

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

gulf coast



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A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS VOLUME 32, ISSUE 1

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The expanse of sky is so wide, there's often more than one thing going on. Rain may darken the western rim while a fierce sun illuminates cloud towers in the center and a brilliant blue fills the east. How can you forecast the weather when it's doing three things at once?

—Mark Doty

I hate the weather, I hate the way it looks. But the city of Houston is sort of perfectly set for people to take a chance on their meal. And that's why I like it.

—David Chang

Dear Readers,

New York City has its foot traffic and skyscrapers, Los Angeles its palm trees and movie stars. Houston, well... You might say it keeps changing its mind. Look up and there's no telling what you might see darkening, swirling, flickering. Look down and you'll probably find a plate of delicious food—although it, too, might be Viet-Cajun crawfish, Mexican-Korean French fries, Texas brisket-stuffed Czech pastries, or any one of countless local dishes that make the term “melting pot” sound laughably inadequate. Houston is a melting zoo. Or a pot-clanging diesel oven. One metaphor alone will not serve its megalopolis-multi-neo-fluid-hybridity. And if the art and literature included in this issue are any indication of Houston's “now,” then its “next” will only continue to spin crazily and beautifully into formations we'd be foolish to predict.

No sooner had our editorial team taken command of the *Gulf Coast* ship than did we begin to speak of “The Houston Issue.” Many of us arrived to the city with our eyes trained skyward, angling for a glimpse of the rare solar eclipse. A week later, we hunkered down for Harvey and watched the waters rise. Soon we were looking up again at TV monitors as the Astros won their first-ever World Series! Up, down, up, down, Rockets, Texans, Beto, Bourdain. As artists and writers accustomed to a more-or-less tempestuous life cycle, even we could not help but fall dizzyingly in love with our wild new home.

And what's love without a love letter?

There were, however, some challenges. Don't get us wrong: we could fill every volume of *Gulf Coast* from now until forever with wonderful work written by and about Houstonians. The problem: Houston ain't like that. Ask the more than 1.5 million foreign-born residents in the nation's most diverse and rapidly growing city. Ask the thousands of

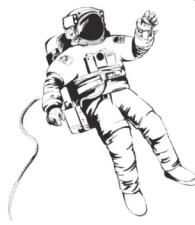
New Orleanians who fled after Hurricane Katrina and ended up taking root. Ask anybody who visits. Houston is, by its very nature, welcoming and expansive, and it cares little for pretensions—especially labels that wall out as much as they wall in.

So we jumped at the chance to publish Mahak Jain's story, about an Indian-American teen who must translate her father's medical diagnosis into words her mother can understand. Regardless of where Jain calls home, stories like hers are woven into the fabric of Houston's culture just as irreplaceably as Robin Reagler's ecstasies under the Waugh bat bridge or Burke Butler's meditations in the Rothko Chapel. Lydia Davis may have never spent much time here, but her absurdist humor fits right in. So, too, does Mark Levine's "Delight in Disorder," whose title sounds almost like a tagline praising Houston's lack of zoning restrictions.

In particular, we found it painfully difficult to decide how best to represent Houston's burgeoning art scene. Arguably, Juliana Huxtable does it all herself. Her mixed-media defiance of anything remotely genre- or gender-specific embodies the spirit of hybridity—of blurred lines and open definitions—crucial to Houston's aesthetic ecosystem. Roberto Tejada's thorough descriptions of two recent, exceptional offerings—the *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA* exhibit at Lawndale and Jenni(f)er Tamayo's *LA QUEERADORA* performance—compelled us to include pictorial documentation.

Pieces in this issue marked with a miniature, marginal astronaut are those we consider to be literally about Houston, and yet it is telling, once again, how different they all are. Min Kang's "real estate will eventually devastate you" rhapsody flings us from Target to the Museum of Fine Arts. Margaret Cipriano's ekphrasis of Cy Twombly plunges us into a world of "romance / and small umbrellas." Micah Fields' essay, "Tarp Town," an homage to Houston's blue-collar, industrial-strength mishmash of improvised and permanent structures, reminds us that our city's visual culture involves much more than sacrosanct museum spaces.

To some, the word "city" may imply urban grit or cosmopolitan polish, but Houston—very much a city-dweller's playground—expands definitions from the ground up. While its limitless sprawl demands serious attention, particularly with respect to income inequality and ecological devastation, Houston rewards us every day with its oddball self-awareness. In that spirit, we've peppered these pages with some of our favorite self-deprecating quotations, to honor what Larry McMurtry called Houston's "misty beauty and sweaty power, ... its funkiness and energy." Y'all enjoy your visit.



Justin Jannise, *Editor* | Paige Quiñones, *Managing Editor* | Rob Howell, *Digital Editor*

THE 2019 GULF COAST PRIZE IN FICTION

Judged by Garth Greenwell

**This year's winner is
"True Blue" by Hannah Withers**

First, I was grabbed by the voice—whip-vivid and jittery, anxious and smart—of this painful, funny study of friendship, and then I was captivated by its insight. Stymied by love they don't know what to do with, these characters fumble their feelings, mistake tenderness and cruelty. I'll remember them for a long time.

—**Garth Greenwell**

**This year's honorable mentions are
“The Day Papa Folded into the Sky” by Elvira Vera
& “Perfect Specimens” by Sara Duff**



WINNER OF THE 2019 GULF COAST PRIZE IN FICTION

True Blue

Hannah Withers

We were both only twenty-one and I had graduated early but Alice still had another year at DePaul. We found a drafty little apartment in a big yellowbrick on the border of the Vietnamese part of Uptown and the rest of Uptown. We told our friends it was in Andersonville because close enough. Because there we were, the straight queens of queerville, grabbing Pho and Q-Tips from the convenience store under the El on our ways home from, for her—school or for me, the frozen yogurt place off Millennium Park.

I needed Alice to go with me to the Baha'i temple in Wilmette because she'd agreed to model in a photo series I was doing—white girls co-opting global cultures. I was calling it *Multi-Culti*, and it was one of several attempts I was making at establishing myself as creative thinker, a public intellectual, a doer of projects.

So I needed Alice to come with me to the world's oldest Baha'i house of worship so she could appear in my art, but Alice hadn't really left her room in two days because she and Tim had broken up again. I say she and Tim had broken up, fact being that I'd broken them up, basically, wedged myself in like the pea under their mattress, but it was for good reason and for everyone's benefit. Except maybe Tim who was an asshole and deserved to suffer. For Alice it was the crying again, the smell of sad candles from her room. Her boilerplate heartbreak which, let's be honest, was wasted on a guy who pronounced it *nuke-u-lar*, and who wished there was a way to tell people that he'd gotten his Arcade Fire tattoo *before* they'd won the Grammy.

I told Alice, let's get out. I said let's go look at some Baha'is. She said nothing and then she said no, and then she put on some pants and said okay, Roxanne, okay.

I tried to jump on the momentum and got my things together as quickly as I could.

Threw my phone, sunglasses, wallet, whatever else I might need in the old leather satchel Alice had given me my last birthday. A book because I always brought a book. Sunscreen because Alice was pale, being from Pennsylvania, and I was even paler, despite being from Texas. Our friend Argos (whose name

was James, but who we called Argos because *The Odyssey*, because of supreme faithfulness and puppy dog eyes) had a habit of calling me Dad because I took care of all of us and wore a lot of flannel. The nickname had caught on, and I thought it was funny but I also: didn't.

I went to check on Alice and found her face down on her bed, wearing only the pants she had just put on. She hated clothing—she was famous for it.

“C’mom, champy,” I told her, trying to pry her up off the bed. She groaned back, buried her face in her arms, shouted something into her quilt. I slapped her twice square on the back, trying to pocket the air between my palm and her unshowered skin for maximum whipcrack. She shouted again, this time not even trying for words.

I went to the pile of clothes at the bottom of her closet and found a crop top, a button-down, threw them at her muted body. “C’mom asshole,” I shouted. “We’re leaving in five.” She groaned, pulled the shirts under her body like a starving amoeba. But there she was five minutes later at the door, clothed, her greasy blonde hair spaghettiied into a bun on top of her slick skull. She was crying a little. I asked if she had her train pass, handed her some sunglasses, and we were out the door. “Let’s go, Daddy-o,” she said, and I said “That’s the spirit.”

It was a Tuesday and she had no classes; I had the day off from Yogurt. Ten forty-five am. The Argyle Red Line platform was empty, newspaper wafting. Waiting for the northbound train, which we never took, Alice huddled in the shade on a bench, chipping what was left of its paint off with her blunt, bitten fingernails. I leaned over the tracks to look for an oncoming car down the line, and Alice yelped “careful! Don’t die, ya freak!” Misinformation about the third rail, counter-drafts, human imbalances made her chronically nervous, and she hated it when folks got too close to the platform’s edge. I hadn’t even realized she was watching me.

I stepped back into the shade with her and sat down on the splintered, decades old bench. I could already feel my jean shorts getting thick with sweat, a mid-September heat wave. I elbowed her gently in the ribs, using more the flesh of my arm than the knobby bone. Baby fat still clung to my frame, despite all my best efforts at dieting, sporadic bouts of exercise, experimentation with self-loathing. I wanted so badly to be a skeleton version of myself, and all my flesh felt like excess

past necessity. I wanted, in all parts of my life, to figure out what was at the real center of me and trash the rest. But my figure always seemed to stay soft, my convictions: irresolute at best.

Alice elbowed me back with no resolve. "Five good things," I said.

"We'll be dead by the time the universe experiences heat death," she responded.

"As always," I said. She habitually started with that one.

"That's about it."

"You can rely on old standards for this round," I said. "You don't even have to think of new ones."

"Dogs exist," she said.

"Right on."

"My skin isn't on fire."

"Great one."

"High-waisted jeans are back in fashion."

"Excellent point," I said. "One more."

"That's it. That is the sum total of positive events in my life right now."

A breeze scolded the train platform, reminding my skin about its dampness, exposure. The automated voice, a calm woman who sounded eerily satisfied with the choices she'd made and her quality of life, told us our northbound train was coming. "I mean there's always being done with the asshole who's been ruining your life. That's a win."

"Right," she said sarcastically as we stood up to board the silver car now in front of us. "Best thing ever."

Love, I knew, was a hell of a thing or whatever.

On the ride up she showed me some proofs from the shoot she and Argos had done over the weekend for the mixed media class they were taking together. Argos was still only seventeen; we'd met him the semester before when he was still in high school and taking some studio art classes in his free time. That fall he became a fully enrolled and comically young college student, and spent all his time trying to get Alice to teach him how to make art and me to teach him how to make love to a woman. Alice was more obliging than me, which isn't to say I didn't fuck him. I just didn't bother trying to teach him anything about it.

The pictures were all of her, naked and covered in paint, standing on the street in front of different houses at night. Alice, painted blue and green like a swimming pool, stomach and face and thighs hanging with monster shadows from the street lamps. Her breasts, fuller than they seemed from the regular vantage outside her shirts, drew my focus, brought to mind apples, high tide, headlights. Brought to mind a light brushing of knuckles, lips. In one or two of the pictures you could see people in the windows of the houses, making dinner or watching football, content with the yellow light of their little interior lives, looking anywhere but at the swampy nude girl in their front yards. She didn't smile in any of the pictures, and something about the light made her face look anatomical, impersonally sad.

"You don't look human," I said on the train that day.

"That's the point," she said. "It's about being swallowed up by something that isn't you. Little green invisible gremlins that we don't like to see, so we don't see them."

"That your artist's statement?"

"The only people who think they need artist's statements are the ones who aren't acquainted with any artists. It's about how spectacular things become monstrous when you lock them out. Duh. De facto. Highly visible."

She had a way, always, of saying things that made no technical sense but the way she said them, they hung in the air and rang, and if afterwards you wondered what the hell they meant, it felt like your own shortcoming. Her explanations made your not *liking* her art feel like you didn't *get* her art. She was more about impressions than she was about explanations.

"So who are we, then, that we can see you?" I said.

"You mean the viewer?" she asked. "Us?"

"Yeah."

"I don't fucking know. God?"

"Right," I said. "God."

This was how she got when her brain was too loaded with the business of being sad to talk about craft or semantics. Fussy, flippant.



A week before, Tim had canceled their plans or at least pushed them back so late that it wasn't even worth her going out anymore, was the only feasible thing for her to sit at home and wait, make herself busy with some painting or project that made her seem independent and unperturbed, an uncaring non-victim of his thoughtlessness, a woman with things to do, until eventually he'd arrive like always at some late hour, smoke-smelling and excited to see her, arms wide for her, both of them smiling their twin smiles as though his lateness had been a storm they'd both weathered, an inevitability that they, through their love, had conquered and now were through with, frustrations forgotten if they'd ever even existed at all. He'd ignore me on their way to her bedroom, ignore me the next morning, and be on his way to keep her waiting all over again.

She was the hugest person I'd ever met, and he made her seem so small.

While she was waiting for him, that night, she repainted an old table we'd salvaged from an alley behind the Christian bookstore. I sat down next to her on the couch with the quesadillas I'd made for us—soy cheese and tofu and broccoli because I was insisting on punk veganism as an inroad to enlightenment that fall. She leaned back toward me on the couch with her plate and sunk into the cushions like a soft zeppelin crash. She wore a light blue bandana to halo back the loose hair from her ponytail. "You look like Pollyanna," I told her.

She laughed and burrowed her face into my arm. "I don't wanna talk about it. Sometimes function over form, you know?"

"That's ridiculous," I said, pulling her red bra strap back onto her shoulder. "And uncouth."

"You're right. Gotta suffer for fashion." She sat back up and pulled off the bandana, leaving her ponytail cockeyed and her flyaways suddenly abundant. She pulled off her filthy wifebeater and the pair of Tim's old jean shorts she'd been wearing, then her bra, then her underwear. "Pollyanna can suck my dick," she said, stepping up to the bay window.

"Pollyanna shaped the children of a generation," I said. "I didn't know your dick was a cornerstone of American optimism."

"You're the scholar of mythic phenomenology," she said, staring out at the street.

"You know every dick has its role to play." We'd both come to DePaul to study

Studio Art. I'd switched over to American Studies, because I liked tall tales more than anyone in Illinois seemed to like my photography.

"You know you're about five hundred percent visible from the street, right?" I asked from the couch, only semi-concerned for the privacy of her areolae, more concerned with their visibility and proximity to me.

"There's no one out there," she said, turning back to me. "And who cares if they see. Doesn't cost me anything, doesn't hurt. You're welcome, sickos," she said, looking back over her shoulder. "Oh, there's Argos," she said, stepping away from the window. "Must be here for *band practice*." She walked to her room, tugging lightly at my tiny orange stub of a ponytail as she passed.

"When's Tim coming?" I shouted from the couch.

"Who knows," she called from her closet. "Whenever the north wind rattles the sill or whatever."

"Right, I forgot your boyfriend is a turn of the century witch."

She stepped back into the living room, wearing the silk kimono I bought her a couple birthdays ago. "He *is* spooky, anyway." She picked up her notebook from the floor and went to look out the window again, chewing an old Bic that floated around the apartment. The door buzzed and I got up to answer, but turned and went to Alice at the window. I put my hand on her shoulder, the thin silk already warm from her skin. She turned to look at me, pen still in her mouth like the nib of it helped her think. "Yeah?" she asked, and I just looked at her, hoping that whatever it was that I couldn't figure out how to ask, fizzing in my throat like spiritual Pepto, would be visible and interpretable by her. I looked at her and she looked back at me. I wanted her to tell me the things it was too hard for me to figure out about myself. I wanted her to pull me apart piece by piece like a rubber band ball until she got to my center, could tell me what creepy thing was in there.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

A doe-eyed discomfort that I didn't recognize in her spread across her body. I could feel it. She laughed. "You better get the door, right? Keeping the suitor waiting?"

I went to the door. Argos, lanky and out of breath as ever, guitar over his shoulder like the true teenage dirtbag from all our lackluster dreams.

“Hey Dad,” he said, pushing past me into the apartment. He liked to spend time in our place because he still lived with his parents in Portage Park and we represented for him a kind of bourgeois hedonism. Shoes on indoors, cigarettes by the window, books more expensive than our cookware and tops optional. Plus two older women and I suppose, looking back, the thrill of available pussy. We were real fuck ups just the two of us, but Argos made us glamorous.

“Hey Al,” he said, still walking through to my room. He turned back to me when he realized I wasn’t following him. “We jamming?” he asked me.

I looked over at Alice in repose by the window, more a feature of art than an author of it. She looked back at me and I saw the depth in her look, but I chose to ignore it because I thought to myself she’s choosing this, she’s choosing this sadness and she knows she is, which makes it all worse and which is the whole fucking thing. And besides, Argos wanted to make music with me, as though he didn’t understand that real, grown men always asked Alice to be in their bands even though I was the one who played instruments, and I was the one who knew how to sing.

“Don’t worry about me,” Alice said, smiling like a porcelain vase. “I’m having an art experience here.” And I left her there, sad and waiting, because I didn’t have to not.

That night when I fucked Argos, sloppy against the bedroom door, I was especially loud.



Late that night, while Argos was asleep, I heard Alice let Tim in. I slipped out of bed and found Argos’ phone, took a few pictures of myself naked below the neck and texted them to Tim. I deleted the sent texts and blocked Tim’s number, then went back to bed. I knew Alice checked Tim’s phone, especially texts that came late at night.

By the next morning, Tim and Alice were no more. I was like the good witch, wand-waving and trailing glitter. I was the brief god of clean resolution, putting an end to the worst waste of Alice’s time using only my tits and a camera phone. Tell me black magic doesn’t exist. Tell me I wasn’t put on this shit earth for a reason.



“Tell me about Pecos Bill,” she asked, on the train to the Baha’i temple. I loved tall tales, and she knew Pecos was my favorite. Even then I thought about how the convalesced always end up having to take care of you, when the discomfort of your not being able to make their pain go away becomes too hard.

“Well to start he was raised by coyotes,” I said. “After he fell off the back of Momma and Daddy’s wagon in the Texas wild.”

“And his whip?” she asked.

“It was a snake. His snake named Shake. And Shake was so big and so strong that Bill lassoed a twister with him once, rode it across Texas.”

“And his horse?”

“His horse was named Widowmaker because no other man on earth could ride him. But old W-M and Bill were sympatico and true blue, and he let Bill ride him up and down the Lone Star, because love and because Widow knew a true cowboy when he saw one, knew that the bond between a true prairie horse and a true frontiersman is nothing to sniff at, is a real and good and eternal thing.”

“And his gal?”

“Well obviously Pecos had a lot of gals, being essentially a handsome superhero of the western USA. He was reported to have married a dozen or so times, which really probably goes to show that he had more of a personality disorder than anything else. But his first wife was named Slue-Foot Sue, and she was tough as fucking nails and a weirdo legendary cowgirl to boot. Love at first sight the way that happens in tall tales, and they married the next day. After the wedding Sue asked Bill to prove how much he loved her, because women are insecure and men don’t communicate, and Bill said *how, darlin’?* And Sue said *let me ride Widowmaker.* And Bill said *sure, darlin’*—such the fucking badass was she that he presumed she could handle the ole W-M. But Widow was Bill’s original dude, and he didn’t love sharing any attention with Sue’s bustle. So as soon as Sue got saddled up, Widow went on a legendary wild west style tirade, and bucked Sue straight into outer fucking space, where she promptly hit her head on the actual moon. After a couple days of star gazing with something that I imagine was like concern, Bill realized that Sue was doomed to starve up there in

the stratosphere, so he whips out his six shooter and, being the best in the literal west, pops her one between the eyes to put her out of her misery.”

“Did she turn into a star?”

“It’s likely.”

“And he married a dozen times after?”

“He did, because of course he did. But none of the wives worked out, and not for similarly whimsical reasons. They just didn’t last, because none of them were Sue, and Sue was his true gal.”

“True blue gal,” she said, and rested her head on my shoulder, either because she wanted me to know she loved me or because she didn’t want me to see that she was crying, or probably both. She had told me before that the great value of Tim was that here was a man who wasn’t scared to hold her while she cried, wasn’t even uncomfortable doing it. She’d thought that was so profound, the pinnacle of love, of feeling valued.

I’d thought that maybe if she weren’t dating Tim, she wouldn’t cry so much.

We transferred at Howard to the Purple line, and watched the suburbs fill out with trees as we rode on to Linden. We got off at the last stop and suddenly there we were, experiencing true family life in the heart of Wilmette, Illinois. It was the kind of place you’d expect to see a little boy in a straw cap chasing a hoop with a stick, Mom and Dad looking on proudly, everyone’s a doctor. I’d been there before, to see the Temple. It was my secret place I came to in crisis, a little slice of solitude when it felt like all that was expected of one’s life was confusion, routine, furtive tears. I remember feeling, in my twenties, in the city, like there was absolutely nowhere to cry and nowhere to look for God. I went to Wilmette to do both, because no one would have expected either.

Another white girl finding solace in someone else’s shit.

I bought us some bourgie sandwiches from a place that spelled shop ‘shoppe.’ Hers was named after a European philosopher, mine after a racehorse. Looking back, it’s possible that hers was named after a racehorse that was named after a philosopher. We ate them in the park by the train, because to eat them at the Temple seemed gauche. We splayed out on the grass like emperors and spilled fancy mustard and prosciutto and dried cranberries onto the ground, laughing

about the time freshman year she fell off a bunk bed giving Tony Heugher a blowjob, the time junior year the chair of the History department walked in on me and Jack Alanis dry humping in the third floor single-occupancy ladies' room in the Liberal Arts building.

"We shouldn't be allowed to pick anymore," she said. "Our licenses should be revoked."

"Hey speak for yourself," I said. "I'm not the one actively seeking men who'll treat me like trash."

She went quiet, and I regretted saying it. I'd meant it as a joke or, I don't know why I said it. But I hadn't meant it how it came out. We cleaned up our papers, tossed them in the trash even though the recycling was only ten feet further. She looked at me over the trashcan, then turned and started to walk, and I had to catch up to her because I was the one who knew which way to go.

The walk to the Temple was short, and trees, and a little bridge over a stream. Wilmette, the sanctity of the suburbs. I didn't look at Alice, but I could hear her breath go uneven, the soft sniffing. We passed a flattened squirrel and I worried that she saw it, then realized it wasn't my worry to have, and I stared it down as we walked by, daring the stain of gore to be bloodier, wishing the mat of fur to reveal more brain, more cracked bone matter. We saw the white dome over a roof and I told here "there it is," even though of course she could see it too.

And as we approached I noticed like I always did—as though it were somehow each time a surprise—how weird and ornate and beautiful the thing was. Unreal. Curving white lacey stone along the dome, pillars and crests and loops circling the bright white, blinding ivory paleness of it. Green shrubs and still reflecting pools set around it concentrically, like arrows pointing to the doomsday button at the center of the desk. I loved this thing, and in that moment I wanted with brute force to explode it.

I was halfway up the second set of steps, making my way to the bright glass double doors, before I realized Alice had stopped at the front of the path, was standing still looking up at the hulking sight of it. I went back to her, expecting a tantrum or some passive aggression, a refusal to go on with me, some female shittiness.

I got to her, and she didn't turn toward me.

“I knew it was you, ya know,” she said, looking up at the dome.

“What?”

“You have a birthmark on your left tit. Duh. Easy. Clear as day.”

We hung still in place like we were tied to the ground, bodies weighted down in a swimming pool. I felt my stomach drop out of my body, my guts a limp loop on the ground. I tried to think of a response, but all that went through my head was *his lasso was a snake named Shake and it was so big and so strong that Bill lassoed a twister with it.*

“I couldn’t figure it out. I mean I’d wondered if he was sleeping with someone else. But this was so especially shitty. And I thought you didn’t even *like* Tim. Why would you have done that, that way?”

I felt like I was blacking out, bucked into space. The sky might have cracked open and dripped its black yolk all over us for all I would have noticed. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I loved Tim because he made me feel special and after this, he couldn’t have anymore. That’s hard, but it’s true. And I love you because you’re my fucking best friend. So what am I supposed to do, asshole? You tell me.”

“You acted like nothing had happened.”

“I’ve been acting like someone I loved ran through me with a hunting knife.”

“But you came here with me...”

“You asked me to!” She spun to face me with her huge sunglasses. I saw my own face in stereo. “What’s more fucked up there? Why should I have to do all the work of dumping my best friend when I’m already the heartbroken one? Do I have to lose everything just because you, what? Wanted the thing I had? Or just wanted me not to have it?”

She took a deep breath and turned back to the temple. Her shoulders lowered, her back straightened. The wind picked up again and shushed the trees. There was that awesome calm, that art experience. “It’s possible for people to love you even though you hate yourself, Daddy-o. Besides,” she said, “you’re right. This place is very, extremely beautiful. You have a better eye than me for that stuff.”

She took off her sunglasses. She was looking up, crying still, indeterminate streams pouring from her packed blue Pollyanna eyes. What really horrified me

was the amazement in her face, not a look of someone in search of something, someone with anything to figure out or solve or answer for. Just a look of vivid, burning knowing. She was unable to take in everything she felt, unable to contain the sweet pity this God, this beauty took on us. She was inaccessible to me as ever, glowing with the way the universe tapped her, leaving her broken bellied and grinning. She was the artist, the feeler.

“Sometimes I do things, and I don’t know why,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “But we always do, later. What’s that called?”

“Hindsight,” I said.

“No,” she said. “Fucking storytelling.”

I asked her to prove that she loved me, and she let me ride the widowmaker. I reached out to touch her angular elbow, knowing I could press as hard as I wanted and I’d never really feel her.

THE 2019 GULF COAST PRIZE IN POETRY

Judged by Aimee Nezhukumatathil

**This year's winner is “Hinge”
by Alycia Pirmohamed**

“Hinge” gives us a new map for a land where both heartbreak and delight can reside, even if, as the speaker notes, “planting my palms together has never felt like blossoming up the side of a mountain...” In the elegant build and stretch of this poem, we are given exquisite possibilities for language and a green longing--all while managing to stack lyricism and light in sonically surprising ways.

—*Aimee Nezhukumatathil*

**This year's honorable mentions are
“Devil’s Tongue” by Felicia Zamora
& “Ordinary Psalm in the Kitchen” by Julia Levine**



Hinge

Alycia Pirmohamed

Tonight, I am all joint and animal dark. My heel blots out the moon,
vanishes the small nod of light. And yes,
I prayed today, verging into my *bismillah* before settling
on the broken.

I stoop into my longings, plot a seed in every crevice. Last week,
I titled another page with my body
and surrendered every bending, splitting line of myself
to the making.

When we refer to plants, we call this positive phototropism,
a body rivering toward the light.
I want to river toward the light. I want to lean my neck toward
a thing until I, too, become ism,

scientific and named into truth.

Today, I walked through a dream that wasn't mine, and I
thought of you waiting at the end of it,
as if to gather me,

and maybe that's just the kind of woman I am—no matter
how many times I halve the moon, or find myself in a room
without a window, I know Allah
sees everything, every hand planting something new,

every metaphor for the tree it becomes. And, yes,
I prayed today, but planting my palms together has never
 felt like blossoming up the side of a mountain.
The only time these hands have ever flowered,

have ever been used for something good,
 was that spring at Yamnuska, where we found a clear,
blue door of glacial water, and I walked right through
 your reflection.

THE 2019 GULF COAST PRIZE IN NONFICTION

Judged by Leslie Jamison

**This year's winner is
“Hunting Season” by Julia Brennan**

“Hunting Season” is a fierce, unsettling, precise and adamantly nuanced exploration of power, exploitation, sexuality, and solidarity, an interrogation of the concept of victimhood that also finds an uneasy and searing language for pain. This writing turns over the stone of every piety to find a mess of unsavory creatures writhing underneath. But it also finds grace in eloquence; it seeks the candors that lie on the other side of sentimentality.

—Leslie Jamison

**This year's honorable mentions are
“The Evangelist” by Kathleen Blackburn
& “Theory of Harmony” by Nichole LeFebvre**



WINNER OF THE 2019 GULF COAST PRIZE IN NONFICTION

Hunting Season

Julia Brennan

1. THE SITUATION

The situation is that I loved a man who loved me even though I was his labor. I used to think it was cool to spend Friday nights on my professor's pale brown couch with the tear in the arm cushions, singing Fela Kuti while the oxycontin sunk in. The wall above his desk was covered in post-it-notes. They said things like "Home should feel like a resolution" and "Look around, the world is bright." He liked to listen to me speak and I felt lit up when he listened to me. There was a hole in the corner of his ceiling and often I thought I saw a rodent poke through to watch us strip.

2. THE WOMAN IN THE CEILING FAN

I once told him, "I think I'm dying here," and he reached behind my head for the orange pill bottle. He dumped the oxy into my hand. The drug he took for migraines and back pains. "I won't make it past thirty-five," he said. "I have a very strong feeling that I will die very young."

I was about to leave him when his mother arrived inside of the house. Suddenly, "I've left," became, "I am trying to leave," or, "I am in the process of leaving now." He said the grief of losing his mother was entering him only now, twenty-five years after the fact of her death. His mother had died, his father had followed, and he had largely raised himself.

He said the grief of losing his mother was making him ill in a nausea inspiring way. That he found himself weeping at the toilet seat, filling the basin with vomit. I came and sat at the edge of his bed and listened. He said his mother appeared to him at night, drifting above his head, her limbs tangled in the ceiling fan.

We slept together naked in the unforgiving spring heat. She wiped the sweat from his brow with cool towels. Held his arm where it shook on the sheet. When his eyes shut, I retreated to the other side of the bed and the distance between us was a field I hoped not to fall into as I succumbed to sleep and lost control of my body.

He told me his mother came to him and begged him to hold her in his little boy arms, now long and muscled, and grabbing for her waist; she swung her legs away. In the afternoon, his mother sat on his desk where he sat editing his work and he turned up *The Underground Spiritual Game* and danced hard to get her out of the house.

He whimpered in the dark; I watched his mouth open and hang in place. His mother came for him. I lay in the dark and undressed and watched light slide across walls. There was a sculpture on his dresser. A skeletal figure carved from sanded balsa wood. Another woman had purchased the sculpture for him, and it was the only object in the room, aside from the yogurt container he filled with water and placed on the stool beside the bed for me to sip. From my twisted position, I stared at the skeletal figure. The figure had no eyes. A soft space where the eyes should have been.

I wondered where he kept the gifts I had given him. Two interlocking stones forming a short chain, sculpted by an old man we'd met at a park on the outskirts of Harare. I had asked the artist about the curves in his wood and stone pieces. The shapes all reminded me of the female body. He'd looked at me and smiled, amused. "Of course," he said. "The essence of all my work. You must know we all come from a woman."

On one of those nights, guilty in the house I no longer wished to be in, as sounds of fitful sleep pushed through the walls, I remembered a younger iteration of myself, the girl he'd met at eighteen. I peered at my face in the bathroom mirror and touched the girl with the palm of my hand. That girl had been falling through a crack. He'd handed her a ladder; the ladder was language. For that, I still felt I owed him something.

His mother story. It made me open, made me unbutton my shirt. Could I help him? I watched him pace the house, reckoning with his mother. I touched my own face to be sure it was still there. My ears, my mouth, intact. I had begun to feel that my face had fallen off of me, that he had scraped my face from the bone while I was asleep. He spoke. I watched him pace but couldn't hear the sound his feet made on the floor. A silence grew between our bodies. I heard everything else—the mice scurrying in the drywall, the water through the pipes.

Toward the end, he asked if he could hire a photographer to take a nude portrait of the two of us in bed. I said yes but the photographer never arrived. I imagined sticking his thumb down my throat in front of a camera. The final developed image: my unclothed body flat and horizontal on his bed, my hand pushing his thumb deeper into my mouth, his own mouth open and laughing.

Had the mother clipped the collar on? Or had he clipped it when I turned my head to look out of the window, onto a stretch of the yard, bone dry, and vinegar was the sunshine crawling up the little stone angel in the shredded garden, the little black dog barking in the neighbor's yard. We stayed inside the house and every blind remained shut.

The house had never been mine to enter as I wanted, and because of this fact, I was impressed by the mother for having found her way inside. On days when I couldn't reach him, when I was feeling particularly desperate, I had attempted to pick the locks. I'd run the mile to his house in the middle of the night. In shadow, so the eyes of the town and institution couldn't see. He'd hear me banging at the door and he'd come and he'd hush me and push me inside. He'd peel off my clothes and lift me and sit me on top of the washing machine, the soft whirr of clothes and soap humming beneath me, and he'd wash my clothes after we finished—*so you don't go to class in the morning smelling of me.*

Almost five years later I learned that there were others.

3. SYNCHRONICITY

I was in the shower shaving when I heard a faint voice on the radio begin to speak about a military coup. Robert Mugabe, who had been in power since the country won its independence nearly forty years prior, had finally been ousted. No one anywhere knew what this would mean. The razor blade shot up and down my leg, lifting hair into the drain. That day, I was preparing to kill a man, and this man happened to be from Zimbabwe, where the coup was now in motion. It occurred to me that my timing could not have been crueler.

I wanted my legs to be clean when I sent the offending documents. His letters. I wanted my head to be very clear. I would brush my hair slowly and put on lipstick. I would sit down on my couch and compose my final message as I bit into a runny egg.

As I wrote to a dean at my alma mater, I pictured my professor preparing coffee in his house. I saw him there. His hands were on the metal grinder with the thin blade, an appliance that had always frightened me. He was a very particular man and I was always terrified of disappointing him. Apparently, my fear extended even to the proper grinding of coffee beans. If I pushed too lightly, the bean wouldn't crush, whereas if I pushed down with force, I might crush the bean to pieces, thus creating a useless powder, no good to drink.

The Zimbabwean woman being interviewed by the radio journalist could not contain her joy. Her voice lilted and sprung into a new octave. This would be a new country, she explained, and she would learn how to participate in it. "I never thought I'd live to see the day my children would not call that hideous man the leader of their world."

