work has appeared in *North American Review*, *Third Coast*, *Ninth Letter*, *Memoir (and)*, *Southeast Review*, and *Blood Orange Review*. He is a graduate of UNC Greensboro's MFA program, and he teaches at The Lovett School. He lives with his wife and two daughters in Atlanta, where he is completing a book-length memoir that includes "Addressee Unknown."

Jonathan Beer is a New York-based artist and writer. Beer has exhibited in solo shows at Georgia Tech's Ferst Center for the Arts in Atlanta, and at Albany Molecular Corporation and Bethlehem Public Library. In September 2012 Beer will have his first solo show in New York at Kathleen Cullen Fine Art. His group exhibitions include shows at Sotheby's, Sloan Fine Art, Boltax Gallery, Flowers Gallery, MUSE Center for Photography and the Moving Image, Theaterlab, The Puffin Room, and the ArtNow Fair. He began to write critically in 2010 while attending the New York Academy of Art for his MFA in Painting. In 2011 he co-founded Art-Rated, a blog dedicated to articles and interviews on the contemporary art scene. He is currently a contributing writer to the *Brooklyn Rail*, *ArtWrit*, and *Art Observed*.

Layla Benitez-James is an MFA candidate in poetry in the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program. Her work has appeared in *Acentos Review*, *The San Antonio Express-News*, and *The San Antonio Current*'s flash fiction blog, among other places.

Mary Biddinger is the author of *Prairie Fever* (Steel Toe Books 2007), *Saint Monica* (Black Lawrence Press 2011), *O Holy Insurgency* (Black Lawrence Press 2012), and *A Sunny Place with Adequate Water* (Black Lawrence Press 2014). She is also co-editor of *The Monkey and the Wrench: Essays into Contemporary Poetics* (University of Akron Press 2011). Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Barrelhouse*; *Bat City Review*; *Blackbird*; *Forklift, Ohio*; *H_NGM_N*; *Pleiades*; and *Redivider*. She teaches literature and poetry writing at The University of Akron, where she edits *Barn Owl Review*, the Akron Series in Poetry, and the Akron Series in Contemporary Poetics.

Eula Biss is the author of *The Balloonists* and Notes from *No Man's Land*. Her work has been recognized by a Pushcart Prize, a National Book Critics Circle Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Howard Foundation Fellowship, and a NEA Literature Fellowship. Her essays have recently appeared in *The Best American Nonrequired Reading* and *The Best Creative Nonfiction*, as well as in *The Believer*, *Gulf Coast*, *The Iowa Review*, and *Harper's*.

Amy Boesky teaches literature and creative nonfiction at Boston College. She is author of *What We Have*, a memoir about her experience with familial cancer (Penguin/Gotham 2010). A 2011-2012 recipient of a Howard Foundation grant in creative nonfiction, she has recently published essays in the *Michigan Quarterly Review* and *Memoir (and)*.

Laynie Browne's most recent books include *Roseate, Points of Gold* (Dusie 2011), *The Desires of Letters* (Counterpath 2010) and *The Scented Fox* (Wave 2007). She is co-editor of the anthology *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women* (Les Figues 2012).

Liza Butler is currently pursuing an MFA in creative writing at Fresno State. Born in Ireland and raised in England, she now lives in the Sierra Nevada foothills with her husband and daughter. This is her first publication.

Gabrielle Calvocoressi is the author of *The Last Time I Saw Amelia Earhart* (Persea 2005) and *Apocalyptic Swing* (Persea 2009), which was a finalist for *The Los Angeles Times* Book Award. She is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships including a Stegner Fellowship and Jones Lectureship from Stanford University, a Rona Jaffe Woman Writer's Award and a fellowship to Civitella di Ranieri in Umbria. She was recently awarded a prestigious Writing Residency Fellowship from the Lannan Foundation in Marfa. Her poems have been featured in the *Washington Post* and on Garrison Keillor's *Poet's Almanac* and in numerous journals. She lives in Los Angeles where she is the Poetry Editor for *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. She is currently at work on her third book of poems, *Rocket Fantastic*.

