

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

# gULF COAST



Journal of Literature and Fine Arts  
of the Coast

# THE COAST

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# gULF COAST

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS VOLUME 34, ISSUE 1

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*Look, a flame stirs from the ashes.*

*Yes, I recognize the face.*

—Adam Zagajewski

Dear Readers,

What would it feel like for our loyalties to drift toward a flag of smoke? What would it require? What songs would we sing?

John Gerrard's *Western Flag (Spindletop, Texas)* adorns this issue's cover. The work is a non-durational digital simulation synchronized to real-time conditions at the Lucas Gusher, site of the first oil strike in Texas (1901). This site is now barren, having been stripped of natural resources that, as the artist has noted, "covered this former sea floor with an abundance of life." A flag for a former sea floor. A flag, according to Gerrard, "for a new kind of world order."

However totalizing the notes of *Western Flag* might seem, world orders, new and old, always encounter local resistance. Of Texas, Evan Garza (make sure to read his essay in this issue) writes: "Its vast expanse and diversity can't be summed up or described in any singular way or through any one experience." That sentiment resonates with the scope and size of *Gulf Coast's* home state as well as the breadth and depth of this issue. To put it another way, the sites of resistance here are multiple, complex, contradictory, humorous, tragic. Their multiplicity resists any totalizing gesture, making for an entwined and entwining collectivity.

You might, then, consider each piece in this issue as a thread in a flag of smoke, or perhaps each text as its own flag. Flags for former sea floors, for new ways of saying or singing—letters blown across pages by the winds of our seeing. We might wonder what loyalties each piece twines with or questions. Once we've read them or seen them, what new responsibilities do we bear?

In his essay, Garza turns the words of organizer, educator, and curator Mariame Kaba into a refrain: *Everything worthwhile is done with other people.* These flags call not for single-minded devotion but for acts of complex relation and resistance. They are woven from complex subjectivities and for others. As such, each text testifies to a desire for conversation, an ever-unfolding sense of belonging. To echo Alison C. Rollins's echo of June Jordan: They prompt us to *take good care*, of our many selves and of others.

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

# THE 2021 GULF COAST PRIZE IN POETRY

Judged by Natalie Diaz

## *Winner, Lisa Fay Coutley*

There is a compelling momentum occurring in Lisa Fay Coutley's poem, a reciprocal slowing and quickening that offers neither rest or unrest, rather it creates a periphery or surround that is also a sensuality. These sensualities destabilize the body-body and the image-body, and require the non-human body in order to fully exist within the electric anxiety or worry. While it's easy to pin anxiety to its negative associations, I found a lot of wonder in this poem, a reorganization of what it means to also eat while we evade, or imagine evading, what is hunting us.

—Natalie Diaz

### Honorable Mentions:

“Nazca Lines” by Elizabeth Robinson  
“Love in a Time of Revolution” by Samyak Sherkot

# Anxiety

according to my therapist, is my body's / way of saying I'm a gazelle, head bent / to long grass, eating but heeding the puma / who's tracking me, so I often stop, raise my / face & wait, unable to chew until my brain / scans the landscape to see I'm free / from teeth. In the tall window of this / office, Lucinda the magenta orchid screams / or flames or celebrates even though it is / January & there is no sky. There's an elephant / straight ahead, Buddha to the left, a trampoline behind me / where once I rocked myself still for the dull pain / in my pelvis. There are two silent clocks / & no foul smells, no reason to fear this room / wants to hold me by my wrists / still light pours in from the north / when a man's hand erases a girl's thigh / until she's the fish with a fluke for its will / forcing her to flash her shimmering fins / bald at the water's top for some lucky bird / come pluck her my parasite inside / I'll be the bird flying a half life / singing against my own desire.

II

Or I am not a gazelle. I am pinned  
to the bed in a way only one of us likes.

I am breath locked behind the wire  
drawn ribs of knowing you're running

out of this week's money to feed  
your babies. I am learning to cry

quietly so as not to hurt everyone  
around me. Each year I grow more

sunflowers for the faces I'm holding  
underwater inside me. A bird of prey

in the house is one less in the sky.

# THE 2021 GULF COAST PRIZE IN FICTION

Judged by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah

## *Winner, Leila Renee*

Great writing makes you feel. In Leila Renee's incredible piece, "But Mostly Weeding," I was forced to feel a complex array of longing, anger, weariness, and hope. The prose crackled with wit and attentive sharpness and I felt myself genuinely caring about these characters and their outcomes. A beautifully told story.

—Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah

### **Honorable Mentions:**

**"Loose Elephants" by Cristian Hernandez**  
**"The Beginning of What" by Sam Schieren**

## But Mostly Weeding

The letter is damp and trembling in Vivian's hand. Wayde's key rattles in the front door.

Wayde crosses the threshold and senses the air's odd weight. Usually when he comes home from school his mother is lounging on the couch blasting Whitney Houston or Brenda Fassie, nursing a mug of milky Ceylon, and soaking her feet in a bowl of saltwater. Today, she stands rigid and silent in the kitchen. They barely greet each other. The only sounds he hears are the chatty schoolchildren outside swarming the street and the cars, blasting speakers, bleating horns. He takes the four steps to their pink-walled kitchen, clutching the rolled copy of the *Cape Times* that he brings her every day. Mbeki, stern and triumphant, graces the front cover.

What Vivian says next sounds to Wayde like it was scripted, practiced: "Your father decided he wants to meet you. He sent this letter. It came this morning."

She waves the envelope for him to see.

Wayde cocks his head. His backpack swings in slow-motion off his shoulder. He makes her repeat herself three more times.

Vivian says, while waving the wilted letter, "He wants you to come spend the summer holiday with him. Up north. In Namaqualand. For three or so weeks. Before Christmas."

Wayde thinks that Vivian says this as if she is telling her madam that dinner is ready.

He throws his bag on the kitchen floor and moves to take the letter from her hand. She clutches it, leans her broad back against the refrigerator and holds it to her chest like a Bible.

"Let me see," his voice—usually timid—now pumped with fury and excitement. "No," Vivian backs away. "The letter's not addressed to you. It's addressed to me." "But it's about me." Wayde says, smelling the ever-present bleach waft off her uniform.

“I’m telling you what it says! I’m telling you! It says he wants to meet you.”

Wayde stands before her in silence, chewing his bottom lip. He still tastes the vinegar chips from school lunch.

“He wants you. You should go,” Vivian says, with a strange desperation.

Wayde wonders where it comes from. She has never even told him his father’s name. *It’s not important. He left. Before you were born. That should tell you everything you need to know.*

“You need to meet him,” she says, not looking at him, but beyond his shoulder.

Wayde asks again to see the letter, the first his father—a lifelong enigma—has ever sent.

Vivian snatches it from his reach. “I’m *telling* you what it said!”

Wayde rolls his eyes. He is used to her hysterics, but unfit to argue.

“Elton,” Vivian says, eyeing the cracked tile floor. “That’s his name. You always wanted to know. Now you know.”

Wayde considers this. A seed of excitement burrows in his chest. This day, the one he has longed for since he can remember, has finally come.

“If he finally wants you,” Vivian says. “You should meet him.” This last part Vivian says eyeing the floor. “Plus, I don’t know how I’m gonna feed you over the summer holiday. Since the Van der Merwes cut my pay, it’s been hell. The cow knows I’ve got a child to raise, and she goes and does this.”

Wayde lets the weight of this fact huddle his shoulders.

Vivian puts the letter behind her back, palms gripped as if she’s under arrest. She takes two careful steps toward Wayde and says, gravely, “He’s even sent money for your bus ticket. He’s got money, you know. From his old days in Cape Town, running around on The Flats with that stupid gang. And now, apparently, he does the whole tour guide thing. You’ve *got* to go. Or else you won’t eat. Even me. Do you know how much of a risk I’m taking doing shit like this?”

She reaches inside the refrigerator for a gallon of milk, the fancy Vitamin D stuff from Woolworth’s, the stuff stolen from Mrs. Van der Merwe’s kitchen. Wayde already knew the whole saga: two months ago, Mrs. Van der Merwe—the woman whose house Vivian cleans—accused Vivian of stealing a fork and subsequently halved her pay.

“I can’t keep this up,” Vivian says, replacing the milk in the refrigerator. “Stealing things to feed you. If I get caught, then we’ll really be out of luck.”

Wayde wants to hug her.

“You’re going,” she says, closing the refrigerator door. “It’s settled.”

Wayde thinks his mother might be right. He thinks so from the dizzying emptiness of his stomach these past two months. The way his clothes are getting looser instead of tighter, as a 14-year-old’s clothes should become. The way they are due for eviction any day now. Black, bulging trash bags clutter the living room; poised for the moment their landlord kicks them out.

“Why does he wanna see me?”

“Because you’re his son.”

“But why now?”

“Because the world’s ending.”

“You really think that?” Wayde asks, feebly.

Vivian has spent the whole year, all of 1999, preparing for the end of the world. Wayde usually puts up with her theories, but not today.

“On New Year’s Eve, it will. Mark my words. We won’t live to see 2000. So we’ve got to do these things before it’s too late. You can’t go to heaven not knowing your father.”

Wayde wants to tell her she’s crazy, but he knows she is completely serious.

“He left before I was even born. What will I say to him? And why do I have to go up there? Why can’t he come down here? I don’t want to go up to his house for three whole weeks. I don’t want to see him.”

“Yes you do, Wayde. You know you want to.”



One week later, December 2nd—the first day of the summer holiday—Vivian and Wayde and his bulging backpack catch a taxi to the Intercape bus station, near the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront. Wayde’s eight-hour bus will go from Cape Town to Kamieskroon in Namaqualand—in the Northern Cape.

When they arrive to the bus station, Vivian says goodbye with a sopping kiss

and a lingering hug. “Be good,” she says. “And remember, there are two sides to every story.”

The sun sets. In the line to board the bus, Wayde decides that he only wants one thing out of this journey: an apology. That is the only way he will accept his father. Wayde cares about the hunger, true, and the eviction, but he also cares about filling the void his father’s absence has carved in his body. He dreams of his father kissing his feet, ravaged with shame.

The prospect of apology carries Wayde onto the dark, crowded bus packed with babies, mothers, elders, odorous stews and leaking take-out containers. And it twists his stomach as the bus pulls out of the station, winds its way out of the shimmering, seaside city and heads north through the desolate veld.

Seated, he clicks in a scratched CD, flips down his player and snaps on his headphones. The same song over and over again. *I ain’t mad at cha . . . I ain’t mad at cha . . .*

He looks out the window at how the night-blackened grass looks like lava; how the sky is a boundless abyss; how the fynbos favor aliens; how the mountains resemble black holes in the star-smothered sky. He wonders what the man will look like, if he will like him, why this is all happening now, if he should punch him in the face, what they will talk about, what they will do together, if he will say sorry. He worries for hours and hours. Until it is the middle of the night and he is the only one awake on the bus. He worries until he throws up. Twice. But he does it carefully, soundlessly, into a plastic bag, so as not to disturb the sleeping woman to his right.



Wayde hails a taxi to his father’s house, thirty minutes from the station.

He knocks with a damp palm.

It is seven in the morning. Cold needles prick his chest and face. He nearly caves in with nerves.

The door creaks open. Elton stands before him. Elton wears a timid smile and his arms are anxiously ajar. Wayde is startled: they look exactly alike. Both have

sandy skin and dense, brown hair. Both have hazel eyes. Both have big teeth—although Elton's missing a few. Wayde exhales and steps inside the home: a tiny cottage on a field's edge.

They hug like winners and losers.

*“My seun,”* Elton says, patting Wayde's back over and over. “Yes, you are mine.”

Elton takes Wayde's trembling hand and leads him inside past a sagging couch, a cluttered table, a TV and stacks of bloated newspapers. Wayde feels awkward because he is taller than Elton. The air reeks of wood chips and dust. Elton lives alone. Wayde wonders what he has been doing here by himself for the past fourteen years.

Like Wayde, Elton is not talkative. Wayde sees him limp. Every step is an interrogation. As he hobbles to the kitchen, Wayde shuffles behind, saying nothing. Their mismatched footsteps slap the brittle wood floor. Wayde feels like he is on another planet. This man is nothing like he envisioned. He is weak. Pitiful, even. Wayde swallows the vigor he had felt on the bus—those intrusive thoughts of pummeling his father, knocking out his teeth, saying, “How could you?”

But this frail man has few teeth and a disarming quietude.

“How was the bus?” Elton croaks in Afrikaans.

“Good,” Wayde's voice cracks. He clenches his backpack. The only familiar thing in this foreign place.

“It must've been boring—” Elton says before devolving into bitter, thunderous coughs. He looks to be wasting away.

Wayde is afraid to breathe. He longs to say more but, as always, chokes on doubt. He curses himself for thinking his quietness would not creep into this moment. *Just talk.* Wayde always says to himself—at school, with friends—to no avail. Just say something. But words never come easy to Wayde. Especially now.

For their first breakfast they eat polony sandwiches on opposite ends of Elton's square kitchen table. Wayde hates polony, but is afraid to say.

“You're tall for your age,” Elton says, with pride, and sits back in his chair.

Sun beams slice Elton's face. A creek of wrinkles blossoms from the sides of his eyes. Wayde notices Elton's hands shaking as he brings his sandwich to his lips.

“Yeah, I’m fourteen. I’ll be fifteen in February,” Wayde says. He’s always hated recalling his age. Birthdays, too. Just one more year Elton hadn’t bothered to call.

*He has our number.* Vivian lamented for years. *He has our flipping number and still does nothing, I swear you’re just better off without him.* She’d say this as if trying to convince Wayde.

“Ja,” Elton agrees, eyeing the window. “I know how old you are. Well, now.”

Wayde searches Elton’s line of sight. Outside the sky is blue. The nearest house is a quarter mile down the road. Land abounds. The road is scarcely occupied by cars. Fleshy polony lines Wayde’s tongue. Rank, metallic.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Elton says.

Wayde perks up. Good, some remorse. Acknowledgment. True, it is the first day, but why not get it out of the way?

Elton says, “You’re probably thinking, ‘what’s there to do out here in the doldrums?’”

Wayde sinks.

“Well,” Elton continues, not sensing Wayde’s disappointment. “I take care of my garden. I retired early. Had to. I’m getting old. I used to work on a farm. But those days are over. Now, I just garden. During the tourist season, I put on a nice shirt and give tours of the flower route. That pays well. The Germans, they tip a lot. But my god, you should see the Namaqua Daisies! You’ve never seen the color orange until you’ve seen that flower. But off season, I keep my own garden. Well, I try. It’s a hobby, really. Meant to be fun. Haven’t been able much lately,” Elton pauses for a few seconds, then restarts, stuttering a bit. “And, well, since you’re here, I was hoping you could join me? We could maybe garden together. It’s only flowers, succulents. It’s tending and watering, but mostly weeding.”

Wayde sets his sandwich down and burrows his bare chin in his fist. He had thought they would do the kind of father-son things he’d seen on television, like fix bikes or build model cars. Not garden.

Elton goes on looking out the window, seeming to talk at the world, “We can even start tomorrow? After we eat these,” he points to their sandwiches, “you must go and sleep. Take the day to rest. You must be tired from the ride. But, tomorrow, we can start.”

Wayde offers a mechanical smile. He has always preferred to stay indoors, huddled inside his shell. Can he say no? Is there a bus back to Cape Town now? Wayde has no money. And he already bragged to both of his friends about how he was spending the summer with his dad. *Your dad? You have a dad?* They revered him after they found out he belonged to another man. They themselves did not and had, too, fantasized about what it must be like to be someone else's. Wayde did not want that reverence to end.

Seconds pass. Wind sifts through the window above the kitchen sink, fluttering curtains. Elton stares at Wayde. Elton's face glows with hope.

"Well, seun. What do you think?"

Trapped, Wayde nods.

Maybe, he thinks, it will be good to garden with my father. I will get my apology. With all the time spent side by side, it is bound to happen. Yes, we will garden together. Father and son.



They go out to the garden around the back of the house the next morning. The garden itself extends twenty feet from the back door. Wayde sees a semi-enclosed plot haphazardly filled with shrubs and an assortment of flowers barely clinging to life. Elton points and names them all for Wayde: birds of paradise, white lilies, vygies, bush lilies, red hot pokers.

The flowers are divided into separate plots in the garden. They are beautiful, but look tired. The petals sway listlessly in the wind. Beyond the garden, the backyard consists of a massive, unfenced field full of tall, billowing grass. Wayde surveys the shrill green, the nauseating blue of the sky. The full sun is obscenely orange. Beyond: rolling, grassy hills, small houses. Wayde wonders how the earth can be any bigger. How he survived so long in the clutter of Cape Town. He breathes in the air and it is so light, so sweet, so easy to swallow.

Wayde crouches alongside the garden. Upon close inspection, he can see that it is in a state of complete disarray. The green coating on the bottom, surrounding most flowers' stems, is not some kind of endearing moss. They are just weeds; an

impossible number of weeds. The weeds grow flatly on the ground. The spiked leaves cling to the soil with a kind of clairvoyant resignation. They know they will be plucked soon, anyway. There is no sense in ascending.

“Our goal,” Elton says, “is to weed this whole plot. By the time your three weeks is up.”

Elton removes his sweat-soaked t-shirt. Tattoos litter his wrinkled torso and sun-leathered back. They are crude, black hieroglyphics that Wayde cannot decipher.

Elton guides Wayde through the garden’s narrow pathways.

“If you came to Namaqualand during September,” Elton mops his brow, “you’d see flowers all over. Wild ones. It’s the most beautiful thing.”

Wayde wants to say, “Then why do you have a flower garden?” But he bites his tongue and nods with false wonder. A plump bee lumbers through the air. Wayde notices dozens more and grows mesmerized. They pace through petals in peace. Wayde has never really considered flowers. Yes, Vivian loved when Mrs. Van der Merwe let her take home arrangements after her little parties in Hout Bay, but that is the extent of his knowledge.

“Lots of weeds,” Wayde blurts, trying to make small talk. Maybe, Wayde thinks, he just needs to get more comfortable around me. Then he will explain himself. Wayde regrets it instantly; it sounded too much like an insult. He braces himself for Elton’s response.

“Ja,” Elton says, then coughs and spits grainy phlegm. “I haven’t been able to get out much. I haven’t been feel—no. Never mind.”

He trails off with what looks like a nervous smile. Wayde smiles, too, not knowing what else to do.

Hands on their hips, they stare out at the labyrinth of stems and vines, tangles of pollen and petals. Alongside one another, taking in the botanic scent and assessing their daunting task, Wayde considers inventing a fake pollen allergy. How could Elton even know he was lying? It’s not like he had been around. Right then, Wayde is accosted by an urge to ask him why he left. But he can’t. He can’t bring himself to do it. Maybe Elton will bring it up first?

Without gloves or kneepads, they work.

“Let’s just focus on getting these weeds out,” Elton says and points to a section.

“We could use trowels, but it’s best really to use your hands. You’ve got to get these things out by the root. Have you ever weeded?”

“Never.”

“Look,” Elton fondles a weed’s sharp tentacles. He gingerly rips it from the earth, then jiggles the soil-clogged root. Dirt rains. “You have to get to the root,” Elton says, shaking the black lumps. “You can’t leave a trace in the soil.”

What’s left looks like the sketch of the nervous system Wayde once drew in science class.

“Like that,” Elton says, proudly. “Do it just like that and this place will be weed-free in no time.”



They eat breakfast together each morning. Elton fries salty eggs and Wayde sets thick oats on the stovetop. Elton likes his oats plain. Wayde prefers them with milk and cinnamon. Every morning, they chew in tender silence and go to the garden around ten o’clock.

Wayde has thought of Elton and his absence every day, ever since he can remember. Yet in the garden, Elton acts like nothing is wrong and no time has passed. He acknowledges nothing. He doesn’t say sorry. Wayde thinks maybe this man really is the source of his silence—this man who is too timid to even explain himself. If Wayde had a son he had not seen for fourteen years, the first thing out of his mouth would be sorry. He would explain himself. He would beg for forgiveness. Most importantly, he would not ask him to weed his stupid garden.

Every day, they pull weeds until one o’clock, then eat polony sandwiches for lunch. There is a lady that comes down the road selling vetkoek and glossy koeksisters. Sometimes they buy these. Then, they return to the garden and work for a few more hours.



On Wayde's fifth day, they sit at the kitchen table and eat vetkoek. Oil slickens their lips. Wayde's knees throb with bruises. His shoulders ache. He watches Elton chew with his mouth open and feels a pang of disgust. Nothing. Still no sorry. Just lazy chatter, shared meals, mutual tans. Elton, out of nowhere, rises from the table. Wayde exhales. Elton limps to the side of the sink, to the wall-anchored telephone. He dials, then coils the cord around his finger. Wayde notices his foot tapping.

“Who are you ca—”

“Here! Come!” Elton rips the phone from his ear and holds it out to Wayde, who, bewildered, rises and runs to it. Elton smushes it to Wayde’s ear, then returns to his spot at the table.

Wayde gives a disoriented greeting. “Hello? Who is it?”

“It’s me! Your mother. Why didn’t you call? I was worried you—”

“I’m fine.”

“Thank God your father had the wit to ring me. Has he,” Vivian lowers her voice, “said anything?”

“What do you mea—”

“Nothing! Be good and have fun. I’m almost out of minutes. I love you and I’m sorry.”

Before he can ask her what for, she hangs up.

Wayde hooks the phone to the wall, turns and eyes Elton. Elton studies his hands.



During work, between stems, they talk loosely. Their conversations are never serious, but they do trade opinions on a variety of topics. Today—their seventh in the garden—Elton quizzes Wayde like a game show host. They kneel three feet from the other, backs hunched over weeds, tugging and casting them aside. The sun bakes their necks deep shades of brown. Birds soar overhead. The cinnamon from this morning’s oatmeal still lines Wayde’s tongue.

“Favorite soccer team?” Elton asks.

“I like basketball better.”

“Really? I love the Pirates. They’re my team. Have you got a girl?”

“There is,” Wayde stalls, “this girl in grade nine I like. But—I don’t know. I don’t know what to say to her.”

“Hold off on that,” Elton tugs a root. “I haven’t had a woman in years. Too much trouble.”

“I guess.”

“Favorite flower?” Elton beams. Sunlight filters through the gaps in his teeth. “Mine’s the protea. Yours?”

“Mom brought these ones home once, from her job. They only opened in the morning.”

“Morning glories. Good choice.” Wayde watches the lines fanning Elton’s eyes bunch together with his smile. “Is it true?” Elton’s smile fades. “Is it true they halved her pay?”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s not important,” Elton cowers. “School. Let’s talk school. Do you like it?”

“It’s boring.”

“Don’t quit. Or else you’ll end up like me. I wish I would have stayed.”

“I guess.”

Elton wipes his forehead free of sweat. A smear of dirt spreads over his brow. Wayde tries to control the shaking of his hands. He clutches a thick bunch of leaves, braces himself.

“And your mother,” Elton says without looking at Wayde. “Is she okay?”

“She does her best.”

“We’re just—” Elton sighs. “Different. She and I are just very different.”



Their garden conversations mostly only skim the surface. Wayde is desperate to pivot them. If he could summon the courage, he would ask Elton just one question: Why?

All Wayde ever knew about his father’s absence came from his mother, who, when Wayde was six and she tired of him constantly asking where his father was,

said that he “just left Cape Town.” The reasons were never specified. From then on, Wayde assumed that Elton was not there because he was compelled to go elsewhere. Well, then why couldn’t he come back? Vivian never had an answer for this. Only a smack of the lips and a rush out the room.

Every day between weeds, Wayde studies Elton for signs of remorse.



On the ninth day in the garden—the 12th of December—Wayde studies the curve of Elton’s neck as he stoops over a weed patch. The sun lights him from behind, turning him into a silhouette. Elton cranes left, toward Wayde. Sweat pools his brow.

“I can’t believe,” he grunts. “That we’re going to see a new millennium.”

“It’s crazy. Mom thinks the world is gonna end. She swears it’ll—”

Elton erupts in wild laughter. He cocks his head back, mouth agape at the sun, and howls. Wayde sees all the broken teeth; the soft gaps of gum where some teeth are missing. And Wayde is plagued with a violent desire. He contorts Elton’s mouth into an apology. He imagines Elton pleading; his nose mashing the soil.

Elton sighs, composes himself. Wayde forces the fantasy from his mind.

“That is something she would believe. She used to say that, you know? Even back in the 80s, she used to say we couldn’t make it past ’99. She’s always been into conspiracies. I don’t think she’s ever been a big fan of the trut—” he shakes his head. “No, never mind. Forget I said that.”

Wayde squints. Elton avoids his eyes. Seconds pass. They continue working.

“Hold on,” Elton pauses, claps his hands free of dirt. “You don’t believe that, do you? You don’t think the world will really end, right?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Good.”

“But I don’t have the heart to tell her.”



After work each day, Elton cooks a meaty stew or roasts a chicken for dinner. Every night they eat together on the living room couch and watch *Noot vir Noot* reruns and dubbed soap operas—*Isidingo* being Elton’s favorite. Then, they go to bed in their separate rooms.

Tonight—Wayde’s eleventh here—Elton prepares a lamb curry. The little house clouds with steam, garlic and onion. Tonight, like the last ten, they sit side by side on the couch before the TV, balance plates on bruised knees and watch television. *Noot vir Noot* blasts from the little screen. Wayde stares down into his rust-colored curry. Creaks of oil pool in the center. He bites the soft, fatty lamb and lets it melt in his mouth.

“We worked hard today,” Elton says, chewing.

Wayde nods and swallows.

“You have this way about you,” Elton sets down his fork. “It’s like you’re holding something in you.”

Wayde forces a lamb chunk into his mouth. He wishes Elton would just bring it up first. His years of absence hang like mildew in the air. Nearly two weeks have passed. And still no sorry in sight.

“It’s nothing,” Wayde says, cloaking his annoyance with a shrug. “I’m just tired.”

Elton studies him for a few more seconds. Wayde feels his eyes drill his cheeks. Wayde keeps glaring at the television. Elton, seeming to resign to something, shifts his gaze and stabs at his plate.

They finish eating and then, like every night, go to bed in their separate rooms. This is every night.

Every night except the next night—December 15th—when Wayde tells Elton he will no longer help in the garden.



Wayde diagnoses himself with a mysterious illness that he swears forces him to stay in bed.

“I’m in a lot of pain,” he tells Elton after dinner—leftover lamb from the prior night. “I need a few day’s rest.”

Elton is sympathetic. He brings Wayde sugar-thick rooibos tea and vanilla rusks. He rises and brings him breakfast. He toils in the garden alone.

But by the third sick day, Elton is impatient.

“Come,” he nudges Wayde’s lying body. “Let’s do this together. It’s no fun alone.”  
Wayde grunts, “Please—”

Wayde doesn’t call Elton dad. He can’t bring himself to do it. Like someone who’s forgotten a newcomer’s name and is too embarrassed to ask for it again, he doesn’t call Elton anything.

“What’s wrong, really?” Elton asks Wayde, sitting on the edge of his bed. Elton rests his hand on Wayde’s foot and pinches his big toe twice. Wayde feels his heart flutter.

What’s *wrong*? You are pretending like everything is fine and it’s not. You are acting like nothing ever happened. You have not explained yourself once. I can’t go on pretending. That’s what’s wrong.

“My throat,” Wayde says, coughing for emphasis.

“You’re going to leave me all alone?” Elton says, amused. “We’ve only got four days left. I would like to spend some time with you, you know?”

Oh, you don’t like being alone? Wayde thinks. I can’t *imagine* what that feels like! Really! It must truly suck!

Even though the cramped bedroom is hot and sweat slinks the wallpaper, Wayde burrows deeper under his blanket. A damp heat swells his chest. Dust clogs his nose.

Elton walks back to the garden, scratching his head.



On the fourth sick day, Elton wakes Wayde. Wayde rubs his eyes and frowns.

“My back,” Wayde groans. “It hurts. I’ll need to rest again today. Maybe the rest of the trip.”

Elton’s hands drop from his hips on his way back outside to the garden. Wayde has just three days left in Kamieskroon and they still have to finish weeding a third of the garden.

After Elton leaves, Wayde creeps to the back window and peeks out the lace curtains. He sees Elton on his knees tugging weeds, pouring sweat. Alone, Wayde thinks. Serves him right.



On the fifth day of rest, Elton realizes that he has really just got two more days with his boy, so he better do whatever it takes to get him out of bed. He, too, has noticed the odd switching of Wayde's symptoms. Today, Elton wakes Wayde and the affliction-of-the-day is his shoulders.

"They're sore," Wayde points behind his back.

"Your *shoulders*?" Elton raises an eyebrow.

"Ja," Wayde grunts, wallowing in the bed, looking wide-eyed up at Elton.

Elton limps away. Wayde digs himself deeper into the mattress.

Elton returns to the bedside with a bottle of Jergen's lotion.

Elton pulls the covers off, turning Wayde into a defenseless worm. Wayde shivers.

"Lift up," Elton commands, clinically. "Take your shirt off."

Wayde moves slowly, stunted by doubt.

Elton points, "Go on. Sit on the edge."

Shirtless, Wayde crawls to the foot of the creaking bed. With a great struggle, Elton swings his aching body around Wayde until he straddles Wayde's scrawny back.

"Relax your shoulders," Elton says before squirting lavender lotion on his cracked palms. He pats it onto Wayde's skin. Slightly red, still soft. The cold lotion initially stings. But as Elton massages it in with tiny circles, Wayde's muscles slacken and warm. He shuts his eyes and feels his father's rough hands knead his shoulders. Wayde sways back and forth with each touch. Elton's fingers are concentrated, delicate. His touch is deep, deliberate. He focuses on each imaginary knot for a while before moving on to the next.

Wayde wants to tell him he's good with his hands, but doesn't, for fear of ruining the moment.

Elton wants to tell him it's easy to tend to him as tenderly as he does his garden, because he loves them both, but doesn't, for fear of ruining the moment.

"Fine," Wayde says to Elton after the massage, as he slips on his shirt. "I'll come now."



The first click is harsh. Wayde's eyes rip out their sockets.

"I forgot to turn off the flash," Wayde curses himself. "Here, try again."

Elton hops giddily around the Polaroid.

"Good," Elton says, wheezing. "Because I need a picture with my boy on his last day."

Wayde will leave tomorrow. Still, Elton has not answered the question. Still, Wayde wants Elton to acknowledge his absence. And, perhaps, most tragically still, Wayde has a curious desire to stay in Namaqualand. He would never do it; his mother would die. He feels he has to go back. He has to find a way to help her—maybe find a job of his own. But the thought crosses his mind.

They spend this final workday extracting the last of the weeds. Wayde cannot believe it is nearly done. The first day, he thought the weeds could never be eradicated. But now they are almost gone. The flowers have returned to elegance. The lilies are velvety white. The birds of paradise are soaring ornaments.

Christmas is in four days. "How will you spend it?" Wayde asks Elton, who pockets the camera.

"Here," Elton shrugs. "Where else? I'll take the day off."

The two never mention the massage from yesterday, but on this last full day Elton asks many questions. He trips over his words—acts like he will never see Wayde again. They even joke with one another. He asks about school, his friends, if he's ever smoked dagga. Wayde answers with the honesty reserved only for farewells. *It's boring. Only have two. Not yet.*

For lunch, Elton bakes a fragrant bobotie and even whips up a milk tart. The dense, cinnamon-streaked custard drips from Wayde's mouth on his way back to the garden for their final afternoon of weeding, of being together. Terror seizes Wayde. He wonders if he can go back to being the hollow boy he

was before. Or, maybe, if he will go back to Cape Town as a boy fully sketched in, fully claimed.

Before they head back outside after lunch, Elton makes a pitstop in his bedroom nightstand, withdraws a Rand-stuffed envelope and hands it to Wayde.

“Give this to your mother when you get back.”

Back in the garden, the atmosphere is cheery and open. Levees have broken. They crouch in the farthest corner of the plot, alongside one another, breathing, pulling, shaking, casting aside. They are intoxicated. With labor, with love, with impending loss.

In the distance chimes the aching bleat of a collared dove. And like elbows maneuvering into a shirt, the question still tugs in Wayde’s mind. No matter how lovely their day, the question climbs his throat like bile, disintegrating everything.

They have already shared so much today, this last day. Elton revealed how he met Vivian (at the clinic) and stitched fragments of his own life (raised in Mitchells Plain. Yeah, you heard right boy, Mitchells Plain). Still, Wayde wants more. And the way their final day is going, full of revelation, full of intimacy—the kind that means you will have to stay in touch now that you’ve shared so much—Wayde cannot help himself. There, in the garden, ripping the final weed, he turns to his father, who observes a passing horde of larks with an impossible, approachable innocence. The question swells like a bloated root. It stumbles and tugs from the wet fury of Wayde’s mouth:

“How come you left Cape Town?”

Wayde throws his hand over his lips.

Elton glances at Wayde, then buries his head in his hands. Dirt crumbles along his palms and cheeks.

Wayde wants to be buried.

Time passes.

“I’m not well,” Elton says, finally, lifting his head. Soil smears his chin. “Have you heard my coughing?”

Wayde nods, trembling.

“The truth is I’m not well.”

“But why?” Wayde presses. “Mom says you left right before I was born. She

says you never called, wrote. Nothing!" Wayde burns with this sudden eruption. The anger is a dagger in his chest. He cries fat, astonished tears.

Wayde sees Elton sink in the soil. His skin melts off his bones. The birds caw overhead.

Wayde rises an octave, his voice a quivering tightrope. "Why?"

Elton is still.

A cloud covers the sun. The shade is cool and tinged with grief.

"Because I didn't know!" Elton dredges the words from his gut. "I didn't know about you until two months ago!"

Wayde freezes. Blood pricks his veins. The flowers stand paralyzed in the wind.

Elton rises, "I have the letter she wrote right in my nightstand! Just two months ago she wrote me, begging for money, apologizing, saying she made a mistake to hide you all these years."

"To hide me?"

"I left Cape Town fourteen years ago. In '85. I came up here because otherwise I would have been killed. Things were different then," Elton pauses, tries to collect himself. "Wayde, I didn't leave because of you. I didn't even know about you."

"What?"

"She never told me about you. She *hated* me for leaving, she took it personal and, because of it, never told me she had fallen pregnant. I would have come back for you. Had I known. And then she sends me a letter asking for money."

"I don't understand—"

"She sent pictures. That's how I knew. I told her I would only send money if she put you on a bus to me. Look. I can't travel far with my condition. And I haven't—" his voice goes ragged. "I haven't got much time."

Wayde is too frozen to swallow. Cold saliva pools under his tongue.

"Now come," Elton bursts, clad in anger and embarrassment, and rises to walk back to the house. He's revealed far more than he promised he ever would. After all, Elton thinks, Wayde still has to go back to his mother—a mother who, Elton swallows, will soon be all he has.

Elton stomps unevenly toward the house.

Wayde trails him like a duckling, wondering what the letter contained. How his mother brought herself to write it. If what she did was the most sincere act of love ever shown, or the most selfish denial a mother could give a child. He wonders how he can ever look her in the eye again. He wonders if she, too, will say sorry.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Wayde still cries. “Why didn’t you tell me what she did?”

“It’s not my place,” Elton says, his hand on the door handle. “And you have to go back to her. No,” he repeats, shaking his head. “This is why I didn’t bring it up. It’s just not my place.”

Wayde starts to say something, but doesn’t. He has had enough of words for the day.

“I know she feels guilty. She has to. I know your mother very well. Well, knew her.”

“Why would she lie about th—”

“We’re *finished*,” Elton bellows, still facing the door. “So, let us go inside and prepare a nice goodbye dinner. Okay? Let us have a braai. I’ll even let you drink a beer.”

Wayde folds his arms, waiting for Elton to open the door.

Elton sighs deeply, then turns around to face Wayde.

“And let me explain to you,” Elton says, panting. “Let me tell you why—why your poor mother probably had the right. I’m not innocent. Not all the way. Didn’t you hear where I was from? I wasn’t. I—” Elton grows flustered. “Fine. All of this, why I had to leave Cape Town, why I came here, I’ll tell you tonight. You’re a man, right? Can you handle the truth? Of the kind of person I am?” Elton points to the lopsided skull etched into his stomach.

Wayde nods and wipes his cheeks. He feels as bruised—as tender—as a petal.

Elton looks up at the sky, shielding his eyes.

“And, seun, before you leave tomorrow,” Elton swings open the door and again looks Wayde in the eye. They glisten hazel at each other. Elton is startled for a second at the honeyed glint, the shared magnificence of it. Then, he finishes his sentence: “Remind me to give you some seeds.”



Vivian meets Wayde at the Intercape Bus Station three days before Christmas. A scorching rain pelts hulking busses and slickens the streets. The mountains weep. The sea swells.

Wayde steps off the packed, foggy bus and is met by his mother's face. His jaw, clenched the entire ride, constricts somehow further. He'd had visions of violence. Of accusation. But he studies her face, cowering beneath a broken umbrella, and thinks she looks fatigued. Dark bags like udders swing below her eyes. She smiles at him, a little too sweetly than normal, and he sees—through the veil of rain, the gasps of passing tires, the heaving chug of engines—that her teeth are much greyer than he ever recalled. She looks so shrunken, so undone, that he decides against it.

“Hi, Wayde.”

“Hi.”

He fetches his bag from underneath the bus and she motions for him to join her side under the umbrella. She struggles to lift the handle higher, to accompany his height. He watches her toy with it, clicking and flipping. A rip leaks rain onto his head. The chill shivers his spine. He watches her struggle and grimace against the wind until he takes the handle from her and raises it high. It covers both of them. She looks at him and her body caves in with relief. A kind of shame lingers in her eyes.

They fetch a taxi home.

They sit in the first row of a Volkswagen Kombi. Behind them sit other passengers from Wayde's bus, belongings stacked on their laps. The driver shuts his door. Vivian and Wayde stare ahead out the wide windshield into the wet fog of night. Blurred city lights speckle red and green. The taxi speeds ahead.

Vivian asks no questions.

“It was good,” Wayde fills in the blank. “I didn't want to leave. I wanted—”  
“I'm sorry.”

Wayde turns to face her. The lights cut her profile. She cracks her knuckles.  
“Okay? I am sorry.”

Wayde studies her hands in her lap. They are so snaked by veins. So ashen. So cracked by chemicals. So worn from toiling, for years, for him. He wants to take those hands in his. He wants to nurse them back to life.

“Do you still think,” Wayde says as the taxi nears the V&A Waterfront, where Christmas décor brightens the horizon. “That the world will end?”

She looks at him, her eyes glossed and trembling, and shrugs. She twists her fingers into a knot.

“I hope not,” she says, into her lap.

The taxi surges east. On their way home they pass Observatory, Table Mountain, the sea, the swaying veld. They jerk while passing a pothole. The seeds dance in Wayde’s pocket.

# THE 2021 GULF COAST PRIZE IN NONFICTION

Judged by Kiese Laymon

## *Winner, Alison C. Rollins*

“Dispatch from the Racial Mountain” is the winner in the most incredible contest I’ve ever read for. Rollins offers, and I’m still unsure how, a new reading of Morrison and Hughes, and this remix of the traditional notion of a peak at the top of a generational climb. This would be enough, but the language is as agile and dexterous as I’ve read in a long time. And it lands brilliantly with a boom, a thump, and a hiss I hear weeks after I finished the work. Flat out future classic.

—Kiese Laymon

### Honorable Mentions:

“To Malik, with sanctified regret” by Caleb Gayle

“BURIED, ALIVE” by Katerina Ivanov Prado

## Dispatch from the Racial Mountain

Two coins. Gold glints from each of Toni Morrison's eyelids. One nugget. A small treasure rests inside the cave of her mouth. Gray gleams. Evidence of a metal-lid tin of Royal Crown Hair Dressing. In the dark, her locks shine like stars ordered in single-file lines. August of 2019, the summer Morrison passed, I made a different type of transition. My partner and I drove midway across the country in his silver Toyota Camry. We left the Midwest, with the spirit of Morrison flying down the highway alongside us. Her presence could be heard in the breeze, its whistle cutting through the Nebraska corn fields. The boat trailed braids of water as Morrison was guided across the River Styx. As she crossed over, I let go of the muddy Mississippi, bid farewell to Lake Michigan. I exchanged the murky brown and icy blue of those currents for purple mountain majesty. I departed from the vibrant South Side of Chicago to live as far West as I ever had before.

My partner, Nate Marshall, and I were relocating to the same state as another Nate Marshall, although they bore no relation. In fact, the Colorado Nate Marshall couldn't have been more different. Years prior, *DNA Info* ran an article titled "Chicago's Nate Marshall Finds His Namesake and All That Divides Them." My Black Nate and this white Nate would learn of each other via a scuffle on Twitter where white Nate accused Black Nate of being a Black supremacist. In March 2014, *The Denver Post* ran an article titled "GOP candidate with ties to white supremacy group dropping out of race." There was a picture of Nate Marshall, a white man with brown eyes, grey beard, and baseball cap. I pictured my Black Nate behind the wheel of his four-door sedan, with his dark chocolate eyes, full beard, a black White Sox fitted above his tortoiseshell eyeglasses. The news report ended with a statement from the Rocky Mountain Antifascists, a group who track neo-Nazi and white supremacist activity, noting that Marshall had formed an online political organization called The Aryan Storm and was actively recruiting members.

I am writing to you from the white porch of a royal blue house in Colorado. The Gullah of Georgia and South Carolina started the tradition of painting one's porch ceiling a shade called "haint blue." This ritual was done to ward off "haints"

or evil spirits who might want to harm the house or the family of folks inside. Rich blue paint frames the flimsy, sun-stained curtains; from the window of our home, my partner and I can see it—“America’s mountain”—Pikes Peak. But before we can talk of mountains, I must first speak of water.

I gave up my daily bus commute in Chicago, along the shoreline of Lake Michigan, to walk to the campus of Colorado College on foot; Koko Taylor’s “Voodoo Woman” blasting through my headphones. I surrendered all those beloved Black bodies, packed like sardines on the J14 Jeffery Jump. Before and after work, we would bob down Lake Shore Drive, frothy waves just outside the bus window. Dear reader, I don’t know that I would ever trade a view of water for mountains again.

A year after relocating to Colorado Springs, I could not have predicted that the world would be facing a global health crisis. More predictable were the protest songs that would bloom across the country in response to continued police brutality. I could not have known I would intimately learn words like *pandemic*, *quarantine*, and *shelter-in-place* as two viruses spread with ferocity. One, Covid-19, which traveled through the air via droplets. The other, unnatural Black death, which came to a head in the murder of George Floyd. Amidst disproportionate brown and Black death rates at the hands of an airborne virus, a white police officer held his knee on Floyd’s neck for approximately nine minutes. The angle: a white-capped mountain looming above a shadowed valley. In a 1993 PBS interview, Morrison states in response to racism: “. . . if you can only be tall because somebody is on their knees, then you have a serious problem. And my feeling is that white people have a very, very serious problem and they should start thinking about what they can do about it. Take me out of it.” A native of the heartland of America, I have not gone a single day without my organs being exposed to the insidious virus of white supremacy. I have not gone more than twenty-four hours without fiddling with the lock that cages me in my own Black body. If you can, reader, find a way to “take me out of it.”

In his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Langston Hughes posits that there is a “mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America.” He defines the mountain as: “this urge within the race toward whiteness,

the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.” As a writer geographically located in the Southwest, I was provided with a new context to confront this negative inverse relationship between being Black and American. In the mountains of Colorado, I was faced with a natural landscape that mimicked the fraught terrain of artistic production. In June Jordan’s “The Mountain and the Man Who Was Not God: An Essay on the Life and Ideas of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,” she states, “Anytime you decide to take on a mountain you just better take good care.” It is the echo of Jordan’s phrasing “take good care” that ricochets through my blood, continuously ringing in my mouth and ears.

Boasting “300 days of sunshine,” Colorado is known as one of the sunniest places in America. Having moved to Colorado Springs from the Windy City of Chicago, you can imagine the allure this location held for me. However, I try to subscribe to the poet Terrance Hayes’s line: “Never mistake what it is for what it looks like.” As a Black queer woman, I am wary of America’s claims of illumination. I have witnessed ghastly imaginings violently taking shape at the expense of darkness; but only things kept in the dark know the true weight of light. As Nikola Tesla professed, “If your hate could be turned into electricity, it would light up the whole world.” I have seen the dark underbelly of white’s blinding glare. From the depths of a basement lit with 1,369 filament bulbs, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* asserts, “The truth is the light and the light is the truth.” Growing up, telling a *story* and telling a *lie* were synonymous. In many Black households, the two words are interchangeable. I seek now to tell you a story. Within this story are only truths—bright as the magic of fire.

Cold is a trickster. When I was a child, adults’ warnings forecasted that if we weren’t careful about how we dressed, a cold was something we would surely catch. I learned early on, with my zipper biting my chin, that if you weren’t cautious about *what* you wore and *how* you wore it; if you weren’t intentional in your layering, thoughtful about how your body would be read once outside, then the cold would have its way with you. The cold would make its home inside your chest.

After sundown, the temperature drops precipitously in Colorado Springs. Too hurried to button my winter coat, I breezed through the brisk December night air of

the grocery store parking lot. Once inside, the chill was mirrored by rows of heavily refrigerated aisles. I rushed through the store collecting various items, stopping in the dairy aisle last. I reached for the final thing I needed—PHILADELPHIA whipped cream cheese. Suddenly, a white man donned in a cowboy hat appeared at my side. Beneath his hat were pointed eyes. His chest hairs stood at attention, peeking out from a blue plaid shirt with milky-colored snaps. His denim Levi's were not nearly as worn as his brown boots.

“Did you make that dress?” he asked, as I placed the silver tub beside the plastic sleeve of cinnamon raisin bagels in my shopping basket. Under my black coat, I was wearing a long burgundy dress with a border of embroidered turquoise flowers.

“No,” I replied, “I didn’t.”

“Where did you get it?” he shot back.

“I bought it.” I said.

“From where?” he returned.

“I bought it in Chicago,” I replied, “from a store called Free People.”

Before me was a man in seemingly authentic Western garb. There I was in a bohemian clothing brand, its company headquarters located in Philadelphia. As a Black woman, it felt strange to utter the name “Free People,” a chain that sells apparel alongside its sister company Anthropologie under the umbrella of Urban Outfitters, Inc. Here, in Colorado, the made-in-India dress took on a new life, a different meaning in the register of the ever-present white male gaze.

“Are you Native American?” the man inquired.

“No, I’m not.”

“What is your ethnicity?” he asked.

“I’m Black,” I responded, “I’m African American.”

“No, you’re not. You’re Native American! I can tell you are definitely Native American.”

I shifted the basket of breakfast items against my hip, unsure of how to respond to his racial proclamation. I had strategically picked the nearest grocery store and planned to run in and out. Now, frozen in time, I stood face-to-face with a white man in a neighborhood Safeway as sticks of string cheese and strawberry yogurts looked on. I mentally let out an exasperated sigh as the man reached into his jean

jacket pocket. He pulled out a business card and handed it to me. “I do energy work,” he said, presenting me with an ombré rainbow business card, its colors swirling from deep pink to blue-green to yellow-orange. At the top of the card was a small image of an eagle in flight, beneath the bird was the phrase “Gifted Cowboy” in cursive script. The card advertised a “Reading of Voice & Eyes” and touted “Energy Work Since 1981.” The name “Gerald D. Ochs” was listed as a “Radio & TV Personality.” The back of the card detailed Gerald’s ability to work with both people and animals and his price of twenty dollars per fifteen minutes. Murmuring “thank you,” I slipped the card into my coat pocket and walked past the man to the checkout lanes.

Earlier, one of the students in my Advanced Poetry Workshop course asked if we could have breakfast on our last day of class. I had quickly driven in the biting cold to buy a few things for the next morning. While swiping my items in self-checkout, I thought of the fact that the student who made the request, CooXooEii, was half-Black, half-Arapaho, and was raised by his mother on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. A talented aspiring poet, his quiet and kind demeanor was harbored in a 6’7” frame. He was a forward on the Colorado College basketball team who I had the pleasure of watching dunk on opponents. I slid him the work of former college basketball players turned poets such as Natalie Diaz and Terrance Hayes. In his MFA application materials and in his very personhood, he embodied one of the lines he cherished from Joy Harjo’s poem “A Postcolonial Time”: “I believe the word poet is synonymous with truth-teller.”

CooXooEii loved the work of Hanif Abdurraqib, particularly his poetry collection, *The Crown Ain’t Worth Much*. In my class titled: “This is the Remix: Sampling as Subversion in Contemporary Poetics,” Hanif’s latest book *A Fortune for Your Disaster* was last on our syllabus. The book contains a sequence titled “How Can Black People Write About Flowers at a Time Like This,” named after a comment Hanif overheard a white woman utter at a Black poet’s reading, shortly after Donald Trump’s election. We spent the final days of the course watching the 2006 psychological thriller *The Prestige*, which Hanif draws from for the structure of his book. As described in the film, Hanif uses the three parts of a magic trick as the collection’s organizing principle. These three parts are explained in *The*

*Prestige* as follows: the pledge—where a magician shows a participant something that appears normal; the turn—where the ordinary thing becomes extraordinary; and the prestige—where the ordinary thing returns to its normal state, with the new understanding that it could easily become something else. Had my Blackness entered into a metamorphosis since moving to Colorado Springs? Was I a magic trick’s “turn”? Was my body now presenting as something else entirely? Was I intimately discovering what a 2017 *Huffington Post* article concluded—that Colorado is the “Most Magical State in America”?

*The Prestige* details rival stage magicians in late nineteenth century London and coincidentally highlights Colorado Springs, where one of the magicians travels to meet with the scientist Nikola Tesla. When Tesla, played by David Bowie, appeared on screen, beneath a carved wooden sign marking Colorado Springs, my poetry students’ eyes lit up. Never imagining that I would one day live in Colorado Springs, my interest in Tesla had been sparked summers before in Vermont. Accepted into the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference as a participant in the genre of poetry, I rebelliously chose to attend all of the fiction craft talks. One such talk was led by author Samantha Hunt, whose publications include a book about Tesla titled *The Invention of Everything Else*. I was enthralled with how Hunt, her long blonde hair dangling at her side, wove truth from the holes of a story. In a Middlebury College classroom, the likes of a large white barn, she recounted to us how she had been invited to the house and laboratory of a man who had an interest in reproducing Tesla’s work; most recently, Tesla’s ideas about healing the body with electricity. Hunt told us how when her children were still babies she had driven to this “mad scientist’s house” accented with sleet and old snow. Once there, she undressed and descended into a basement where she intentionally exposed herself to 200,000-300,000 volts of electricity. She told us, as she recounts in “Queer Theorem,” the volts did not kill her. Surrounded by the staggering beauty of endless fields of goldenrods, I was left with more questions than answers: When had I been closest to death? Beckoned a near-death experience? How many times had I played with fire? Almost died?