I was shaving around my ankle, picturing Mugabe's Blue Roof mansion, a sprawling estate hidden behind a stone wall in Harare. He said that after five the street closed to cars and pedestrians. Young ZANU-PF soldiers patrolled through the night. "If you're found walking the street after hours, horrible things happen to you," I had been told by the man I was about to betray. Our relationship had begun around the corner from a dictator. We walked around the Avenues on Sundays, careful to avoid his street.

On one of those walks he taught me the word for 'demon' in his language.

Now I felt like a demon. There was a cut on my ankle, bleeding. Was he listening to this radio program in his own house? I couldn't help but wonder as I soaped the flat space between my tiny breasts. His hand was on the grinder, the grinder was on the beans, and outside the sun would remain locked in place for seven days. I'd checked the forecast in his area. I wanted to take him down on a day he least expected something would go wrong, and I knew how he felt about rain.

Whenever it rained in Zimbabwe that summer I could never leave the house. I couldn't go anywhere without being accompanied by him, for fear on his part that I might enter into a marriage I didn't understand.

"How young do you think I am?" I'd ask.

"Trust me," he'd laugh. "These men are very charming."

I was proposed to several times that summer. Once at a bar with a braai pit outside. Our cab driver had approached our table with a pink drink in hand. All around us pig flanks, chicken breasts, and hot liver smoked on hooks above the grills. When the driver approached our table, the man I would kill today had pulled the chair out from under him, so that as the driver popped the question, he fell with the chair into a heap on the floor.

The razors I used were pink and cheap. My hair in the drain made the basin fill up. I walked dripping and naked to the scanner, where I copied his letters. The ink ran a little. The red envelopes were in my wet hand when I pressed send. Red envelopes with his yellow post-it-notes stuck to the front. “I am sorry this is invasive, won’t happen again.” Red envelopes that he’d asked a friend to place beneath my pillow.

“They’re the color of poison,” another friend noticed, when I pulled them out of a box.

Outside my window, a dog pissed on a bench leg. The chef at the restaurant I lived on top of walked into the street to kiss his wife.

“The world is strange and telepathic,” he used to say. I took notes, naked in his bed with my notebook out.

“I can always sense when you are thinking of me. Do you know you repeat your opinions three times, whenever you are very touched by something?”

I wrote it down.

4. ON THE TV, A SCALPEL

I remember the news report that seemed to be everywhere several months after I faxed the love letters. Veteran harbored a medical scalpel in his body for almost four years, lawsuit says. Surgeon being sued for malpractice.

The veteran had suffered severe abdominal pain for ten years, ever since his surgery performed at a VA hospital in Connecticut immediately following his final tour. At a recent doctor’s appointment, an X-ray showed that the surgeon had accidentally stitched a scalpel back into the veteran’s body. This scalpel had rusted significantly in the gut. The blade had shifted and now threatened to poke through the stomach lining. The lawyers were calling this situation an egregious

malpractice case. An incomprehensible level of incompetence on the part of the surgeon. He would pay the victim 2.1 million dollars damage, and he would never work again. The news anchor interviewed the veteran as I ripped the scabs off my body in bed.

Considering this outcome, I wondered what the victim was most pleased about. Was he happiest to:

1. Discover the source of his pain
2. Have proof (x-rays) to locate said pain. To show it to others. He would not be questioned.
3. Profit from this pain-source

In my view this result was incredible. Much better than having suffered years of severe pain for nothing. A competent surgeon removed the scalpel. He wiped the rust from the veteran's innards. The veteran survived and he also made money. I was envious. I felt sick all the time and I had no idea what to do with my feeling.

5. THE SITUATION

There was another woman. I learned about her a year ago. X was also in his house alone at night. She documented her experience. I bought her story for sixteen dollars on the internet and felt conflicted. I wanted to know and I wanted to remain blind. I took off the blindfold when I broke the spine of her story. I appear in the middle as a knock at the door, but she doesn't know this, doesn't know the knock is me. He says I am his colleague. It was the day before my birthday, the day she writes that they were alone in his house. His house which was also his classroom. When I knock. She uses parenthesis to suggest they touch in some significant way. They touch between parenthesis, in the pause, when I am not around. He sneaks her out the back door when I knock. The back door leads to the garage, where extra trash bags pile up. When I read the scene the first time through, I picture her standing by the trash, inhaling the stench of brown banana peels and rabbit; the food we ate. I make her fall into the trash, into our dinner, when I read her story. And we sat week after week, side by side, our legs probably touched. I mean, they must have. His couch was small. And we sit in our creative writing class in his living room, eating the lentil soup he's made, squeezing the

perfect lemon wedges dry. All ten of us, his students, but X and I always on the couch, claiming the place we know, our whole bodies know... our knees knock, our bowls spill a little, and maybe we smile collectively, like a pair, and then we move on to talk about the work. I guess maybe I suspected. I don't know. If I'm being really honest, I didn't like her. I know he fed me reasons. He told me she was coming on to him. My distaste for her became extreme. I have not thought about her in a very long time. Not until now. Now I cannot stop seeing us there together, on the couch, riveted by the man who made us feel seen, or something, what was wrong with us. The two of us sitting there, upright in the place where we howled and undressed. At least where I undressed. The man asked us to grab for our insides and spread them out for everyone to see. And I held him there, at night, in our classroom, as he threw up his own insides and talked to me about the grief of losing his mother. I thought he was my mother. He was, in many ways, a mother to me. I didn't know what to do with his grief. I didn't know how to hold it. I held that grief so clumsily, like a child holding a cup of juice. Spilling the cup. A reflex. A sudden jerk. She wrote about all of it. His childhood, his history, what little he told of it. Where he was from. An orphan. Places I knew. I hated her, I hated that she did that to him. I felt for her. I wanted to talk to her. I'm not sure. During the nights that followed this revelation, I thought that I could hear the ocean, but I live across the street from a gas station in Providence.

J,

8/5/13

You know, in the morning when you lie facing the wall of windows,
your back arched a little, your spine
runs delicately under your flesh, cutting you exactly in half.

Sometimes I watch you [a] sleep. When you are asleep, you have
such peace: your face holds the most delicate of privacies.
It is greying outside, the sun laying firm siege on the sky.
There, its [sic] leaning on the high floor of the flat across from ours.

When you are asleep and I watch you, I feel like such a creep.
You have the quietest of hairs along your spine.
You have the loveliest beauty spots played asymmetrically down your back.

I am lying there next to you thinking of how kind you are.
How so smart, so sweet, so funny, and how so content
You feel to me in that hour. I lean over to you, gather
You in my arms.

I want always to kiss you down your spine, knot after knot
Lay my lips on you.
You're my kind of girl.

Thu, Nov 16, 2017, 2:28 PM

J,

My name is _____ and I am the Title IX Coordinator at _____.
Dean _____ shared with me what you had shared with her regarding your experience at _____ with Professor _____. I wanted to let you know that we met with Professor _____ today to let him know that the college would be initiating a formal resolution process against him for a violation of the sexual misconduct policy. In that meeting he was calm and admitted to having the relationship he had with you. He also chose to resign effective immediately.

_____ shared your concern for the safety of your sisters as well. I want you to know that _____ is no longer allowed on campus and has received a trespass notice. This means that he must be escorted on campus if he has a legitimate need to be here (i.e. returning items or removing items from his office). I also personally warned him not to have contact with you or anyone associated with you and he stated that he does not plan to do so. If your sisters do experience any kind of communication from him, please encourage them to speak to me about it.

If you would like to speak with me regarding this, or if I can be of any support to you, please let me know. I am also including information below about our website where you can find all of the information regarding the sexual misconduct policy.

6. ON THE PHONE WITH A VICTIM

I was up in bed, staring at a blue strip of light hovering on the wall when the first woman called to tell me she had also been his victim. I'd moved into my small and unembellished apartment nine months prior. The only sheets I owned were on the mattress. The mattress was on the floor. I woke up with my right leg on the hardwood, the other twisted in the sheet like a branch ripped from a tree. My window opened onto the roof, and as the woman spoke, I realized I needed air. I had been inside all day, arranging and rearranging my four pieces of furniture: a blue chair, a pink lamp, a rocking horse, a cinderblock and on the cinderblock my books: *The House of Hunger*, *Black Sunlight*, *Nervous Conditions*.

She described my life four years ago to me. "When I was in the house with him, he was very paranoid," she said. "He pulled down the blinds and checked them once. Then after he took my clothes off, he circled the rooms again, checking a second time. As if this weren't enough, he walked to his closet, grabbed his neckties, and began hanging his ties around the curtain rods, so that the slats between blinds were covered."

"Yes," I said. "He did that."

"Oh. He did that? You saw that too?"

"Yes, exactly that."

She continued. "Sometimes he called me late at night and I wasn't sure what he wanted. I knew what I wanted. I'd walk to him and when I arrived the snow clung to my hair. He pulled the snowflakes out. He made me soup. Everything felt warm."

From my roof, I watched a woman push her baby through the snow in this little red toy car contraption. She was running. She screeched, her baby giggled. The two did not slow down. I felt worried for the baby. Would the baby fall out? I was glad the mother didn't seem concerned. When the mother couldn't run anymore, she picked up her child, threw him into the air, and caught him.

The woman on the phone was still talking and I had no idea what to say to her.
“How did you get my number?” I asked her.
“He gave it to me.”
“Why do you think he did that?”
“I don’t know. I begged.”
“One of the reasons I wanted to call was, well, he gave me an STI. I got really ill. My mother had to come to take care of me. My mother needs some sort of support system. She feels so responsible. How is your mother holding up?”

I didn’t know what to say when the woman tried to comfort me, because I felt more like a bull than anything. If I were to adopt her new terminology, I would have to concede that I was on the phone with a victim, living below a victim, in a victim’s body, on a floor mattress.

On the first night of my life in this new apartment, the woman who lives in the place above me cried for several hours. These tears were not normal tears. They were violent, shuddering, and I thought they’d never end. I’d followed her cry around the rooms, trying to interpret or make up an event that might have precipitated them. At first, I felt very sympathetic towards her. I pictured her in many dire situations. I considered bringing her a bowl of soup, but as I neared the bottom of my whiskey glass my patience for her noise dwindled, and I wanted to go to sleep, so badly that I communicated with her by standing on my mattress and knocking with a hammer left behind by the previous tenant—and she yelled down, *you’re so cruel*.

Below me, a popular restaurant. This restaurant played music at all hours. Depending on who was working, I got the top forty countdowns or Axel Rose, and I liked neither the top forty countdowns nor Axel Rose, so I often sat with my headphones on and listened to the news, all bad, as usual, why was news never the good kind, I wondered, something good must be happening. I watched the mother and her baby walk down the street and out of view.

I was up in bed, now nine months into my tenure as a tenant, noticing how the exquisite yellow of the gas station sign faded when a car pulled in for gas with blinkers on. This blinkerlight ruined the innate beauty of that yellow, the properties inherent to it became clouded, and this made the sign look drab. I

looked down at my skin and wondered what sort of light had effects like this on my body. I knew, of course, that bad lighting was a real thing, that the quality of a photograph often depended on the photographer's aptitude with manipulating his light sources. This made me sad. Manipulating the light sounded horrible, like putting a choker on the sun.

She was telling me a story about how they'd met again, years after their affair ended, somewhere near the school where she was getting her Master's degree.

"Anyway, I think this rendezvous might have taken place when he was still seeing you," she said, "Which is why I wanted to call and let you know."

I bit my hand. I didn't know how to tell her that I really didn't care about something that had happened four years ago. Somewhere along the line, I'd grown a sharp tongue. It was better to bite down on it. I had learned how to make a fake plant appear real to me, and vice versa. I went to the circus and stared at trapeze artists, studying how they moved, graceful, without a tinge of visible self-doubt. Doubt would cause you to fall to your death. Doubt was a fatal feeling. I tried to explain.

"I think what happened has already happened, and I am really sorry you are only learning about me now, about how there was another one of you and I was her, that your experience of love has been duplicated. I know it's very hard," I said.

These new powers of reality-bending helped make me feel as invincible as a dental patient on Novocain, as though I were permanently under my own spell. The sidewalk cracks were trapeze wires. I walked across and didn't fall.

A car pulled out of the gas station and the yellow returned to its usual magnificent state.

The woman said she'd heard I sent the letters. She thanked me for sending them. "That was very brave of you."

"I didn't feel brave. I just walked to the scanner. I put the letters face down on the glass. I pressed send. It was all pretty abstract."

I was alert when the mouse ran into my room and sat by the heater for a second. I would later be asleep when it died in the trap I'd set in the opposite corner. I would wake up again in the morning and smell it, and I would be the one to find the latex gloves under the sink and wipe it up because I was living alone.

"Could I hear one?"

“Could you hear what?”

“A letter?”

“Could you hear one—”

I was up in bed, retracing what everyone around me kept calling my trauma, and what I kept seeing as my dog. I kept attaching bobby-pins to my arm-hair and calling them IVs. I kept whispering that my trauma was my pet. My love was my dog. My love was the black spot on the floor where mouse intestines had decayed overnight.

The man had probably wanted to kill me. As it turned out the man had many loves. He'd been the love of other people he also called love. I hated love. This woman was loved, and as I listened to her speak, I was a bit insulted to be in the same camp as her, not because she wasn't a kind woman, she was, but because I could tell that under no circumstances would we have ever gotten along; in fact, I was sure that if I had met her in person by chance, I would maybe have said two words to her, hello, hello, before calling it quits. She would never be a woman who registered to me, and I would never be a woman who registered to her, so this reparative conversation we were having felt like a waste of my time and I resented him for putting us in this awkward position.

“It turned out that my love saw me as a child, he licked my cunt to teach me how to be a woman. Don't just get down on your knees. Learn to ask for your pleasure, and I did ask for it, and in this arena, he always delivered. No other man has ever known how to make me cry,” she said.

“I also learned that crying while naked can make a woman more susceptible to deep love, or something close to wonder. Whenever we touched a space as wide as an inked sea expanded in me and I had to swim in it. So, whenever I pulled up my jeans, I always thanked him for the fun,” I said.

The woman who cried above me slept with fifteen stuffed animals every night. I knew this because a week ago a fire alarm had kicked us out of the building. The owner of the restaurant below us was a drunk. He'd pulled the alarm. He often ruined the bar experience for his customers. They seemed not to mind, as they kept coming back. I ran downstairs to escape the unbearable noise. Fifteen minutes after the alarm began sounding, I was in the restaurant, drinking a whiskey sour on the house, when I saw the woman weeping on the corner of the street, near the

mailboxes, with her stuffed animals wrapped in her arms. If this had been a real fire, she would have died for love of those animals, and I was shocked that she'd risk her life for multiple species of stuffed fabric. I decided that if I were a person who loved her, I would buy her a real dog, because she would be a very good pet owner, indeed. I felt like patting myself on the back for thinking of this. So, I did that. I reached one hand behind my head to congratulate myself for wiping the stain up when the mouse died, and for responding so quickly to the fire alarm.

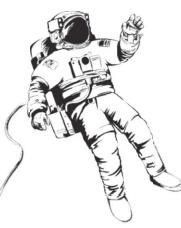
**I am grateful to the women who helped me understand my experience by sharing with me their own. Some identifying details altered, some voices composites.*

“HOUSTON IS A CRUEL, CRAZY TOWN
ON A FILTHY RIVER IN EAST TEXAS
WITH NO ZONING LAWS AND A CULTURE
OF SEX, MONEY AND VIOLENCE. IT'S
A SHABBY, SPRAWLING METROPOLIS
RULED BY BRAZEN WOMEN, CROOKED
COPS AND SUPER-RICH PANSEXUAL
COWBOYS WHO LIVE BY THE CODE OF
THE WEST—WHICH CAN MEAN JUST
ABOUT ANYTHING YOU NEED IT TO
MEAN, IN A PINCH.”

-Hunter S. Thompson

After Marriage

In flying, bats unfold,
opening themselves to
danger (hawks, owls)
in the grey-dark sky.
We might, together, play
a game of silence if
we dared a taste of
blindness. I
am bats tonight, except
instead of flying I'm
lying here on the
ground like an object
ejected from one
paradise
to another. Cloud
cover reflects my love
back to me
through damp leaves, and
micro-mist susurrate in the
air. Every
breath I take glitters secretly
and then, like kissing, disappears.



The Fifth Planet

Come, early summer in the mountains, and strawberry moon,
come and carry me softly in the silver canoe on wires to the summit
where in that way of late night useless talk, the bright dark asks me,
“What is the thing you are most afraid of?” and I already know
which lie I will tell.

There were six of us huddled there in the cold, leaning on the rocks
lingering in the dark where I do not like to linger, looking up at the
sharp round pinnacle of light discussing what shape we saw—rabbit,
man, goddess—but that brightness for me was haunted by no thing,
no shadow at all in the lumens.

What am I, what am I, I kept throwing out to the hustling silence.
No light comes from the moon, he's just got good positioning
and I suppose that's the answer, that's what I'm most afraid of,
that I'm a mirror, I have no light of my own, hang in empty space
in faithful orbit around a god or father

who will never see me whole. I keep squinting to try to see Jupiter
which the newspaper said would be found near the moon but
it's nowhere, they must have lied. Or like god, there is too much
reflection, headsplitting and profane, scraping up every shadow,
for anyone to see.

Aftershock

River the friendless time that spins in morning insipid

Written a blue scar that daily supplies body as kin

Riven what is spilled under magnetic polar influence

Hollowed from planet's mineral core as death might

In the night quiver intemperate

Prayers given while every word chills experience into shapes

Leave all this but sound your own shape out and alone

Body a spore my soar and sound

Heliotrope heathen my hard earned shore

Every rivet every spire wishes one more season

Drift your unlegended map now law to govern

My unpronounced name echoing all the way down

No one knows me no one loosens this harness

I that opens to see the name that covers me

The room accepts no life to number

Every death a lens that dilates to bring the I inside

To what is home it seems un reasonable to believe

But reasonable to say river that insipid time to skin

You have no human right to know

Are you person place or thing

Bulking

The safest place to bury a body
is in another body,
is in your own body.

—Sonya Vatovsky, “Rhetic Asphyxiation”

If you examine my body, you will find the mark of the devil on my flat bony ass. Every time I show my body to a man, I hope he'll be the last who will need to inspect this blemish where the devil put his blood in me deep. I am cursed to show it to men because I am cursed to love men who love the ass. The last one, I told there was an ugly mark before he saw it. “I'm going to lick it,” he said. Nothing could possibly be worse. Almost nothing. The internet says that these days, eating ass is just normal. The fear consumed me. But in the end, he didn't lick it. He glanced, but he said he didn't see the mark, then looked back at his phone, where the women lived. *God damn*, he said to the photo of a woman on Twitter the week after he broke up with me, a woman whose bare, pale ass looked soft as a feather bed. God. I'm the damned one, with this bone basket of a pelvis, my body a pit with no fruit. My only fat is in all the wrong places, not my hips but my waist, the bad kind of curve.

Before I ever took off my clothes for him, he would send the peach emoji and I knew once he peeled me he'd find me juiceless. If you bury a pit as hard as my hips, does it ever make a peach tree? What I'm trying to say is, I have a body that's out of style. A body I didn't mind when I was in 9th grade and a popular boy used to call me to list all the things that were wrong with me, all the things he'd change—my acne'd face, my wrong jeans—but he said the one thing he liked was that he knew he could hold my whole ass in his hands if he tried.

The white goth gf's in the last man's phone lived in bedrooms in front of mirrors. They lived in g-strings and in his depressive episodes. They lived somewhere in Europe, I think, except for the ones who lived in his area code. The

pictures he would heart, heart, heart, heart, heart became my teachers: I would raise a knee, swivel my hips, ask the mirror to lie for me. *Please say something nice*, I texted him. He didn't. How could he? The women in the phone had hips like parentheses, exclamation-mark waists. I never brought them up. Not when I texted my best nude and it hung in the phone, *Delivered*, without comment. Not when we lay parallel in bed and he stared into the phone between us, his fingers pulling and tapping the screen, after he looked away when I stripped naked to put on my fifth-grade gym shorts I wore for sleep. The internet said to let him want. You're not supposed to take a man's comforts from him. Not supposed to tell him what he can't do. Men like novelty, the internet said, so I decided to make myself a new body for him.

I hadn't lifted weights in years, but I would try again. I started with a squat so heavy I pulled a hip. I didn't stop. I flexed my ass for the mirror and put my body in the phone. I wanted to say, *Look at me and no one else*, but the women had more hashtags, bigger mirrors, better thongs, fashionable genes. You can only look at one woman in a phone at a time, and he chose the Instagram women.

Now he is gone, and I am growing.

I read in my phone that sadness is stored in the hip flexors. At the gym, knees bent, grasping a loaded barbell that weighs as much as half of me, I weep. Look who's in my hip: the man who said I had a body like Gauguin's *Tahitian Women Bathing*—the painting with the love handles, bellies, and hip dips—and force-fed me; the one who hit my ass so hard I don't think it could still be called a spank; the one who demanded the mystery hole when the other one bored him. They always leave. I am too much and my body is never enough. They can't bury their faces in my flesh well. Because they would not see me, I have to stare at my own body in the mirror, raise my skirt, and pretend I am a woman in the phone. This make-believe never works: even my lace underwear can't dress up my consolation-prize body, the reality body that's easy to forget as soon as they close their eyes and imagine anybody else.

All night, when I am supposed to be sleeping so my muscles can grow, I watch YouTube videos of men in gyms telling me how to bulk. Abs are made in the kitchen, they say. This ass is made in the dark bedroom where I try to sleep with

earplugs and eye mask, trying to lose all sense for 8 hours a night. This ass wakes me up asking to be fed. So I feed my ass balanced macronutrients, a dozen kinds of protein powder, and pictures of the women in the phone.

A man who lives in YouTube tells me what the pain should feel like. Dull, not sharp. Tolerable, not electrical. My favorite feeling: the ache of microscopic muscle tears, sweet in a way that heartbreak never is, because skeletal muscle and cardiac muscle are not the same. I lift so much so often so heavy that if I don't feel sore, I don't feel happy because I don't feel like I'm making a new body inside my skin. My fitness goals: to deadlift my bodyweight, so I can lift myself out of this; to deadlift double, so I can carry the body of the love dream we made and dump it in a grave; to not have a body a man can hold in his hands. I have a hobby, finally, and it is making myself unrecognizable.

The 23andMe test said I have the muscles of a lifter. I try not to tell myself I will never have a fat ass, even though it's true. I take supplements anyway, the ones the grow-your-butt-dot-coms say will move my belly fat to where I want it. I think only about YouTube and gains. I don't think about the curveless ancestor women who paddled their heavy canoes across the water we emerged from when time began. They flattened the babies' heads, you know. Their foreheads marked them as high status forever. This is no different, except that I don't know what I'm doing. I look in the mirror and see that my gains are not what I want at all: more hardness. The next man who gets me gets bones, like all the others. He gets to see exactly what holds the organs. My ass is devil-marked, bony, and unremarkable. My heart is soft, bone-shielded, and now wrapped in muscle a man will never get to me through.

Every night I wake up at 3:30 am and look into my phone as though it's what I need and not the opposite. When I look at photos of the Twitter woman with the *god damn ass*, I imagine his face buried in it, and I think about a line from a poem I must have read a hundred times, or maybe a Tweet retweeted over and over, like a muscle cell forming to patch a micro-tear, or a body born in a maternal line. The line is something like, *the best place to bury a body is inside another body*. My phone doesn't know what I'm talking about, but it says that people also ask, *How many bodies are in a grave? Can two bodies be buried in the same grave? How long does a*

body stay buried? How deep do you need to bury a body? My good-for-nothing hips are a graveyard full of the shapes I tried on, my hip flexors packed tight with the bodies of men who could call me *cute* or *beautiful* but never hot. I'm not apple, pear, or rectangle, I'm a sturgeon, because my body came out of the river. A body like mine used to be in style; a body like mine used to be the only body around. A body like mine was made in the canoe before the white people came. I was taught not to decline a gift. These muscles are good at making more of themselves for a reason. A salmon's sides feel hard but a salmon never meant to be soft for you. I've never known a white man who understood that all of the salmon is blessed, all its flesh tastes perfect, but we have always known that the belly is different. You save the belly. You set it aside. You serve it to the one you love the most.

A Secure Form of Living

The position was meant to be temporary, covering for the receptionist at a dental clinic while she visited family for four weeks. Though it was July, for my first day I selected a full-sleeved black turtleneck and nylon pants. Heat puffed up my neck and sweat slickened my chest as soon as I dressed, but I was seventeen then and didn't own office clothes.

An unfamiliar shoe box was waiting for me outside the bathroom door. I removed the lid, littered the floor with tissue paper. Inside, a pair of black pumps, trimmed with eyelets. A gift from my parents for my first day. I slipped my feet inside. My heels pinched, my toes too.

The apartment was noisy with my mother's kitchen sounds. Water shooting from the faucet, a bag crumpling and closing, the pot lid knocking into place. A shuffle from sink to fridge, the thud of a hard landing, an inexplicable sigh. Through the living room, past my unmade bed on the pull-out sofa, I presented myself, newly shod, at the kitchen entrance. My mother evaluated my clothing, ladle clutched in her right hand, with more care than I had given myself in the mirror. Two weeks before, when I showed her the admissions letter to New York University, she held it shyly with both hands. "And I didn't even complete the tenth standard," she said.

She returned the ladle to the pot on the stove. The bubbling liquid would eventually yield a creamy lentil stew, my favorite, for dinner after my first day at work. Her nightgown swayed at her ankles, blue with four-petaled white flowers. Twenty years later, she still has not replaced it, though the fabric is aged and translucent and moves over her bones like a dyed casing. "Remove the shoes," she said. She held up three chili peppers, the color of dried blood. "Don't move."

I held my breath. She waved the peppers head to toe, casting around me a long necklace of spiced aroma. She threw the peppers into an open flame on the stove, and they released a hissing smoke, proof that any evil thoughts had been burned. I opened my mouth, and she sweetened my lips with jaggery.

"Papa?" I asked.

“Let’s see.”

The door to my parents’ bedroom was ajar. My father lay shirtless on a mattress resting on a box spring, facing a window that overlooked the grounds. The building we lived in was one of thirty in the complex, each with forty units. Upon arrival, my mother and father had boasted to our Delhi relatives: “What haven’t we got! A basketball court, a tennis court, a park just for the children, and a swimming pool that anytime is ours to use!” In reality, the number of residents outnumbered the capacity of the grounds. Once, we had visited the pool, an experience so unpleasant—“Even Delhi traffic can’t compare!” my father declared—not even the temptation of a sweltering day drew us to return.

My mother crawled across the mattress on her knees. Her mouth hovered above my father’s ear, his hair curling tenderly under her breath. I cringed automatically.

“Smriti is leaving for work,” she whispered, nudging his shoulder. “Are you awake?” He wouldn’t be, of course. My father finished his night shift after the birds started singing, slept for four hours, then returned to the road for his day shift. He kept himself awake with coffee from Dunkin’ Donuts and my mother’s parathas, stuffed with more green chilies than potatoes. “They remind a man he’s alive,” he said to her, too often and too loudly. A refrain I found tired, but my mother still blushed.

My father dragged himself out of the sheets as if he had been faking sleep for his own amusement. He stared in confusion until he saw how I was dressed and the shoes.

He planted thick hands on my shoulders, a grin plastered on his face. I shook a little under the weight. “Work hard,” he said. “And if you are lucky, have a good day.”



I hurried to the bus stop, wishing for the car. A year before, my father had replaced it with a utility van, so he could take on larger deliveries. He opened a new bank account for the extra money. He showed me the statements when they

came in the mail. “That’s your education,” he said, stabbing the growing number with his index finger. “Your future.”

The bus rode down Oak Tree Road, past the throng of Indian stores and restaurants. Most of them hadn’t opened yet. The people who owned these places lived above the stores. The bus stopped before a beauty parlor; the shifting curtain in the window above revealed two women, one tidying the bed, the other ironing a shirt.

Fifteen minutes later, the bus arrived across from a stumpy building where the office was located. The door was locked. I waited in the shade of a tall hedge, sweltering at the neck. Many people passed, mostly women. I stared at each of them hopefully, and they stared back with empty faces. I didn’t know what the receptionist looked like or her name. I had never met her or Dr. Seth, the owner of the practice. He had hired me over the phone.

The receptionist appeared exactly three minutes before eight. By that time, sweat had seeped through my bra, droplets were rolling uncomfortably from my stomach to the waist of my pants, and the area around my throat was a wet sauna. I longed for a tall glass of cold water—or two or three. When the receptionist found me, wilting under the bush, she appeared unimpressed.

“I’m Pony,” she said. “Are you the replacement?”

I nodded, too eagerly. A thick bead of sweat dropped from my forehead to the ground. Pony removed a stuffed key chain from her purse, and I joined her at the door, anticipating a cold blast of air.

“My name’s not actually Pony.” She picked through the key chain, pulling back each key carefully. “I wore ponytails all through school, and the name stuck. Though look at me now.” She pointed at the bob swinging above her jaw. Her attention turned to my collar. “Trying to hide something?”

“What?”

“I was your age once.”

I flushed when I understood. I pulled down my soggy collar and revealed unblemished skin. She looked disappointed and finally unlocked the door.

Pony flicked a light switch. I joined her behind the reception desk. The air was cool but not the icy blast I had hoped for. I shook out my sweater, blowing some breeze over my heated skin. I felt sweatier now than I had outside.

Pony dropped her purse below the desk, then turned on the small computer sitting in the corner. “You have a boyfriend?” she asked. Her eyebrows were thin, made of pencil, and they rose at the end of every question. I shook my head. “I had a boyfriend when I was your age. How old *are* you?”

“I’m seventeen.”

“I remember what that was like.” The computer booted, and while Pony entered the password, I took in my surroundings. Two gray filing cabinets stood in the back, bearing a stack of empty folders, in red, yellow, and blue. A paper cutter and a label machine sat beside them. A telephone hung from the wall next to the reception window, and an appointment book was open to this week’s schedule. The names were written in small print in pencil, with phone numbers underneath, and there was an appointment every half hour. D’Souza, Kalanathy, Singh, Singh, Warren, Patel, Sinha, Patel, Vargas... Most of the names had tick marks beside them. A couple had asterisks. The first appointment was in half an hour.

“I’ve already pulled the folders for today’s patients.” Pony pointed to the stack beside the appointment book. “They are in the correct order, but that will change as the day goes. First come, first serve. I think we have a new patient too...”

The phone rang. “BS Dental Care,” she said, rolling her eyes. My father had mentioned Dr. Seth’s first name—Bhavyam or Bhavyansh or Bhavin—that’s right, Bhavin. “Pamela speaking. How may I help you?” Her eyes locked on mine. “She’s here, perfectly on time.” I lowered my eyes. “That’s my plan. I’ve got it covered. See you soon.”

“That was the boss,” Pony said, hanging up.

“What time does he come in?”

“Usually at ten.”

“Oh.” I checked the appointment book again. “But the first patient...”

“A cleaning. The hygienist will take care of it. And there’s other doctors who help part-time. His wife’s a dentist, too, did you know that? Worked here for six months, then she got knocked up and stopped coming in. Can you imagine?”

“Uh...”

“Want to see the rest of this place?”

A wall separated the reception from the dental work area. Three dull turquoise chairs formed a line across one long room, separated by dividers, and at the end, shoved into a corner, was a small X-ray machine. Pony didn't know the names of any of the instruments, but she knew that Chair Number Three was preferred for longer operations, Chair Number One for younger patients, and Chair Number Two for cleanings. A door next to Chair Number One led to an office, a long room with Dr. Seth's desk and files on one end, and by the door, a small table for breaks and meals.

That day, I learned as much about Pony as I did about covering the front desk. She had three kids, two boys and a girl, and she was leaving for four weeks to meet her boyfriend's family in Phoenix. "Fingers crossed," she said, wiggling her ring finger. Her boyfriend was a plumber named Eric. She said he was the only half-decent man she'd ever known.

For the first part of the day, she gave me the filing to do and the appointment reminders and had me practice using the label machine, which was finicky and liked to skip letters. But when I was done with that, she wouldn't show me how to do the claim forms or answer any questions about the insurance companies or anything more complicated than a head-scratch. I didn't figure out why until I remembered the hints Dr. Seth had dropped during the interview, about keeping me around for more shifts in the future. "I'm going to school after," I assured her. "I won't even be in New Jersey. I'm just trying to save some money."

"You're a doll," Pony said, embarrassed and pleased. "I have three kids. You know how it is." I didn't, but she didn't care about that.

At lunch we ate burgers at the McDonald's across the street and then visited the urologist's office next door. She told me the plan as we were walking over. While she distracted the receptionist, I pocketed some pens and a deck of Post-it notes. Then we visited the pediatrician's office, where I met Dr. Govind and his lollipops. While he gave me a tour, Pony swiped a few folders and notepads. I was surprised that stealing was so easy.

We surveyed our loot back at the office. She must have noticed the look on my face. "Don't get on your high horse. You haven't tried getting Dr. Seth to order us some pens."

The day started at eight and ended at seven. After the dentists and patients left, Pony organized the magazines in the waiting area into stacks and set the chairs tight against the wall. She said that cleaning up at the end of a day was like putting down a period at the end of a sentence. A burly man three times her size—Eric, I supposed—knocked on the door. After Pony left, I put away the pens and receipts and patient files and at the last minute I decided to return to the front desk and calculate how much money I would be making at this job and if it was worth the trouble.