A Boston native, **Morris Collins** received his MFA from Penn State University in 2008. His first novel, *Horse Latitudes*, is forthcoming from MP Publishing in Spring 2013. Other fiction and poetry has recently appeared in or is forthcoming from *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The Saranac Review*, *Passages North*, *Nimrod*, *Lake Effect*, and *The Los Angeles Review* among others. He now lives in Baltimore.

Steve Coughlin lives in Athens, Ohio. His three favorite Bruce Springsteen albums are *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, *The Rising*, and *Lucky Town*.

Chris Dombrowski is the author of *By Cold Water*, a Finalist for Foreword Magazine's Book of the Year in Poetry, and *Earth Again*, forthcoming in 2013 from Wayne State University Press. With his family, he divides his time between Montana and Michigan, where he teaches at Interlochen Center for the Arts.

Kent Dorn was born in Greer, South Carolina in 1977. He received his BFA from Anderson College (1999) and his MFA from the University of Houston (2005). Recent solo exhibitions include *Remains*, Freight + Volume, NYC; and *Dweller*, Bryan Miller Gallery, Houston. He is represented by Freight and Volume, NYC; and lives and works in Houston, TX.

Norman Dubie's most recent collection is *The Volcano* (Copper Canyon 2011). He lives in Tempe, Arizona, and teaches at Arizona State University.

Ansel Elkins, born in the Alabama foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, is a recipient of the 2011 "Discovery"/*Boston Review* Poetry Prize. Poems have appeared in *AGNI*, *The Believer*, *Best New Poets 2011*, *Boston Review*, *North American Review*, *The Southern Review*, and elsewhere.

Rebecca Evanhoe is a native Kansan. She received a BA in Chemistry from the University of Kansas, and she is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Florida's Program in Creative Writing. Rebecca's work has appeared in *NOON*, *Harper's*, and *Parcel*.

Marcela Guerrero is research coordinator at the International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. She is also writing her dissertation, "Icons Afloat: Creolizing Semiotics in Contemporary Caribbean Art," as a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Art History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Thomas Heise is the author of *Horror Vacui: Poems* (Sarabande 2006), *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture* (Rutgers University Press 2010), and *Moth; or how I came to be with you again* (Sarabande 2013). He is an Associate Professor of English at McGill University and divides his time between Montreal and New York City.

Sean Patrick Hill is the author of two books of poetry, *Interstitial* (BlazeVOX 2011) and *The Imagined Field* (Paper Kite Press 2010). His interviews and reviews have appeared in *Boston Review*, *Guernica*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Rain Taxi*, and *Bookslut*. He is currently an MFA candidate at Warren Wilson College and lives in Kentucky.

Geetha Iyer was born in India, grew up in the United Arab Emirates, and moved to the United States to study biology; she has since become an MFA student at Iowa State University's Creative Writing & Environment program. She writes fiction, nonfiction, and poetry with a bent toward place-based and science writing. She is a recipient of the Hopwood Undergraduate Short Fiction Award and the Robert F. Haugh Prize from the University of Michigan.

Drew Johnson was raised in Mississippi. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Harper's*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Five Chapters*, *The Cupboard*, and elsewhere. His reviews, interviews, and essays have appeared at *The Paris Review Daily*, *Bookslut*, *The Collagist*, and *The Rumpus*. Much of this work can be accessed through his website at www.walkswithmoose.com. He lives with his wife in Carlisle, Massachusetts, and is finishing a novel.

Garret Dean Johnson holds an MFA in Fiction from the University of Houston and teaches creative writing at both Houston Baptist University and the University of Houston-Downtown, where he recently served as Faculty Advisor to *The Bayou Review*. He has also taught for Writers in the Schools (WITS) and is currently shopping a novel.

Joshua Kryah is the author of two collections of poems, *We Are Starved* (Center for Literary Publishing 2011) and *Glean* (Nightboat Books 2007). He is the poetry editor of *Witness* and will be the Thornton Writer-in-Residence at Lynchburg College in the spring of 2013.

Lo Kwa Mei-en's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Ninth Letter*, *Crazyhorse*, *Guernica*, *New Orleans Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, and other journals. She won the 2012 *Crazyhorse* Lynda Hull Memorial Poetry Prize. Most recently from Columbus, Ohio, where she graduated from Ohio State University's MFA program, she currently lives and works in Austin, Texas.