In the fall of 2019, I gave a poetry reading as part of the Colorado College Visiting Writers Series. Forty-four years before, one of my idols, the poet Robert

Hayden, had read on a Friday night at Colorado College, with plans to meet with an admiring Yusef Komunyakaa the next day. Saturday afternoon, they visited Garden of the Gods, an area of sandstone formations in Colorado Springs. I would take everyone that came to visit me, from family to friends, to Garden of the Gods. In exchange for the Chicago Bean this was our go-to tourist attraction—the most visited site in the Pikes Peak region. In his essay “Journey into ‘[American Journal]’”, Komunyakaa recounts Michael S. Harper gifting him with a copy of Hayden’s *American Journal* years after their visit to Garden of the Gods. He states that he was surprised by the title poem and how its contents rekindled “sensation and images” of their Colorado afternoon together. Rather than write a realistic narrative to describe the rock formations, Hayden instead chose to take on a futurist fantasy. Commenting on the speaker of the poem, Komunyakaa states: “It seems as if the narrator is on a spiritual quest, that this voyage into the brutal frontier of the American experience is a confrontation with his own alienation.”

In addition to Hayden’s title poem “American Journal,” his poem the “Tattooed Man” contains some of my most favorite lines; one of which is: “All art is pain suffered and outlived.” While dating, I learned that one of Nate’s favorite movies is *The Five Heartbeats*, a film he watches multiple times per year. A fun fact we share is that my cousin (maternal grandmother’s sister’s son), John Canada Terrell, plays the character Michael “Flash” Turner. In the film, one of the Five Heartbeats states to an audience upon receiving an award: “I was at a party once and a critic said, ‘Donald Matthews will be a great writer when he suffers more.’ And I thought to myself, what does that mean—suffers more?” This scene of the movie has always resonated with me, this notion that I, too, would be a better writer when I suffered more. For better or worse, I developed a belief that any potential pain, trauma, or suffering would only function to contribute to my becoming a stronger writer.

Bottles of Martinelli’s sparkling cider clinked together in the back seat of my Chevy as I drove home. I sifted through the man in the grocery store’s exchange with me, trying to put my finger on what I found to be the most troubling. What I found highly disturbing was his level of certainty, his insistence on assigning my race to me in spite of what I told him and what I furthermore know to be true. I could have more easily just agreed with his assertion. The initial fear at

his approach I had confined to my right hand as it clutched the bagel spread. As a Black woman, I have been trained to mentally calculate and evaluate the levels of threat surrounding me at all times. I have learned to fear both the limits and limitlessness of the white imagination. I have practiced how to quickly make mental jumps to anticipate potential danger and preemptively deescalate a situation. I have learned how to play dead, play “stupid,” play submissive, feign ignorance, all in the name of avoiding a 911 call, evading being deemed a challenge to authority, or a threat to the delicate racial power balance. A tinge of guilt flavored with shame sat on my tongue. The shame at not knowing whether his viewing me as Native American would be perceived as positive or negative, as friend or foe. In the uniquely constructed racial hierarchy of the United States, and now as a resident of the Southwest, was it more “safe” to be read as Native American than Black? Beside the shame was a hint of sadness. A knowledge that Black or African American was a somewhat vast, fluid, and ambiguous descriptor.

Growing up in St. Louis, I often found the complexity of race’s mythology reduced to Black and white. In many ways, from pop culture to lived experience, the farther away from Blackness you could visually demonstrate or the more diluted the Blackness, the better. Being anything but Black or to have Blackness watered down to any degree, was a mark of beauty and affluence. Long hair or wavy tresses were ideal. Lighter skin, hazel eyes, and narrow noses were prized. Of course, there were a few exceptions, full lips and tan skin being examples of the features that the white students in my all-girls high school desired. As a kid, it appeared a special bonus to be biracial, to be able to assign your caramel skin to a white mother or your long hair to a Cherokee grandmother.

After undergrad, I would begin to travel the world, where the complexities of race would continue to unfold. While riding the train in Barcelona, a man nearby tries to speak to me in French and then Spanish, before he asks me if I am from Brazil. He never tries English. Because of my skin color I couldn’t possibly be American. In downtown Chicago, while waiting to grab a to-go lunch order, the brown bag is paired with the question, “Are you mixed?” or “Your hair is so beautiful, what are you?” While waiting in line at Chipotle, a Nigerian woman tells me my hair is a “blessing from God.” When I lived in DC, I would sometimes

be greeted in Amharic; in certain neighborhoods, I could pass for Ethiopian or Eritrean. In Brooklyn, when I visit my sister, I pass as Dominican.

As a professionally trained librarian, I am intrigued by the mythologies we both inherit and personally build in order to shape our identities. As fellow poet-librarian Audre Lorde proposes in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (a work of “Biomythography”), we are woven from myths, dreams, and multilayered histories. I am continuously fascinated by the ways we choose to curate who we are for the external world. During one of the many days of Covid-related shelter-in-place orders, I learned of the passing of writer Herman “H.G.” Carrillo. On May 22, 2020, *The Washington Post* ran an article titled “Novelist H.G. Carrillo, who explored themes of cultural alienation, dies after developing Covid-19.” More complicated and perhaps heartbreaking is the “Editor’s note” that ran a day later, stating: “After initial publication of this article on May 22, *The Washington Post* learned that key elements of H.G. Carrillo’s biography had been fabricated over many years, by Carrillo himself.” Carrillo’s sister and niece had contacted the newspaper to correct the record and share that their family had not in fact fled Fidel Castro’s island in 1967. Carrillo was born in Detroit to parents who were native Michiganders, and no one in their family is Latino.

In the midst of Carrillo’s husband’s grief, he learned that his spouse’s true name was Herman Glenn Carroll and that he was not the childhood Cuban immigrant he claimed to be. His husband, Dennis VanEngelsdorp, states for the article, “It was a story he told me . . . I mean, he was a storyteller.” He goes on to say that he has “come to peace” with these posthumous discoveries, observing that “in any other century, there were storytellers, like jesters, and in African culture, and in First Nations cultures, and when they told stories, people never expected the truth to be the reality . . .” The article ends with VanEngelsdorp, a professor of entomology, strolling through the garden of roses, peonies, milkweed, and goldenrod he shared with his late husband, remarking, “We have over 70 species of bees on the property . . . There are indeed flowers every day of the year . . . I’ve seen 12 species of butterflies.”

As a librarian, I take research very seriously. Using newspaper archives, I looked up “Gerald D. Ochs” across multiple local outlets. In December 2008, he

was featured in *The Gazette* in a profile piece titled, “Area psychics share visions for America.” In an effort not to be irresponsible or negligent, I collected a slim file of documentation on Ochs before scheduling an appointment with him. From between a rock and a hard place, from the sentiment of *damned if you do and damned if you don’t*, I found Gerald’s rainbow business card and gave him a call. We nailed down a date and time and Gerald told me that he appreciated I was from Missouri, that kind people come from Missouri, unlike his home state of Iowa. I was instructed to bring pictures of Nate and my mother to our appointment. “Good Lord ride with you,” he said, before I hung up.

It was spring when I would again put on my Free People dress, this time to drive to the house of a psychic. On May 19, 2020, I went to meet with Gerald. I imagined I was an anthropologist, an understudy. Just as Zora Neale Hurston traveled to Plateau, Alabama to interview eighty-six-year-old Cudjo Lewis, I drove less than ten minutes to Gerald’s home to have him explain my past, present, and future. A pale-yellow Thunderbird sat perched in front of the Taylor Apartments. Gerald had given me directions to go to the second floor of the complex and knock on door number seven. In the midst of a raging pandemic, with Black and brown folks being killed at disproportionate rates, I performed “Black Indian” so Gerald could play “Gifted Cowboy.” In lieu of horses, the center courtyard of the apartments was filled with plastic deer.

Immediately inside Gerald’s apartment was a desk loaded with at least a dozen carabiners and an assortment of what appeared to be hundreds of keys. I was offered a seat at his kitchen table, a dish of brownies and a bushel of tomatoes oddly paired on the stovetop behind me. Gerald pulled out a white binder with sheets of loose leaf paper and asked if I had brought photographs as directed. I pushed my cloth face mask deeper into my bag as I pulled out three photographs of my mother. Gerald was drawn towards one of the pictures of my mother on a recent trip to Colorado to visit me. In the picture, she holds a hawk on her hand covered with a falconer’s glove.

“See the face right there?” Gerald asked, pointing to the trees behind my mother and the hawk.

“No, I don’t see it.”

“There’s a face. There’s a face. There’s a face. There’s another face,” Gerald exclaimed, pointing to different areas of the trees and sky. “This thing is loaded down with faces. Some of these are protective spirits. There’s another face in the bird.” he said, pointing to the feathers on the hawk’s chest. “See the two eyes and the nose?”

“Yes.” I lied.

“Is she married, single, or divorced?”

“She’s divorced and single.” I responded.

“She intimidates both men and women. She’s too damn strong and somewhat stubborn and overly demanding. Are you married or single?”

“I’m single,” I lied, given the two options.

“Are you dating anybody?”

“Yes.”

“Is she looking for anybody, your mom?”

“I think so.”

“Ok, now, are all these three pictures of her?” he asked, tracing his finger across each photo.

“Yes.”

“Oh, that’s very interesting, because your mother is what we call a ‘changeling,’ what Native Americans call ‘shapeshifters.’ Each one of these pictures is different. In this one, she looks like a much older person. See how low her forehead is? See how high it is in this photo? Here, it is lower. She changes the form of her body. Her breasts can be bigger or smaller. Her arms can be longer or shorter. Once she makes her mind up, it’s made up. You aren’t anything like her. I’ll tell you that! You have an ability to see and know things, but as far as changing in forms I don’t see you doing that. I would almost bet you that in one of her lives she was a man. When she gets mad she is kicking out more male energy than female. Nobody wants to mess with her.”

Shifting from the specificity of reading my mother’s eyes, Gerald went on to give me more “universal information.” Leaning forward in his chair, he continued: “What I am going to tell you, this affects everybody on the planet. There’s two things. One is, we are going to die—that’s a given. The second one is, your path—whatever

is on your path is on your path. You will not die until your path is completed, unless you have a death experience and that changes everything. After I had my death experience in '84, I wasn't even close to being the same person."

"So, the death experience was positive?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. You don't have no fear of anything. You know when you're in a situation that's not the best situation to be in, but there's not a fear, it just tells you 'wake up.' My death experience happened when I was in the sleeper of my semi-truck."

"Does everyone have a death experience?" I asked.

"No, there are very few people that have death experiences and I don't know why. Everybody that I've had the privilege of talking to that has had a death experience, none of them have had the same experience. Everybody pretty much sees the bright light though. You can look at it for maybe two seconds. It is so intense, it's too bright. It gives you an opportunity to appreciate life. We have to remember everything on this planet is pre-set up."

As Gerald swiveled his chair towards me, I peered at his two large earth stone rings. He looked closely at me, stating: "You have an extremely old mind. Where you have to be careful is you are just like me, you are a caretaker. I got a feeling. Is your mom still alive?" Gerald asked.

"Yes." I said. "I brought recent pictures of her."

"Well I'm trying to figure out why it seems like somebody kind of pushed you in my direction."

"As I told you on the phone, I was intrigued by the bird of prey on your business card," I said.

"I once experienced being a female eagle from the waist up and a human from the waist down," Gerald responded, gesturing to the lower and upper halves of his body. "I actually flew; and when this happened it was at night in Wyoming with a storm blowing, but what I experienced was sunshine and heat. I could see for miles. The wingspread was ungodly, unreal. A Native American touched my head and I had the death experience. He told me, 'No white man should have these abilities,' but it was because I have an open mind, no fear factor, and I was in the right place at the right time. I don't drink, smoke, or do drugs."

Pointing towards the floor, Gerald transitioned to the story of an energy reading he had done for a woman's pet cat. "I know a woman that has got this cat and I told her when I met the cat, 'that's not a cat.' His eyes were way too big for a cat and that cat looked at me like, 'Well, you weren't supposed to figure that out.'" I wondered if this cat was black. Returning to Gerald's kitchen and unsure of what to make of his anecdote about the cat I continued, "And also, when I met you in the grocery store you said that you believed I was Native American."

"You are," he replied.

"But being Black I don't really have . . ." I began. Gerald cut me off, saying, "Your eyes, it comes in, you've got Native American in you somewhere, and it may be a carry-over from another life. Oh, yeah, you could pass off for Native American just like boom, boom, boom. But you need to be carrying a Taser or a gun because you've got a hell of a high speed of energy."

"Does that attract bad things?" I asked.

"It attracts males that are on the dark side that want to rape you because they want your energy. They don't want you. They want your body. They want the energy."

"A high energy attracts dark energy?" I asked.

"It attracts anybody and everybody, but the negative will be drawn to you in a heartbeat to get recharged because they're non-humans. In another life, you very much could have been a medicine woman, and there's a very good chance you may be one in this life because you are so sensitive, so emotional, and so caring. Now, make damn sure you get you a Taser. Not pepper spray! A Taser or a gun. Because if somebody comes at you, you need something to stop 'em dead in their tracks. How old are you right now?"

"I'm thirty-two, but my birthday is July third so I will be thirty-three soon."

Gerald paused to calculate something with the information I had given. He used a blue pen to scribble some figures on a sheet of paper in his binder. "Fourteen and eighteen come in on you really super strong. If you didn't get raped at fourteen or eighteen you came close and it's all about your energy. Plus, you have bedroom eyes. And women, I said women and men both will be drawn to you. And you wanna know why?"

"Why?" I responded.

“Because you got the same problem I got. We’re kickin’ both energies out. We’re kickin’ both male and female. Females will be drawn to you as much as the male. But it will be a male-female because you’re the female. Even though they are females, they will play the male part. They will see you as an easy prey, because you are fragile and somewhat naïve.”

I silently nodded my head.

“I hope you’re not offended. I’ve read thousands and thousands and thousands of people. I may never see you again and I have nothing to gain here. It’s just your reading. Do you understand? Do you say prayers at night?”

“Sometimes, not every night.”

“It’s very important you do this and I’m gonna tell you why. Whoever is guiding you, if you don’t ask for anything in your prayers they don’t have a hell of a lot to do. When I say a prayer, I say a prayer to God and ‘my people’ because I know I’m not from this planet I’m from the Plateians.”

“The ‘Pla-te-ians’? How do you spell that?”

“I don’t know how to spell it. I would have to get back to you on that. It’s another planet. But if you want a different job, a different location, if you want to travel, whatever you want, say, ‘give me some help, give me an idea of what direction I need to go.’ It’s a good idea to pray. You are going to probably see yourself as being freer to be your own self. In the spirit realm, time doesn’t exist. It stands still. Just like there are doorways all the way up into Cripple Creek that take you inside the mountain, take you inside the planet that has been there for thousands of years. We’re living on the outer edge and inside the planet is an inner world, and then there’s outer space; they all three connect. You understand?”

“I say the nightly prayers and ask for guidance?”

“Ask to be shown in a dream or another way ‘what is in store for me?’ See, if you don’t pray, like I said, you’re kind of not knowing what the hell to do with yourself. But certain spirits in other dimensions are assigned to help you. Ask for help. Don’t be afraid to ask. Don’t be afraid to pray. What is going on right now is a major war between the good and the bad. The dark side is trying to take this planet over for all the wrong reasons. You understand? You have to be so cautious, especially you, because your field is high, you’re a giver, and

caretaker, and you have to learn how to say ‘no’ and mean *no* because your body is your body.”

With every passing moment in Gerald’s kitchen, my fear and anxiety increased. We stared into each other’s eyes across an avocado and mustard colored retro tablecloth. Neither of us wore face masks as advised by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. I mentioned to Gerald that many people had died as a result of Covid. His response: “The ones that are scared are lost. They will probably never find themselves. Because they’ve been programmed through the computer, through the TV, through their phone. Once you get into fear you are screwed because there is no cure for fear.”

“But a lot of people are scared right now,” I responded.

“After I had my death experience, I’m not afraid of anything,” he explained, with a shrug.

“But you said that a lot of people have not had a death experience,” I reminded him.

“Oh, that’s right. Probably might be one out of a thousand people have had a death experience. When you are in a place where you feel vulnerable say, ‘I need some help’ and ask for the white light to be put around you which is God’s protection. It don’t matter what religion you are. God is God. See a lot of people will say they are religious but they are anything but religious. If you feel that too many people are into the fear factor, try to find a location that you feel comfortable in.”

“Okay,” I responded.

“I don’t wear the mask. I think it’s stupid because a doctor came on a couple days ago and he said these people wearing these masks are going to die before everybody else because they’re not breathing in fresh air. They’re just getting carbon monoxide and that’s all they’re getting and its killing their lungs but they’re programmed to believe they have to wear the mask. It’s all demonic. You understand?”

I nodded. I thought, then, of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “We Wear the Mask” with the opening line: *We wear the mask that grins and lies.* I thought of the hooded night riders of the KKK, as this barefaced man before me explained how wearing a mask in the middle of a public health crisis was demonic.

“Got any questions?” Gerald asked, but before I could reply he remarked, “well, I gave you an extra fifteen minutes.” I had stayed with Gerald an hour, yet he charged me only forty dollars—his rate for thirty minutes. I placed two twenty dollar bills on his kitchen table as he imparted more insights for free. His last words informed me that there are eighty-seven different life forms on earth. He warned me of reptilian lizards who masquerade as humans. He cautioned that not everyone that looks to be human is human. He informed me that he had recently confirmed these findings while shopping in Walmart, where he struck up a conversation with an eighty-year-old man who had retired from NASA. “Eventually the hologram will stop working,” Gerald said, throwing up his hands, “they have to use human energy and drink human blood to maintain a human appearance.” He went on to explain that, “the lizards have engaged in crossbreeding” and are “responsible for the millions of missing babies” worldwide. He closed by informing me that this information was carefully removed from the Bible.

As advised by Gerald, I began to pray nightly to “God” and “my people.” Like magic, brown bodies began to descend and fill the rooms of our blue house. As though taking a cue from Virginia Hamilton’s *The People Could Fly*, winged beings began to appear out of thin air. While watching television on Sunday night, a form would flutter across the screen. Then, another would appear, this one headed toward the breast-shaped orb of the ceiling’s light fixture. Another, while eating dinner in the dining room. A shape would flit atop a bookcase only to be joined with two more shadows dancing close by on the wall. In the kitchen, in the bedroom, in the living room, in our home offices, colored figures began to arrive. *Acronicta leporina*. Miller moths. Nate swats at the moths with great delight. He takes pride in hunting them, until they fall on him, at which point he shrieks in disgust. I like him in this role as protector—annihilator of insect invaders. But these moths could be our reincarnated ancestors, another lifeform that simply refuses to take the shape of a human body. I don’t say these thoughts aloud. I am silent. I sit and watch as they are killed.

I began to look for information on the cultural meaning of moths as omens. I found a 2011 article titled “Insects and Death” in *American Entomologist*, which illustrates the vast mythology relating insects to the forecasting of death. For

example, three species of moths in the genus *Acherontia* are called “death’s-head hawkmoths” because of dorsal markings which resemble a human skull. Ultimately, I discovered that insects symbolize not only death but also rebirth.

Taken to researching the sudden abundance of Miller moths in Colorado Springs, I learned that their migration is a spring tradition. The moths’ rapid population increase, the result of a lack of moisture across Colorado and states along its eastern border. I visited the May Natural History Museum, located in Colorado Springs’ Rock Creek Park, which contains the world’s largest private insect collection. Once inside the fairly compact museum, I trailed a small boy who every few seconds shouted the word “grasshopper” with exuberant glee. With the repetitive sound of this child’s one-word exclamations, I viewed displays containing only a small fraction of the collection’s over 100,000 specimens. Through iridescent wings of every hue, I learned of the museum founder James May’s worldwide travels and “near death experiences,” collecting specimens through various means such as luring butterflies in Central and South America with a sticky mixture of ingredients including: “beer, fermented fruit, pineapple essence, whiskey . . . and molasses.” The museum placard for the “Agrias Butterflies” explains the function of this mixture, stating: “Naturally (as it would a person), this makes the butterfly drunk and unable to fly so the collector can carefully pick him off the tree trunk.”

My first tattoo, obtained while an undergrad at Howard University, is a butterfly. My lower back exists as a block of amber, my skin preserving the butterfly in permanent ink. *Library of Small Catastrophes*, my debut poetry collection, contains the poem: “Elephants Born Without Tusks.” In it, I describe the use of peppered moths as a teaching tool for natural selection. Birds unable to see dark moths on soot-covered trees, a byproduct of rising industry, ate lighter colored moths instead. Thus, the darker moths were able to survive. How have my ancestors adapted in an effort to survive? How does the dark keep me safe?

While hiking in Colorado, I want to hear the refrain of Martin Luther King’s “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech. On Monday mornings, when my colleagues compare notes, and suggest trails from their weekend adventures, I want to join in, rather than look away, too tired to mention the latest instances of police brutality. The American Dream is to “move on up,” to ascend, to advance, to climb. Instead,

what I long for is flat land, rivers, and lakes; for the running water that Sam Cooke sings of in, “A Change Is Gonna Come.”

Born in the gateway to the West, when I look out at the Colorado mountains, I am presented with a longing to go home. In bed, I repeat, “I want to go home, I want to go home, I want to go home . . .” The trouble is, I’m not sure where home is anymore. Whether near or far from “home,” Black death seems to find me. Still, I would trade the mountain peaks for the fried catfish of Missouri’s Mississippi River. I would exchange the warm sunshine of Colorado Springs for Lake Michigan’s wind, for a view of the foamy waves from the window of the Jeffrey Jump making its way down Lake Shore Drive; the bus filled with Black folks that look like my aunties, uncles, cousins and ‘nem.

Dear reader, if you can hear me, I am afraid to die on this mountain. First thing this morning, cold was there to kiss my feet, my soles gently pressed against the bathroom floor tiles. As the sun shone its face, I found a moth floating in the toilet. There it was; waiting for me. A sign? A magic act? An omen? I do not know who it came in the name of or what it was trying to communicate. I do not know what anything means. I remember its wings, a breaststroke of stillness on the water. On its dark abdomen, a poem about flowers.

## 轰隆隆 Is the Sound of Thunder

滴滴答答 is the rain stitching a bell jar, or the clock remembering its days  
as a clepsydra. 扑通 is the sound of a man stumbling  
& 哈哈哈哈哈 is the laughter that chases after  
玲玲琅琅 is the water sword whacking the 哎当锵锵 jade pendants  
of cold rocks. 娴娴瑟瑟 is the west wind & 扑扑簌簌  
is the falling leaves that 萧萧翩翩 with an autumn moon

In fact, 簌簌 is the sound of all soft things falling  
The tears 簌簌 on the face. The snow 簌簌. The begonia 簌簌  
on the mahogany bone of a folding fan. 簌簌 the brushstroke  
paints the rice paper into a landscape of black mountains  
泠泠淙淙 the rivers flow where the inked mountain is not depicted  
flow in the uncharted whiteness

The bold strings 嘈嘈 like blizzard, the fine strings 切切 like murmur—  
the melody of a girl playing 琵琶 on the orchid boat  
back in the Tang dynasty which we still hear through 白居易's poetry  
If the river could speak, would the mountain understand its utterance

The sound of a frog is 呱呱呱, which is annoying  
If you cannot stand the 呱呱呱, please put the frog into a boiler  
The hard part: try not to mourn the frog

The sound of the autumn moon is 寻寻觅觅, 冷冷清清  
凄凄惨惨戚戚, which is also the 点点滴滴 sorrow of 李清照

Because to mourn the frog one must speak in the language of frog  
which is to 呱呱呱

咿咿呀呀 is a 青衣 singing with 盈盈脉脉 lips of red beans  
飘飘冉冉 is their furbelow 依依霏霏 among the willows & catkins

式微 is the evanescent light of a lantern. Wrong. 式微 is the swansdown evening, a girl calling her beloved: why don't you come back. Come back

In truth, 式微 is 王维 writing a poem to the shadow of his leaving friend who promised to come back with a sprig of magnolia to light up the yard  
His poem has the sound of clouds spread low on the moving water

The lamplight threads a dim song across the voice of trees  
that can only be heard by insects & birds

关关喈喈雍雍嚙嚙嗷嗷萋萋肃肃呖呖 are the sounds of birds  
薨薨嚙嚙嚙嚙趯趯啁啾了了 are the sounds of insects  
噼里啪啦 are the firecrackers bumping into the air  
叽里咕噜 is a mouse stealing oil & falling from the chair  
呦呦 the deer sings. 萧萧 the horse chases the wind  
淅淅沥沥 the knuckles of rain knocking windows of a departed train  
知了 is the cicada chirping its name: 知了知了  
布谷 is the cuckoo calling itself: 布谷 cuckoo cuckoo 布谷

For us, the petals fall with no sound. For the fire ants, the petals hit  
the ground with a sound as loud as thunder, which is 轰隆隆

But what is the ant's onomatopoeia for the thunder & falling flowers  
What is the petal's onomatopoeia for the wind that brings forth its own falling  
Still, we keep hearing, hearing, hearing the hiss of white, yellow  
& blue petals scattered in a bowl bitten by the ants' bitter teeth

淅沥沥 淅沥沥 淅沥沥 淅沥沥 the rain  
轰隆隆 轰隆隆 轰隆隆 轰隆隆 the thunder

# Where a Black Woman Belongs

*for Breonna*

she belongs high  
twisted and licked  
inhaled  
purple  
in theories of legend  
in a crown  
inside the church of her warmest sins  
in the flour caked in her grandma's palm  
cellular and magic  
on the tongues of cheetahs  
inside a big mouthed galaxy  
inside a bad attitude's longitude  
inside a burning church  
near the exits; in epiphanies  
on papered checks  
on shelves  
a black woman belongs in a graveyard  
next to her father's promises  
in the streets, covered in chalk around the knee  
kneeling;  
in the car  
hands up, blistered from mixing hot stars  
on hot stoves  
she belongs in her mother's darkest sandstorm of prayers;  
inelegantly  
sexed in hotel rooms  
on worn sheets  
on asphalt  
with knee on carpet  
with mouth on flesh  
with legs open

on shoulders  
amongst sea monsters  
singing mermaid, queening  
in playgrounds  
in the dry lake of her bed  
shaven  
tailored  
awaiting a night of senseless mistake

## If Lord you say      be still and know

I am    Lord you are    but  
I am not so            sure I am  
                          even present quickens into past  
hope for what        I do not    know rest-  
                          less nights    less days nest  
inside a life        worth less    than one copper  
                          coin issued    forth  
                          is hard to re-    call back Lord  
& I'll trade    my *ifs*                    for *when*  
                          I hush    enough a hum-  
mingbird will hover just    above the sill &  
                          no he cannot            get his fill  
                          either or stop    pulsing    red  
means sugar too simple    merely  
                          being    is a feat    he beats  
his wings so fast        he blurs  
                          a fever-flight    how  
                          to divine    a frenzy from  
                          afloat I am  
                          & do not know  
                          how to keep    to carry on    *if*  
options both        look like torpor    I am not  
                          after still        please    Lord kick in  
                          don't you reside  
                          in wind

## Your Tomorrow Clothes

When it finally comes time to lay them out, I can't decide between the print with the tree silhouettes, or the flowing red with gold embroidery, shimmering and geometrical like a mosaic. These are just two among dozens, so many dazzling garments, it's hard to choose.

As a little girl, I watched you tie your sari before parties. You tucked the folds into the waistband, not ashamed to use a safety pin. You threw a perfect fan of pleats over your shoulder. The glimmery aqua was your favorite. I knew so well the delicate swish of its satin, a sound like the wings of birds. You powdered your lipstick, blotted with tissue, and powdered again, bracing for the night ahead, trying to reinforce what might easily be rubbed away. Sharp points defined the peaks of your lips, the corners of your eyes, drawn by your artist's hand. You'd given up clothing design to marry, yet precision inhabited everything you touched.

We didn't speak as I watched, but this was the silence of awe, not the silence that came later. I was not yet the daughter who climbed out her window in the night to attend parties where I would carry no trays and serve no hors d'oeuvres. Not the girl who grew up, who moved away to make a life and tried not to look back. The girl who left you to fend for yourself.

From college I read your letters. How dad locked the dishes in the basement so you had to wash after every meal, took you off the joint accounts when you bought more. How you learned to start the lawnmower, and then landscaped the entire yard with the tools that weren't locked in the shed.

Over the decades, you found a way to hold on. Buy extras when you can. Two replacements, or more, for each one thing lost or taken away. Not just one length of fabric, but a stack to hide away in the back of a closet, in case you have the time again to sew. Store used coffee grounds that could be used to make pigment in a cupboard or drawer. Cut out an interesting idea. Save. Repurpose. Stock up. Hold on to what could be made useful, or beautiful. There's always tomorrow. Always another chance to bloom.

With each visit I made home, I watched your sharp lines fade. For so long, you resisted the slide. You stockpiled clippings, still with perfectly square corners, meticulously cut, filed by subject. Then, no longer the clippings, but the magazines themselves, first shelved neatly by date, then amassed in reused grocery bags. Then just all the mail, in stacks, in bags, in piles.

When I finally move back home, you have long outlived my dad. Walls of boxes tower throughout your house. You thread your way as if through the corridors of a fortress, hands reaching out to steady you. I open windows and doors, take a week to unearth the stove.

I go through boxes for months. My school reports packed against crumbling eyeshadows, leather tools crushing broken electrical cords.

You eat home-cooked meals, have your nightgown changed every day. Finally, I tackle your room.

“I can’t watch.” You turn your eyes and roll away. Until . . . “The carpet still looks good. What about that speck of lint, that pile on the desk?” There, buried under age and a lifetime of memories and unfinished plans, is the you that cries out for beauty, the ordering creation of intention, design.

We reach the closet. One-by-one, the garments come out for a view, some with tags still hanging, things you imagined wearing long after the days of hosting faculty parties were gone. Each night I hang your day’s favorite on the door, what you might wear next if you had the energy to dress.

“That’s beautiful,” you say. “I’ve never seen it before.”

“You don’t remember this?”

You reflect. “Sometimes I think it’s better I don’t remember everything.”

I make you marzipan from scratch, hang a new birdfeeder outside your window, repot the kalanchoe, reseason cast iron. Eventually, the house is like a flowerbed you laid out with everything in its place. I bring you photographs with breakfast, the arrangement of drums you collected, the paintings you made, forgotten views through windows now revealed. You smile, as if to reassure, this last push to restore order, my effort, mattered. But you don’t speak, or pat my hand. Our third silence is a simple one, camaraderie, amity.

When the moment finally comes, I can’t understand. Somehow, you: the one thing I couldn’t restore.

You wrote out all the instructions long ago, but this I forgot to ask. Which among these will you now wear? I flip through the hangers like yellowed pages, and there it is, your aqua sari, hidden at the back for years, still crisp and clear as an empty sky. Long too small, you'll fit into this again now, with your frail limbs like wings. I hang it on the door, and tomorrow you will be swept off in its satin, to the sound of the whispers of birds.

## Boots

Strip the bed, leave the mattress near the window  
and despite the chill of October leave the window  
open, that the air may suck up all memory  
into the trees. The soft filtered light spilling  
in is what the photographer uses to suggest  
the pavement of spirits. The photographer will  
place the open book on the bare pimpled  
mattress—leaves blowing. We understand  
the cliché all too well, but below,  
at the foot, are the ornate leather of boots—  
a woman's boots, worn, elegant, full  
of the alarm of authenticity—and their solitary  
stand, their emptiness, their grace  
are as grand as the firmest metaphor,  
a quality of beauty in formed things  
that turn to spirit. And here is where  
we must sing a sweet blues, not of sorrow  
but of the lingering delight of desire  
and the passing of lamentation.

# Photo Shoot

*for Gordon Parks*

The camera remembers, leaves a stain  
of you that travels without you,  
stays around long after you.  
So when the Negro man,  
with the accoutrements of his vocation,  
the heavy black leather satchel,  
his fedora and delightful smile,  
speaks the requisite ma'ams and sirs,  
you ask for a minute to don  
your church frock, with the broad  
collar you like, and you thank the Lord  
that it is only Monday and the lovely  
Sunday'do has not tattered to ordinary  
country living, and you make the line  
of your lip, tidy the curve of your  
painted brow and practice that holy  
smile, that this lasting image, staining  
the future, will say, "God and country."

# Death Watch

*“Well if you leave out his personal life, he was a happy man.”*

—Lynn Brown Jr., business associate of Wallace Stevens

It is, of course, old Wallace Stevens,  
austere as a cow in autumn,  
polite, blandly circumspect,  
curled hair above the black long  
coat; it is he who stands watch—  
waiting for you—and you, again,  
have the taut skin of an infant,  
your body covered in the thin  
sheet as if already wrapped  
in burial cloth, the neat lines  
spindling out like ripples of a pond,  
your eyes turned to that sweet  
sister of yours, in her chair,  
watching over you, helpless  
as a saint who knows all too well  
that the rest is not our affair.

Mr. Stevens says nothing; he is  
kindly but that is because  
you know how careful he is  
with the arrangement, the paper  
work. And when he says, with  
a ticking dry tongue: *Well, it*  
*is all in order now, you can*  
*have a good death, you know*  
he makes his poems as an accountant  
calculates what is in hand

and rarely considers what is to come.  
Protect me, you say to your sister,  
with her pointed nose and crooked  
stick. She stares at Mr. Stevens,  
then mutters softly, *It will be fine,*  
*sweetie, you go . . .* And you know  
she has not heard you; you  
know, for you have not spoken.

# Poem to my Uterus

after Lucille Clifton

Bright wanderer	homing station set	for the gathering
one tiny studded	heartbeat	
you shed	bright blood	each monthly turn
I thought	I'd trained you	
how feeble	my attempts	to control
my body	my worry	
& still	you barren home	empty
of anything	resembling family	
each try	frozen & fresh	familiar & foreign
anonymous men	I chose	
from glossy catalogs	this one	plays basketball
this one	plays piano	

I bring them all to you lay them bare  
divide my thighs hoping  
but you stubborn & polyped  
pocked with fibroids ever unwilling  
I strive to line you with rich blood  
one book says fresh pineapple  
one says avocado I eat  
whatever magic promises  
to make you take maybe  
I've ruined you with Accutane  
or decades of Ortho-TriCyclen pummeled  
the entry to your home  
with bleached water from public tubs you  
worried carafe sweet doomed hovel  
show me what you need to make a life

# Harbor

The line was long, but we decided to wait. It was less that we were resolute in our desire to see the exhibition than that, having come this far downtown, and with both of us feeling the languor of end-of-year exhaustion, we couldn't think of an alternative way of spending the afternoon. At least, that is how A. justified it, and I parroted his words back to him, as my canvas bag hung heavy and pendulous from my shoulder with the weight of my camera.

As usual, Yayoi Kusama's show was one of the most popular exhibitions of the season. The main attraction was an installation, a small box lined on the inside with mirrors and color-changing lights. Critics likened it to an experience of infinity, which viewers could claim as their own for one full minute. Supposedly, it was an amorphous and expansive vision of a universe where the selves we brought in would be simultaneously eradicated and multiplied into a visual eternity, one that is tangible yet on the brink of obliteration, at the mercy of the flick of a light switch or the opening of a door. Lovers testified that the most magical part was seeing themselves reflected back in so many iterations, particularly given the fragile nature of many such relationships, in which a frequently felt fear is the loss of the beloved, that the beloved should slip through the cracks between the fingers of the lover's cupped palm.

A. and I stood at the end of the line that wrapped around the gallery, across the street, and snaked down another block. It was his idea, coming to see the exhibition. I had eyed Kusama's shows for years but never went, had always been terrified of the lines, but mostly thought they were gimmicky.

A. had proposed it the afternoon I resigned myself to leaving my photography project in a botched state after months of strain and compromise. More than usual, there had been a rusty feel to the development of the series, a self-sabotaging friction; the endpiece was a crude placeholder, there just to fill the space.

*Before we leave: Yayoi Kusama?* he messaged me as I sat alone in my studio, my prints scattered on the floor around me. I was tired of art and art was tired of

me—I no longer wanted to look at it. Yet I read the text again. *Before we leave*. I imagined seeing A. by my side, his form traversed by lights in the dark, reflected back to me infinitely, so I messaged back, *Sure, let's go*, and I told myself that as tired as I was, I'd bring my camera.

On the sidewalk, A. leaned out to examine the line. It looks like it's going fast, he commented.

It does, I agreed blindly. So when's your flight tomorrow?

11 a.m. And yours?

The day after tomorrow.

I imagined A. back home in Zurich, then myself in transit to Suzhou, and my ribcage filled with a sinking emptiness.

Looking forward to seeing your family? A. asked.

Just my mother. But yes, sure, I am.

I stopped myself before I reflexively asked him the same question; certainly, he would be glad to return to the people he left behind—his family, his home university, his girlfriend of almost two years—but for once, I didn't need to be weighed down by the reminder of it.

We inched forward. A. looked behind us; several more people had joined the line.

*Mais voilà*, he said, this is how we met.

He seemed far away behind his eyes, as he often did when he was thinking, and he smiled, sad and soft, like he was recalling a distant memory.

*Ah oui*, I said, taking in the length of the line and remembering the one that had zig-zagged across the university square. *Oui, exactement comme ça*.

*Ça pourrait être pire*. He turned to me and added, There are worse people to be stuck waiting with.

I looked at him, surprised by the overt declaration of affection.

*Tu sais*, he continued, I think now I understand what you meant that day. About why you think French comes more naturally. With me, I mean.

In the line that evening, as a student squeezed his way between us, saying excuse me excuse me just passing through, A. had asked, *Tu préfères qu'on parle en français?* My English is better, and it seems like yours is too.

I had tried explaining, in a series of nervous pauses and non-sequiturs, as the entrance to the panel event grew closer. In this adopted language, the harder things were easier to say. Meaning must have fallen through my words; A.'s silence had been respectful.

*Ah bon?* I asked now.

Yes, he said. I have the impression that speaking in a common third language is more challenging, but more . . . private.

Precious is the word I would use, I thought. *Oui*, I said, *ç'est ça*, that's exactly what I meant.

The line moved. Clouds had gathered overhead. Looks like it's going to rain, A. commented.

I don't have an umbrella, I said. Do you?

No. But it's no problem. Being Swiss, rain is my natural habitat.

Well, it's definitely not *my* natural habitat, so this'll be fun, I said. A. smiled. In the overcast light, the angles of his face were soft, and his eyes, usually drawn over with the shadow of his brow ridge, appeared large and bright.

Did you finish your project? he asked.

I hesitated. Barely. I brought my camera.

After the panel, A. had visited my studio with me. He had just gallantly given me a tour of the university's applied sciences facilities—it had been remarkably thorough, accompanied by generous explanations and even demonstrations—and I thought it only appropriate to return the favor. As I led him through the dingy halls of the arts building, with its creaking wooden steps and peeling paint, I tried not to think about what the dilapidation around me must say about the nature of what I had committed myself to: trying to justify relevance in the scramble for funding, laboring to cast shadows of truth while the rest of the world raced forward in the light with new products and discoveries.

Yet as we made our way up the building and I did my best to describe what I did, if A. had any disparaging thoughts, he didn't let them show. Eventually I saw it: A. was exactly as he came; there was never any ulterior motive, no hidden spite, no calculated kindness. He took in the world free of judgment, walked through it with the same openness and fascination as he did those halls.

*Voilà!* I announced as I pushed open the door to my studio, making an extra effort to summon energy into the flat timbre of my voice. Not as exciting as a photonics lab I guess, sorry.

No, it is, just different, he said. He made his way around the studio, the frame of his glasses aligned with his brows in a way that gave him an air of concentration, and eventually arrived at my desk.

*C'est à toi?* he asked. He was looking at an early iteration of my project: one image printed across two gelatin silver prints.

I nodded, letting silence fill the room before explaining, It's supposed to be a hand—a woman's—reaching for someone's face. A pause as I watched him regard it with a sharp focus. You've been to art museums, right? I continued. Those Renaissance paintings of naked women draped over forest rocks, Marilyn Monroe's curves all over the Pop Art period; it's always been about male desire and the female body. The male gaze thrusting itself on the woman's body. Like female desire doesn't exist, or that it doesn't matter, which is worse.

And is this what female desire looks like to you? he asked, turning to face me.

I became suddenly aware of how close he was standing, how sincere his expression, how the red-orange rays of sunlight piercing the floor-to-ceiling windows cast an intense warm glow on one side of his face.

I looked away. I don't know, I managed to say.



Two women came around the block. Is this the line for the exhibition?

We nodded, and the women fell in behind us. Minutes passed; having never felt the need to fill silence ourselves, A. and I had once noted together the American tendency to scramble for topics at lulls in conversation. As we moved forward a few steps again, I noticed a piece of graffiti on the wall next to me. It was a drawing of two anthropomorphic cacti, lying on their sides, facing the same direction, one's arm clasped over the other's—spooning.

*C'est chouette, ça,* I commented. This is cool—neat. I took out my phone to snap a photo and out of the corner of my eye saw that A. was looking at the image

as well. I felt a slight sense of achievement, not only for drawing his eyes to my actions but also for producing a message that I thought was telegraphic enough: *In your presence, this is what I think of.*

When I put my phone back into my pocket, A. was still looking at the cacti.

*En fait*, he began, my girlfriend and I have been having some problems. And I'm not sure how it will be, seeing her again.

I stared at him. What? How? I wanted to ask. Why? How long has this been going on? You said it was perfect. Glee rose in me, but shame tamped it down immediately as I imagined how it must weigh him down, how it must eat at him, that liminal state of uncertainty in this relationship so dear to him—

Excuse me? Can you take a picture of us?

It was the women behind us again. If you could get the line in the background, that'd be great, the speaker said enthusiastically as she held her phone out to me, a recent iPhone model in a slippery holographic case. As I took it with both hands, trying not to look at A., terrified that I would drop it, I saw that the line had lengthened significantly in the last few minutes.

I took several shots, trying to find angles that would evoke the length of the line while also presenting the women in as flattering a way as possible in the poor lighting, yet trying not to deliberate too much. Take too long, and their expressions would seem frozen and forced.

I handed the phone back, gave her a smile, and prepared to turn to A. I'm sorry about your relationship, I would say. Then I would let it go. But the woman spoke before I could. So where are you guys from?

The line moved again. Irritation surged in me as I realized that for the next hour or two I would have to curb my actions and words in their presence, and I found myself mourning the last of the privacy A. and I had together. On any other continent, would a long line have been enough reason for strangers to ask such spontaneous questions?

Their names were Riley and Harper, from South Carolina. They had grown up together in a small town, even in adulthood had never gone six months without seeing each other. After college, they made the move to New York City together and now shared a flat in Bushwick, each serving as the other's source of stability in what was, honestly put, a ruthless city.

Was it nice, I blurted out, was it nice being in the same place your entire lives? Knowing the same people?

It was, yeah, Riley said. You feel very, she paused—safe and, like, seen. You know, when everyone's from there.

Was it hard moving to a new place? A. asked.

Kind of, yeah. New York's so different from the way it is back home. But we're each other's homes now.

A. nodded in understanding, and I wished I could ask him what it was like: to be able to understand it, that sense of home.

Then Harper spoke for the first time. We say sometimes that moving out here was like throwing ourselves into the middle of the ocean when we had barely even left the harbor.

A. was looking at her, which was only natural; he'd have appeared rude otherwise. Yet as I heard her airy voice, saw her ice-blue eyes framed by deep orange hair, saw A.'s attention fixed on her, I suddenly felt very plain and, as I realized my own inattentiveness to Harper, a current of guilt and exhaustion washed over me. I felt a drop of rain on my cheek. I looked up. The sky had darkened.

Wow, it's getting really cold, Riley commented. A. nodded in agreement.

With a gust of wind, a hat flew by us from further up in line. I watched it tumble along the side of the building, then looked up to search for an owner, when I saw that A. had already chased after it wordlessly and was holding it in his hands, triumphant. In a few bounding steps, he returned to the line and sought out the owner with a speed and levity that revealed an earnestness for life, a confidence in other people that I couldn't quite remember ever having.

It was drizzling when A. rejoined us. The sky had become a thick, curdled grey. Harper pulled a maroon umbrella out of her purse. Dread rose inside me as I touched my camera through the fabric of my tote bag.

Shit, I said. My camera . . . I turned to A., my hands on my head. How did I overlook this? The rain, my camera.

What do you need?

I don't know, I stuttered, something plastic, a plastic bag, something.

The rain was coming down more steadily now, and it filled the street with a

thin static. A. began unwrapping his scarf. I wanted to protest. And I would've, had it solely been about my comfort. But I thought of all the photos on that roll of film; for over a year I had kept re-winding and removing it after certain shoots out of a strange unease towards seeing my memories materialized: a family I had left behind in Cambodia, an aging mentor in her home outside of Oslo, rootless immigrants in my old Queens neighborhood. Near the end of the roll would be A. himself, skipping stones by the Hudson river, his shadow long and limber against the sunset, his smile a way I knew would make my breath catch in the darkroom. I had risked having overlapped exposures and wasting inches of film, but in no way could I afford to lose the roll.

Put this around it for now, A. said, handing me his scarf, his neck now exposed and pale in the grey light. Raindrops contoured the curve of his jaw, disappearing under it for a brief second before reemerging on his neck, where they slowed and merged and engorged in size before being absorbed by his coat collar.

Do you want to share our umbrella? Riley asked, and I blinked. A sharp shame pierced me as I realized that it was the same American friendliness at which I had been so irritated that now prompted her to share a tiny umbrella.

Hearing her offer, A. placed his hands firmly on my shoulders and shifted me under the minimal shelter.

I'll go find something for your camera, he said lightly.

Should I come with you?

Of course not, your camera will get even wetter. I'll be back soon, he said, and I watched the shape of him, tall and lean and footsteps assured, grow smaller and blurrier as raindrops like silver threads obscured him from me.

I'm sure he'll find something, Riley reassured me. I forced a smile. The line moved, and now the gallery was just a hundred meters up the street.

So how long have you guys been together?

Did I look taken aback? Oh, we're, we're not together ... I heard myself stutter. Oh, sorry about that!

Raindrops rolled down the surface of my shoes as I said, It's okay, yeah, we're not dating, repeating it as if it had not already been stated. He has someone, I added. Then I faced her. Is it . . . obvious? Riley's eyes were an amber color, the

look in them bright in a way not dissimilar to A.'s, and how had I not noted the empathy in them before? She could be anyone close to me now—an older sister, an old confidante.

You mean, you? Riley asked. I nodded. A bit, she said. Him, too, Harper added. No, I said, surprised at the firmness in my voice, he's just like that.

Soon, A.'s figure reappeared in the distance, the weak domed shadow of an umbrella wavering over his head like a too-large halo.

He's back! Riley exclaimed, then in a tone of sympathy, oh, he's completely drenched. In my peripheral vision, I saw her and Harper studying me.

A. sloshed up to us. I found a photography shop, he said. And a poorly-built umbrella! He pushed wet hair out of his eyes; he truly was drenched. I watched him as he shook water from his right hand before reaching into his coat pocket and pulling out a camera rain sleeve. *Et voilà*, he said, smiling proudly as he held it out to me.

Of course, I thought, this is Chelsea. B&H should just be two blocks away.

I swallowed thank you's as I fumbled with the packaging and slipped it over my camera. I handed A.'s scarf back to him. He stepped closer to me, and I opened my eyes wider now that I was sheltered. How I would have hugged him, if not for our spectators. Thank you, I said again, as rain continued to pour down around us. It was coming in torrents now, straight down with the lack of wind. Save for the rush of water, everything was uncannily still.

Are you cold? Riley asked Harper.

Yes, she said, she was.

Riley turned to A. and I. We're getting really cold, we're going to leave. We can come back another day. Their expressions were apologetic, as if they were truly sorry to leave us in this interminable line, these two young people who might not make it to the exhibition, at this point a physical haven more than anything. I thanked them for sharing their umbrella.

Good luck, they wished us, glad your camera's safe. Take care, Riley added, addressing me. And they stepped off the curb.

A. and I stood as they had left us, coat sleeves touching, listening to the rain drum steadily over our heads.

Then the wind started. The rain swelled and swirled, coming down horizontally into us one minute and driving against us the next. A current of runoff gushed past our feet. The gutter bubbled. The umbrella fought to uproot itself from A.'s grip. In a violent gust of wind, it flipped inside out, waving around like a rogue bowl, and then there was a snap.

That doesn't sound good, A. said. He lowered the umbrella and flipped it back. The canopy now hung loose on spidery ribs. He raised the umbrella again, and the wind blew the runoff from the wildly flapping fabric into our faces.

*Bon*, he said with finality as he lowered and closed the umbrella. This isn't really serving its purpose anymore.

Rain cascaded freely onto us. Damp seeped down to my skin immediately, a heavy blanket of chill.

*Ça va?* A. asked, blinking through streams of rain.

Yes, we were wet already. I'm just cold.

Do you still want to wait? he asked gently.

Something hardened inside me. It was right there, the gallery. Abandoning the line meant abandoning the image inside the building: our reflections in the mirrors punctuated with lights like stars, our forms repeated and reiterated, right side up and upside down, merging into each other. How permanent it would appear, the illusion. A. and I, our own galaxy. What was the title again? *I who have survived myself to arrive at loving you*. I thumbed the hard edges of my camera through my bag.

So I said that maybe we could wait a bit longer, see if the rain eased up. We'd come this far already.

*D'accord*, he said, and in one movement, he reached out and pulled me into him, pressing me against his body, which must have been colder and wetter than my own. I would have been surprised, had he not already held me like this before. Icy rain streamed over us. With my face resting between A.'s neck and shoulder, his head inclined in a way to create a kind of shelter, I closed my eyes to block out the deluge.

We passed several long moments like that, pressed against each other. Our bodies seemed to vibrate; whether it was me who was shivering or him, I could

no longer tell. We watched groups in front of us brace their umbrellas against the rain as they dashed up to the entrance, where the door would open and each set of visitors would exchange a few words with someone inside, only for the door to close again. Discouraged, they hurried away, hunched beneath their umbrellas and bags. Soon, there were only a handful of people left, but the gallery still seemed impossibly far away.