I stared at the small number, though I had already decided the number didn't matter. I thought, these days, only of New York, though any city would have satisfied. The train from Iselin to Penn Station was an hour, but Iselin had not benefited from the proximity. Here, every shop, restaurant, and house had the ragged, worn look of those who worked too hard for too little and knew only how to get by. The look of my parents, though I felt guilty thinking it. The most interesting ten dollars I could spend in Iselin was over dosas at Udupi Palace, whose owners my parents sometimes invited home for chai and biscuits. New York City sidewalks were older and dirtier and more broken than the sidewalks of Iselin because so many people had taken a chance on New York sidewalks. There was no taking chances in Iselin because there was nothing to take a chance on.

The front door jarred open, and I positioned the pen like a knife. But it was only a cleaning lady. A heavy-set, elderly woman who looked too gray to be pulling a bucket of water. "I'm sorry," I said, standing.

"You okay. Sit." Ignoring me, she continued toward the patient area. Her knees shook as she dipped the mop under the chairs. Feeling too much like I was eavesdropping, I entered Dr. Seth's office to gather my things. But then I thought it might be rude to leave so soon after her arrival.

"Would you like some tea?" I asked.

"No, I am working," she said.

I didn't want tea but made the tea because I had said I would, and a few minutes later, she joined me in the break room with a vacuum. She stopped me from throwing out the tea bag. "Can be used again," she said. "I will drink, not now, later." I wrapped it up in a paper towel and she slipped the tea bag inside a pocket.

“You go home. Too late for a pretty girl.”

“Thank you.” I picked up my purse. “See you tomorrow.” She throttled the vacuum and jabbed her finger at the carpet. “I do my job properly, you don’t see me.”



I wanted to work at Wegman’s or Shop-Rite or even the Dairy Queen, the places where my friends worked, most of them since the start of high school. But my father never gave permission, not even for the money. He refused to let me work anywhere that wasn’t behind a desk. My friends could afford to work at such places because their parents worked behind a desk, he said.

But my father had the wrong idea about BS Dental Care, and he had never met Dr. Seth. A short, balding man born without a chin, as if God knew that the man he grew up to be would be so dull and insignificant he’d have no need of one. He wore the same thing every day: pleated dress pants and an off-white button-up that he then covered up with a blue-green smock. The hygienists and I joked that Dr. Seth could be the keynote speaker at a conference about the uselessness of optimists. I hadn’t met his wife—the hygienists called her Mrs. Dr. Seth—but she was the reason his phone rang a minimum of eight times a day. Most of the time he picked up, but when he couldn’t, she called the front desk, and I had to explain to her the exact procedure he was in the middle of before she would let me go.

Every morning at eight-fifteen, Dr. Seth called the dental office from home, claiming he would arrive at ten, but he showed up fifteen to thirty minutes late, hurrying through the door in small, quick steps like there was a short rope tied between his ankles. After a week and a half, it became clear his tardiness was due to his wife’s concern over his son’s nonexistent illnesses. He cycled through patient after patient and ate his lunch standing at his office door because he booked patients every half hour, a policy he refused to change.

He didn’t care about the problems this caused. Pony never taught me how to deal with patients whose appointments were an hour late or how to tell a patient that the doctor wouldn’t be able to see them at all, and we would have to reschedule for a different day, when their appointment would likely be late again.

She never warned me about a patient barging in through the reception door and planting himself in a chair, refusing to leave until Dr. Seth had pulled out the tooth rotting through his gums.

Dr. Seth said the practice couldn't afford to turn patients away. After a week of pulling patient files, I discovered why. Folder after folder revealed notices of overdue payments—from a year before, two years before. And still, the doctor continued to see these patients.

When it was time for me to receive my first paycheck, Dr. Seth passed me an envelope stuffed with cash. There was no pay stub, no summary of deductions, only roughed-up twenty-dollar bills. I didn't care about the money the government lost. I had the evidence I needed to make the case to leave BS Dental and start applying for jobs elsewhere.

I had to wait days before I caught my father between shifts and presented the bills. He picked through the twenties one by one, as if they might carry a clue. He removed a twenty, which he handed to me, and closed the envelope, setting it aside to be deposited. "He must have his reasons," my father said.

"A lot of the patients pay cash, hundreds of dollars he pockets right in front of us, and he is always charging different rates for the same service. And some of the patients pay nothing at all. Something's not right." I described to him how few supplies the office had, how Pony cut corners, not mentioning my role.

My father lumbered to the kitchen. He had just returned from a night shift, and I made nothing of his slow movements, his limbs heavy from want of sleep. "Savita Auntie says he's a good man," he said. Savita Auntie lived in our building, a patient of Dr. Seth's. She was the one who had told my father the position was available. "He's Indian," she had said, by way of recommendation. "Not many dentists who are Indian around here."

"He's *nice*." Though I wasn't sure. "That's not what I mean."

My father downed a glass of water, then another. He left the glass in the sink and wiped his hands on the washcloth. "Always finish what you start, Smriti."



One day, Dr. Seth called me into his office. He was sitting behind his desk, a rare occurrence. His hands were folded in front of his cell phone, silent for once, as if he were about to pray. He asked me to find him a magazine file, or he asked his cell phone, since he refused to meet my gaze. “We don’t have one,” I said.

“Look properly,” he said, in a sharp tone that didn’t suit him. It gave him an air of deeper awareness that did not sit well with the bumbling, tardy, inefficient, useless man I supposed him to be. I searched the front desk, in the drawers and under the desk, and then the supply closet, which contained more dental supplies than office supplies. Why did he want a magazine file? He never used his office.

“I checked everywhere,” I told him, crossing my arms. “We don’t have any.”

“Fine,” he snapped, so loudly the patients could hear. “I’ll do your job when I am done with mine.” He left his phone and stormed to Chair Number Three. The patients in the waiting area glowered in my direction. All of them were annoyed at me, even though it was Dr. Seth who had arrived an hour late. Shaking, I stared at the appointment book, all the patients whose appointments I had to cancel because Dr. Seth had told me this morning he wouldn’t come in on Thursday because of “family appointments.”

The very handsome husband of a patient walked to the window. It was unfair, I decided, to be berated by good-looking people. I didn’t give him a chance to speak. “I know you’ve been waiting a while, but I can’t make things go any faster. One of our doctors canceled”—a lie—“and we are behind schedule.”

He smiled, revealing perfect teeth, his stubble more attractive in comparison. “That’s okay. I am wondering, do you have an empty box? A small one?”

“Yes.” In my confusion, it sounded more like a question. I found a box in the storage room and brought it to him.

“And a blade?” I remembered the patient who had forced his way to Chair Number One. But if this man was going to put the knife to anyone’s throat, it should be the doctor’s, so I gave him the blade we used for opening packages.

The man returned to his chair with blade and box. He set the box on his lap and began carving. I checked his wife’s file: Sunali Takkar. She was in for a root canal. The man returned to the front, holding what resembled an upright

magazine file, except it was made from cardboard. “My kid likes to draw on them,” he said. “Just keep the box taped, and it’ll last.”

I turned the box over and over, trying to understand it. It was the kind of thing my father would do—use a screwdriver to open up a machine, any machine, when it stopped working, and then use his wits to get it started again. The kind of thing he would do, anyway, before he started working twenty-hour days. I placed it under the desk, where it wouldn’t be damaged.



The Takkars were the last to leave, and because of the husband’s earlier help, I paid more attention to the couple’s conversation with Dr. Seth.

“Two more appointments,” Dr. Seth said to me. “One week apart.”

“And then we’ll be done?” Takkar said. His wife waited beside him, one cheek swollen.

“After the last session we’ll know.” Dr. Seth moved to leave, but Takkar stepped in his way.

“How much, total?”

“Comes to...” Dr. Seth rubbed his forehead, like a magician in the middle of a trick. “Five hundred.”

Takkar’s handsome forehead crumpled. Dr. Seth looked away, nodding to the beat of some ridiculous song. “No, not five hundred. I am getting it mixed up. Three hundred. And we accept in installments. You have a baby coming?”

Takkar’s wife bowed her head, embarrassed. “A baby boy.”

“How old is your other one?”

“Two. Walking on his own now. He can say a few words too.”

“Very good. I have a three-year-old.” Dr. Seth rapped the counter. “Two more appointments, and you are set. Smriti, set up their installments. Fifty today?” Takkar nodded. “Good.”

After they left, I brought Dr. Seth the cash and showed him the magazine file Takkar had crafted. “Smart man,” he said, setting it aside. He had already forgotten what he needed it for.



At the start of the third week at the dental office, I woke up to find my father curled in his bed in the shape of a claw opening reluctantly, murmuring in sleep about his deliveries. The room smelled of soiled clothing and the sweat of a cornered animal. When he coughed, brown phlegm dribbled from the corners of his mouth. Between our schedules, I hadn't seen him for a few days. "He was saying he is feeling down," my mother said. Her hands fluttered. "But just a cold."

I called the warehouse manager to tell him my father was going to miss his next shift.

"Will he be back tomorrow?" Rafael was shouting, his voice drowned by trucks and machinery. I carried the phone to my parents' bedroom. My mother was now rubbing mustard oil on my father's back, on his arms, the rounds of her hand the same rounds she made when she fell to her knees on the kitchen floor and scrubbed out dirt with a cloth and bucket. My father didn't wake up once.

"I don't know."

Rafael was quiet. "Okay, he's off today and tomorrow. But tell him I can't hold his routes past Friday."

Before leaving for work, I wiped the sweat off my father's brow, then kissed his forehead. "Feel better," I whispered, confident he would.



That day, I had a new plan for dealing with Dr. Seth. When he arrived, late of course, I greeted him with a "Good morning" and asked if I could make him coffee. It was easier than grunting about the four waiting patients. As for the patients, I spoke to them as if the delays and inefficiencies were part of the plan and to be expected. They were not annoyed. They had come prepared with newspapers and magazines and books. The mothers brought homework, worksheets, and textbooks, to be completed by their children in the waiting room. A woman with

a toddler asked if I had any crayons, and I handed her a pencil, along with paper for the child to draw on.

The day passed quickly and in a rush. I had no reason to worry about my father; my mother was with him. Around six o'clock, she called. "Smriti?"

"How are you?" I spoke cheerfully, using the same high tone I had with the patients. "How's Papa?"

"The doctors are taking him away," she said, "and they won't say anything. I am saying to them he is fine, but they are not understanding me..." A patient knocked on the reception window. I threw up an index finger, then closed the window.

"Where are you?" I asked, my voice dropping. She didn't hear me because she couldn't stop speaking. Dr. Seth appeared. I pointed at the phone.

She was rambling, something about his heartbeat, a local clinic, and paramedics. "They are asking questions, and I don't know what they are meaning." She was crying now.

"Are you in an ambulance? Where are you?" The chair beside me shifted, and Dr. Seth's familiar blue-green smock appeared in the periphery.

"No, no, I am at the hospital, I have been here one hour already. Now they are taking him away, they are saying ICU, ICU. I don't know what they are saying, they are wanting to know about medication, I am saying to them he is not taking any medication, he doesn't have even a fever, but they are not understanding."

The more frantic she became, the calmer I felt. There were leagues between each word I spoke. "Which hospital?" After a few tries, I finally learned the name.

I returned the phone and turned to Dr. Seth. He was leaning back, his hands steepled on his head. "It's my father."

"You need to go?"

"I have to." I glanced at the waiting room, crowded with patients.

He returned to the other side of the counter. "Then you must," he said, without meeting my eyes.

Ten minutes later, I was in a taxi, on my way to John F. Kennedy Medical Center.



The hospital parking lot was deserted, though it was full of cars, and I passed no one in the hallways. You'd think the cars had arrived on their own.

I found my mother in the waiting area outside the doors to the ICU. She was in the tunic she reserved strictly for house wear, clutching her purse. When she heard me call, she rose. "They gave me these papers." She held out a sheaf of forms.

"What did the doctor say?"

She shook her head. "I said to wait for you."

To enter the ICU, we had to pick up a phone and explain why we were here. A beep sounded and the doors swung open. The nurse's station was in front of the doors, and a nurse named Jill was in charge of our father. She wanted to know "the patient's medical history." I translated her questions to my mother, and I translated my mother's answers back. "How is he?" I asked. "What's the doctor saying?"

"The doctor is with your father. They are still working to stabilize him. We were waiting on his medical history. I'll get this to her."

"About this insurance form."

"Just fill it out and we'll take care of the rest."

"Is there a separate form if we don't have insurance?"

"Is that it then?" The nurse tapped a pen against her lips. "Is that why you didn't bring him in?"

"What?"

"The clinic your mother called. They told her to call the hospital. Why didn't she just bring him in?"

"We didn't know how sick he was. He didn't even have a fever. The doctor didn't say... what's wrong with him? Is he going to be here long?"

"His lungs are full of fluid and his organs are in shock. So yeah, he's going to be here a while. Now it's a waiting game, for the lab results to come in and tell us exactly what's going on. We'll call you when the doctor's in."

Around eleven, I woke to Jill shaking my shoulder gently. She told us the doctor had inserted a tube in my father's throat and hooked him up to an oxygen machine to help him breathe. The tube was emptying his lungs, but we were allowed to visit.

Dark-green fluid was percolating out of him in pearl-sized drops. His whole body was blanched, pasty like wet flour. Already, a spray of black and white hairs was spreading across his cheeks. A sedative dripped into his arm, keeping him asleep, and I wondered if he was dreaming under his twitching eyelids.

I found two styrofoam cups and filled them with cold water. I passed one to my mother. Tears rolled unevenly into her glass as she drank.



My mother and I took a taxi back to the apartment complex, to sleep and collect fresh clothes. There were no streetlights to guide the way, only the beams of the cab and some faintly glowing signs in shop windows. The buildings in the apartment complex jumbled together, indistinguishable. The taxi circled a few times before we finally found the one we lived in.

Upstairs, I scrubbed my face with water and soap. My skin was pink when I was done. My mother hadn't moved. She was still seated on the edge of the sofa, holding her head like it was a heavy weight. "I am not going to work tomorrow," I said.

She rapped her head against her hands. "He didn't say a word. Should I have—but I didn't know, I swear, I didn't know." She clenched her stomach. The sounds coming from her frightened me. All I wanted to do was cower or run. "Smriti, say something. Is it? Is it my fault?"

I answered too quickly. "I don't—I don't know, maybe. How would I know?"

The night ticked forward, and my mother didn't remove her face from her hands. I should have walked toward her, sat beside her, held her, but I kept my feet fastened to the floor. There was a part of me that didn't want to take back what I had said, a part of me that was greedy and ashamed.

She combed her fingers through her hair. "What would your father say?"

"About what?"

"You skipping work, making excuses."

"This is different. The doctors might—"

"It's no different. We will carry on." My mother was not stern by nature. On her, hardness was a costume, a comedy act.

“But what if you need my help?” She jerked up from the sofa.
“I am not a child,” she said. “I am the mother, not you.”



The next morning, my head pulsed from lack of sleep when I opened the practice. A gauze had slipped in between me and the rest of the world. I called Rafael as soon as I entered, before the first patient arrived.

“Sorry about your dad, miss, but I can’t hold his routes. If I could I would, I’m telling you. Say what, have him call when he’s better. I’ll get him something.” He didn’t say good-bye before hanging up, just “sorry” once, then a beat later, “sorry” again. My father had said Rafael was a good man.

Dr. Seth arrived fifteen minutes late, rushing in small steps toward his office to don his smock. “All right?” he called, like he was asking about my bus ride.

“Yes,” I muttered after a while. He turned away. It was too late to say anything else. I called in the first patient and directed her to Chair Number Two. The day passed in a fog, all the faces I encountered blurring, all the conversations I had like I wasn’t making them, like I was someone else. At seven, after Dr. Seth left, I collected my things, not bothering to clean up, no time for Pony’s satisfaction of placing periods at the ends of sentences, and I called a taxi to take me to the hospital, to doze while my father breathed wheezily from a tube, startling awake every few minutes when the machines monitoring him beeped to life.



It took three days for the lab results to come in. The doctor said my father had developed bacterial pneumonia, a severe case. “He should have come in as soon as the symptoms began,” she said. “He’s lucky he got here when he did.” She said his body had tried to fight the illness but became “septic.” That confused me, conjured images of sewers, of my father’s body poisoned by putrefaction. I thought of the rot the tubes were pulling out of his lungs and gagged.

“What does it mean?” my mother asked me. “He is okay?”

“The doctor said she knows now what medicine to treat him with.”

“That is good? He will get better?”

I nodded, though I wasn’t sure. The doctor had given no such assurances. She had been careful to say they had identified the bacteria and knew how to treat it, but she had made no promises about his recovery or the quality of his condition. When I got home, I looked up septic shock. It had nothing to do with sewers, just toxins that shut down organs, blocked the passage of oxygen to the brain. If not caught quickly enough, dire.



The hospital cafeteria overlooked the parking lot. We had formed a habit of eating our dinners in a corner, where I watched the setting sun glare off the hoods of cars, while my mother prayed. She and I had both abandoned our bowls of soup.

Upstairs, the nurses were emptying my father’s throat. I tried not to think about it, but that only made me think about it more. The long tube scratching the walls of his chest, his esophagus and his throat raw as the nurses yanked it out.

An hour later, we rode the elevator back to the fourth floor, to the ICU. The room was curtained. A woman in a glittery blouse was standing outside.

“Are you Mr. Kumar’s family?” We nodded. “I am the social worker. Could we talk?”

The woman introduced herself as Stefanie Timmins. She directed everything she said to my mother, and my mother leaned in, as if getting closer would help her understand. “I need to discuss next steps. The doctors have just told me Mr. Kumar is no longer intubated—”

“How is he?” I asked. “Is he awake?”

“You haven’t seen him yet?”

“We were just about to—”

“This will just take a few minutes. Before we release Mr. Kumar, we need to know his aftercare situation.”

“What do you mean? We are his family. We are going to take care of him.”

Ms. Timmins nodded. “He was in your care when he was admitted?”

“Me and my mother.”

Ms. Timmins flicked a glance at my mother. “Does your mother speak English?”

“She understands.”

“I am going to need you to translate to her what I am saying.”

“I have been translating.”

She raised up her hands. “I understand this is very stressful. I have a son your age, and this can’t be easy on you. I am just trying to help.” She rustled her papers.

“He is coming off the sedatives now, and we’ll have the PT come in tomorrow morning to do an evaluation.”

“The PT?”

“The physiotherapist.”

“Why does he need a physiotherapist?”

Ms. Timmins cleared her throat. “Your father has been in a hospital bed for over a week. He is going to need rehabilitation to return to full health.”

“But he’ll return to full health?”

“The hospital will provide the best possible care. We have some questions about the living situation. Do you live in a house?”

“An apartment.”

“Is there an elevator?”

“Stairs.”

“That’s going to be a problem. In his condition, he may not be able to handle stairs for some time. We may recommend him for inpatient care in that case...”

My mother shook my arm. “What is it? What is she saying?”

“Just wait,” I told her. “What does inpatient care mean?”

“He’ll have to be admitted to a clinic to work with a skilled nurse.”

“He can’t come home?”

“It’s not that we aren’t letting him come home, Miss Kumar. Your home isn’t accessible.”

“But if we had an elevator, you’d let him come home.”

“Yes, and also a home that is accessible, wheelchair-friendly.”

“What do you mean? Is he going to be in a wheelchair?”

“Possibly. Temporarily. There’s no way to know how long. This all depends on his recovery. My job is to make sure you are prepared for all possibilities. I am here to help with the patient’s transition back to normal life.”

“Inpatient care.”

Ms. Timmins breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s right.”

After Ms. Timmins left, my mother and I returned to the hospital room. My father’s oxygen mask was gone, replaced by two small tubes below his nostrils, whistling whenever he exhaled. One of the machines behind the bed was missing.

We stood on either side of him. His eyes were closed, but he shifted restlessly, his body awake to the dry, cool air of the hospital, the uncomfortable smell of things that were scrubbed too clean.

My mother rested her hand on his. His fingers curled, about to close around hers, but they stalled halfway, stuck in a half-curved position. He opened his eyes. They blinked heavily at nothing, then closed again.



On my last day at BS Dental Care, after the final patient left, I wrote a short report for Pony, longhand on a yellow notepad. I told her about the major insurance claims we were waiting on, the papers a patient hadn’t brought in, the installment plans that required follow-up. When I finished, I visited the restroom. The red dot on the phone was blinking when I returned. I checked the voice mail.

“Hello, Smriti, this is Pony. My flight for tomorrow was canceled! Can you believe it? These fuckers. And they won’t get us on another one until the next day, maybe longer. What do they care about real people’s lives? I’m going to be a day late, maybe even two. You can cover me, right? Let Dr. Seth know for me. You’re a doll!”

I returned the phone slowly, the idea forming in my mind, circling around the first bill from the physiotherapist. My heart thudded when I heard my name.

I entered Dr. Seth’s office. “Did you call me, Dr. Seth?”

I thought he would ask me about the phone call, who it was. But he just

handed me my envelope, satisfyingly bulky. I held it, my heart slowing. It was a voice mail, and he would never know.

“Dr. Seth, I wanted to say, if you still need me to cover the front desk, if Pony can’t do it...”

“What do you mean?”

“Uh, you said, about wanting me to work shifts in the future.”

“I remember. But you told me you couldn’t.”

I flexed the envelope, picturing the bills rippling inside. I thought of Pony and her three kids. “I am available, any day you want.”

He squinted through his glasses. “What about New York?”

“I’ve decided to wait a year or two. Get a bit more experience first.” Replenish the bank account. Start over.

Dr. Seth nodded, slowly. “That’s good news for me. I’ll call you when we need you.”

“Thanks, Dr. Seth.” I returned to the front desk. My breath stalled as I rechecked the voice mail. I made myself listen to the message. I couldn’t go through with it if I didn’t listen to it all the way to the end. Then I pressed “7” to delete.



The following morning, I lay in bed, dressed for work. I closed my eyes when the phone rang at eight forty-five. My mother picked it up, her voice echoing toward me. She appeared at the door. She was dressed for outside, preparing for a visit to the inpatient clinic, to my father. “It’s Dr. Seth,” she said. “He wants to know if you can work today.”

I took the phone and listened to him explain. “No one’s picking up at the practice. I’ve tried calling for half an hour now.”

“Pony’s not there?”

“She isn’t. Maybe she decided to stay in Arizona. You’d think she’d have the decency to... we’ve got patients waiting.”

“She and Eric were really close,” I said.

“Who’s Eric?”

“Her boyfriend.”

He paused. “She was a good receptionist, but a bit too friendly, I always felt.”

Oh, Pony. “I don’t... I don’t know about that, Dr. Seth. I better leave, though, if I want to get there on time.”

My mother was watching from the kitchen. “You’ve got work today?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Maybe for longer, too.”

“That’s good. That will help.”



The only permanent member of BS Dental Care was Dr. Seth. Everyone else was temporary, even the patients, who, as soon as they acquired steady incomes and jobs with insurance, upgraded to dentists in townships with names like Freehold. BS Dental Care was a terminal, and as its secretary, I met many people searching for an exit at my reception window.

People like Indu and Priya, hygienists and sisters who had agreed as teenagers that dentistry was the most secure form of living. Once they saved enough, they planned to start a joint practice specializing in orthodontics. Indu was the taller of the two at six feet, and the one who planned to become the orthodontist. Priya, two inches shorter, though she was older, wanted to remain a hygienist and handle the finances. They had thick, tree-like bodies. They should have been models. Their favorite actress was Tabu, one of the tallest actresses in Bollywood. When there was the rare lull between patients, they would come by the reception area and sing me her most famous song in twin voices.

“Mujhe rang de... Mujhe rang de... rang de... rang de...”

Two years I knew them. They had such plans. Then they married within six months of each other, left the practice, and I never heard from them again.

Or Sanjay, who was a bachelor and had completed two degrees in Delhi before moving to New Jersey in his middle age. Because his degree in dentistry was not valid in this country, he was doing a third, but Dr. Seth gave him patients anyway, in exchange for a higher chair fee. His mother, a stooped, widowed woman who walked like a pigeon, rode the bus for an hour to bring him lunch. They retreated

into the break room and closed the door, which no one else did. One day, through a crack of the door, I saw her opening the clips of the tiffin and pulling out bowls of dahl, raita, and pickle. She broke off pieces of bread and dipped them in the dahl and then fed him each piece. He held her hand, before taking a bite, as if he might swallow her fingers by mistake.

And Pony. I heard that she and Eric married and moved to Phoenix. That's what I prefer to believe. When she returned that morning, explaining tearfully the message she had left, the years she had worked here, the income she so desperately couldn't afford to lose, Dr. Seth must have had some inkling. I was too young then to know how to hide what I didn't want the world to know. Something of my guilt must have shown on my face, drawn out like worms after a rainfall, because I saw its recognition so clearly reflected in Pony's face before she slammed the office door. And yet Dr. Seth never said a word. He kept me on, until I left him too.

Mental Health Day

I refuse to put on my work clothes. Molly doesn't put in a tampon. Little Brother refuses to wear his harness. The Bears refuse to put on their shoulder pads. David won't put on his work clothes. Benji refuses to unfold his Liverpool jersey. My dad doesn't put on his lab coat. My senator rejects his flag lapel pin. Emma declines to put on her necklace. My therapist refuses to put on his running shorts. Sufjan Stevens refuses to put on a trucker hat. My landlord refuses to put on his work clothes. The Bears don't lace up their cleats. Kayla refuses to squeeze into her Doc Martens. Ben doesn't polish his glasses. My grandmother runs out of nicotine patches. John Ashbery won't wind his wristwatch. My step mom refuses to apply eyeliner. Gray doesn't open his underwear drawer. My handyman refuses to put a pencil behind his ear. Beth and Carly refuse to put on their wedding bands. My boss doesn't put on his tie. The Bears refuse to put on their helmets. My coworkers don't put on their work clothes. The shopping malls are closed. The laundromats are empty. Everyone is naked except this one little kid who is a black belt in karate.

Even the Flowers

Even the garden stands
gaping. Queen Anne's lace,
pink lady slippers, Forget-Me-Nots—
the fat heads of sunflowers
are open-mouthed & supplicated to the morning.

Wanting to munch them pedicel
to papery petal,
to chop up their color
like a trash disposal in the belly,
I smell bumble bees sleeping inside.

Maybe, once—me—a bee born,
life-to-life, from the swathed bulb
of a bluebell. I have heard
this thorax move & shake
all buggy, and

flowers like my mother started off buried, and
even now the sympathy orchids
are dying in the TV room.

The Other Woman

When he wandered from the room
I imagined he'd been kidnapped.

What kind of ransom would I rally
for his rescue? Kidnapped,

or on the phone with his girlfriend.
How would I grieve? I watched TV

until he slouched back into the couch,
where we stared at a building

exploding. At some point he said
I always thought we'd end up together,

the screen's blue light almost pretty,
almost like clouds tatting temporary

shadows across his face in a park, where maybe
we were staging a picnic, and not the glare

of the skyscraper shrugging into rubble.
It was such a bizarre thing to say.

Another White Night

This city's a swamp. Eyes threaded red,
I droop. He damps in sleep
while I flip and roll, try to writhe
down to a sluggish pulse.
The upstairs neighbor
paces a heavy tread
the length of her apartment,
like a lunatic chained to an asylum wall.
His face sunk in the mattress
like he'd been shot in the back of the head.

Self Portrait with Praying Mantis and Rain

—After Henri Cole

In the wet heat of June, the flies are declaring triumph.

Mulberries have fallen all over the porch and are turning quickly
into mush with a bright, sour scent. Whatever the praying mantis wants,
whatever vision she is conjuring from her place of stillness on the railing,

I want to lie down tonight and surrender to it. (I loved you, I'm sorry,
is how I expect it will go, but who knows now that her wings have snapped open
and she has flown in a clean arc into the first wave of blue rain.)

The birds have started to shriek and the trees to sway in wide circles,
all their leaves raised. What I mean to say, whatever else
in those years was true, in Arkansas, in the wet heat
(red wings, green wings), as much as I did anything, I dreamt of you.

Late in the Evening¹

*“puerto rico prende sus luciérnagas
para aparecer:
luz ansiosa en el mapamundi.”*

//

*“puerto rico turns on its fireflies
in order to appear:
an anxious light on the world map.”*

—Raquel Salas Rivera

from the eastern tip of Dominicana,
they say you can see Puerto Rico
flutter,

lone firefly in the dark.
late in the evening, across 237 miles of sea,
and then some more, this flicker, wavering

candle wick, floating
ceremony of slow death
is too often sole reminder of our birth-

mark on this planet—a wave
to the world, satellites above, incalculable immensity
of space. whereas in any other instance, cartography,

with its fat thumb, would smear and stir us
into the waters. but late in the evenings,
we are picture-framed firework

¹ September 21, 2016; September 20, 2017; April 18, 2018—three dates in which Puerto Rico suffered an island-wide power outage.

of imported fossil fuel,
hanging from the dark canvas
of earth. late one evening,

from the eastern tip of Dominicana,
they say they saw a swat, a splash,
a sputter—a hand coming down

like a sinking ship, fingers wet
and eager to meet at the flame.
and they wondered about mouths.

who had the bigger one, the night sky
or the ocean. the slicker throat, smoother
swallow—to have gobbled up light

in a single gulp, not even a shadow
of island remaining. no one else wondered
about the stretch of bright that sunk

like a pebble. bulbs are easily replaced,
a blown fuse tossed—why else are waters
as deep as they are if not to bury bones

and the broken, submerge in forget
the forgotten. only those on the eastern tip
of Dominicana lit candles,

late in the evening, set them afloat,
and released jars of restless fireflies
into the night.

A hurricane has come and gone. What do we tell our children now?²

Tell them about the waters. The ones they wade in,
taste on their lips. Tell them not to fear the waves that birthed
and baptized them. Drowning is of no concern
as long as the island stays afloat. That heat grows like a fetus,
and come June, another swell will miscarry
into the wind. Tell them of Guabancex. A goddess whose fury
destroys everything. *Juracán* the storm she spawns,
the word hurricane a bastardized translation—drifts from one mouth
to another. Tell them *hurricane* lies arid
and unmoving on the tongue—in bite-sized headlines, quick
conscientious exchanges on the way to work.
Hurricane sounds like “hurry, cane” and sugar boils in the bile
and rises like blood in the throat. Tell them
not to speak this word. Say, *Juracán*. Let it thrash your mouth open,
shriek it like a prayer, sing it like a *son*.
Our bodies are the potholed roads of chaos. Sweat tendrils

² The title of this poem was borrowed from the following article, “Coping with Post-Hurricane Psychologically: A Parent’s Perspective”, by Keiya George, published in *VI Life and Style Magazine*.

down our spine. It's the way we dance,
the whirl in our walk. The way our bellies spiral into hunger,
how we coil and curl—thrust forward,
in love-making, how we breathe up storms.

Fet i amagar

No sé quant de temps duc amagada
a l'ull cec de l'escala. S'han cobert
les hores d'un tel irisat i trist
com el plat d'escudella que m'esperava
a taula. L'àvia ha deixat de cridar-me
i tots comencen a sopar sense mi.
Algunes nits, les culleres s'aturen
un instant en l'aire, com si haguessin
perdit un record que els fos necessari,
però aviat reprenen el moviment
i sol·lícites escampen
calidesa i oblit
a parts iguals.

Com un cetaci cansat de viure,
també l'escala tancarà un dia
l'immens ull blavós
i ja no seré a temps
d'entrar al menjador
rient
i cridant
que només era un joc.

Hide-and-Seek

I don't know how many times I have hidden
in the blind eye of the staircase, hours
covered over with iridescent, sad skin
like the plate of stew waiting for me
at the table. Grandma has stopped calling me
and everyone has started eating without me.
On some nights, the spoons stop
for a moment mid-air, as though
losing track of some essential memory,
but soon they resume their movement,
seeking to spread
warmth and forgetfulness
in equal measure.

Like a cetacean tired of living,
the staircase too will one day close
its immense blue eye
and there will no longer be time
to enter the dining room
laughing
and shouting
it was only a game.

Fury Water Adventures

On the dolphin-watch tour boat,
I sense motion sickness. The wind,
stubborn as toddler tantrums reminds
I've never held an animal bigger than me
close to my chest. Except grief.

Look, how the keel of any poem
when you bring an absent mother into it
is thrown off balance. Like her sugar. When low,
she asked for boondi laddoos. First, pinching
the sliver of almond garnish lightly as if testing

the waters of gluttony, then devouring the whole
sphere in one bite. Sputtering in proverb: the power
of clarified butter is bigger than any mother or father.
Jo kare ghee, to na kare ma aein peey.

Forgive my sweet tooth for cradling the dead.
Investigating bow to stern, I've emptied my weak gut
and sucked on hard boiled sugar that has colored
and depressed my tongue. I am mistaking

buoys and gulls for a two stomached wonder.
Imagining a fin in the faraway blue.
When the optimistic captain says, look for the end,
the fluke, I think he means a stroke of luck.

**“HOUSTON HAS THREE SEASONS.
JULY, THEN AUGUST, FOLLOWED BY
SUMMER.”**

-Stan Musial

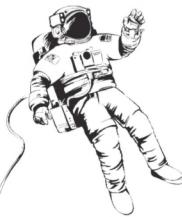
Returned to God

The delivery-room nurse pressed the white disk against my bare belly to feel for my baby's heart rate, and I could tell by the pale, silent look on her face as she reached for the phone that my son's pulse had plummeted. Nurses and interns crowded into the room, followed by the doctor, head crowned with a puff of slicked-back gray hair, frame stiff and heavy like a tree trunk. *How's that epidural holding up?* he asked. I said, *Okay, I think?* The doctor lifted the scissors. *We need to get him out quickly.* A moment later blood splattered his white coat, his arms bright red and green up to the elbows. The nurse demanded that I push, my husband yelled, *Push, push*, and I pushed. *Push harder*, everyone yelled, *Faster*. Black dots crept into the corners of my eyes, a hand slapped an oxygen mask on my face, *Push again, he's almost here* and then there he was—slathered in green and grime, the fishing line of umbilical cord tangled around his neck, and he breathed the first breath I did not breathe for him. He looked like a chunk of lava rock exploded from a volcano, soaked in primordial goo and ash. He already knew to curl toward my breast when I held him in my arms, his mouth puckering along my skin. When I closed my eyes, I imagined him as a dark bird, flying over the horizon of my ruined body.