Dr. Lakra (b. Jerónimo López Ramírez, 1972, Mexico) has created murals for the 2nd Trienal Poli/Grafica de San Juan (2009) and The Centre for Contemporary Arts CCA, Glasgow (2007). He was the subject of solo museum exhibitions at the Drawing Center (2012) and ICA Boston (2010) and a two-person exhibition with Abraham Cruzvillegas at Museo de Art Contemporáneo de Oaxaca, Mexico (2005). He has participated in numerous group exhibitions including *Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art*, Barbican Art Gallery, London (2008); *Wunderkammer: A Century of Curiosities*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2008); *Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art from Mexico City*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2007); and *Pierced Hearts and True Love; a Century of Drawings for Tattoos*, The Drawing Center (1995).

Rob MacDonald lives in Boston and is the editor of *Sixth Finch*. His poems can be found in *Octopus*, *notnostrums*, *Sink Review*, *esque*, *H_NGM_N*, and other journals.

Mohammad Jafar Mahallati is co-translator, with Kazim Ali, of Sohrab Sepehri's *Water's Footfall*. He is Presidential Scholar in the Religion Department at Oberlin College. He served as Iran's ambassador to the United Nations from 1987-89 and was instrumental in brokering the peace agreement that ended the Iran-Iraq War.

Sarah Manguso is the author of five books of poetry and prose, most recently *The Guardians* (2012) and *The Two Kinds of Decay* (2008). A 2012 Guggenheim Fellow in Nonfiction, she lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Clancy Martin is Professor and Chair of Philosophy at the University of Missouri in Kansas City. A 2011-2012 Guggenheim fellow, his work has appeared in *Harper's*, *The New York Times*, *The London Review of Books*, *Esquire*, *NOON*, *Tin House*, *Details*, and many other magazines and newspapers. His novel, *How to Sell* (FSG), was named a "Best Book of 2009" by the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Publisher's Weekly*, and *The Guardian*. His piece in these pages is excerpted from his forthcoming book, *Love, Lies and Marriage* (FSG).

Marty McConnell lives in Chicago, Illinois, where she works as a fund-raiser for a youth and family center. She received her MFA from Sarah Lawrence College, and her work has recently appeared in *A Face to Meet the Faces: An Anthology of Contemporary Persona Poetry*, *City of the Big Shoulders: An Anthology of Chicago Poetry*, *Indiana Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Salt Hill*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Muzzle Magazine*, and *Drunken Boat*.

Jeffrey McDaniel is the author of four books, most recently *The Endarkenment* (University of Pittsburgh Press). He teaches at Sarah Lawrence College.

Pushcart Prize winner **Jill McDonough**'s books include *Habeas Corpus* (Salt 2008), *Where You Live* (Salt 2012), and *Oh, James!* (Seven Kitchens 2012).. The recipient of fellowships from the NEA, the Library of Congress, and elsewhere, she directs 24PearlStreet, the online writing program at the Fine Arts Work Center.

Patrick McGinty was raised in Arizona and worked for years as a prosthetist in the Phoenix area and the rural communities and reservations of the Colorado Plateau. Since earning his MFA in fiction at the University of Virginia he has been a humanities editor at Oxford University Press. He married his wife Theodora in June. "Her Circus" is his first published story.

Originally from St. Petersburg, Russia, **Olga Mexina** was transported to the US at the age of 12. She grew up in New York and got her BA from New York University. After graduation she spent years going back and forth between New York and St. Petersburg. Currently, she is working on her MFA in Poetry at the University of Houston, where she also teaches and serves as an Assistant Editor in Poetry for *Gulf Coast*.

James Miranda's writing has appeared in *Indiana Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Third Coast Magazine*, *Storyglossia*, *PIF Magazine*, and elsewhere. He lives and writes in Athens, Ohio.