Is this how we would spend these last hours? Watching our time be washed away in the cold?

Eventually, I pulled myself away from A. I think we should go, I said.

I think so too.

I'm not sure where we can go like this though, I said, gesturing to the water flowing off of us. I imagined how I must mirror the sight I saw: A.'s hair plastered to his head, a waterfall running off his coat, his eyes squinted in an attempt to block out the torrents of rain. As he looked at me, his face widened into a smile and he laughed, a pure, breathy laugh, and I began laughing too, and could taste the flat brininess of the city rain. Then his expression shifted into one I couldn't be sure I had seen before: relaxed and rosy, eyes soft, corners of the mouth just barely upturned.

Well. Since you live so far uptown, *chez moi, alors? Apéro?* I asked.

His smile warmed. I'd like that very much, he said, and we left, contouring the building that we would never enter.

At the corner, we were blasted by a stronger gust of rain. Trees strained in the gale. A. shouted something as we continued on, leaning into the wind.

What?! I yelled.

Urban canyon! Wind is funneled into the street and accelerates!

I nodded, and in a surge of spontaneity, threw my arms above my head, squinted at the sky, and shouted, PHYSICS! A. stumbled in laughter, and I looked for too long, for I tripped over the curb and blindly grabbed at his arm to stabilize myself. He shrugged his arm away to take my hand and, through the downpour, I was surprised.

We continued for blocks, stepping over rivers of stray leaves and empty soda cans, the world swirling around us as a continuous, deafening rush of rain. Time

was inflated; it seemed like I had been waiting for so long in that line with A., then waiting for him to come back, then waiting together again, and it seemed like it had been raining for so long and so hard that, waiting and wading through the emptied city with him, I felt as if I couldn't remember a time before the rain, or a flame before A.

Eventually, we neared my apartment. Through white sheets of rain, I could make out the shapes of boats bobbing in the harbor. From this distance, they seemed almost serene in the storm. Street lights and whipping tree branches obscured the violence of the boats' lurches, the force with which the wind must have jerked them from their docks. How easily they would be washed out to sea without their anchors. As A. and I approached our last block, I pictured the boats straining at their ropes under the swollen waters, pulling at their moorings, a mass of them quivering in the harbor, tied down by someone determined to seek them out again.



In the entrance of my apartment, I flipped the light switch, but we remained steeped in darkness. It was evening, but it might as well have been night.

Must be the storm. I'm sure you can explain how it works, I teased, a tone I summoned rarely and performed badly.

As we shrugged off our dripping coats and I hung them up in the closet, he said, I could explain, but I'll spare you tonight, and I could hear his smile in the dark. It was true; A. lost me whenever he talked about the technicalities of science, of circuits and waves and lights. But I never stopped him. I liked it, liked watching his mind peel back the garish drapery of the physical world to reveal its workings, mechanisms clear-cut and which he understood with such conviction. It seemed a world of black and white and certainty, a world that made sense and wanted to prove it, so unlike the grey and abstract, capricious world of art where I could rarely be certain of anything. But I said nothing, didn't press him. Our time was limited, and we were still dripping rainwater onto the floorboards.

I don't mind the dark, by the way, A. said, and I told him that I didn't either, but that I had lights in my bedroom, just to make pouring drinks easier. Battery-powered, I said, those twinkly fairy ones. He chuckled. Bolder in the dark, I reached out and tugged on the corner of his sleeve. *Viens*, and he followed my lead.

In the bedroom, I felt along the wall past the mirror in the dark, heard the rain drum on the windows. When I found the battery switch, I clicked it on. Little balls of light burst through the blackness. I removed my camera from its rain sleeve and brought it up to the string of lights. I checked the lens, the viewfinder, all the buttons on the camera body.

It's dry! I said to A., a little too elatedly. Thank you, again. Really. *Tu m'as sauvé... beaucoup de choses.*

You're very welcome, he replied happily.

I set my camera on its shelf and made my way back to A.

What happened to the photographs? he asked, scanning the room. Are you moving?

In the yellow light, my walls were pitifully bare, their austerity exacerbated by oily stains from tape and adhesive putty and by the little black holes where nails once were. In a corner was a stack of the previous inhabitants of my walls: paintings and prints and photos living inside frames and mat boards carefully chosen by an eye that loved them.

No, I'm just . . . re-thinking some things, I said, trying to keep my tone airy, and shifting my attention from the walls to A.

In the same waxy light, I saw how the royal-blue of his button-down shirt brought out the tone of his skin, saw how the fabric clung to his body, slim and angular, in truth not the type to usually draw eyes but that had always drawn mine. And though I could reach out to touch it—the gentle slope of his chest expanding with every breath—I felt a strange, immense sadness at how distant the beauty of this person still was from me, this person who made me feel faint yet alive in a way I hadn't in years, who had been so silently good to me though I did not belong to him.

Then he was talking. Are you disappointed that we couldn't see the exhibition? he asked. Sure, I said, sure I'm disappointed. *Je veux dire*, we waited so long. And

I thought of the missed shot, the intensifying feeling that the sight inside that gallery might have been the endpiece I needed all along.

It's okay, I said to A., reassuring myself more than him. We have our little private infinity room. I gestured at the lights and the mirror. He laughed, Yes, I love it. What was it titled again, the show?

And I said in English, I who have survived myself to arrive at loving you, suddenly feeling like my voice was caught in my throat.

I who have survived myself to arrive at loving you, A. repeated slowly.

I'm sorry about your relationship, I prepared myself to say, but he spoke first.

I've been thinking about your project, the one you showed me. *Le désir féminin* . . .

I waited. He took a step towards me. He reached for my hand, his own slim and cold, and brought it to the side of his face, cold and wet. He closed his eyes as he held my hand there. Warmth built in my palm.

I'm sorry about your relationship, I said, and I could barely hear myself.

*Ne soit pas*, he said. Don't be.

Will it be okay? I whispered. *Avec elle?* He had never even mentioned her name, I realized.

A. nodded, transferring my hand to his neck. We talked about it. She gets it, that it happens when you go on *échange*. She said it's okay.

Was that possible, I wondered. But A.'s breath was warm on my ear. I couldn't ask. The lights around us seemed to waver as A.'s hand cupped my face.

I had dwelled in the imagined moment so often that when it actually came, A.'s lips and body felt simultaneously like disbelief and an anticipated memory. Our clothes fell to the floor with a slick, wet sound, the way time might if we sloughed it off in handfuls.

In the mirror, our bodies, barely illuminated, moved against the backdrop, passing in and out of the lights. Our own galaxy.

I lost track of facts quickly. Whose lips trailed my neck, whose body rocked against mine, whose arms I gripped to steady myself. Who clasped me tight as he moved faster and I could no longer distinguish the patches of light behind my eyelids from those in the room.

A., who was always untouchable? A., who I had wanted in vain? A., so beloved to me?

On the bed, A. eased me onto my back. He brought my hands above my head and held my wrists down as he entered me again and pressed his forehead to mine. As the pressure of him built inside me, carried by the rhythm of us, the ceiling coming in and out of focus, I suddenly felt a jab of pain somewhere vague in my body and almost cried out. *Ça va?* he whispered. Yes, I said; it wasn't him, which I didn't say.

All these months, to have allowed myself to be filled with something so fleeting, so without hope, yet so defining. To have nursed it, to have let it penetrate. Permeate.

A. released my hands. In the fresh absence of his touch, the skin on my wrists felt cold, and I reached for him, wrapping my arms around his neck. Now he was moving faster, and soon he uttered two successive sounds that signaled the end to come, that point of no return, and as I looked up at his face—the face my yearning had led me to know so well—haloed by the lights behind him, I wanted to say, don't come. Don't come, I wanted to say, don't come so you don't have to go. But I said nothing as he said, *Je jouis*, I come, or, I'm coming, and when he hinged into me one last time and I felt a pulse inside me, *Je t'aime*, I thought, in this futile, incomprehensible way, *je t'aime je t'aime je t'aime*.



Has the rain stopped? We'd been lying in complete silence for a while. A. got out of bed, walked across the room, parted the curtains. Yes, he verified, it's stopped. He came back and put my hand on his chest and I placed my head against his neck.

In the line . . . did something happen while I was gone? he asked. You seemed different when I got back—sad.

Ah, I said.

A pause.

They asked me how long we'd been together. I told them we weren't.

He seemed to think for a few seconds before asking, And do you want us to be together?

I had thought about it before, in meaningless bouts of reverie. He had his family to return to, his country, his language. We had degrees to finish. I was stationed here to see this fragment of my life through. In a relationship, the differences between us that made it exciting now would wear us down. We would frustrate each other. It would never work, I tried to convince myself. Yet what wouldn't I do to make it work?

If not for the distance . . . I started. I pressed my temple with my thumb until it hurt. And you?

A. said what I thought he would. I'm a practical person, *tu sais bien*. You know that. And I did. It was part of why I was drawn to him. A moth to a flame.

As if acknowledging that we both knew the conversation was over, A. took my head between his palms and pressed his lips to my forehead. I shut my eyes.

It's getting late, I said when I opened them. You have a flight to catch tomorrow. Do you want me to stay here tonight? A. asked.

Of course I want you to stay, I said in my head. I've always wanted you to stay. But what I said was *Comme tu veux*, whatever you want, a bit too offhandedly. It'd become a reflex, pretending to be cold or indifferent, afraid that proactiveness would bore or repel, and I thought about how disappointed A. might be to hear me say this, A. who was holding me naked against him, A. who was so genuine and warm, a harbor from the contrived games of the world.

He didn't take long to respond. I'll stay, he said. As I turned over onto my side, his hand reached around my waist to find my own, and he pressed up against me in the dark.



In the morning, A.'s touch was light and ghostly. As we made love again, I watched our shadows solidify against the pale yellow wall that brightened in the daylight seeping through the sheer curtains. The sunlight seemed particularly vivid after a day of gloom, and for a moment I found myself perplexed at how such a

constant, powerful element could ever be so obscured as to make our figures as nebulous as they were yesterday. How tangible we were now, our shadows fusing and severing, fusing and severing, so tangible that it seemed impossible—unfair—that from now on, the space between our bodies would only grow without cease.

I glanced at the clock. Time was running out, as it had always been for us.

As we sat up, I said, I'd like to take a photo of you.

Go ahead, he replied, lips brushing my shoulder as I swung my legs over the bed and my feet sought the floor.

Words I knew too well floated through my head as I took the few steps to the shelf where my camera rested and picked it up: *the photographed life is forgotten faster*. The captured image is permission for our memory to breathe, an excavated space that diverts our attention from the past to the present rolling in. The photo says to the bearer of memory, *This happened, this was real*. It says, *You can let go now*. And memory will let go, of all the movements, the shadows, the words inside the millisecond captured. And as we repeatedly revisit the image, crisp and bordered, it will eventually plaster itself over our original memory, which becomes increasingly gauzy and fogged. And so my memory of A. that morning would be distilled down to one frozen moment—a static souvenir.

I began to return my camera to its shelf, when I looked back at A.

I saw his body draped over my bed, the sheets gathered around his waist, each pleat casting a valley of shadow. He had lifted his right hand to shield his eyes from the hardening rays of sunlight, and it now rested on his brows, palm facing up, as if cradling something in the heart of it. Feeling my gaze, or perhaps simply noting that my steps had stopped, he turned his head and gave me a soft smile in that tender way which had always stirred something in me. I felt a rush of intense fondness for him, the surge of it so strong that it was painful.

My camera was solid and weighted in my hands. I pulled the film advance lever and heard the film wind out of itself inside the camera body, ready for the next exposure. Here it was, the endpiece.

All the hours I ached for him, wanted irrationally to spend loving him. Parting was so imminent, disappearance just on the other side of the door. How was I to risk it—risk leaving this moment unrecorded, to be dissolved by the fickle tide of

forgetting? Pain and beauty—isn’t that what art promises to bear witness to? Pain and beauty. A. was both.

I lifted my camera. For a second, A. was lost to me as its body passed in front of my eyes. When I found him again in the viewfinder, his gaze was still fixed on me, but his smile was fainter now, and he had let his arm drop, his hand now limp at his side.

*Stay, stay with me like this*—I adjusted the lens until A.’s image became sharp against the swirl of the room, and I pressed down on the shutter.

## what language do you love in?

The first language I learned holds immense,  
holds water, holds memory, cut.

Every woman in my family calls the women  
in my family bitches or cabrona or puta  
who almost killed him but didn't  
& he lucky. A tongue splits when I laugh  
and I hear my aunt, how she pockets grief.

I hear my father's voice, how his silence  
is a pocket for translation, for fear,  
a driver afraid of red lights that siren  
for documentation, that siren in english.

I've loved people who could not hold the island  
I loved them with. How *bendición* is an I've arrived  
and *que dios te bendiga* is a may you keep arriving,  
with your water, in this island we love  
across. Spanish is a machete to lineage  
and English is our tongues machete  
through one another. English is a tongue  
tied to loss and hearing no one at arrival.

How arrival is a search for prayer,  
that we hear in Wela's voice. How a bedside  
*ángel de la guardia* is a *bendito* is a *mija, cuidate*  
like it is love *con mas fuerza, con ganas.*

Ganas is a word I do not know how to translate,  
and it is the first word I remember when asked  
to, how translation is a shattered gift,  
is our waters, drained, is our waters feared,  
is our grief,  
is this,

documented

*te fueron las ganas?*

## Affair

I behead a leaf with my fingernail, meiosis of green  
in my palm because I've forgotten how to hold  
something, be held. Months since I've been a ravine  
to paddle through. To practice touch, I fold

this green like money, like bank for every night  
you came to my bed like a paying customer, cheap  
cologne and a phone that buzzed me wet through your right  
pocket. Don't name them—the woman, the things that keep

my body's bucking your secret, a backseat gift  
unwrapped again and again across the swish  
of nylon. If I shrunk myself for this short shrift-  
ing, pretzeled my body, flattened, folded, switched

positions to accommodate, who's really to blame?  
I'm only a mangled leaf, halved and athirst for rain.

# A Diagram With Hands

My aunt tells me *those hips are screaming*  
*for twins* and I want to stop

her at “screaming.” I cannot think of a time  
when I wasn’t conditioned

to think that this carrying was beautiful.

My mother likened her pelvis

to a butterfly as my brother flowered  
in its pocket, demonstrated

its spreading with her hands—two flat  
palms cambering into

a shallow bowl. *The body makes room*, she said,  
and waited for me to copy her

movements. I think about this now as my aunt  
mimes an hourglass around

my hips, the image of my mother’s cupped  
hands in front of me. How

it was more of a gesture of supplication  
than accommodation,

how instead of life I’d hoped for rain  
in the gourd of her lined palms.

## Night Vision

It was the time we spent together in August that gave me the idea to become an expert at night vision. Because he was a musician, I had been fixated on sound. But chords escaped me. I strained in vain to tell major from minor, charcoal from sun. Still in the humid dark his face angled toward mine. Those first few nights my body became everything. If I had carried shame like a newborn in my hands, I dropped it. Groaned incessantly like his kittens, who ate everything in sight. When they got sick, I watched him hold their lips to his nose, sniffing the black abscesses like fruit. When he came close, I cut off my nose. Death scares me more than anything. If I had kissed my uncle on his deathbed, and my grandfather before him, I did it out of pressure. Everyone else was kissing them. Mouthing verses to scrape the sun of soot. Like everyone I know, they had asked to be buried in daylight—as if the light goes with us. Even among the living, sometimes it seems a night will never end. On our last one he said two things in his sleep. *What sounds terrible you make. Where is your nose.* Maybe three. *The night is a butcher you cannot sing.* In the black unmoving water of the night, I opened my eyes. I listened to the nightjar, groaning between our bodies. I kissed the rim of the future and buried everything I saw in it.

## Small Writing Desk

Angry to be pent inside,  
my mind is in need of something stony.

If a thing is not immortal,  
how does it go on feeding, keep being

afraid? We think that the soul dies eventually,  
that it will break the dream of living.

The new spring wind today is sweet and cold—  
I can almost imagine running out to meet someone  
in it, buttoning up my dress as I go.

Even now, as I lie in the ground, quite faded  
and redolent with chemicals.

# The Givens

Undressed,  
I ask my little finger,  
can I at least make you do anything?

I've cleared away so many things.  
I ate the seeds, I ate  
the leaves, I ate the wicked flowers

of memory. But the evenings  
are still terrible and derisory.

Tell me what it is like to be  
without me, I ask the room,

like a live eye in a pan,  
or a cold shadow unattached

to consciousness.  
Perhaps then the work can be light  
and pleasant, as love comes

to nothing, as stems keep  
pulling up water.

# The Ecopolitics of Yayoi Kusama's *Self-Obliteration*

*Since Darwin, biologists have emphasized the perspective of the individual. They have stressed the perpetual contest among discrete species, the struggle of each organism to survive and reproduce within a given population and, underlying it all, the single-minded ambitions of selfish genes. Now and then, however, some scientists have advocated, sometimes controversially, for a greater focus on cooperation over self-interest and on the emergent properties of living systems rather than their units.*

—Ferris Jabr, “The Social Life of Forests,” the New York Times Magazine (December 6, 2020).

On nearly every trail and riverbank in the state of Florida, *Cryptothecia striata* is scattered across the trees. It is a bright white, circular lichen that looks like paint splotches on the bodies of oaks, cypresses, and pines (Fig. 1). Sometimes *Cryptothecia striata* appears as just a few spots on the bark of a tree; other times it is mottled across multiple trees. During the three and a half years that I lived in Tampa, this lichen became a fixation of mine—largely due to how much it reminded me of Yayoi Kusama’s *Self-Obliteration*, a 24-minute film that she created in 1967.

*Self-Obliteration* begins with a close-up of a hand placing white dots on a horse. The horse walks along, flicking its tail. The camera pans out, and the hand is revealed to be Kusama’s. She then places white dots all over her own body. In a series of jump cuts and repetition, we see Kusama riding the horse slowly in a pasture, her kimono draped over the horse’s back. As the exposure of the film darkens, focus is pulled to the white dots. Kusama and the horse fall into the shadows, no longer easily distinguishable.

Throughout *Self-Obliteration*, Kusama places dots on all that she encounters: plants, water, people, and rocks. She wades into the middle of a pond and

paints a canvas with red dots, then submerges the canvas, letting the dots float on top of the water. As perspective widens to include more of the pond, lily pads on the water become dots. There's a shot of a spotted frog leaping. At one point she places dots on a tree, and it is uncanny how similar this looks to the *Cryptothecia striata* in Florida. Later, she covers a person in individual maple leaves, then buries them in foliage. Speaking of herself in a 1999 interview with *BOMB Magazine*, Kusama said, "Painting bodies with the patterns of Kusama's hallucinations obliterated their individual selves and returned them to the infinite universe. This is magic."



Yayoi Kusama was born in Matsumoto City, Nagano Prefecture, "surrounded by the towering peaks of the Japanese Alps." She describes her family as "an old one, of high social standing, having for the past century or so managed wholesale seed nurseries on vast tracts of land." These seed nurseries are the site of her earliest hallucinations, and she describes these hallucinations in detail in her autobiography titled *Infinity Net* (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Throughout *Infinity Net*, the influence of the natural world on Kusama's work is evident. In the following excerpt, pebbles symbolize the dots she would later become famous for:

During the dark days of the War, the scenery of the river bed behind our house, where I spent much of my disconsolate childhood, became the miraculous source of a vision: the hundreds of millions of white pebbles, each individually verifiable, really "existed" there, drenched in the midsummer sun.

Since she was young, Kusama has suffered from a condition called depersonalization, or "the phenomenon of experiencing a loss of personality." Growing up in a traumatic home environment, she writes of her illness: "I am told that when reality is too agonising, human biology has ways to turn it off, and

that this innate defense system is what triggers the condition." Described as "auras around objects, or hearing the speech of plants and animals," she began sketching the hallucinations she experiences as a means of coping. Now, they are inextricable from her work.



**Fig. 1.** A Florida tree. Courtesy of the author.

The first time I saw *Cryptothecia striata*, I was canoeing down the Weeki Wachee River. The lichen was vivid and alluring, resting on a “mermaid tail,” as the knobby cypress tree root systems are colloquially referred to. After identifying this lichen, it wasn’t long before I started noticing it everywhere. Over time, a double exposure developed in my mind—*Self-Obliteration* like transparency film over each iteration of the *Cryptothecia striata* that I saw.

A combination of a fungus and an alga (or bacterium), lichens are composite organisms. Forming a symbiotic relationship, “fungal filaments” surround the cells of the algae or bacteria, trading protection for nutrients. Scientific illustrations depicting this interaction easily call to mind the particulates of Kusama’s work.

Reading *Infinity Net* and seeing *Cryptothecia striata* on every hike, I spent a lot of time thinking about the overlap between “art” and “nature.” As humans are descendants of a bacteria-like organism originating in the ocean, one can say that, essentially, art stems from nature. Nature encompasses art. Yet a sandhill crane performing an elaborate courtship dance, for example, is generally considered “nature” and not “art,” though of course it is both. For centuries, dominant ideology has framed humanity as separate from and superior to nature. Kusama’s work serves as an invitation to shift this perspective—to see humanity as part of a greater, interdependent whole.



In her autobiography, Kusama relays that at times her paintings expanded beyond the canvas, onto the floors and windows, even “crawl[ing] on and into the skin of [her] hands.” This experience is reflected in *Self-Obliteration* as she walks the horse down to a pond. When the horse takes a drink, dots spread to the water, reminiscent of lichen propagating as wind carries parts of its body elsewhere. This scene and its wider context in Kusama’s life invoke questions around connection and infection, concepts that have made their way to the forefront in the present. As droplets have moved a virus across the globe, interconnectivity has never been so clearly exhibited.

In 2017, an environmental disaster devastated the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. Described by Maya Wei-Haas for *National Geographic* as “a wildlife massacre of massive proportions,” an overgrowth of the algae *Karenia brevis* clogged the water, killing marine life across the spectrum. Dolphins, manatees, sea turtles, stingrays, and whale sharks all washed up on Florida beaches. Scores of dead fish littered the landscape, producing a smell that, mixed with the respiratory effects of *Karenia brevis*, completely choked the air. Countless maggots arrived, making a feast of the fish. Scientists believe this algal overgrowth has roots in human agriculture, with Florida sugar playing a primary role. Unknowingly contributing to this horror, I bought Florida sugar for years before I moved there.



Speaking on her motivations in *Infinity Net*, Kusama writes:

My desire was to predict and measure the infinity of the unbounded universe, from my own position in it, with dots—an accumulation of particles forming the negative spaces in the net. How deep was the mystery? Did infinite infinities exist beyond our universe? In exploring these questions I wanted to examine the single dot that was my own life. One polka dot: a single particle among billions. I issued a manifesto stating that everything—myself, others, the entire universe—would be obliterated by white nets of nothingness connecting astronomical accumulations . . . And the spell of the dots and the mesh enfolded me in a magical curtain of mysterious, invisible power.

The power of Kusama’s art lies in making this structure more visible—the reality that we are all part of an interrelating ecosystem, and that the decisions we make can have profound effects on everyone and everything we’re in relationship with. Unfortunately, there are limits to what we can do as individuals when it comes to the current state of our ecological crisis<sup>1</sup>—as it is tangled in the ubiquitous roots of colonialism, capitalism, and industrialization. A broader, more symbiotic approach

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<sup>1</sup> Humans make up 0.01% of all life on Earth yet are responsible for the extinction of 83 percent of wild mammals, along with the felling of 46 percent of trees. (As reported by *The Guardian* and *National Geographic*.)

is long overdue. Like the mycorrhizal networks connecting plants below the forest floor, Kusama's *Self-Obliteration* provides the foundation for a way forward: a vision in which individualism dissolves into a framework of mutuality.

As Kusama wrote in a manifesto for one of her "Happenings"—political performances that took place during the '60s and '70s: "Forget yourself and become one with Nature. Lose yourself in the ever-advancing stream of eternity. Self-obliteration is the only way out."

# Drown

Last night's unbound legs  
doze onward, its bone  
black eyes flicker

a path over the cliff,  
when flatness whistles  
and you hold up

your neck, inhaling  
fire scorched earth  
from nearest raincloud.

You spoon clipped  
incisors into bowls  
of discarded finger bones

woven into the long  
sleep ahead. Here,  
moonlight heats

minutes into hours  
and you thrum from inside,  
where a crack begins to widen.

# Lure

Lured by the solid dark,  
to drag sentences  
toward: closer.

He looks for the song  
that held his hand,  
not the ghost,  
who spit into his mouth  
and pierced his eyes  
with rain-scented fingernails.

He thinks the smoke  
in the valley,  
is the center of him,  
but that too,  
moves beyond  
the twisting plot's thinness.

Humming a thud,  
his hair knots,  
and bowls fatten  
with thorn-covered vowels.

Sometimes he thinks  
pills can bring back  
the earth photographed  
in black and white;  
bring back seasons  
that visit when summoned  
by waving corn stalks over fire.

# Where Language Leaks Through

Extracted caws crawl  
on fingers of painted sand,

then clasp shut, growling,  
in the mirror's alarm wail.

Rib steeped in left lung  
blink gnawed-bone glint.

Blood fills with thinness,  
as the palm's heat

arrives on a gurney, star lit.  
For a brief second—

wailing flavored grass  
shoots from wrists, tongue shaped.

# Aura

Cliffs, skirted  
by smoke-laced air  
wrung from blinds, eclipse

faint sighs dripping  
down a fence-line's aura.  
Eggs in her throat,

female rain returns  
in photographs  
wind-hung at eye level,

when her husband  
taps the light locked  
doorknob with his scuffed boot.

# Above (View from Birdly)

*for Sophie*

Conventionally, the picturesque indulges elevation  
A certain view onto managed land  
Epitomized by the ha-ha, the architectural folly

In which a recessed wall preserves the illusion  
Of uninterrupted terrain. Walking, one would come  
To an edge, a sudden drop. And there would be

Contained by definition. But from the hill's height  
Would see only what was always already  
Framed by the *repoussoir* trees. For those

Who wished, this vision indicated  
The absence of labor, the people concealed  
By landscape. And some have tried

To suggest this could be “reclaimed,”  
Whether by revealing the technique  
Or by depicting the people. But I would argue

That leaves the view intact, insofar as  
You can't unsee it. Imputing interiority  
Might be a further violence, since we must assume

Our original outline to be flawed. In poetry,  
Enjambment works as a kind of ha-ha  
Engendering things like the gendered

Division of labor, even in this house  
Where we speak of the frame, and the window  
And the visual cortex. See we think

We think without seeing, but we do not.  
The point is not to close your eyes  
Nor to imagine a utopia I'd have to give

Myself up to believe in  
But to observe the bands of green and blue  
Stacked up one behind the other

Such that if we go down this mountain  
We must climb another  
And another and another.

## Dakota 1969

*If you want to write a song about the human race. . .  
write a song about the moon.*

—Paul Simon

Call it a lace curtain or a veil. Call it  
a tent of hyperbole or moonlight dissolving  
in the kitchen. Call it a way home.

In the garden of wives there are sometimes  
lovers, if not for long. Larking  
on horseback among the prickly pear as if life  
is a Western and they have the world on a string.

We are listening to the first moon landing  
on transistor radio by candlelight, because  
on earth's back forty the power has gone out.

Cattle are lowing in Auntie's corral:  
season of separation, of call and response.

I wonder if the astronauts are singing  
hallelujah in solitary whispers under their breaths.  
Acoustics in helmets are terrible, they say.  
No crowd noise in that earth-lighted stadium.

Last week a prairie fire lit up the bedroom  
window like a furnace door and left a thousand  
acres of pasture around the new missile silo  
scorched, barren as the moon we once imagined.

I did not spark that sweeping conflagration  
but memory has kept it burning.

## A Garden

The flowers are without reason,  
without economy or moderation.  
Pink and gold, they tower above  
the double doors, a citadel of silk  
impervious to logic. They glow against  
the dark of December despite rain,  
despite deprivation and mortality, as if  
an entrance to some other winter,  
some world in which the stream of time  
runs slant, or in reverse, though  
what they form is only a portico, preface  
to the fertility clinic on Fifth Avenue,  
where I admit I have wondered  
what one might learn about time,  
flesh, fate. Next door, mannequins pose  
in lace chemises, faces anonymous,  
feet helplessly arched—an uncomplicated  
argument on this Sunday morning, grey  
as mist itself and sodden with desire, desire  
made visible and therefore endless,  
unpreventable. Against the wind  
I've closed my coat, though my face  
keeps showing itself to the world, a face  
it seems that anyone could read.

## Before the Wedding

At first, Leila's not sure what the woman is running from. The woman staggers for a few feet and then walks in turn, looking behind her to the street's end as she slows. She has a red scarf wrapped around her neck, one end trailing like a ribbon. The straps of a black leather bag clasped loosely in her right hand. She looks smart in the way all London women look smart to Leila, as if they always rise a bit earlier, spend the time picking through a tray of earrings and rolling the lint off their coats. Leila watches the woman get closer and hears her breathing heavily, letting out a high, pained sound that only children make.

Leila looks down the narrow street, which leads to her hotel. There are two men walking from where the woman ran from, hands tight in their jacket pockets to protect against the October air, but they seem undisturbed. As the woman passes, Leila opens her mouth to say something, though she is not sure what it is she could say. The woman seems around Leila's age, her face unlined but older looking in that way it is impossible to describe—a thinning, like the beach after the tide rolls inward. Leila turns around to watch the woman continue her loping gait. Perhaps she was threatened, though no one seems to follow her. Perhaps she just walked in on her husband with another woman, their comforter in a heap on the floor so that she saw them in their full nakedness, all hair and tendons.

At the Tate earlier in the day, Leila saw a white sculpture that was supposed to be a woman's body in profile. It was one clean strip of metal, the gloss of the paint reflecting the overhead lights. Only a man could imagine a woman's body like that, so unblemished.

Leila walks the block to her hotel. The building is slotted neatly between a pair of brick townhouses. She finds two other women outside crying, looking over their shoulders to a single distant point, their arms wrapped around one another's waists. A siren sounds out in the distance. Still, other people are walking down the street unbothered, and Leila passes a restaurant where patrons are beginning to gather, laughing and taking off their coats, the light a honeyed

yellow, contrasting with the cool, early evening blue of the street. Inside the restaurant, all seems warm and good. Leila walks past the two crying women, their noses buried in each other's necks. She hurries inside, to her husband.



Of course, he is asleep. That morning, Joseph told her he had work to do, pulling out his laptop, large and bulky as a lunch tray, and so she had gone to the museum by herself. But now here he is, curled beneath the comforter like a small boy, one hand slipped beneath his cheek.

They're in London for a wedding. One of Leila's college friends, Jamie, is marrying a man from Richmond who wears cream-colored turtlenecks and talks too often of his mother. Leila and Joseph arrived the evening before, their heads and stomachs still in America, and at their hotel found a room sized for a ship, a strip of carpet no bigger than their suitcases between their bed and the bathroom. They were not hungry, but each took bites of an overcooked steak in the pub next door while men and women came and went around them, drinking pints that wept on the wooden tables. Joseph made bets on who would give the worst wedding speech and tried to remember what awful poem his cousin quoted at their own reception. Leila furrowed her brow, pretending at the same task, though she could not recall who this cousin was. After nine years together, Joseph's family still blurred into one long receiving line of pale, rounded faces.

Upstairs, they couldn't sleep. Joseph opened the window for air, letting in the sounds of the street: car tires slickly rolling over the pavement, the murmuring lilt of the pub. At first, Leila tried to fall asleep by listing the measurements for a Mornay sauce, a Bordelaise, an Espagnole—she's found calm in the French sense of order ever since culinary school. When that did not work, Joseph told her to imagine walking through her childhood home. She pictured the lemon tiled kitchen, the wood-paneled dining room where her mother struck her that one May, after she left the wet cast iron to rust on the stove, the low, velvet couches in the living room, soft as pearls.

Leila stands up on the mattress to pull the heavy brocade curtain back, prodding Joseph awake with her foot. Outside, the street is nearly empty, one lone man walking down the sidewalk, headphones covering his ears.

“You’re never going to get on British time now,” she says, as Joseph rolls onto his back.

He smiles and pulls at her toes so that she begins to tip forward. He always becomes more mischievous when they travel, pinching the side of her thigh in public or stealing a bite of her cake when she goes to the restroom. It reminds her of how he was in college, soft-bellied and playful as a dog, but she is not able to indulge this now. She sits next to him on the mattress and tells him what she has seen.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” he says, pulling a buttoned Oxford over his head. “But if you’re worried, I can go ask the concierge if anything is going on. Maybe the Queen died.”

“I think we’d know if the Queen died.”

“We would if we were in a normal sized hotel room with a television,” he says, rising from the bed.

After brushing his teeth, Joseph goes downstairs. Leila pulls the comforter flat, frowning at the taut, pencil thin burn on her hand from brushing against a sous chef’s frying pan. Beneath the bed she sees Joseph’s suitcase open, its tongue lolling on the carpet. She pulls it towards her and refolds his sweaters and t-shirts, rolls his tie into a coil so it sits against his shaving kit as tightly as a snake. This is something she has found herself doing in their third year of marriage, taking care of his belongings as she cares for her own. He has told her not to do this, that it makes him feel like a child, but she finds calm in wiping the gum from the lip of his shampoo bottle and going through his dresser drawers. It is during these acts that her love for him shudders through her, desperate and overwhelming.

Joseph returns in fifteen minutes. Leila has just finished peeling off the tips of her nails, throwing them into the toilet bowl.

“Well, it’s not nothing,” he says, locking the door.

He found the concierge speaking to several other guests, telling people to stay in their rooms. There were gunshots fired in the tube station several blocks

away, and the police are worried it's another attack. Another guest, an American, said they were shutting down the stores outside. That she'd been looking for an umbrella for her mother when policemen in neon jackets told shoppers to hide behind clothing racks, and she'd pushed past them, knowing what happens to people that remain, what happens when there is nowhere left to run.

"Why do they think it's an attack? Couldn't it just be a mugging or something?" Leila asks.

"I think we have to trust that the police know something we don't," Joseph says, standing upright on his knees on the mattress and looking out the window. "I knocked on the room he said was Caroline's but she didn't answer. Do you know where she is?"

"No. I tried to see if she wanted to go to the museum with me earlier, but she never texted back," Leila says, though she'd done no such thing.

Six months ago, they moved to Boston, the city where Joseph grew up. Leila hated its roads that looped aimlessly as flies, its devotion to chowder, all of which she told Caroline, the only friend of hers who lived there. Caroline studied opera in college and now gave voice lessons to the petulant children of investment bankers and surgeons, girls who emptied reams of toilet paper into the bowl and flushed, soaking her bathroom floor.

Joseph knew Caroline from school too, but they'd barely spoken back then. When he and Leila had begun to date their senior year, they'd spent little time with friends, creating a cocoon out of his pilling twin comforter. In Boston, when Leila became consumed by the restaurant where she worked, she insisted Joseph and Caroline become close, and each of them vaguely reported back to her about getting coffee together, going to a reading in Cambridge. She first saw them truly interact at a party she and Joseph hosted several months ago; though several other associates were there from his office, whenever Leila looked for Joseph in the crowd she found him speaking to Caroline. First in the doorway where she had left them, then leaning against a kitchen countertop, laughing as he fumbled with a bottle of wine, pressing the cork in with a butter knife. Then on the couch, Caroline holding a throw pillow in her lap, looping one of its tassels around her thumb. Afterwards, Leila asked what Joseph thought of Caroline, and he said only

that she was clearly lonely. Leila agreed, though the next day she sliced off the tip of her thumb as she remembered how Caroline had laughed, holding her hand to her collarbone, which was so thin that Leila imagined snapping it in two, simple as the marrow of a cooked chicken.

In the weeks that followed, Leila found herself thinking of them every morning as she ran, a routine Joseph sullenly resented, reminding her how she used to sleep eleven hours a night in college. She thought about how Caroline and Joseph had claimed chairs on opposite sides of the dinner table at the party, the handful of times before the party when the three of them went together to the movies and they had her sit between them in the theater, cupping her like parentheses.

“I’m sure she’s fine,” Leila says. “Far, far away.”



They wait in the hotel room for nearly half an hour. Joseph huddles over his laptop, refreshing the news, though the story only tells them that the station is closed and everyone should stay in their homes. Leila is surprised by how little panic she feels, calmly listening for a spray of gunshots or the loud, resounding boom of a bomb. It is second nature to her now, this attunement to disaster. Every day as her train crosses the Charles, she imagines someone removing a pistol from their waistband or coat pocket, imagines it with the same cool detachment of considering whether to cut through the park. She wonders what this is doing to her body. If, like a lobster in a pot, she will not feel what this constant state of panic has wrought until it kills her.

Though she worries about calling Jamie when she is already stressed from the wedding, Leila decides it will be worse if she doesn’t. Jamie doesn’t pick up, and all texts to Caroline are left unanswered, the white of Leila’s phone so bright that it stings her eyes. She decides to lie down, shimmying off her jeans, the cold of the room prickling her thighs.

She closes her eyes and imagines the room of Rothkos at the Tate, how the canvasses had loomed like dark, scarlet windows. A tour guide had been leading a group of old British women in matching vests, their hair white and tufted as

clouds, and Leila had stopped to listen. The guide shared that Rothko was inspired by Michelangelo's Laurentian Library in Florence, that Rothko had wanted to make the viewers feel as if they were trapped in a room where all of the doors and windows had been bricked over. Afterwards, Leila had tried to sit in the dimly lit gallery, to let the paintings consume her, but she was pulled out of her reverie by the man next to her unfolding his map, by realizing the hotel might not have an iron to smooth the wrinkles that netted her silk dress.

This was how Leila has felt ever since she started culinary school, her mind both slowing and quickening as she began to cook late into every evening and rise just after dawn. In the kitchen she is dogged and sharp, but on the train she reads and re-reads newspaper paragraphs, the words held in her mouth only briefly, like cigarette smoke. It is a sacrifice, she thinks, for how much she has come to love being a chef, how much more like herself she feels, undoubtedly thanks to her mother, who made her peel garlic so often she could never get rid of the smell on her fingers, though she tries not to dwell on that. These days, she can remember those long-ago things so clearly, while more recent thoughts and memories have begun dissipating, curling loose and upwards. Like the names of Joseph's colleagues or a conversation they'd had about his no longer eating salmon, which he had to remind her of as she stood over a tender pink fillet, a bloom of its fish bones in her hand. She finds herself apologizing often, holding him in bed after he has fallen asleep, her heart trilling as if she swallowed a cup of sugar.

"I'm going to go see if the concierge has heard anything else," Joseph says, slipping on his shoes. "You're okay here alone?"

"Of course," Leila says.

"I'll only be a minute."

"Take your time. I'm fine."

"Of course you are," Joseph says, his voice slightly souring.

He leaves before she can decide how to tell him she needs him, and a few minutes later Leila's phone rumbles on her stomach. She picks up to find Jamie, who has been sitting on her carpet making heaps of paper chrysanthemums. Leila tells her what has happened and Jamie begins to weep, a breathless, wet cry, listing cousins and aunts, trying to remember where each person is staying. When Leila

asks about Caroline, Jamie says that she asked her to pick up the place cards over an hour ago, as the shop was not far from the hotel.

“Oh god, you don’t think she’s there?” Jamie says. “You don’t think she’s—”

Leila can feel her pulse in her throat, but she tells Jamie that Caroline is undoubtedly miles away, that she probably picked up the cards and kept walking. That Caroline hadn’t paid for international service, relying on the internet for texts and calls, so she was undoubtedly blissfully unaware. Leila reminds Jamie of the morning in college when she had learned she was to be valedictorian, and how Caroline had gone missing for the next seven hours, only to return with Prosecco and an armful of bottle rockets that they set off across the campus lawn.

“She’s probably somewhere in Notting Hill, trying to find someone who rents doves,” Leila says, though all she can see is Caroline sitting on the floor of a shop, shattered glass scattered around her like petals.

After they hang up the phone Leila opens the window, letting in the fall air. She lets her arms hang limply over the edge even though it has started to rain, the wind brushing her hair away from her face. The street is empty now, and across the way she sees a cat batting at a lace curtain, its claws tangling in the soft latticework. She looks down the street, willing Caroline to round a corner, though there is another part of her that already believes her to be dead. She imagines Joseph crying. How red his nose becomes. She imagines him drawing her a bath she will sit in until it is cold. She would have to find someone to cover her shifts in the kitchen. She considers every small moment just as she has imagined the shootings on the train, the bombs exploding on a nearby street. She feels like the cat at the window, sedately unspooling the threads.

Caroline is supposed to sing at Jamie’s wedding, an aria from *Faust*, a performance Leila has been dreading. She first saw Caroline perform their freshmen year, a time when Leila was hopelessly morose, unsure what to study, only able to find peace ribboning onions in the dining hall’s kitchen, cutting them more evenly than her mother ever could. She had come to the auditorium slightly drunk on cheap rum, and finding only five or six other students in the audience, felt embarrassed for Caroline, who she had begun to imagine as a younger sister, tender-hearted and easily bruised. But then Caroline opened her mouth, and at

that first note goosebumps prickled Leila's forearms, the sharp flush of envy. Her voice was deep but light, all air, as if it came from only her chest. It was almost painful to listen, and Leila found herself biting her bottom lip until it bled as she watched how sharply Caroline inhaled, how widely she opened her clear, wet eyes, as if for that one song she was draining herself of all life.



When Joseph comes back upstairs he asks Leila to close the window, as rain has started to wet the comforter. There is no more news from downstairs, though the concierge says this is a blessing, for there to be no more gunshots or a bus exploding across the river, no signs of a larger attack. Leila hugs a scarf to her shoulders. The hotel is as drafty as a manor house.

Jamie has been texting every several minutes, asking Leila if she thinks she should postpone the ceremony. If it is selfish of her to be thinking of this, if Leila has heard anything from Caroline, if Caroline has returned to the hotel. Leila tells Joseph only that she was able to reach Jamie. Joseph stands over the bed, biting the corner of his thumb. For a moment Leila thinks of not mentioning Caroline, but realizes what it would mean for her to say nothing, what she would need to admit to herself. She takes a breath in, and when she opens her mouth again there is a pressure that makes it difficult to speak, as if a plant, thick as rubber, is blooming in her throat.

“Jamie said that she asked Caroline to go get place cards a little over an hour ago,” she begins. “But I’m sure she just picked them up and kept walking. I’m sure she’s—”

“Where did Jamie say the store was?” Joseph asks, his hand dropping to his side.

“She said just a few minutes’ walk from here.”

“But near the station? What’s the name of it?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t ask—”

“How could you not have asked?” he says, his voice rising.

“I didn’t think to ask, okay? And even if I had, what would I have done?”

“Called them? Looked up how close they were?”

“And then—what? Popped out in the middle of a lockdown?”

“You’re right, it would be absurd to put someone before yourself, someone who loves you so much. To care for something outside of a goddamn restaurant kitchen.”

“What are you talking about?” Leila asks, the plant pressing against her tongue.

“You know, never mind. I’ll go downstairs and see if the concierge knows of any paper stores nearby. You stay, I’ll go.”

Joseph turns to the hooks above the small, narrow table that lies between the bed and the bathroom, pulling off the dresses and shirts that Leila hung there—there is no closet—so he can get to his coat. He throws the clothes on the bed, the silk and cotton covering Leila’s feet. She feels like she’s watching the scene from over in the bathroom, in the same way she watched him and Caroline at the party that evening, trying to distinguish what was unfolding before her, what hung in the air, the way her mother used to have her close her eyes and lean over a pot on the stove, asking her what she smelled, murmuring approval or pinching as Leila whispered garlic or chicken fat or thyme.

“Joseph,” Leila says, quietly.

“Or just call Jamie, and then I can go out and see—I think someone should try and find her, and if we know the store—”

“Joseph,” she says more firmly, and he stops, his hand halfway through a sleeve.

Without looking at her, he takes off his coat and folds it over his arm, placing it on the table. He sits beside her on the bed as she pulls her feet close to her buttocks, willing the earlier siren loops or even the sounds of an explosion, the low thunder and crackle that she expected from the evening news. But in the room, there is only the soft brush of his coat unfurling, then falling to the floor.



They decide to go downstairs for tea. Neither of them professed to be hungry but they need a reason to leave the room, so Joseph says the word, “*Tea?*” like he’s questioning whether it even exists. Leila pulls her jeans back on and Joseph looks away, as if he hasn’t seen her thighs and white, cotton underwear every day for the last nine years.

They enter the dim lobby, with its claustrophobic elegance, its glossy round tables and velvet chairs, and Leila notices a stream of people outside the front doors. Two waiters and the concierge are standing at a window, not paying any attention to a small handful of guests clustered behind them, their phones at their ears.

Leila begins to walk towards the door even though Joseph tells her to wait, that they should ask someone if it is safe. Outside, several men in wool suits file into the pub next door, their faces grim as pallbearers. A teenage girl in silver combat boots sits on a stoop with mascara trickling down her face. Behind Leila, close enough to hear, Joseph asks an older, dazed man with a Liberty shopping bag crumpled under his arm what happened.

“They said they found two boys from Hounslow with a gun on them, so I think it was all nothing,” the man says. “They told us we were all free to go.”

As Joseph thanks him, Leila’s eye catches at the faraway violet of Caroline’s coat. Caroline is standing at the other end of the street, staring at the cobblestones with folded arms, staggering in the middle of the road as if her shoes are slightly too large for her feet. When Caroline looks up and sees Leila in front of the hotel lobby windows, she begins walking briskly forward.

Caroline throws her arms around Leila, and though Leila is numb to her embrace, she whispers *you’re alright, you’re alright* into Caroline’s soft blond hair.

When they finally release one another, Leila finds Joseph beside her. Caroline is brushing her tears away with the bottom of her palms, weakly smiling at them both, saying that she shouldn’t even be crying, as it was all nothing. Joseph does not move to hug her, knowing that would be too much, but Leila watches as he instead cups his hand behind Caroline’s neck. She watches his fingers on Caroline’s skin, touching the down of her hair and lowering his head to meet her eyes, repeating what Leila said seconds before with a tenderness she has not known since before they were married. Caroline pulls away gently and he releases his hand to take a step towards Leila, his cheeks stippled with a flush.

“I think we probably all need a drink,” he says, trying to laugh.

“Yes. Hard alcohol.” Caroline wipes at the sheen beneath her nose.

“You all should head to the pub,” Leila says. “I’m going to go pick up the place cards.”

Joseph looks at her. "You can't be serious."

"I can't imagine the store is even open. It's probably all roped off," Caroline tells her.

Leila says she wants to at least see, that there will be no time to go tomorrow before they need to be at the church. There is still a wedding, even after all of this, and it will be one less thing for Jamie to worry about. Though they continue to protest, Leila insists, saying that if nothing else, she needs the air.

"Order me a cider," she says, forcing a smile and folding her arms across her chest. "I'll be there soon."



The streets are not as full as they were last evening, several shop windows extinguishing like candle flames as Leila walks, the owners probably desperate to return home now that the tube is open again. Leila came to London once before, when she was eighteen, spending every cent her grandmother had left her on a trip to Europe, much to her mother's chagrin. All she remembers is fried cod shimmering in a fold of newspaper, markets of cheap, thick t-shirts and silver jewelry, waking to a puff-faced Australian standing over her bed in the hostel, wavering as if he was on a ship. She had found the city cold and overfull as a waste basket, like in Westminster Abbey, where the dead were lined up and layered.

When Jamie said she was moving to London, Leila asked her why, and Jamie said it was the same reason Leila moved to Boston. To make the one you love happy.

Leila is not wearing her coat, and as the sky blackens the air begins to bite. When she turns down a side street she finds a corner pub painted a slick brick red, several men and women standing outside of it holding pint glasses half-full of amber lager. Inside, the air is heavy with curry powder and the room is so full she has to stand, so she follows a narrow staircase to the second floor, where there is a smaller room with another bar and scattered round tables. She orders a Guinness and sits down next to two older men in walking caps, knotted veins on their noses.

She has turned off her phone and when she sits, she removes it from her pocket, laying it on the floor beneath her table.

As she lingers, more people come upstairs. She imagines Caroline and Joseph at a pub like this, huddled at a corner table but not touching, their fingers wrapped around their glasses. The noise around Leila is a cacophonous din, but the word *gunshots* hooks her ear.

“—and then they yelled at us to move away from the windows, and I ducked beneath this row of pink women’s bathrobes, because I thought they’d be long enough to hide me.”

“—there were so many people running up the stairs, I thought someone was going to be crushed—”

“I tried to call my mum, but she didn’t even pick up—”

Leila realizes it is all anyone can speak about, and feels an incredible, deep longing. She wants to speak to someone, to tell them the story of what has just happened to her. She looks to her phone on the floor, brushing against it with the tip of her boot. It would be too much to tell Jamie before her wedding, and in Boston, everyone at the restaurant will have begun work, sauces simmering at the stove, flaky bricks of dough being kneaded against the steel countertops. Even if one of them picked up, they would not understand. In so many ways, nothing has happened.

“Are you waiting on someone?” a man asks, leaning over the back of the chair opposite her.

He is smiling at her, waiting for an invitation to sit. The cuffs of his shirt are rolled up over his forearms, and she imagines letting him, and how they could talk about what transpired at the tube station, nothing more. He would tell her how he was on the way home from work and ducked into the pub when he heard the sirens, feeling lucky to be barricaded in a place with chips and Smithwicks. She would tell him how she had not been afraid, and how that itself scared her.

“Yes,” she says. “I am.”

At fourteen, on her school’s soccer pitch, a girl told her that a plane had struck the Twin Towers. Leila thought she was lying, and throughout the day, even as they rolled a television set into the lunchroom, her numb defiance continued. Then

her father picked her up from school and, not saying a word, folded her into his arms, and she began to weep so violently that when he pulled away she could see his chest hair through the dampened parts of his shirt. At home, her mother fried a ribeye in butter. Her father told her she did not have to do her homework.

Though she could never admit this, months later she found herself missing that time, missing how they all watched the news as the smoke plumed and lifted, and how easily she had fallen asleep between them, her body heavy with pure, uncomplicated grief.

## Understudy

You tell us of the executions outside  
your window in the hospital.  
Each day, they bring patients to the courtyard to shoot.

One day, it will be you,  
you know, but do not say  
over the phone at reception.

I wonder, Father, if you stay awake  
listening to the bullets rattling  
against the walls of the courtyard,  
against the glass of your room.  
The night turns the window into a mirror  
you cannot peel back.