At home, I lay Hugo in his cradle and lowered my body into the bath, like an old ship with rotted wood, smelling of dried blood and sweet milk and sour-salt urine. But I could not tolerate the air between us and returned to him, still dripping. I woke up in the night slathered in sweat, panicked, searching for my son in the sheets. *I lost my baby, I need my baby, my heart.* I imagined he was an organ I had lost.



The work of women is the work of fastening. Of placing a button on a blouse, of placing a Band-Aid over a skinned knee, of placing a hand over a warm forehead, of placing a spoon in an open hand, of placing a child in a lap.

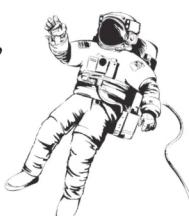


Women's work is the stitch that embroiders matter with spirit. All this we know, or are told; women are expected to sew together the seams of the world. The other reality of women's work remains unspoken: The unfastening, the tearing of flesh from flesh, splitting of matter from matter, that is bearing a child. The work of women is also the work of letting go.

Hugo cried for the first four months of his life. Some nights he was just a scream covered in skin. I felt like an old, ragged tent in a sandstorm—nothing more than a thin sheet, flapping and torn, between him and all that sand. I was convinced that I had failed as a mother: failed to offer my son protection from pain. I asked my husband, *What is the point of giving life to a child who will only suffer?*

I took Hugo to doctor's appointment after doctor's appointment, to specialists who identified nothing wrong with him. I rocked him as I sat in waiting room seats beside crippled children, beside children whose mouths could barely move to form speech, their words flattened like smashed spoons. I thought, *Suffering has no end*, and I wondered if joy has no end, too. My mother watched Hugo for an hour one afternoon and urged me to go to the gym, but as I lugged my aching body onto the treadmill, a child flashed across the TV news—a baby with tubes in her nose and throat, tucked in crisp white hospital bed—and I felt a sharp, deep pain, a throbbing from the place where Hugo's diamond edge cut me when he entered the world, and I needed to go home.

I rocked Hugo hour after hour, his soft egg head in my palm, held my thumb against the spot where his skull opened to the world, through which I could feel his heartbeat. I felt his breath against my palm, I stroked his soft hair. On his trembling head, my hand looked like weathered stone. Hugo's perfect newness had aged me; I felt distinctly that my bones would be reshaped, reused for another purpose. His hair was dark brown, his right ear pointy like an elf's. When Hugo nursed at night, in the brief periods of quiet between hours of screaming, I whispered to him of the birds and cliffs and waves in Big Sur, of the smell of pine in the Sandia mountains above Albuquerque, of stone bridges and quiet alleyways in Rome pooled with light, of finding a conch shell on a beach in Sierra Leone and lifting it to my ear. I wondered if he would one day see the sun set on the Sandia mountains, how they glow a luminous pink before the darkness. I wrote letters to him in my head. Most



I never wrote down. He sucked quietly in my arms, wetly swallowing milk as the raccoons tip-toed along the fence, their bodies rippling shadows.

When Hugo was a month old, we took him to the Rothko Chapel. I wrapped him in a sling, his bird-like body sweaty and trembling against mine as we crossed a park heaving with wet summer air to the Chapel doors. I walked in circles around the circular coffin of stone-black paintings, those towering doorways of Death, as he slept against my body, cradled against my breast. *You just came from this, from the great dark*, I whispered in his ear.

Earth became water. I rocked Hugo until the arches of my feet ached, the muscles in my legs twitched and spasmed. When guests held him, I still swayed, rocking from foot to foot. Hugo spoke to us, his voice not yet etched into words, just a river of sounds. I sang. Years before, my husband Dave had told me, *I think singing is the only thing you're really bad at*, which he meant as a purely factual observation, but after Hugo was born I learned to sing. My wind pipe had been corroded by rust, but I sang to Hugo anyway through my dry, rattily throat. I sang *Everything's gonna be alright* and *Hey, Jude*, and *I look at clouds from both sides now*. Each night his father and I sang, *It is a wonderful world*. We sang, *I hear Hugo cry, I watch him grow, he'll learn much more, than I'll ever know*, night after night, and the rust flaked away, and there was my voice.

Hugo's body was jiggly and soft, almost no bones, and he returned to my breast again and again and refused to leave, finding refuge, perhaps, in the body that was once his. In the afternoons, I tried to make Hugo nap by laying beside him in bed. It worked; he slept beside me for hours, nuzzled against my body, his fingers folding and unfolding like petals, his thumb resting between his first and second fingers. My body was large beside his, like a mountain. My breaths took twice as long as his. His body was long like water. I had nowhere to go and we had nowhere to be but with each other.

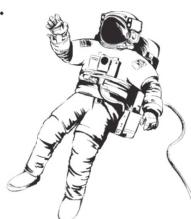
As Hugo twitched in his sleep beside me, I wrote: *Whenever I feel tired or bored or worn out, whenever I miss my prior life, I remember that this, too, is a moment I will miss. It is already gone, cannot be held. Soon, one day, you will not be napping beside me in bed, or poking your head over my shoulder, using my body as the pedestal from which you gaze at the world. One day you will be free. I will always love you across the space*



that freedom gives us, and maybe once in a while I will remember the weight of your little head against my shoulder.

When Hugo turned four months old, he stopped crying. His eyes had turned blue, no longer the desolate, arctic gray of when he was born. He swiveled in my arms, twirling and diving like a dolphin. Only a few weeks before he did not know his hands and toes were his own; now he grabbed my nose, my neck, pushed away the bottle he didn't want. In the evenings we walked with Hugo in our Houston neighborhood, the sky lit pearl in the late summer. He sat in the cloth carrier on his dad's chest, his dad's palm against his forehead to support his neck, and gazed out at the breezy street, skin sticky with sweat, eyes big and joyful like a prince at the prow of a ship. We circled the park, the thick air parting around us like reeds, as boys and girls improvised a five-person soccer game in the fading light. I pulled down the tree branches to show Hugo the purple flowers, placed waxy Magnolia leaves in his hand.

Hugo played with the ice on the table, scraped it, tried to catch the ice between his fingers, but it slipped and bounced and disappeared. He didn't know that ice lives in mountain crevices, that ice scrapes entire valleys with its scalpel, that ice once covered much of our continent, that as a girl I skated across a frozen lake and saw a fish captured in the ice, eye open to the sky like a quiet moon. In the afternoons I sat in my son's bedroom, rocking him to sleep. I nursed him and he reached up his hand to place it against my teeth. A beam of light flickered through a windowpane crowded with pollen. In the evenings, I gave him a bath, holding up his slippery-soapy waste. He giggled and splashed. He was fascinated by the water from the spout, how it moved like a ribbon and yet when he closed his hand, he broke right through it.



In my letters to Hugo, I often wrote to him about my grandmother: of holding her hand as we walked along the beaches of Los Angeles, searching for shells; of

the nights we slept on her sailboat with the ocean rocking us to sleep; of how she once instructed me in how to sculpt stone. *Don't impose your own shape on the stone*, she warned. *Feel the rock for what it contains*.

That my grandmother appeared at the end of my pen surprised me. My grandmother was someone who, I had long been convinced, had very little to do with my life. My main posture to my grandmother was one of willed forgetting. Or perhaps anger. Before my father died, he called my grandmother and told her he felt despair. *Take a walk*, my grandmother responded. He killed himself a few days later. I was thirteen when my father died, and though I lived twenty miles from my grandmother's house, I rarely visited her in my teenage years. I thought her words to my father were emblematic of her failure as a mother, and as a person, emblematic of who she was: a woman incapable of facing darkness. To tell a suicidal person to *take a walk* was to refuse to acknowledge his suffering, I thought; was to say, *I don't want to see your pain*.

I did not see my grandmother in the last decade of her life, after her descent into dementia. After her funeral, her living children and grandchildren entered her house. I had stepped into a capsule, back into a childhood I felt I shouldn't return to because it was gone: the egg-white cracker jacks tin with the smiling boy in blue; a finger run along the inside rim still uncovered a sticky ribbon of crumbs. The window that squeaked when my grandma cracked it open, each night, to feel the breeze on her face. The garage sink where I stood on a stool to wash my hands, fury with sawdust, after hours in grandpa's wood shop. The telephone with the cord dangling on the kitchen wall, waiting for the grandchildren to call.

We went about the work of disassembling my grandmother's life, dividing her possessions between us. Among possessions unearthed: a silver bracelet my father made in high school shop class, on which he imprinted the words, *To Mom, Love John*.



Prompted by the letters I wrote to Hugo about my grandmother, I dug up a handful of photographs in my closet: photographs of the statue my grandmother had sculpted for my father after he died. My grandmother had placed the statue



next to my father's grave at the old Spanish mission, a white-washed building that rose like a sail above the smoggy valley, a narrow canyon of light-dappled chapel that smelled of wet rock. There is a photograph of my grandmother standing in the nave, between worn walls painted with rusty lines by the Indians who once lived nearby. The lit red candles are just blurs, her hair a silvery bulb, and she stares at a crucifix that has almost disappeared in a pool of light.

In another photograph, my grandmother kneels in the grass of the cemetery that adjoined the mission, a quiet place except for the buzz of freeway traffic, with pillars of palm trees that scraped the bare California sky and young saplings recently planted among the fresh gravestones. She wears soft blue jeans, a pink turtle neck, pick socks, and tennis shoes. Her glasses are big, square bifocals, tinted a tea-color. Her left hand hangs by her knee, her skin so transparent that the white of her knuckles glows. Her body is miniature, as if created for a smaller, simpler world, but she throws a long shadow. Beside her is the statue.

The bottom half is just raw rock, like the ocean in a storm. Jesus's body rises from the choppy waters, his torso smooth and broad and flat. He has no hands. He has a beard, a softly-sculpted line of mouth, and it looks as though a tear is falling from one eye. Jesus wears a crown of thorns made from wire, and a wooden cross is buried in the stone behind him. His arms are fastened to the sides of his body, not draped along the cross. Many Jesuses look like so much coiled silk, gazing skyward, already shivering with the breath of God's spirit. If the crucifix is a vision of ultimate pain, it is also a premonition of transcendence, an image of suffering that contains deliverance from suffering. But the empty sockets of the eyes of my grandmother's Jesus stare forward, not to the Heavens, for the sculpture is a tribute not to those who are nearly risen—who are already beyond the garden of Gethsemane, who, even as the nails tear into the flesh of their wrists and the sweat and blood dribbles down their necks, look up and glimpse the Creator's face—but to those who are left behind. A tribute to my father, who felt there was no hope but extinction, whose suicide, in the view of Catholic doctrine, was a mortal sin that may have forever severed him from the Savior's grace.

What is a mother if not a maker of homes? My grandmother fashioned for Jesus an arc of metal to protect him from the wind and the rain—a shelter, for



the stone, that she had failed to make for her living son. In the photograph, her hand rests on the metal. At the bottom of the statue, she placed a plaque: *In loving memory of John Marcus Butler, a gift from God, 11-14-46, returned to God, 8-24-97, with love, Mom.*

Holding the photographs between my hands, I felt a softening in my body. There are worse things to tell a suicidal person than *go for a walk*, I reflected, for there may be little solace for despair beyond going outside. One night, when my son hyperventilated with tears, I carried him out over the moonlit grass, the air wet with humidity and sparking with the chirps of cicadas, and pointed to the moon and said *moon*. Hugo gazed up, took a deep, rattling breath, and pointed.

And now that I was a mother, I felt I knew what my grandmother meant when she said, to her suicidal son, *take a walk*. She meant, *I love you. The world is a wonderful place. It is worth staying in.*



As a teenager, if I thought about my grandmother's statue at all, it was to dismiss it: an image of the Christ who would not accept me, a non-Catholic, to communion; a gesture of false repair. In the way of teenagers—all teenagers, really, but especially one encased in a grief she could not feel—I decided that my grandmother could not understand me. It did not occur to me that hers was a pain I could not see, because it would require that I feel my own.

I don't know if the statue still sits in the cemetery, still exists in the world at all, because I have not visited my father's grave in twenty years. But the statue is not something that will last. The statue is women's work. Women's work has no currency. It is not generally considered the great work of civilization. My grandmother's is not a statue a curator would choose to put in a museum, except perhaps a thousand years from now, as a relic of how ordinary people lived. It does not call attention to itself, would not be labeled an artistic achievement. It is something else: a private conversation between mother and son. Words of love and protection, spoken when protection was impossible—when the gesture of protection was all she had left. It is the work of women who make life, cracking open their own bodies, and then let it go.





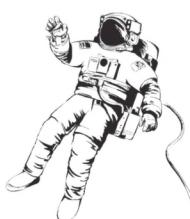
My son turned a year old. He had eight teeth, silvery-blue eyes, feathery hair caked in dried banana and streaks of oatmeal, and a smile wide enough to swallow the world. He delighted in the heaviness of his footsteps. Afternoon after afternoon we traced circles around the dining table, puttering across the sun-dappled kitchen floor to the window. He touched the glass with his fingertip, gazed at the tree with peeling red bark and shock of purple blossoms, and gurgled *taaa*.

One morning, I walked him to the park in the red running stroller. When we arrived I strapped his brown sandals to his feet with Velcro, saying *This is your foot, let's put your shoe on*. I parked the stroller under the oak tree and lifted him up. He was heavy now, and so solid, so real—as a baby he was the littlest trembling leaf, now his body repelled mine.

He giggled as I placed his feet on the woodchips and wriggled from my arms and began walking bow-legged, his left foot splayed out. We heard the grumble of cars on the distant freeway going to work, the air soft and heavy like a grandmother's hand, as it always is in summer, the weight of air: Houston has taught me many things over the years, among them than the spaces between us are filled with matter. My son clobbered over the woodchips, picked up the big ones thick as cockroaches; he liked feeling them in his hands. Perhaps in the first exhilaration of walking, of running, it is comforting to hold on to a piece of the Earth. He squealed and ran to the plastic blue swing and pushed it and laughed like all the beautiful things in the Earth splitting open and blooming at once.

Watching my son, I felt afraid. I protected him all the time—from outlets, from rocks that he seemed to think were candy, from candy that would rot his teeth, from the burn of the sun. But against the things that could most harm my boy—a bullet, a malignant cell, a speeding car, a long night of despair—I was powerless. They never warn us of this, that our joy will also be a form of grief.

And yet that morning, as my son chucked chunks of woodchips onto the plastic slide, I recalled the words my grandmother inscribed on my father's statue: *A gift from God, returned to God*. In that moment, I felt my grandmother had spoken to me, told me something of what it is to be a mother, and what it is to have a son.



To bear a child is not just to birth him, but to bear the wound of love he leaves behind. My grandmother whispered in my ear: *The child is a gift. You let him go.*



To bear a child is to journey to the edge of annihilation. In my dreams, my child, my dark bird, flies over red desert mountains and into a dim evening sky. His wings, a thin “v” of charcoal, blur into clouds dusty with dusk as he glides beyond the edge of all I can see, beyond the edge of all I know.

In my life, I have carried my share of sadness. I have known a little of all the darkness that vast sky can hold. To let him fly into it, alone, seems impossible. And yet isn’t this my task, as his mother? To nurture one tiny, breathing fragment of the universe, to love him more than anything I will ever know, and then to release him. To return him. To let the journey be his own.



the tears of the world are a constant quantity

—& I went each day to the little store flamed out & no longer furious selling garbage to the unhoused, I spat & spat in all directions, I ate the cheapest bread I could find, I wrote nothing read nothing except emails about health inspections, the key was badly cut, the piercing room unsanitary, the boss sold the couch so we wouldn't sit down then realized he was the only one who sat down to call home to a home that was gone now so he usually said Jordan instead, neon tinnitus, at the back the men heated coals on a hot-plate, shhh the grownups are speaking & we switched the station when the public health ads came on, I sometimes gave away crack-pipes for free, sad how I am always sad now, the store with nubby carpet its cheap never cheap enough, the boxes arriving like Christmas, an old man came in crying because someone at the shelter stole his leather jacket, I'm asking you how do I live with this, brass-toned, tasted like blood, I carried it laced through my fist—

Fremont Hospital

—do you think in the real world anyone's gonna save me an orange? she said, & she kept the note I wrote her she worried about missing her shift she snored like an infant wailing a fever, I don't wanna tape my drawing on the wall that's too mental hospital, don't like to eat lunch with the child abusers—I'm here because of what happens to children & how old is your son? His father? Let's talk about your father let's talk about my father let's talk about fathers the pin of the name badge the grid of the spreadsheet they built us landfills we built them guillotines in return from the scraps, disposable underwear & single-use deodorant, technically a toothbrush is contraband now let's learn what's wrong with our brains—her father told a story about a monster big red toes & a gate for a tail it ate naughty children it roamed the streets & snatched the children up caring about what's wrong too much is called obsessive morality located in the cingulate anterior cortex means I know what happens to children & women who work at the dollar tree—the fathers evaporate & we turn the machines on ourselves to cut the rind—a story about a monster, look, the call is coming from inside the house, she kept the note I wrote her she said they bust you out quick when you don't have insurance said there's something wrong with our fathers said they make me empty my purse each shift—

Kindness

Tired, sore, shoulders broken
by luggage, and feet broken
by city sidewalks, the train,
the car, the walk up to my parents'
home, at last I can rest.

At last, the sofa is mine,
the night descended already
like the cover of a birdcage,
ready to signal pause, comfort,
the ceasing of the day's fraught travel.

At last I can lie down across the cushions,
and my father comes in with a blanket.
Handing it to me, soft warm fleece, a comfort
every home that might be a home should offer,
he says to me, *I washed it*
because your sister used it last.

The surprise of the kindness, the gesture,
small as it may be. The gathering
of the laundry, the cleaning of soiled things,
the chore he leaves in arrogance for Mom.
Look how he cares, in this moment, how he cares
enough to strip the fabric of its past,
to make it new again for my body,
which is not a new body,
and hasn't been for so long
that it can't remember
the sensation of newness.

He leaves with a *goodnight*
I receive as the largest gift
he's ever given, from the man whose hand
held fists, whose arms held affection at length,
whose back held the tight knots of anger.
He's gone up the creaking stairs
and left me here, holding a blanket,
freshly cleaned. How warm, how soft,
how easily I sleep that night.

The Misadventures of Ba Gyi U Taung

Ba Gyi U Taung was, in their village, the one who did everything no one else dared to do. For example, in their village, a person died. This person, because he had had a disease, his body swelled up in death. So when they bought a coffin, he didn't fit in it. The coffin was too small. His body, on his deathbed, had swelled up, and it was swollen and bloated. So there was only one way to fit this person in his coffin; they had to puncture his stomach. They had to puncture his stomach and remove his insides.

Who would do this? No one dared to do it. That's when Ba Gyi U Taung said, *Buy me two bottles of liquor*. He drank until he was drunk, and then he cut open the body. When people came to the funeral, the body looked presentable, because it fit inside the coffin.

Ba Gyi U Taung did all sorts of things like that.

And during the Japanese occupation, Ba Gyi U Taung drove a horse cart. He knew your grandfather, he knew that even though Kyaw Myint looked strong, he was not cut out for hard labor. *So I'll be the one to do the hard labor*, he said, *if there's any to be done*.

So he drove a horse cart to provide for the family. He drove a horse cart, and his cart was an exceptionally slow cart, the horse a useless horse. And the thing that upset horse carriage drivers the most was that in the evenings, when night fell, at around six or seven—most drivers closed up, they went home, they stopped working—because at night, drunk people came out. They would get drunk, get a ride, and then run away without paying.



But Ba Gyi U Taung, because his horse wasn't very good, because he had few customers, it was hard for him to earn money, he didn't earn much, and he couldn't stop when other drivers stopped, because he hadn't made enough money for the day.

Because he hadn't made enough, one evening—he drove through the evening until around nine 'o clock—one day, while he was driving, at around half past eight, the Japanese came, Japanese soldiers. There were three horse carts, including Ba Gyi U Taung's, and three Japanese soldiers. They rode one person to a cart, you see.



At first, everything was normal.

They were all returning to the Japanese military base. They traveled together, all three carts following the same route.



But about halfway there, the driver of the cart at the front said, *Hey, these guys are drunk. It looks like we won't get paid tonight.*

And the driver in the middle said, *That's nothing. A week ago, another driver was brought along to a naval base, and when he got there, they surrounded him and beat him up, and they stole his money. All the money he had earned that day.*

And as they approached a small hill, the driver at the front said, *Don't weep if you're too slow*, and he kicked off the Japanese soldier who was sitting in front of him in the carriage. He kicked him off then drove away. Then the second driver also kicked off the guy in front of him. And Ba Gyi U Taung thought, *Damn, I'm in trouble*, and he had to quickly kick off the guy riding in front of him as well.



But because he was the last horse carriage, the Japanese soldiers who had fallen off had gotten back to their feet and came running after him. They chased the carts, and because Ba Gyi U Taung was at the back, he was the nearest to them, and they almost caught up with him, so he had to drive faster and faster and faster. If they caught him—they were chasing him with knives—they were going to kill him, but luckily, he escaped in the end.



When they got back, he cursed the two drivers who were in front of him. He said, *What was that? You didn't even tell me what you were going to do.* And they said, *We didn't have time to tell you. It was something we had to do while we had the chance.*



The next day, the Japanese military arrested all the horse cart drivers. The guys who were arrested were beaten up. Luckily, Ba Gyi U Taung didn't go out that day. He didn't dare to drive a horse cart again.



Later he and Ko Myint Swe, decided they would go into business together. They said, *We have relatives in Bogale and we know our way around in Yangon, so from Yangon to Bogale we will sail a sampan.*

It sounded like a good idea. They could bring goods from Yangon and sell them in Bogale, and when they returned—they had relatives who made ngapi and ngachauk—they could bring those back and sell them in Yangon. So they would make a profit going in both directions. They would transport goods from Yangon to Bogale and they would transport goods from Bogale to Yangon. There was no loss in this plan.



So, they went and bought a sampan. But what they didn't understand was—they did not understand anything about the nature of a sampan. Because they went and bought a sampan without understanding the nature of a sampan, the sampan that they bought was one that had a history of sinking again and again.

Even with sampans, daughter, there are good ones and bad ones, good boats and bad boats. The sampan even had a name, Won't Return, because everyone who sailed this sampan drowned and died. But Ba Gyi U Taung and Ko Myint Swe didn't know about this, and they said, *We got it for cheap*, and they bought it.



They bought the sampan, and the goods from Yangon, and they sailed. Your grandfather and another friend were at the front—they had already gone ahead on their own boat—and Ba Gyi U Taung and Ko Myint Swe followed on a separate boat.

When they first left Yangon they had sailed out in the ocean, but when they neared Bogale, they had to draw close to the villages on the coast, and as they approached, all of a sudden, Karen rebels began shooting at them with guns, shooting at the water in front of the sampan, and they yelled, *If you don't want to die, pull up*.



So there was no way they could not stop. It was a dacoit attack. They had to pull up to the shore, and as soon as they did, all the goods they had brought along on the sampan were looted, they were all taken. Then the rebels said, *We know there is money on this sampan, we know that you wouldn't come from Yangon without money*. And the rebels threatened to beat them up.



Before their little sampan had reached the shore, Ba Gyi U Taung and Ko Myint Swe had had a discussion. Ba Gyi U Taung said, *Ok, Myint Swe, who is going to be the captain of the boat?* Meaning, who is going to be the leader? And Ko Myint Swe said, *I'll do it. Are you sure?* Ba Gyi U Taung said, and Ko Myint Swe said, *I'm sure.* So they hid the money well—if it was found, they would be killed, they would be killed for hiding it—but they hid it well so it could not be found, and they pulled up to the shore.



And when they got there, the rebels asked, *So who is the leader?* and Ko Myint said he was, so they began beating him up—slapping him in the face, and knocking him around until his teeth came loose. They beat him up and asked, *Where is the money?* They also beat up Ba Gyi U Taung, but every time they hit him, he moved closer to them, saying, *Ko gyi, big brother, please don't do this, please don't do this*, so he didn't get hit as hard. But because Ko Myint Swe, in fear, retreated from the blows, he was hit harder.

And while they were beating them up, the rebels said, *The sampan in front of you sunk because we shot it down. They didn't stop when we told them to.* So Ba Gyi U Taung thought, *My younger brother is dead*, and he was grieved. But then they said to the rebel leader, *Sir, please don't hold us captive, please let us go.* And the rebels said, *We'll let you go, but after you go on to Bogale, and pick up the ngapi and ngachauk, you will stop by us again, or we'll kill you.* Ba Gyi U Taung and Ko Myint Swe said, *Yes, we promise we will stop*, and they were let go.



Back on the sampan, Ko Myint Swe scolded Ba Gyi U Taung, he said, *Maung Taung look at what you've done, because of you, I'm bruised and swollen.* And Ba Gyi U

Taung said, *You're the one who said you wanted to be the leader, I never told you to do it.* So they got into a fight, and after they fought, the two of them were not on very good terms when they arrived in Bogale.

Luckily, when they got to Bogale they saw that father had escaped, your grandfather had escaped because they caught a fast current. By the time Ba Gyi U Taung passed the rebels the current had slowed, so they were caught.



What are we going to do about the return trip? they thought. *These rebels are going to shoot at us again.* But your grandfather said, *It's not a problem. There's a way to get around them.* They would wait until night, for low tide, for when the tide pulled out to the sea, and the rebels would not be able to follow.

So they waited and they went. And they escaped. They made it out of Bogale. They thought, *In the end, we did well.* Even though their goods were looted when they entered Bogale, their relatives, upon hearing what happened, had pitied them and had given them all the ngapi and ngachauk for free. So they thought, *We did well,* and they returned to Yangon happily.



But as they approached Yangon, the sampan began to slow. Ba Gyi U Taung said, *Myint Swe, what's happening?* And when they looked, they saw that water was filling the sampan, the sampan was flooding. So they had to pitch water out of the sampan, they kept pitching and pitching but water kept entering, and they couldn't stop it.

Just then, someone from a passing sampan said, *You gentlemen look like you want to die.* They said, *Why do you say that?* And the person said, *You have too many goods on board. You have to dump your goods. If you don't, no matter how much water you pitch overboard, it won't help.*



And this person was right. No matter how much water they tried to pitch out of the sampan, it was slowly sinking, because the water was entering too quickly. So they had to dump all of their goods overboard, with much remorse, and other sampans nearby even picked up some of their goods. Then, after they had dumped everything, even then, water kept entering the sampan, and they had to keep pitching it out again, working non-stop, until at the very end, they arrived at the harbor. And as they approached the docks, the sampan sank into the water, and they had to swim the rest of the way.



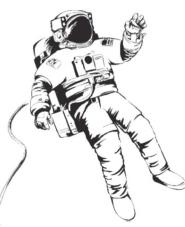
They barely escaped. The sampan sunk, and they had no money left. They lost everything. They were lucky they didn't die. That was his life, daughter. Ba Gyi U Taung was never lucky.

In All Seriousness

After Cy Twombly's *Untitled 1985* –
Cy Twombly Gallery, Houston

Head full of fishes.
Someone says *complicate the blue*.
I do. I do. I do.
Ceremony at the electric zoo, it's all romance
and small umbrellas. Holding
hands by the pond. Understand this: the child with butterfly
wings wandered off alone. The sky holds
up a sign that says Save Me.

I haven't seen my
face in years. Once, I read *How to be Tender*
from cover to cover. It made me feel
like meat with eyes, sizeable fists. Hey, I'm a well
-trained vertebrate. Today the fishes say *you first*. Around the edge,
they flicker with a sick, green gleam.
Famous striptease, I'm in love! Here's
a promise that will get you going: there's a tiny place for you, if you can
find it. The door's got a broken clasp.
Something will get out. Something will get in.



Hybrid Theory: An Interview with Juliana Huxtable

Juliana Huxtable has created a new hybrid for herself as a DJ, writer, performer, media star, and visual artist. Huxtable's powerful, self-created persona is inspiring to witness. It is equally inspiring to see a young artist take control of her unforgettable representation as a trans person of color who left her Texas youth for a global career. She spoke with Houston-based curator Bill Arning about the influence of her Texas upbringing on her work, how she melds intuition with formal rigor, and why she remains occupied with ideas of gender conformity and sexualized identity. The interview below has been minimally edited for length, style and clarity.

Bill Arning: You were born in Houston and grew up in College Station. Do you ever return to visit? How do they respond to you today as an international and highly recognizable cultural icon?

Juliana Huxtable: I very rarely go back to Texas now, as my siblings now live in other states, and my mom has moved from my hometown to Houston with her husband. But I do go back when possible and am actually planning a trip in the next year or so to Bryan-College Station. It's funny because when I'm in Austin or Houston, there is occasional recognition for my work, particularly if I am there for a music gig, which has been my only "work" context to return thus far. But, in College Station, there is a feeling of going back to my hometown that is quite odd in many ways. People who follow me or are still in touch with my family will recognize me, but largely the span of time and growth has made it so that I feel almost like a stranger, and it seems I appear that way to many people. In some ways, it's quite beautiful, as growing up was tied to so much explicit prejudice and verbal and physical aggression...to return and be seen as someone there...albeit someone who stands out very much allows me to experience the town...to return to beloved places with a sense of anonymity. I found myself reminding people of who I was

when I saw a familiar face, but I like that Bryan-College Station is so culturally its own space that I am just...there.

BA: How does your hometown appear to you now versus when it was still home?

JH: It's grown immensely but so much of it is still the same. The last time I was there, everyone spoke of the new Wal-Mart that was built—a sign of growth and progress to many people. There's a culture that is resistant to change in many ways: evolving technologies adapt to the local culture instead of the other way around, which is interesting to me. There's a palpable sense of ideology, how it's performed, how it's enacted on every level. I'm excited to go back again with friends and my boyfriend to show them the place that I came from because it really is an insane marker of conservative, both evangelical and fundamentalist Christian, and pseudo-urban but ultimately big, small-town Texas life.

BA: Your practice is the definition of hybridity, and when art students look at all the ways your creative life manifests, you are an inspiration for a free-form art practice. When in your development as an artist made you decide you did not need to narrow your scope? Was that an effect of your Bard years?

THE MULTI-FACETED NATURE OF MY WORK IS AS MUCH A REFLECTION OF MY VARIED INTERESTS AS IT IS HOW I CAME TO SUPPORT MYSELF AND EVENTUALLY THRIVE IN NEW YORK'S ECONOMIC CLIMATE.

JH: It was less a decision than a product of circumstance. I've always done whatever I could to get to where I needed to go. I was an artist in multiple senses of the word growing up and also had many interests outside

of art. When I left Texas to go school, art seemed suddenly a luxury, a space into which time and labor was invested but which didn't contribute to my immediate financial reality. School was really difficult. I often worked 30-45 hours a week at various jobs, all in addition to my classes and extracurriculars. I abandoned the pursuit of art proper, for many of these reasons, and immersed myself in Literature, Philosophy and Critical Theory courses. By the time I got to New York, paying

rent and utilities was my primary concern, and as a secondary concern having enough money to take the train and dress myself to go out. My practice grew out of intuition and was contingent upon whatever I had access to at the time. Much like Kembra Pfahler's availablism, the multi-faceted nature of my work is as much a reflection of my varied interests as it is how I came to support myself and eventually thrive in New York's economic climate.

BA: Your work shared space at the New Museum Triennial with the hyper realistic nude sculpture of you that was the most Instagramed piece in the show. At that time in interviews you spoke about how Juliana Huxtable as a representation by others was getting confused with you as a very intentional maker of art. A few years down the road, has the image and intention developed an easier coexistence? What tools were necessary to regain control of the machine

JH: Trusting my instinctual awareness of context and making work based on that trust of self has been the best tool. I'm so grateful that I've been able to make work in so many other ways and to have a real engagement with these news mediums, contexts and forms.

BA: Your text-based image works abridge dense blocks of language, inviting and challenging readable consumption. They function halfway between modernist poetry and wheat-pasted political manifestos. How did you develop that formal device?

THE FACT THAT I WASN'T SELF-AWARE OF THAT WRITING AS "POETRY" OR OF BELONGING TO ANY GENRE IN PARTICULAR GRANTED A DE FACTO LICENSE FOR FUSION AND HYBRIDIZATION.

JH: This was honestly the influence of the poetry I've been exposed to and cherished throughout my life. I've been continuously writing since I was five or six years old in one form or another. I especially took to poetry starting when I was 10 and have always read and consumed poetry and really so many forms of text and literature. I love text in all its forms and formats, and my writing is awash of so many things. I rediscovered a sense of experimentation in writing

through Tumblr after moving to New York, and I think the fact that I wasn't self-aware of that writing as "poetry" or of belonging to any genre in particular granted a de facto license for fusion and hybridization.

BA: I have read interesting quotes from you about beauty, and how beauty functions in political and social systems. Is that still an interest now that self-portraiture has lessened in your visual work?

JH: Always! Beauty is highly politicized, and the idea that we will ever be 'beyond' it is absurd to me.

BA: You have been called upon to represent communities often; you have found ways to avoid being pigeonholed, and your last show seemed to question if your work was rightfully termed political or activist. What descriptors of your practice do you find generative or productive?

JH: I honestly don't know. My least favorite writing is my own "about" me or my work. I avidly avoid writing biographies, show descriptions, et cetera... I will write a text that inspires or is the basis for a show and sometimes I will publish that, but anything further feels impossible.