Devon J. Moore hails from Buffalo, NY, with a lot of time spent growing in Wilmington, NC. She worked as high school English teacher in the Bronx for four years and currently lives in Syracuse, NY, where she is completing her MFA in Creative Writing at Syracuse University. She is a recipient of the Syracuse University Fellowship, the winner of the 2011 Joyce Carol Oates Award in Nonfiction and has poems published in or forthcoming from *Stone Canoe* and *Harpur Palate*.

Julia Anna Morrison is an MFA candidate at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She has a BA in English from the University of Georgia. She grew up near Atlanta, Georgia.

Rusty Morrison is the author of *After Urgency* (Tupelo Press 2012), winner of the Dorset Prize, and the chapbook, *Book of the Given* (Noemi Press 2011). She is also the author of the Sawtooth Prize-winning *the true keeps calm hiding its story* (Ahsahta Press 2007), which also won the Academy of American Poet's James Laughlin Award, and *Whethering* (Center for Literary Publishing 2004), which won the Colorado Prize for Poetry. Her essays have been published in *Kenyon Review*, *Pleiades*, and the anthologies *Beauty is a Verb* (Cinco Punto 2011) and *One Word* (Sarabande 2010), among others. She is the co-publisher of Omnidawn.

Maggie Nelson's most recent book is *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (Norton 2011), which was named a Notable Book of the Year by the *New York Times* and is just out in paperback. She is the author of three other books of nonfiction prose, *Bluets* (Wave Books 2009), *The Red Parts* (Free Press 2007), and *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (University of Iowa 2007), as well as four books of poetry, including *Something Bright, Then Holes* (Soft Skull Press 2007) and *Jane: A Murder* (Soft Skull 2005; finalist, the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for the Art of the Memoir). She has been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in Nonfiction, an NEA Fellowship in Poetry, and an Andy Warhol Foundation/ Creative Capital Arts Writers Grant. She currently teaches in the School of Critical Studies at CalArts and lives in Los Angeles.

Jess Novak is pursuing an MFA in poetry at Florida State University. Her work has appeared in *In Posse Review* and the anthology *Milk and Honey: A Celebration of Jewish Lesbian Poetry*.

Sara C. Rolater is a graduate of Rice University and an MFA candidate at the University of Houston. She has been a fellow at the Writing Immersion Retreat in Bali. Her fiction has appeared in *Ghost Town*. Check out her Facebook status collage poetry at plagiarizemyface.com.

Robin Romm is the author of two books and a chapbook, as well as numerous articles and book reviews. Her story collection, *The Mother Garden*, was a finalist for the PEN USA prize. Her memoir, *The Mercy Papers*, was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year, a *New York Times* Editor's Choice, a *San Francisco Chronicle* Best Book of the Year, and named one of the ten best nonfiction books of the year by *Entertainment Weekly*. Her writing has appeared in many magazines and newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *The Observer*, *O Magazine*, *Slate*, *Salon*, and *The Atlantic*. She lives in Portland, Oregon. This story is from her new collection in progress, *The Healing Room*.

Allie Rowbottom received her BA in creative writing and gender studies from New York University and her MFA in writing from the California Institute of the Arts. She is currently a PhD candidate in nonfiction writing at the University of Houston. In her free time Allie enjoys yoga, horses, and tea.

Sohrab Sepehri (1928-1980) published eight books during his lifetime. A painter and poet, he is widely considered to be one of Iran's most important literary voices of the 20th century. His book-length poem *Water's Footfall*, translated by Kazim Ali with Mohammad Jafar Mahallati, is available from Omnidawn.

Maggie Shipstead is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, a former Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford, and a recent resident at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. Her short fiction has appeared in *Tin House*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Ecotone*, *American Short Fiction*, *Subtropics*, *The Best American Short Stories*, and other publications. Her story "La Moretta" was a 2012 *National Magazine* Award finalist, and her first novel, *Seating Arrangements*, was published in June. She doesn't really know where she lives but is open to suggestions.

S.E. Smith is the author of *I Live in a Hut*, winner of the 2011 Cleveland State University Poetry Center's first book competition. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *jubilat*, *FENCE*, and *Best New Poets 2008*, among others. She is the founding editor of *OH NO* magazine and holds an MFA in poetry from the Michener Center for Writers.