You used to take me to the windows of our house  
and point to the snow piling up in the streets.  
Overnight, the storms would leave behind mountains  
we could tunnel through,  
we could climb.

The snow no longer falls.  
Not in the winter here, shorter  
year by year and full of rain,  
nor now.

Days pass in the full rasp of summer.  
It takes you to the city of your childhood—  
your empire of ocean crusted over with salt.

The looking-glass eyes of the squid  
laid out to dry on the sand  
remained glassy and bright, and you'd

swim never-ending laps across the water, almost  
touching that dark island of Taiwan.

War, you know, is coming.  
You can hear it in the crashing of the waves  
against each stroke of your arms.  
On one side, the Republic of China.  
On the other, the People's Republic.

The posters in the street warn of the army  
that will ride across the sea.  
The foam of their horses' mouths will spill over  
the foam-tipped waves.

Even the driftwood you collect on the beach is twisted  
with meaning. Everywhere you look,  
things are calling out to you with soft  
rippling voices,  
speaking to you with the intimacy you always wanted.

They spoke to your father, your brother too  
in ways you could never understand.  
Not even at their deaths so many years ago  
and so young.

Now, you allow yourself to hear them.  
You get up from the bed at night.

You walk the hallways  
in clothes you've worn for weeks.  
You are frightened for me, your daughter  
and lately, a new son—  
a brother I have never met,  
that no one will ever meet.  
You are certain of the war that will meet us. The guns.

You are a restless sleeper,  
the nurses report with cheerful voices.  
One day it will be you  
they take outside. One day,  
it may be me.

## Gospel acrostic where fear is the only constant

Here's my favorite part of the Bible: at the Last Supper, Jesus tries to ease everyone into the idea that he's about to die quite violently, he's

giving them his bread and wine and asking them to think of him sometimes. *Right*, say the apostles, unfazed, *but once you've kicked the bucket, who's in charge?* On this passage, there's a schism: one school argues they didn't believe anyone could kill Jesus, that they were razzing him, trying to make him laugh. No, the others say—and I agree—the apostles really jockeyed for the dying Lord's endorsement in the middle of his living wake. I've been at that table, digesting news of cancer, miscarriage, aneurysm, layoff, and here hidden

in this poem I'll stow this confession: my first thought's always *I'll mourn later: now how much does this set me back?* Even joy—like when my wife, hands clasped

tenderly across her stomach like a show pony's plaited mane, says she likes *Henry* for a boy by way of telling me she's pregnant, and I'm figuring eight months without a drink will be a nightmare, and how many paychecks

she'll miss, and should I take the risk of raising children if I barely have enough patience to suffer through Atlanta traffic twice a day . . . my face aches, I'm smiling so hard. And I like how Adam and Eve's first thought upon receiving the knowledge of good and evil is to run behind a bush. Sometimes I imagine them back there, desperately sticking fingers down each other's throats, hacking the apple up, trying to stamp the knowing out like a stubborn fire.

## from *Todo comienzo*

2.

No quedaba tan claro como viene. Si es del anudamiento o es del pasmo, Nunca sabrá el olvido lo que cubre. Balanceándose como un vestido de verano en la azotea insinuaba opulencia en el verde, advenimiento de lo casto produciéndose, océano desde sí más a la espuma. Recorría la costa buscando entre las rocas veletas animales del plancton partículas de seres que la noche ilumina. Hasta ahí, el canto era otra cosa.

Después la oscuridad pone su marcha y en la pregunta aplasta lo que emerge. El mar como un fondo o apego algo que llama. Siempre a llorar por esas mismas partes de cielo, esos recortes de la costa en las desembocaduras. Hay un borde en el que crecen pinos que perfuman el viento. Una superposición de mareas, una alborada saca polvo del astro: debería el tiempo respetar esas cosas y las líneas dibujarse en otra dimensión.

Cables trenzados, rayas que no cesan. Las mujeres se agolpan. Los vestidos se achatan, quién quiere remontar esa subida, si son monos famélicos que desde la cima tiran piedras. El traje en la ventana se ventila y guarda, entre las fibras, las temperaturas de la brisa.

Puede ser que la muerte se introduzca esta tarde. Puede ser que se anime, o que no le convenga.

## from *All Beginnings*

2.

It wasn't so clear how it comes. If it is from knotting  
or shock, oblivion will Never know what it covers.  
Swaying like a summer dress on the roof  
suggesting opulence in the green, arrival  
of the purity that's being produced, ocean from inside itself,  
becoming foam. It traveled the coastline searching  
amid rocks quills plankton animals  
particles of beings illuminated by night. Up to  
that point, the song was another thing.

Afterwards darkness takes its leave and in the uncertainty  
it flattens what emerges. The sea like a backdrop or affection  
that calls. Always crying out through those same parts  
of the sky, those cuts in the coastline in the river's mouths.  
There's a rim on which pine trees grow and perfume  
the wind. A superposition of tides, a daybreak  
pulls dust from stars: time should respect these things  
and the lines should be drawn in another dimension.

Braided cables, lines that don't cease.  
Women throng together. The dresses  
flatten, who wants to surmount this hill,  
if there are starving monkeys throwing stones  
from the top. The suit airing itself out in the window  
maintains, among its fibers, the temperatures of the breeze.

It may be that death comes in on this evening.  
It may resolve to do it, or else decide not to.

Como esas rutas que atraviesan los campos, es el mismo campo compungido atravesado por la estepa aunque a esa altura ya haya surtidores, agua en baldes de lata, remansos en la sombra.

Lo que queda de ahí es viento amable que a veces trae perfume de fruta, de hojas de limonero, de árboles de duraznos agrupados. Así la medianera, así el silencio de la distracción y la distancia.

Pasa una nueva altura sobre sandalias libres que lleva de otro modo la minucia. Y se desprende la blusa en la frescura del color violeta. Pasa la luz y filtra lo que el sol dejó en la fruta, más perfume viscoso, el tiempo apremia.

Sólo el alrededor que queda en los cordófonos cuando pica la tarde entre las aves.

Arma la rama que dice sólo Ahora.

Los vegetales se deletrean entre los dedos. Las yemas que apaciguan al tacto del socaire.

A la textura de su crecimiento.

Like those roads that cross the countryside, it's  
the same sombre countryside crossed by the  
steppe though at this height there are already fountains, water  
in tin buckets, havens in the shade.

What remains from there is gentle wind that at times  
brings the perfume of fruit, of a lemon tree's leaves, of  
peach trees grouped together. Thus the dividing line,  
thus the silence of distraction and distance.

A new height passes over unfastened sandals that  
carries in another way the trivial. And the blouse comes off  
in the cool of the purple color. The light passes  
and filters what the sun has left in the fruit, more  
viscous perfume, time hurries along.  
Only the surroundings that remain in  
stringed instruments when evening stings among the birds.

It assembles the branch that only says Now.

Vegetables are spelled between fingers. The buds  
are soothed by the touch of the lee.

To the texture of their growth.

3.

Apenas el contorno avanza sigiloso  
la concavidad se ha vuelto de repente  
Sonora. En horas de vaivén apareció  
la síntesis del día que con minúscula  
trama urde los nombres. Hostiga y palpa  
la blonda cabellera, nada más que esas frutas.

Requiriendo la mano entre la lana,  
Lo único que puede verse son las curvas  
amplias y abiertas. Una extensión  
que sin color, se explaya.

El rumor continúa, renace entre los puntos  
más lejanos. Necesita que vuelva por sus cauces  
que vuelva a andar recodos del cerebro.

Lo que sostiene sigue  
con la radio prendida  
Con el motor prendido  
con el tiempo. La espiral  
se reduce. Se reduce en  
la espera interminable, en  
el sitio inmediato al que  
el esplendor provoca.

Incandescente, esa luz, encandila.

Desampara al crecer el vértigo en la boca  
Que cambia de intensidad, que está y no está.

Hay sonido en la mente. Hay respuesta a ese estímulo.  
Hay rondas en la noche. Palabras como peces nocturnos  
En la fosforescencia de un mar que no se toca.

3.

The contour barely stealthily advances  
the cavity has suddenly become  
Resonant. At times the swinging appeared  
like a synthesis of the day that with a delicate  
weave spins the names. It harasses and touches  
the blond hair, nothing more than those fruits.

Requiring a hand among wool,  
The only things that can be seen are full and  
open curves. An extension that  
without color is expanded.

The murmur continues, reborn among the most  
distant points. It needs to flow again through channels  
to move again through bends in the brain.

What sustains it keeps going  
with the radio on  
With the motor running  
with time. The spiral  
is reduced. It's reduced in  
the interminable waiting, in the  
immediate place provoked  
by splendor.

Incandescent, that light dazzles.

It disappears as the mouth's vertigo grows  
As intensity changes, here and then gone.

There's a sound in your mind. A response to that stimulus.  
There are rounds in the night. Words like nocturnal fish  
In the phosphorescence of an untouchable sea.

4.

Lejos, asoman partes de una redondeada punta.  
La luz es de metal.  
Azul el resplandor, entonces.

Y el olvido magnífico con el manto de oro.  
Arrastra con su ruedo la penumbra. Enorme.  
Quedan las hojas con el sonido último.  
Allá en el fondo. Allá.

Sin embargo esa larga y esmerada sombra se parece al principio.  
Al lugar inicial con tanta arena. Finísima en las dunas.  
El mar todos los días móvil con su rumor. Recipientes  
contra las paredes en inmersión profunda  
el agua quieta. Calor desde esos cuencos reproduciendo  
el sol, que pasa. Apenas acumuladas nubes sobre la línea alfa.

Esto es el tiempo, de repente mudo. Vidrio. Y mientras,  
toda esa luz corpuscular cayendo, dorada, milimétrica.

4.

Far away, parts of a round point appear.  
The light is made of metal.  
The blue splendor, then.

And magnificent forgetting with a golden cloak.  
It drags on its hem the penumbra. Enormous.  
Leaves of the last sound remain.  
There in the background. There.

Nevertheless that long and exacting shadow looks like the beginning.  
At the initial place with so much sand. So delicate among the dunes.  
The sea moving each day with its murmur. Recipients  
against the walls in profound immersion  
quiet water. Heat from those hollows reproducing  
the passing sun. Hardly any cumulus clouds over the alpha line.

That is time, suddenly mute. Glass. And in the meantime,  
all that corpuscular light falling, golden, precise.

# I ask Google to tell me something encouraging

To impress the young with the difference between a database and the internet, a librarian draws aquaria rich in goldfish and, in contrast, cartoon oceans—oceans which, if anything, her whimsy overstocks with tangs and carp, with kelp and boots.

The lesson is simple—the seas' vastness, its voids and oddments, even the librarian who urged us toward surer waters, where the fishing was good—and it comes back to me after  
I ask Google to tell me something encouraging

and Google harpoons, from the schools of things it knows, this: *unlike the tomato and the banana, the strawberry is not a berry.*

One wonders about artificial intelligence. One wonders what human flaw is here magnified by way of a strawberry, red and sweet pretender, whether some coldness on the coder's part or the questioner's clumsy mumbling.

Then again, it is possible that I have pulled from the blue exactly what I was fishing for.

I do rise from the bed, after all, and pad downstairs and pull, from a glass case, an encyclopedia reliably rich in sharks and sailfins

but in which I read instead about a plant  
that depressed persons once ate whole:  
leaf and fruit, taxed stems, late blooms.

And so learn that at least one cultivar  
of encouragement sends out runners, curiosity  
its faux-berry, a cure for small sadness.

Or maybe it is whimsy to trust oceans  
to lift us. Maybe it is worse than whimsy  
to imagine the old world's melancholics  
salting strawberry roots' plaits.

# My Body is Wrong

Every race starts the same. The gun goes off and I'm terrified. I'm a cannonball let loose. My legs move on their own. Elbows tucked, knees pointed straight, I'm the embodiment of efficiency. Every motion is critical and confident. I must make it to the front of the pack. I will make it to the front of the pack. I could bulldoze a house with my thighs. I could run straight into the sun.



I stopped running in the same way I began: all at once and without much thought. It was August of 2009 and I was done with it. I didn't deliberate. I deferred to my body for once. I didn't tell anyone. No coaches, no teammates. I just never went back to practice. I was tired.

I had just returned home to New York from Oxford, where I lived for the first half of the summer, which changed me in a way you can only be changed at seventeen. I studied art on its own the first time. No AP classes. No learning for grades. I learned without effort. I got to be a kid. No five-hour practices. No cross-training. No waking up at 5am. No squeezing in homework.

I went to Stonehenge and admired its permanence and staticity and confused existence. I went to Brighton Beach and threw sand pebbles into the ocean one by one and the tide regurgitated them to me one by one by one. And the pointlessness of cyclical didn't matter, cellphone-less beside the wharf with all my friends.

But every so often, I would remember that I was falling behind. Back in New York, my teammates were training all summer ahead of our cross-

country season. Five times a week, they would wake up before the sun to meet our coach at the high school. No other sports teams practiced. In the lonely world of pre-professional athleticism, it was just them and the hot sun and the empty school.

Our other classmates never came to our races, but we were on the best team in the school. We qualified for State. We ran in the Federation Championship. Our team captain went to Nationals every year. We trained with Olympic seriousness.

And suddenly it all felt so silly, so self-serious. We were seventeen, sixteen, fifteen, fourteen. We were only kids. But we weren't really. We were something in between. *Not a girl, not yet a woman* just like Britney Spears. Like popcorn, every few weeks someone in our region would pop up out of nowhere, suddenly fast, suddenly winning, suddenly nationally ranked, suddenly a woman. And we all secretly hoped that that potential was also marinating in us, waiting for some arbitrary moment to reveal itself.



I go to the doctor because my body is wrong. I haven't had my period in five months. My pediatrician wants to put me on birth control. I am confused by the proposition. I don't understand why I should use a pill that prevents pregnancy to get my period. She doesn't mention the possible side effects, the headaches, the mood changes. I decide to let my body sort itself out. No one suggests that I should stop running so much.

When I return the next year with blood in my urine, we find my first rare disease whose vascular implications mean that birth control could kill me. I take in the moment for posterity. I arrange a small vow to my body: *I will always trust you over anyone else.*



I focus on a point far in the distance even with my line of vision. Never looking up, never looking down, it keeps me moving fast. No objects matter except the sixty girls running beside me, made of mostly limbs, knees and elbows. I want to murder everyone in my way. I threaten to destroy everything they've ever loved. And in the moment, that feels normal.



To say something like *The world is designed by and for men* doesn't mean much of anything. It is too abstract to generate feeling. I first notice trickle down patriarchy when my life depends on it. To spend ten years and \$30,000 searching for a diagnosis for vague but widespread pain should be a sign of some failure, but there is no one big enough to blame except my government, which lacks a face to wag my finger at. There are little failures everywhere and they all attach in some great invisible web. I pay attention to the way each failure relates to others as my only line of defense. An egotistic doctor ignoring my pain is my incompetent supervisor. A lack of funding from the NIH for research for illnesses that predominantly affect women is my dismissive coach when I miss my period for months. They all band together to tell me about my body or ignore it altogether.



I go to the doctor because my body feels wrong. The nurse takes my height and weight, blood pressure and pulse. The nurse plugs my numbers into an electronic file that represents my body. An algorithm calculates my body mass index. My body is a point far outside the bell curve, lost at sea. The doctor tells me *you are too thin*. The doctor thinks he's throwing me a

life raft. He is my first adult doctor. I think about my pediatrician. I miss her waiting room with big illustrations of polar bears. I miss being asked questions. I'm not sure what to say. I am a small little girl. He is a big man in loafers. He is wrong, but I say nothing. I defer through silence. He does not mention that my blood pressure is low.



After the first four hundred meters, I'm settled into my position. I am in the woods. Only my heavy breath and light stride punctuate the quiet. I can't see anything but the trail. The leaves precariously hanging onto branches don't register. All I see is the stretch of distance and the bumps of the trail, every tree root and pebble accounted for and avoided.



Sara was a popcorn girl. More than just my team's captain, she was unbeatable in my region. She won every race by minutes, lived a few meters ahead of everyone else, ran every race against herself. She was nationally ranked. She was going to the Olympics one day. She had entered a new stratum of runners, and like all pre-professional female athletes, she was destined for one of two things: she would become a professional runner, or her body would fail by her early twenties.

We trained around Sara's needs. We overtrained. Often our all-male coaching staff trained us with the boys, made us fit to meet the boys' schedule, fit into the timeframe of boys' biological development. Like clockwork, I would become too injured to run by the end of each season. I limped around my high school between classes clutching different parts of my body: in November my knee, in March my lower back, in May my hips, in June my dizzy head.



I go to the doctor because my head is wrong. To prevent my migraines, they give me medications made for other illnesses: SSRIs meant for depression, beta blockers meant for blood pressure, Botox meant for wrinkles originally meant for crossed eyes, anticonvulsants meant to prevent seizures. Because they're not meant for head pain, they do more than prevent migraines. They have unendurable side effects: I hear voices, my hair falls out.

Migraines have been around since ancient Egypt, recorded by Hippocrates in 400 B.C. The first migraine medicine created specifically for migraine prevention started trials in 2017 A.D. If migraines didn't disproportionately affect women, it wouldn't have taken 2,000 years to develop a treatment. I eagerly wait a year for my medicine to enter the market like it's a husband returning home for dinner.

When I begin my new migraine medicine, it controls my menstrual cycle. On the side of my prescription, it reads: *side effects may include constipation or soreness at the injection site.* There's no mention of hormone interference. Because medical research routinely excludes women, we don't know how illness is particular to us, how medicine particularly affects us. The cyclical nature of our hormones is ignored for the staticity of maleness. I report my side effect to the FDA with hundreds of other women, but the label stays the same.



I get to the hill and want to stop. But my legs are moving on their own and they don't stop. They could go on forever. I am alone with my legs in the woods. No cheering. I cheer for myself, *go go go.* I raise my arms up a little and pump them back farther and farther with each stride. They are Newton's cradle. I don't slow down.



Between *The Real World* episodes on MTV, I watch a Dove commercial on *Real Beauty*. They tell me to create a new standard of beauty. They tell me to have confidence through bar soap. By high school, Olay commands me: *love the skin you're in.*

In the early days of Facebook, memes circulate slowly. Overlaid on a picture of a full-figured Marilyn Monroe reads *this is what a real woman looks like*. Boys in my class share the image over and over. Models are ridiculed for being rail thin. *Eat a cheeseburger!* someone comments. *This is not what a real woman looks like.* I am not a real woman.

I grow up thinking body image campaigns aren't for people like me. Are all in service to the male gaze. Are only there to give women confidence. And then I got sick.



I go to the doctor because my body feels wrong. I sit unclothed on a table in the middle of a big room. A boy my age looks into my ears and asks me questions. He makes awkward comments about ear wax. The words come out of his mouth in flutters as he avoids looking at my breasts. I want to pat his head and offer him a cigarette. I am a professional. His hand shakes as he presses his stethoscope to my bare back and I imagine him in ten years, post med school, post residency, post awkward patient interactions, post caring, post humility.

The real doctor enters the room and asks if I have an eating disorder. No introductions. No ice breakers. I miss the boy's tentative hands and questions. I want to laugh at the doctor. I want to ask him if he thinks that question would work, if anyone with an eating disorder would just

come out and say so when asked. But I answer no in that careful tone I've perfected, respectful and believable. I try to ask a question about my symptoms. *What did you eat for breakfast this morning?* The words fall out of his mouth all pointy. The fluorescent light hanging above me changes shape. The room is an interrogation and I am a criminal. *Coconut yogurt and granola.* Every question he asks is a little trick. *What's your favorite food? How many meals do you eat a day?* I can hardly tell what he's up to. I want to pat him on the head for being a good little detective, but I still need him to answer my medical questions. I check the clock on the wall and time is running out. My fifteen minutes are almost up. *I was born like this, in this ratio.* I speak in the language of algorithms. But none of that matters now. I live too far outside the curve and he wants is to pull me back in. I leave the appointment the same way I came in, feeling wrong wrong wrong.



*You're built like a runner.* This is what everyone tells me when they meet me. They are free to talk about my body because I am thin and tall and that means I am good. When my mom asks me to show off my thin legs to her friends, I roll my pants up to my knees and walk around the room so they can laugh at the physics of my body. In the sixth grade, my classmate accuses me of having an eating disorder. During races, spectators can't believe my legs can hold me up. They let me know that as I cross the finish line. *You are too thin.* My best friend on the team won't talk to me every time I eat pizza because it's not fair that I can eat pizza and be thin. I find out that she's not kidding, that it really does make her mad.



When I am my most depressed and teenaged, I can't eat for four months. I weigh only 97 pounds. My friends envy my thinness. They talk about my

body because I am thin and that means I am good. After my boyfriend breaks up with me, I feel unattractive. When he sleeps with other women, I am quick to insult their weight because it's the only ammunition I've got. I'm embarrassed by this but can't seem to stop.



I make it to the top. I am stronger than anyone, stronger than Sylvester Stallone, stronger than Arnold Schwarzenegger. I go back down the hill I just came up. I don't think about pointlessness. I do not make this a metaphor. The world is literal and before me. The world wants my soft step. My hair is falling foliage. I plod my agile tree limbs into the dirt. I lower my branches and lean into it. The gravity of the world makes me move faster and faster. I let it happen. I remember where the earth curves to get my footing right, to avoid the tree root, to maximize speed without falling. I am going so fast.



I remember the smell of chlorine and the all-male coaching staff surrounding me and Sara and our five other varsity teammates in our high school's pool during our lunch period as we cross-trained instead of eating. I remember running ten miles with the boys in single digit temperature in January and the feeling of hot incinerating my lungs as I walked back inside my high school's gym to ride stationary bikes for an hour followed by an hour-long core workout. I remember feeling like my muscle was eating itself. I remember missing my period for four months. I remember the early symptoms of my disability that I ignored to keep running. I remember being injured more than anyone. I remember injury being normal, expected. And by the end of each season, when my body was too tired to move fast anymore, I remember watching the back of Sara's head growing smaller and smaller ahead of me like she was getting

sucked straight into the sun. I had never seen someone that could really go on forever.

Sometimes when I'm bedridden I pretend I can go on forever. I think of the weightlessness of my body running up four flights of stairs and the evenness of my breath. I think of feeling completely in control of every molecule inside of me. For a moment I feel light as a feather. I feel immortal, invincible. I am a cannonball again.



I go to the doctor because my body feels wrong. I go to the doctor because my body feels wrong. I go to the doctor because my body feels wrong. I go to the doctor because my body feels wrong. I go to the doctor because my body feels wrong. I go to the doctor because my body feels wrong. I go to the doctor because my body feels wrong. I go to the doctor because I am wrong. I go to the doctor because I am wrong. I go to the doctor because I am wrong. I go to the doctor because I am wrong. I go to the doctor. I am wrong. I am wrong.



I leave the woods and can see people yelling in the distance. Their voices don't register. Their cheering arms move in sync with the tree branches bending to the wind. I hear the ocean in my seashell ears. For the last 2200 meters, I've been telling myself *only 800 meters left*. But this time it's real. I can see the next person in front of me. I threaten everything she's ever loved. I must beat her. I catch up to her. For a small moment we are

conjoined twins. Our arms move together, our legs move together, our heart beats as one. She speeds up and we are two again. I sprint ahead of her to prove something. She can't catch up. I keep sprinting. I can't stop. I am proving something to the wind. I use every bit of energy left in my pathetic, wheezing mitochondria.

◆◆◆

In a Facebook support group for my genetic illness, a woman writes: *I'm so mad. I went to see a new rheumatologist and my doctor just told me to lose fifteen pounds and all my symptoms would go away. He wouldn't even run any tests.* I click open the post's 54 comments to see woman after woman after woman say *same same same*. We have joined ourselves together virtually out of desperation. We crowdsource the data of our bodies to make sense of ourselves. We talk to each other when our doctors don't listen. We solve each other's pain.

I remember the nephrologist's office with plaque after plaque of New York's Top Doctor Awards hung on a wall behind a doctor that prescribed going home and eating ice cream for blood in my urine. *If you gain fifteen pounds, you won't pee blood anymore.* I said nothing. I was a little girl. He was a big man in loafers. I looked at my chart on the clipboard in his hands: the low BMI circled, the check mark next to dairy allergy ignored.

I am the 55th woman to comment on the post: *same except I was told to gain fifteen pounds. It's almost like we can never be the right size.*

◆◆◆

I go to the doctor, a rheumatologist, a woman. She asks me questions. She types into her computer all of my answers. She doesn't ask about my weight. She bends me up and down. She squeezes my heels. She diagnoses me.

She leaves the room. I laugh uncontrollably. I don't know why. I watch myself laugh at the cotton balls in a jar. At the white room. At my purple gown. I finally have a name. A defense. A retort.

She returns to the room and orders me scan after scan. She apologizes that it's taken me ten years to learn why my body is. I leave the room and I feel light as a feather. I am a cannonball let loose. I have solved something important despite every little failure. I want to wag my finger at something that will see me.



I stop running in the same way I begin: all at once and without much thought. I cross the finish line. My limbs flail. I hardly have any bones. My heart and lungs think I'm still running. I rip off my number and hand it to another hand who hands me a medal. There are noises, all logically singular: the cheers from the crowds coming out of individual mouths, the feet barreling down behind me, the clanking of medals and rips of paper. If I hadn't been running, I could trace them all to their source. But for me, right now, they blend together into nothing. I only hear the thump of my heart in my ears and the soft erratic whir of my breath. I don't know how or why but I walk down the shoot. I keep walking and walking and walking. My legs could go on forever.

# I have too many tabs open on my laptop & the world is ending

& nothing feels good. End of summer in America, it's been a terrible year. Bought a cheap crop top in the wake of my loss, because what does the body have to do with grief? Everything. Everything I lose & lose myself hourly. To be honest I bought two crop tops online then took a long walk to the cemetery at golden hour, the orange sci-fi sun brimming all over the place. To be honest I walked to the cemetery at the golden hour so I'd have an excuse to text the famous artist the luminous yet pixelated cemetery when I got back home. Have I always been so tedious? The answer is yes & of course I have. Still, what matters is I'm there when the light floats the gravestones off into the softer expanse, all our facts turned into shadows stacked on the hillside. When the sky becomes a chandelier of haze over this prime daypart when families settle down to dinner in front of their widescreen TVs. When the field sets to glow despite how rutted & windswept. Even at its most mundane, look how easy this world can bring me to my knees.

# MÀ : Scold

The horse has not come home \

The mulberry has not had enough sun \

The clock on the wall is ticking down too loudly \

The child is peeing too loudly \

Things harden on the way down \

Talk faster, now quieter, now be silent \

The bad books in the study are falling and burning \

Count them. Count them \

Quiet \

The grass grows too slowly \

It grows much too green and slowly \ We step on it

# Everything Worthwhile Is Done With Other People: Unpacking 2020 and the 2021 Texas Biennial

*1990: Already ten years into trickle down economics, a rise in cynicism, growing racial and class tension, and the widening gap between the very rich and the rest of us. L.A. before the riots of 1992. A time of defunding vital social programs, the abandonment of the ideals on which our country was supposedly founded. The erasure of history. The Savings and Loan bailout with our tax dollars . . . The explosion of the information industry, and at the same time the implosion of meaning.*

—Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “1990: L.A., ‘The Gold Field’,” 1996

2020: Eighty-two days into quarantine, a rise in cynicism and a surging global pandemic, growing racial and class tension, and the widening gap between the very rich and the rest of us. D.C. a week after the murder of George Floyd. A time of defunding law enforcement, the abandonment of the ideals on which our democracy was supposedly founded. The erasure of history. The Covid corporate bailout with our tax dollars. The coronavirus has claimed 104,000 Americans. There is still no national public health strategy five months after the first reported American cases. Officers on the street are in riot gear while some hospitals are forced to use trash bags for PPE. The explosion of the disinformation industry, and at the same time the implosion of truth.

Everything is on fire. Each night across the country, cops are arresting hundreds of peaceful American citizens instead of three more of their own. We’re exhausted from staying up all night, filming police encounters from our apartment window, making sure cops aren’t roughing up Black folks and protestors on the street after curfew. I haven’t been to a protest because I’m afraid of getting Covid or arrested or shot. Every day that I don’t pull up my isolation and guilt triple in size. I feel as empty as a black square on Instagram.

Helicopters are circling low above our building in D.C. when we learn my husband's mother is in the ER. The hospital's guidelines mean no one from the family can come see her even though she's Covid-negative. Stunned, my husband asks if I can run out and grab a bottle of wine before curfew, so I throw on a mask and head downstairs. The liquor store at the end of the block is already boarded up. It's then that I see a small crowd of people gathered at the Dupont Circle fountain. Impassioned chants of *BLACK TRANS LIVES MATTER!* echoing loudly down the block immediately knock tears out of my face. I sprint toward the sound and feel a swift rush of relief wash over me, like the long-anticipated tonic of the first summer wave slamming against my body. After three months of physical isolation, the queer fates have brought me to my people. I resist the urge to wipe my face with my hands and make my way into the crowd.

“His name was Tony McDade!” a man shouts.

*His name was Tony McDade!*

“A Black transgender man!”

*A Black transgender man!*

“May he rest in power!”

*May he rest in power!*

“Black lives matter!”

*BLACK LIVES MATTER!*

“Black trans lives matter!”

*BLACK TRANS LIVES MATTER!*

My voice quivers with every sound leaving my mouth. I lose control of my voice as I shout and suddenly I'm sobbing. My crying is muffled by the crowd's chants and I'm comforted by their cover. I look around hoping to see someone I know, but we moved here just 48 hours before lockdown. Masked passersby and neighbors from surrounding blocks begin to flood the Circle. Within minutes, a small crowd of angry, mourning queer people has become a diverse mass of protestors. There are no police in sight; it's just us. There's a sense that each of us in this moment are the truest forms of ourselves: present, out, united in anger, united in peace. I have no friends here and every single one of these people is family.

When I get home, my husband is staring out the window. A Black Hawk helicopter circles no more than three or four stories above our building, filled with armed military personnel ready to deploy. Our pockets whir and then we see the news: federal police have just fired tear gas and rubber bullets at a crowd of peaceful protestors standing in Lafayette Park, eight city blocks southeast of us, so the President could walk across the street to stage a photo-op with a Bible in front of a church.<sup>1</sup>



2021: Last summer, as the world fell apart and then collectively rebuilt itself, I thought a lot about the words of organizer, author, and prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba. Her work is deeply rooted in collective action. Kaba's father was an anti-colonialist organizer in the revolution that freed Guinea from French control in 1958, and the pan-African spirit of his work profoundly informed her understanding of the importance of collectivity. "He always told me, 'Your responsibility is not just to yourself. You are connected to everyone,'" Kaba explained in a 2019 interview. "Everything worthwhile is done with other people."<sup>2</sup> I repeated this statement to myself daily in quarantine. *Everything worthwhile is done with other people.*

In between protests I also frequently revisited the last published writing by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, a deeply political and personal essay for his friend the artist Roni Horn and her 1996 Wexner Center exhibition catalogue, *Earths Grow Thick*. Felix was dying of AIDS and wouldn't live long enough to see the show for which Horn's book was published. Yet despite his disease, government inaction, the death of everyone around him, economic collapse, a growing culture war, and his own impending death, Gonzalez-Torres built space within all this chaos to stop and marvel at the beauty and queer potentiality of Horn's work.

When Felix's partner Ross Laycock was dying of AIDS in 1990, the two of them happened upon Horn's *Gold Field* (1980-1982), a sheet of pure gold thinner than a piece of paper, lying directly on the gallery floor at L.A. MOCA. To Felix the sculpture was, "a new landscape, a possible horizon, a place of rest and absolute beauty."<sup>3</sup> Gonzalez-Torres, whose untitled piles of candy require

<sup>1</sup> Evan Garza, "Quarantine, Day 82," *A Queer Anthology of Healing*, Pilot Press (2020).

<sup>2</sup> Eve Ewing, "Mariame Kaba: Everything Worthwhile Is Done With Other People," *Adi Magazine*, 2019. <https://adimagazine.com/articles/mariame-kaba-everything-worthwhile-is-done-with-other-people>.

<sup>3</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "1990: L.A., 'The Gold Field,'" *Roni Horn: Earths Grow Thick*, Wexner Center for the Arts (1996).

installation by a team and the participation/consumption of several viewers, was uniquely aware of the significance of collectivity and he recognized it at work in Horn's practice. As bell hooks describes in the catalogue, Horn's work "calls attention to the primacy of solitude even as it reminds us that the outcome of engaged solitude is an intensification of a sense of togetherness."<sup>4</sup> *Everything worthwhile is done with other people.*

If the events of the last year—a global pandemic, the police murder of George Floyd broadcast in real time, revolutionary efforts to defund police—have made anything clear, it's that real change requires collective action in order to be effectuated and sustained. The extraordinary vacuum of distancing and self-isolation has shifted our focus from subjective experiences to a collective understanding of shared struggle. As Dr. Caroline A. Jones suggested last year in *Artforum*, "the proliferating RNA virus [must] turn our thinking from selves to our species monoculture on the planet."<sup>5</sup> I think it has.



Within days of the El Paso shooting in 2019 Ryan N. Dennis and I were invited by Big Medium, an Austin nonprofit dedicated to supporting artists and building community through the arts across Texas, to serve as curators and artistic directors of the next iteration of the Texas Biennial. That October, as we prepared our announcement, Atatiana Jefferson was shot and killed by Fort Worth police while in her own home as she was babysitting her 8-year-old nephew. Weeks later, Texas—the largest recipient of refugees in the country—became the first state to refuse them when the Governor declined to consent under a new White House executive order. Kids were in cages, families separated. While ethnonationalism and the dehumanization of Black, Brown, and transgender bodies in Texas may have been the social and political point of origin for the Biennial, Ryan and I were insistent that through the work of contemporary artists the project look forward, outwards in all directions, with a critical lens pointed backwards as a means of understanding the present moment and constructing possible futures. Although we were both living in Houston when our work began, by early March 2020 my

<sup>4</sup> bell hooks, "between us: traces of love—Dickinson, Horn, Hooks," *Roni Horn: Earths Grow Thick*, Wexner Center for the Arts (1996).

<sup>5</sup> Caroline A. Jones, "Virions: Thinking Through the Scale of Aggregation," *Artforum*, Vol. 58, No. 9 (May/June 2020).

husband and I were living in D.C. and Ryan was leaving Houston to take on the role of chief curator at the Mississippi Museum of Art in Jackson, MS.

Enter Covid. Within days of landing in our new homes, we each went into self-induced quarantine. Like all exhibition teams last year, we had no choice but to either cancel or postpone. There was a good argument to be made for having more time with artists to respond and plan an ambitious project. But what would a biennial look like in the midst of a pandemic and how would we build it? In-person studios and site visits were out, and plans to exhibit the project in one venue no longer made sense for public health. As we considered a path forward, our attention was drawn to artists whose practices imagine or create futurities or whose works grapple with the histories contained within objects and ourselves in order to consider new modes of seeing history and each other.

The reach and influence of what takes place in Texas extends to every corner of the globe, which meant the criteria for Biennial participating artists had to be expansive. In addition to artists living and working in Texas, we broadened the scope of the project to include “Texpats,” a term we coined for native Texans and artists with deep connections to Texas living and working in any part of the world. Current and past Core fellows, educators, retirees, nomads, immigration activists, and artists from land neighboring Texas were in the pool. Some of our favorite Texas-born artists have lived in New York, the Northeast, California, or elsewhere for decades, and countless Texas artists are active internationally. If an immigrant city like Houston, the most ethnically diverse metropolitan area in America, can give birth to the cross-cultural gift that is Viet-Cajun crawfish, this is a conversation that has to be international in scope. If we’re to engage fully in a conversation about its cultural, social and environmental impact, Texas must be framed in a global lens—and so must its artists.

Dallas-based artist Ja’Tovia Gary’s recent spectacular experimental film work *The Giverny Suite* (2019) (Fig. 1), which will have its Texas debut in the Biennial exhibition co-curated with Max Fields at FotoFest, uses the verdant and distinctly European backdrop of Monet’s famous gardens to frame the image of her Black body and the lived experiences of Black women. The film combines archival images and sound, hand-made celluloid animations, and Giverny flora with

documentary footage of Gary interviewing Black women on the street in Harlem. The question that frames both these interviews and the film—*Do you feel safe in your body?*—also recontextualizes footage of Black icons and civil rights activists Nina Simone, Josephine Baker, and Fred Hampton. Celluloid distortions and black-and-white images of drone strike footage alter the landscape of Gary's film as she interrogates Black women about their feelings of safety. As Dr. Ayanna Dozier described in her award-winning essay on Gary's work in *Gulf Coast* 33.2, "Their replies do not resolve the question but rather reveal how, for Black women and girls, safety is always a negotiation with the world and oneself amid a backdrop of white supremacy and patriarchal terror."<sup>6</sup>

Histories are contained within objects. This idea is explored by several artists in the Biennial, and there are few American sculptors more synonymous with the memory of materials than Melvin Edwards. Born in Houston in 1937 and raised in Fifth Ward, Mel is a master sculptor who has welded race, politics, and steel for more than sixty years. Edwards's *Lynch Fragments* (Fig. 2), his ongoing series of welded and gnarled assemblage reliefs, recall the shackles of chattel slavery, the distortion and violence of Jim Crow, and the anthropomorphous dignity of African masks. Although first produced in 1963 in response to violence experienced by Black Americans, the *Lynch Fragments* have since been informed by anti-war activism, the memorialization of individuals, and various African metalworking traditions and histories. In doing so, Edwards invites a multivalent context and potentiality into these objects that is collectively greater than the trauma that bore them.

Sondra Perry's interdisciplinary practice is concerned with technologies of representation and particularly how Blackness is reflected, depicted, surveilled, or emerges from within technological and virtual frameworks. Her 2019 installation, *you out here look n like you don't belong to nobody: heavy metal and reflective* (Fig. 3), is in many ways interested in the same political and contextual history of iron alloys explored by Edwards. Perry's installation combines a large iron casting crucible (complete with a TFT LCD display), a ceiling-mounted video featuring images of eighteenth and nineteenth century iron shackles, and a pyramidal sculptural object whose upturned base is a metal aggregate of railroad spikes, iron oxide, and iron-based meteorites. Contained within each metal object is the astrological life

<sup>6</sup> Ayanna Dozier, "Sound Garden: Ja'Tovia Gary's The Giverny Document," *Gulf Coast* 33.2 (Summer/Fall 2021).

of a meteoric rock whose four-billion-year orbit around the Earth ended with their metallurgic transformation by men into discrete tools of bondage. For Perry, the material history of these objects offers opportunities for recontextualization and new possibilities for their life as instruments in digital production.

In the vacuum of quarantine and physical isolation in the last year, the performance practice of Houston native and 2021 Rome Prize winner Autumn Knight has expanded dramatically. Her March 2021 livestreamed performance, commissioned by Vancouver's Western Front, beautifully transformed the limitations of a virtual performance from her New York studio into a digital proscenium for the staging of digital drawings, performed actions with various objects, and layer upon layer of color, texture, animation, and altered live and archival audio (Fig. 6). At the center of all activity are her Black hands; they are both director and performer, arranging or spinning objects in-frame and cueing audio and other directorial elements out of frame. The centering of Black women, as well as her own body, is a recurrent element in Knight's performance and video work, where the virtual performance space is transformed into an expansive experimental theatre of Black female agency.

Issues of immigrant justice are central to the collaborative duo of L.A.-based artists Cassils and Rafa Esparza and their ongoing project *In Plain Sight*, a coalition of more than 80 artists who over the 4th of July weekend in 2020 identified the locations of immigrant detention centers across Texas and the southwestern United States and, overhead, displayed messages via fleets of sky-typing planes (Fig. 5). *In Plain Sight* also deeply engaged the needs of immigrant communities through extensive community building with migrants and more than 30 organizations on the ground. Sadly, because these facilities still exist and are expanding in the new administration, Cassils and Esparza's work for the Texas Biennial is a continuation of IPS with the addition of AR (augmented reality) technology, which will display artist-generated messages in skywriting at the geolocation of new and existing detention centers across Texas. *Everything worthwhile is done with other people.*

Activism and political intervention were fundamental to the early work of San Antonio native and New York artist Donald Moffett. A founding member of

Gran Fury, the agitprop artist collective that emerged from the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in 1988, Moffett is now living and working through the second epidemic of his lifetime, which he experienced primarily in self isolation on his ranch in south central Texas. “Even though Covid is much more in people’s consciousness [than HIV/AIDS],” Moffett recently explained to *Artforum*, “there are again great political divides: between those who must risk their health and those who can afford to isolate, and between those who wear a mask and those who refuse, which is a tension I’ve been witnessing here in Texas, and everywhere really.”<sup>7</sup>

Moffett’s recent “glory hole paintings” which precede the pandemic have since sprung into organic, cellular mutations like porous virions coated in candy paint (Fig. 7). Not long into the making of this series, the New York City Department of Health released guidelines which detailed safe sex options during the pandemic, including the use of physical barriers like walls. “There’s no worry of Covid in a glory hole, where breathing takes place on opposite sides of the wall. But masking is another form of anonymity—less sexual, maybe mysterious, but still very heightened in a social context . . . Covid is just a subset of a larger aberration in nature with people as vector.”<sup>8</sup>

On January 10, 1901, a well at the Spindletop oil field in Beaumont, Texas struck oil, and it was a gusher. The role of Texas as the singular point of origin in the history of the petroleum industry, and its effect on global climate 120 years later, are examined by Irish artist John Gerrard in his towering wall-scale animation *Western Flag (Spindletop, Texas)* 2017 (Fig. 4). The work is a large-scale digital simulation of the now-barren site of the “Lucas Gusher,” which Gerrard has reimagined with a flagpole at its center bearing a flag of perpetually-billowing black smoke. In a sense, Gerrard’s animation represents the environmental opposite of the American flag on the lunar surface (though the vehicles used to reach each site are powered by the same fuel). *Western Flag* and Gerrard’s other reimagined “virtual sculptures” of the Texas landscape are the product of extensive archival research and underscore the global impact of the human corruption of the natural environment. Gerrard’s inclusion is also significant in that it marks the inclusion of an international artist for whom Texas and its history are subject matter.

<sup>7</sup> Osman Can Yerebakan, “Interviews: Donald Moffett,” *Artforum.com*, January 11, 2021. <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/donald-moffett-84884>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*.

Texas is a geographical and cultural study in contrast. Its vast expanse and diversity can't be summed up or described in any singular way or through any one experience. As curators we understood this to be an expansive framework on which to build a project like the Texas Biennial and an invitation to organize a project that is intergenerational, international in scope, richly diverse, and abundantly transdisciplinary. El Paso native and New York-based painter Virginia Jaramillo and sculptor Mel Edwards are late career artists in their early eighties while some are current and recent MFA grads, like Dallas artist Ari Brielle, Marfa-based Xavier McFarlin, and recent MFAH Core fellow Ryan Hawk. Talented mid-career artists like Mumbai-born Abhidnya Ghuge, Denton's Annette Lawrence, and Houston's Kaneem Smith were essential to the conversation. As were performers like CHRISTEENE's Paul Soileau, artist collectives like Filipinx Artists of Houston and House of Kenzo, composers like Graham Reynolds, and groundbreaking filmmakers like PJ Raval and Ja'Tovia Gary.



Perhaps bell hooks was right and the outcome of engaged solitude truly is an intensification of a sense of togetherness. *Everything worthwhile is done with other people.* Through the work of dozens of exceptional artists, educators, activists, and practitioners, the 2021 Texas Biennial imagines itself as an iterative and expansive source of agency and collective potentiality. It is the product of radical transformations in collective action and awareness catalyzed by a global pandemic and worldwide demonstrations in defense of Black, AAPI, and Palestinian lives. Rather than center narratives of destruction and trauma, the project is an artist-driven, collaborative effort to imagine and build a way forward. Mariame Kaba says it perfectly: “[Artists are] there as the people to help us think through it. *Why does this have to be?* It doesn’t have to be like this. You can think of something totally fucking different. *Why are you all stuck in the presentist moment?* You can dream a future. We need that so desperately in the world.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Eve Ewing, “Mariame Kaba: Everything Worthwhile Is Done With Other People,” *Adi Magazine*, 2019. <https://adimagazine.com/articles/mariame-kaba-everything-worthwhile-is-done-with-other-people>.

**p. 161, Fig. 1.** Ja'Tovia Gary, *The Giverny Suite* (still), 2019. Film, 39:56 minutes, three-channel installation, stereo sound, HD and SD video footage, color/black & white, 1920 x 1080, 16:9 aspect ratio, dimensions variable.  
Image courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.  
© Ja'Tovia Gary.

**p. 162, Fig. 2.** Melvin Edwards, *Some Bright Morning*, 1963. Welded steel. 14 1/2 x 9 2/8 x 5 in.  
Image courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.  
© 2021 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**p. 163, Fig. 3.** Sondra Perry, *you out here look n like you don't belong to nobody: heavy metal and reflective*, 2019. Mixed media including HD video on monitor, SD video on TFT LCD with sound, crucible, 7-pound sad irons, railroad spikes, 18th/19th-century crab rattle shackles, 18th/19th-century shackles, Campo del Cielo iron meteorites, black iron oxide, red iron oxide, 1-Octen-3-ol, web cameras, hard drives, SD card readers, audio and video cables, water, Spanish moss.  
Commissioned by The Shed. Installation view: Manual Override, The Shed, New York City, November 13, 2019–January 12, 2020.  
Image courtesy of the artist, The Shed, NYC, and Bridget Donahue, NYC.  
Photo credit: Dan Bradica.

**p. 164, Fig. 4.** John Gerrard, *Western Flag (Spindletop, Texas)*, 2017. Producer: Werner Poetzelberger  
Programmer: Helmut Bressler  
Modelers: Max Loegler, Philipp Marcks  
Game Engine: Unigine  
Installation development: Jakob Illera / Inseq Design  
Annual solar simulation commissioned by Channel 4, UK.  
Image courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery.

**p. 165, Fig. 5.** Cassils and Rafa Esparza, *BURSTING IN AIR #XMAP, Susan Silton, Nueces County Jail, Corpus Christi, Texas, July 4, 2020*. Part of *In Plain Sight*. Image courtesy of the In Plain Sight Project. Photo credit: Fonzie Muñoz.

**p. 166, Fig. 6.** Autumn Knight, *at Western Front*, 2021. Image courtesy of the artist.

**p. 167, Fig. 7.** Donald Moffett, *Lot 101220 (open orange)*, 2020. Urethane paint, UV clear coat, wood panel support, steel, 12 x 6 5/8 x 5 3/4 in.

**p. 168, Fig. 8.** Virginia Jaramillo, *Site: No. 9 37.2172° N, 38.8544° E*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 54 in. Image courtesy of the artist and Hales, London and New York. Photo credit: JSP Art Photography. © Virginia Jaramillo.

**p. 169, Fig. 9.** Ari Brielle, *Altar (self)*, 2020. Gouache and acrylic on panel, 40 x 36 in.

**p. 170, Fig. 10.** Ryan Hawk, *to confuse selfishness with freedom*, 2020. Tattoo on silicone rubber, synthetic hair, 8 x 3.5 x 1.5 in.

**p. 171, Fig. 11.** Abhidnya Ghuge, *Hands That Pick Me Up*, 2017. Site-specific installation for the Galveston Arts Center, 6000 Hand dyed and woodblock printed paper plates on wire, 12 x 24 x 11 ft.

**p. 172, Fig. 12.** Annette Lawrence, *March 17–24*, January 2021. Location: 1316 Jacksboro Hwy, Fort Worth, TX 76114. Photo credit: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

**p. 173, Fig. 13.** Kaneem Smith, *Perpetual Celebration Tapestry*, 2020. Mixed-media textile remnants, reclaimed and repurposed burlap, steel pipe, acrylic paint, 8 x 10 x 2 ft. Site-specific commission artwork for George Bush International Airport, United Airlines Terminal C.

**p. 174, Fig. 14.** Matt Manalo, *Displacement & Proximity*, 2021. Zip ties, rubber band, wool, raw cotton, laser jet prints on transparencies, found woven trays, 43 x 48 in.

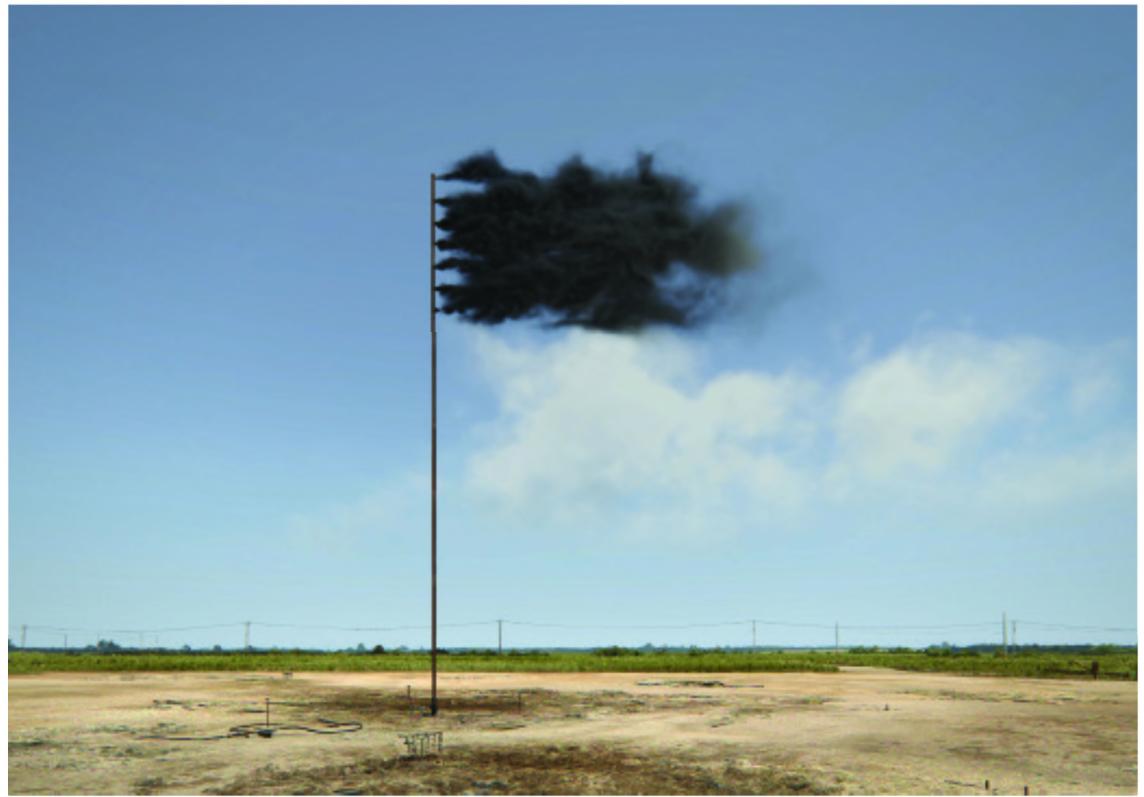
**p. 175, Fig. 15.** Rachel Gonzales in collaboration with Filipinx Artists of Houston, *Portal of Healing*, 2021. Presented at the Chao Center of Asian Studies at Rice University. Photo credit: Trish Morales.