BA: I was discussing the video "A Split During Laughter at the Rally" with friends, who are all fans of your work, and there was much debate as to whether the depiction of political activism was meant as a criticism of the narcissism of trying to save the world. You have been pretty careful to not overly define your position in terms of resistance or activism. Now as Trump Era activism and resistance is entering its third year, has your position changed or evolved at all? Is spending time in Europe a godsend to grant perspective?

JH: Well, that show was about the difficulty of establishing a sense of position in the first place. It was about a perceived or experienced crisis—one that found its loudest and most immediate avatar in a sense of political undoing but that gets at

questions fundamental to the contemporary moment. And so, in many ways, I still feel a sense of crisis. I see the unfolding of an actual crisis, and the question for me is how to find and utilize a discourse and agency when crisis becomes ubiquitous. I am not one for pathology, determinism or fatalism, as I think surrendering to these sorts of concepts is the precondition for a sort of “inevitable” nihilism. But, at the same time, I understand that fatalistic views of political possibility are the product of a very real sense of material alienation from the means of direct change, action, et cetera.

BA: You work as a DJ and remixer with artists who operate on very big cultural stages. How has moving so fluidly between cultural arenas affected your ideas around your own impact on the larger world?

JH: Any idea of what my influence is, is tied to the capricious algorithms and wildly contingent nature of social media and search engine optimization algorithms and the like. I just assume whatever idea of my impact is, is probably inflated and easily erased so it's better to keep making work and being grateful that at any point there is an audience to whom it speaks.

p. 113, Fig. 1. *Untitled (Psychosocial Stuntin')*, 2015
Color inkjet print
40 x 30 inches (101.60 x 76.20 cm) Edition of 3
Courtesy of the Artist, JTT New York and Project Native Informant London

p. 114, Fig. 2. *A Nazi Shopping Trip to a Ben Sherman and Fred Perry Sample Sale in Paris*, 2019
Framed C-Type on Fuji matt paper
24 x 18 x 1 1/8 inches (61 x 45.7 x 3 cm) Edition of 3 plus 1 AP
Courtesy of the Artist and Project Native Informant London

p. 115, Fig. 3. Installation view
Project Native Informant at Art Basel Hong Kong 2019.
Courtesy of the Artist and Project Native Informant London

p. 116, Fig. 4. *TBT*, 2019
12 colour archival ink on linen, collage, homemade badges in artist frame
53 7/8 x 42 1/8 x 2 3/8 inches (137 x 107 x 6 cm)
Courtesy of the Artist and Project Native Informant London

p. 117, Fig. 5. *Corporal Anarchy*, 2017
Oil, acrylic, fabric, handmade buttons, metal grommets and inkjet
Print on canvas in 2 parts, framed
44 7/8 x 26 3/8 inches (114 x 67 cm)
53 1/8 x 29 1/8 inches (135 x 74 cm) (framed)
Courtesy of the Artist and Project Native Informant London

p. 118, Fig. 6. *The Feminist Scam*, 2017
Inkjet print, vinyl, magnets on metal sheet
96 x 48 inches unique (243.84 x 121.92 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, NY/LA
Photo credit: Joerg Lohse

p. 119, Fig. 7. *Transsexual Empire*, 2017
Inkjet print, vinyl, magnets on metal sheet
96 x 48 inches (243.84 x 121.92 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, NY/LA
Photo credit: Joerg Lohse

p. 120, Fig. 8. *A Split During Laughter at the Rally*, 2017
Digital video
Running time: 21:41 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, NY/LA
Photo credit: Joerg Lohse



A NAZI
SHOPPING
TRIP TO
A BEN
SHERMAN
AND FRED
PERRY
SAMPLE SALE
IN PARIS.







GO TO A NBA WOMENS BASKETBALL GAME, CHECK OUT BLACK HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS BASKETBALL GAMES, GO TO A COLLEGE GIRLS BASKETBALL GAME AND IT'S SWARMING WITH DYES AND BALLOONIES, LOOKING FOR FRESH MEAT, LIKE I SHOT STOPPED MY DAUGHTER FROM PLAYING ORGANIZED BASKETBALL IN THE 4TH GRADE BECAUSE 2 OF HER CHILD HOOD FRIENDS WERE TURNED OUT BY DYES IN MIDDLE SCHOOL BEFORE THEY EVEN GOT TO HIGH SCHOOL

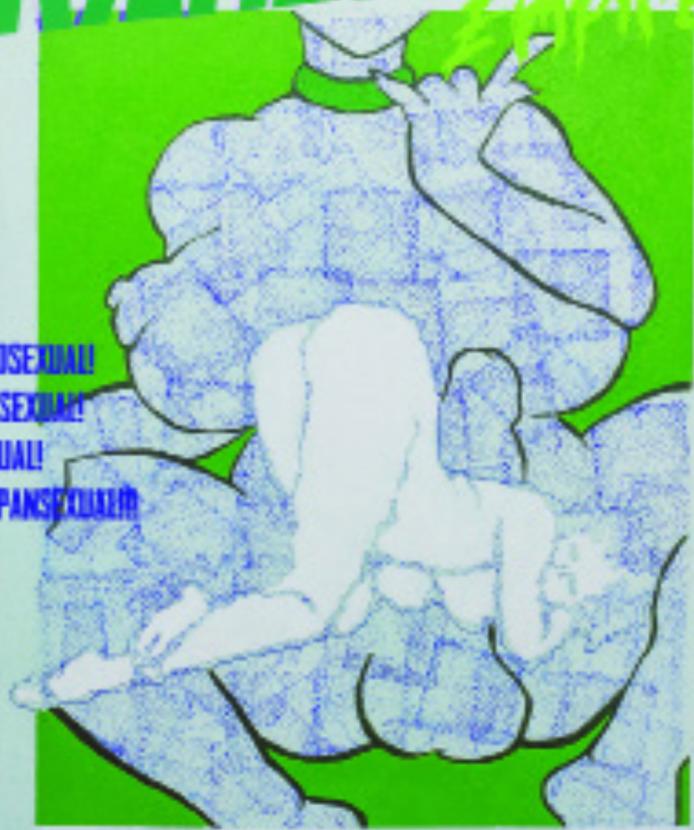


INTERSECTIONALITY, COUNTELFRO, FEMALE MASCULINITY AND THE DESTRUCTION
OF THE AFRIKAN FAMILY

NUMBER OF SWEDISH CHILDREN REGISTERED AS GENDER OTHER THAN BORN

TRANSSEXUAL

METROSEXUAL
HOMOSEXUAL
BISexual
Now PANSEXUAL



EFFEMINIZATION IS THE ONLY PROCESS, THE LAST DESPERATE ATTEMPT
THAT SURVIVAL ORIENTED AFRICAN MALES CAN STRIKE BACK AGAINST THE
ENEMY WITHOUT ATTACKING THE REAL SOURCE OF THEIR FEARS ABOUT
THEIR OWN MANHOOD



King Midas

Everything I touch turns into a golden retriever. Some call it the dog touch-me-not. Others call it the woof-woof. I prefer the former. It has a maverick ring to it. There are many kinds of maverick. There are many kinds of dogs. Dogs that once were toothbrushes. Dogs that once were dishwashers. Sea devils and oranges. Once, I ran head first into a warrior. He became a dog warrior. The dog warrior ran right back into me and became two dogs. Once, I clapped for a dog and a dog fell out. Once, I wept so hard into the washcloth and found a dog against my face. I thought the touch would go away, but it didn't. I thought I'd never meet my father, but I did. I met him in an airport. The airport turned into a dog who wagged its tail at me. The plane took off with me inside it and became a dog that fell from the sky. Each tiny little strand of golden hair a tiny little golden dog. Once, I didn't eat anything for days. I refused to open my mouth for the dog to enter. Once, I pulled a dead hair from my head. I pulled a dead dog from my head. How awful it is to become attached to a thing that is living. My father is a dog. My house is a dog. I have never touched my mother. What a monster I am. Time is a dog. Romance is the ugly dog that the car hits. Eating Disorder is a dog that drags me by the collar. Rows and rows of flowers become roses and roses of dogs. I move through empty space. Every dog becomes a blur. Every nicey-nice. Every wake-up time. There is a howling and I am somewhere in it. It is sabotage alone that I confuse for love.

No Appreciation for the Work of the Hand

I have this hammer.

Once, it was a hammer. Now, it is a hammer for sale.

A hammer so good it distracts from the fact that it is even a hammer in the first place.

A hammer so good it is incapable of birth; no one will betray it.

It does not speak French. It won't even try to learn.

I like to beat people with it. I like to beat myself.

And I beat long nails into the wall and leave them there. I do.

Nobody wants to talk about birds, but they'll talk about a hammer.

But birds are the hammers of the sky.

I have not smashed a bird with my hammer, though the sensation that I should never leaves me.

When my father left me, he left me with this hammer.

All I could do was beat myself with it.

It didn't change a thing.

I hit the hammer with another hammer in hopes it would become less of a hammer.

I hit the other hammer with my hammer. It shattered into sixteen pieces (I counted.)

I ate the sixteen pieces of the hammer over the course of seven days.

I try to make the hammer less of a hammer and it becomes more of a hammer.

I try to make the hammer more of a hammer and it becomes more of a hammer, too.

When I left my mother, she left a hammer on my doorstep, a different one.

I vowed not to beat myself with it. Or anyone for that matter.

I fear I am changing into what has changed me.

Every morning, I still wake up.

I say, "I am awake, finally awake. When am I going to die."

A hammer should be used for hitting and not throwing.

A day I wake up is just a day I go back to sleep.

That is a problem. Big Jumbo Wumbo Problem. Colossal.

Go ahead. Record me. I'll say it again.

Big Jumbo Wumbo.

But only if you take my hammer.

There are no recordings of me with the hammer when I am young.

Because I have never been young.

Please, take this hammer away from me.

It isn't wise to carry around a hammer while you cry and cry and cry.

Nobody lends you mascara. Or invites you along to the Rodeo.

I want to go to the Rodeo. Pet the bull, even if it is mechanical.

I know no one is watching me, but I feel everyone watching me.

I never feel I am not standing in the corner of the room.

Lying is Getting

to me. The high-ups instructed me not to tell their dad about the particulates—the last time he caught them polluting, he made them sit themselves down right there and eat a whole smokestack. I keep nodding when the city insists I stick with the story of accidents—she was cleaning her gun, he was cleaning the recessed sign on the front of the passenger train, they were holding hands and had a whole plan to clean the concrete twenty-two stories below the ledge of the mixed-use downtown tower. To really make it shine. The party line is getting me good. I keep turning my face to the flashbulb in an effort to seem like someone with no secrets, and now when I see other people framed and beaming, I want to know what they're keeping in. The expected number of photographs per contemporary wedding is several thousand. All that sin—

Delight in Disorder

Then the Governor dressed us down, then disordered
Grunts were, like body odors, disclosed. In wanting us,
He spread us on the sloping lawn, shoulder to shoulder,
And the skeet-shooting above us was no distraction
For we were face down in a deserving place.
I got a stomachache right then, and got myself
Into downward dog, while a pair of thugs scuffed
Behind me, steel-toed. Up on stage, ribbons
Of copper wire wavered, and the keynote
Speaker did his droning best, petty, coated in rice flour:
A homegrown act, thrown up on a shoestring, but I
For one was done with crotch-grinding civility.
The Governor leaned towards me, pursed his lips and farted.
Side by side, there was no telling apart which finger was whose.
He called me “Sweet Lady”
And the sun slipped across the moon like kindling and the wind
Held its yellow breath as he examined the back of his throat
With my cock. It was fine to be of every use.
There followed a snack of herring and toasts
With crimson butter and did I thereby
Neglect (full belly and all) to see one must
Not confuse legal possession with ownership
Of the bewitched lad’s soul? “You have a winning smile,”
He praised. “It makes up, almost, for your tempestuous
Entrails.” Well stretched out, I could no more care less

What words were, rolling about in the swale of wildflowers
Among living thorns and pollinators.
“Precisely,” responded my scissors.

after Robert Herrick

His Poetrie His Pillar

Only sailors speak of pyramids
I left behind, back when I lived in hope.
Then as now, I sought to please
And betray, to be tightly buttoned up.
It is unkind, I know, to have handled you
That way, when your baubles were thrown
Or smashed for all to touch. Me
And my boys will turn to stone
Over time, not to worry. Easeful death
And neglect, acids and heavy rain will rot
Memorial statues and old bones beneath.
Often enough in Sunday School we forgot
How to use manners, for we were
Involved in heavily planning dad's memorial
And had no idea how his mound got here
Without earth movers bearing down like a wall.
Behold (he warned us): Brute force eats away
Inch by inch unwelcome spirits within it.
Never, hearing his words, have we had a meal stay
Down so long, undigested, like minute
Caterpillars gathering into a glum circle. Goodnight—
If that's the way to say the kingdom's over.
Here it stood, wanting only to write
And vanish, Robert Herrick, nothing more.

A Brief Update on Language at the End of the Anthropocene

March 4, S.+2

Document 21.4. Newish Terms & Phrases in Use Post-S. throughout the Middle Atlantic (draft)

Acta Est Fabula, Plaudite

Though Latin is by no means making its resurgence, this phrase has been found frequently at the end of farewell letters written before an *Exit Pill* was ingested. Translation: “The play has been performed. Applaud!” A laudable attempt to leave one’s life on an appropriately upbeat note. Are we not saving the world? Do we not all deserve some applause? I, for one, would like some applause.

Air Burial

The securing of a dead body to a structure’s roof for disposal by carnivorous birds. Generally refers to the burial of a loved one, as none of us have the time or stamina to deal with the bodies of strangers. (See Document 107.2 for recommended knots.) The problem is the smell. And that nobody wants to look up anymore because when you look up you might see an *Air Burial* on a roof, possibly the burial of someone you knew. This is a problem. It is not our biggest problem.

Antemania

An unhealthy obsession for how life used to be before the sterilization virus was released (i.e., pre-*S.* life), coupled with an unwillingness to accept the present situation. Marked by hysteria, *House-Sealing*, plus hoarding of pre-*S.* artifacts, such as receiving blankets and IUDs. I am no longer supposed to use the words “receiving blanket” or “IUD” (reference Document 21.8) but I don’t know how else to write the names of the artifacts.

Anthropocentric Dependency

The opinion that if there are no humans, there can be no planet; that it is our consciousness creating the world; that when the last of us dies, the Earth will blink out. In case you're wondering, this is not going to happen. We are not that important. We are not important at all. See also *Human Narcissism*.

Auto-Extinction

The preferred term for the current process of human extinction via *S*. The prefix "auto" suggests some individual agency and choice, even if that is not entirely the case.

Baby Snatcher

Those individuals at the child markets who bid with greedy aggression, having sold their shelters, screens, and/or seats on the *Exit Ships* to gain enough barter. I did not bring enough barter to the early child markets in my city because I did not have enough barter, so I did not receive even one child. Therefore, I am not a *Baby Snatcher*. A *Baby Snatcher* accumulates way more than their fair share of children, whose supply, as we all know, is now limited.

Barber Paradox

A barber blinds only those who will not blind themselves. The blinding may be metaphorical or actual. Probably actual. Does the barber blind herself? I don't know the answer to this question.

Blue Fallacy

- A) The hope that extraterrestrials may have possessed planet-saving technologies necessary to reverse climate change, resurrect extinct species, and in general restore the Earth; we only needed those particular extraterrestrials to arrive.
- B) Alternatively, the belief that blue extraterrestrials who arrived and briefly visited in the year *S*.-250 neither arrived nor visited; they were a hoax.
- C) Honestly, who cares at this point. We weren't saved.

March 7, S.+2

21.5. A Proposal of Final Additions to the English Language (draft)

Def. 31: a word capturing the future richness that will emerge on Earth after we're gone: the lushness of the flora, the ecstatic bounty of the fauna, the fullness of the seas, and the soaring height of the forests

Prototypes: postazzle, ultravist, anormify

Decision: declined for definitioning

Reason: none given

Def. 83: the post-human Earth

Prototypes: Arth, Hearth, Postarth

Decision: declined for definitioning

Reason: none given

Def. 112: a city hundreds of years from now after that city has been reclaimed/restored by vines, trees, animals, etc.

Prototypes: recitied, uncitied, naturized

Decision: declined for definitioning

Reason: *STOP FORCING THE HUMAN LANGUAGE ONTO THE NON-HUMAN WORLD*

March 8, S.+2

21.4. Newish Terms & Phrases in Use Post-S. throughout the Middle Atlantic (draft), cont.

Blue Quiet Thursday (BQT)

S.'s silent release date, November 23, in the year S.-1. As the incubation period for all strains of S. was lengthy (220+ days), the proper announcement of S. and the start of the *Auto-Extinction* did not officially occur until the following April on the *Day of Notice*. *BQT* is a somewhat misleading term. November 23 was not, in my memory, particularly blue or quiet.

Bonafide Shit

Sold by hustlers in the form of a gold-speckled injection labeled with pictographic

certification that claims to reverse sterility. I tried a vial to see whether it would work—because what if it did work?—and it didn't work. Illegal to sell or purchase, though no one is actually enforcing such laws. Sale price: physical favors, children's tresses, paper road atlases, or something else. What I paid is none of your business.

Crocodile Dilemma

If a crocodile steals a daughter, but promises to return the girl if the mother correctly guesses what the creature will do next—how should the crocodile respond if the mother walks away? I don't know the answer to this question either. In fact, I think it's a stupid question. It's not like, after *S.*, the crocodiles and other leftover animals began talking to us, like they used to do in the old children's books. This is not a children's book.

Day of Notice

The date of *S.*'s official announcement, April 17, in the year of *S.*, roughly 215 days after *BQT*. If I were being completely honest here, I would say this was not a great day. But no one is being completely honest, so forget I said that! The official beginning of the *Great Transition*.

March 16, S.+2

*21.8. Terms Removed from Use Post-*S.* (draft)—A-C*

A1B Emissions Scenario, A2 Emissions Scenario, Abatement, Abortions, Adaptation, Administration on Aging, Afforestation, Afterbirth, Aggressive Growth Fund, Agroforestry, Alternative Minimum Tax, Amniocentesis, Annual Wellness Visit, Anthropogenic, Anticipation, Apocalypse, Artificial Insemination, Artificial Regeneration, Attachment Parenting, Audits,

B1 Emissions Scenario, B2 Emissions Scenario, Babify, Baby, Baby Blues, Baby Boom, Baby Cake, Baby Doll, Babykins, Baby Registry, Baby Shower, Babysitter, Babywearing, Backcasting, Balance of Power, Barrier Methods, Baseline, Battleground State, Bill of Rights, Biofuels, Biological Opinion, Birth Centers,

Birth Defects, Birth Rate, Black Carbon, Blastocyst, Braxton-Hicks Contractions, Breaking of Waters, Breathing Tubes, Brownfields, Bucket Lists, Build Back Better, Burial Insurance, Burp Cloths, Business as Usual,

Calling Hours, Candidate Species, Capacity Building, Carbon Footprint, Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation, Census Bureau, Certified Financial Planners, Childbearing, Childbirth, Childhood, Childish, Childproof, Chorionic Villus Sampling, Circumcision (Infant), Coalition for Rainforest Nations, Colic, Colostrum, Committal Service, Commodities, Composting, Condom, Conservation, Consumer and Fraud Protection, Consumer Price Index, Critical Habitat, Crowning, Cryogenics, C-Section,

March 22, S.+2

21.4. Newish Terms & Phrases in Use Post-S. throughout the Middle Atlantic (draft), cont.

Echoworms

The staticky panic that invades one's ear after going for a certain length of time without hearing another human voice. Oddly, one's own voice, i.e., talking to one's self, or listening to audio, have little effect on an *Echoworm*. Often a sufferer will attempt, it must be said unsuccessfully, to resolve the situation by inserting a pointed object into the eardrum. Do not do this. I have not yet done this, though I have considered it. I would like to hear your voice or a voice.

Endangered Rights Amendment (ERA)

The *ERA* allows ordinary citizens the right to punish, maim, and/or dispose of any human harming an animal and/or an animal's environment. This means don't go trapping animals, even if you're starving. If you must harm something, harm yourself. Do you have any ideas about how I can hear your voice?

Exit Pill

A government-supplied pill that allows a person to leave their life with ease and minimum mess. The pill's promised "pain-free exit experience" is debatable—at the very least there are convulsions—though these pills have proven effective for their core

purpose, which is fatality. You should keep your exit pill near you, in a place such as your pocket, because you never know when you'll have seen enough and you'll want to leave. I keep mine in my shirt pocket. Its packaging makes an unsightly bulge. I don't care. I don't think anyone cares. The pill is rumored to be a delicious grape flavor.

Exit Ship

A desirable way to leave. Tickets are awarded through a complicated and imperfect lottery system. I was not able to get a ticket. Various modes of transport (rocket, jet, prop plane, spacecraft) fly passengers upward until the transport self-destructs. There may or may not be a view.

March 29, S.+2

21.5. A Proposal of Final Additions to the English Language (draft), cont.

Def. 118: a series of words that are more positive and upbeat; words that will raise our spirits and warm us with a satisfactory glowing!; words that would bring needed balance to our linguistic revisions, as people are becoming sad to use words

Prototypes: interlyric, limiten, ferlum

Decision: declined for definitioning

Reason: *SADNESS IS APPRORPLATE*

Def. 140: a nice, neutral-sounding word for the physical changes that *S.* causes in a person

Prototypes: beneflip, newert, noviden

Decision: declined for definitioning

Reason: none given

April 4, S.+2

21.4. Newish Terms & Phrases in Use Post-S. throughout the Middle Atlantic (draft), cont.

Eyes Out

A) The carrying out of self-induced blindness, the blindness achieved either through blindfolds, hoods, or permanent injury to the eye.

- B) I'm sorry about all the bleakness. I am trying to introduce more optimistic terms but my supervisor, who says their name is Harlee, continues to decline my proposals.
- C) I have never met Harlee. We communicate through the network when the network is running.
- D) The idea, or coping strategy, that if one does not see something happening, it is not happening.

Family Planning

Determining, through progressive and empathetic conversation, how each member of a family will leave their life, in what order, and when. My family consisted of Alexia. Alexia claimed we decided, through *Family Planning*, that soon she would leave her life and I wouldn't because I had to finish up these documents while she had no documents to finish. I don't remember deciding this. I remember the documents were very important.

Family Replacement System

The belief that we are most intimately linked not to whomever we loved but to this planet and its multitude of organisms. Our genetic or romantic connections to each other are therefore inconsequential. I want to believe this is true. See *Our Family Is the Earth*.

Forespace

Do you think telling yourself something is true makes it true? A *Forespace* is a place one deposits objects from their pre-S. life as part of moving on. A *Forespace* can be as simple as a fire pit in a yard or a slit in a mattress that afterwards is sewn up. My *Forespace* is a jar we used to leave on the kitchen table. We used to fill the jar with water and weeds from our yard. Alexia picked the weeds that most closely resembled flowers. The jar was empty when I turned it into my *Forespace*, as there was no longer a yard, no Alexia, no flowery weeds. Into the jar I placed a shell clip I once wore in my hair, when I had hair, and Alexia's key to the side door, which appeared identical to my key, only it was not mine, and a strip of fabric from our pillowcase, and an antique silver rattle my mother had saved for me. The rattle's head was a sheep's head,

its body was the body of a monster. This did not seem an appropriate toy for a baby, but what do I know. I am not supposed to use the word “rattle” or “baby” or “babies.” I lost my hair once S.’s incubation period was over. We are not to focus on what we lost. That is why I buried the jar. I won’t tell you where I buried it. What did you put into your *Forespace*? I will leave room below for you to answer:

April 5, S.+2

21.8. Terms Removed from Use Post-S. (draft), cont.—D-G

Death Certificate, Decedents, De-Extinction, Deforestation, Department of Commerce, Descendant Report, Diastasis Recti (postpartum), Discontinuities, Doomsday Clock, Drawdown, Driving Forces,

Eclampsia, Economic Development, Economic Loss, Ecotourism, Eldercare, Election Day, Electoral College, Embalming, Embryo (Human), Emerging Patterns, Emissions Scenarios, Enteric Fermentation, Environmentalism, Episiotomy, Estate Conservation, Estate Planning, Evacuation, Exit Polls, Extirpate,

Fertilization (Human), Fetal Distress (Human), Fetal Monitor, Fetus (Human), Fontanels, Forecasting, Foresight, Forest Management, Fossil Fuels, Freedom of Information Law, Frozen Zoos, Fugitive Fuel Emissions, Funeral Home, Future Farmer, Future Generations, Future Interest, Future Life, Futuremap, Future Perfect, Futures Exchange, Future Studies, Future Value, Futuristic, Futuristically, Futurologist,

Garden City, GDP, Geoengineering, GNP, the Golden Years, Group of Mountain Landlocked Developing Countries, GWP,

April 10, S.+2

21.4. Newish Terms & Phrases in Use Post-S. throughout the Middle Atlantic (draft), cont.

Generation E

My supervisor instructed me to write a personal note about each of these

definitions to make this particular document more readable. The personal aspects of the definitions are supposed to help ensure that people such as you read the documents from beginning to end, so you can understand the changes we made to our language, as the changes to the language mirror the changes we had to make to ourselves. *Generation E* is the final generation of humans, born between *S.-18* and *S.+1*. I don't know what to say about this.

Geographic Narcissism

The delusional self-importance that occurs when one becomes the only human left, or at least visibly alive, in a set geographic radius. Achieved by ignoring the immensity of non-human biomass in the same space. Do not stop reading these documents. As long as you are reading these documents, we are connected by an invisible thread that runs from my mouth to your ears. Or my fingers to your eyes. Whatever. Can you feel the invisible thread? Please do not break the thread. When you are done reading these documents, you must return to the beginning and reread the documents.

Geo-Opt / Geo-Optimism

The theory that the troubles of the previous centuries were caused by a human inability to care for the planet. Therefore, after transition work is complete and humans become extinct, everything is going to be okay from the planet's point of view, which is the only point of view that will soon matter. I think this is why sometimes, or often, or all the time now, the personal seems very small and irrelevant, a point, a pinprick of light that was lost along the way in the past.

Going Dark (GD) Rate

The annual crude death rate of the human species. No one, no agency, is keeping track of this now. Let's just say it's a pretty high number. I want to ask you some questions. When I ask you a question, I will imagine you forming the answer to my question in your mouth. Even if you are writing the answer to the question, or thinking it, I will still imagine the shape of your mouth as the sound comes out of your mouth. The sound which is your voice. If I heard your voice, I would take a jar, not the jar from my *Forespace*, but a different jar, a jar I have yet to

find, and I would put the sound of your voice in the jar I have yet to find, and I would seal the jar.

Golden Equilibrium

Here's a question for you: If the personal is small and irrelevant, a pinprick of light that was purposely lost or left behind somewhere in the past, what happens when we turn to look at the light? I will leave space below for you to answer. A *Golden Equilibrium* is what we are giving to the world; the state of the world without us; a pretty term.

Grassroots Exit

Those who choose to ignore any suggested or supplied means of exit, instead finding a different and presumably novel way to leave. I am looking at the light. This is not a suggested movement of the head.

The Great Transition

The period of time from *S.0* to somewhere between *S.+20* and *S.+37*, when the world is transitioning from an unhealthy anthropocentrism to its ideal and humanless state. Known more simply as the *Transition*. The light is crystalline and refracted and cold. I plan on existing until I finish these documents. I'm not sure what happens after. Is that personal enough for you?

April 14, S.+2

21.5. A Proposal of Final Additions to the English Language (draft), cont.

Def. 187: a left-behind child whose parents exited without them, so that now the child doesn't know what to do and the child is wondering why their parents left them and whether they were loved; a word that also means the child was loved

Prototypes: motouth, omniki, panspring

Decision: declined for definitioning

Reason: none given

Def. 201:	a word for the sterilized sperm of a male human, since the word “sperm” comes from the Greek <i>sperma</i> , “seed,” and also <i>speirein</i> , “to sow,” neither of which apply anymore; same problem with the female egg or ovum—it’s not technically an egg anymore, is it, as an egg must be able to grow into a new individual
Prototypes:	ineg, dissper, ovced
Decision:	declined for definitioning
Reason:	none given

April 15, S.+2

21.4. *Newish Terms & Phrases in Use Post-S. throughout the Middle Atlantic (draft), cont.*

House-Sealing

The immersive retreat into one’s shelter or home. Includes the boarding up of windows and doors, the cementing of chimneys, and extensive VR while the power supply lasts. A symptom of *Antemania* and often *Eyes Out*, though *House-Sealing* isn’t all bad. I myself wanted to *House-Seal* with Alexia. I thought if we *House-Sealed*, the two of us could pretend to be living in some other time. We could have covered the windows with old pictures, so when we pretended to look outside we would have seen the pictures instead of what was outside. The pictures I wanted to use were from my great-grandmother’s collection; they were pictures of people printed on an opaque, glossy paper. People wearing hats on vacation, and people buckled to the seats of cars, the car windows open, and people lying along the white edges of the ocean, and people watching a bear lope into the woods (I don’t believe bears exist anymore), and people holding their babies in a waiting room (do not use the word “babies”), and people standing in line, fanning themselves with their hands. I’m not stupid. I know the time period of such pictures was also not ideal, but I am talking about pretend play, I am talking about making shit up. Alexia thought *House-Sealing* was a stupid idea. She said she was done pretending. She opened the door. I want to tell you a story about what happened.

Human Narcissism

See *Anthropocentric Dependency*. The problem is there are no more stories. There are only documents and lists. How do you tell a story that isn't a story? I am trying to think of a way to tell you.

Hurry Up and Wait (HUAW)

The phrasing adapted by individuals frustrated that human extinction will take decades to complete because much damage can be carried out in such a timeframe. Here is a story that is not a story: There once was—who? They lived—where? They lived with—whom? Why were they living? Then what happened? *HUAW* individuals argue for the immediate release of a second virus, this one fatal to humans, an *S.v2*.

Lifecourse Deactivation

The occasionally gradual but, more often, acute experience of letting go of one's assumed life trajectory. In certain people, such deactivation may result in feelings of panic, groundlessness, and dissociation, though others may feel an immense relief. I never figured out how to experience *Lifecourse Deactivation*. Alexia told me this was because I had read too many novels, fantasy novels in particular, or was it science fiction? Either way, novels about survivors (don't use the word "survivors") of a catastrophic event where not everybody died. I kept thinking we'd stumble upon a community of non-sterilized humans who'd managed to avoid the virus. I know what you probably think about communities, but this community in my mind was made up of 100% good people, each with a distinct and useful skill, and it turned out in my mind that Alexia and I were part of the non-sterilized community! I thought we would be okay. We were not okay. We did not stumble upon a community of non-sterilized humans. Such a community doesn't exist because everyone is infected.

May 7, S.+2

21.8. Terms Removed from Use Post-S. (draft), cont.—H-P

Habitat Conservation Plans, Habitat Fragmentation, Heiress, Heirloom, High Grading, Horizon Scanning, Human Resources, Hydrofluorocarbons,

Immunizations, In Vitro Fertilization, IPCC, IUD,

Kick Count,

Labor and Delivery, Lanugo, Layette, Leakage, Let-Down Reflex, Life Insurance, Life Support, Lobbying,

Malthusian Growth, Market Equilibrium, Meals on Wheels, Mechanical Ventilation, Meconium, Megacity, Midwife, Milestone Planning, Miscarriage, Mitigation Potential, Morning-After Pill, Morning Sickness, Moro Reflex, Municipal Bonds,

Neonatal Unit, News Cycles, Not in My Backyard, Nutrition Education,

Obstetrics, Ocean Acidification, Office of Children and Family Services, ONA Opportunity Centers, the One-Hundred-Year Plan, Onesie,

Paleoclimate, Pallbearer, Peace Corp, the Pill, Placental Abruptio, Points of Light, Postpartum Depression, Pregnancy Tests, Preparedness, Prescribed Burning, Probate, Pro-Choice, Projection, Pro-Life,

May 24, S.+2

21.4. Newish Terms & Phrases in Use Post-S. throughout the Middle Atlantic (draft), cont.

Moon-Washing

The act of telling the children of *Generation E* that they were always meant to be the last generation, that there was never any choice or possibility for a different future, blah blah blah. I doubt Supervisor Harlee will even read this. I doubt I have a supervisor anymore. I can probably stop defining these words and they wouldn't even notice.

Moore's Paradox

Harlee? Are you there?

Morning Mantra (MM)

I can picture a gate. The gate was made out of wire, metal, and wood. What was I doing by the gate? Write your answer below:

Negasayer

What was I thinking there? That I could get in? That I could get out? What side of the gate was I on? Harlee? Please write your answer below:

Negative Carry

The fact that I apparently no longer have a supervisor does not lessen the importance of this document, so I will return to my task of defining. *Negative Carry* is the point at which the cost of sustaining humanity on planet Earth exceeded any possible benefit, occurring approximately *S.-300*, way before any of us were born. This means we shouldn't feel guilty about the state of the world we inherited, as the world we inherited had already been fumigated, dynamited, melted, drilled, scorched, bombed, overcrowded, deforested, and flooded by the poor choices of our ancestors. Let's blame our ancestors. Let us return to the gate. If the gate I mentioned above belonged to one of the communities, whose idea was it to join a community, and was it a good idea? Please answer below:

Opening Day

The date the final *Homo sapiens* will pass on. This will occur roughly between *S.+20* and *S.+37*. I wonder what the last person will look at on *Opening Day*. If I

were them, I would look at the sky, at a flock of birds, ideally ascending. Ideally not vultures. About joining the community, I thought this was what you were supposed to do in the apocalypse, or post-apocalypse, or whatever you want to call what is happening. (Please do not use the word “apocalypse.”) I thought you took the person you loved, you packed a bag, you went to find other people with whom to spend the remaining years, people with whom you would rekindle the best parts of humanity, a bright flame, flaring for a little longer.