Susan B.A. Somers-Willett is the author of two award-winning books of poetry, *Quiver* and *Roam*, and a book of criticism, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*. Her writing has been featured by several journals including *The Iowa Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Poets & Writers*, and *The New Yorker*. Her collaborative documentary poetry series "Women of Troy" aired on PRI and BBC radio affiliates and received a 2010 Gracie Award from the Alliance for Women in Media.

Alexandra Teague's first book of poetry, *Mortal Geography* (Persea 2010), won the 2009 Lexi Rudnitsky Prize and the 2010 California Book Award. Her work has also appeared in *Best American Poetry 2009*, *Best New Poets 2008*, and many journals. A 2006-08 Stegner Fellow and the recipient of

a 2011 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, she is the new Assistant Professor of Poetry at University of Idaho.

Daniel Tyx teaches English at a community college in McAllen, Texas, where he lives with his wife, two children, and a number of pets which by fiat shall not exceed the population of humans in the household. His work has appeared in *The Gettysburg Review* and *Along the River: An Anthology of Voices from the Rio Grande Valley.*

M.A. Vizsolyi's first book of poems is *The Lamp with Wings: Love Sonnets*, which was winner of the National Poetry Series. His poems are recently appearing in *Ploughshares*, *Tuesday: An Art Project*, *Ninth Letter*, and *BOMB*. He teaches ice hockey and ice skating lessons in Central Park, and lives in Brooklyn.

Sidney Wade's most recent collection of poems is *Stroke*, from Persea Books. Her sixth, *Straits & Narrows*, will be published by Persea in Spring 2013. She has served as President of AWP and Secretary/Treasurer of ALTA and has taught workshops in Poetry and Translation at the University of Florida's MFA@FLA program since 1993. She is the poetry editor of *Subtropics*.

Joshua Ware lives in Denver, Colorado. He is the author of *Homage to Homage to Homage to Creeley*, which won the 2010 Furniture Press Poetry Prize. Three of his chapbooks will be released in 2012: *Imaginary Portraits* (Greying Ghost Press), *How We Remake the World: A Concise History of Everything* (Slope Editions), co-written with Trey Moody and winner of the 1st Annual Slope Editions Chapbook Prize, and *SDVIG* (alice blue books), which he co-wrote with Natasha Kessler. His work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Barn Owl Review*, *Conduit*, *esque*, *Hobart*, *The Journal*, *NANO Fiction*, *Third Coast*, and *ILK*.