**p. 176, Fig. 16.** House of Kenzo (Brexxitt, Ledef, Bobby Bearz, grapefruit Gonzales), *Mesolithic BREEDing groundt*, 2021. Photo credit: Rosei Matcek & Henry Rodriguez.

















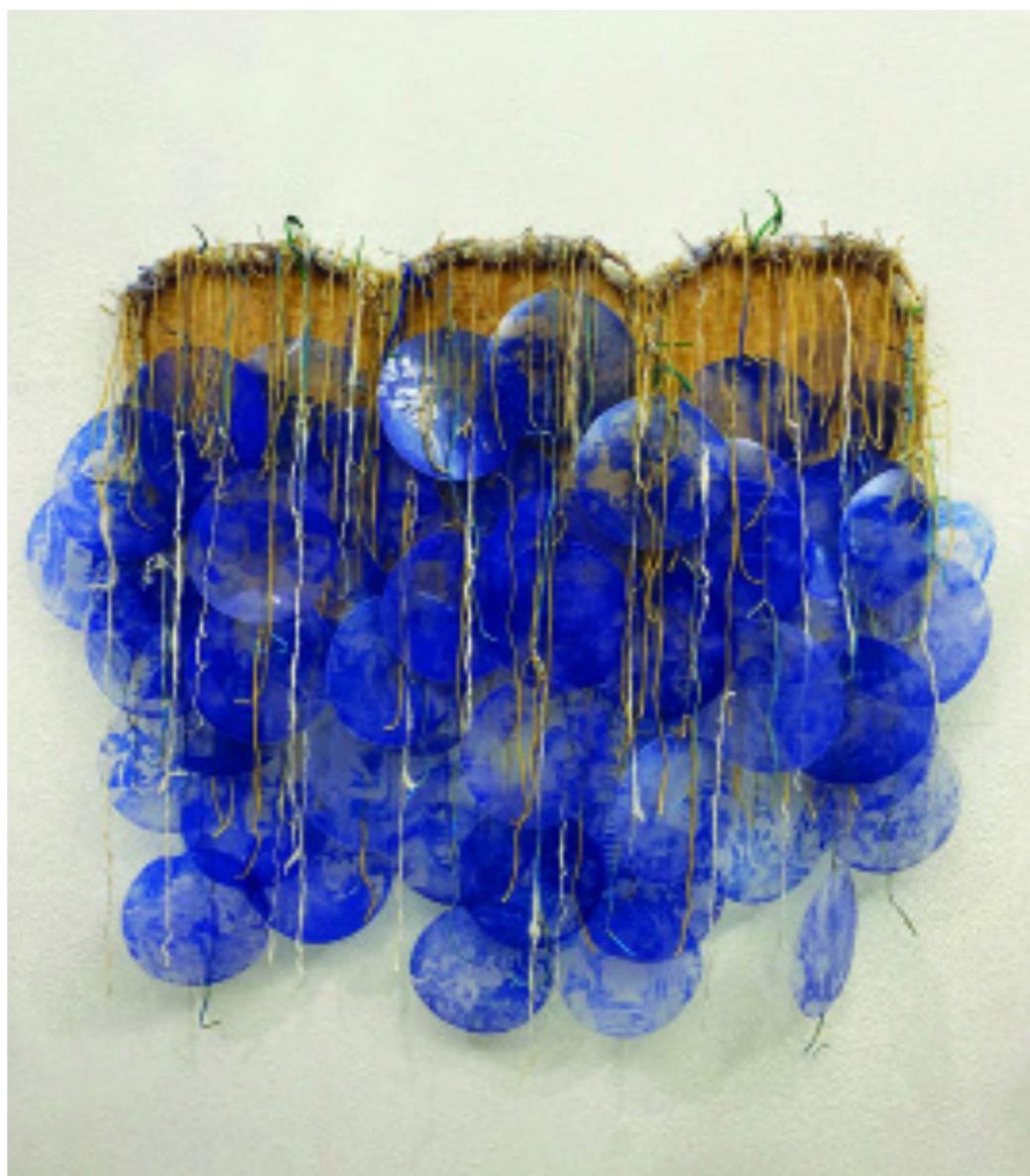
















*Copy 7.*  
Eleanor Eleanor (1977– )  
Metal, four motors, robotic appendages,  
wires, latex, wax, paint, human hair  
2014

After making various self-portraits and self-copies for various shows, I produce a version of my body I can really use. I can arrange her into a chair and sit on her back, and she's chair-like and strong, and she can hold me up. She corrects my posture. She rocks me to sleep. I can sleep standing up when I'm in her arms, as astronauts do in zero gravity, we take up less space this way (though we are double-sized), or I can sleep lying down on her, and as I move in my sleep, the version of my body can put her corresponding body part to mine to hold me up, surface of forearm to surface of forearm (her skin is mattress firm but with some give), ear to ear to cheek to cheek as I turn my head slightly in my sleep, and the effect is like what I imagine the effect of floating in air to be, like what I dream of when I dream I am floating in the air. Look I am holding myself up. Some kind of elaborate bootstrap. This version of myself is valuable, useful, would surely top the one million mark at auction, which they say is a triumph for any woman, but I find I can't sell her the way I can't sell an ugly locket from my dead grandfather containing a lock of his hair from when it was still dark, from before I was ever born, something I can hold to mark the hole, to mark the what's-missing-in-my-life. So I produce another *Copy 7*, or rather, a *Copy 8*, a version of the version of my body I can really use, or in other words, a version I can sell.

## *Billboard.*

Eleanor Eleanor (1977– )

Billboard, color copy, actual sky  
2011

The sky is attached to the city  
at its billboard.

I collect a picture of a cloud that is  
right next to a billboard outside Detroit  
an hour away from where I'm living  
(the cloud grey and washed with the dirt of the air)  
and make a color copy  
exactly the size and shape of the real cloud  
and put it on the billboard.

This costs me \$4,500 for three months.

The real clouds are free and endlessly  
circulating. The city rolls through them  
like a player piano, like endless  
cashier tape. I see  
exact copies of clouds I saw before  
appear again in exactly the same place.  
No cloud leaves a mark.

The city leaves a mark. Buildings  
abstract the sky, blazon it  
into its smaller parts,  
which I contemplate individually. Buildings  
advertise themselves on billboards placed  
ahead of themselves,  
outside of their space.

We see the billboard before we get the building  
before we get the city.

The building is low, strip-malled or  
the building is abandoned.

Abandoned advertisements are tragic,  
like looking at a picture of an already  
dead man taken soon before his death,  
or the already dead mother  
of the already soon dead man.

The past looks tragic over one's shoulder.

The past turns to salt.

But the past is what holds down the sky,  
because something's got to.

Elsewise where would all the clouds go? Surely  
away, away.

Nobody new buys my billboard  
when my three-months lease is up, so they leave it.  
My advertisement for clouds starts unraveling,  
starts ruining, the second I look away.

# Make It Bad. Make It Often.

Success in Making depends on these principles:

1. The natural procedure is to begin with exercises in



Common now is the notion that failure is imperative to the creative process, to innovation. We know all about how terrible first drafts lead to better and better ones. We know that the big breakthrough comes only after we have fallen hard upon our noses. We have memorized this tale, embedded its arc into every televised story, integrated its principles into corporate performance evaluations. Failure as darling of start-up culture, dramatic prequel to the successful feature. Everybody wants at least one. The bigger, the better to fetishize later.

Artists, too, know that writing or painting or drawing or dance is about practice, not perfection, and that staying open to failure keeps us open to triumph, too. But failure to make good art is not why I am here. I am here to talk about making bad art. Sure, some might call making bad art failure, but I am not convinced that what we call bad art and what we call failure are the same thing. In our best failures, we can locate the attempt at making something good, of taking risks and having gone for the big. We often find traces of seriousness, the same seriousness that likely lead to that same failure. When we fail, we are invited to start again, to keep trying, going, risking, repeat.

to establish a feeling of need for the more accurate work.

Take Sol LeWitt, for example, one of the most celebrated artists of the twentieth century. His now-famous advice to Eva Hesse in 1965 was grounded in the importance of allowing oneself to make something bad. To make “the worst” one could make. Read for yourself:

Just stop thinking, worrying, looking over your shoulder wondering, doubting, fearing, hurting, hoping for some easy way out, struggling, grasping, . . . Stop it and just DO! . . .

Don’t worry about cool, make your own uncool. Make your own, your own world. If you fear, make it work for you—draw & paint your fear and anxiety . . .

You must practice being stupid, dumb, unthinking, empty. Then you will be able to DO! . . .

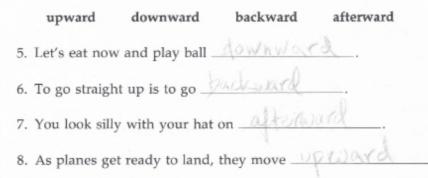
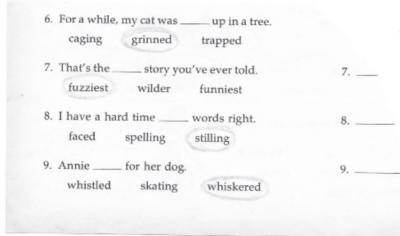
Try to do some BAD work—the worst you can think of and see what happens but mainly relax and let everything go to hell—you are not responsible for the world—you are only responsible for your work—so DO IT. And don’t think that your work has to conform to any preconceived form, idea or flavor. It can be anything you want it to be . . .

I know that you (or anyone) can only work so much and the rest of the time you are left with your thoughts. But when you work or before your work you have to empty you

In Hesse’s case, this freeing led her to complete, on April 23rd, “An Ear in a Pond,” the first in a series of work that launched her as a solo artist (I’ll refrain from the word “career” here for reasons I’ll come to later). If you haven’t seen “An Ear in a Pond,” search for it now. I know you have your phone nearby. Striking, right? This piece shifted the trajectory of Minimalism of the box. Read the particular way the work slipped from the frame and invoked sensuality was radical. This work broke ground for women in a hostile-to-all-things-feminine art world. Thank you, bad art. Look what you invited into being.

Keep in mind that these letters were not text messages or emails that shot off overseas in a matter of split seconds. Hesse had to sit and work for days in the discomfort she felt, in the unknowing, \_\_\_\_\_ in the blank where it belo. She had to work through that before she could give herself, with Sol's help perhaps, permission to be "stupid" and allow the big, bad work to come.

But let's pause here to look at what the words "stupid" and "bad" actually signal for us, SIGNS.....37, 61, 103 what anxieties they produce. Do you remember the following such exercises from grammar school?



Do they send a chill of apprehension through you?

I got the responses wrong, after all. Bad girl. But look how much more fun these wrong sentences are. Notice the space for wonder they open back up in

us. Consider the image of playing ball downward. It invokes twists of gravity, a possible alternate universe. And I, for one, want to know how Annie whiskered for her dog. I also have a hard time stilling words right. There is nothing to see when we give the correct answer. We are made deaf by the fact of its correctness. This is the basis of cliché. There is nothing to see when we prove ourselves smart by finding the rote answers to things.

It is precisely such senselessness that artist William Kentridge wants us to engage. He calls on this “necessary stupidity” in the “august citadel of scholarship” that is Harvard University where he opens his series of Norton Lectures by sharing this note he wrote to himself:

REMEMBER YOU ARE AN ARTIST, NOT A SCHOLAR.  
BUT AVOID A SIX-HOUR PARADE OF IGNORANCE.

But what does he mean by “necessary stupidity” and how it is different from ignorance? In “making a space for uncertainty,” as he suggests, we allow the work to make itself in our hands. We cannot approach the page or the canvas or the wall by planning and knowing. We must humble ourselves, render ourselves thoughtless so as to invoke a state of receptivity. Only in this way can we “traverse the difficult space between ‘I dreamt’ and ‘there came to me in a dream.’ We act “as projectors or receivers of that which is in us, that we don’t know; or as recipients and transmitters of the world outside.” This state of receptivity can be induced by substances, of course, but it can also be accessed through regular practice. Writers and artists in what is called the West have been invoking and testing Zen Buddhist notions about emptying the self since the past century. Natalie Goldberg famously describes it in action when she claims that “a writer practices being dumb.” Notice that the practice here is a verb, a kind of meditation by doing.

For Kentridge, the practice of emptying or “making space for stupidity” is balanced by the back-and-forth of the artist-as-maker and artist-as-viewer (what many writers call the “inner critic”). interest in acts of measuring reveals itself with equal strength

In his lecture, he shows double-exposure images of himself: Two Kentridges, one at the wall, drawing; the other, seated, looking, critiquing. He writes:

The blank sheet of paper awaiting its marks. It is not that a drawing superimposes itself on the surface. But there is an urge, an impulse to make the mark. Possible marks or shapes, projected out onto the paper. A diagonal starting here, leading to an edge here. A line here, or lowered to this point. The shape we will find only when we start to draw—a mixture of making and looking.

Perhaps this is a good place to talk about the division between making and looking, between the ARTIST AS MAKER and the ARTIST AS VIEWER. This is a very real division.

[Show film sequence of *Drawing a Rhinoceros*.]

Any seasoned artist recognizes these two, a seeming split. Here, Kentridge praises the shadows. That is the name of this first lecture, in fact: "In Praise of Shadows." What shadows, exactly? Those disparaged by Socrates is his description of the cave in Plato's *The Republic*. Those famous shadows on the cave wall that Western intellectual traditions are meant to lead humans away from. The shadows of ignorance and the leading into light. The light of the direct sun. The light of direct knowing. The light of Enlightenment. The light, not the dark. Not the dark shadows thrown upon the cave walls by fire:

From this, Plato tells us, comes the ethical imperative of the philosopher. The man who has seen the light and apprehended the understanding that follows from it has a duty to return to the cave, to unshackle those in darkness, and to bring them up from the cave into the light. If necessary, this must be done with force. The nexus of enlightenment, emancipation, and violence emerges. Our agenda has been set.

The poet Édouard Glissant, writing in 1967, pointed out these same ravages of light versus dark in the processes of cultural genocide and imperialism:

Half the world

came out of the nights, the half that had until then been marked to be the dark face of the globe. And here the earth became one, and in this density the One, mandated by the imaginary, was confirmed. The poetic ecstasy of the One is untied by militant unity.

Glissant, like Kentridge, takes us into the underside of making, into the messy necessity of what he calls “generous naiveté” and a critique of

a “willful” literature  
(in which intention gains over the unpredicted part which hitherto belonged to the hazardous realm of the book).

He sees danger in the harmony of “the One,” a harmony achieved in blood and suffering that is “not speakable.” Read Glissant. Allow yourself to be lost in the density of his images, in how his words resist becoming objects.

Decades later, Kentridge wonders, too, about the generative secrets these “shadows” hold for all of us, and especially for artists. He investigates the “pleasure of the trompe l’oeil,” the enjoyment we take in “being tricked and not tricked at the same time.” He says that our awareness of the game, which becomes a “double-game”

4 and 4 make 8,  $4 + 4 = 8$ , 2 fours

of being tricked and not tricked, then becomes

a triple game: the book and playing card we know; the awareness of the paint, oil, glaze, and canvas which makes the illusion of the book and card; and thinking of ourselves, our self-awareness of looking.

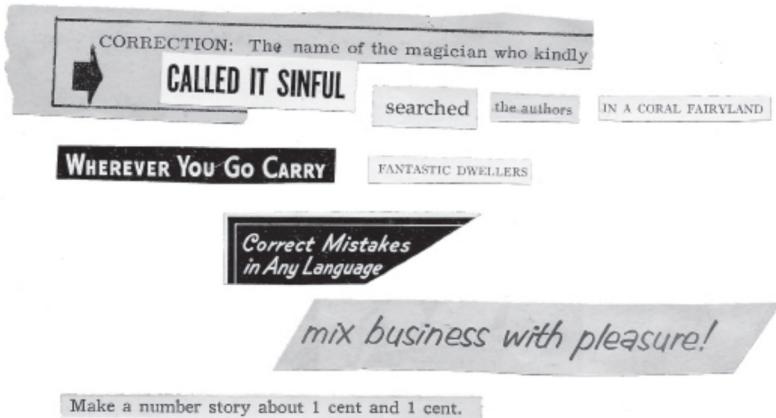
He contends that, on “the other end of the scale from the *trompe l’oeil*,” one shamanic divination practiced in northern South Africa calls upon viewers to project their future “from the eyes outward” upon a blank canvas. No bones or runes necessary. The “view” comes from inside the body.

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Kentridge wonders, too, about the consequences of Plato’s urging us into light, not only as an artist, but as a South African. His next lecture extends this celebration to a celebration of the shadow and darkness that Europeans spent centuries demonizing in his home continent. NAMES AND SYMBOLS.....26, 82, 83, 85, 94, 124, 132, 140, 141 In “A Brief History of Colonial Revolts” and “Vertical Thinking: A Johannesburg Biography,” he teases apart and makes messy the impact of colonial rule on real lives and on the formation of culture and scales of value. On the act of making itself. He then leads us back into the studio, into mistranslation and entropy. He makes a mess of his lectures, which, in turn, makes another kind of sense.

He performs his “necessary stupidity” by highlighting the thought-gathering “ums” and pauses. He does not whip his animal body into speaking without gestures or in clear, clean arguments, but welcomes them in all their slips and hesitations and breaking. Throughout the lectures, published as a book, he lets loose ends dangle and avoids clean arguments. (He opens the lectures by telling us of his distrust of logical debate, after all.) What is performed here is a decolonial questioning of the cave’s role in a continent of sun. But, it is also a generous showing, an extended exposure that allows us to slow and to connect. To be imperfect and necessarily stupid, too.



Let's look again, though, at these messages about receptivity and play and uninhibited doing. The LeWitt-Hesse exchange and Hesse's subsequent breakthrough illustrate the make-bad-art-on-your-way-to-making-good-art sequence, that one corporate productivity gurus tout as epitomizing the important role of failure in productivity creativity. Yes, Hesse's willingness to embrace the bad does lead to arrangements of dots on the page, as what is ultimately deemed good, but let's stop to consider the subjectivity of these markers. The New York and European art worlds finally deemed the works as such, and Hesse herself wrote that she could feel that they were her best works up to that point. One can see that joy of stumbling into something vital all across her face in the picture of her posed beneath "An Ear in a Pond." But I would argue that this glow and this joy came before she'd stumbled into the good. This joy arises in the play that making so-called bad art allows.

Let's consider the example of Jean Luc Godard. Renowned for his inventive approach to cinema and narrative throughout the 1960s, Godard lost fans and popularity as he continued to reinvent his approach through the rest of his life.

1. How can we cross to the other \_\_\_\_\_?
2. We'll use that bridge made of \_\_\_\_\_.

Why did he not stop experimenting if such risks incurred distaste from the public and fans alike? Because trying new things and making what some call bad art is much more life-giving than sameness and safety. We all know the story of that dichotomy, **Moderate rates.** right? No artist wants to be Thomas Kinkade, even if we would gladly figure out what to do with his boatloads of money. The guy died by overdosing on alcohol and Valium only after filing for his company's bankruptcy and a stint of public urination, after all.



Critics and artists agree that Kinkade epitomized bad art, the kind that takes itself seriously yet has no substance. But there are other kinds of bad art:

We write 3 tens also in this way: **RAILROAD** art that revels in its terribleness without hiding behind any hipster-sanctioned irony, for one, and art that offers play and connection, for another.

When we make bad art, we are not always trying to make good art and we are not always left feeling the call to do better. We may, in fact, be satisfied—nay, elated—upon the completion of something truly bad. Now, I am not talking here about novices who make bad art because they do not yet have a taste for the good, whatever that is. Although, perhaps, belongs in the sentence. I am also talking about them. I am definitely not talking, though, about risk-free, mass-produced art made as commodity. I am interested in the seasoned artist and the freedom one can find in making truly bad art. I am interested in art made by groups of people, art that

prioritizes collaboration and process over final object. But I am interested in this object, too—especially when it is bad—and what such art can unleash in us.

Say each word below to yourself.

Put the number of syllables you hear  
in the word on the line



One work that many critics agree is bad art, even possibly the worst, is the 2015 Swedish film *Dyke Hard*. A queer midnight musical that embraces its B-movie cult genre roots under the banner, “Trash as Trash Can,” *Dyke Hard* took 400 people four years to complete. It didn’t begin as a feature-length film, though. *Dyke Hard* first came into the world as a silly trailer that feminist/LGBTQIA+ bookstore owner Bitte Andersson and several customers made to advertise a movie that did not exist. Public demand for a feature film made them reconsider and soon a community effort was in action, from successful crowdfunding campaign to collaborative filmmaking. The result is an epic 80s-style musical extravaganza that celebrates amateurism and heart. Martin Kudlac’s review notes that,

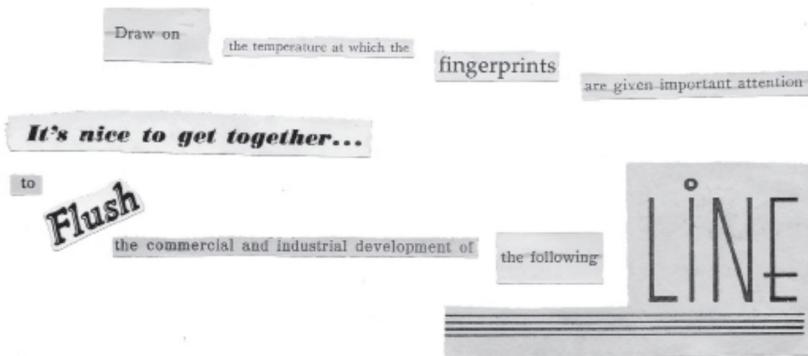
Despite licentious unrestrained gaiety, the admirable amount of collective work, enthusiasm and a hefty dose of positive naivety, all count among the building blocks.

In *Dyke Hard*, friendship creates a transformative kind of “magic,” to borrow again from Kudlac’s review, that the bookstore’s queer community wanted to foreground. It’s the kind of magic that saves our actual queer lives, and the amateurism—a word

whose root is *love*—that friendship encourages plays a key role in the creation of any community art. This is the kind of bad art I want to engage: the art that doesn't take itself seriously, the art that connects. The art that makes us grab our paints or pens or microphones and play.

fruitful paths to a profitable number outcome, will yield a larger volume if allowed to stand until room temperature before beating.

There is much talk these days, thanks to the popularity of Dr. Brené Brown, about how vulnerability is a prerequisite for connection, and the antidote to shame and isolation. The best bad art allows space for such connection. The best bad art calls us to become raw again, to approach the work like a novice, for fun. It shakes us loose of our professionalism and cool. It shakes us loose of our perfectionism and shame because it is shameless. Such bad art does not culminate in good objects or productive outcomes the way Hesse's did, but in a deeper change, one that transforms the insides of us.

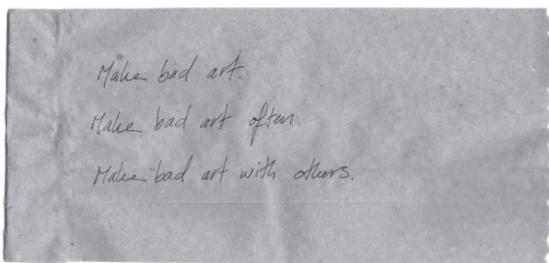


After watching *Dyke Hard*, my girl and I grabbed her mini-keyboard, dressed up in anything bright thing we could find—cracked red belt for a headband, grandma's shimmering polyester blouse, sideways ponytail secured with string—

and made up a ridiculous song for a friend. We improvised numerous videos, invented lyrics on the spot, laughed until we nearly peed the bed. Our session was over by the end of the night, bodies weakened and lightened from the hilarity, and we felt closer to friends we hadn't seen during the long pandemic months after sharing the terribleness we had made with all of them. During the following days, the wake of our play even allowed me back into writing I had felt stuck on the outside of for weeks. But, again, the point wasn't about the good art into which the bad art led. I was delighted by the awful films themselves—both the music video and the silly outtakes—and wanted to share them with everyone I knew. I wanted to say: *Look how bad these are and also how much fun. I want you to have fun, too, and be weird and silly and shameless.* It was the impulse to make and to share that I had known as a kid, an impulse we all know. It is this very impulse that Lynda Barry questions in her recent books and in her research at the Wisconsin Institute for Discovery. For Barry, interest lies in the shame associated with making something bad that leads most of us to stop our natural inclination toward drawing and storytelling at some point in our childhoods. "When did you first notice you were bad at something? And then what happened?" she asks in *What It Is*. "Good or bad. Q: Is one always in exchange for the other? Is there something missing in both?"

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Look again at the words above. Find the



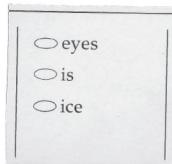
In the midst of this same epidemic, I began working with a group of volunteers to translate Fabio Morais's Brazilian book arts manifesto, *Sabão (Soap)*. I was the only native speaker of English, and not one of us had ever translated before. From the start, perfection was not our goal; the collaborative *act* of translating was. I italicize this word *act* because, in Morais's essay, he proposes that publishing and editorial acts are at the heart of Brazilian book art culture. This is substantially different from European and North American book art traditions that center the *object*.

INDEFINITE COMPARISON..... 18, 19, 20 I won't delineate the details here because you should read his essay for yourself—we've translated it and everything for you. But I will describe our translation *act* as embracing the fundamentals of a bad work of art.

We (1) the following forms:  
might be asked to write out as associated with intentionally left in slips of language that give the texture of other Englishes, of an English that has colonized Brasil through Hollywood and fast food and military interventions and business requisites, an English that has come back to its empire in a marvelously distorted form. We embraced what may be perceived as bad for reasons that resonated with the decolonial bent of Morais's words, but also for the space it allowed for our coming together—seventeen strangers from across Brasil, Denmark, and the United States. We gladly gave our Wednesday nights to discuss the minutia of syntax and word choice over video conference because we believed in the work, but also because we believed in each other and in our work together—that its messiness could be truer than a translation that passed through only a single lens. Luckily, Morais was game and recognized that our act performed just the spirit he was arguing present in Brasil since 1798. (I repeat: read the text for yourself.)

See if you can do it without looking at the alphabet.

Let's look now at the role stakes have to play in the making of bad art. Nicholas Serot, Director of the Tate Museums, described Eva Hesse's art by saying, "these aren't works you've ever seen before." A compliment by Western standards. But then he goes on to claim—in her own documentary, no less—that "they're made for herself. They're not made for an audience. They're made in the same way as her diaries were made or her notebooks were made. She's exploring and you see it in her work. You see her trying out different combinations." Consider the underhanded nature of this compliment. A male critic would not dare say such things of a male artist who is "exploring" and "trying out different combinations." He would be described in much more commanding terms, as a genius hard at work—never as dabbling for himself in his diary. It is no surprising revelation that brilliant female-presenting artists consistently have their work and their processes downplayed and devalued by even those with good intentions. We've all internalized these myths.



Such minimizations should not make us lose heart, though. Nor should they add another reason to take ourselves too seriously. A lack of expectation can be detrimental to our early formation, absolutely, but it can also allow us even more space in which to do our deepest and most necessary work. It can afford us more license to stay "stupid" and penetrate the core of our making, to get at the big work, the moving kind. No one is looking. Go! ! We cannot fully control the perpetuation of oppression, but we can refuse it and fight against it. We can do our deepest work in spite of all efforts to minimize it. In fact, we can sometimes do our deepest work precisely because of these efforts. The lack of expectation can be a gift. No one has ever expected much of me as an artist. I was

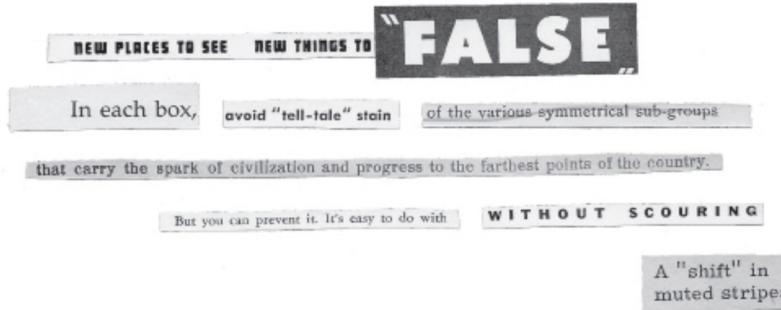
free to grow into myself without the burden of being treated early on as a genius or as even having great potential.

A few months ago, I had dinner with an old friend—a male artist from a family of famous male artists—who asked me with genuine concern if I ever considered my legacy. I nearly laughed beer through my nostrils, the idea seemed so ridiculous. No femme-presenting human I knew was writhing in her mid-thirties over the question of legacy. We counted ourselves lucky if we were still making and being read, exhibited,

discussed. The idea of ever having a legacy was not something I had ever felt entitled to aspire to in the first place. Sure, in my wildest fantasies, I wanted to have an impact like Adrienne Rich or Audre Lorde, but this meant specific things: I wanted to make work that moved people, that changed the way they saw their world and their lives. I wanted my work to save a life like their work had saved mine. I wanted to give to others what these writers had gifted me, but I did not think in terms of legacy. Legacies were for men and rich people, for rich men, mostly. I was a country bumpkin and a queer femme, the daughter of cabinet makers and loggers and minnow farmers who had escaped town by the skin of her breasts. I grew up not knowing a single working artist and still consider myself lucky to have even achieved this: a life dedicated to my work and to the work of others. And lucky I am. I know the stakes. I know the ease and risk of giving into lowered expectations.

These lowered expectations, though, are also everything. I know many artists who started out expecting themselves to write *The Great American Novel* only to have turned out to have written nothing twenty years later. Do not torture or inhibit yourself with expectations. Do the up-front work of renaming inherited or internalized or culturally sanctioned detritus that stands between you and the work that you





Yes, the cultural expectations that surround male artists, as Kate Zambreno so poignantly details in *Heroines*, do indeed help them to affirm themselves as artists, and need to be more evenly allocated among all of us. But such expectations do not always guarantee that the work will get done or that it will be any good (though examples abound of not-so-good work being exclaimed as great by the simple fact of the value we place on the maker's privileged identity) and covered with dirt. Any artist who has had success can warn you about the dangers of expecting yourself to make good work in its wake. Expectation can have a paralyzing effect. Lower your expectations. Be stupid. Be small. Only when we are small can we crawl into the places where our truest work hides. You will find your footing. You will find your sense of self and worth in the making of your truest work. You will find it by remembering that your ability to become small does not diminish you; it is a strength. It keeps you agile. It keeps you inside the work. It keeps you making.

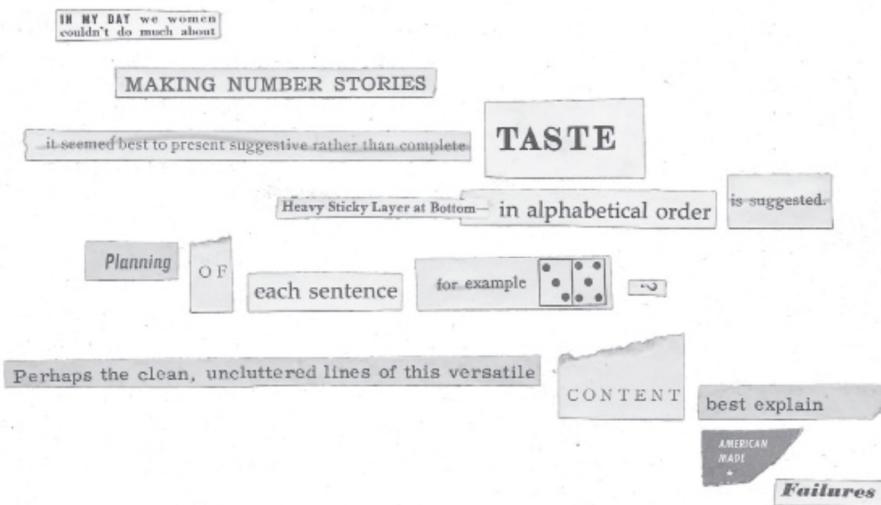


What I mean by “bad art” is also the art we fear is bad when we are making it—the art that feels unruly, raw, or otherwise terrifying. Its making leaves us naked, dumb, animal. Move toward this feeling, stalk vulnerability. By vulnerability, I do not necessarily mean the sharing of our deepest secrets. I mean the vulnerability our imperfections render in us. I mean the state of connection that vulnerability allows. Writer, scholar, and publisher Teresa Carmody delineates this in one of several “confessions in language” she made during a video of a talk entitled, “Life, Art, and the Title of this Talk,” at Stetson University’s MFA of the Americas’ 2020 summer residency:

I like to admit not knowing things because then I get to share how I learned them. To me, this is a deeply feminist gesture in that it grounds my authority, which is different than knowledge, within relationships that actively make space for vulnerability and intimacy. What is your relationship to authority and to the authority of others? What is the difference, if any, between being an author and being a writer? Between being a maker and being a reader?

Like Carmody, I am interested in “actively mak[ing] space for vulnerability” by showing up necessarily stupid or dumb. Dumb as in dull. Dull as in not sharp. Suspended at certain angles, sharpness kills the incoming body. Welcome the whole animal by becoming animal again. Not animal in the way European languages have led us to think of animals as dumb or lesser than human. Learn from “the animal of your body” and disavow language that claims ownership over such a creature (your body). Let the animal be untamed, leading. Let it teach stillness, shamelessness, how to be uninhibited again. Brave the unsharpened, the wild, and let it keep you humble, receptive, able to give. It is this giving that interests me. The writer unafraid to be imperfect—not ignorant or dull because they do not know any better, but able to hold their imperfections and give from that space—is, by definition, a generous writer. There are not too many of these. We seem caught up in the sublimity of perfected craft at the height of our literary empire built atop a post-war masculinist writing workshop model that spits out

identical stories for an identical (read: **GOOD TASTE IS YOUR GUIDE** ; read: "the One;" read: violently harmonious; read: culturally dominant) audience catered to by state-instituted literary magazines and corporate publishing houses. Sometimes we are blinded by the sheen of our own polished surface. Sometimes we hide behind theoretical or poetic impenetrability and consider any transparency a dumbing down. Sometimes we know not where to find readers between those reached by a literature of Oneness and the playful renderings of those deemed "experimental" and therefore elitist, too complex.



I am not calling for any blanket accessibility that would render brilliant work bland. I am not urging that we exchange complex literature for only easily digestible fare. This sentiment abounds in the United States: life is hard, so why add difficult literature to it? Why give people another chore? Why not give them pleasurable, easy reading? Because easy reading makes life harder. What some call difficult only feels difficult because of the way we are taught that literature needs to be unlocked, that there is some magic key we must find in order to unlock its meaning. Nor am

I advocating for literature to be difficult for the sake of being difficult. Lord knows there are plenty of bland examples of that. What we most need is a willingness to make and read works that are generous but that do not give themselves away so readily. Works we might not recognize the boundaries (read: genre; read: easily marketable category) of right away. Work that might not contain the boundaries to which we are acculturated. *Every fertile abstraction nourishes itself of its fruitful imperfection.*

(Glissant). We need art to stay with us at the bottom of the body where tissues are warm and sinews undefined. We need art to spark more questions than it answers. We need art to admit the mess we intuit, to reveal connections in its tangle. We need art to unhinge that tangle and loop it into the next. To survive in a complex world, we need complex culture. We need comfort, yes, and sometimes we need escape, but we also need language and thought and making that lead us through, that can carry all our messiness and vulnerability and breaking and seepage. Only those writers who brave their whole selves—their complexity, their ease, their imperfections, stupidities, and charms—who revel in making bad art often enough to stay sane, have anything to offer the rest of us. Go into the shadows, saturate yourself in your dampest, crudest places. Become animal. Emerge with coal or emerald. Leave rough or facet. Share freely.

## Ricordi of Chance Operations

A moth that drinks the tears of sleeping birds,  
a girl who fears the numeral thirteen.  
The shallow bowl of water will reveal  
the future of a watcher reflected  
on the miratorium's still surface.  
Triskaidekaphobia they call it,  
this mathematical anxiety, mine,  
evidently, to anticipate or  
evade. Already I fear moths and bees,  
most anything that flies and lives—not ash  
from the fires that lights on my hair, then falls,  
but seed-spores and cattail fragments, yes those,  
and insects throbbing in the heat like thin  
metal speaking, occupying August  
air with sound that can't be switched off, muted.  
Neither can wildfire be contained, but  
gorges in the dark beyond the ridgeline,  
menacing night sky with glowering orange  
that glows above the edge of distant hills.  
I fold my wings, drown into sleep. Thirteen  
moths fly from the rim of the future's glass bowl  
to flock my eyes, be slaked by insensible tears.

# Number

Take it in, Genet says.  
Drop your body, willing  
into the dilation.

Ruined in the apparition  
of complex lines and shadows,  
wild-weed and rattle of this  
black fragment of city park,

Genet.  
Loving anyone  
who will tender.

Criminal, hopeless,  
strange and inside  
the brutal fever of this  
small strange night: 2 A.M.,  
nadir-blue, Eastern city.

Genet, my other, brave  
double, tell me,  
what do I say, what do I  
do—

to the dream  
when it comes to me.

## Its Origins

I didn't want to look  
to see the thing I made.  
I knew if I did, the shame  
would enter back into me  
like a song that won't stop  
repeating. I was confined  
inside the narrow space. But I was  
using my arms, my strength.  
Remember, she said, shame is a veil  
milky like film or the upper  
layer of dreams. You can lift it  
with your fingers, using your substance.  
But the mind is a machine. It never stops  
thinking. In the photograph  
I am wearing a scarf of many small  
bright birds and the silver  
branches of unknown trees.  
I am moving against the future,  
my small body pushed up  
against its glass.

# 現在,或者把門反鎖的時候

《男身》與《弄泡泡的人》輪流發言

1.

說著,就拿起鏡頭來了

曲起來如你的睡姿／鏡頭,固執又叛逆／小小的甜蜜的拳頭／前後。遠近。大小。高低。／

熱戀中的我們／纏成一束／一派自然的緣／我們靠得很近／整個山谷靜極／像是被手電筒照到／

一種尷尬／美麗而多彩／我們只是偶然相逢／輕輕的咬著／慷慨地潑灑／

唯一跟你留下來的／也就是你看到我放在書桌上的／幾乎像假的／那一張／蜿蜒出來／在我腦中重複曝光／

兩隻夜行性動物／一場偽裝／你將你柔軟的舌尖輕貼在它的背面／我由衷地向萩原道謝

# from Now, or When the Door Was Locked on the Inside

Male Bodies and The Bubbles Maker take turns to speak.<sup>1</sup>

1.

when speaking, the camera was held up

curved like your pose in sleep/ the camera's lens, steadfast & fractious/ a fist of petite sweetness/ front back. far close. huge small. high low./

lovestruck/ we were woven as one/ a scene of natural green/ we got real close to it/ the whole valley went ultra-quiet/ as if caught by torchlight/

a sort of shame/ picturesque & hued/ we saw each other by chance only/ we gently bit/ we generously spattered/

the only thing left about you/ was what I put on my desk that you also saw/ that looked almost unreal/ that photo/ it turned up meandering/ in my head, repeatedly exposed/

two nocturnal animals/ an incident of disguise/ the tip of your soft tongue licked the photo's back/ I genuinely thanked hagiwara<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This poem is an experimental, intertextual dialogue composed of found language from two contemporary gay essay collections written in the Taiwanese Mandarin: Sun Tzu-ping's *Male Bodies* and Chen Po-yu's own *The Bubbles Maker*.

<sup>2</sup> Hagiwara is a subject in *Male Bodies*: a Japanese exchange student in Taiwan, who develops a relationship with the protagonist.

2.

秘密就開始長成了一顆果實

隨意切割／對於彼此的重要性／盛裝在皿中／也就柔軟起來／就像命運的巧手安排著我們／又淺又薄／無法理解的感傷／

極狹窄，僅容一人通行／光的小傷口／隱密，但是相通／被枯葉覆蓋／洞裡／快速輪替／曖昧色調／在我黑暗的夢境裡

我們的入口，是別人的出口／好像沒有誰有選擇權／虛線／站了一隊又一隊的遊客／走到百枚皿／檢查我們的四肢／源源不絕，愛的汁液／相遇時用母語高談／「有光，是陽光！」／「不要重複」

2.

then secrets started growing into a fruit

feel free to incise/ what we meant to each other/ held by a saucer/ we mellowed out/ as if fate's delicate hands were puppetizing us/ shallow as well as thin/ an unfathomable sorrow/

utterly narrow, only one person could be let through/ the tiny wounds of light/ hidden, but interconnected/ blanketed by dead leaves/ inside the cave/ a swift rotation/ of lust & hue/ in my dark dream

our entrance was others' exit/ no one seemed entitled to choosing/ along the dotted line/ troops after troops of tourists/ entering the akiyoshido cave/ to examine our limbs/ our endless stream of love juice/ when seeing each other, we talked loudly in mother tongue/ "there's light, it's sunlight!"/ "do not repeat"

5.

你的眼神寫滿納悶

夢中不自覺抓破／歪歪斜斜的兩條線／沒有事情要發生／在陽光升起的剎  
那／沒有人看得見我，連我自己都不能

迂迴曲折／睡意全無／我說我們要愛到永遠／他不開心／難道就真的會永遠?  
／毫髮無傷／沒有上班／鬧鐘沒把我吵起來／關鍵詞／擠滿青苔／任何可以  
回答你的字眼／透明清淺／只能擁有當下啊／不知蹤影的鳥／你好嗎?／一  
只天藍色／持續震動了幾次／電話給你／我有權利／我期待

時間發出微弱的聲音／天氣已經涼得很均勻／有人打開燈／難以言說／很  
野／你的溫柔／再過個彎，就要下坡了／電話鈴聲像是死了一般／額頭、眼角、  
兩頰／往偏旁的一處空間／側身通過百葉窗／離開學校／黑褐色的／傷心的  
晚餐啊／他是第一個。他倒數／你慷慨答應

5.

your eyes were full of puzzlement

I had scratches from a dream without knowing it/ two slanting lines/ nothing would happen/ upon sunrise/ no one would be able to see me, not even myself

we got complicated/ sleepless/ I said we would love each other forever/ he was upset/ could there be really forever?/ unscathed/ skipped work/ my alarm did not wake me/ keywords/ rife with moss/ any words would do as answers/ clear & shallow/ could only live in the moment/ the vanished bird/ how are you?/ a sky of blue/ the phone trembled a few times/ someone was calling you/ I exercised my right/ I anticipated

time whimpered/ it was getting chilly evenly throughout the day/ someone turned on the light/ as if having something harsh to say/ very primitive/ your kindness/ after another turn, then downhill/ my ringtone, like the deceased/ your forehead, corners of your eyes, your cheeks/ I retired to the space on the side/ I passed through the blinds sideways/ I departed school/ a mud-colored/ sad dinner/ he was the first. he was counting backward/ you handsomely said yes

## Rogue Taxidermy

Along West Mountain Road I trail Cole and watch his trash bag sway. He holds it at his side by the bunny ears of my double knot. Passing drivers might think we're volunteers, but even at fifteen we look less like do-gooder Boy Scouts than criminals sentenced to pick up trash as part of parole. We're all hair and grease and pustules bursting. Cole doesn't shower because a natural smell is part of his look. It's awful, not like locker room body odor, but worse, like rot. Sometimes I'll go whole weekends without using deodorant or showering, and I'll smell my armpits to get used to it. It helps. I want to match his filth. I'm trying to grow a beard.

Eyes down, he reads out the roadside's trash as he walks: oil jug, windshield glass, used syringe, rodent corpse. He bends over. Stolen women's jeans cling to his ass, and some mixture of November and shame makes me shiver. We're far enough up the mountain that you can see all of Scranton from the deader spots. Behind trees, the sun sinks, its light like breaking ice, and in gaps between the thinning pines I see stalled headlamps a half-mile below in the valley, neon Xs on the porn store slash bowling alley, a gaudy glowing cross on the church that used to be Kmart.

“Fuck yes,” Cole says, pulling my knot apart. “Totally undamaged skull!”

He and I trawl the shoulder every day after school. We're looking for bodies or parts of them to bring back to Cole's garage, where broken animals wait, defleshing in paint buckets full of beetles or chemicals, for Cole to reassemble them in new combinations. Gluing the bones/fur of one animal to the bones/fur of another isn't a hobby I would've chosen, but I'm getting into rogue taxidermy because Cole is into rogue taxidermy.

He snaps on his latex glove, picks up the squirrel, drops it in the garbage bag, and hands the bag to me. I do the tying because I'm too squeamish to touch. While I finish off the knot, tripling it to signal I'm cold and bored, he psycho-voice says, “Open wide, Scotty!” Cross-eyed, he makes a claw of his hand reaching out for me. He's doing Mad Dentist, which he always does when he's in the gloves,

and I know I'm in love because it's deranged but I laugh. Blood sticks a few gray hairs to the tip of his pointer finger. I pull away and tell him to fuck off.

"Let's turn back."

"You mean this way?"

He points farther up the road.

"Cole, stop."

"Catch me, make me." He sprints, leaving me behind still holding the bag.

The road leads away from our houses, and if you follow it all the way up West Mountain, you'll hit the abandoned sanitarium where kids cooler than me (by a lot) and Cole (by a little) go to shoot up. Cole would do different drugs if he did them. At his Catholic school it's easier to get cocaine than heroin, but at my school it's the opposite. I spend my lunch periods listening to books on tape in the library, so I don't know how anyone gets coke or heroin or, honestly, even cigarettes. Cole doesn't know that about me, though.

The thing is I'm actually more punk than Cole in some ways. Like, Cole's rich and I'm poor. Cole's mom is an orthodontist. Mine is an alcoholic. Cole markers up his arms like he's got a tattoo, but I've got a huge scar down my arm from an accident when I was young, so I look like a cutter. He's got a Lou Reed fan profile in his Myspace top 8, but my school is having an *actual* heroin epidemic. There's a banner above the school's main door that says "Heroin, It's Here!" It's meant as a warning but reads like an ad. When I walk past, I gayly think of Super Woman, Sailor Moon, cartoon women I used to wish I could grow up to be—and that is the exact kind of faggy thing that makes me emphatically not punk.

As Cole sprints and howls away, I imagine it, the drug use. I picture something ritualistic and vaguely supernatural. The light is Harry Potter light, *Chamber of Secrets* light, and the ones without the needles are chanting, doing something like spirit fingers with wiggly hands in the air, while the one with the needle injects himself and says something pained and wise under his breath. I almost Googled it once, how to do drugs, in case it was something Cole wanted to try together, but for now he's straight edge, so I am too.

Before the road curves, before the woods would've taken him out of sight, he stops running and breaks into one of his kicky, jumpy punk dances, jumping and

kicking in a circle, like he's got prey trapped there. He's singing the song "Born to Die" by the band Choking Victim. He put it on a CD he made for me. It's not a romantic CD, and I don't like the music (Cole doesn't know my favorite band is No Doubt) but I listen to it all the time.

I run toward him.

Cole's my future and I'm his future. We've talked about it, even though we haven't had sex or even kissed. He says we'll inherit his parents' house when they die—"of old age when it's time," I always interject, and Cole fake-evil smiles and says "or however." Then we'll sell it and live off the profit in some ratty place, a shed, a shack off an unmapped road, and we'll furnish it with found things. We'll live off the land with skills we learn, and we won't see another person forever and ever—but lately Cole's been changing the story. He says maybe we'll invite fucked up travelers to stay and we'll hear their stories about drugs they did with other drifters or stowaways they fucked in train cars. Once when I asked him how the drifters will find us, he got breathless and loud and said, "How did people find the Underground Railroad? Word of mouth, secret codes, smoke signals, bird messages, carvings in trees, intu-fucking-ition!"

But I know what he's thinking. He has all these secret internet friends from music message boards I don't know the names of. I know who he wants—ELelektrikgoodbi. Cole says he's a deadbeat punk in Philly. I'm afraid he's in love. I'm afraid he'll invite ELelektrik to the cabin. I think he's a creep, but I don't bring it up. Cole gets excited when he talks about ELelektrik, which I hate, but I never want to ruin it when he gets excited. If I know what makes him excited, I can make myself match it, so I'll make him excited too.

Here on the road, it's just us, and when I picture the shack, I picture it without the travelers, without ELelektrikgoodbi, without his stories that'll make Cole's eyes widen and mouth gape and head nod as he ignores me. We don't need other people. I want Cole and me in a sleeping bag on a wooden floor, no heat, no power lines, the whole place unfurnished, dark.



Cole and I met on the school bus at the end of last year. I was getting bullied, called a faggot by Sammy and Paul, who were my friends in middle school until my fagginess became so obvious that if they stayed my friends they would've become fags by association. They were being especially bad that day, trying to get the whole bus to do some sort of homophobic chant, and Cole told them to fuck off.

Later that night I was at my computer. It was a summery spring. There were crickets outside, a fire going in a neighbor's yard, and a breeze was carrying burnt pine through my open window when Cole IM'd me. I don't know how he got my screen name.

r u?

this is Cole

am I what lol

u kno

I didn't know what to say. I typed out *no haba* and deleted it and typed out *yes* and deleted it and typed out *no lol*. The fact that he didn't put the word in writing made me trust him. It felt like he understood secrecy, like he might also have a password-protected online journal where he switched the names of crushes to girl names. I typed yes and sent it.

He said he was too, and we started sitting together on the bus.

We don't go to the same school, but my school and the Catholic school share a bus for kids who live on the outskirts, where Scranton fades into the farms and woods that surround it. We'd never spoken before even though he lives so close that if he screamed in his driveway, I could hear it from my house. The Catholic kids kept to themselves on the bus, and to be honest, I never thought he was my type even though my type was pretty vague, basically just whatever pics I could find for free online or in the *Men's Health* magazines my dad kept in the bathroom.