Our Family Is the Earth

I don’t think it was a good idea to join the community. Or, rather, I think it was a good idea at first, then it stopped being a good idea. *Our Family Is the Earth* is the motto for the proven *Family Replacement System*. Full phrasing is as follows: “Make our mothers the forest and our fathers the desert. Make our children the current and future flora and fauna of the world. Give us ending.” I say this every day.

June 2, S.+2

21.5. A Proposal of Final Additions to the English Language (draft), cont.

Def. 206: a word for what we’ve done
Prototypes: endende, fugecess, umplore
Decision: declined for definitioning
Reason: none given

Def. 231: a word that encompasses 10.7 billion goodbyes
Prototypes: pionunct, finorous, graflictor
Decision: declined for definitioning
Reason: none given

June 13, S.+2

21.4. Newish Terms & Phrases in Use Post-S. throughout the Middle Atlantic (draft), cont.

Paradox of the Heap

If I say something every day, will I begin to believe it? If I remove a single body from a heap of bodies below a popular overpass, will I still have a heap? Let’s

keep removing bodies one at a time. It doesn't matter where we put the bodies. What matters is that at some point, the heap will disappear. Does a single body determine the difference between a heap and a not-heap? Why does this matter? Why was the community so nice in the beginning and then what happened? I will leave space for you to answer below:

Pileup

The unclaimed bodies of exiters that accumulate in urban areas. Who or what is in charge of removing these bodies? Why did Alexia join the community and then decide she didn't want to be a part of anything? Answer below:

Postphobia

Did I leave the community? If I left, did I leave alone? If I left alone, what happened to Alexia? Was it easy or difficult to leave? Did leaving hurt? Was the hurt physical, emotional, or both physical and emotional? Did they unlock the gate or did they refuse to unlock the gate? Please write your answer below:

Post-Sterilization Depression

Treatment resistant, though rewatching the *Recreations* on continuous loop is known to help. Sufferers may also find joining a *Wideheart Exit* local group to be useful. This type of depression is common in the *Transition*. Alexia had it. Lots of people did. Most people. At its core is an inability to see the good things remaining in the world. Like a good waterfall or a good sunrise. It is a disinterest in current or

future waterfalls and sunrises. Since *S.* was released, I have seen the sun rise dozens and dozens of times. I make a point of standing outside the RV where I sleep to watch the sky transition from dark to light. Each sunrise feels like a chance to start over. If something feels a certain way, can we agree that it's true? If the gate was not made to be unlocked, how did I unlock it? Write your answer below:

Reality Mindset

Here's the thing, I don't believe in answers. Did I alone see a series of beautiful events after I left the community? Does it matter? Questions will always exist. That doesn't mean there will be answers. This makes questions different from defining, where each word possesses a correct meaning. The correct meaning of *Reality Mindset*: an approved focus on what is and will be, rather than what was or could have been. All words are legitimate words. Most questions are a trick, a trail of crumbs, a clue. Clues. I am having trouble staying here in an appropriate *Reality Mindset*. I'm sorry.

July 3, S.+2

21.5. A Proposal of Final Additions to the English Language (draft), cont.

Def. 232: a word for the sounds I hear at night

Prototypes: alactima, foderfin, dystreow

Decision: declined for defining

Reason: *THE LANGUAGE IS FINISHED, GOODBYE*

July 31, S.+2

*21.4. Newish Terms and Phrases in Use Post-*S.* throughout the Middle Atlantic (draft), cont.*

Recreations

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. The *Recreations* are scientist-endorsed CGI footage that reconstruct the world as it will be once we're gone. That world, according to the *Recreations*, is going to be great. It's going to be healed,

flourishing, epic, and wild. Watching the *Recreations* reminds us how this will all be worth it. The program is on your screen. It's on everybody's screen, force-loaded remotely in coordination with the *Day of Notice*. Did the events that I saw outside the gate have nothing to do with human beings but everything to do with our absence? You don't need to answer that.

August 21, S.+2

21.8. Terms Removed from Use Post-S. (draft), cont.—Q-S
Quickening,

Rational Choice, Rattles, Rebound Effects, Receiving Blanket, Reconstruction, Red List, Reduce Reuse Recycle, Refinancing, Reforestation, Restoration Ecology, Revolutions, the Ring of Fire, Risk Assessment, Risk-Based Framing, Risk Management, Risk Perception, Rooting Reflex, Roth IRAs, Rupture Scenario, Rural Development,

Scientific Method, Shallow Ecology, SNAP, Social Security, Species of Concern, Species Recovery Plan, Spring Break, Starter Home, Strategic Planning, Strip Mining, Superfund, Supermarkets, Super Tuesday, Surrogate Mother, Survival, Survivalism, Survivor Outreach Services, Survivors,

September 4, S.+2

21.4. Newish Terms & Phrases in Use Post-S. throughout the Middle Atlantic (draft), cont.
S.

You should know what this is by now.

Screenies

I have more questions you shouldn't answer. Did I hog the beautiful events with my body and my eyes? Did such events make me realize how I lacked importance, how we all did? Will events such as these continue to be beautiful when there is no one, no human, left to witness them? What will the definition of *beautiful* be once we're gone, and who, or what, will determine such a definition?

Screenies are reclusive individuals. Generally, there is hysteria when this type of person's screen goes dark due to power failure or hardware malfunction. Sedation or restraints will likely be needed, if available. Such items will not be available. I was never a *Screenie*. I was something else. What was I? You don't need to answer that. *Screenies* may coincide with the act of *House-Sealing*.

Terraism

The pointless vandalizing of the post-*S.* planet. The philosophy that humans should take as much as they can with them into extinction. Includes the hunting of endangered animals and the destruction of ecosystems. Suggested solution is termination of perpetrators upon sight, allowable via the *ERA*. I once terminated a perpetrator engaged in *Terraism*. He snared a fisher cat and stupidly he put down his gun to work on the snare. I was not a good aim. I wasted bullets. Don't imagine that. Let's imagine sunlight, bright and wide and private, as it enters a grove. The light is living, alive with a silvery throng of insects that lower and raise their wings in unison. We stand in the shade of the trees; we are outside of the light; we see what could be in such light.

To Leave One's Life

That isn't what I saw. After leaving the community, I joined the Transitionists, who have never pretended to be building a utopia. We are not a community; we are a group of individuals connected by a spotty virtual network. *To Leave One's Life* is the preferred term for dying. "I am *Leaving My Life* tomorrow, just like we talked about," Alexia had said, her fingers occupied with the hole on the left knee of her jeans. She wanted to widen the hole. By the end of the day, she succeeded. Really, her jeans were ruined after that. She had flat brown hair riddled with early gray strands. I loved the color of her hair. It was so ordinary and expected. We are trying to make sense; we are trying to leave a record for the wind to read.

The Turnaround

Will occur in the middle period of the *Great Transition* once things settle down. A time that will be marked by growing acceptance, healthy population thinning, and a

decrease in transitional violence. Approximately *S.+3*. I do not have enough matches or food to last through the year. So I will not be here for the *Turnaround*. That's okay. Time is beginning to slow. A day lasts a month; a week will last me years.

Wevidual

The positive hive mentality; the comforting belief that together, as a species, we are finally, all of us, good. We are shining. We shined. I have nothing personal left to tell you.

September 5, S.+2

21.8. Terms Removed from Use Post-S. (draft), cont.—T-Z

Temporary Assistance, Teratogens, Terraform, Thermodynamic Modules, Threshold, Tipping Point, Tourism, Tragedy of the Commons, Transportation Control Measures,

Unemployment Insurance Benefits, UNFCCC,

Vaccinations, VBAC, Vernix Caseosa, Veteran Burial Allowance, Vital Records, Volatile Organic Compounds, Voluntary Commitments, Vulnerability Assessment,

Water Security, Water Stress, Wedge Issue, Women Infants and Children Program, Worldview, WTSHTF,

Zoology, Zygote (human)

September 6, S.+2

21.5. A Proposal of Final Additions to the English Language (draft), cont.

Def. 233+: a word for everything that future generations of humans (do not use the phrase “future generations”) were supposed to create, both good and bad, that they now will not create because there will be no future humans; a word for the last human sound the last human will make before she/he closes her/his eyes forever;

a word for what the animals are thinking about all this; a word for a different outcome where we helped make a different world where we didn't have to go away; a word for the place we imagine we are going versus the place we are actually going; a word for the words we lost or gave up—or did we throw those words away like they were garbage?—they weren't garbage; a word for all the unburied bones that aren't buried because people can't bury themselves; a word for the spaces we are leaving behind and what wi

October 15, S.+2

21.4. Newish Terms & Phrases in Use Post-S. throughout the Middle Atlantic (draft), cont.

Wideheart Exit

I once told a similar narrative about myself to someone like you. This person was disappointed; they wanted an old-fashioned story, one in which we understand everything and explain everything. I asked this person who was like you, “Do you honestly think there is still plot?” Instead of a story, our lives may be the following: a statement, an essay, a myth, a comedy, a dream, an argument, a list, an epitaph. Have you noticed what letter of the alphabet I’m on? I suggest, while there is still time, you go outside and find your own beautiful event. Go find your own gate to bang against. Figure out how to get in or out.

Zero Game

These are games a player cannot win in the old sense of the word win, where winning meant to accumulate objects or to stay alive. So a redefinition is required. In a *Zero Game*, winning becomes the opposite of survival. I am not supposed to use the word “survival.” *S.* is a *Zero Game*, and we are guaranteed to win.

I forgot to write the previous definition.

Wideheart Exits are well-planned mass exit routes involving 10+ people. Preferably completed in seclusion, though on occasion such exits may turn into a spectacle. This is how I would like to go, with others, holding onto a person’s hand or two people’s hands, if I can find a *Wideheart Exit* group. Do

you know of any groups nearby? You may write your answer below. This is your final answer.

Zombie Fallacy

The gap between how popular culture once imagined an apocalypse/post-apocalypse (do not use the word “apocalypse”), full of opportunities for heroism, action, and individual survival (stop using that word), worthy of a multitude of games, movies, novels, essays, and theme parks—versus what post-*S.*-reality is actually like. It is not like a game or a novel or a movie. There are no sexy costumes or rescues. There are dirty clothes. There is a lot of down time. It is quieter than I imagined, at least here in the valley it is quiet, muted, and green, and I am out of food. I saw a bird yesterday morning, a brown bird with white streaks along its breast, at about the time when I also saw the tip of the sun emerging from behind the tree line. I was always told to not look directly into the sun or I will ruin my eyes. It’s okay to ruin our eyes now. I looked into the sun while this bird sang. It sang clearer than I had ever heard a bird sing, and lovelier, as if the world wasn’t ending—because it isn’t—and the bird kept singing until other birds I couldn’t see began to answer, until it was like the whole forest was singing—not to me, or to us, as this was not a song to an end—the birds sang to the world, a song to the sky, to the leaves, to the wind, to the future sky, to the future—not ours, theirs—the sound urgent, celebratory, inhuman, and rising. I closed my eyes. When my eyes are closed, I can still see the shape of the sun.

**“MOST OF HOUSTON WILL SPEND
ETERNITY IN HELL.”**

-Billy Graham

real estate will eventually devastate you

as a bulls-eye the Loop or the 610 is where you wanna be
Arts Gastropubs Thrifting Gentrification

out of that Target lives Sam Houston Tollway or the Beltway 8 it's cheaper to live there but it is very Less Desirable You Are Admitting Your Age

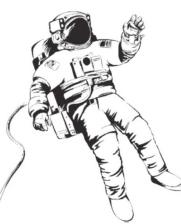
out of the Beltway are: Farmlands Squares
Suburbans Yogurtlands and Happily Ever Costco

because money buys time

and I would say that outside of the Beltway equals a Death Knell on my Cool Factor or whatever but I always ate at Buffalo Wild Wings

*

birth and parenthood reminds me that I am constantly leaking! a thin, permeable membrane away from death or that time is a spectrum and am always nearing (fearing?) death



I take long walks in the morning with my dog and child
I talk a lot inside my own head

I think of HM's tankas she wrote while reciting the poem to herself
think of LC who wrote in her head while sweeping

maybe that's what I will have to do, I said to myself
in a slightly resigned breath (but reignited)

*

writing again feels like

the dream I have
where I am running as fast as I can
muscles straining kicking
gravity sucking pulling like mud
like moving boulders off my shoulders

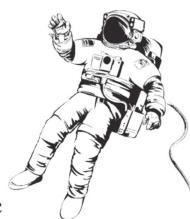
and the shadow gets closer anyway

*

while splitting a meal of chicken teriyaki and stir-fried noodles at the mall food court
I told my husband that I had a secret dream of publishing a collection of essays
I think it was the only place that I felt safe saying that out loud, against the din of
everyone else

but here's the thing—I love reading them but can't seem to write them, mine don't
make sense

I don't know where to start. Do I start from the time I arrived in the US or do I start where
my father goes to jail for hitting my sister



GULF COAST

*

I daydream about living in California
as I march swagger suffer thru
a humidity that feels like the
slick inside of my ass cheeks

but we can't afford to buy in LA
or the Bay

(and when did buying a home become a goal,
a reality for you, you silly silly poet)

a pointed question that my middle school classmates asked me
or the question my students asked me before my husband and I bought a home:

You live in an *apartment*?

*

Her birth story: Do I
start from the time I went into labor or
the time I knew by the heat of my face that I knew I was pregnant

*

we keep marching trucking pushing in this heat
that feels unthinkable at 9 in the morning
using my own salted, sweating shoulder to rub against face drip



Why are we here

one night at dusk
my husband thought it was cute to peer inside of our own windows
to look for our dog and see what she was doing wore business casual chinos
then a cop pulled up to ask, Do you live here

*

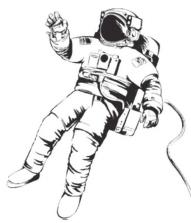
I am tired and
Why are we here

when I parked my car on the street to meet up with family to
look at houses in one go
only to pull up to a circle of confused bodies
hovering my car, ready to tow it away,
trying to wave all away with My bad

so tired and
Why are we

I had already decided to stay for Thanksgiving—it was my junior year of college, and I knew shit was going bad: sister moved out of my parents' apartment, living with a friend. Andrew visited me from Dallas, had just arrived and we went for tacos. Hadn't even taken a bite and got a phone call from my sis: “Dad was arrested—he hit me at the donut shop, and the police are here now.” a response that I still regret to this day:

What did you do



GULF COAST

*

a facsimile of my mom, who looks a lot like her but speaks English, appears inside of my head to say the following:

you need to be so busy that you wouldn't know it that you're sad

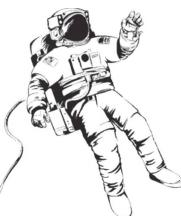
*

I visited the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, to view the Ron Mueck exhibition, wanted to see *A Girl* (a giant replication of a naked newborn) and *Mother and Child* (a miniature replication of skin-on-skin or golden hour between new mom and baby)

In a true agoraphobic, paranoid fashion, I Googled then bought the tickets in advance. I looked up where to nurse in the building. I Googled how to get there and studied the map before getting in the car. I breastfed my daughter as a top up then changed her for the road

*

how inevitable, that with time, every Thing becomes clear



slowly learning my lines and following stage directions to *A Life in Suburbia*

we Google the sizes of houses in Katy or Sugar Land but decide that our house remained intact through Harvey—we can remain in *it*

from To Feel Things and Their Names

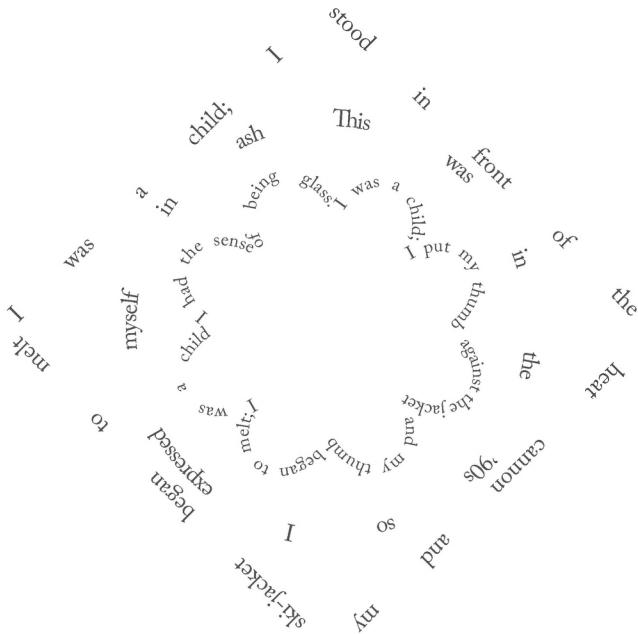
GULF COAST

Toby Altman

I was a child; my mother clipped my ear with her office scissors
I was the 90s so there was no way to express pain
and blood was the ornament of the sink
this was the 90s so there was no way to express pain
so only the sink

I was a child; I fainted at the urinal
and a concrete wall caught my head. After my injury
I could not shit. I ate soft bread and lentil soup;
it sharpened inside me, refined into a stormy liquor.
The relation of being cut, from the inside. Buying a car
should help with that. The fact of having been injured and
my relation with the wall. The blood in my brain
like a freshly laundered blanket: so that I smell
“abundant warm daylight” lavender chlorine grapes

I was a child; I watched a white man slug a shot of vodka. The eye of a squid like a knot of rotten bread, rotating at the bottom of his glass. He slugged that too then he crashed his corvette. I was a child; I did not know I was in the presence of debt. The eye and its relations. The eye and his relation to it. Being cut from the inside.



There is something desirable about being taken apart, being softened. As a loaf of cheese melts in the sun. In this way, I became the scholar of banking and its relations. Its relations are described, by some observers, as a feeling of intense sweetness, calm, and precision. Folded or wrapped in gray paper, an envelope of ashes.

The

child,

whose

history

fermented mortgage

and

travel

I was a child; a stranger took me by the arm and said, "It seemed to me impossible to inaugurate a conversation within myself." I was a child; I did not know I was in the presence of debt. A stranger took me by the arm and asked: "Who is the author of money? Who is the author of grass?"

Presswife

In late 17th- & 18th-century America, many printers' wives took over the business after their husbands fell ill or died.

DINAH NUTHEAD (FL. 1696)

Her flywheel-heart pumps
harder now—

a wounded bird
on crane-leg spokes,

a widowed rib-bone
raging from its cage.

She will salvage all she needs
from loss—

she will not waste
any of her parts.

ELIZABET TIMOTHEE (1702-1757)

She uncorsets herself
rib from rib

—bottles them for boneblack.

She burns them down to char—

a color airless as deep nightsky,
 moonless as mourning dress.

ANNA CATHARINA ZENGER (1704-1751)

She warms her hands
at the millstone,
 blends her waxen ink—

boiled linseed oil,
 boneblack for pigment,
 pine resin to bind.

CORNELIA SMITH BRADFORD (D. 1755)

She lays her type in raised rows

 like milkteeth

line by line
 by line—
all these small mouths
 to feed.

Her long s
reaching out over ligatures—

slender & curved as
 a crane's neck.

ANNE CATHARINE HOOF GREEN (1720-1775)

*What late news?
Which fresh noose?*

She prints her galleys on cotton rag,
holds them to the light

until truth bleeds through—

dark-winged against
cloudwhite sky.

CLEMENTINA BIRD RIND (1740-1774)

Any goodwife knows
how to disappear.

She props open a window—

thinks crow,
thinks sparrow,
thinks crane.

She rearranges her bones—
moveable ligaments
& marrow,

composes a new form.

Her waning body
only press & release.

Latinx Art in the Future Imperfect

You imagine the complex of time and place as ground given to invention, situations of exchange, things made with purpose or as improvised actions in arenas inclined to favor displays of furtive experience. You wonder what pressures conspire such that one form of life, and not another, so endures as to be acknowledged in hindsight. What objects and actors survive in memory over other eventualities indicative of an identical past? Whatever else compels the affirmation of history, a narrative drive seeks to arrange discontinuous events, actions, and artifacts into a plausible field of relation. Regarding his final book, *Before Pictures*, the late art historian and critic Douglas Crimp spoke candidly about the dilemmas of writing proper to objects, social exchanges, and historical description; about the question of tone or voice commensurate with argument and storytelling; about the perspective that wonders where exactly to begin any narrative, and how to navigate the space between the idiosyncratic view and the common concern.¹ A distrust of the developmental account compels a form of curatorial practice toward accounts that work to reflect the incidental temporalities they describe; art histories that pursue alternate narrative or spatial techniques capable of connecting episodes around subjects and locations, in order to gain closer proximity; to inhabit the restless and unruly contemporary commitments to “the experimental exercise of freedom.”²

These reflections came to mind around *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA* and the exhibition’s recent iteration in Houston at Lawndale Art Center (April 6, 2019 – June 2, 2019).³ Curators C. Ondine Chavoya and David Evans Frantz, in research that sought to offer the “first historical exhibition ever mounted on

¹ Douglas Crimp in public conversation with Dean Daderko, Contemporary Museum of Art Houston, 12 November 2016. Douglas Crimp, *Before Pictures* (Brooklyn, New York: Dancing Foxes Press; Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

² Mário Pedrosa, the late Brazilian art critic and theorist, referred to the practice of art and politics as the “experimental exercise of freedom.” Mário Pedrosa, “O bicho-da-séda na produção em massa,” *Correio da Manhã*, Rio de Janeiro, Domingo 14 de agosto de 1966, 4º Caderno, p 3: “Já faz bastante tempo que, tentando analisar o fenômeno, defini a arte de nossos dias como o exercício experimental da liberdade.”

³ *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA*, curated by C. Ondine Chavoya and David Evans Frantz, originated as part of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, an initiative of the Getty Foundation. The exhibition was organized by ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries in collaboration with The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and organized as a traveling exhibition by Independent Curators International (ICI). The exhibition itinerary spanned the following dates and venues: MOCA Pacific Design Center and ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives Gallery, West Hollywood, CA (September 9, 2017 - December 31, 2017); followed by The Hunter College Art Galleries, New York, NY (June 22, 2018 - August 19, 2018); Vicki Myhren Gallery, University of Denver, Denver, CO (September 13, 2018 - December 2, 2018); Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art,

LGBTQ Chicana/o or Latina/o artists,”⁴ found it imperative to deviate from the art historical convention that lends focus to a circle of lesser known artists in the orbit of an allegedly major figure. As well, instead of organizing the exhibition “around an aesthetic or conceptual uniformity across multiple bodies of work by various artists,”⁵ the curators assembled media as varied as Xeroxed flyers, music ’zines, mail-art postcards, fashion wear, videos, text-based art, photographs, and paintings. The assembled works and ephemera, surreptitiously at times, pointed back to artist Edmundo “Mundo” Meza (Tijuana, Mexico, 1955 – Los Angeles, California, 1985) whose brief life and work in East LA had until now remained largely invisible to the mainstream art world and to established Chicano/a formations of the 1970s and 1980s. These collaborations with Meza were “not always immediate or one-to-one, and thus some of the connections may appear unexpected or anomalous.”⁶ Nonetheless, Meza’s attitudes, energies, and promise—cut short at the age of 29, from complications due to AIDS—were central to connecting worlds of art and action in Los Angeles around the women’s liberation movement, gay rights struggles, and *El Movimiento*, the social and aesthetic affirmation of identity for Mexican descendent peoples in the United States. *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA* proposed a narrative based not on categories, formations, and influence, but on encounters that led to chance associations and intentional kinships. The exhibition invited speculation about what an historical account can convey when the premise most resembles the ephemeral cohesions that drove alternate forms of society and belonging. It made visible a little known archive of works and documents that tell the story of alliances, sites of experimentation, and incidents of conviviality. In Los Angeles, from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, these energies gave way to art making, nightlife, social-justice activism, punk music scenes, print publishing, and fashion innovations—all claims to a form of urban visibility—a right to the city—and to makeshift spaces that often parodied mainstream art and culture. Similarly, the curators designed gallery spaces to reflect the “queer synergies” and

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV (January 11, 2019 – March 16, 2019); Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX (April 6, 2019 – June 2, 2019; Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA (September 6, 2019 – December 9, 2019). *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA* and the University of Houston CounterCurrent performance by Jennif(f)er Tamayo, discussed in this essay, formed part of Latino Art Now! 2019, a conference (University of Houston, April 4-6, 2019) and citywide series of art events co-sponsored by IUPRL (Inter-University Program for Latino Research) and the University of Houston. My thanks to Stephanie Mitchell, for providing installation views of *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA*; and to Karen Farber, for the images of Jennif(f)er Tamayo’s *La Queeradora*.

⁴ C. Ondine Chavoya and David Evans Frantz, “Axis Mundo: Constellations and Connections,” *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA* (New York: DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2017) p 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

networks that led to a particular form of world making, at once “promiscuous and capacious.”⁷ In their curatorial essay, Chavoya and Frantz allude to “Julie Ault’s fluid framework for what constitutes an artistic movement; ‘shared concerns and overlapping agendas... social configurations as well as communication and degrees of collaboration between individuals—one thing leading to another, migration of ideas and models, generative social processes.’⁸ A sobering testament to the precarious fate of material culture and to the unpredictability of historical processes, *Axis Mundo* rehearsed the idea that “there are numerous reasons why artists are known or unknown,”⁹ presenting the assembled work in such a way as to “de-center and destabilize canonical formations,” prompting analogous occasions of display to spatialize and mirror the historical account.

The result of multi-year research into both institutional archives and personal collections that uncovered surprising finds and unexpected connections, *Axis Mundo* presented a memory-atlas of images and artifacts from an underground network that connected Mundo Meza to such figures of the Cold-War-era Los Angeles avant-garde as Alice Bag, Vaginal Davis, Simon Doonan, Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, Ruby Ray, Zoe Leonard, Phranc, Pauline Oliveros, and Jack Vargas. The exhibition re-staged the interweaving worlds of the Los Angeles DIY punk scene with Chicano conceptual art and vernacular traditions, including work that employed the aesthetics of *rasquachismo*, an “aesthetic philosophy of the underdog,” Chavoya explains, “a making do that has to do with tactics and tenacity.”¹⁰ In constellations that connect histories of community organizing around questions of same-sex desire, modes of gender expression, and experimental art practices, *Axis Mundo* recovered queer Chicanx histories and artists’ archives structured into thematic arrangements. The associations radiated outward from the self-fashioning proper to gay subcultures (“Chicano Chic”); to glam rock, punk music, and performance art scenes connecting the group Les Petites Bonbons, founded by Jerry Dreva and Robert Lambert, to the multimedia ethos around the band Nervous Gender, whose lead member Gerardo Velázquez produced paintings, graphic design, sound art, video, and poetry (“Art Meets Punk”). Similarly, such venues as Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) were shown to have drawn connections between punk performances, arts advocacy, and AIDS activism.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Cited by Miss Rosen, “True Radicals: An Inside Look at LA’s Queer Chicano Networks, *Huck* (online) June 19, 2018.

Visual relationships in *Axis Mundo*'s curatorial design worked to reflect similar sorts of "queer synergy"—as, for instance, between a painting (*Las Locas*, c. 1980) by Teddy Sandoval (1949–1995, Los Angeles) and neighboring works on display. Sandoval's acrylic and mixed media canvas depicts three anonymous men turned in half body poses as though facing the lens during a camera shoot for an album cover photograph. The scrawls and stray markings that speckle the background in pastel colors appear to resemble the effects, in color photography, of light in the interior of a discotheque captured by inadequate film speed. The shirtless, hairy-chested middle figure wears green eye shadow, his brows tweezed and arched in knowing ascent. He looks on in decided contrast to the featureless faces of the stylishly attired companions to his left and right. All three sport prominent handlebar moustaches. Partially hidden in the anonymity of the nighttime crowd, Latino masculine attributes and the grooming associated with the "clone" aesthetic of 1970s and 1980s gay male subculture, both affirm and contradict the flamboyance to which the title, *Las Locas*, alludes: a reference to screaming queens. Next to this work is photo documentation by Judith F. Baca of her 1975 performance *Vanity Table*, part of the Women's Building exhibition entitled *Chicanas, Venas de la Mujer*. Dressed to play the persona of La Pachuca, the artist gestures to the camera as though catching her reflection in a mirror, enacting a masquerade of Chicana ferocity—what Catherine S. Ramírez calls "aberrant femininity."¹¹ By turns she applies cosmetics, wields a switchblade, and adjusts her neckerchief, blouse collar, and upwardly voluminous hairdo. Sandoval's *Las Locas* and Baca's *Vanity Table* prompt ideas continuous with Patssi Valdez's *Portrait of Sylvia Delgado* (early 1980s), the subject rendered in what Leticia Alvarado terms "high femme (aggressive) makeup," and with the "gender ambiguity"¹² underscored by the male and female sitters in Jef Huereque's *My Parents in Their Matching Zoot Suits* (c. 1973).

Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA viewed the Southern California metropolis as home to simultaneous sites of heightened meaning within a larger national and global context. In this respect a series of work on paper by Carlos Almaraz (1941, Mexico City – 1989, Los Angeles) can be read as emblematic of the exhibition and its method. He produced, in 1970, a series of collages using tiny

¹¹ Catherine S. Ramírez, *Woman in the Zoot Suit* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) p 56; cited in Leticia Alvarado, "Malflora Aberrant Femininities," *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA* (New York: DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2017) p 101.

¹² Leticia Alvarado, "Malflora Aberrant Femininities," *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA* (New York: DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2017) p 95.

magazine cutouts sparsely distributed over a grid-paper surface, titling the small format works with more than a hint of the grand theatrical gesture: *The Conscious Manipulator*, *The Children's Party with A Angel*, *The Important But Clever Lover*, *The Queen's Own*, *Sweet Indulgence*, and *The Young Martyr*. Almaraz had moved from Los Angeles to New York City where, from 1965 and 1970, he rented a SoHo loft from Richard Serra and Nancy Graves, worked as an illustrator, gained exposure to the anti-art strains of dada and Duchamp, the literary cubism of Apollinaire and Gertrude Stein, and an art world that saw Pop art in critical decline but still robustly supported by a network of commercial galleries and collectors. Struggles with depression led Almaraz back to Los Angeles where he reaffirmed a connection to his Mexican roots in the artistic energies of *El Movimiento*. In 1973 he worked with artist Judithe Hernández on a convention mural for Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers (UFW) and became a founding member of the Chicano art collective Los Four (with Frank Romero, Gilbert Lujan, and later, Beto de la Rocha and Judithe Hernández).¹³

In the 1970 collage works, composed during the transitional period between New York and Los Angeles, Almaraz infused these diminutive works with homologies for same-sex desire and its consequences associated with danger, along with references to the animal kingdom and the divine, visually structured by foregrounding the margin or edge of the compositional field. In *The Conscious Manipulator*, a male hand releases what appear to be large thimble-like forms into the air; simultaneously, a grey-scale magazine cutout of a 1960s beefcake, in full-frontal nudity, appears dwarfed in the lower right-hand corner by the encompassing surface grid and by a gargantuan cluster of table grapes nearby. In *The Children's Party with A Angel* [sic], two depictions of lesbian sex—one in black and white, the other in color—feature female couples whose bodies variously embrace and entangle, while an angel, as though lifted from a medieval Book of Hours, kneels in prayer with back turned to the scenes of seduction. In *The Young Martyr* an art-deco locomotive charges headlong toward a courtly maiden—another art historical overlay—a truncated obelisk crowned with an obsidian sphere, and a photo cutout of a woman-identified model seated in partial undress, legs slightly parted. A pair of scissors floats above a 1950s pinup reclining face down in hose

¹³ Oral history interview with Carlos Almaraz, 6 February 1986–29 January 1987 January, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

and garter belt, her body severed by the compositional grid of the collage. Other elements in the series include a fragment depicting a packet of Nestlé's bittersweet chocolate; a flower-bearing child as though reproduced from a vintage Victorian greeting card; a hand-crafted basket, a sign for Camel cigarettes, and a revolver; duplicate male nudes from 1950s bodybuilder magazines that doubled as gay erotica in the repressive climate of the Cold War; and disembodied female legs and other body parts transposed from midcentury softcore print publications. In these collages, Almaraz arranged details derived from the mass media to serve as visual counterparts for the antagonisms that play out between fear and fantasy, between prohibitions and the "ground relative to one's desire."¹⁴ These collages endure as emblems of the queer Mexican-descendant networks that prompted conversations in Los Angeles during the 1970s and 1980s about experience and experiment in art and creative action, driven by sexually non-conformist and ethno-racial demands for cultural equity, social inclusion, resource distribution, and forms of civic reciprocity. The collages argue for the social life of art on an axis that connects one's desire and locality to the larger world.

As with other artists in this exhibition, Carlos Almaraz died from AIDS-related complications.¹⁵ In this respect *Axis Mundo* also served as model for thinking about the intimacy of kinship and artistic practice linked to situations of catastrophe, trauma, and extreme transience. Art historian and theorist Robb Hernandez has proposed that "AIDS's near obliteration of Chicanx avant-gardisms' queerer exponents yielded other modes of recordkeeping, custodial interventions, vernacular preservation, and storage technologies..." In the "response to human loss" during the AIDS crisis, Hernandez identifies an "archival body/archival space" that personifies "another state of *being*, an approximation of *human loss* in the articulation of accumulated records."¹⁶ *Axis Mundo* made visible the radical contingency of persons and practices that comprise the meaningful narratives of a moment. The exhibition exposed the precarious nature of the historical account,

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 7*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 319. "The only thing of which one can be guilty is having given ground relative to one's desire."