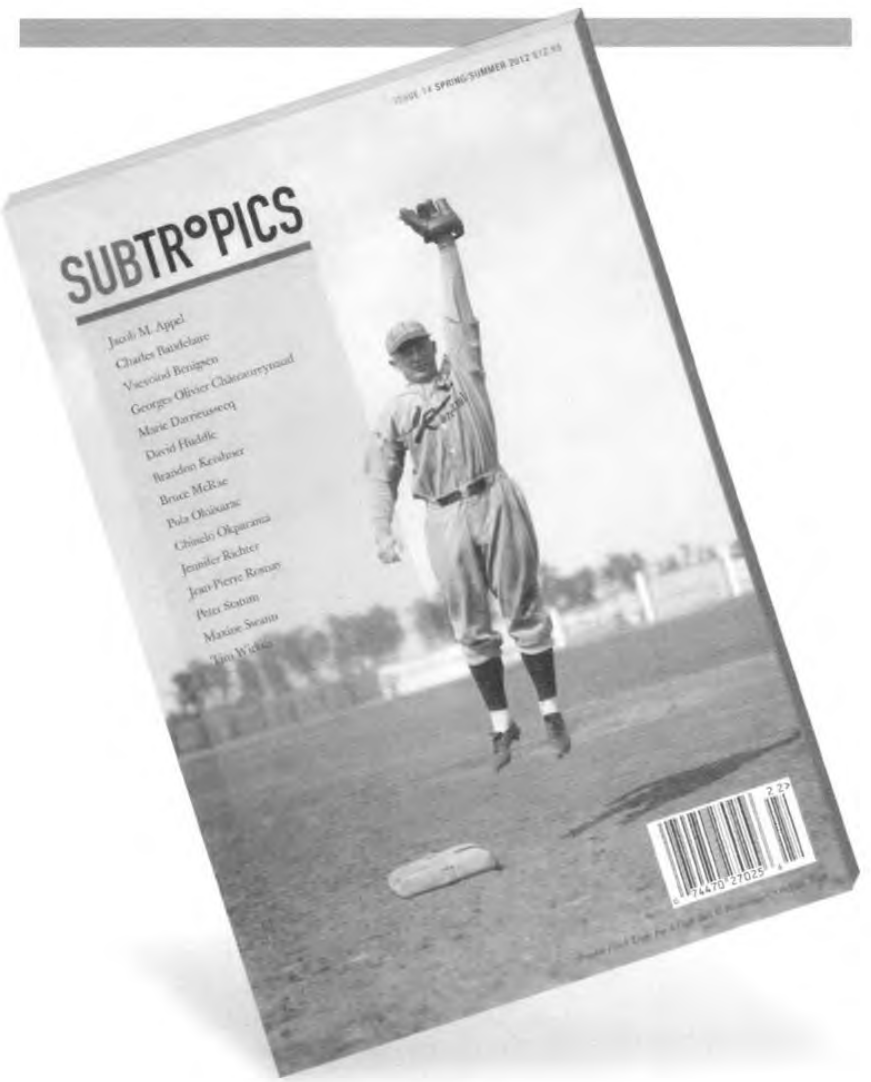
Emily Watson's essays have been published in *AGNI*, *River Teeth*, and *American Tensions: Literature of Identity and the Search for Social Justice*. She has an MFA in nonfiction from West Virginia University and teaches at Ivy Tech Community College. She lives in Indianapolis with poet Matt Anserello, their son, and a very lazy retired greyhound.

Elizabeth Willis's most recent book, *Address* (Wesleyan 2011), won this year's PEN New England/Winship Award for Poetry. Her other books include *Meteoric Flowers* (Wesleyan 2006), *Turneresque* (Burning Deck 2003), *The Human Abstract* (Penguin 1995), *Second Law* (Avenue B 1993), and the chapbook *All the Paintings of Giorgione* (Belladonna 2006). She is a 2012 Guggenheim fellow.

Jenny Xie is currently an MFA candidate and Stein Fellow at NYU. She is the recipient of the 2011 Amy Award from *Poets & Writers* and has poems forthcoming in *Indiana Review*, *The Literary Review*, and *Slice Magazine*.