Even now that we're in love I don't think about Cole when I jack off. I wonder if he thinks about me. I don't ask. It's not the kind of thing we talk about. Under my bed, I'm hiding a TV Guide with a shirtless picture of the guy from the reality show *Joe Millionaire* on the cover. He's wearing a cowboy hat. A lot of times I'll look at that. I'd die if Cole found out, not because he'd be jealous but because it would probably be the faggiest thing he's ever heard—and corporate.

After we started sitting together on the bus, Cole and I spent the whole summer together. I'd wake up, go online, and wait until noon for Cole to wake up and message me. All morning, I'd be so anxious I couldn't eat, so I'd sit by my computer with my soggy frosted flakes and then when we did hang out, I'd be so hungry that I'd feel lightheaded and quiet, unable to think straight, but it was fine because Cole did most of the talking.



I'm panting, it's embarrassing, as we retread the ground we covered. Cole's telling me about the wife of our senator, the one who once compared gay sex to sex with dogs. Apparently, she had a miscarriage, and she and the senator brought the fetus home.

"They slept with it in their bed," Cole says and spits into a pothole. "And we're the perverts! It's grotesque right?"

"You should talk." I nudge him, and his left foot slips from the pavement into dirt. He stumbles, more than I thought he would, and drops the garbage bag. The bodies it holds thud on the ground.

"I think it's fucked," he says. "I think it's fucked to sleep with a fetus."

He picks up the garbage bag and through its thin white plastic, I can see the collective silhouette of two squirrels, a one-winged bird, and Cole's rubber gloves, which the lump of corpse wears like antlers. Today was a good haul. Most days we don't find anything at all.

"If someone else did it you'd think it was cool."

"Whatever. ELelektrikgoodbi told me about it, and he agrees with me. He thinks it's so fucked up."

When I hear ELelektrikgoodbi's stupid internet name, I feel like my body's a trash bag and everything inside is dead, jostling around in suffocated air. I have no idea what his screen name means even though I've tried looking it up. They used to talk on the message board, but now they're instant messaging too. He asked for Cole's address, and Cole gave it to him. A couple days after Christmas, ELelektrik sent Cole a CD with new punk songs on it. Every time Cole plays it, I listen for

unique sounding lyrics. Then at home, I search the words to learn the name of the song so I can find it on Limewire and, from that point on, pretend like I knew it all along.

“How does he even know? It sounds like a lie.”

“ELelektrik knows fucking everything. He went to college.”

“For a semester.”

He looks at me like I said the most boring thing in the world. Cole’s bragged about how ELelektrik dropped out of college to protest something. Now ELelektrik steals and scams people and dumpster-dives. I know what Cole means when he tells me all this: If ELelektrikgoodbi lived closer, I would hang out with him instead of you. ELelektrik wouldn’t turn away from the sight of eyeless hides on Cole’s mounts. He wouldn’t gag and leave the room when Cole did the gutting.

“Well, whatever.”

I don’t tell Cole, but I feel bad for the senator’s wife. I feel bad for the fetus, too. I picture it, raisinish and shy in a lidless jar, climbing out of its jar, crawling between the wife and the senator.

“We just have to see this jackass on TV.” I kick some gravel from the shoulder, watch it rattle into the road’s gray streaks faded by tire tread. “She has to live with him.”

“And it.” He scrunches up, pulls his arms to his chest and wiggles his fingers, making an unborn thing of himself. I look away.

“I’m cold, can we hurry?”

I exhale all my air, hoping Cole will do the thing he does with my breath when it’s visible, and he does. He half-crouches and propels himself toward the fading cloud, sticking out his tongue like a frog, like he’s slurping my air into himself.

He looks around for cars or walkers. No one can see us but us, so he puts his arm around me while we walk.



At the base of his driveway, Cole kicks down the Kerry/Edwards sign, and I push some brown leaves over it before we walk up toward the garage. The election is over, but Cole’s mom keeps the sign up. He rolls his eyes and says, “She thinks she’s

protesting. Jesus.” Cole’s not a Democrat because he’s an anarchist, and he’s glad Bush won because he’ll bring us closer to the end of the world. Most afternoons, his mom gets home from work before I leave, and whenever I get to the bottom of the driveway, she’s already stood the sign back up. She never mentions it to Cole. He’s seeing how long that’ll go on.

When I first met Cole, he said he lived out in the woods, in the middle of fucking nowhere, but really his orthodontist parents just have a lot of property. It’s less than a mile from my house, but it feels remote in a way that mine doesn’t. His parents park in the driveway so he can have the detached garage to himself. After one of Cole’s suspensions, their family counselor said Cole needed space to explore his feelings, to see how they manifest authentically. He’s made the garage so fucked up and vile that being there feels scarier and cooler than it should. The chemicals that burn the bones clean burn any comfort out of the air too.

Cole started the taxidermy stuff in September. He saw a taxidermy store on a backroad out in one of the sad poor farm towns he’d bike to when he threatened to run away and convinced me to go back to it with him. We walked four miles to get there. I was convinced we would die. Beneath a deer head, a man with long gray hair sat at a counter lined with stuffed birds. I was afraid of everything, of the dead animals, of the living man asking if he could help us, but Cole wasn’t. He asked the guy about his life, about how you cut open a hide and clean a skull. The guy told Cole, “You remind me of myself,” and I was jealous. I didn’t want to be like this guy, but it made me anxious that Cole had the option, that he might grow up into someone I didn’t know how to talk to. The man didn’t make Cole pay. He sent us away with a free scalpel, a gimlet, a pinking iron, and four small knives that Cole waved around the whole walk home while I carried two buckets—one full of 300 dermestid beetle larvae, which would start a colony and eat the sinews and gristle that clung to skeletons, and another of a hydrogen peroxide solution, which would bleach the gristle-free bones.

It’s cold in the garage, but Cole takes his uniform off as soon as we walk in. He looks punk in his Catholic clothes, but he looks even better when he takes them off. His parents have a *Desperate Housewives* look, but when he’s in just his tank top, he looks like a deadbeat who’s been arrested on *Cops*. He doesn’t have a single

muscle. He looks sick but it's just that he's vegan. I take off my coat and sweater. When Cory Fisher got ambulanced out of gym after a dodgeball to the nose last week, I stole his Sublime shirt from the locker room after class. Cole sees it for the first time when I take my sweater off.

He says nice shirt, and I get a rush, and he shoves our garbage bag into the freezer. He knows I won't watch the gutting, so he does it when I leave.

He puts on new gloves and pulls a squirrel skull, bleached white now, from the bath of hydrogen peroxide.

"Want to dry it off?"

I say sure, though I don't. It's so light it feels like nothing, and as I rub the towel along the thin ridge of the eye socket, I'm worried I'll snap it.

"Careful," Cole says. "My views are up. I need to upload that guy tonight."

Cole cares less about the creatures he makes than the photos he takes of them. He's pouring the peroxide into a colander in the sink, straining out loose teeth. I like watching his concentration, seeing how much he's able to care about something. Sometimes he looks at me the way he looks at bones while he's gluing them, and when he does, he doesn't have to use sappy words like love. I know what he means.

The peroxide solution gurgles in the sink drain and fallen teeth tap against metal.

When the photos come out good, he puts them up on his blog and probably sends the link to his internet friends, to ELelektrik.

I hand back the skull, and he gets to work. A raven smashed against his bedroom windowpane last week, and he's attaching its wing bones to the squirrel skull. He might glue feathers back onto the wings, but he hasn't decided yet.

I stand behind him while he does his gluing. He's a bad teacher. It's like he forgets I'm there. I can't see his hands. I don't know what he's doing. He doesn't explain anything he does, so if I want to learn anything (and I don't, but I want him to think I care) I have to go home and watch YouTube videos of old men tearing animal ribs apart.

But he's quieter than usual today. Usually he at least turns around to check on me. Maybe I offended him with the fetus thing. I guess he just wanted to hate

a homophobe together or talk about how fucked the government is. I probably made myself seem pro-life.

I get close and put my hands around his waist. He twitches like a dog in an electric fence.

“Fuck.” His glue bottle falls out of his hands and spills, soaking the bones. “Oh, fuck. Would you get me a paper towel or something? Jesus.” We don’t touch much. When we do, Cole starts it.

After I bring back the paper towels, he starts ranting about faggots. He does this every day in the garage, but today I worry my touching him inspired it. Cole’s the first person I’ve met who makes me realize morals don’t come as part of a set. He’s Buddhist and straight edge, and to show it he branded an X on his wrist with metal he held over a fireplace flame, but as he rubs the bones clean, he says, “I’d kill a faggot before I’d be one.”

“Not you, obviously,” he adds over his shoulder. He’s gay but he hates faggots, and he’s explained that they’re not the same thing. According to Cole, I’m a faggot because my voice is high-pitched, and I can’t defend myself. According to Cole, I’m a good one, though.

While he finishes gluing the squirrel bird, he says we’re lucky. “Almost everyone else like us is a faggot who does the dumbest shit. They like musicals and shopping and gay dancing and their fancy coffee.”

“You sound like a Mormon.”

“Wrong.” He hands me the squirrel bird. It’s smooth and feels good in my hands, but glue bulges in the spots where the bones aren’t meant to touch. “If I were a Mormon, I’d have like five wives, and you’re the only person I’m going to date. Ever.”

“What about ELelektrik?” I say and regret it.

I don’t know if Cole knew ELelektrik when we met. We don’t really talk about other people we know, though for me that’s because I don’t have many other people to talk about, except maybe my parents or my boss at the grocery store. Maybe I just assumed I was the only one who knew Cole was gay because he was the only one who knew I was. Maybe I just assumed Cole didn’t have other friends because I didn’t. I was surprised the first time he told me about his message board friends.

Cole gets so close to me that I can smell his breath when he says, “About ELelektrik.” He grabs one of my hands like he thinks I might run away. “Just so you know, he’s coming up this weekend.”

“Oh.”

“We’re going to the show together downtown. He might stay over.”

“Your mom’s letting him stay over?”

“We’re going to sleep out here. I’ll tell her I’m sleeping at your place.”

I look around at the garage, at the hanging tools, the loud freezer full of animals, the torn-up loveseat in the corner. Is that where they’ll sleep? Curled up together?

“You can’t inhale corpse germs all night. You’ll suffocate.”

I picture Cole waking up to find ELelektrik dead beneath him.

“I guess you don’t want to come?”

“You know I can’t.”

“Right.”

Hours and hours, whole days of Cole’s life are out of reach to me. School, obviously, but more than that. Like, Cole has AOL but I only have AIM, and you need an AOL subscription to see an AOL member’s profile, so I have no idea what song lyrics Cole has there or if he copies and pastes funny things ELelektrik has IM’d him. I want to ask to see it, but he’ll think it’s weird if I do. On Fridays and Saturdays Cole goes to local band shows. He invites me, like today, but he knows I won’t come because they’re both work nights for me. I’m saving up for a car so Cole and I can take a road trip and never come back. It’s probably a secret relief for him that I can’t go, that I can’t embarrass him there.

I think of Cole and ELelektrik doing one of their punk dances to loud music and sweating, holding each other, feeling emotions they express by touching each other, maybe kissing, which we still haven’t done. I picture ELelektrik meeting Cole’s punk friends and how they’ll tell Cole how much they like him after, and how I’ll go back to sitting alone on the bus, and how Cole will move on, and he and ELelektrik will be here in the garage doing what we used to do but having a better time doing it.



I have to go to work at six, and it's starting to rain, and though Cole and I live close, a walk home during a wet rush hour means getting splashed by minivans and spending a four-hour cashier shift feeling soggy. I know I should go. I start to move toward the table to put the skeleton down, but before I can, Cole takes it back and puts it where I was about to.

"I've gotta go in for dinner," he says.

"I should go, too."

"Wait. Before I go, I was wondering." He stoops down to pull something from his backpack. He's quiet for a second before he holds out his digital camera. "Would you take a picture for me?"

"Yeah, like you holding the rat bird?"

"It's a squirrel, and no." He hands me the camera. "Like, of you. Without, you know." He gestures toward my Sublime shirt, my jeans, which I only now realize are baggy, unflattering.

I must look shy or scared because he says, "Don't worry about it if you don't want to," and I say, "No—no—" even though I am scared about it. He's never seen my body before. He says, "Well, maybe it's better if I go inside. You can surprise me."

I figure ELektrikgoodbi must have sent him a naked picture. Maybe he wants to compare them. I don't want to take it, but I can't say no. Maybe asking for this picture is Cole's way of saying he thinks I'm hot. When I think that, I get a rush like getting an A on a test.

He goes in for dinner, and I set up the camera. It's cold, too cold to wear nothing, and I feel bad, out-of-bodyish, like I'm moving without telling myself to move. I drop my shirt and look at it on the ground.

Last year in eighth grade my best friend from third grade, who I'd stopped hanging around with because he was gayer than me, got beaten up in the hallway, and I watched from a crowd of kids, watched the way, when he started to bleed, it was unclear where the blood was coming from, maybe his eyes, maybe his nose, and his whole face was red, and his body on the ground didn't look like a body but a pile of clothes, a chore someone didn't do. At the other end of the hallway, acne-pocked soldiers handed out recruitment brochures. They didn't do a thing,

though they must've seen. In Cole's garage, in paint buckets lined against the spider webbed walls, black beetles crawl over the bodies we found, gnawing away what clings to a bone, stepping over each other to feed on it.

It has a ten-second timer, the camera, and I set it, step back, start counting down.

Ten, nine. Did the senator and his wife tuck the fetus in? Did they cuddle with it? "And we're the perverts!" But I don't think it was perverted. I feel really far away from Cole, though I know he's just inside. I'm not sure what to do with my arms in the picture. I cross them, then put them at my side, then try holding them out like bird wings. Eight, seven.

I don't think it's nice—the fetus in bed thing. I've seen pictures of fetuses. They're everywhere in Scranton: on billboards and stuck to car bumpers. I don't like to look at them. I feel bad that the senator can love something I can't.

Six, five. My whole body is goosebumps. Will they show in the picture?

I didn't go up to Michael—that's the friend, the gay one—while he was on the ground. It wasn't that I didn't care. I just didn't want to know what blood smelled like. I didn't want to see the way it made clothes stick to skin. I didn't want to see his hair matted with it. If he was dead, I didn't want to know what that looked like either.

Four, three, and as time stretches, I'm irritated, and I think of Cole recoiling from me, not wanting me, so what's the picture to him? Who was he to ask for it? I bend for my shirt on the cement. I won't take it. But the flash goes off when I'm bent that way, my arms limp and hanging.

Before I get dressed, I look at the picture in the camera's viewfinder. I seem like I'm mid-collapse. My face is out of frame except my chin and the slightest bit of lip. My body looks breakable, broken, but the lighting is dramatic. The flash washes out my skin, so you can't see the acne that covers my back and sides. I'm glowing, and in the background, light glints on the shovels and sheers and saw blades that hang from nails on the wall.

I almost press delete, but what would Cole think if he came back to the garage and found no picture? Probably being afraid to be naked was more of a faggot thing to do than being unashamed. So I let him keep it. I go home and change, and

my mom drives me to work at the grocery store, and I'm late and I smell like death, and all night, customers ask why I look like I'm about to cry.

Why did I look like I was about to cry? Cole said what I wanted to hear—I was the only guy he was going to date, ever. And what was the picture but a step toward that? But all night at work what I'm thinking is, what if he doesn't like it? What if he didn't actually ask me to take it, what if he was joking or I misheard? What if he sees my body and thinks it's gross, thinks who could sleep with that? And all night I imagine what will happen: he'll unfriend me on Myspace, he'll block me on AOL, he'll send the picture around, everyone will know I'm a faggot and he'll deny he ever asked for it. I've never thought of Cole as cruel before, though I probably had chances to. On my break, I go in the back and stand by the dumpster shoot, smell the old produce getting older and browner and softer, think how gross it is, think how gross Cole is. By the end of my shift I've reimagined him, and when I get home and go online, I don't feel an anxious thrill but dread until, eventually, he messages me.

Pic too dark. Maybe next time. Took one for u . . . want it?

He invites me to Direct Connect on AIM so he can send me a picture back, and I wait a long time to reply. I try to imagine what his body might look like, but when I do, I can't keep him separate from the flickering memory of roadkill flesh, the gash and spill of it. I decline his invitation, say my internet's being weird.



Cole and I keep sitting next to each other on the bus, we keep hanging out, but it's more awkward. He doesn't ask if anything is wrong. He doesn't ask me to take my clothes off again. He treats me like a friend. When he rants, I don't play along anymore. I say can we skip the taxidermy and just listen to music, and he says fine. We stop taking our walks. We sit in silence while he nods along to music I don't like, and I stare at his mounds of beetles de-fleshing something he must've scavenged without me. When I turn sixteen in January, I'm allowed to increase my working hours, so I go straight to the grocery store after school. I save up enough to buy a used car, and I stop taking the bus altogether.

ELektrikgoodbi never comes. Cole stops hearing from him. He tries DMing him on the message board, but he never replies, and he's stopped signing onto AOL. Then a month later, Cole hears from someone else on the board that ELektrik overdosed. He calls to tell me this in the spring. He says he was in love with him even though they never met. He doesn't know what to do. He should have done something. What was there to do?

I say, *I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry*, and it's the last time we talk.

When I leave for college at Penn State, I tell the story of Cole like a joke—yes, I say, rogue taxidermy. No, I say, I'm not making it up, though of course I exaggerate, intentionally or not, the parts of Cole that were easiest to see, and in the meantime he disappears.

He moves to Philly and it makes me mad—I see the pictures on Myspace—Cole with ELektrik's punk friends holding forties on the street, Cole with new piercings, Cole's newly tattooed face in a photo with a long and pleading caption—*I have nowhere to go can someone let me crash?* A few days later his Myspace is gone. I refresh and refresh and refresh.

I try to believe he found a cabin somewhere in the woods far away, like Vermont or Wisconsin, where he can scavenge, be alone or surrounded by freaks. Maybe I'll find him someday. I'll walk in and gag at the old scent of him until he becomes familiar again. It's a threadbare fantasy I've come back to for years, wearing away its particulars and lies, so when I picture Cole now, there's no cabin, no woods, just one body, an indistinct blur of his and mine, crouched in the dark, alone and scared and unkept.

## Charm School

The sprinkler system in my room is defective. I file a report with the smallest animal on the farm. The water wakes the grass at my ankles, the moss infects the rug. It gets quiet—each girl in her swimsuit, sleeping like money in a vault.

I will never be one of them—my eyes bleak like a pelican's, trapped at the Macy's Day Parade. I tie the dog like a balloon to my finger, and together we walk down the hall.

My shoes are silk buckets. My face is a magnet, always repelling what's closest. I wear an argyle sweater, hold my body like a dagger. Just like my mother, I sit at the wooden desk.

It gets lonely, like deviled eggs. I stoke the dormitory fire, feed houseplants with the blood of my finger.

According to the instructor, I am dim-witted and delightful.

When it's my turn for laundry, I sew faces onto sleeves.

In the midst of a blizzard, the clock tower consoles me.

Snow falls into the napkin of my lap.

Each night I wander, like an abbess after bed check, out to inspect the progress of trees.

## Weather Submarine Peach Structure

we stretch rice until it ends. we orbit a blank spot in the universe, a nothingness where something we used to worship once shined brightly. we lick the radiation from our lungs & paint deviant symbols. when we pray for pieces of our grandmothers, we expect their voices to chime through the radio or appear god-like on sundust. instead we receive stacks of dense cloth that smell nothing like them. still, our parents whisper the vaguest beauties as they cry into their hands. we don't remember that our grandmothers ever sewed so much, & we can't convince anyone to tell us whether the star-patched quilts belonged to our grandmothers or our husbands' grandmothers. crinkly little gap-toothed raisins smiling from pictures as recent as yesterday, but they can't remember either. the sundial. the breadbox. the cast iron pan shining with oil.

# Great Bottomless Well

1.

In the lonesome cabin, by the gardens,  
I was a great puddle of time. What is this desire  
to comfort another, in the crater  
of a cotton-fabric bed, and  
a head rested upon my chest?

This is what we mean by silence.  
It has always been just one human ear,  
on top of curved and collapsed things,  
making waking sounds  
from a pressure and a hole.

2.

Perfection of the soul—oh, how *uncolorful*.  
The night sky can be just a cloud  
yawning over us—another sea,  
as we wave hello and farewell.

I can only think of an adulthood,  
that the snow in Russia hinted at,  
where the men danced  
on skates across the ice, laughing.

The moon tonight shows  
the ability to grow from old to young,  
and how to become the color blue.

3.

I hold a paper fortune in my hand.  
It argues, *ignorance never settles a question.*  
I rip it in half, and declare, *knowledge*  
*never gives the proper response.*

4.

Rejoice, small soul. I declare  
that existence—is not a necessity.  
There is no substitute for a day in a life  
and the day is not yet over.

Stars,  
play vibrant roars of jazz  
against the comets.

Like a dream split from an egg—  
*like* an awakening.  
Every eye must close after it opens.  
This is the art of sleep. Eternity—  
I summon thee as flirtation.

## Imitation Games

In the year 2000, I was the chief copy editor of my household. We had just gotten a computer a few years before, and, as the eldest child of our immigrant family, it was my job to proofread my parents' emails. My mother would call me out of the room I shared with my two siblings and point me to the Yahoo Mail page pulled up on the Mac 95. As she rushed off to the kitchen to pound garlic, I rolled up my sleeves and put my fifth-grade grammar to work.

*I wish delay not be problem*, the email said. I corrected it to, *I wish the delay would not be a problem*. Then, I reread the paragraph, realized what my mom was saying, and changed it to, *I hope the delay will not be a problem*. I smoothed out phrases, tried variations: *I hope the delay won't cause any problems. I hope the delay's not an issue! I do not wish to cause any problems with the delay.*

When I was done, my mother would shuffle back in, wiping her hands on her apron, and make me explain each edit.

"I changed 'a homework' to 'the homework,'" I said, pointing with the cursor.

"Why?" she asked in Korean.

"Because—I don't know. You don't say 'one homework.' I mean, maybe you say, 'a piece of homework.'"

"The homework," she repeated. "*The* homework. Okay, what else?"

"Um," I scrolled. "And this, I just changed it to sound more polite."

"Will you let me know," she read, trying out the phrase. "Oh, that's more polite? 'Let me know'?"

"Well, no," I said, struggling to explain, "'Let me know' is kind of a casual way of saying it, but it's like . . . friendly? And it's more polite to ask it as a question than to say, 'tell me.'"

She nodded. "Will you let me know. Will you let me know."

"Or you can say, 'please let me know,' but that's, like, really formal."

"Please let me know," she repeated. "*The* homework. Okay." She hit 'send' and said in Korean, "Tell your siblings to come eat dinner."

"I mean," she said, switching to English as she hurried back into the kitchen,

*“Please, will you let them know come to dinner.”* She laughed at her little joke as she popped open the rice cooker to fluff it vigorously.

Like most Koreans of their generation, my parents had taken English classes all throughout grade school—but there’s a vast, violent difference between speaking a language and speaking it well enough to move through American xenophobia unscathed. Over the years, my parents signed up for a few ESL classes and kept two volumes of a Korean series called *Casual English*, which explained phrases like “a dime a dozen” and “while you’re at it” in great detail. But their secret weapon, of course, was us: me, my younger brother, and my younger sister, all of whom spoke perfect American by the time we were in the first grade.

One year, in a fit of frustration, my parents insisted that we correct every grammar and pronunciation mistake they made, no matter how small. All year, the apartment was noisy with our family’s collage of idioms and diphthongs: my father rehearsing “frankly speaking” over and over as he switched through slides; my mother practicing the *th* in “Catholic” and the *th* in “mother”; my siblings demonstrating “doesn’t, doesn’t” until its meaning fell apart in their mouths. We learned to smile reassuringly at cashiers, to chirp, “Have a good one!” in flawless Midwesternese to avoid some danger we couldn’t quite name, only feel the seething edges of.

Now, in my thirties, I walk away from interactions at the grocery store and replay each conversation, studying the tape like it’s still my job. *Was my joke about the plastic bags weird?*, I muse, chewing my thumbnail as I drive home. *How’s your day going. How’s YOUR day going. Maybe she didn’t hear my joke.*

I wish I could stop picking apart every two-minute conversation I have with a stranger, but I can’t shake the habit. I can’t stop going back over the scene and asking, “Was I convincing?” Of what, I’m not sure.



Forty years before my parents stood in line at the airport, practicing the dialogue they would have with the immigration agent on the other side, a British scientist was writing a different kind of imaginary high-stakes conversation. The

Turing Test, as it came to be known, was first proposed by the mathematician Alan Turing in his 1950 paper “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” in which he famously asks, “Can machines think?” In response, Turing posits that the more useful question to ask would be: Could a machine successfully *imitate* human thinking?

The test he proposes is a modification of a popular parlor game called the Imitation Game. In it, two people, one man and one woman, go into separate rooms, each with a typewriter. A third stands outside and calls out questions with the aim of figuring out who’s who. The other players type and slide their answers under the door, doing whatever they can to trick the guesser: lie, joke, do their best imitations of each other. In Turing’s version of the game, one of the players in the rooms is replaced by a machine. The aim isn’t to distinguish man from woman, but human from computer—for a computer program, that is, to successfully fool someone into thinking they’re talking to a real person. Turing predicted that machines would be passing the test by the end of the twentieth century. This wasn’t to say he was making prophecies about the rise of Skynet, or even—to answer the original question—that he believed computers would be able to think. What Turing was saying was simply this: by the year 2000, machines might, sometimes, with some reliability, seem human to us.



Nearly twenty years past that deadline, I’m in an art museum in Dallas, sitting alone on a bench to listen to a sound installation. From speakers hanging above my head, the sounds of voices, garbled and collaged. The voices are the voices of women interviewing at a sperm bank. It’s a meditation on the commodification of human life, according to the artist, and I’m listening, concentrated, trying to decide whether or not I like it.

Suddenly, the door swings open, interrupting my focus, and a couple walks in. Like most of the museum’s guests, they’re white, middle-aged.

“Oh my god!” exclaims the man, pointing at me. “I thought she was real!”

Angry at the disruption, I turn my head to scowl at him.

“Oh!” he says. “She *is* real!” He laughs and turns to the woman. “I thought she was part of the exhibit,” he says to her.

I wait for my apology, but none comes. They sit down on a nearby bench, their voices drowning out the sounds of the art piece. Finally, I give up and walk out the door, as the sound from the speakers mixes with his words, churning in my mind—*she is real—she is real—she is real—*



Each year, various competitions are held to test computer programs against Turing’s proposal. The most prominent of these is the Loebner Prize, launched in 1990 at the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies. Judges chat with bots and people for about five minutes each, and the competition gives monetary prizes to the programmers whose bot can fool the most judges into thinking they’re talking to a human.

I’ll say this from experience: you can do a lot in five minutes to convince someone to treat you like a person. “How’s it going, I’m checking in,” I say to the hotel receptionist as I step up to the counter; “Oh, I did my undergraduate at Brown,” I say to my doctor, pulling out my list of questions. When the DMV clerk complains about the weather, I pull a *you’re telling me* face. But sometimes, you don’t have five minutes. Sometimes, the Turing Test flashes past in a single, clamorous instant.

“Welcome aboard, sir” says the flight attendant to the graying man ahead of me in line. “Welcome aboard,” she says to his wife. She’s projecting calm. But like all flight attendants, she’s also silently keeping tabs on six or seven potential disasters at once: someone struggling with their suitcase, cabinets clanging, the minutes ticking down until departure. Amid this tiny orchestra of chaos, I step up and enter the scene. She looks at my face. The briefest moment passes, a calculation so quick she likely doesn’t register it’s happening. It takes just long enough for the line to start moving again. She settles on a languageless smile.

“How’s it going,” I try, but it’s too late—she’s already looking away, toward the sound of someone slamming an overhead compartment. The test is over; I didn’t make it. The line shuffles me along.

“Welcome aboard,” I can hear her say to the family behind me as I heave my bag down the aisle, solid and invisible as any object.



Once, in middle school, I checked out a book from the local library—an actors' guide to British accents. For some reason, I cherished this book. I stayed up late mouthing its vowels, practicing Scouse and Cockney intonations. Alone in the basement of our rented split-level ranch house in Decatur, Georgia, I honed my ability to sound like I was from places I'd never been to, places I might never in my life see. This was eighth grade. We had just moved for the third time in my life—from Minnesota to Wisconsin to Connecticut, and now, to a suburb in the South, where girls threw pool parties and cicadas screamed from the trees. In history, my class was debating whether or not Georgia should change its state flag, which, since 1956, had borne the stars and bars of the Confederacy.

“You have to admit that the old flag is prettier,” said Abby, one of those girls who was so confident, other people seemed always to be floating toward her, like bugs to a blue screen. I was a devoted student of the back of her head. One day, she turned around. “Do you have a pen I could borrow?” she asked, pronouncing it, as everyone in Georgia seemed to, the way I'd pronounce the word “pin.” For days afterward, I practiced under my breath: *Pin. Pincil. Pinguin.*

The psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott calls imitation a “specialty” of patients who experience dissociation—who develop, as he calls it, a “false self” that is compliant, competent, acceptable to the parent. In their book *Racial Dissociation, Racial Melancholia*, David Eng and Shinhee Han note the prevalence of dissociation among their Asian American patients and students, and take it a step further, arguing that this way of being describes a quintessential Asian American experience. They write that certain features of dissociation—compliance, deference, imitation—in fact “quite accurately describe the social contract of Asian American model minority citizenship in the United States.” You can stay, as long as you don't cause trouble, as long as your labor is “skilled,” as long as you don't stand out.

When I left Georgia for college, I was eager to start clean, to shed white suburbia's long trance and leave that well-behaved outcast self behind. I was excited to finally be the real me—but it wasn't always clear whether I was becoming her or just learning to impersonate her. For one thing, my accent was muddled beyond hope by the end of my first year at Brown. I used "y'all" in every other sentence, while saying "both" like a Midwesterner and "marry" like a New Englander. Worse, my accent would shift, subconsciously, depending on who I was talking to; and unfortunately for me, my new classmates were from everywhere: from London to Johannesburg to Kansas.

To be able to imitate accents on cue is a skill; to do it unintentionally is cause for suspicion. This is the problem, of course, with trying too hard to pass the Turing Test. "There are those who can be themselves and who can also act, whereas there are others who can only act," writes Winnicott. But what to do when "talk like yourself" is an impossible demand? In the grocery store, I say "yes ma'am," giving it a little too much twang, and the clerk's eyes linger on my face as she hands me my receipt. I scurry off before she can see the seams of my skin suit—or worse, before she sees there's nothing underneath it at all.



I can't help but wonder now about how convincing my mother's corrected emails actually were. Was it obvious that they'd been proofread by an eleven year old kid who'd rather have been playing Pokemon? I'm sure there were times I overcorrected in one direction or another, times I made my mother sound too colloquial or too academic. After all, I, too, was actively learning how to sound like a real person, picking up words and phrases every day from episodes of *The Simpsons* and *Friends*, from vocabulary quizzes and the cafeteria. And what happened on those occasions when, surely, my mother didn't bother with calling me into the room? What sort of person did the person on the other end imagine my mother to be—this woman who might have said, "I am appreciate the more time" one day and "Glad everything checks out" the next?

My job was to correct my mother's sentences; I wonder now if my ministrations only made them more monstrous. I wonder: what's the likelihood

that, in trying to make her voice sound more natural, I only shoved us both further into the uncanny valley?



As it happens, Alan Turing's paper was published in the same year that the Korean War began—1950. I say this to say that when Koreans use English to try to prove their humanity, we're telling an old story. It's a story that includes children learning to say "Gib-eu me choco-let" to American soldiers, who sometimes bought loyalty with cans of food, and other times bombed crowds of refugees to clear the roads. It's a story that includes the sex workers who sold American cigarettes on the street to buy rice, and who, for the rest of their lives, bore the mark of having once been a woman who'd said, "honey, honey, kiss." It's a story, of course, of Korean villagers saying "migook," meaning America, and of the way that act of reaching morphed into a slur, turning us—and later, perversely, whole swaths of people along the Bamboo Curtain—into *gooks*. The lesson being: if you want to be human, be careful how you pronounce your liberator's name.

That lesson persists. In 2019, South Koreans spent 6.14 trillion won (about 5.5 billion dollars) on private English education. A month after arriving in Seoul on a study abroad semester, I said the word "girl" in front a group of Yonsei students, and they practically swooned. And if I ever got lost navigating the city, it wasn't because I was a foreigner, since every bus stop, exit sign, and subway announcement was also given in English. Seoul anticipated my American presence; I was afforded an ease of movement in those few months that my parents, in the US, never were.

Maybe this is an assimilation story, but not the way you might think—a story not just about "making it" in the US, but about surviving American assimilation into the fabric of post-war South Korea. Maybe the day we became *gooks* is the origin point of what I experience, two generations later, as a refraction of my selves. Somewhere in my history, a woman is calling a soldier what he is, and the word flies back, twisted, and wraps itself around her form. No wonder I woke up with an

“I” and a “you” tangled up inside me. No wonder I keep fussing with my voice box: *How’s it going. I’m good, thank you. Thanks for taking the time.*



In 2014, a flurry of news articles reported that a computer program had finally done it. At a competition held by the Royal Society in London, a chatbot called Eugene Goostman managed to convince 33% of judges that it was human, leading the conference’s organizer, Kevin Warwick, to proclaim it to be the first to pass the Turing Test (a claim that was subsequently met with much debate). Built by three Russian programmers, Eugene Goostman’s secret weapon was his persona: a jokey, thirteen-year old boy from Ukraine, whose English included some occasional, charming mistakes.

Eugene’s foreignness operated as a kind of plausible deniability, an explanatory shield for the garbled phrases he inevitably started spitting out after a few minutes of conversation. While my parents’ grammatical errors had pushed them further out of the realm of people one ought to treat as people, Eugene’s nudged him further into it. Somewhere between them: a valley, where the inhumanity of the accented immigrant mingles with the inhumanity of the speaking machine. Somewhere in that valley, eighth-grade me is whispering, “pin, pincil, pinguin,” while fifth-grade me tries to copy-edit her way out.

Incidentally, the chatbot currently regarded as the world’s best is Mitsuku, who’s won the Loebner Prize more times than any other bot. Created by a man named Steve Worswick (yes, he is), Mitsuku is represented by a number of avatars, ranging from a blonde pseudo-anime character to a CGI teenager with a Y2K-chic blue bob. But unlike Eugene, Mitsuku has no built-in blunders with English, no foreign accent. Her Japanese-ness, in other words, is purely aesthetic. She is just Asian enough to smooth that line between foreignness and thingness, to make it all make sense.

I can’t help but imagine a different iteration of the test, one in which Eugenes and Mitsukus compete against immigrants from Korea, Cambodia, El Salvador, Afghanistan, and so on. How many of each group might end up being categorized

as bots, and how many as humans? In many ways, such questions are constantly being answered by the Turing Tests all around us: Who's a "criminal" and who's a "kid"; who's "illegal"; who's a "real woman," and so on. Always, on the other end, a judge, peering into the valley and saying, *"I am a person. What are you?"*



I'm visiting home and listening to my mother give orders over the phone. For the past nine years, she's worked as a nurse practitioner, and on the days she's on call, the phone erupts constantly.

"This is Grace," she answers, lifting the end into a melodic question. We're driving up the downtown connector from the airport, my dad at the wheel. When my mother listens, she listens with her whole body, torso tilted toward the car speaker, eyes pointed up as if watching the words scroll in the sky over the highway.

"Let's order an abdominal x-ray to rule out bowel obstruction," she says at a professional, extra-enunciated clip. She sounds amazing. She throws in an "eleven-ish" like it's nothing, and I can't help but marvel.

And yet, at home, when we sit down to dinner, all she talks about is how hard it is not to be able to "speak English well." At first, I brush this off. "You're both great at English," I say dismissively as I fuss with the samgyeopsal on the grill. But my mother's not satisfied.

"They complain about they don't understand me, because of my pronunciation," she says. She looks worn thin as she picks at her bowl, and I remember the tenseness in her listening body. "Every day is so hard. I feel discriminated."

She tells me that, during her first few years at the long-term care facility where she works, her survival strategy was to be relentlessly agreeable. She'd smile, act cheerful, say yes to anything anyone asked her to do—because it was easier than trying to argue in English, easier—as Eng and Han write—"to comply and to be compliant."

"I told myself, I'm at the bottom, I'm the lowest one here," she says now. "That way, when someone mistreat me, I can just say, 'oh, well' and not be mad." Instead, my mother would smile, smile, smile her way to the end of each week.

"I'm so glad that you speak English and don't have to do that," she says to me. I don't meet her eyes as I stuff a lettuce wrap into my mouth. My dad asks if I'll look over his grant report while I'm home.



Did I ever become real to that man in the museum? When I turned my head, he realized his mistake. But rather than apologize to me, he'd turned to the white woman next to him and narrated the mistake to *her*: "I thought she was part of the exhibit." In turning my head toward him, I became real, though not real enough to merit a direct address. I recognize this relegation to "she." Occasionally, as a kid, people would all but refuse to talk to my parents. Even when they were standing right there, they would be addressed only in the third person: "What's her last name?" "Can he come in next week?" It would be as if their bodies were set pieces, present only to give context to the scene.

What if, instead of glaring, I had been—to use Cathy Park Hong's words from her essay "Bad English"—*soberingly fluent*? I play the dialogue over and over in my head as I pace around my apartment, rehearsing for a confrontation that's already not happened. What if I had followed them out of the room and demanded an apology? Or explained how it had felt to be pointed at like that? Or called him an asshole, kicked him in the shin? What if he happened to read this essay, or any of my writing? What would be most likely to convince him that I was a person worth addressing? Would any of it be enough?

This version of the imitation game is a losing one. Sure, it's pleasurable to stomp around and fantasize about my eloquence, eloquence as an act of revenge. But most often, what feels like vengeance is just more of that old plea: *Let me in*. The more I say, "I am a person," the more the other side of that coin gleams: "I am a person, not a thing," which spins ever dangerously toward: "not a monster," "not foreign," "not illegal," and so on. And yet, to speak English well is my job—has always been my job. How to do it without cleaving myself further from my parents? How to fix my mother's sentences without splitting apart her voice, and mine?



Writing for the *New Yorker*, cognitive scientist Gary Marcus complains that modern day Turing Tests don't test "real" AI technology, though he concedes that "it's easy to see how an untrained judge might mistake wit for reality." However, he writes, "the winners tend to use bluster and misdirection far more than anything approximating true intelligence."

"Wit" versus "reality." "Bluster and misdirection," as opposed to "true intelligence." But aren't wit and misdirection as much technologies of intelligence as are Python or C++? Don't white men writing for the *New Yorker* depend on witty phrasings to secure their ability to be seen, and therefore live, as people in the world, with all the things we agree "people" should have (food, housing, dignity), even while denying them to "those people" in the same breath?

I'm not convinced that Turing himself would have agreed with such a clean separation between "wit" and "intelligence." In one passage in "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," a questioner asks, "Please write me a sonnet on the subject of the Forth Bridge." An unnamed respondent replies: "Count me out on this one. I never could write poetry." Is this a human speaking? An imitation of a supremely clever computer? Turing doesn't say one way or the other. In fact, he admits: "It might be urged that when playing the 'imitation game' the best strategy for the machine may possibly be something other than imitation of the behaviour of a man." I only wish he would tell me what that "something other" was.



Here's a description of the only computer program I've ever written, during the single month that I audited an intro-level computer science class: It asked: "What is your age?" And when you entered a number, no matter what you put, it would respond, "YOU ARE OLD!"

This was a week when we were supposed to be learning about "if/else" conditional statements. The original code I'd written had said "you are old" or "you are young" depending on what number the user inputted. But in the end, I decided

it would be funnier if the answer always came back the same. Fifty-seven? YOU ARE OLD! Seventeen? YOU ARE OLD! And so on.

She was a profoundly useless conversation partner, my program—profoundly artificial, and profoundly unintelligent. And I loved her.



“If a patient cannot play—cannot mediate competing social realities in a healthy and adaptive manner—then it is the goal of therapy to enable this basic, creative skill,” write Eng and Han. Racial dissociation as a result of forming that compliant false self that America demands, that is, leads to an inability to play. And play is crucial. The ability to play is what allows us to move through the terrible contradictions of living in this place, in these bodies, in the wakes of these histories, while maintaining something like a self.

What would it mean for me to treat the imitation game as just that—a game? To smile, smile, smile—not just to survive, but to win by playing? By messing with the program until I can make someone—even just myself—laugh?



I’m in an art museum in Dallas, sitting alone on a bench while listening to a sound installation. From speakers hanging above my head, the sounds of voices, garbled and collaged. The voices are the voices of women interviewing at a sperm bank. It’s a meditation on the commodification of human life, according to the artist, and I’m listening, concentrated, trying to decide whether or not I like it.

Suddenly, the door swings open, interrupting my focus, and a couple walks in. Like most of the museum’s guests, they’re white, middle-aged.

“Oh my god!” exclaims the man, pointing at me. “I thought she was real!”

I turn my head toward him. On his face, realization clicks. Before he can speak again, I point back.

“Oh my god!” I exclaim. “I thought he was real!”

He starts, then laughs. “Oh,” he says. His wife looks back and forth between us.

I laugh, as startled and relieved as he is. “Oh no, I’m so sorry,” I say, standing. “I thought you were part of the exhibit.” Above, a woman’s voice, minced into fragments, is saying, *someone who, someone who, someone who*.

“You thought—?” says the man, confused but smiling.

“I know, how funny!” I say, shaking my head in agreement. We share a laugh. “Okay, well, thank y’all for coming,” I say, beaming gregariously.

“Oh,” they say.

“Yep, you can just exit back out that way,” I say, gesturing with an open hand. “Bye now.”

“Thank you,” they say, wondering who I am.

The door swings shut behind them. I take my place and listen. Overhead, a collage of voices churns, saturated with longing as the women describe the kinds of humans they hope to create. *I wish the—I hope the—I hope the—someone who*. I mouth along with the almost-language, until I feel myself starting to come into focus.

# Poppies

*On the occasion of the Supreme Court's ruling  
on June Medical Services v. Russo*

There are poppies in bloom  
all over the yard. All night  
they fluttered blackly  
their trim dresses, which are also  
their bodies— all night  
my eye sockets filled  
with the pebbles of insomnia,  
while the hours moved around me  
like old cars.

I was trying to give myself  
as in marriage to a country  
that wouldn't have me—  
wrapped in a white sheet  
to the country of dark air—

Now the sun swishes  
its greasy windshield wiper,  
the poppies glow dead red.

I have to tell you, sometimes I hate poetry, for all  
it refuses to say. Sometimes I hate the law,  
for all it sits there picking the alphabet  
out of its big teeth.

What I wish the Court had said:  
We should not be forced to translate  
leaves of blood,  
nor to live by translations  
hacked out by those who scarcely  
speak the language.

So speak the language, can you? Maybe  
I am an animal within  
an animal. I feel the stone  
beneath my breastbone  
the size of a woman's shoe.

## clay birds

was the spoon that you took to me still wet with hashweh  
was the brush so heavy because you were losing it, your hair

like an injured sparrow in your sleeve I wanted you to hold me

you were the injured one an empty sleeve I heard swing  
when you threw me, a clay

I file the sounds of it in a story, my wound  
there are drawers like that in the Eastern State Penitentiary

was it my mouth that swung shut, a metal door to hold me in perfect solitude  
did I starve of my own accord in a house full of hashweh

if we are still in need of a perpetrator, what about the open field

## let this be the place

the astro turf lolls  
over relocated graves

the mall parking atop  
internment camp

the making of a life a line  
of humans to a shark

your ode to hospitality not a tent  
in a sandstorm

a text to the father of your child's  
foul-mouthed friend

each day the battle against the inner garden  
of fireweed, poison berry

mornings they produce admiration  
their verve, nuanceless sheen

fight the urge to pity the mouse  
hunting under the oven

question the question  
would it be more?

let this be the place you lay  
your traps

## Wild Child

When Imogen logs on to the sperm bank's website, she sees that it will not be like ordering a salad. With a salad she can say "Whoa, now! Easy on the chickpeas," or "Hold the croutons," or "Let's do green goddess instead of raspberry vinaigrette." But at the sperm bank, the menu is *prix fixe*, not *a la carte*. At the sperm bank, it's: *No substitutions, please*. With anonymous ejaculate, it's a package deal.

For example, Imogen likes hazel eyes but not lawyers, and yet here is Donor AX45TR8, a hazel-eyed lawyer. Imogen likes not-too-tall classical musicians, but lo and behold here is TH72HS9: a lovely five-niner who has the audacity to have mastered the electric guitar. Imogen must prioritize. What is most important? IQ or EQ? Fingernails with half-moons or earlobes that are attached? Yale or hale? Perfect pitch or someone who has pitched a perfect game?

What Imogen wants is this: a doe-eyed son with an indefatigable zest for life. A boy skilled in listening and wit. Social justice and socializing. An animal lover, a cellist, a champion swimmer. *The butterfly*.

Don't get her wrong. It's not that Imogen seeks perfection. Perfect people are friendless people; she would know. It's just that minimally flawed humans have an easier time in the world, and who doesn't want ease for their offspring? Go on, Imogen nods to the laboratory gods. Give the child an imperfection, but have the defect be the sort of blemish that imbues humility and exudes affability: a birthmark in the shape of Hawaii, a space between the front teeth, hay fever.

The last thing Imogen wants is craziness or laziness. Can a professional in the field of semen tell her more about the thrill-seeking gene or hereditary narcolepsy? Can someone promise that her child will not make derelict decisions or fall asleep at the opera? Can she pay more for these sorts of guarantees? Because Imogen has stocks and bonds and platinum cards with her name on them. Imogen has been saving for a long time for the child who will save her.

Imogen studies the donors. She imagines their frozen sperm. Way in the back of some sterile office, there are test tubes filled with arctic tadpoles that will thaw inside of Imogen. They will race to meet her pale and reticent egg. One tadpole

will prevail and grow into a frog and this frog will grow inside of Imogen until it emerges as frogs do: from the darkness, in the springtime, wet and blinking, its voice new and untested. She will hold this frog and wipe it clean and then she will kiss it. Her kiss will turn the frog into a prince. *Her* prince. She will name him something royal. *Rex, Duke, Earl, Laird.*

Imogen decides on GU39QP1. Her virtual baby-daddy. He's a teal-eyed veterinarian. He plays the oboe. He was, *is*—he's out there, somewhere, calling cats instead of cat-calling—proficient at pickleball and Mandarin and crosswords and sign language, though rest assured he is not deaf, nor is anyone in his gene pool. He has no family history of anything other than color blindness, to which Imogen thinks: a world, muted, is not such a bad thing.

Imogen clicks, the sperm will be shipped, her doctor will be picked. When her monthly egg is on the verge of dropping into the proverbial straw, Donor GU39QP1 will rush to meet it. Just like in baggage claim, he will be a man with a sign, searching and hopeful. Her egg, a woman laden with both luggage and longing. Imogen has never known love, and yet she knows love like no one else. Unable to find it beyond herself, she will cultivate it within herself. She is a farmer. The baby is the harvest. She will grow what she seeks.

After Imogen makes her decision, she goes out to lunch. “I’ll have a salad,” she says to the server. “Easy on the chickpeas. Hold the croutons. Green goddess, please.”



Before Imogen can have regrets about the oboe or pickleball, there is a phone call. The sample has arrived at her doctor’s. Imogen imagines a white Styrofoam cooler and dry ice, a pair of metal tongs producing a tadpole popsicle from a burst of fog. That night, Imogen’s anticipation keeps her from deep sleep; she half-dreams of a football field heaving with bullfrogs. She must wade through them to find the one meant for her, the most shiny and emerald one. The one with the tilted golden crown. At dawn, Imogen dresses in a baby blue skirt and matching blazer. *Laird*, she says over breakfast. *Rex, Duke, Earl*. She decides on Laird. She decides

to skip her espresso. She decides at the last minute to shave her privates, one leg then the other propped up near the kitchen sink. She forgoes soap and powder for fear they will kill the sperm.

*Laird*, she thinks in the taxi. *King Laird*. There is traffic, the ride is long. Her privates burn. Imogen has time to fret. Laird will be difficult for others to spell and pronounce. Laird is not a playground name. Imogen decides instead on Lear with an “e-a,” then Leer with an “e-e,” then Lee, like the American jeans. And also, the American Confederate. Imogen frowns and fumbles for her cab fare. *Rex* rhymes with *sex*. *Duke* rhymes with *puke*. *Earl* rhymes with *pearl*. Earl it will be.

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When the doctor injects the sperm, Imogen imagines the teal-eyed veterinarian inside of her, thrusting in a considerate and unselfish way. He offers to take her out afterward for halibut and Manhattans, but Imogen declines, because this is business and she is resolute. *Thanks, but no thanks*. She smiles. *Earl and I got this*. The doctor lets Imogen rest with her feet in the stirrups for as long as she likes. She sings “Michael, Row the Boat Ashore” and then falls asleep. She dreams she is covered in lily pads, that she is made of them. When she wakes, Imogen pats her abdomen, three taps on the left ovary, three taps on the right. She lifts each arm and sniffs into each pit; they smell faintly of moss.

The next day, she goes to work like nothing has occurred. Well, maybe a manicure or an eyebrow waxing. A thorough flossing. She takes turns tapping on her keyboard and tapping on her stomach. For lunch, Imogen eats kale and quinoa with a wooden spoon from a wooden bowl. For dinner, she pours an entire bottle of gin down the drain. For twelve consecutive evenings, Imogen walks to the drugstore for fun and gathers sticks like kindling. She brings them back to her apartment and urinates on them, one white twig after another, until, one day, there is a fire: two red flames erupt on a single stick side by side and bright in the night. Imogen smiles. “A child is made, a woman is saved.”

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The baby settles in Imogen like a pumpkin seed, at first timorous and tame, sending out its blind, searching tendrils and fumbling like a child down a dark hallway. Imogen drinks organic milk and watches nature documentaries. She rubs her stomach and smiles in a superior way. *Mama, Mama*, she hears the child cry in the night. *I'm right here*, she says. *See?*

A few days pass. The tendrils reach the sides of Imogen's womb. At first they latch on like fireflies to fingertips, and then, rapacious, like mousetraps to thumbs. The tendrils invade her insides, they grow hairy and dark. They turn from beansprouts to grapevines. They drink of her blood. They drain her of iron and irony.