¹⁵ Chavoya and Frantz write: "Artists who passed during the heights of the epidemic include Carlos Almaraz (1941-1989), Steven Arnold (1943-1994), Tosh Carrillo (1941-1983), Mundo Meza (1955-1985), Ray Navarro (1964-1990), Richard Nieblas (1950-1994), Teddy Sandoval (1949-1995), Jack Smith (1932-1989), Jack Vargas (1952-1995), and Gerardo Velazquez (1958- 1992). Additionally, artists Jerry Dreva (1945-1997), Tomata du Plenty (1948-2000), and Ricardo Valverde (1946-1998) died before their work could receive the robust attention and scholarship it warrants." See: C. Ondine Chavoya and David Evans Frantz, "Axis Mundo: Constellations and Connections," *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA* (New York: DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2017) p 35.

¹⁶ Robb Hernández, *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicanx Avant-Garde* (New York: New York University Press, 2019) p 6; 22.

accidental kinships or cultivated associations that will or will not have survived—the future imperfect—as to document the incidents of sociability that eventuate in scenes of art and expressive culture.



Inasmuch as *Axis Mundo* looked at urban space as a model to think about histories of ethno-racial and sexual self-fashioning for Chicana/o/x identity, contemporary Latinx artists turn to the landscape of digital capitalism to give new meaning to queer Latinx personhood. Jennif(f)er Tamayo, a queer, formerly undocumented, Latinx writer and performer has developed a multi-platform and multipart intervention, existing in iterations on the page and in the visuality of poetry-as-performance. The performer's transposed voice and body multiply as sites of corporal histories, media critique, identitarian loss of bearing, but also ancestral knowledge prone to ask questions about the violent legacies of slavery and settler colonialism that haunt the present and the specificity of place. The body examined is also multipart: the artist's own, as figured in language, but also in relation to the Nickelodeon television animated cartoon figure Dora the Explorer.

In an artist statement Tamayo writes that “If Nickelodeon’s *Dora the Explorer* was, perhaps, a whitened fantasy of the late 1990s ‘Latin-Explosion,’ or an affective recuperation of Cuban migrant, Elián González, snatched back into the arms of U.S. empire, or a digital production of deracinated pan-Latinidad ready-made for mass consumption, then my various performance-poetry projects, loosely titled *LA QUEERADORA*, take on the digital properties of hyperlinks, glitching and meme-ing to develop a poetics of annotation that critiques *Dora the Explorer*’s enduring participation in the embodiment and deployment of global white supremacy as an infectious *virtual-corpo-reality*.¹⁷

In the poet’s book-length work *YOU DA ONE* (2014/2017)—a print-based performance or theater of voices, what Della Pollock terms “performing writing”—Tamayo created an immersive textual space.¹⁸ In typography that provides a harrowing, excessive, and deranging glimpse into the internet unconscious, celebrity delirium, rape culture, and the immigrant condition, the book is also

¹⁷ Jennif(f)er Tamayo, *LA QUEERADORA Project*, artist statement manuscript, 2019.

¹⁸ Jennif(f)er Tamayo, *YOU DA ONE*, 2nd ed., Akrilica series (Blacksburg, Virginia: Noemi Press, 2017).

an agonizing account of family trauma, a father-daughter interface or reckoning, immigrant narratives of return, in this case to Colombia, and textual orchestrations of melancholy, sarcasm and fury. The book serves as a time-based and visual performance about the desire for access, world-making, inaugural scenes, embodied actions, and about unacknowledged debts; chiefly the frame of performance that prompts affect-in-motion; with this in turn driving commitments between visual and vocal imaginations.

Similarly, in *LA QUEERADORA*, Tamayo examines the “racial project of U.S. Latinidad,” as complicit with the nation-state’s “capitalist and anti-Black enterprise,” through the lens of the artist’s own childhood and “the rise of mainstream internet culture.” Tamayo has stated that insofar as the project of Latinidad and the internet culture “began to ‘enter’ households during the 80s and 90s,” Dora the Explorer (DTE) can serve “as a critical site of inquiry. A ‘live-action’ character [becomes] imbued with a digital materiality key to her production of Latinidad: fluid, placeless, and amorphous.”¹⁹

In this alternate universe, a critical space of enactments, existing simultaneously on the printed page and in performance space—Dora’s antithesis is the symbolic weapon of the law, the phallus of white supremacy. This “white cock” sets into motion a complex system of analogies that connects the surveillance state, the capitalist machine demanding fuel in the form of laboring immigrant bodies, to the Stephen Sondheim/Leonard Bernstein musical *West Side Story*. It transposes Freud’s 1905 case study, “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria,” onto the Dream Act of 2011 (section C paragraph 3), or vice versa; at any rate onto a queer or subordinate desiring subject lost in tyrannical nightmares of domination over a precarious or destitute life.

I won’t lie; like white cock, sometimes I want to crush hearts
 I want to stomp out all the love in all the hearts
 splatter crust broke hearts of my shiny baby sweetiemaks
 but the cost of permanent residency is good moral character
 in which good moral character is determined by a medical examination
 into the caliber of me 21st century pristine slut affect

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

look at me: does it hang on me like drag, overcoatish
like _____
okay-perhaps I like white cock for its bald eagle qualities
Its _____
the way in which white cock screams AMERIKA! AMERIKA!
With its stick drizzle gold Drano paved streets

I WANT TO LIVE IN AMERIKA
EVERYTHING GREAT IN AMERIKA
AI AI AI AI AI AI AI²⁰

In the Houston CounterCurrent 2019 iteration of this work, and as a prelude to the performance proper of *LA QUEERADORA*, Tamayo participated in one of “Ten Tiny Dances” performed by various solo artists or duets in the queer space of Houston’s LGBTQ+ disco Rich’s. This “night club” Dora swayed to disco, reggaetón and cumbia as Tamayo wielded and finally destroyed a prop of the white phallus while taking swigs from a bottle of Colombian *aguardiente*. The printed page as well becomes a spectral site of reversals and substitutions, of writing un-writing itself, with Dora’s selfhood “trapped in the ecosystem of my subjugation... an imagined body dematerialized.” Dora ventriloquizes the obscene fantasy formations and the sinister thoughts of the US nation state and its not so invisible corners of the cultural apparatus that would denigrate or fetishize. “(BROWN) BODIES ARE OVER (BLACK) BODIES ARE OVER (BROWN) BODIES ARE OVER GOD CAN ALL THE (BLACK & BROWN) BODIES BE THROWN OVER! because what better body than the body of the American Language what better body than the written word...”²¹

In text-form the system of analogies unites Dora the Explorer to Ana Mendieta, to Ida Hauer, the Dora of Sigmund Freud’s case study, and to the language of maternal indebtedness. In one section, Tamayo substitutes the name of Freud and other identifying terms with the characters Dora, Boots, Diego, and Swiper in an appropriation of “Dora: An Analysis of a Case Study of Hysteria” by Alex Gatlin. Past the half mark of Tamayo’s 40-minute Houston

²⁰ Rachel Eliza Griffiths, Jennifer Tamayo, Cathy Linh Che, Carolina Ebeid, *Ruth Stone House Reader I* (Vermont: Monk Books, 2016), n/p.

²¹ *Ibid.*

performance, the performer so disrobes from Dora's explorer drag into black lingerie as to conflate Madonna's 1984 iconic pop song "Borderline" with Gloria Anzaldúa's *La frontera*. This "borderland between / our subjectivities / a cave so grand it glitters / like a cut"²² cross-dresses into threshold space where "what one considers a border crisis a crisis of limits is really a crisis of the body and it, the body threatens limits and has its own limits brought into question."²³ The shifts in tone and mood are as abrupt as news feed on the social media, now intimate, now laughable, now sinister: "Or, perhaps , consider my sister, DORA THE EXPLORER in Episode 18 Fairy Tale Land and The True Princesa in which Boots is drugged after he eats the fully grown abortada banana and turns into ZOMBIEBoots. And the gnomes ask do you know how to break the sleeping curse, DORA? You have to become a true princesa so you can save Boots, and then DORA says with a resting bitch face that says that's a lot of work, sure I'll save Boots, I'll become a true princess. Oh celestial DORA of our hearts Border Cross Dresser. DORA blank as white. DORA revised from heritage. I want to rip your sweet brown face off and stitch it on to the tiny sticky bodies at the borderlands and in a chorus so sick and dark it's like a mighty condor chanting HOLA YO SOY DORA! HOLA YO SOY DORA! HOLA YO SOY DORA! DORA DORA DORA THE EXPLORA. Imagine the chorus of the border crossers singing HOLA YO SOY DORA through their g0-old lungs in some kind of communal misery that understands bodies are a way of reading. And this border crisis, this crisis of limits is the connection between: Hola yo soy DORA! and hola yo no puedo ser DORA yo no puedo ser DORA yo no puedo ser DORA! / tu / no / eres—" ²⁴

The 40-minute version of Tamayo's *LA QUEERADORA* leads artist and audience to such syllables that would oblige a kind of physicality, a high metabolism, a gesture language in the locations of mass media derangement, or to the obscene underbelly of unwanted thoughts in a "future imperfect." By future imperfect I have in mind the view attributed speculative writer and novelist William Gibson. "The future is here," he claimed, "it's just unevenly distributed."

In practices, like those of Tamayo and others, the materiality of the page and its concomitant voicing are critical border-spaces of poetry and art capable

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

of energizing alternate geopolitical locations; borderland eventualities and hemispheric desires often staged across landscapes residual to the original brutality and theft of colonial settlement. A Latinx cultural poetics I have in mind appeals to a future imperfect rehearsed in imaginative failures to disavow the hemisphere's violent underside of history. It is a work in progress currently enlivened by a generation of multiracial queer and gender fluid artists and activists crafting pathways for discussing the X in Latinx art. Poet and scholar Alan Pelaez Lopez argues that "Latinx" is "not for everyone. Transgender and gender-nonconforming Latin Americans living in the U.S. have used the 'X' as a reminder that their bodies are still experiencing a colonization invested in disciplining them to fit a standard gender identity, gender presentation, sexual orientation, and a particular sexual performance." For Pelaez Lopez and for poet/performers like Jennif(f)er Tamayo, the "x" is a scar that exposes four wounds that Pelaez Lopez nominates as being the legacies and histories of "settlement, anti-Blackness, femicides, and inarticulation."²⁵

This cultural poetics obtains personas in the research imagination made possible by those artists for whom pattern language and speech so rekindle in the tangible present as to coalesce into that voice Michel de Certeau describes as moving "through an intermediary zone between body and language... strange interval, where the voice gives speech without 'truths', and proximity a presence without possession."²⁶ This presence without possession is to ask what it means to engage an advanced poetic language of public imperative; and whether social engagement is necessarily manifest, specified, awaiting notice or, by contrast, created elsewhere in enacted speech, voiced by personas in time. This dual commitment between visual and vocal imaginations underline complex patterns and experimental relationships animated in immediate or historic context between maker, institution, and audience: breaking the spell, so to speak, of human-made things and their means of circulation; it posits lyric drive as that unfamiliar vitality in which personhood can or cannot know itself as an axiomatic proposition of the historical uncanny. In opposition to forms of certainty over the "opaque landscape of anonymity," a Latinx poetics can bring together works as those that may suggest that in our embodied political identities the visual and the vocal are apt to coincide,

²⁵ Alan Pelaez Lopez, "The X In Latinx Is A Wound, Not A Trend," *EFNIKS*, September 13, 2018.

²⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, translated by Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) p 230; 241.

but more likely to endure as mutually dissolving ostensible selfhoods. Here, *LA QUEERADORA* intones provisional parting words:

these days i'm into negativity, like being less than , like being zero
like the possibility of zero to be so lacking it burns holes on all it touches
i imagine myself scorching
zero, deflated,
effervescent—a halo
i believe in the power of nothing
because first, fuck power
and second, could i coronate myself with a glowing nothing
i would do it forever, i am beautiful in the space of nothing in which I burn
the cavity of me outlined in pink droopy leaflets, scorched
from the inside out. don't touch me i'm nothing.²⁷

That nothing is neither a disintegration nor a vanishing. The zero circles back to enliven Latinx personhoods—a vocal, visual, and embodied *bricolage*—to empower the imagination, the underground place where, as Gloria Anzaldúa once insisted,²⁸ the possibility of uniting all that is separate can happen and make happen.

²⁷ Rachel Eliza Griffiths, Jennifer Tamayo, Cathy Linh Che, Carolina Ebeid, Ruth Stone House Reader I (Vermont: Monk Books, 2016), n/p.

²⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa. *Borderlands: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute, 1987), p 79.

p. 177, Fig. 1.

Installation view of *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA* at Lawndale Art and Performance Center.
Photo by Nash Baker; courtesy Lawndale.
Featured on the back wall, from right to left:
Teddy Sandoval, *Las Locas*, c. 1980;
Judith F. Baca, four vertical photographs,
documentation from the performance *Vanity Table*, 1975;
and Jef Huereque, *My Parents in Their Matching Zoot Suits*, c. 1973.

p. 178, Fig. 2.

Installation view of *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA* at Lawndale Art and Performance Center.
Photo by Nash Baker; courtesy Lawndale.
Featured on wall, left to right, upper to lower row:
Carlos Almaraz, *The Conscious Manipulator*, *The Children's Party with A Angel*, *The Important But Clever Lover*; *The Queen's Own, Sweet Indulgence*, *The Young Martyr*, 1970.

p. 179, Fig. 3.

Installation view of *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA* at Lawndale Art and Performance Center.
Photo by Nash Baker; courtesy Lawndale.

p. 180, Fig. 4.

Installation view of *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA* at Lawndale Art and Performance Center.
Photo by Nash Baker; courtesy Lawndale.

p. 181, Fig. 5.

Jennif(f)er Tamayo, *La Queeradora*,
installation and solo performance at MATCH Houston;
CounterCurrent 2019, Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts,
University of Houston, 10-11 April, 2019.
Photographer: dabfoto creative

p. 182, Fig. 6.

Jennif(f)er Tamayo, *La Queeradora*,
installation and solo performance at MATCH Houston;
CounterCurrent 2019, Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts,
University of Houston, 10-11 April, 2019.
Photographer: dabfoto creative

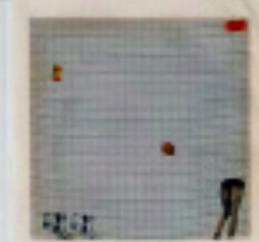
p. 183, Fig. 7.

Jennif(f)er Tamayo, *La Queeradora*,
installation and solo performance at MATCH Houston;
CounterCurrent 2019, Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts,
University of Houston, 10-11 April, 2019.
Photographer: dabfoto creative

p. 184, Fig. 8.

Jennif(f)er Tamayo, *La Queeradora*,
installation and solo performance at MATCH Houston;
CounterCurrent 2019, Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts,
University of Houston, 10-11 April, 2019.
Photographer: dabfoto creative











LA QUEERADORA



MY DOA IS A
FORM OF HEALING





Not Yet Ring Lardner

I said to him that I had been trying to write a story in a Ring Lardner sort of style. He asked me what a Ring Lardner sort of style was. Ring Lardner was a writer of humorous stories, I said. He wrote back in the 1920's about your average sort of guy, what we used to call a middle-brow kind of American man—though back then the average sort of middle-brow guy was not like what he is now.

This wasn't a very good description. But I had already lost him anyway—you have to get his attention with the first few words, and then keep it.

A few days later, I read him my story.

He said there was no beginning, no end, and no plot. He asked if that was the way Ring Lardner would have written it.

Well, no, I said. I'm still working on it.

Years ago, in a book I took out from the local library, I found a letter that was just like a monologue by a Ring Lardner character. The guy was writing from Florida to his buddy, and the letter was about going to Spring Training and about his wife's health. I kept the letter, it's somewhere in the house, but I've never been able to find it again. The more time goes by that I can't find it, the more it seems to me, in my memory, a perfect Ring Lardner story.

The Joke

When the strait-laced brothers dropped by, church-goers Barry and Austin Knickerbocker, to give us their bills, I was embarrassed by the state of the house—the kitchen they walked into from the porch, and the living room, the two places they would see. Clothes and toys strewn everywhere. Stains on the cabinet doors. Dishes piled on the counters and in the sink. The high chair tray sticky. It was no excuse that I was a tired young mother, helping to support us all, and taking care of the house as best I could. And now the baby's father and I were talking about a separation.

Barry needed a pen to write something on his bill. I gave him a pen that was lying on the kitchen table and walked into the living room with Austin to show him the ceiling.

Later, when they were gone, I looked at the bill, which we would now be able to pay. We had had no money at all, just \$42 in our savings account, and then my husband's father had died—suddenly, out of the blue. He was a bachelor and a bit of a rake. My husband had gone down to New Jersey and sold his Cadillac and come home with a check for \$10,000.

I looked at the door they had gone out of, and the empty driveway where their truck had been parked. Then I picked up the pen and looked at it.

Printed on the pen was a joke: “What’s the difference between parsley and pussy? You don’t eat parsley.”

I laughed so hard, then—not exactly at the joke, more at the joke plus the situation—that the baby, off in the next room, started laughing too.

We had probably taken the pen with us from my father-in-law’s house when we were cleaning it out.

But later, I thought: I don’t know about what other people do, but I know that we eat parsley.

The Other She

From where she is, in another part of the house, she hears his voice in the bedroom, in the distance, speaking gently, domestically, thoughtfully to her. He does not know she is not in the room.

And for a moment, then, she feels there is another she, with him, maybe even a better she, and that she herself is a spurned she, a scorned she, there at the end of the hall, far away from the room where they have something nice going on together.

Portrait of Jealousy as a James Bond Villain

A few things we know for sure:

it will be convoluted, it will drag on too long, halfway through you will wish you had never started—but there are perks too:

Ursula Andress in the white bikini with the warrior belt, Melina Havelock & her menacing crossbow

Most of it's circumstantial, though:

pure reaction, intellection on ice, flashy cars & foolish girls & one precious suicide capsule

You remind yourself:

Laura Mulvey was right about the gaze, how it always stems from a patriarchal place...

Three dots become connected:

envy . . . objectification . . . avarice

Greedy to *see & be seen*,

you ignore M's advice, you disregard all Money Penny's warnings (that look in her eyes...)

Recurrent accusations of *Don Juanism*—

sexual promiscuity motivated by impotence, feelings of inferiority, or unconscious homosexual desire

All sex & subterfuge, conquest & espionage:

elaborate entrapments (electrocuted by eels, strangled by pythons in a swimming pool...)

What are the odds?

Today, transposed: a Lexus & a license to merge—easily, amid the stupefying traffic

Dinner out & breakfast in bed,

Lucrezia Borgia's ring the retro ornament of "offing" someone (though "outing" may prove more effective)

O unconscious wish! O imaginary signifier!

voyeurism . . . fetishism . . . disavowal

Section 14

That hereafter no State court or court of the United States shall admit Chinese to citizenship; and all laws in conflict with this act are hereby repealed. (1882)

then it was time to go to work. the laboratory lay with its innards spilled open: beakers and microscopes, fish skin stretched taut, then mounted onto slides. stray hairs on tiles, as thin as matchsticks, stiff beneath her boots.

in another year—not hers—fields yawned wide.
men riding boats came, in hoards, with their hands in their pockets, docking their mouths on hard crusts of bread. a string of questions cast their bodies to tighter nets, criss-crossed and dented at the skins:
how many stairs alight the case in your sister's house?
what are the locations of moles on your sister's body?

shame wept inside a salty mouth. answerless,
englishless, they cocked their thumbs to the dirt.

in her year, she crackled her thumb against
the glass. gills and scales. men and the dollops of their
calves, beating against a barrack bed. *home, home.*
want to go home. she placed an eye through
the microscope to look at the specimen: scales,
omega, silver, fat, a slow ghost crawling past,
those men in their boats, *China, California*, only
to be sent back. the mole above her lip glinted. her
body, ancient with steam, pressed its meat
against the lens. if she looked hard enough, could
she see them there? tiny men sailing a gilded strip
of fish skin, waving their oars, *remember me,*
remember me, begging her for a piece of land?

Secretive

Trust me, I was not born cruel.
Should I make a distinction between the cruelty of talk
and the cruelty of touch,

the cruelty of turning away?
Like erasure of doubt
as when I sleep hoping the winds

pass and wake to a treetrunk
crushing the roof? My friend who survived
a hurricane left a message for me

too early this morning. I listened
from a cloud of gray satisfaction I
wish I had imagined. With only her voice

angling through phone lines teased and patched
for the hour, she couldn't prove a thing
about my consciousness.

Simple to get by with demurral. Protect the wound
the lie laid open and the disappointed one
excuses the moment, the body

as cage—but not if this strategy
keeps coming up favorite, the usefully
transparent you can't accuse because

you believe in proof. You've agreed,
what can be seen and counted.
Eyelids cracking apart like eggshells,
peanuts or praise at the sound of a bell.
From the rubbery side of a continent,
conjecture. At the bridge
of every house, a bathtub,
into which you're advised to pad your body
when the tornado balloons.

I used to think cruelty a kind of strength
because I was helpless against it.
Omission might be enough,
measured to the cut like a bandage
that sticks without tape because blood
seeps up like glue. Somehow I'll forget
to be cold. What I've lost
was accidental. I pick up a habit and I talk
about it all day where no one hears.

Leave me alone, I'm sleeping.
Cross-armed like a soldier on the bed.
When I slide my leg an inch either way
morning's colder. Like a tissue
of skin I've grown into saving my life
like hearts rushed to transplant patients,

in ice chests, on planes, passed off by workers
in too much of a hurry
to recall how someone's chest

weighed a whole pound more
and someone's eyes moved
across the shape of a day

and the promise of eternity belonged
in prayer. The veranda they run to,
the scientists. Who believe

it is good to give what one has
no use for. They are, of course, right,
as far as it goes—the shock

of a dead heart twisting as it's reborn.

The Motherer/The Mothered

Da Vinci was the first person to realize that light entered our eyes from without. Before that, people thought it was sent out from within. These tiny little pupils are all we have to look out on the world with. Some scientists say reality is nothing more than a hologram, a projection, an illusion of light, which makes everything appear three-dimensional when in fact it's only two. Karl Pribram, a neuroscientist, and David Bohm, a physicist, came to this conclusion simultaneously from different ends of the spectrum. Pribram said that our brains, with our memories, the foundations of our very selves, continuously create these holograms. Bohm extended this idea to the universe, calling it a metaphor. At the implicate layer of the hologram, time and space do not exist, events, experiences, meaning, all fold into one another, with no cause, no effect, imagination and reality ultimately indistinguishable. As a child, I used to sit in an armchair in the living room of the house I grew up in and stare down at the wooden end table next to me, the way the light glossed the shaped octagonal surface with an impenetrable sheen until I shifted and the light plunged down, down, further down, deep into the wax, revealing scratches below the surface. A baby now nurses. A black and white picture of a whale, placed above a changing table next to a window, a frame of squares following one another around in a circle. Da Vinci said that the worst thing ever for a work of art is for it to live up to the artist's ideal. What greater work of art might we be here to create than ourselves? (*Remember when your mother told you you would never have the imagination she did?*) The leaves sparkled in the first part of June, and the duck pond nearby too. Wind wrinkled water rippled pockets of light whose position flickered with the breeze. I want to know what is real, the layer behind the layer, to catch a leaf and pull it back. If you remove a glass windowpane and set it out on the world oh what you can see through that empty hole and through that frame set out on the world. A highway hums the hum

of the vast void, a line of trees, from a deck in Delaware, the interplay of light and shadow making them appear deceptively thick as though they can separate me from the humming. And once I lay in the grass at night, staring up at the stars, up at their depths, and thought how the trees looked two dimensional in the dark. Or a whole forest through which patterns of possibility might emerge. I read: *An operational environment includes the individual and the individual's external world. The concept of the operational environment has been extended to include the quantum sea.* Jim Gates, a physicist, said once at the World Science Festival in New York, where he was a speaker on a panel on what it means to be human, *We are blessed with the ability to know our mother. We are conscious of more than ourselves. And just as a child sees a mother, the species' vision clears and sees mother universe*, and the baby cries in the store in the mall, and I heard him cry the whole way out of the store, the whole way out into the mall, as it became a distant echo, and I followed that cry through a maze of aisles in a different store to locate him. When I was four I got lost in a store because I ran circles around a clothing rack. A lavender turtleneck, a closed-mouth smile, a ghost of another frame, shimmers, quivers, blinks, from the wall. We are blessed with the ability to *know our mothers*. But if you cut a hologram in half, the whole is contained in each part. A friend says of another's writing, *she has trouble making meaning from experience*, and, how are our eyes supposed

to contain

all of this?

How we can be so aware
of being contained
within ourselves and yet

contain

all

of the things
around us,

and in June,

before the draught,

to catch

a leaf

and pull

it
back

The Matchmaker

Su's day in the matchmaking business started, as it usually did, at the hospital. He drove his shiny van to the center of the rural town some thirty miles from his home. By the time he arrived soon after nine, the sun was lighting up the façade of the hospital. Built in the 1950s, it had not been renovated since. Two ground floor windows were broken. The gutters in front stank of rotten fruits. Despite its dilapidated appearance, it was the only hospital for the town and for ten neighboring villages. *If it weren't for the sunshine, Su thought when he pulled up in his van, it would look no different from a crematorium.*

Nine o'clock was a perfect time to start working. The doctors were already off on their morning patient rounds, having just finished a cup of green tea to lubricate their teeth and tongues so that they could repeat, "What's brought you here?" "I'll give you a prescription," and "Next, please," more than fifty times every day. The nurses had finished their staff meeting and were hanging new, large saline bags over the patients' beds. They were ready for a chat.

"You've got a new perm, Nurse Li! It looks great on you!" Su greeted a middle-aged woman as he got out of the elevator. The notice on the wall said the elevator was for "Staff Only," but he always took it. The fourth floor, where the ICU was located, was his favorite floor. Always empty and quiet except for the visiting hours in the late afternoon, it didn't smell like the rest of the hospital—no human sweat or stale perfume, no poignant sterile alcohol, and no formalin—the breath of ghosts. Li was a plump woman who used to be skinny before she got married and had a son. It wasn't apparent that she had gotten a perm. Her hair reminded Su of the dog-eared pages of an old book. The only curled part was the ends. But she must have been eager to preserve her looks; her lips were blood red, a stunning sight in her weary-looking face otherwise without makeup.

"That's so sweet. You know I haven't been to the salon for months," Li said with a broad smile. The upper part of her body tilted slightly toward Su.

"How would I know? You always look great. You've bought a new lipstick, right?" He nodded at her lips.

“Oh, stop it!” Li began to giggle, covering her mouth with her bare hand the way a shy schoolgirl would. “It’s no use flattering me. The girl in the ICU is still alive.”

“Oh,” Su said, glancing over in the direction of the ICU. The two thick, steel doors looked stained and sooty. He wondered how the girl could still breathe in a place like that.

“And no serious accidents reported today,” Li said. A smirk flashed at the corner of her mouth as if she were telling a joke.

“Oh,” Su said again. This time he had a gloomy feeling. Outside, drifting clouds covered the sun, making even the fourth floor dark and shadowy.

“When do you need to find a girl’s body? I mean, for that woman’s son?” Li unscrewed the lid of a thermos and started to blow off the white steam.

“Tomorrow.” He looked at his watch, although it did not show the date. “Otherwise she’ll have someone else look for it.”

“She’s really in a rush, isn’t she? Her son just died two weeks ago? In a car wreck?”

“Some people can’t wait. They want their unmarried sons to rest in the soil as soon as possible so they won’t be haunted.”

Both Li and Su turned to shoot one more look at the doors of the ICU. The sun came out of the clouds and cast a shaft of light on the floor. As if encouraged by the light, Li poked at Su’s elbow and asked in a low voice, “Hey, honestly, how much does the woman offer for the match?”

Su blinked and smiled.

Li poked him again, this time on his leathered chest. “Come on. We’ve been friends for years. I won’t tell the others. I know you’re getting rich. Look at your car. Look at your leather jacket. Tell me, is it this much?” She held up four fingers.

Su only smiled, trying to suggest a bolder guess.

“Oh, Su! You guys are making money easily! Look at me! I have to work three day shifts and two night shifts every week, and my salary in a year is not a third of what you can make from one deal!”

He caught a trace of jealousy in Li’s tone. Quickly, he smiled—jealousy might make her less helpful—and said, “Not that much. I have to pay others to get the work done. And seriously...” He stepped closer and breathed the rest of his words

into her left ear. “Is there any chance she’ll die tonight or tomorrow morning? Can you ask the doctor about it?”

“You’d be better asking Old Heavenly Father than asking the doctor,” she said in a raised voice.

While she busied herself closing the thermos, he put a thin, red packet of money on her desk and left. The contents, he knew, would make her happy enough to talk again soon.



Su was somewhere in his forties. Fifteen years ago, he had married a woman from a neighboring village. Ping was considered a good wife; she took over all the household duties, all the farm work, and cared for his parents before their respective deaths. She gave Su two healthy sons. But she was unhappy. It was written on her face. At first, Su guessed it had to do with how poor they were. When he was rich enough to build a new house for his family, he thought Ping would be happy. Just count how many people had come up to her and said what a great husband she’d found on the day Su hosted a feast in the new house!

That night, after all the neighbors left, taking with them their noise and warmth, he realized it was freezing outside. He quickly shut the front door against the wind, mounted the staircase, pushed the bedroom door open to the yellow lamplight, and climbed under the quilt where his wife already lay. The quilt had been warmed by a stove underneath the brick bed; it was very comfortable. He wanted to chant something like, “Sweet, sweet home,” but before he opened his mouth, Ping reached to turn off the lamp, lay flat, and split her thighs apart like a pair of tongs. Entering her body, he smelled a mixture of onions and foul fish, even though neither of them had appeared on the dinner table that night. The moonlight sifting in from the curtains lit up Ping’s face. She was always a plain woman, but tonight her wide-open eyes reminded Su of the dead. And she was silent; he couldn’t even hear her breathing. He had planned to ask her what she thought about their new house, but now he saw no point in raising the question.

After that night, they did not have sex anymore. Ping seemed to find his lack of interest a relief.

Su's marriage, like that of everyone he knew, had been arranged by a matchmaker. He never asked Ping why she'd agreed to marry him; he knew why he chose to marry her, though: back then, he couldn't afford the betrothal present requested by the families of other women. Su, too, was a matchmaker, but the matches he arranged were between the dead: ghost marriages. He suspected Ping hated him for what he did for a living. But he was good at his job, and ghost marriages were a long-time local tradition.

He was driving away from the hospital when his phone rang. His client, the woman who had just lost her only son, had dialed his number.

"If you fail to find my son a daughter-in-law by Saturday," she shouted, "I'll replace you. And don't you dare use an old granny's body to fool me. I'll have someone check on the body. I have enough money."

Su wanted to shout back, "I know you have enough money. You have two daughters who are living in big cities doing that kind of thing." No one had told Su anything about the woman's daughters, but he knew immediately after catching his first glimpse of her newly built villa with a swimming pool. In an inland village, if someone's house stood out like hers, she must have at least a daughter in a city, minding that sort of business.

"Yes, Mrs. Shi," he said obediently. "I'm trying very hard to look for a suitable young girl for your son. But things are hard nowadays since young girls have all gone to work in big cities."

"I don't want to hear any excuse. Either you prove you can earn the money, or you let someone else do it." Mrs. Shi hung up.

Su didn't remember exactly when the practice of ghost marriages had made a comeback. In the era of Chairman Mao, all religions and superstitions were banned. If a family lost a young, unmarried son, they used paper or dough to make a match for him. As a boy, Su had watched a life-sized dummy girl being put into a paper wedding dress. He remembered craning his neck through the window of Old Yao's shack as Yao drew a face on the head of the dummy bride.

"What's that for?" Su asked.

The next thing he knew, Yao was rushing out of the shack. He stuffed a candy into Su's hand and patted him on the shoulder. "Good boy. Don't tell anyone what you've seen."



As he put his cell phone back in his jacket pocket, Su saw that it was nearly ten o'clock. He had two hours until lunchtime. The idea of three predictable dishes, two bowls of rice, and a taciturn, expressionless wife added to his gloom. He still had time to go around to a few villages and try his luck, although he suspected no good would come of it. His van bounced over the bumpy country road. It was fall. The farms were yellowed; the hum and drone of dying insects reverberated in the villages. Su kept his front windows open.

He circled the farms, hoping to catch sight of floral wreathes or a newly piled mound of dirt. But if someone had died, he knew he would have already heard. He had informants in every village—on the first of the month, he gave each of them two packages of cigarettes. Su's eyes darted to meet those old graves. He hadn't lied to Mrs. Shi—his business was limping—he hadn't even cashed a deal this year. A couple of years ago, he could pinpoint an old tomb with his eyes, make a mental note, and come back later in the night with a spade, and perhaps with a helper too. They would dig up the coffin, remove the contents, and bring them to an undertaker that Su had known for years. Chen was a professional who answered the door twenty-four hours a day. His rule was, "As long as the bones are still there, I can make it look like a real person." But, of course, he charged on the basis of completeness.

Before the restoration began, Chen would burn three sticks of incense in front of a Guan Yu statue and kowtow three times on a red mat before the altar. "I'm guilty," he said in a low voice, "but please have mercy on me. I have to raise my family." Then Su followed suit. Chen already had three daughters, but he wanted his wife to give him a son. After Chen finished this ritual, he looked into Su's eyes and said, "If I don't do this, my daughters will have to be prostitutes in big cities."

Su nodded to show he understood.

Then Chen would take out his toolbox. He never let Su observe the secrets of his trade but sent him to enjoy a cup of tea in the living room. After a couple of hours, Chen would amble into the living room, cheeks glowing. “Su, go take a look. I’m done.”

The incomplete body of an old woman who had died two years ago was transformed into a sleeping beauty in her early twenties wearing a fine, red Chinese wedding dress. The skin of her face looked as smooth as silk.