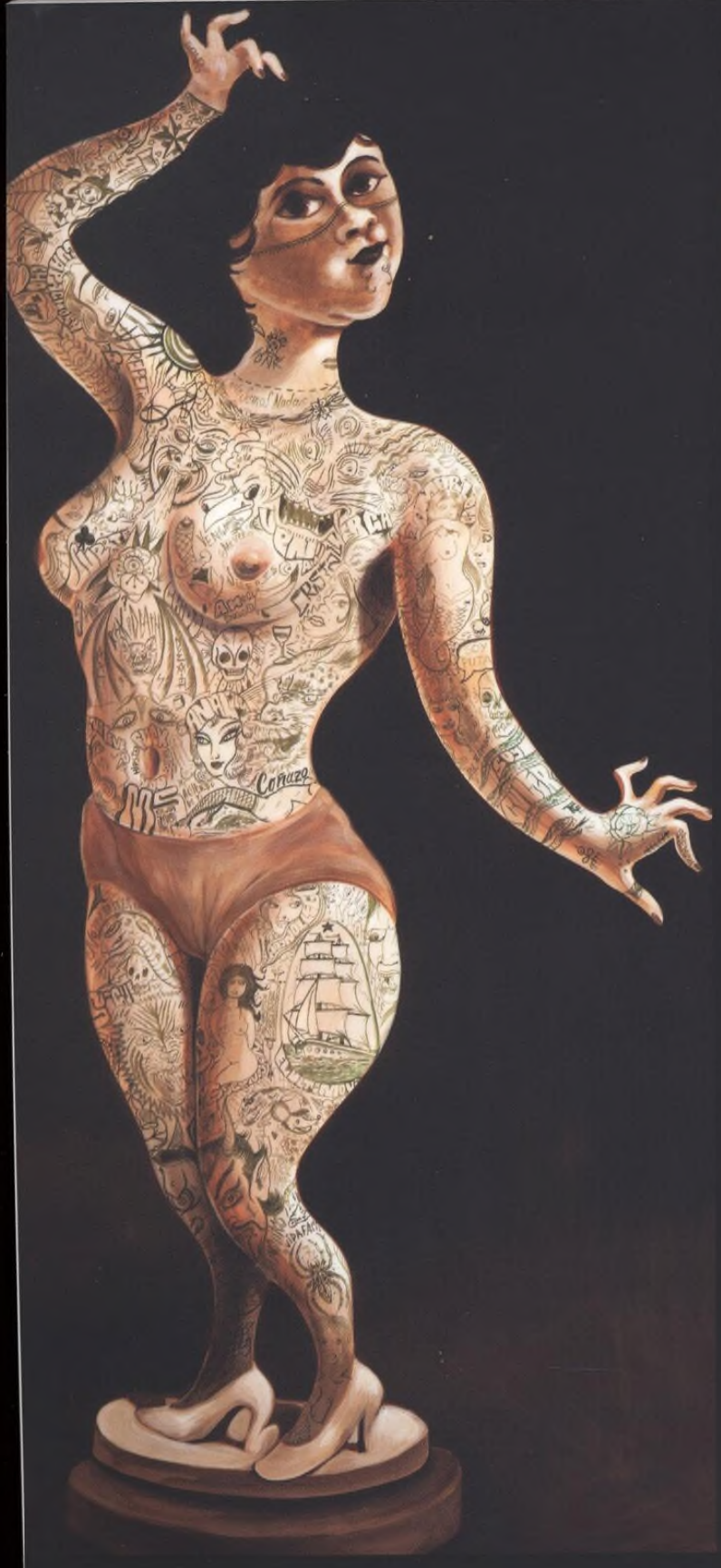
Dean Young's most recent book is *Bender, New and Selected Poems* (Copper Canyon Press 2012).

SUBTROPICS



THE LITERARY MAGAZINE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

www.english.ufl.edu/subtropics/



POETRY BY CRISTIN O'KEEFE APTOWICZ, ARI BANIAS, MARY BIDDINGER, LAYNIE BROWNE, GABRIELLE CALVOCORESSI, CHRIS DOMBROWSKI, NORMAN DUBIE, ANSEL ELKINS, THOMAS HEISE, JOSHUA KRYAH, LO KWA MEI-EN, ROB MACDONALD, MARTY MCCONNELL, JEFFREY MCDANIEL, JILL MCDONOUGH, DEVON J. MOORE, JULIA ANNA MORRISON, JESS NOVAK, SOHRAB SEPEHRI, S.E. SMITH, SUSAN B.A. SOMERS-WILLETT, ALEXANDRA TEAGUE, M.A. VIZSOLYI, SIDNEY WADE, JOSHUA WARE, JENNY XIE, AND DEAN YOUNG.

FICTION BY MORRIS COLLINS, GEETHA IYER,DREW JOHNSON, PATRICK MCGINTY, ROBIN ROMM, AND MAGGIE SHIPSTEAD.

NONFICTION AND LYRIC ESSAYS BY MARK BEAVER, AMY BOESKY, LIZA BUTLER, STEVE COUGHLIN, REBECCA EVANHOE, CLANCY MARTIN, JAMES MIRANDA, DANIEL TYX, AND EMILY WATSON.

REVIEWS BY, AND INTERVIEWS WITH JONATHAN BEER, LAYLA BENITEZ-JAMES, EULA BISS, MARCELA GUERRERO, SEAN PATRICK HILL, GARRET DEAN JOHNSON, SARAH MANGUSO, OLGA MEXINA, RUSTY MORRISON, MAGGIE NELSON, SARA C. ROLATER, ALLIE ROWBOTTOM, AND ELIZABETH WILLIS.

ARTWORK BY DR. LAKRA AND KENT DORN.

$10 WINTER/SPRING 2013
VOLUME 25, ISSUE 1