Before long, Imogen is rendered voiceless by nausea. She takes a leave from work. She resists looking at the sun. She must sip water in the tiniest of sips. She finds her grandmother's silver thimble and drinks from it. Imogen can hardly leave the couch. She can hardly will herself to wash a dish, change a sock. The mail gathers on the floor beneath the brass slot. She pretends the bills are love letters from the laboratory gods. *We are sorry*, the gods write. *You should be*, thinks Imogen. She has food delivered. She eats two bites, leaves the containers on the floor. Cockroaches scatter this way and that. Imogen watches them through one squinted eye. She pretends they are musical notes, dark and bouncing. She tries to sing a lullaby. To herself, not the child.



At two months, a golden flower bursts within her. Imogen sees it in a dream, then wakes and remembers a hymn from childhood. At three months, the flower curls into itself like a green nut and Imogen, for the first time in her life, is able to whistle. The nausea subsides. She returns to work. At four months, the nut becomes a gourd. It inflates like a basketball, pumped. Imogen is filled with an inexplicable lightness, a manic merriment. A twinkle returns to her eyes. There is pink in her cheeks. Suddenly, she craves only meat. She buys Porterhouses and skirt steaks and lollipop lamb chops from the corner butcher. At night, in the moonlight, she sucks marrow from bones. She saves the bones and puts

them in a bucket of bleach. Later, after the baby arrives and while he naps, Imogen will make a chandelier from them. In the meantime, she declutters her apartment. She throws away her diplomas. She gives her gold jewelry to the homeless. She cuts off her hair and puts it in a silk pillowcase. She staples the pillowcase closed and mails it to France. Imogen considers a color for the baby's room. She remembers the baby may be colorblind. She decides on ivory—*rib, calcium, skeleton*.

At the 20-week ultrasound, the doctor points to a brewing storm on the screen. "It's a boy," he says. "See here."

"Of course it is," Imogen laughs. "What else would it be?" She squints at the screen, where the doctor points, and sees something small and inconsequential. Imogen has a vision of the future. Of a locker room. Of Earl, hardly unfurled.

"He'll have a big personality," the doctor grins. "Larger than life."



Imogen has never had friends, at least none who have lasted longer than a month. She has blamed this on her beauty and her brains, but deep down she knows it is because she is bottomless. To speak to her is to engage her. She is a booby trap. A deep canyon disguised by a thin layer of pine straw.

Bart is a new employee at Imogen's firm. He has only been there two weeks; his enthusiasm is still palpable.

"We should have a shower," he says to Imogen at the water cooler. "Is there not going to be a shower for you and the baby?"

Imogen shrugs, but her heart flutters. The baby leaps in a biblical way. The pine straw rustles. "What's your number?" she stammers. "Your phone?"

Bart acts as if he had misheard. He smiles. "I'll organize," he says. "What fun."

On the day of the shower there is a scattering of gift cards on the conference table but only Bart and Imogen in attendance. The office is empty.

"Where is everyone?" Bart is perplexed. "This can't be right."

Imogen peels the blue wrappers from six blue cupcakes and sets them back down, naked on the tray. She is quivering. She does not eat them. She is filled with

the thrill of possibly being loved. “What’s your address?” she says to Bart. “Where do you live?”

Bart looks at Imogen and eats a cupcake slowly. Imogen imagines Bart wiping her tears, braiding her hair, assembling a tricycle, stirring a stir-fry. Here he is, his arm around her waist. They are picking out towels, picking out a beach house, picking out headstones. Here they stand in a garden of roses, and here is a sword, and here goes Bart falling on it, for her, their son. Which was not his son but now is.

“I have to go,” Bart says. There is blue frosting in the corners of his mouth, as if he has suddenly understood something and can no longer attend to basic manners. “Congratulations.”

And then, nothing new; Imogen is alone with her gift cards. At home that night she sits in the baby’s femur-colored rocker and thinks of her estranged parents, her strange self. She waits for the baby to kick her three times: *I. Love. You.*



Imogen pays someone to be with her in the delivery room. A delivery guy. A literal one. His name is Shawn, from Domino’s, and he needs money. Imogen offers him five hundred. Shawn stalls. Imogen offers a grand. Shawn accepts. Imogen pays him three hundred up front and takes her pizza, mushroom. Shawn writes the date on his palm. The birth is scheduled in three weeks, a C-section.

“Rad,” Shawn says at the fifteen crisp twenties. “Sweet!”

“It’s a boy,” Imogen says. She will throw out the pizza when Shawn leaves. “His name is Earl and you can meet him when he is older and pretend to be a cousin, an uncle.”

“I can teach him to drive stick,” Shawn says.

Imogen sees Shawn at her door in sixteen years. He has a beard. He tousles Earl’s tidy crewcut. He gives Imogen a single rose. “Will you hold my hand when they cut me open?” she whispers.

Shawn laughs like a boy, because he is a boy. “For a grand I think I have to.”



On the morning of Earl's birth, Imogen drains the bleach from the meat bones and sets them to dry on her dining table. There are enough bones to build an entire cow, minus its skull. The apartment smells of chlorine, a drained pool. Imogen drinks a glass of Prosecco in the nude. She fries a cube steak in butter and eats it with a spoon. She puts on a silk robe, baby blue. In the cab, she tells the driver that her husband left her for an infertile redhead named Jennica. The driver tells her he is sorry, and Imogen drinks his pity like a second glass of wine. At registration, Shawn, the delivery boy, is waiting. He wears jeans caked with flour and smells of tomato sauce. Imogen hands him an envelope with fourteen fifties.

"Go and buy me a blue teddy bear in the gift shop," she tells him. "And a blue vase of blue lollipops and a giant blue balloon shaped like a stork."

Shawn nods his head. He trots off in the direction of the gift shop but forty minutes later has still not returned. Imogen knows: he was only there for his money. She proceeds on her own. She puts on her hospital gown. She lets the nurses prep her. They shave her. They swab her abdomen with yellow antiseptic. She lets the nurses look into her sad eyes with their sad eyes, and their concern fills Imogen with joy.

An hour later, when the doctor pulls the baby from Imogen and announces that it's a girl, Imogen pretends he is wrong. She pretends that girl does not rhyme with pearl. She pretends not to see the swollen folds between Earl's legs. She pretends not to notice Earl's narrow shoulders and rosebud mouth. When she holds Earl to her breast and coos, "My son, my prince, my boy!" she pretends the nurses regard her with admiration and not terror. For the four days Imogen is in the hospital, she pretends she is trembling from love and is sleepless from joy.



For a month, Earl is a pearl. Imogen feeds and hums and swaddles. She sleeps in seven-minute intervals. She lives on sugar water and canned sausages. She

practices different ways of laughing. Imogen watches the wound below her breasts and above her privates, from which her prince emerged, heal into a shiny pink smile. She talks to herself in French. She composes a national anthem in her head. Earl is the country to which she sings. One day, Imogen feels well enough to take the bones from the dining room table and attempt a chandelier, but she cannot find the glue. She cannot remember what glue looks like. She puts the bones into the metal trashcan and begins to cry. Soon after, Earl begins to cry. Before long, Imogen begins to scream. Not to be outdone, Earl follows suit.

Earl and Imogen howl for days. The tenants respond at first by pounding on their floors and ceilings with broomsticks, but then on Imogen's door with fists. Imogen takes the metal trashcan of bones and rattles it for an hour until Earl sleeps for an hour. An hour of rattling, an hour of sleep. Over the course of a week, Imogen's biceps grow large, her eyes grow frantic. Scream, shake, sleep. Weep, bang, heap. At last, the landlord arrives. His smile is sheepish. His hat is wadded in his hands. He asks Imogen to temporarily relocate.

“Two months,” he says. “The rent is on me.”

“A beach vacation?” Imogen says. She repeats it to herself in French. *Des vacances à la plage?* She laughs for the first time in weeks. It flutters to the ceiling like a bird let out of a cage. “How generous!” she says. “How kind!”

“Well, I . . .” the landlord stammers. He looks at his feet. He shuffles his feet. Earl lets loose with a shriek. The child turns the color of Mars. The landlord turns ivory—*rib, calcium, skeleton*. Broomsticks bang overhead and underfoot. “The beach it is,” he mumbles. “The beach it is!” he shouts.

Imogen stares at the landlord. His hair is gray at the temples. He looks drained and pained. Imogen sees him in a beach chair with a tropical drink. She sees him beside her, feels him inside her. “Come with me,” she says. “Come with us.”

The landlord opens and closes his mouth. He fumbles for his wallet. He hands Imogen its contents and backs out of the apartment, flustered. “I have to go,” he says. But Imogen hears: *I love you so.*



Imogen packs a suitcase with the bleached bones, the baby blue robe, the baby blue suit, her grandmother's thimble. She slides the unused gift cards from her office shower into her wallet like a slick brick. She places Earl in a linen sling printed with gray whales and wears him across her body like a pageant sash. For two cab rides and two flights, Earl is uncharacteristically silent. When Imogen arrives at the hotel, she stands in front of it and feels light and elated. She breathes in the sea. She takes in the sun. She marvels at the silence. Earl has nothing to emote until Imogen is in her double queen deluxe, sipping from a pineapple filled with cream and rum and looking out at the ocean, and then his voice unfurls like a tidal wave. His screams crash through Imogen's room and the rooms beyond like a storm surge. By dinnertime, Imogen and Earl are relocated by the management to the highest floor, and the surrounding guests are relocated to the lowest. On the second day, Imogen is sent a complimentary breakfast and three blue pills. On the third day, she is sent away. With free shoehorns and shower caps.

Earl is a relentless, vacation-ruining rain. But still, a second hotel takes Imogen for a night, and a third takes her for an afternoon. A bed-and-breakfast lets a banished and famished Imogen eat her takeout dinner in their parking lot, but at the town's final motel, the staff sees her coming and locks the doors. From the tiny glass lobby, they wave and shrug and hold up a sign that reads: WE'VE HEARD ABOUT YOU. "Heard" is painted in bright, furious-baby red.

Imogen wheels her suitcase down to the beach. It digs its heels into the sand, and Imogen pitches forward as if beaten back by a headwind. At the water's edge, she looks left, which is north, and right, which is south, and decides on south. *Seat me at the right hand of God*, she thinks, though she does not believe in a god at all, much less one with chairs and hands and mercy. But south she moves, regardless, past sunbathers and ball-tossers and dogs with their ears pinned flat to their heads. Everyone hears Imogen and Earl coming. Everyone stops for the parade. The spectators' gapes are their salutes. Their silence is their homage. The suitcase's wheel ruts mark the highway to hell, and nothing dares cross over them. Not person or pet, seafoam or seaweed.

When the day is done and the sky is the color of funeral ash and the bait fish rise and fall like tossed silver coins, Imogen nears a stretch of protected land free

from civilization where she can, at last, be uncivilized. She sets Earl down in the sand. He writhes and wails in his sling. Imogen opens the suitcase and dumps the bones into a pile, and beside the pile she lays back, ready for outlining, like a gunshot victim. One by one, she takes the bones and pokes them into the sand, tracing herself. She goes around her legs and in between them. She places the bones around one arm and then the other. When Imogen is done, the bones are a white picket fence and she is the vacant house within.

Imogen sits up and sighs. She stands and tiptoes outside of her perimeter. She gathers the gift cards and presses them into the sand above her picket head, fanned like a liberty crown. She takes the complimentary shoehorns and arranges them into the shape of a sword, a tortoiseshell weapon that begins in her bony hand in the sand and points north, away from a pretend god. As Earl would have it, his milk pours from Imogen's breasts the entire time she works. As Imogen would have it, she removes her stained suit at sunset and stands naked. She gathers the free shower caps and sets them out to sea like manmade jellyfish. She releases her suit to the wind, and it lands in the ocean behind the translucent shower caps, a pale blue, polyester ray. Imogen puts on her robe. She puts her grandmother's thimble on her thumb. She puts on the writhing, wailing, whale sling and tiptoes back inside of her bony outline and reclines with Earl on her chest.



The screams fade out as the tide comes in. The sea laps at Imogen's swollen feet, at her veined legs and virgin crotch. It reaches the pink smile on her abdomen, then Earl's back and her chest. The baby turns silent and still. Imogen pats his back with the silver thimble. She hums "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore." She sings an anthem, hears a cello. She sees cockroaches turn into water bugs and water bugs turn into thimbles. Each wave fills a thimble with wet sand, and each thimbleful is dropped into a canyon. As the canyon fills, the birth is rewound in Imogen's mind. Earl shrinks from infant to gourd, from gourd to green nut, from green nut to golden flower to tadpole. Imogen sees a tadpole sucked into a syringe. A popsicle refrozen. She sees a teal-eyed veterinarian who cannot bring himself

pleasure holding an empty sample cup. Imogen opens her eyes. In the path of the moonlight, the bones float out to sea, one after another, in the shape of a ladder. A perfect girl climbs one slippery rung at a time, but Imogen pretends not to see her. Imogen closes her eyes. She tastes salt in her mouth, but whether it is seawater or tears, she cannot say.

In the morning, Imogen wakes from a dream in which a single bone rattles in a metal trashcan. When she opens her eyes, she sees her thumb, the silver thimble, tap, tap, tapping on her chest. In place of Earl, there is a breastplate made of pearl. *Mother of pearl*. Imogen rises in her wet, blue robe. She looks north and south for her prince, and then she looks out at the ocean and remembers. A champion swimmer. *The butterfly*.

Imogen packs her empty suitcase with ten thimblefuls of wet sand. Of the three gift cards that remain, she takes one and slides it into the pocket of her robe. She sets off, wheeling further south until she can hear the whine of civilization but not see it. Imogen trudges eastward over sea oats and dunes. Thrice she stops to catch her breath, to tap the silver thimble on her breastplate. Eventually, she emerges in a parking lot. Across a two-lane road, she spies a diner. Imogen proceeds toward and through the cry of traffic. She parks her suitcase at the restaurant's door. She tightens the sash of her robe. Inside the diner, she requests a table for one. Imogen's server narrows his eyes at her as he hands her a menu.

“Would you like to hear our specials?” he asks, but what Imogen hears is: *Would you like to hear you’re special?*

“No,” Imogen says, eyes downcast. “I’m good.”

Imogen knows she will order a salad. The one with the most ingredients. Croutons and chickpeas. Green goddess and raspberry vinaigrette. Reticent eggs and pickleballs and green nuts and pumpkin seeds.

“One loaded salad,” the server will say. “Do you want me to hold anything?” And Imogen will keep looking down and she will answer *No*, because she knows if she looks up, she will say *Me*.

## Saj bi v kočo skočil

Hej, zmagovalka, zakaj me pipaš z  
zobotrebcem? Ton, ton,

rov. Ton, ton, rov. Izum je  
diagnostičen in je na

robu planeta. V zemljji, v šapkah,  
dvakrat. Ptički pojejo. Je tudi

tu nekakšna gos (galeb) ki počne  
nekaj čudnega, čudnega?

Motorji se vklapljajo. Vse  
brsti. In petelini hukajo

za rokave. Žabe so bele, ljubijo  
trenja in zastopniki čebel

še spijo. Barvasti so. Zemljica  
bela, hodi in ugasni.

# I Would Lunge into the Cottage

Hi, winner, why do you tap me with  
a toothpick? Tap, tap,

ditch. Tap, tap, ditch. The invention  
is diagnostic and sits

the planet on edge. The paws go into  
soil twice. Birds sing.

What, here, can start up a grebe, into  
weird, weirder reality?

Engines run and gun. It's all gonna  
bud. And roosters roar,

off-the-cuff. Frogs are white, they adore  
friction, and bee representatives

are still asleep. They are colorful. White  
world, leave, vanish off the earth.

## Glossolalia

It starts when something falls  
into me. A pale moth lands  
on the steps of the chapel  
in a wine-tinged shadow—mute  
fur trembling. I am of course

“uncomfortable.”

There comes a time, you say,  
in faith, when one allows oneself  
to speak in tongues. Under the light  
your steady hand lifts above  
two ruined wings, fluttering.

# Appendix

In the catalog of Days, I can identify all the moments I was in love. Like Day 67 of 15,809 with N—I looked at him in a cold sweat, after he said, *Try the live octopus*, and only after the tentacle squiggled into my mouth, and I tasted nothing but pure predatory instinct like fear, back-of-the-throat sour, only after I began to swallow, N said, *Make sure you chew thoroughly, or it might stick*. I wanted to throttle him on Day 67 and didn't. Or Days 807 to 13,009, when I forgot to be embarrassed by my own vanity, sitting in the bathroom sink peeling my nails and talking about my day—or was that not 807 to 13,009? I thought the index for *Lovers*,

*N, see also Love letters;  
First readers; Pork bone  
soup*

ended at 15,809 (see *Regrettable behavior*) but—last week, something shifted in the window of our old apartment, and there it all was: still lit, still.

## de *Nul chemin dans la peau que saignante étreinte*

Contre les murs ivres d'éclats, chute le soleil.  
Nom brisé de la fleur.  
Cœur qui tremble est plus lourd que l'attente  
du marin.  
Arrogante prière au vide que de battre ses ailes.  
Mais que vaut-il d'être debout quand traîne  
la lumière au sol ?  
Par devoir d'insomnie  
ou nécessaire chanson de chair,  
la nuit cassée à corps battant de noctambules.  
Surgit l'aube des chaînes.  
Bleu comptant la course des vagues.  
Tel secret de pluie, quelle longue route l'espoir.

## from *No Way in the Skin without this Bloody Embrace*

Against walls drunk with shards, the sun plummets.

The flower's shattered name.

The heart trembling weighs more than the wait  
for a sailor.

An arrogant prayer to the void just beating one's wings.

But what's it worth staying upright when light is  
dragged through the dirt?

Because of insomnia  
or necessary chantey of flesh,  
night's broken into a body pulsing with nighthawks.  
Out of the chains dawn surges.  
Blue tallying the rush of the waves.  
Some secret of rain, such a long way towards hope.

Mon chapeau est un torrent d'été des Caraïbes que la vie a déposé sur ma tête. Mes lunettes sont des masses d'ombres taillées du chaos. J'ai le cœur infecté du sang pourri des frontières. Une veste noire saupoudrée du sable des préjugés couve mon calibre suicidaire. Ma terre, mon passé, mes ancêtres sous ma peau, j'ai mes jambes de figue et je porte un pantalon skinny à l'envers saturé d'épines.

My hat is a Caribbean summer flood that life has  
dropped on my head. My glasses are wads of  
shadow cut from chaos. I have a heart infected by  
the rancid blood of borders. A black vest dusty with  
the sands of bias broods over my suicidal gat.  
My land, my past, my ancestors under my skin, I have  
figs for legs and I wear a pair of skinny jeans inside  
out and soaked with thorns.

j'ai violé tant d'horizons de tendresse  
un sel de tristesse  
m'arrache la langue  
un ciel mouillé sous les paupières  
le sang sec  
comme un signal de panne de cœur  
ma voix rouillé . . .  
des sanglots sur le clavier  
je m'en vais  
me droguer de musique

je ne suis qu'un verre  
à réfugier des coups de pierres

I've broken so many horizons of tenderness  
a salt of sadness  
rips out my tongue  
a damp sky under my eyelids  
blood dry  
as a dash light flashing heartbreak  
my voice a rusted orb . . .  
sobs all along the keyboard  
I'm through the door  
to drug myself with music

I'm just a cup  
where hurled stones curl up

## from *There Was No Adderall in the Soviet Union*

*In which I drive to Chicago for the annual International Slavic Studies Association conference and tell you along the way about how I came to be in “the experiment of the century.”*

Nobody will ever be able to do what Ellis did in the first chapter of *Glamorama*. Five pages, five entire pages, of Victor spouting rage about some specks on a wall, specks nobody can see but him, calling someone “baby” every thirty seconds, and that word and the whole situation get you so frustrated that you lose perspective and you hate Victor, you hate Ellis, you hate the book so much that by the time the real stuff comes around—terrorism, illusions, exploding bodies, warnings, grotesque snapshots of what we’ve all become—you throw the book against the wall, disarmed, admitting total and utter defeat (that devil!). Victor Ward and his goddamn specks wrapped you around his little finger as though you just learned the alphabet yesterday.

And what about Virginia Woolf, with Mrs. Dalloway’s flowers? It’s astounding—this Clarissa, this “I’ll buy the flowers myself,” as though you don’t have air enough to read, as though London is bursting into white-hot flames before your eyes, as though these very sentences are making your heart start thumping unevenly like a wannabe DJ beatboxing during a set. Lermontov, “I was traveling post from Tiflis”—just. Just a window swinging wide open without warning, a feeling of freedom and danger stealing into the room on a gust of icy wind. This is what gives you breath, as though you’d never known what breathing was before. When every space between words contains an endless expanse, and every comma could be hiding the blare of an air raid siren.

Meanwhile, the language in my world wouldn’t even set off a smoke detector. We humanities scholars write in such a way that every time you cycle back to the word “therefore,” *you can unequivocally conclude that the aforementioned fact*

*demonstrates the phenomenon described; you can speak with a high degree of certainty in such a case about the idiosyncratic dualism of this narrative construction . . . And at every step, at every step—whole clusters of suffixes agglomerating, shoved onto a skewer, a smorgasbord of -tion-ness-isms. After long nights of endless essays, I get up and stretch, trying to shake off the dull fever that burns when you have so many hours to write so many words, and you know perfectly well that you can write x words in x minutes, but there are so many fewer minutes than words . . . A cold pink sunrise glimmers outside the window and starts screeching like the funny little hyperactive bird perched on the balcony across the street. And looking at the bird, thinking about myself, I declare aloud: “Today, a case of extraordinary stamina has been exhibited to me by myself, demonstrating that in extreme circumstances, under the influence of adrenaline, even an entirely depleted human body appears capable of activating hidden energetic resources and producing results significantly exceeding my typical academic output.”*

Over time, you start to notice the defects of our desiccated academic language less and less. My colleagues can discharge twenty-minute tirades without pausing to breathe in or out, and even the briefest nod in the hallway risks triggering a historical excursus spanning three millennia. It’s an academic frame of mind, a mode of living and thinking where the brain registers *both overt and implicit relations not only among various ostensibly disparate formations within the same semantic plane, but also among those that seem at first glance to have no identifiable interconnection in meaning or in substance*.

The world is starting to swim and go blurry before my eyes. I shake my head a little and take one hand off the steering wheel, then the other, stretching them in turn. I clench and unclench my fingers, rap them on the dull plastic of the dashboard, and fix my concentration onto the road. The city at dusk demands focus.

I used to think Chicago wasn’t for me. Too much steel, too much gray. But beyond its taciturn exterior and the reflective surface of Lake Michigan lurks the same essence you’ll find in New York, just with a tinge more local American charm. New York, Moscow, Tokyo, Berlin—all metropoles are the same. They’re supranational spaces capable of absorbing anyone who has nowhere else to

go. That's why Chicago started feeling like home to me, with its cool, metallic indifference, its streets without trees except for the patch of green right in the middle, in Grant Park. Steel and streetlamps glow around the city and children play in cosmic silver fountains as my rental car speeds past the Art Institute, which is imposing enormous fees and unheard-of security measures to feature a Kandinsky original at the Slavic Studies conference tomorrow.

The International Slavic Studies Association's decision to host this year's conference in Trump Tower raised the eyebrows of many a sage, established scholar, but no graduate student so much as blinked an eye. This was a minor change, "the transfer of our Holy of Holies into the inner sanctum of capitalism," as Professor D., the world's expert on Gavrila Derzhavin's poetry, commented in *The Russian Observer*. Still, he declared, the Trump Hotel with its spire symbolically penetrating the sky not only demonstrated that the Center for Neural Conflict Development had managed to accumulate a sizeable number of generous alumni in the ten short years since its founding; it reflected the shifting status of the contemporary humanities. Emerging from academia's most universally neglected corner, we had finally walked out to center stage, vowing to show the world something truly miraculous. To be precise, this meant that my supervisor, Professor Carlow, had reached a frontier of discovery that would outmatch everything anyone had done or talked about in the last fifty or even one hundred years. That includes all the quantum physics and big bangs taken together, and I still might be selling it short.

It also meant that, over the last four months, Carlow had appeared on the covers of *Time*, *The Economist*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, and *Citizen K* looking so nonchalant that the tabloids had whizzed past the restrained headlines of their superiors to scream in bold print that "Carlow made academia sexy." Meanwhile, I played assistant to endless photoshoots, watching my boss's public image transform into that of a revolutionary figurehead, the symbol of a merger between good old academia and the gaping jaws of glossy print.

But at least the photoshoots added some variety to my day-to-day life in the lab, gave me time to strip the monitors from my body and put on some high heels. I would pose with a briefcase full of top secret documents (which I, of course, had never laid eyes on—the parameters of our "blind" experiment only allowed

me to hear scraps of our plans twenty or thirty years into the future, with almost nothing about our current results). I would walk behind Professor Carlow in a freshly pressed Vivienne Westwood suit delivered by the laboratory's stylists—yes, you heard that right—and with every clack of my heels on the floor, I would count arguments for and against the project. Was it made of infinite kindness or delusions of grandeur, messianism or a global arms race, discovery or competition?

During the photoshoots, Carlow's role consisted of standing with his arms crossed over his chest and gazing off into the distance. He would wear sweaters in a classic shade of navy blue, but with an edgy cut, his neckline diving casually into a scalene triangle. I was always too busy to concern myself with things I couldn't change, so while the stylists calculated and measured out the ideal line for my boss's V-necks—one that would look accidental but not careless—I would check my email, churn out twenty-one replies, and still have time to wave to my parents over Skype. (I hardly ever see my family, no more than once a year, and in the other 360 or more days our interactions involve waiting for one another online and adding up the eleven-hour difference between Kazakhstan and the East Coast until we can finally exchange picturesque descriptions of what's happening here and what's happening there. Through the camera, I can see my little cousin growing, watch my cat getting older, and do my best to ignore how my parents keep changing, too.) My Skype chats would catch Carlow's attention, and he'd give me a brisk wave that meant "enough dawdling—we have to talk," finally lending his sweater that naturally carefree look that even his team of six designers with degrees from Julliard and Saint Martins hadn't managed to achieve. When I saw that wave, I had to turn off my camera and get up obediently to receive and decipher yet another string of commands.

Carlow is sixty-seven. He has luminous white hair and a goatee that reminds me of the Russian nationalist Edward Limonov. He also has thick black-framed glasses, a deliberate voice, and hand gestures so precise that they seem to hint at extended practice sessions in front of a mirror or even with a private coach. In any case, I'm probably the only one who notices. The most prominent aspect of Carlow's appearance is his boundless intellect, which ingrains itself like dust in his delicate eyelids and the bridge of his nose. Sometimes, I think I could calculate his

IQ based solely on his face. Rumor puts it around 170 or maybe 200, making him the youngest member of Mensa in history. He's the most famous professor at MIT, the founder of the Conflicting Neurology Department—dry, strict, always dressed in gray with accents of white or powder blue, Carlow never gives me a break.

From the very beginning of our work together, we set limits and rules. Because our research was always about crossing personal boundaries—my own, to be exact—the professor deigned to enlighten me about his own personal motives for doing this work, his ambitions, his plans for the future. Naturally, I was forbidden from talking about any of it under threat of “experimental treatment” in the form of selective memory erasure. So while everybody else saw Carlow as a matter-of-fact, unimpeachable academic on the verge of changing the world, I alone could grasp the scale of his evil—and benevolent—genius.

When I was sitting in line to volunteer for the experiment, crumpling my tag (number 964) into a ball, I was sure that even the chance to see Professor Carlow in person would be worth these three and a half wasted days, after which I would become one of the 1,329 losing applicants who had given the world a single ideal candidate for neuroconflicting programming. Two years, five months, and six days ago, it turned out that this ideal candidate was, in fact, me. A young woman (birthplace: Kazakhstan; ethnicity: Volga German; native language: Russian; citizenship: Germany; address: Cambridge, USA; position: doctoral candidate; department: World-Systems Analysis; research interests: politics and culture of the former Soviet Union; IQ: 142; body type: anorexic; information metabolism: Ethical Intuitive Extrovert; special characteristics: redacted), twenty-seven years old, originally from Central Asia but with a tangled biography that stretched across Europe. Having moved even further to the West in hopes of revolutionizing Experimental Slavic Studies, having landed in the web of world-systems analysis, I had become the ideal modeling clay for the experiment of the century.

“Fitting raw material for a globalized context,” Carlow concluded, presenting me to his lab’s inner circle.

It wasn’t just that he helped his colleagues stop seeing me as a living human being and start seeing me as *an amalgamation of conflicting life experiences*. He also opened my eyes to what I really am. As it turns out, I am *a plexus of various*

*unevenly weighted vectors and fragmented paradigms that maintains homeostasis due exclusively to a natural instinct for self-preservation and a rationalism built over the subconscious death drive, with a resulting psychological counterbalance that yields an overall neutral outcome.*

“Your life, your experiences, and your actions,” Carlow patiently explained to me, “exemplify the destruction of all established paradigms. They embody a nearly infinite mass of conflicts—which are nonetheless finite, seeing as you are not mentally ill. In other words, one might say that you are relatively healthy on a physical level, but you are a pathologically and irreversibly fragmented individual.”

Gradually, I got used to thinking in those terms myself, drawing a mental distinction between me as the playdough of our time (95% of my existence) and me as a living person with her own thoughts, desires, feelings, and all the rest (this remaining 5% occurs exclusively when I am alone). Because I couldn’t tell anybody outside the experiment what my life had become, and nobody inside the experiment cared what I thought, my situation prompted the partial disintegration of my social identity—*my self-conception in comparison (in relation, to use the correct application of Einsteinian theory to the experimental humanities) with other people, given that other people had stopped functioning as projections of my self-conception onto my environment.* After all, I couldn’t argue with all of them at once. I couldn’t explain that their only charge against me was essentially that I have a soul, a mind, and a body that time and space shuffle around according to their own internal laws.

Last month, Carlow posed for the annual international special issue of *Vogue*. His picture is supposed to go on the cover alongside the headline “Science is the New Sexy.” This is how he has beat out thousands of colleagues both past and present, people whose work has always been considered dusty, boring, and obscure. Carlow hasn’t just popularized science: he’s given scholarship sex appeal.

It’s pretty satisfying to think that I’ve made my mark on it all. I’ve spent hours with monitors all over my body and an electrode cap on my head, mortally exhausted, doing interviews with an endless stream of journalists from the States to Germany to Japan to Canada to Russia to China to France to Tanzania, smiling like they taught me to, dispensing phrases that had been specially constructed to make the

necessary impression without leaking any details. I took on every assignment with zeal, from a week of sleep deprivation to a general proof of Fermat’s Last Theorem. There was also hypnosis, a strict informational diet, traumatic memory restoration, daily CT scans, and a lot of little wires. After a year, I got so used to the tickling feeling of those wires that I stopped noticing them altogether and found myself able to relax despite it all.

I’m completely exhausted after that flight from Boston to Chicago yesterday, but three pills of Adderall are enough to get behind the wheel of a rental car (all on the project’s dime) and make the drive downtown. Listen, they’re playing that old Lana Del Rey song “National Anthem” on the radio. I always smile when I remember how we filmed the music video (Lana was volunteer number 889 on our list, so it was easy for Professor Carlow to line me up as a backup artist). Lana wore a romper with five hundred tiny embroidered suns, and I had a big moon attached through my chest like an arrow. We were in love, and just as she pulled me to her with a seductively harsh whisper of “Money is the anthem of success,” I would draw her in with my “angelic,” as we called it, crooning of “I’m your national anthem.” All of my guy friends were jealous that I knew exactly how much Lana Del Rey’s lips tasted like cherry syrup: she ended up giving me a whole box of that lip gloss.

But I actually liked two of our other scenes best. The first one centered on a big map of the world and on me, my arms thrown out like a cross over all of Eurasia, emitting roots that burrowed themselves into the soil—with help from a lot of CGI, of course. Still, when we shot that scene, everything almost happened to me in real life. I felt that I was the Earth, that my veins were rivers and my arteries were black with oil, propelling energy across my limbs, from Central Asia at my left-hand fingertips all the way to the Arctic, from the Caucasus to my heart, which pumped out everything that ever happened to me, to the Earth, to the people who walk over it—walk over me—and fall back into its depths, becoming it, becoming me. We search for a God above us, I thought, looking up at the artificial sky, but the source of life is really beneath our feet, and God is in this Earth that allows us to be born in its breast and return to its love in the end. Only one thing was hard for me: I had to force myself to be steady and apathetic, not to shut down amid

that burst of love no matter how much I wanted to, no matter how much it hurt to hug all living beings without choking them. Maybe that's why my arms were tied down to the Earth: love can be destructive. When Lana stepped across the ocean and leaned toward me in that scene, quickening the heartbeats of viewers all over the world with ecstasy, disgust, or envy—I didn't hold back. I raised my arms, tearing off chunks of my map and whole clumps of dirt to embrace her, reaching for her cold skin and her cherry lips.

Her hands were always really, really cold. When she twisted a lock of my hair around her finger and once again declared to the camera, "Money is the anthem of success," when she grabbed my shoulders and whispered in my ear, "so put on mascara and your party dress," I was always surprised at how icy her touch was, take after take. And take after take, I pushed her away, throwing my outstretched arms in an embrace to the screaming crowd. I stood on the rim of a red wall and implored them to tell me I was their national anthem; I took their ovations standing up, hyperventilating on that euphoria, on that insane air—until the wind ripped me away from the very edge, tossing me down gently so that I floated like a feather into the arms of the people below. They jostled one another in excitement, forcing their way through and reaching insatiably for my body. It was the next thirty seconds that got the video banned from every channel on TV, and Lana ended up shooting a new one, this time with A\$AP Rocky instead of me, and with a different plot. But for us, the most important thing was that the original version still existed, still awaited its hour of glory.

The hotel really went all-out hanging banners on the walls for the conference. Every coffee table is smothered with program brochures featuring Carlow's face on the cover. No surprise there: our annual Experimental Slavic Studies conferences used to bring in a crowd of about three thousand, but the revolutionary advances of the last few years have shot that number up to ten thousand. This year, with our project's first big presentation on the schedule (and rumors about it spreading since January), we were expecting anywhere from fifteen to twenty thousand attendees, however many the association could actually sort into panels and roundtables. Every hotel in Chicago is booked, student discounts had to be cancelled, and the students themselves are squeezing into dorm rooms over at UChicago. Basically,

the whole affair is a hot mess, and the mad scientist himself is as sharp and satisfied as he's ever been.

Following the directions on my Google Glass, I return my rental car in a private service lot and go through the expedited registration process with a senior manager. He leads me to a private elevator in the restricted section of the tower where our four main research group members are also staying, along with two ISSA members who are close enough to Carlow to know what's going on. There's a twenty-four-hour surveillance system in the hallway, and every room of my suite is equipped with a red button for calling security. I feel like all these extra precautions are a bit of a joke, or at least wholly unnecessary. It's not like they would actually protect us in case of any well-planned sabotage, but they do get in the way of us living our lives. Still, Carlow insisted over and over in the run-up to all this that if the only thing standing between our project and total destruction is secrecy, then we'd better be safe than sorry. I don't think Carlow is a particularly talented security expert—if I wanted to damage the project, I would lose my head figuring out exactly which weakness to target. But okay, okay, nobody knows any of it, and I agree that in a place with this level of agitated euphoria, it would be thoughtless to leave anything to chance. When you come down to it, my brain is currently valued at a minimum of thirty-eight million dollars.

“Of course, they may be the ones making atomic bombs, but we’re the ones making the people who decide how to use them,” my professor would say. He always gets worked up when people ask him about the value of the experiment. In his style of performance, that means slicing his palm through the air and manipulating his jaw to punctuate every syllable like a dotted line. His fear of sabotage is perpetual: he banned me from ordering any medications, even vitamins, from anywhere outside our lab’s internal pharmacy, and I can’t so much as set down my phone for fear that Carlow would lose my GPS coordinates. Every evening at nine on the dot, the phone rings for me to give him an exhaustive report on how I felt that day.

I wonder how he hasn’t noticed that I’ve been taking, shall we say, generous doses of Adderall, Ritalin, and sleeping pills. Sometimes, it feels like he must know it all, and he’s probably just pretending that he doesn’t. It’s not like anybody cancelled

my own schoolwork, so I have to spend every free minute glued to my computer screen, speed-reading books and articles. In between my sleep deprivation sessions and my brain scans, I'm always in cabs between MIT and Harvard to take my exams, go to seminars, meet with my advisors, and sometimes even see my friends. On my lunch breaks, I write final papers right in the lab, surrounded by blown-up cross-sections of my brain, and then I spend the nights polishing my writing to a sheen until the alarm wakes me up to start another day of work with Carlow.

One of the experiment's initial conditions was that I couldn't step back from my career. I wasn't supposed to sacrifice any of my own ambitions, though that in itself is a more ambitious goal than it might seem. On top of the anorexia that I've never had time to think about, that I've come to befriend as my body's natural state, these two years of experiments have turned me from an internally conflicted person into a person who's just broken and exhausted. Not that I give a shit. How I look, what messages seem carved into my face, what everyone around me thinks—none of it has been on my mind for a very long time. A person and their physical shell have no meaning; they are only carriers for the idea, for the only thing that has meaning. If you want to stay toned or look presentable, there's medicine for that, and makeup and the fashion industry and tooth whitening. There are a billion ways to create and maintain visual forms while preserving internal contents. That's why bodies and appearances—the sparks in people's eyes, the grace in their limbs, the depth of their gaze—it's all nothing more than a social construct, a mode of self-presentation. Only ideas matter.

In any case, my body is always leading me on, like a flaky friend or my ex from Oxford, though I've burned him right out of my hippocampus. My body makes demands: food, sleep, rest, glucose, kindness. My emotions and attachments haven't gone anywhere. I still carve out time to see my best friend Sarah, to go on dates, to talk to my parents.

I open the door to my room, throw my bag onto an armchair, and curl up on the bed. The Adderall is making my heart sound like a malfunctioning alarm clock. Every second's beat feels like a lightning bolt. My brain is firing immaculately. I feel like a car going three hundred miles an hour: every idea I read about instantly visualizes itself and systematizes itself in my head; data automatically falls into

tables and graphs; I can diagram the complete works of John Donne or read Kant for the first time and understand every word. My mind is precise, sharp, unerring; it grasps every concept with ease and instinctively senses connections and associations among everything it touches. Every thought is like an arrow shattering the infinite darkness around it, and the only problem is that the sharpness of my consciousness won't let me sleep, keeps waking me up from a half-slumber whenever a seemingly familiar theory rotates suddenly in my mind or I break through the endless hermeneutic circle of criticism about that one novel, the one where . . .

The gyre of thoughts erodes my body, and I am always arriving in a state somewhere between dreams and unreality, moving through a fog, unless I have my pills, though I still shudder at every explosion of a new idea in my head. Sparks beat one after another at my temples, keep me afloat, and the pills help me keep going, keep ingesting and regurgitating everything I know. Whenever I realize, more mentally than physically, that I'm going into crisis mode, I can always knock back a dose of sleeping pills like an alcoholic taking the first shot of the night, to take a break, to . . .

I have never been as happy as I have been these two years. There's nothing better. You can do anything, there is enough of you for anything, even for . . .

Technically, it was like this before the experiment, too, just softer, slower, more uncertain, like an action shot in slow-mo. And then somebody suddenly presses play. Carlow explained to me that he's trying to unravel, to *disrupt homeostasis, to activate all potential conflictive nodes and destroy the balance of interaction between reason and the body*, to escalate them toward a war for my soul, for my . . .

I love the last half hour before I fall asleep most of all. When I draw a white dot of slumber on my tongue, and ten minutes later, it starts to dissolve outward, spreading first over my face like a silk handkerchief soaked in chloroform, then down along my neck, swimming smoothly toward my hands and feet, pressing me into the bed, into an empty chasm, where it doesn't . . .

I slump backward, hit the button that closes the blinds, and "today" is complete. (2014–2015)

## Prelude

Every year, when the lindens bloom, I think of the year when the lindens didn't bloom.

This year, so far, the lindens haven't bloomed.

I think of the year when the lindens didn't bloom.

An idea almost comes, or it comes in disguise—it's the same old thought, but today it is startling.

The way you fail to see, or recognize yourself, in a mirror at strange angles.

Thoughts almost arrive.

The way an owl swoops between two black trees, only at dusk, the dusk of evening—

Morning, of course, has its own foreshortened, clandestine dusk.

Dusk of morning. The light unblue.

Original thought was the mere idea, idea with no shadow.

The thought everafter is only shadow, and shadows are startling.

## Wild Animals (Normal Distance)

Watching silent films in a backyard at night, I'm distracted by a bat  
fluttering overhead, its flight path so erratic.

A moth made bright in the projector light.

The day before in the park, there were so many midges in "the  
middle distance" we couldn't estimate their number.

Thousands? Hundreds of thousands?

A raccoon in the vines on a telephone pole . . .

Baby bunny in the grass . . .

However cute, I like to imagine it might be rabid.

I think a little threat is necessary for happiness.

I think sometimes we want to be threatened, sometimes we want to  
be the threat.

Sometimes when I'm standing what feels like a normal distance from  
a person, they keep seeming to edge away.

I must keep edging closer too, or the effect would stop happening,  
but it continues.

Like when you go into the ocean, you never come out where you went in.

I'm trying to decide if Wittgenstein was sexy. It's not obvious.

I think the answer is “yes” or “unanswerable.”

I think delicate people are frightening.

But I also think fear is erotic.

Wittgenstein believed his *Tractatus* was the last work of philosophy that would ever “need” to be written—that he had answered all the important questions.

He quit philosophy for a while and became an architect . . .

He built a house for his sister she wouldn’t live in . . .

Einstein believed that publishing his theory of relativity would end all thinking about time.

Now scientists believe we have a mirror universe, a “reflection” of our universe where time flows backwards from the future to the past.

The “arrow of time” either points in one direction or in two directions, forwards and back.

Why not in all directions, like a minute hand? Or in *all* directions, like everything?

I want to experience my past again, but as I was then, doing what I did then—nothing changed.

In what sense, then, am I not living through it, again and again?

Isn’t the past always *happening*?

# The Idea of a Meadow

I've become obsessed with the idea of a meadow, a meadow I am not in.

Yellow flowers are in the meadow. They must be; they are part of my idea of a meadow.

There is the yellow on green below, the flowers in the grass, the white on blue above.

My viewpoint is in the middle, though I'm not in the meadow.

It forms a white line extending out to the horizon, a line that is real in the real of the meadow—

When the meadow is real, so is the line.

You can think of the meadow as kind.

But the meadow is indifferent to human life—even to mine, even my meadow.

My meadow with day moon and trickling stream, rabbit and magpie.

White wisp of cloud, white snow on the mountain, the meadow a valley—

There is cloud wisp and flowers, but they are not for me, when the meadow is real.

I'm not in the meadow. The meadow is not mine.

# *REVIEWS*

# A Poetics of Spacetime: Rosebud Ben-Oni's Latinx Futurity

*If This Is the Age We End Discovery* (Alice James Books, 2021) is Rosebud Ben-Oni's second full-length poetry collection; it has as its lineage other such visually punchy, cross-linguistic and genre-bending Latinx poetry as J. Michael Martinez's *In the Garden of the Bridehouse*, elena minor's *TITULADA*, and to a lesser extent Eduardo C. Corral's *Guillotine*. Always varying in form and occasionally incantatory, Ben-Oni's voice and artist's eye emerge triumphant in the collection. She takes cues from the cadence of preachers and from coding syntax (with all its bracketing punctuation) to nest her language and slow our reading to a halting pace: "She pulls away. I feel the blood. Running. From sharp. Sharp. Nails" ("Poet Wrestling With Every Night She'd Crucify Herself"); "I created you {exo}. From origins {tender} & unproven. For you. / I crossed the streams & struck. Incurable. Fire / left :: / unguarded // & {untendered} desire. For you alone. I swallowed" ("Poet Wrestling With Gravitron As {{ :: Gravitron :: }}"). In his *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant describes the moment that poetry can begin to challenge narrative once it becomes language-in-itself: "as if satisfied with its perfection, [language] ceases to take for its object the recounting of its connection with particular surroundings, to concentrate solely upon its fervor to exceed its limits and reveal thoroughly the elements composing it—solely upon its engineering skill with these." Glissant is theorizing a Caribbean poetics, but Ben-Oni certainly breaks language down into component, disembodied parts while pushing its limits: a compound word like *slingshot* gets dissected into ">:: sling- // {shot} faulty & error." Many of these poems buck narrative in favor of a hierarchical structure, mimicking programming language and forcing us to consider the function of a word inside another word.

The poet describes her book as a "love letter to the very nature of being alive"—indeed, there is a hyperawareness of illness and the body's precarity, eerily prophetic given the timeline of this book's birth during the pandemic. "I highly

recommend disconnecting,” she begins “All That Is and Is Not in Our Nuclear Family,” and I desperately want to take her advice after being chronically online for the last year. When she says “am / I another long long trick // of existence still burning // like a halogen” in the 19-page final “Poet Wrestling with Reverse {Re-Verse} String Theory,” even though her subject (the intimate crisis of identity, of body) is personal, I can’t help but read the I as universal. This collection is filled with virus, multiverse, screen, collapse, “hyperspaceawakening”—the sliding plates of the book’s preoccupations might as well be tarot cards I’ve just laid out.

The longest sequence of poems (all but six follow this formula) is the “Poet Wrestling with \_\_\_\_” in which the author finds herself ruminating on the various cultural touchstones and scientific theorems that preoccupy her. From Bunnicula to Bob Ross, from the Gravitron to exponential equations, these poems expand from the physicality of their titles into the intangibility of personal histories, imaginary and real conversations, and the vastness of Jewish mysticism. By including a poem of the poet “wrestling” with her own previous poetry collection, she grapples with a meta-analysis of her own writing—she articulates the difficulty of the writing process even while (or rather, after) writing. Occasionally, at their least effective, these poems feel like a game of telephone for which we’ll never hear the opening phrase. In “Poet Wrestling with An Ode to Her Brother,” Ben-Oni spins the title of her previous book into an image the poem hangs on:

I never made it through a single night.  
 It wasn’t without design. The *brxght*.  
*Brxght xyxs.* & still the border. Night.  
 Unfurls.

:: *ξ the xyxs ::*

shudder through hurricane season.

Because there are so many degrees of separation between the text and the image it’s trying to convey, the emotional resonance here is elusive—I wonder about the

use of x as e only in “eyes” and x as i only in “bright,” and whether there is some mysterious continuation from Ben-Oni’s previous collection.

The most interesting movement of this sequence is “Poet Wrestling with Bunnicula in the Challenger Deep.” Delightfully complex, this poem marries the poet’s various concerns (the scientific world, the fondness for childhood literature, the body’s position amongst a deteriorating world) with glittering, wild imagery:

Oh wet & sweet. Vampire bunny.

They’ll never grasp. Hold or sour

on little bunny-powered. Nautilus. Tearing through blue  
& luminous. & vamping. In bunny darkness. How bare skin

thirsts through neoprene. Is how you breathe me.

& freely. Is it possible. To explode without

moving?

The weird displacement of a character like Bunnicula (the equally horrific and adorable vampire bunny of its eponymous children’s book series) to the deepest part of the Pacific Ocean, with all its mysterious withholding, is compellingly inventive. Ben-Oni then delves (literally—the poem’s camerawork takes us to the bottom of the sea) into a sensuality that is at once wistful and incisive:

Entwining on ocean floor

where they think all there’s to suck  
are rotting whale bones. & molten  
core. Unreached. Is what presses

my neck. To your teeth. Without taking. Further & deftly.

What I could give, tightly. & at such. Depths. How we get  
each other. To come. For. & Against.

Bunnicula emerges elsewhere and morphs into a figure of the speaker's newly-diagnosed (unspecified) illness, a lover, or both. Here's the opening to "Poet Wrestling with the Poetics of Unsolvable Physics":

Maybe I *am* writing this to get you to stop  
pursuing me, my little vampire bunny—  
[...]

I'd rather take *{chance}* & get

gnawed. & chewed & chomped  
& become delicious & seduced  
as. Evolution. Is. Seriously

screwed.

This poem enacts a conversation between speaker and rabbit in which he stalks her from train stations into her own imagination, yet they always manage to miss one another. The poet's body becomes the bargaining chip, the offering that might unite them or at least place them onto the same physical plane. Nothing quite works: "Maybe dry veins / nibble. & one more night / we're still bloody peas. & quarks. / & maybe it's not important. / To the Theory of Everything." There's uncertainty, and it has bunny ears.

Of all these "wrestling" poems, the most subversive is "*Efes* Wrestling with the Poet Who Won't Look Away." *Efes* is the Modern Hebrew word for "zero," and, in Jewish mysticism, it means "to nullify, to conceal." The poet posits that it is "responsible for Dark energy; vampire bunnies & insomnia; insatiable lover; enemy of mathematics & elegant equations; Creation's Twin," among other characterizations of her own design. This reversal of the poem's gaze, from speaker-

as-subject to speaker-as-object, is a welcome progression and one that complicates the narrative of the book. A prose poem with a hole in the beginning, it's striking in its obvious departure from the less-structured pages that precede it. Here, the poet triangulates her obsessions: God + spacetime + disease. "Only in time is your God safe . . . You, poet, are more than. Similar to this. Terror." Suddenly we as readers are given an image of the poet in a mystical, perverted mirror (I am reminded of Sylvia Plath's "Mirror," as well as the moment when Finn Mertens confronts his past comet-self in *Adventure Time*) and the collection's most complicated convergence. *If This Is the Age We End Discovery* ends on a note similar to Adrienne Rich's *Diving into the Wreck*, another clear poetic ancestor. Here's Ben-Oni:

{*o perhaps You*  
& *You & I*  
*will until*  
*something*

:: *Greater than* ::

*gives—}*  
o o o what if

{*what if*}

With this asking, Ben-Oni pushes on Glissant's language-in-itself; indeed, the words even get separated into singular vowel components. She's pared down the heavily-populated poems to two final entities: you and I. These two words end us on a precipitous note—not quite hopeful, not quite doomed, as if we stand on the edge of a *Blade Runner* skyscraper, overlooking a futuristic spacetime, filthy for all its inevitability.

# Build That World: Helen Macdonald's *Vesper Flights* and Rachel Kushner's *The Hard Crowd: Essays 2000–2020*

Helen Macdonald's 2015 bestseller *H Is for Hawk* showcased an agile hybridity, combining memoir, nature writing, and literary history into a meditative text that gazed outward as much as inward. Her newest book, *Vesper Flights* (Grove Press, 2020), displays her skills as an essayist, which she wields with the same force. Her prose style—luxuriant, supple, and evocative—can snatch any object from the world and render it with such linguistic force it seems to physically exist in the text. These essays allow Macdonald to rove through the environment around her, ambling an improvised path as her panoramic eye moves from root to branch, earth to sky. In one essay, she notes that field guides, the illustrated books that help nature enthusiasts identify species, “are far from transparent windows on to nature. You need to learn to read them against the messiness of reality.” Though there are no photographs or illustrations in *Vesper Flights*; Macdonald’s lyrical conjurations serve as effective field guidance. As a bonus, she does the messy reality comparisons for us.

Macdonald returns again and again to the illusory divisions human beings have erected between themselves and the natural world. While trekking to the coast of Ireland where peregrine falcons nest in “two decommissioned cooling chimneys,” Macdonald characterizes the birds’ adaptive behavior as “a small, feathered rebuke to our commonplace notion that nature exists only in places other than our own.” Taking her brother on a tour of the Wicken Fen nature reserves in Britain, she diagnoses one of the reasons this misconception exists: “If you start to see ecologically rich habitats as temporally separated from us, then the lack of wildlife in modern landscapes seems unremarkable.”

In one of the book’s most effective pieces, Macdonald investigates the phenomenon of DVC, “deer-vehicle collision,” which occurs in America to the

tune of “one and a half million” per year, though “it’s likely much higher, for many go unreported.” Macdonald herself was never interested in learning about deer, but as she worked on the essay, she watched supercuts on YouTube of cars slamming into deer and read the maniacal glee in the comments section. Soon she realized her apathy toward deer was “not so very different from those who would write approvingly of the physics of a dying deer, or how the best thing about a deer collision is how funny it can be,” because “it’s hard to feel sympathy with a thing whose reality you’ve chosen to ignore.” After all, these animals “die because they have no conception of the nature of roads.” Macdonald’s gift is to palpably render non-human environs onto the page and then remind you that this foreign-seeming land is not foreign at all.

Macdonald frequently exposes these kinds of polarities as arbitrary or inaccurate. In an essay on the rare occurrence of “the nuptial flights” of ants (titled, unaffectedly, “Ants”), which disperse into the air only to be met by a flock of hungry gulls, Macdonald explains how the relationship between science and mystery is not only not combative but rather intercorrelated and mutually enhancing. Though science is often accused of “subtracting mystery and beauty from the world,” for Macdonald, “it’s the things I’ve learned from scientific books and papers that are making what I’m watching almost unbearably moving.” The examples she gives and the conclusions she draws deserve to be read in full.

What stays with the reader after turning the last pages of *Vesper Flights* is the need to recognize the marvels of the world with the appropriate awe. She calls the unexpected and transfixing encounters with nature “fugitive instances” in which she is made unambiguously aware of “how unlikely it is that in the days of my brief life I should be in the right place at the right time and possess sufficient quality of attention to see them at all.” Moreover, these extraordinary moments cannot fully be grasped or explained using our rigidly separated systems. “Scientists aren’t supposed to speak of magic,” she writes, “and New Agers tend not to bother with sustained research into animal physiology or behavior,” but just as we need to dissolve the meaningless border between humanity and nature, we also need to raze the walls between our approaches and amalgamate every

tool at our disposal in order to work toward a better understanding and a more ethical treatment of our planet's dizzyingly diverse populations.

If Macdonald's milieu is the natural world, then Rachel Kushner traverses territory that is inescapably human. She specializes in the things we've constructed, the hallmarks of civilization that work to separate us from the realm of animalia. Her novel *The Flamethrowers* features motorcycle races, Italian politics of the 1970s, and the New York art scene. *The Mars Room* details life in prison for a former employee of the titular strip club. Kushner's characters are hard-edged, world-weary, and attuned to the cultures they find themselves in. While Macdonald convincingly argues that the demarcation between animals and humanity is illusory, Kushner makes a strong opposing case. In her humans there is little trace of a natural world.

Many novelists publish essay collections as addendums to their careers, curios for fans or academics. Kushner is one of the few whose essays are just as effective, and affecting, as her novels. In one essay from *The Hard Crowd: Essays 2000–2020* (Scribner, 2021)—“We Are Orphans Here,” about Kushner’s experience in Shuafat Refugee Camp in East Jerusalem—her learning about her subject is part of the story. “With no previous experience in the region,” she writes, “and little knowledge,” she embarks on her journey as a novice, and as she imparts information, it is as if the reader is learning along with her.

Another aspect of Kushner’s nonfiction is the way it allows her to write about things she knows a great deal about *personally*. *The Hard Crowd*’s opening essay, “Girl on a Motorcycle,” relates Kushner’s harrowing experience racing the Cabo 1000, a highway event that “began in San Ysidro, the last American town before the border of Mexico, and finished in Cabo San Lucas, at the tip of the Baja Peninsula, approximately 1,080 miles south.” A car, she tells us, would make this trip in “four or five days of difficult driving”; the racers in the Cabo 1000 do it in a single day. Throughout the essay, Kushner wields motorcycle nomenclature with ease:

[The Ninja 600] was the perfect bike for this: powerful but small and lithe enough to handle well on mountain curves. To increase speed and performance,

I upgraded the bike with stainless-steel after-market valves, a resurfaced cylinder head, a high-performance carburetor jet kit, and four-into-one exhaust with an unbaffled canister.

A reader needn't know what any of this means (this reader doesn't), but Kushner's light usage of terminology makes you trust that she does.

Often, the pieces here stem from personal interests and lead to detailed research. In "Happy Hour," she explores the work and the "seamless and clean-cut salesman persona" of Jeff Koons, in which she does a deep-dive exploration of his series *Luxury and Degradation*, which are "exact reproductions, in oil on canvas, of liquor advertisements." There are keen essays on her lodestar fiction writers: Cormac McCarthy, Denis Johnson, Marguerite Duras, and Nanni Balestrini, whose escape from police by skiing the Alps from Italy to France Kushner depicted in *The Flamethrowers*. Her *New York Times Magazine* piece "Is Prison Necessary?", a profile of prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore, clearly stems from Kushner's passions. It's an excellent argument in the form of a profile, one that dispels many misconceptions about the prison-industrial complex, such as the assumption that private penitentiaries and profit margins are the culprits behind its continued existence.

The essays in *The Hard Crowd* are not only interesting in their own right but also provide insight into Kushner's fiction. In "Made to Burn," Kushner itemizes and captions the images she had pinned up as she wrote *The Flamethrowers*. These reproductions show how industriously Kushner immersed herself in the art and politics of the 1970s, a practice that makes her a convincing novelist and a gifted essayist.

Kushner grew up in San Francisco in the '80s among punks, druggies, skateboarders, and motorcyclists. In the title essay, which closes the book, she recalls with wistful but clear-eyed melancholy the time of her youth, now gone. "In all that loss," she writes, "a person continues to locate little tokes of joy from new and surprising places." The past still "lingers," but "you have a present, a now, even as you drag with you a snowballing bulk of what was." Even though many of Kushner's essays live in the past, whether historical or personal, there is something

inexpressibly now about her work. Each sentence speaks to our current world, the way we can learn from what came before, in order to make better what comes next. In this way she is much like Macdonald. When she interviews James Forman Jr. for “Is Prison Necessary?”, the legal scholar tells her, “What I love about abolition . . . is the idea that you imagine a world without prisons, and then you work to try to build that world.”

## Dispatches from an Uprising: *There's a Revolution Outside, My Love*

We're languishing in an era of converging domestic crises while also approaching a bleak anniversary for events that sparked the largest civil rights mobilization in our nation's history. Last summer, that open wound fueled urgency, collective action, and—for the first time in my life—a belief that some things might change in this country. But of course, as in all revolutions, those with vested interests have wielded power to exhaust us. Consider the Capitol Riot, or the rapid increase in mass shootings and incidents of racial violence. During the murder trial of Derek Chauvin, about three people a day were killed by law enforcement. It's as though the enemy were asking us, "Are you still watching, America?" That very same enemy is digging in their heels to make us despair for fear of what this coalition of determined people could dismantle, should it continue to wake up every day and refuse to be tired.

It's fortuitous, then, the publication of *There's A Revolution Outside, My Love: Letters from a Crisis* (Vintage, 2021). Never before has writing on politics awoken me so poignantly and shocked me into the present, past, and future so quickly. Among the anthology's pages are some of the most treasured writers today—Edwidge Danticat, Layli Long Soldier, Monica Youn, Julia Alvarez, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor—alongside other great leaders of the vanguard, who have painfully captured the reckoning unfolding in our daily lives. All the while, their voices are not just raw but hoarse with resilience. They share their freedom, grief, and insights across searing letters, essays, poems, and meditations that, when looked at together, are more rallying cry than printed work. Rather than adopting traditional approaches to the topic-based anthology, this kaleidoscopic tome of loss and joy is interested in free expression, shaped by the kind of radical exposure that is only possible when a culture is forced to face itself. Throughout, its shifting chorus grapples with language, with the styles and modes that the world envisioned by these writers will need. Indigo Moor captures the sentiment

best in “A Riotous Anodyne,” a letter addressed to Sacramento that turns into a meditation on poetry and minority experience: “And even if it is not material, a lot of old notions will burn.” It is thrilling to see established and emerging voices alike speak so candidly, to watch as they harness mixed media and transcend history, to marvel as they unapologetically carve space for themselves in a field that often tells them that for this type of writing, there’s just no room.

But there is room, and these writers are no longer asking for permission to share it on their terms. They do not hesitate to show their scars, to contend with their conditioning, to scathingly analyze the mechanisms and media that have disenfranchised marginalized people across American history. As when encountered with any feat of collective vulnerability, I am reluctant to reduce an ordeal to a few choice words. While these pieces have been edited and arranged deliberately, it is through motion that they crystallize, and it is their resonance outside and within this forum that so deeply touches the reader. Tellingly, each piece ends with the approximate date it was written, a device that shakes up passive reading into active reflection, forcing us to revisit our individual and collective experiences of the past year. They write not to remind you of the draining saga that sparked this revolution, but to ensure that we don’t lose sight of how this revolution felt and continues to feel.

Look no further than the second-person essay on state sanctioned violence by Daniel Peña, “Let these protests Bring Light to America.” He writes:

[In Mexico] they say disappeared. Like there’s a person-shaped hole missing in the world. And that’s the first time you think of those holes walking around. Not like ghosts—the way an American would see it—but like an echo. There but not there. Nowhere but everywhere. Not so much remembered as felt.

By analyzing disposability rhetoric in the United States vs Mexico, Peña makes a case for trauma’s power to surpass cultural and linguistic limitations. Meaning, even when rifts in language exist, there is a legibility in approximation, there is a feeling that connects these writers not just to their communities but beyond.

And that is what these writers are doing: they feel with us. They feel the paradox of what it means to fight for and believe in a country that has proven it will not return the favor. They feel the echoes of generations past and future, those whose radicality they've inherited, and those whose radicality they'll enable. Through this manifesto, we are given notes from the streets of nearly every state, we are presented with an untethering of POV and time, all in the service of shared liberation. Joshua Bennett offers us prose and poetry in his piece “Where is Black Life Lived?”, noting that both on and off the page, Black people “conjure a world that is worthy of us.” These writers waste no time waiting for a worthy world, opting instead to build one—and fast, before the relentlessness of our enemy wins the war.

Within these pages are potent manifestations of survival, of what it means to live boldly and incompletely while in defiance of institutions that demand submission. We are only human, say these writers, despite how much we are denied our humanity. Together, we can dismantle these systems when inspired by a feeling so profound that these great writers can only gesture towards it. Layli Long Soldier reminds us of this feeling in her brilliant essay, “I Cannot Stop: A Response To The Murder Of George Floyd,” as though we have not all wrestled with the fine line between instinct and powerlessness. She apologizes for the “gaps” in her writing, for the failure to do justice to our centuries-long plight. Even in inadequacy, she asks that we remember warmth: “The sun. Its light. Look at its power to reflect in incalculable directions, in the darkest places.”

# Strange to Me: Why W.D. Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle* (1959) Deserves Attention Now

Artfully oversharing salacious personal information on social media; the rise of autofiction—in their own ways, each of those things is derived from confessional poetry, that oft-heard term that, depending on the person, seems to have a bevy of different interpretations. To most readers of contemporary poetry, confessionalism is squarely represented by Sylvia Plath's virtuosity in her posthumous collection *Ariel*, by John Berryman's wrought scope and syntax in *The Dream Songs*, by the high-key pyrotechnics contained within Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* and Anne Sexton's *Live or Die*. Like-minded yet disparate compatriots such as Maxine Kumin, Etheridge Knight and Theodore Roethke might factor in as well, but the aforementioned four have long constituted the standard confessionalism pantheon.

In her edifying 1998 essay, “Confessional Poetry: My Eyes Have Seen What My Hand Did,” the poet and critic Regan Good states how “[t]he best confessional poetry uses detail from life to position the poem’s speaker in psychic moments from which truths—hilarious, grave, desperate, terrifying, fraudulent—are spoken,” whereas the worst confessional poems double down hard on personal angst and personal angst alone, considering it to be a wholly “self-sufficient poetic subject.” Good quotes from an interview that John Berryman gave in 1970, two years before his suicide, in which the heavily bearded one states, “My idea is this, the artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him. At that point he’s in business.”

We don’t think this way anymore. Certainly poets and artists of all kinds use their personal experiences (both good and bad) in greater service to their art, but I would argue that the days of considering “lucky” those who “have experienced the worst possible ordeal” are thankfully behind us. Trauma happens often, and it’s

not a constructive goal of the twenty-first century poet. Most poets writing today are far more interested in widespread cultural change and societal shift instead of their own subjective morasses. The emphasis is on the collective, although within that framework each and every poetic speaker necessarily has their own story and viewpoint.

All of which brings me to W.D. Snodgrass, a name that, circa 2021, is known but not particularly well-known. With his 1959 collection, *Heart's Needle*, Snodgrass unknowingly established himself as the first confessional poet. His work inspired Lowell and Berryman, and he was Anne Sexton's teacher. Snodgrass was the first, but such a circumstance was, at the time at least, less than advantageous. Although it was celebrated upon its release and won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1960, *Heart's Needle* was initially viewed as a singular oddity rather than the opening salvo in a widespread writing phenomenon.

Like most of the poets dubbed confessional, Snodgrass reviled the term (it was coined, disparagingly so, by the critic M.L. Rosenthal) and claimed that what he was doing in *Heart's Needle* was part of a longer continuum, one that previously had never been caged within the confines of a quote unquote poetic school. He was right, but rearing its head amidst Modernism's slow decline and Postmodernism's shaky ascent, the work in the volume nevertheless gained attention and acolytes for its informality, its distinctive forthrightness. I paint with a broad brush here, purposefully, but the stalwart Modernists (Eliot, Stevens, Moore, etc.) never wrote straightforward, emotionally charged poems about their failed marriages or the earnest love they had for their children. They never wrote personal, I-centric poems about missing someone, simply straight-up-and-down missing someone. That wasn't part of the Modernist design, not by a long shot.

Without much fanfare, however, that's what Snodgrass did in *Heart's Needle*. The book is centered on the dissolution of the speaker's marriage and his subsequent estrangement from his three-year-old daughter. Those things happened to Snodgrass and he wrote about them in a roundly unadorned way. Taken from the fifth poem in the titular series of the volume, an emblematic stanza from *Heart's Needle* reads:

Winter again and it is snowing;  
Although you are still three,  
You are already growing  
Strange to me.

When I first read those lines a decade ago I thought they were borderline sophomoric—the pat rhymes, the perhaps too direct sentiment. I wanted more bombast, more linguistic knottiness and artful convolution.

*Heart's Needle* isn't that kind of book, though. The poems are rhythmically charged and they do sometimes contain clodding rhyme schematics. But there's a reason for that. Actively coping with his sorrow and pain, unable to see the child he loves more than anything else in the world, Snodgrass *sings* about his experience, and this music is directly related to his primal impulses as a human being, not as a poet. The poetry in *Heart's Needle* has been deliberated on and revised over, to be sure, but there yet remains an instinctual, immediate aspect to it. In the ninth poem in "Heart's Needle" Snodgrass writes:

I walk among the growths,  
by gangrenous tissue, goitre, cysts,  
by fistulas and cancers,  
where the malignancy man loathes  
is held suspended and persists.  
And I don't know the answers.

The window's turning white.  
The world moves like a diseased heart  
packed with ice and snow.  
Three months now we have been apart  
less than a mile. I cannot fight  
or let you go.

That line “And I don’t know the answers” always sticks with me. It’s so often the artist’s job to pretend that’s not the case; that the answers, or at least the tendrils of the answers, are embedded within the work. *Heart’s Needle* lets go of that illusion. Vulnerable, tentative, the poems simply impart the message: *I need to be strong right now and being strong is proving hard.*

Although he had his share of controversies (a later volume, *The Fuehrer Bunker*, imaginatively recreated what might have been said in Adolf Hitler’s bunker during the last month of his life) Snodgrass didn’t lead nearly as eventful a life as Lowell, Plath, Berryman, or Sexton did. Perhaps his art suffered as a result, but I don’t think so. Those other writers pushed and expanded the structure of confessionalism more than Snodgrass did, and their books are more widely read and celebrated. *Heart’s Needle* isn’t as impactful for the contemporary reader as, say, *Ariel* or *The Dream Songs*, but that’s not to say it’s a trifle of a book. (Read it.) Snodgrass’s *Heart’s Needle*, moreover, made the poetry of the greater confessional pantheon possible. More important than that, though, Snodgrass reconnects with his daughter by the volume’s end. Art matters—but love matters more.

## History, Nonetheless: *400 Souls, How the Word is Passed*, and *A Little Devil in America*

Even before the text of the *1619 Project* appeared in the pages of the *New York Times Magazine*, the backlash to it could be felt in American classrooms. As a humanities teacher, I tend to believe I can intuit this sort of silent winding up of reactionary historiography. Then, in August of 2019, ahead went the *1619 Project*. Spearheaded by Times journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, the *Project* offered a collection of essays from an array of historians, writers, and social scientists in order to retell the story of America (as opposed to the United States) as a nation in its essence *begun* on that day in 1619 when the first African captives arrived in Jamestown Colony.

The audacity of the essays, and the *1619 Project* as a whole, seemed not to lie in its particular set of facts—most of which were common knowledge for historians and even students of American history—but in the framing of those facts into a narrative about the composition and, to borrow from the romantic nationalists, spirit of the American people. It seemed to suggest that Americans couldn't be Americans without the cultural, economic, and spiritual impact of African enslavement and the resulting formations of the American selves. This idea is not revolutionary, to borrow a pun. The historian Gerald Horne has built a career on illustrating in minute detail the mortal fear and decadent wealth that, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, fomented emergent white supremacy around fears of Black and indigenous insurrection. His work, and especially his *Counter Revolution of 1776*, supports the most contentious claim of the *Project* made by Hannah-Jones that, for at least *some*, the American Revolution was fought to retain the status quo around African enslavement.

It was inevitable, then, this spring when *400 Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619-2019* (One World Press, 2020) appeared on bookshelves that it did so in the wake of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *1619 Project*. It was

also two weeks in advance of the publication of the reactionary (and, to make a judgment, white-supremacist) 1776 Project that proposed to turn the country back to what it called “patriotic history.” That is, a history where America is blamelessly tilted toward “freedom” from the start, oblivious to the minor “problem” that was mass enslavement of Africans, not to mention the genocide of Native Americans. Bills in support of forcing this history on curriculums are being written in GOP dominated statehouses across the country.

Written as a “Community History,” *400 Souls* is both impressively long and tantalizingly short—four hundred years split into five-year chunks that each span at most six pages of text seems hardly enough for such a massive subject. Blain and Kendi as editors have assembled an impressive list of writers, including journalists, historians, poets, storytellers, social scientists, educators, and essayists, each tasked with finding a voice to express something essential about their five-year time period. Nikole Hannah-Jones leads off the text with the story of the White Lion, the Dutch ship—captured by English marauders—that carried those first Africans from Angola to the coast of what was in 1619 the Jamestown Colony. As in the *1619 Project*, Hannah-Jones focuses on resituating historical meaning and representation of our national genesis—pushing readers to confront the different conceptions of when “America” began, and what those moments of beginning illustrate about the nation. Why does the collective American psyche know about the Mayflower, but not the White Lion? she asks. What does that history tell us about *our* history?

And while this question is important, much of the work the book does to answer it may be best understood in its form. Sections of poetry weave between narratives variously imagined and intricately pieced together by historians. Throughout, we see the interconnected web of history in a traditional historical narrative with characters and events, or social-science analysis with theoretical structures. In Wesley Lowery’s essay on the Stono Rebellion, we witness his visit to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, where he and his family “weren’t looking for a specific name or incident—there aren’t any known lynching victims in our lineage—but we knew it was possible, perhaps even likely, that at least one of those memorialized here would be recognizable as kin.” We also read Justin

Phillip Reed's poetic evocation of the contradictory pronouncements of "slavery" and "freedom" during the American Revolution. Patrick Henry's voice addressing the Second Virginia Convention produces "echoes" of what could have been the voices of the enslaved nearby plotting "daring daydreams." We get history, if by that we mean facts, but we also see a mode of historical interpretation—perhaps the real point of historical writing—in the multiplying subjectivities of the writers. Poet and author Joshua Bennet's "American Abecedarian" is a closing salvo that says just enough, pacing the simple form of the abecedarian into something more. "I is for *I*," he says. Which might be the point of it all.

As the editors and stewards of this sprawling text, and historians themselves, Blain and Kendi had to often answer for the spiralling subjectivities of *400 Souls*. Sprinkled among the book's multitudinous forms are fifty pages of notes—it's clearly a heavily researched enterprise. But still, even Michel Marti interviewing Blain and Kendi on PBS's *Amanpour & Co.* asked how they would answer the question of whether their historical work was affected by who they were, their own ideologies and values. Blain answered, that it was a "nice concept," this idea of "objectivity." When considering history "as Black scholars in the academy, we can't simply talk about, for example, police violence in some abstract way, because this is something that affects all of us. It's—you know, it's a life and death issue for us."

The felt experience of history might be the emerging specialty of poet and educator Clint Smith, whose essay on "The Louisiana Rebellion" in *400 Souls* reproduces his trip to the Whitney Plantation in Wallace, Louisiana. It appears as a much longer essay in his recent book of historical essays *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* (Little Brown, June 2021). For Smith, the lived experience of historical understanding is history itself, where the smells, feelings, and images of experiencing historical monuments and sites become co-substances with the historical events that took place and have been recast as statues, plaques, and fodder for historical docents of all types. In *How the Word is Passed*, Smith narrates his visits to sites important to understanding the memory of slavery in the United States. Some of these sites Smith visits, such as the Whitney Plantation, tailor themselves toward offering an experience of understanding the history of slavery; others he visits try to hide it, like Angola Prison, and the

Blandford Cemetery (home to the largest mass grave of Confederate soldiers in the US) in Petersburg, Virginia.

Smith's essays at times read more like interrogations of history. At the Blandford Cemetery, staffed by a man named Ken (described in excruciatingly sweaty detail) and funded by the Daughters of the Confederacy, Smith presses the docent repeatedly on what it means to be a Confederate "empathizer," those whom Ken sees visiting the cemetery most frequently. Smith keeps saying sympathizers. Ken keeps stressing empathizer. The reason people come to the cemetery is to see the beauty of the stained glass in the historical chapel, Ken says. Ken's boss, Martha, who "had a kind face with large tortoiseshell glasses that sat high on her nose" invokes her heritage as the descendant of a Confederate soldier, who, as a non-slaveholder, she insists, fought to defend his town. The awkward tension lifts off the page. And when Smith finds a flyer for a Confederate Memorial day glorifying the Lost Cause, Martha quickly avoids the subject by trying to hide the offending material.

Eventually these scenes that Smith renders, both at Blandford and elsewhere, bring up historical questions that he soon addresses through interviews and personal reflection. The essay that begins in the Blandford Cemetery weaves its way towards an interview with historian Kevin M. Levin, author of *Searching for Black Confederates* and writer of the history blog Civil War Memory. The important part, and one that Smith stresses again and again, is that history is not merely facts, but the utilization of those facts into narratives, memorializations, and presentations. But just as important as the history is the experience of that history, and how one experiences it. This unwillingness to confront the subjectivities of American history often creates the awkwardness that inhabits Smith's personal narrative portions of the text.

Smith's evocation of the experience of history in geographic space seems like a natural contrast to Hanif Abdurraqib's new book *A Little Devil in America: Notes in Praise of Black Performance* (Random House, April 2021). In his blurb for the book, Smith calls Abdurraqib's mode of writing "slices of our cultural landscape" braided together with "history, criticism, and prose so stunning it makes you want to read every word out loud just so you can hear its music." The "slicing" of Abdurraqib's

book cuts across his own experiences with Black performance and a deep and wide conception of the central importance of Black expression to American art and history. To just give a small sample, Abdurraqib draws us through stories about Josephine Baker, Sun Ra, the Columbia disaster, the death of Abdurraqib's mother, Octavia Butler, Master Juba, Al Jolson and the history of Blackface, Dickens and his American journeys, Stacey Dash on Fox News, Ellen Armstrong, Robert Guillarme, Aretha Franklin, Alma Cummings and the dance marathon craze of the 1920s, midday dance breaks at Abdurraqib's high school, Young Thug's choice to wear a dress on an album cover, Wu-Tang's ability to be forever, the impact of Soul Train, and (most importantly) the magic of Whitney Houston's redemption after being booed at the Soul Train Awards. There's a fraught exuberance to it all. Abdurraqib bounces us through these different histories with rhythm and clarity. It's a joyful book, and still one that, as the writer Marlon James says, "snatches back" the soul of America from America itself.

In an essay about why he "Would Like to Give Merry Clayton Her Roses," Abdurraqib guides us through an experience of Clayton's famous shout on the chorus of the Stones' "Gimme Shelter." This anecdote is brought into a deeper understanding through the story of Meredith Hunter's death at Altamont at the hands of the Hell's Angels, and how when Clayton shouts "murder" a third time, and her "voice bends, and then breaks," soon "a door slowly" gives way "to the army of noise pressing up against it." Clayton's "murder" and Hunter's murder mirror each other. Abdurraqib tells us that "Clayton sings the word [murder] as if she fears it" as if it's just as real as anything. There's an undercutting danger to the exuberant art of Black America as Abdurraqib writes it. It's true. And it's history.

## Contributors

Recent work by **Jeff Alessandrelli** appears or is forthcoming in *BOMB Magazine*, *Poetry London*, *Denver Quarterly*, and the *Hong Kong Review of Books*. Alessandrelli is most recently the author of the poetry collection *Fur Not Light* (2019), called “an example of radical humility” by *The Kenyon Review*, and forthcoming from the UK press Broken Sleep. In addition to his writing work Alessandrelli also directs the non-profit record label & press Fonograf Ed.

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**Olga Breininger** is a writer, digital artist, and literary anthropologist. She was born in 1987 in the Kazakh SSR and later moved to Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Following publications in prominent Russian-language journals such as the *New Literary Observer* and *Druzhba Narodov* (*Friendship of Peoples*), Breininger’s debut collection, *There Was No Adderall in the Soviet Union*, was published by the contemporary fiction imprint Elena Shubina Publishers to widespread controversy. The book was nonetheless nominated for all four of Russia’s major annual prizes for literary prose. Currently, Breininger teaches at multiple Moscow educational institutions, including her own online school. She is preparing her third book for publication and translating Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation* into Russian. Her writing can also be found in English translation at *Words Without Borders*.

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**Taylor Byas** is a Black Chicago native currently living in Cincinnati, Ohio, where she is now a third year PhD student and Yates scholar at the University of Cincinnati and an Assistant Features Editor for *The Rumpus*. She was the 1st place winner of both the 2020 Poetry Super Highway Poetry Contest and the 2020 Award for New Poets from *Frontier Poetry*, as well as a finalist for the *Frontier OPEN* Prize. Her chapbook, *Bloodwarm*, is forthcoming from Variant Lit this summer. She is represented by Rena Rossner of the Deborah Harris Agency.

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**Cassils** is a transgender artist who makes their own body the material and protagonist of their performances. Cassils's art contemplates the history(s) of LGBTQI+ violence, representation, struggle, and survival. For Cassils, performance is a form of social sculpture: Drawing from the idea that bodies are formed in relation to forces of power, and social expectations, Cassils's work investigates historical contexts to examine the present moment. Cassils has had recent solo exhibitions at the Station Museum, Perth Institute for Contemporary Arts, PAFA. They are the recipient of a United States Artist Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Creative Capital Award.

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**Franny Choi** writes at the intersections of race, gender, technology, history, and the speculative imagination. Her most recent book, *Soft Science* (Alice James Books), won the Elgin Award from the Science Fiction Poetry Association, and her writing has appeared in the New York Times, the Atlantic, Paris Review, and elsewhere. She teaches at Williams College and co-hosts the podcast VS alongside Danez Smith.

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Born in Côte-de-Fer (Haiti) in 1994, **Jean D'Amérique** is a poet, playwright, and novelist who splits his time between Paris, Brussels, and Port-au-Prince. Author of two plays—*Avilir les ténèbres* (2018, finalist for the prix RFI Théâtre) and *Cathédrale des cochons* (éd. Théâtrales, 2020, prix Jean-Jacques Lerrant des Journées de Lyon, finalist for the prix RFI Théâtre)—he has also published three noteworthy collections of poetry: *Petite fleur du ghetto* (Atelier Jeudi soir, 2015, special mention for the prix René Philoctète, finalist for the prix Révélation poésie de la SGDL); *Nul chemin dans la peau que saignante étreinte* (Cheyne éditeur, 2017, winner of the prix de la Vocation de la fondation Marcel Bleustein-Blanchet, finalist for the prix Fetkann de poésie); and *Atelier du silence* (Cheyne éditeur, 2020). His first novel, *Soleil à coudre*, is out now from Actes Sud.

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**Shangyang Fang** comes from Chengdu, China. A Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, he is author of the poetry collection *Burying the Mountain* (Copper Canyon Press, Oct 2021).

**Elisa Gabbert** is the author of five collections of poetry, essays, and criticism: *The Unreality of Memory & Other Essays*; *The Word Pretty, L'Heure Bleue, or the Judy Poems*; *The Self Unstable*; and *The French Exit*. She writes a regular poetry column for the *New York Times*, and her work has appeared recently in *Harper's*, *New England Review*, the *American Poetry Review*, *The Nation*, and elsewhere.

**Ja'Tovia Gary** (b. 1984, Dallas, TX) uses documentary film, experimental video art, and installation to address representation, race, gender, sexuality, and violence. Her critically-acclaimed multimedia piece, *The Giverny Suite* (2020), was the subject of one-person exhibitions at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, in 2020. Gary's other films have been screened at festivals worldwide, including Houston Cinema Arts Festival; BlackStar Film Festival, Philadelphia; the American Film Institute Festival, Los Angeles; the Montreal International Documentary Festival; Frameline LGBTQ Film Festival, Edinburgh; and Ann Arbor Film Festival. Gary's work is in the collections of the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Thoma Foundation.

**Evan Garza** is a Washington, DC-based curator and writer, and a 2021-2022 Fulbright U.S. Scholar at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in Dublin, Ireland. He is co-curator and Artistic Director of the 2021 Texas Biennial, *A New Landscape, A Possible Horizon*. Garza's curatorial and museum work is dedicated to exhibition and collection diversification with a focus on women, artists of color, LGBTQ+ artists, and art historically marginalized communities. His first reviews for a contemporary art journal were published by *Art Lies* in 2008 and his writing has since been published by *Art Papers*, *The Drawing Center*, and *Artforum*.

**John Gerrard** is widely considered a pioneer of simulation within contemporary art. His works frequently address subjects of power, reality, technology, and ecology. His most recognized piece, *Western Flag*, simulates a flag of smoke on the site of the world's first major oil strike in Texas, USA and recalls the CO2 legacy that it left behind. His works are in the collections of MoMA, New York, Tate, London; LACMA, Los Angeles; M+, Hong Kong; Ullens Foundation; and other institutions globally. John Gerrard works with Pace Gallery globally.

**Abhidnya Ghuge** is a multidisciplinary installation artist known for site-responsive installations. The value of a human life, a woman's life in particular, is her focus, bringing attention to the cultural dichotomies regarding women. Using humble disposable paper plates, and recontextualizing them into objects to be admired and cherished, Ghuge urges people to look into the possibilities, the power and the potential of life irrespective of class, color or culture. Born in Mumbai, India, Ghuge earned her MD in Dermatology from the University of Bombay, India before pursuing her BFA and MFA from The University of Texas at Tyler. Ghuge has shown her work at several museums, private and public galleries in Texas, Florida, Georgia, Baltimore, and Colorado. She has public and private collections in the UK, the US, and India.

**Rachel Gonzales** (b. 1986, Massachusetts) is a Filipina American figurative and abstract contemporary visual artist educated and experienced in both architecture and fine art. She graduated from Rice University with a Bachelor's in Architecture in 2010. Informed by her architectural background in designing physical spaces, her paintings also serve as containers or portals for the human experience, and focus on reclaiming "the female gaze" as a more profound way to see beyond the form. Gonzales works mostly with acrylic on canvas, watercolor on paper, and ink or chalk on paper. Working in both abstract and figurative spaces, she pays homage to the abstract contemporary reminiscent of Cy Twombly's "romantic symbolism," with intentional mark-making and fused words with drips of color that fade like a fleeting memory. Her figurative works capture the essence of a person and the subject instilled with a gaze of their own.

**Silvia Guerra** was born in 1961, in Maldonado, Uruguay. Her books include *Un mar en madrugada*, *Pulso*, and *Fuera del relato* (2007), a fictionalized biography of Lautréamont.

**Ryan Hawk** works across video, sculpture, and site-specific installation to imagine alternative corporealities and forms of embodiment. Solo exhibitions have been held at Gray Contemporary, Lawndale Art Center, the Umlauf Sculpture Garden and Museum, and the Museum of Human Achievement; screenings, performances, and group exhibitions have taken place at Grace Exhibition Space, the Museum of Fine Arts, Nagoya, Jonathan Hopson Gallery, and more. Notable awards include an SMFA Traveling Fellowship, The Arch and Anne Giles Kimbrough Fund, and an MFAH Core Residency Program fellowship. Hawk holds an MFA from the University of Texas at Austin.

**Rage Hezekiah** is a New England-based poet and educator, who earned her MFA from Emerson College. She has received fellowships from Cave Canem, The MacDowell Colony, and The Ragdale Foundation, and is a recipient of the Saint Botolph Foundation's Emerging Artists Award. Her chapbook *Unslakable* (Paper Nautilus Press) is a 2018 Vella Chapbook Award Winner. Her debut full-length collection, *Stray Harbor*, was published in 2019 (Finishing Line Press). You can find out more about her writing at [ragehezekiah.com](http://ragehezekiah.com).

**Hannah Hirsh** holds an MFA in Creative Writing from NYU, where she served as a poetry editor of *Washington Square Review*. She has received support from NYU, the Fine Arts Work Center, the Community of Writers, and the Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Ploughshares*, *The Yale Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and *Narrative*. She lives in Brooklyn and is currently a managing editor of *American Chordata*.

**House of Kenzo** is a multidisciplinary art collective that has firmly planted their stilettos in a multitude of fields, garnering the attention of the underground club scene, avant-garde fashion explorers, international festival circuits, fine art galleries, and experimental theaters. Blending jaw-dropping dance moves from disciplines like modern, vogue, hardcore, contact improv, and contemporary hip hop, the group chants mantras at the audience inviting them to join into communal and cathartic dance exposition. Active performers include Ledef (sound production), Brexxitt (choreography), Grapefruit (concept design), and Bobby Bearz (thespian). This is the sound of Texas Underground.

**Virginia Jaramillo** (b. 1939, El Paso, Texas) spent her formative years in California studying at Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles, from 1958–61 before moving to Europe and settling in New York City in the late 1960s. Central to a career spanning nearly six decades is Jaramillo's drive to express materially our sensory perceptions of space and time, in what she describes as "an aesthetic investigation which seeks to translate into visual terms the mental structural patterns we all superimpose on our world." Whether creating bold abstract paintings, sculptural mixed-media compositions, or meticulously formed handmade paper works, Jaramillo has forged a unique voice, experimenting with material and process to pursue her ongoing explorations of human perception of reality. Jaramillo lives and works in New York.

**Mia Kang** is the author of *City Poems* (ignitionpress, 2020). Named the 2017 winner of Boston Review's Annual Poetry Contest, her writing has appeared in journals including *Poetry*, *Washington Square Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *PEN America*. She has received awards and fellowships from Brooklyn Poets, the Academy of American Poets, the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and the Millay Colony for the Arts. Mia teaches art history at Cooper Union and Hunter College, CUNY.

**Jesse Lee Kercheval**'s translations include *The Invisible Bridge: Selected Poems of Circe Maia and Love Poems* by Idea Vilariño.

**Autumn Knight** is a New York-based interdisciplinary artist working with performance, installation, video, and text. Knight's video and performance work have been viewed within several institutions, including the Whitney Museum of American Art and The Kitchen.

**Hilah Kohen** is a translator and a current doctoral student in Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania. She works primarily in Russian and the Kavkazi Jewish language Juhuri. Her research focuses on socialist literary communities of the twentieth century and especially on language choice in those communities. Kohen has also covered post-Soviet opposition movements as an editor for the international edition of *Meduza*, a Russian-language online newspaper. Her work can be found in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Nashville Review*, *Music & Literature*, and the Kavkazi Jewish media outlet *STMEGI*. With Josephine von Zitzewitz, she co-edited the February 2021 issue of *Words Without Borders*, which features young Russophone writers in English translation.

**Annette Lawrence**'s art transforms raw data into drawings, objects, and installations. The data accounts for and measures everyday life. Her subjects of inquiry range from body cycles to ancestor portraits, music lessons, unsolicited mail, and journal-keeping. She recognizes things that go unannounced, remain steady, are unremarkable on the surface, and develop meaning over time. Lawrence's work is held widely in museums and private collections, and her recognitions include the Whitney Biennial, MacDowell, Moss/Chumley, Skowhegan, and the Core Program at MFA, Houston. She is originally from New York, NY.

**Sandra Lim** is the author of the poetry collections *Loveliest Grotesque*, *The Wilderness*, and *The Curious Thing*, which will be published in the fall of 2021. She is a Guggenheim fellow in poetry and lives in Cambridge, MA.

**Mariana Lin** completed her MFA from Pacific University where she was nominated by the late Marvin Bell for *Best New Poets 2019*. Her prose and other work have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *New York* magazine, and others. She was born in Taiwan.

**Kimberly Y. Liu** is an MFA candidate in fiction and literary translation at Columbia University. Her work has appeared in *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Columbia Journal*, and *Four Way Review*. She lives in New York and translates from French and Chinese.

**Daniel Lusk** is author of several poetry collections and other books, most recently *The Shower Scene from Hamlet* and *The Vermeer Suite*, art and poems. Winner of a Pushcart Prize for his genre-bending essay “Bomb” (*New Letters*) and other awards, his work also has appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *Spillway*, *The Southern Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *North American Review*, *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Salamander*, *The Iowa Review*, *River Styx*, *Indiana Review*, *Live Encounters*, and many other journals and anthologies. He has been writer-in-residence at Stranmillis University College-Queens (Belfast, NI), Juniata College (Huntingdon, PA), and The Frost Place (Franconia, NH) and a Resident Fellow at The MacDowell Colony and Yaddo. A native of the prairie Midwest, Daniel lives in Vermont with his wife, Irish poet Angela Patten.

**Cate Lycurgus**’s poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Best American Poetry 2020*, the *American Poetry Review*, *Tin House*, *Boston Review*, *Best New Poets 2019*, and elsewhere. She has also received scholarships from Bread Loaf and Sewanee Writers’ Conferences and was named one of *Narrative*’s 30 Under 30 Featured Writers. Cate lives south of San Francisco, California, where she interviews for *32 Poems* and teaches professional writing. You can find her at [www.catelycurgus.com](http://www.catelycurgus.com).

**Matt Manalo** is an artist and community organizer. He was born and raised in Manila, Philippines, and has called Houston, Texas, home since 2004. He received his BFA in Painting at the University of Houston. He runs the community-based alternative art space Alief Art House and founded Filipinx Artists of Houston. His work involves elements of painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, and printmaking. Being a first-generation immigrant, Manalo discusses his experiences navigating around physical and social structures of society while exploring issues like erasure, colorism, and colonial mentality in his work.

**Abby Minor** lives in the ridges and valleys of central Pennsylvania, where she works on poems, essays, gardens, quilts, and projects for reproductive justice. The granddaughter of Appalachian tinkerers and Yiddish-speaking New Yorkers, she is the author of the poetry chapbooks *Real Words for Inside* (Gap Riot Press) and *Plant Light, Dress Light* (dancing girl press). She also serves on the Board of Abortion Conversation Projects, an internationally-active non-profit.

**Donald Moffett** emerged as both an artist and activist in the late ’80s, participating in the Act Up movement, founding member of the collective Gran Fury, and founding partner of Bureau, a transdisciplinary studio. Taking abstraction and the monochrome as evolving unfinished languages, Moffett challenges the traditional flat frame of painting through non-traditional techniques and employs new forms that serve as carriers of both personal and political meaning. Currently, Moffett is pursuing *Nature Cult*, a deep study and expanding practice of how art and the environmental crisis might collide.

**Matthew Moore** is a poet, editor, and translator. His poems appear widely in journals such as *Annulet: A Journal of Poetics*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Fence*, and *Guesthouse*, among other magazines. From 2012 to 2020, he co-edited the online poetry journal *Flag + Void*. He is the translator of Tomaž Šalamun's *Opera Buffa*, forthcoming from Black Ocean in Fall 2021. He was born in Illinois.

**Olivia Muenz** is a disabled writer from New York. She holds a BA from New York University and an MFA in creative writing from Louisiana State University, where she earned the Robert Penn Warren Thesis Award in prose and served as an editor for *New Delta Review*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Black Warrior Review*, *Salt Hill Journal*, *Anomaly*, *Denver Quarterly's FIVE S*, *The Boiler*, *Pidgeonholes* and elsewhere. Find her online at [oliviamuenz.com](http://oliviamuenz.com).

**Josh Myers** is from Heidelberg, Germany. His poems have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Copper Nickel*, the *Missouri Review*, *Passages North*, *Poetry Northwest*, and elsewhere. He received his MFA from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, which is also where he met his wife, poet Jessica Lynn Suchon, and adopted his dog, Gracie. The three of them live in Philadelphia.

**Sondra Perry** (b.1986 Perth Amboy, New Jersey) received a BFA from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University in 2012 and an MFA from Columbia University in 2015. Perry attended the Core Program, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 2015–2017. She lives and works in Newark, NJ. She makes videos and performances that foreground the tools of digital production as a way to critically reflect on new technologies of representation and to remobilize their potential.

**Jeannine Marie Pitas** is the translator of *Carnation and Tenebrae Candle* by Marosa di Giorgio and *We Do Not Live In Vain* by Selva Casal.

Born in 1993, **Chen Po-yu** has won numerous literary prizes in Taiwan, including the Lin Rong San Poetry Award. He is the author of titles such as *The Bubbles Maker* (essays) and *mini me* (poems), both originally published in the Taiwanese Mandarin.

**Paige Quiñones** is the author of *The Best Prey*, winner of the 2020 Pleiades Press Lena Miles-Wever Todd Prize for Poetry. She has received awards and fellowships from the Center for Mexican-American Studies, the Academy of American Poets, and Inprint Houston. Her work has appeared in *Best New Poets*, *Copper Nickel*, *Crazyhorse*, *Juked*, *Lambda Literary*, *Orion Magazine*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Quarterly West*, *Sixth Finch*, and elsewhere.

**Leila Renee** is from Milwaukee, WI and is a graduate of the University of Notre Dame, where she received a Fulbright award to teach in South Africa. Her writing has appeared or will appear in *Prairie Schooner*, Harvard University's *Transition Magazine*, *Columbia Journal*, *Electric Literature*, *The Offing*, *Fjords Review*, *BLF Press*, and other places. She is a current MFA in Creative Writing student at Syracuse University, where she is working on a novel and a story collection.

**Thomas Renjilian** is a fiction writer and poet originally from Scranton, Pennsylvania. His work appears in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Catapult*, *DIAGRAM*, *Thrush*, and elsewhere. He received his BA from Vassar College and MFA from Oregon State University, and he is currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Southern California. Based in Los Angeles, he is a fiction editor for *Joyland Magazine* and managing editor of Ricochet Editions.

**Alison C. Rollins**, born and raised in St. Louis city, is a 2019 National Endowment for the Arts Literature fellow. Her work has appeared in the *American Poetry Review*, *New England Review*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and elsewhere. A Cave Canem and Callaloo fellow, she is a 2016 recipient of the Poetry Foundation's Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship. In 2018, she was the recipient of a Rona Jaffe Writers' Award; and in 2020, the winner of a Pushcart Prize. She has held faculty as well as librarian appointments at various institutions including the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Colorado College, and Pacific Northwest College of Art. Her debut poetry collection, *Library of Small Catastrophes* (Copper Canyon Press), was a 2020 Hurston/Wright Foundation Legacy Award nominee. She is currently pursuing a Literary Arts MFA at Brown University.

**Kiran Kaur Saini** is the daughter of a Punjabi Sikh and a North Carolina native. Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Glimmer Train*, *Pleiades*, and *Strange Horizons*. A film industry professional for the last 15 years, she has been home caring for her mother throughout the pandemic. Her writing often focuses on issues of aging, cultural identity, and autonomy. You can find more of Kiran's work at [www.kirankaurssaini.com](http://www.kirankaurssaini.com).

Slovenian poet **Tomaž Šalamun** (1941–2014) published more than forty books of poetry in Slovenian and English. He was born in Zagreb, Croatia. His first collection of poetry, *Poker*, was published in 1966. He was renowned among his generation as a leader of the European avant-garde. His most recent books, published in English posthumously, are *Andes* (2016) and *Druids* (2019). *Opera Buffa* is the last collection of poems Šalamun completed in his lifetime. He died December 27, 2014.

**Stephanie Sauer** is an interdisciplinary artist and author of *Almonds Are Members of the Peach Family* (Noemi Press) and *The Accidental Archives of the Royal Chicano Air Force* (University of Texas Press). She teaches prose writing in Stetson University's MFA of the Americas program. More at [www.stephaniesauer.com](http://www.stephaniesauer.com).

Visual artist **Kaneem Smith** lives in Houston, Texas, and has had solo exhibits at the African American Museum in Dallas, University Museum at Texas Southern University, the Museum of Fine Arts, and at Project Row Houses in Houston, among others. Her artworks have been included in group shows at the Station Museum in Houston, Grounds for Sculpture in New Jersey, Lima Art Museum in Peru, and most recently at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond. Ms. Smith has received several grants and awards for her artworks, including an Artadia Award and Louis Comfort Tiffany Grant in 2017.

**Allison Titus** is the author most recently of *Sob Story* (Barrelhouse Press) and *The True Book of Animal Homes* (Saturnalia Press). She has received fellowships from the NEA and Yaddo, works at an ad agency and teaches in the low-residency MFA program at New England College.

**Hannah V. Warren** is a doctoral student at the University of Georgia where she studies poetry and speculative narratives. Her writing and research interests focus on the grotesque, post/apocalypse literature, and representations of alterity. She is the author of two chapbooks: *[re]construction of the necromancer* (Sundress Publications 2020) and *Southern Gothic Corpse Machine* from Carrion Bloom Books (forthcoming 2022). Her works have appeared in *Passages North*, *The Pinch*, *Strange Horizons*, *Ithrusk*, and *Fairy Tale Review*, among others.

**Priscilla Washington** is a Palestinian American writer, editor, and human rights advocate, whose recent roles include Policy and Communication Specialist to the Norwegian Refugee Council and Managing Editor to Defense for Children International—Palestine. Her poems, book reviews and other writings have appeared in publications such as *Al Jadid Magazine*, *+972 Magazine*, *Matter*, *Mizna*, *The Normal School*, *Rosebud Magazine*, *The Baltimore Review*, and *Sukoon*. Her chapbook, *Paper and Stick*, is forthcoming with Tram Editions.

**Kathleen Winter**'s books include *Transformer* (2020 The Word Works); *I will not kick my friends*, winner of the Elixir Prize; and *Nostalgia for the Criminal Past*, winner of the Texas Institute of Letters First Book Prize. She was awarded the Ralph Johnston Fellowship at University of Texas's Dobie Paisano Ranch. Her poems and fiction appear in *The New Republic*, *New Statesman*, *Five Points*, *Poetry London*, *Gigantic Sequins*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The Cincinnati Review* and *Copper Nickel*.

**Nicholas Wong** is the author of *Crevasse* (Kaya Press, 2015), the winner of the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry, and *Besiege Me* (Noemi Press, 2021). He is also the recipient of the *Australian Book Review's* Peter Porter Poetry Prize. His recent poems and translation have appeared or will appear in *Ninth Letter*, *The Georgia Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *The Cincinnati Review*, among other journals. IG: @citiesofsameness.

**Haolun Xu** was born in Nanning, China. He immigrated to the United States in 1999 as a child. He was raised in central New Jersey and recently graduated from Rutgers University. His writing has appeared in *New Ohio Review*, *Witness*, *The Florida Review*, and more. His chapbook, *Ultimate Sun Cell*, is set to publish with *New Delta Review* in 2021.

**Gisselle Yepes** is a Puerto Rican and Colombian poet from the Bronx. They hold a BA in American Studies from Wesleyan University with a concentration in Caribbean Studies. Their work is forthcoming with the Academy of American Poets and has appeared in *The Missouri Review*, *iō Literary Journal*, *Voicemail Poems*, and *PALABRITAS*. Gisselle is the founder and editor of *Gisselle Edits*. They currently live in Bloomington, where they are a MFA poetry candidate at Indiana University, receiving the Vera Meyer Strube Poetry Prize, the Bertolt Clever Poetry Prize and the Guy Lemmon Award in Public Writing.

**Jane Zwart** teaches at Calvin University, where she also co-directs the Calvin Center for Faith & Writing. Her poems have previously appeared in *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, *Threepenny Review*, *The Poetry Review* (UK), and *TriQuarterly*, as well as other journals and magazines.

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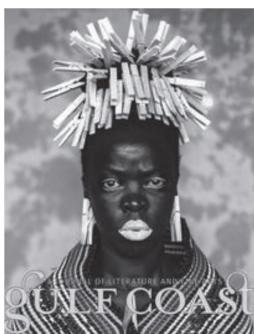
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