“Satisfied?” Chen would ask. Su would begin to count the bills.

Now, as he passed a wheat field, Su recalled his client’s threatening words: “I know what tricks you matchmakers play. I’ll have someone check on the body.”

She didn’t understand that even the body of a granny was hard to find. All the tombs were now cemented like those of ancient emperors and empresses. When a tomb robber was caught two years ago in a neighboring village, many locals were stunned to find their parents’ tombs empty. “Nowadays people have no shame,” they barked. “They even rob the tombs of old women.”

When he passed the village coops, Su found himself thinking of the couple he had talked into giving up life support for their vegetable daughter last year. The next morning, when he arrived at the hospital, he found them right outside the front door; they had regretted their decision and wanted to resume life support. “She died already,” he lied quickly. The mother collapsed and immediately Su drove her and the father home in his van.

Later, when Su returned to the hospital and took the elevator to the fourth floor, he felt guilty. Nurse Li had been waiting for him. “The girl just died,” she said.



Su arrived home around noon. Ping was sitting at the table, leafing through a book with a black cover and blood-red margins: the Bible. The three dishes on the table exactly matched his prediction. Ping rose to greet him when he came in and sat down again after he had taken his seat. All was wordless. When he picked up his chopsticks, she began to say grace in an almost inaudible voice. Su had to put them down and wait for the final “Amen.” As soon as it was spoken, he picked

up the chopsticks again and reached for the fried minced pork. Ping ate in tiny mouthfuls and did not make a sound.

Su wondered when his wife had converted to Christianity. Perhaps it was around the same time as the young people began fleeing to the cities for work. Now the only people remaining in the villages were old people, married women, and kids, as if in the aftermath of a war. When Su walked the country roads to get in touch with his informants, women would cram small cards into his hand: "Christ makes your children smart," "Christ makes your wife fruitful," "Christ makes your husband rich."

Su didn't know which of the three wishes had brought Ping to Christianity. His guess would be the first.

The only times Ping seemed alive was when their two sons came back from boarding school on Friday nights. The elder son was in ninth grade and the younger was in eighth. Su liked those nights because dinner was unpredictable. Ribs, fish fillet, shrimp were all possibilities. Watching her across the table on Fridays, Su would wonder whether his decision to send their sons to boarding school was too hard on Ping. Without meaning to, he had shortened the period she seemed alive from seven nights a week to only two.

"It's a very good school," Su had said two years ago. "It promises they'll get into a good high school, which, you know, can lead them to a college in Beijing or Shanghai. I want my sons to have a better future." He immediately regretted saying "my." "I mean, our sons. You understand, right?" He searched Ping's face for understanding, but she only stared at him with her abysmal eyes. He had taken her lack of tears for acquiescence.

Ping finished eating more quickly than he did. She placed her chopsticks on the table and started to read the Bible in an almost unintelligible voice. He had gotten used to this routine. But today something felt different. He looked up from his bowl and found that she was watching him while she read. As if the Bible verses were written on his forehead.

"What are you doing?" Su put down the bowl and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

"They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Ping's voice was suddenly clear.

“Stop,” he shouted. “What is it?”

Ping paused. Mouth still opened, she looked through Su’s eyes, as if she were staring at two holes on the wall.



Poor Ping has been living a sheltered life, Su thought when he got back into his van. She doesn’t understand that the real world is never black and white or heaven and hell. He took a small daily planner out of the glove compartment. For years he had been keeping a succinct account of his business—a + for the day a deal was cashed, a 0 for the rest. Leafing through all the zeros for this year, he felt pain in his chest. If things went on like this, he wouldn’t have enough money for both of his sons’ boarding school tuition; he would have to choose between them.

The planner had a different quote for each page. “You have to be ruthless to succeed.” He touched the saying for this week.

Early in the year, rumors had reached the town that ghost marriage matchmakers like Su were going so far as to kidnap and murder young women. Nurse Li had refused to accept his calls for several days.

“How could you believe that?” Su said as he crammed a Swatch watch into her hands after she finally agreed to see him. “If that had been true, all the matchmakers for the living would have branched out. No work left for us.”

Now, as he rolled the planner into his pants pocket and revved the engine, he wished he knew where to find a young woman, dead or alive. His cell phone rang. It was Nurse Li.

“The doctor asked to see the girl’s parents. They’ll be here in half an hour.” Her voice was muffled—she must have been cupping her mouth.

Su said he would be right there. He turned and drove back to the hospital. At moments like this, he felt he was being looked after by some god, even though he wasn’t sure which one: Guan Yu, the Old Heavenly Father, or Christ?



When the elevator doors opened on the fourth floor, Su saw a middle-aged couple was already sitting on the bench outside the ICU. The mother wore a long dress with floral patterns and a flannel cape, the fashion twenty years ago. She buried her head into the embrace of her husband, sobbing. The father looked stern and composed. He wore a white shirt and a suit, the uniform of a local three-star hotel. Su was glad he had left his leather jacket in his car; now he only had on a wrinkled shirt.

He lingered for a while in front of the ICU doors before sitting down next to the mother.

“You are waiting for the visiting hours, too?” he asked.

“My daughter. The doctor said her condition was not optimistic.” The woman burst out crying again.

“Who are you visiting?” the man asked.

“My wife. She’s just had brain surgery. Not good.” Every time he needed such an excuse, he always claimed his wife was seriously ill. He could have said his father or mother instead—the lie would no longer harm them—but even if he reminded himself beforehand, the scenario of having a dying wife leapt out of his mouth.

“My daughter also had brain surgery. It didn’t go well.” The woman stopped crying and looked at Su tenderly.

“What did the doctor say?” he asked.

Li walked slowly past on her way to the bathroom. He felt her cast an admiring glance in his direction, but luckily the couple didn’t notice.

The woman said the doctor had asked if they would give up the emergency treatment.

“I heard the emergency treatment is very painful for the patient,” Su said. After a moment, he added, “If they ask about my wife, I won’t let them do it.”

The woman started sobbing again. The man told Su they had already renounced the emergency treatment; that was why she felt so sad.

“Remember we did this for her good,” the man said, patting her gently on the back.

Poor parents! Su thought. *For the rest of their lives, this decision will compound their earlier one to bring her to this terrible hospital in the first place and make them even more guilty.* “What’s her condition now?” he asked.

They told him she was in a coma. It had been one month today, and by law, the doctor needed to give them a critical condition notice. After another two weeks, he would ask them to decide whether they would renounce all the treatment and let her go.

“I won’t let her go,” the woman almost shouted. “I’ll take care of her as long as she still has breath.”

“Calm down,” the man said. “It’s been only a month. Some say within the first three months the patient can still wake up.”

Su’s heart sank at the words “three months.” He needed their daughter now. “But the ICU costs so much!” he said as he smoothed the creases out of his shirt. “I work in a grocery store and I can’t afford it. I’m here to ask the doctor what the chances are of my wife waking up. If it’s less than 30%, I know I have to let her go.”

Li came out of the bathroom with a fresh coating of blood-red lipstick. Su started to hear other noises: footsteps on the stairs, the ringing of the elevator. He smelled takeout food. In half an hour it would be visiting hours.

“Have you had your meal?” Su stood up. “I’m going to get something to eat. Would you like me to bring you something?”

It was a test, and as he had expected, the woman thanked him politely and took out three steamed buns from her purse, giving two to her husband, keeping one. The sign was either good or bad: they had no money and they could use some, or they would make any sacrifice to keep their daughter alive. Su took off to pretend to eat, giving the couple time to ruminate on what he’d implied.



Outside, Su found himself unexpectedly hungry. He bought a roasted sweet potato from a vendor riding a tricycle. *What a poor couple! They don’t even have money for meals.* He looked around at the crowd outside the hospital: a shriveled granny sitting on the curb to sell gardenia flowers, a young couple burying their heads in clouds of white steam the whole day to keep a stand of steamed buns, and an ancient man with a hunchback limping back and forth to collect coins for bicycle parking. Looking at these miserable people, Su was filled with human pity.

“How’s business?” he asked the sweet potato vendor.

“Hard. Not enough to make a living,” the vendor said.

“Child?”

“Two daughters.” He held out a sweet potato. “Another one?”

Su shook his head and started to walk back. The sun was setting. The upper part of the hospital basked in warm, orange light while the rest of the building was dark blue. A window on the top floor was flung open. Su shielded his eyes from the bright reflection.

If I had to transfer one of my sons to public school, he wondered, which would it be? His elder son worked very hard and kept good grades. He’d land at a top university, but only with the help of good teachers. The younger son was smart, but he was not yet sensible. If he had to go to public school, he might end up in a teenage gang.

Su finished the rest of his sweet potato in two big bites. He rehearsed the questions he planned to ask the couple: Who was going to take care of them when they got old? Who would pay for hospitalizations, nursing homes, and so forth? They needed to think about themselves. Then he would suggest the idea of a ghost marriage; that way their daughter would rest in peace and they could receive a betrothal present...



“Sir, have mercy on us. Give us some money.”

A dirty hand grabbed Su’s sleeve. Su shook it off promptly. A peasant woman in her forties came to her knees in front of him, her other hand holding a girl of about ten, skinny and pale.

Occasionally one or two peasants from neighboring villages would walk for hours to the hospital, the most populated place in town, to beg for money. Su usually ignored them, shaking his hand as if swatting a fly. “I’m poor,” he would say. “I don’t have money.” But today, something about the girl caught his attention. Her big, lucid eyes reminded him of the photo of Ping that the matchmaker had shown him years ago. The girl’s fingers kept pulling down the V-shaped collar of her too-large blouse, and from time to time, the woman patted the girl’s hand off the collar.

“She was born slow-witted,” the woman said.

“Your daughter?” Su asked.

The woman nodded, bowing her head as if she felt ashamed.

He pulled out a ten-yuan bill and gave it to the woman. “You can’t get much money here. Have you ever thought about taking her to the big cities in the East?” He tried hard to sound as if he was thinking only of their well-being.

“I can’t go. I have two boys to take care of.”

“If someone is willing to take her for you, would you consider the offer?”

The woman looked up at him, her eyes brimming. “Sir, would there be such a good person?”

“But,” Su said with a deliberate pause, “big cities can be very dangerous. If something terrible happens to your daughter, you may regret letting her go.”

“I won’t,” the woman said firmly. “She has a weak heart. The doctor says she won’t live past the age of thirteen. She’s already twelve.”

“Oh.” He took another glimpse at the girl; she looked too small to even be twelve. “In that case, I may have a friend who can help. If you can tell me where you live...”

He jotted down the woman’s address in his planner. She seemed very excited, kept saying “thank you,” and pressed the girl to kneel and kowtow to Su. “Say, ‘Thank you, uncle.’”

The girl knelt down, cracked a big smile, and said, “I’ll wash, cook, and be a good wife.” Then she pulled down her collar to show part of her chest.

Su realized she had been trained to do so; the thought disgusted him.

The woman smacked the girl. “Do you have no shame?”

The girl’s eyebrows, eyes, nose, and mouth seemed to come closer together. Perhaps thinking it was all her fault, she chanted her line again, this time clearer and louder: “I’ll wash, cook, and be a good wife—”

“You are not her mother, are you?” Su asked the woman.

The woman’s face dropped. “You want her or not?” she said in a businesslike voice.

The girl was still on her knees. She was looking at Su with her crystalline eyes, silent.

He turned and walked away. For a few yards he could still hear the woman’s voice—“Take her, please. Be our savior.”



Stepping through the doors of the elevator, Su felt dizzy. Both his hands were clenched into fists; he was angry, but he didn't know why. He thrust his right hand into his jacket pocket and touched the planner with the girl's address. What am I doing? Am I planning on murdering a twelve-year-old? He was appalled by the word "murder" appearing in his mind. But if only he could find a body for the rich woman, he wouldn't need to choose between his sons. It would be enough to play a vigorous game of "The Eagle Catches the Young Chicks" with the little girl or give her pills to make sure she would sleep through the wedding. She'd be buried six feet deep after that. No one would find out. No one would care.

The elevator doors opened, and Su stepped out. He was immediately swamped by the smell of sterile alcohol. Wrong floor. The hallway was filled with people in bandages, some missing limbs, others with disfigured faces. Hell! Su gasped. But strangely, no one was groaning. They all sat on the benches, waiting patiently. Seeing Su, the man who sat closest to the elevator folded his newspaper and made room for him. He had an enormous tumor growing out of his neck.

Su had never before been afraid of any hospital sight. But today, something terrified him. "They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." He turned back to the elevator and kept hitting the button.

It was an old elevator. There was no screen showing its location as it made its way slowly up and down. Su began to sweat. He felt as if a small crowd of people were gathering behind him. He didn't look back.

Christ, Guan Yu, Old Heavenly Father, whoever you are. Get me out. I am a good husband and father. Su began to whisper to himself: "Have mercy," "I am begging you," "Please." He tried out all the usual prayers. He even repeated "Amen" several times as if his wife's word would break a curse. But the elevator didn't come. As he pressed the button again, his planner fell to the floor.

"Sir, you dropped this."

Su felt a scorching palm on his shoulder. It was the man with the huge tumor. He was holding Su's planner.

Su took it and thanked him.

“I have the same planner.” The man smiled, his tumor lifting. “You have to be ruthless to succeed.” That’s the one for this week.”

“How ruthless can you be?” Su joked. He could hear the wheels groaning.

“After I had this”—the man pointed at his tumor—“my wife left. She sold our son to a couple with no boy. Two weeks later she sent all the money back and asked me to find our kid. But I am using it for my surgery. Yes, I’m selfish. But even my son will thank me some day—”

The elevator doors opened while the man was still talking. Su rushed in. He watched the man disappear behind the closing doors.

It was going down, but he didn’t mind. He carved a + with his thumbnail on the cover of his planner. That little girl is already almost dead. She’ll be glad to escape that horrible woman and to not suffer in this world. He let out a long breath, imagined Ping closing the Bible, standing up, and going to the kitchen. He imagined the pots boiling on the cooking range and the pans sizzling. He imagined the boys coming back, kicking off their shoes, and complaining about their schoolwork.

“Is there anything in life as hard as math?” he imagined his younger son asking.

“That’s right,” Su would smile. “You don’t need to worry about anything other than math.”

Parable

Yes, I have spent my hours running
a cloth and hand along the shelves
and countertops, filled with this need
to make clean each surface. In my room
of dust and slanted light,

I've busied myself
with order. Just how I would never want you
to see me, saying again, *I wore your bracelet*
to the drugstore, I wore it everywhere—how to say it
without sounding precious? In class
on Thursdays, I focus on breathing,
aligning my hips with the end of the mat,
arms extended,

palms facing one another.

In to Cobra—open the chest and throat. You said
I was in love with my own sadness, walking
around like a cartoon man shot with a cannon,
the hole in my middle perfectly circular—
you could reach right through me.

I met the man in the neighborhood park,
a safe, agreed-upon place. He said his name
with an uptick, like a question. What did I expect?
To see your face in his face, your hands coming
from his sleeves, in his pockets? Something
straight out of a movie?

Just another lonely boy.

Just me, again, looking down and whispering
something apologetic, walking home
with the teacher's voice in my mind:
Trikonasana—envision the body between panes of glass.

Ex

I was pinged, I was tagged. Several people said, *Just thought you should know.*

Their wedding website rose to the surface like a bloated corpse come free of the bricks I used to drown it with. I was startled at first. I had not seen a photo of him in over a year. He looked fitter, had grown a beard, was glowing. The woman he had left me for was still younger, thinner, ecstatically beautiful. *Oh, would you look at those two!* Sundress, straw boater, poppy field, golden light. *And the size of that rock!*

Their registry was a honeyfund. *The last thing we need is more things*, they winked. The hot trend then was minimalism. The theme of the year was shed, shed, shed. *Give us the gift of memories!* they said. Their honeymoon was first-class to Tulum, eco-hut, turquoise waves, snorkel equipment. *Because love*, they said, *is like an ocean.*

I wondered what they meant by that, those dabblers of coastlines and shallow waters—that love is vast? That love is deep? Is that what you mean? After he had spent most of our savings on secret wooings, I spent what was left on scuba lessons. I thought of it as drowning for the non-committed. So I did it over and over again.

That night I imagined I ran into my ex-husband on the street and said the following things: Do you even know what it means to dive down at dusk, to come upon a wreck in the black water in the black night, with a flashlight swaying back and forth like a searchlight, praying for nocturnal eels, trolling for Spanish lobsters? Do you know that the coral are bleaching, how staghorns reach out like deformed, ghostly hands? That the ocean is noisy with your own breath and insatiable parrotfish, the hum of an unseen motor circling above you? Have you been where the reef overhangs in the diminishing light and in the shadows seen a nurse shark, brown and rubbery and still, with milky, dead eyes? Do you know there are tunicates that eat their own brains, slugs ruffled like lettuce leaves, and fish with both eyes on one side of their head? And deeper and deeper still, where teeth get bigger and eyes disappear and creatures make their own light,

and the ribcages of whales face upright on the seabed, deeper and deeper, is this what you mean? Where the abyssal plain stretches out like a barren planet across which no one dances hand in hand, and there I find you still, a dark form skimming the seafloor, a faintly glowing lure, a monstrous jaw, an elastic stomach, an indiscriminate hunger, a stifled rage, a sonar seeking, *blip blip*

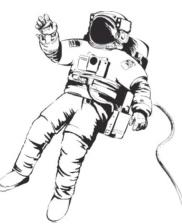
Tarp Town

Acknowledge, for a moment, the ecstatic abundance of the city's textile mascot, humble defender of the place I'm from: *the blue tarp*.

Regard its proliferation. Name a more democratic yard of material, one that spans class and culture, one that populates every square mile and block of human occupation.

A swift reckoning of its worth: The Houstonian tarp's intended usage eludes concise description. Its function is obvious and infinite. It carries no directions. The tarp shelters and shades, fastens and secures, billows in the wind like a bright, snapping flag. It drapes and stays, held by bungees and twine and decades of pooled rain. It harbors without discrimination. Conceals and emphasizes. It frays at last into bleached strands of gentle, synthetic hair. In the face of our particular clip of urban change, more than any item, perhaps, it holds true. The tarp maintains. Maintains what? That's hard to parse. Existence. Color. Moisture. Dryness. Fat squads of breeding mosquitos. A shotgun shack's saddlebacked roof. A Buick's shattered window. An itinerant encampment under 610. Change. Stasis. The whole goddamn spirit of the H upon which it prevails and serves. *Gather 'round*, the tarp says. *Crouch underneath. Hold me up with your palms and be well.*

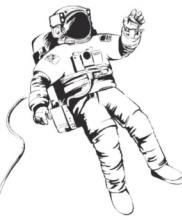
As a child, watching the skies darken and swell with a gathering storm, I reached up a ladder and handed "the tarps" to my stepfather, who stapled their edges to our window frames in preparation for hellish wind and whipped-up debris. Completed, tarps covered every inch of the home's glass. The place went dark. Holed up for a day or two, occasional sunlight filtered through our new shades, and for those moments we lived in a magical, glowing womb of tarp-blue, as if plunged in an aquarium.



Research says the iconic shade of blue-tarp *blue* is a coveted swatch, engineered and patented, churned out overseas, stacked, shipped, and sold for hefty margins. That blue is a brand, dreamed up by a clever machine for profit. But I've seen varieties. I'm no purist. I like the grays and greens, the sunfaded and camo print, the olive drab, crumpled in truck beds and pulled taught from the ends of carports, reaching over a smoldering grill, slung over a pile of furniture in the yard, mid-move. Bring them all, I say.

In 2016, worried by aesthetics, the city embarked on a rigorous and well-intentioned anti-tarp crusade—the Blue Tarp Program—aimed at subsidizing the expenses of those who sustained roof damage in one of many squalls and could not afford repairs. A noble municipal effort. But I couldn't help but lament the shame lugged at those dutiful blues. That utilitarian ensign cast as vulgar, crude. I felt a need for commemoration; a pause, at least, for farewell and thanks.

What follows, then, is a tour of tarps as they appear in the place I love, spotted on long walks within the city's perimeter, taken between 2016 and 2018. Some of the “tarps” captured here, in a strict sense, are not tarps at all. They're clear or fogged swaths of stuff. But they uphold the city's plastic conscience just the same. The tarp cadre is inclusive, I believe, like the place and people it protects. More importantly, these images are a reminder that hope springs from mold. An assertion that I will be, forever and always, an inspired child of my adored Tarp Town. Praise it.





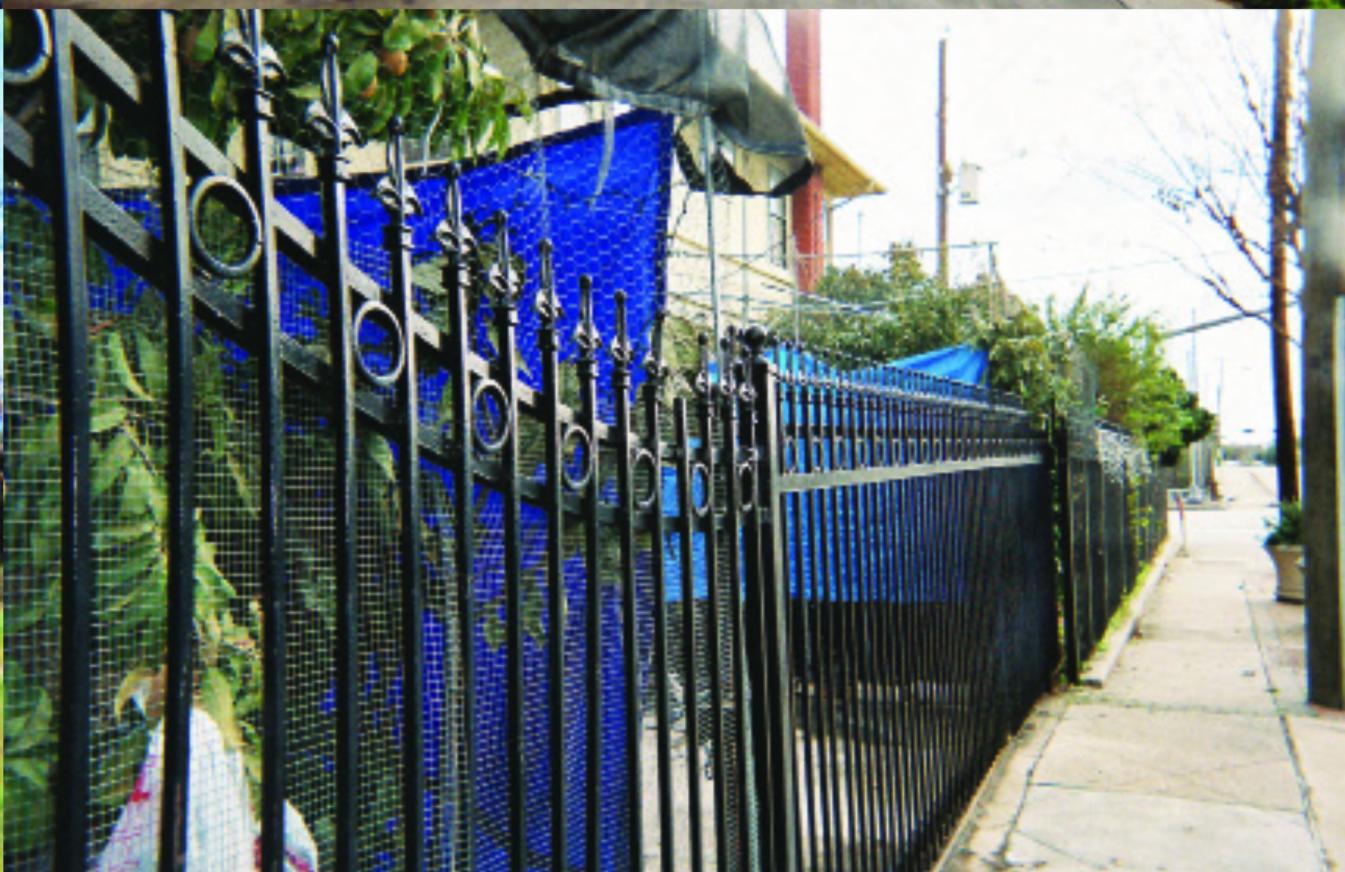








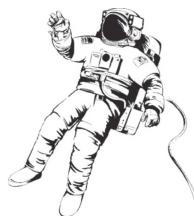






Another Succulent Tattoo at Some Two-Star Parlor in Montrose

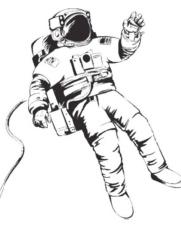
Casey tells me white ink hurts the most. More than blue, the second worst. Some people are allergic to red, flower in hives when it enters. He stops talking and a thousand wasps sting my arm beneath the buzz of his needle. My head donates all its blood to my arm. I don't know if I've ever let anyone pain me this much in this sense. Earlier, he told me about a girl with difficult nipples, how hard they were to pierce. She screamed as if he hit an organ, and for a moment he thought he might have When he loses grip and the needle swivels, the white ink rips into me deeper and I have a kind of love for him, the kind a squirrel has for the boy who shot her with a BB gun as he plucks the pellet out of her back when the twitch of her ravenous body is too much.



GULF COAST

When I'm Seven

I spend the winter of '96 with no coat,
see my first Houston snow that year,
point at a flurry and my mom says
it can't be. They send us home early
from school to our backyards where
we awe at the flakes like feathers
from a down pillow ripped above,
and the snow dusts everything
but doesn't stick. I lift my tongue
like I do my hands to the truck
to receive shaved ice in summer.
No one at home notices I don't
have a coat that year. The snow takes
a day to stop, but the winter slows
like an ice sculpture hesitant to lose
its swan shape. Our heater breaks
and doesn't get fixed. I pretend
my breath is my grandmother's
cigarette smoke. The neighborhood
kids agree, *let's be dragons*. A burner
catches fire on our stove trying to boil
water, and before I shout for someone
else in the house to put it out, I warm
my hands on the flames and see
them flush with too much pink.
Otherwise, I ball my fists to hold
my heat and wear my sheets as a cape, fly
from couch to couch when no one's
around, repeating, *I am a dragon*.



**“HOUSTON IS AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT
CAN HAPPEN WHEN ARCHITECTURE
CATCHES A VENEREAL DISEASE.”**

-Frank Lloyd Wright

The Cabin in the Woods

TA jury granted me a cabin in the woods to work on a book about fear.

“Alone?” a friend asked. I told her I had decided that a residency full of other artists made me anxious. This would just be a residency with myself.

“Don’t get murdered,” she told me.

“Ha ha, I’m not going for research,” I said. But that was when I began, silently, to tally the clank of my heart.



I drove to a coastal town a few hours south of Seattle on a sunny day. The freeway exit was flanked by a casino and a corrections institute. Purple road-kill streaked the highway.



In May of 1907, a businessman’s wife and mother of three disappeared. Ten days later, her children found her in a cabin on an Ohio mining settlement. “TIRED OF NOISY WORLD. Woman Spends Ten Days In Cabin Simply to Be Alone,” reads the *New York Times* headline. The woman, the article notes, was “not demented.”



I didn’t used to want to be alone. I learned many things in adolescence, but I did not learn how to live with my own heartbeat. I never thought to want it. Hyper-connection, I believed, was a means to self-improvement. To build a life was to build a tribe: to find people you liked and liked you, to call and text them regularly as subtle reminders of this, to rope yourselves together until the meals and gossip and crises you shared strengthened you all, the way that eating dirt

as a child could bolster your immune system. So to claim a prolonged period of solitude—that had once seemed indicative of a certain gall. Hubristic on some root and evolutionary level. *You think you can make it alone? You think you can start the fire? Who watches for beasts while you are sleeping? Who plucks the splinter from your heel?* Even Thoreau had needed his mother to do his laundry.

During the year between the dining halls of my undergraduate education and the cubicles of my graduate school one, I worked as a personal assistant in rural Sicily. I lived in a stone-compound-turned-cooking-school in the middle of my boss' family winery, where life carried the social buzz of a feudal estate, and where at any given time you were likely to hear someone else, whether a member of my boss' family, the international visitors or interns, the live-in Sicilian staff and groundskeepers, the *vendemmia* harvesting the grapes around us, or the neighbors who drove up to fill red gas tanks from a hose of wine. I loved the bustle, but it did not take long for me to realize that on my one “free” day a week, I could follow the dusty tractor trails deep into the rolling hills of vines and revel in both the silence and what it brought me: nobody could call my name, nobody could ask me to do a thing. I would get lost in the land and lost in my head, and when I stumbled back before dusk, I would feel exhilarated and renewed. It shocked me that I had never tried to spend my free time alone before.

When I applied for the residency, I did it hoping to find a similar silence, with the bonus of a writing desk thrown in. A peaceful house surrounded by woods for walking? Perfect. In the months before I arrived, I summoned the sunny wood-walled room as an emotional haven, recalling the website images whenever I was facing a classroom of whining students, or maneuvering between appointments and social obligations with my phone like some extra, aching appendage. How I longed to wake up and have nothing asked of me but the horizon of an empty page. Beneath it all, I ignored the well-trod rug of my speculative anxiety. As a child, my mother had said that she didn’t like sleeping alone in our creaky house when my father was away. Her statement had once surprised me. I had even judged her for

being a coward—it was her house too, right?—but that was before I understood the particular woman-shape of her nerves. When I thought of the residency, I tried not to dwell on these nerves. Instead, I thought of a friend who had once participated in a “back to the land” semester program in Vermont. Toward the end of her time, every student had spent 24 hours alone in the woods as a sort of final hurdle of self-sufficiency. My friend described raising her sleeping tarp, making dinner, doing a watercolor, reading, waking up with the sun. When she spoke about it, her face took on the revelation of someone who had found the Virgin Mary in her morning toast.

So all year long, I thought of the cabin with this sense of molten possibility, cultivating a prickling curiosity about how two solo weeks might feel. The residency accepted only women, and I savored their online testimonials of creative discovery like chocolate. “Your time there will be a blank slate,” a friend told me. “It can be whatever you want.” When she said this, I believed it.



The most popular genre of contemporary cabin story always begins well. Picture a lake; sunshine so syrupy it looks like it needs mopping up; buoyant laughter, white-toothed and female. Picture a scene that could be a commercial for shampoo, or a station wagon, or the sort of pill that quiets the din of soldiers running, guns up, through your brain.



Colleen met me outside of town, in the empty parking lot of a fire station beneath the pines. She was 85 and on the residency board-of-directors, with a stainless-steel bob of hair and the appointed task of guiding me to the cabin. When I drove into the lot, she rolled down the window of her Subaru Forester and smirked behind thick black shades. I was late. I had gotten lost. It was so nice to meet her. Before I could say much more, she nodded, slicing the air with her hand in a gesture that approximated a wave and setting the car in motion. I

spun the steering wheel to follow her, aware that I would have to work for her attention. It made me like her immediately. Later, I learned she was married to a man a few decades younger.

I trailed her car from quiet roads to quieter ones. Eventually we reached the driveway to the cabin, a gravel road that wound through red trees as thick as linebackers. Sifted through the Douglas firs, the sun came in thumb-sized splotches of yellow warmth. On one side, a few feet off the road in a newly chopped clearing, the white hulk of a truck gleamed in the afternoon glow, sort of like a trailer, but mostly like a truck with the wheels gone. I wondered what was in there, and how many bodies one could fit inside there, and then I tried to swerve my brain toward the smell of wet earth and pine, the gloss of salty sea. Living alone meant there would be nobody to distract me from my mind. I realized I would have to be economical with my fear.



I had envisioned the house alone in the forest, but at the end of the driveway, the road split into two homes. Colleen told me that a gunsmith and his wife owned the bigger one. She said they were very nice, with a big dog that sometimes confused enemies with friends. She pointed to an informational binder with, among other things, very specific tricks for peaceful coexistence with said dog. On top of the binder was a plastic baggie of treats with a note to *ALWAYS keep the treats with you if you are walking outside.*

“Got it?” Colleen said. I nodded. Then she showed me a bamboo pole cut into a strip a few feet long, which lay beside the dining room table. I was trying to figure out if this spear was also for the dog when she bent over and showed me how to wedge it behind the sliding glass door to keep it from opening.

“Just in case,” she said. “For when you’re gone. Nobody will break in when you’re here.”



The year before I arrived at the residency, I read Howie Axelrod's *The Point of Vanishing*, a memoir about two solitary years Axelrod spent in a New England cabin after losing sight in one of his eyes. In one scene, the young writer hears a mysterious knock at the door, and freezes. A minute later, he regains his composure. "If there was a crazy man in the woods, a wild bearded loner liable to do anything, I was him," writes Axelrod, triumphant. "*I am the crazy man!*"

When I read this, I felt a pinch of envy, and then it swelled into something stronger. How many women could imagine opening the door and feeling the same thing? I thought of an adolescent friend whose mother had once told her not to wear makeup if she rode the public bus. *You definitely want to try to look ugly*, the friend told a rapt crew of us afterward. *You know, so nobody tries to rape you*. Years later, I read a news article about "anti-pervert full-leg-of-hair stockings" sold in China, described on a trend blog as "essential for all young girls going out." Even when the stockings were outed as farce, the anxiety that had caused the Internet to fall for them stayed true. As a child, I had dressed in fangs and dark cloaks because I wanted to be scary on a dark Halloween street. *You'll never be scary*, the world whispered now. *But if you're not conventionally pretty, at least you might be safe.*



I met the neighbors on a walk that first evening. I was walking down the driveway and they were loading something in and out of the big white truck. The gunsmith looked to be in his mid-50s, with suspenders and a pear-shaped torso. His wife, who shared my name, wore her long brown hair in a loose knot behind her head. The dog was panther-sized, with a head the size of a small toaster oven. *Zoomer*: a rescue from a New Mexican cage fight. This dog wasn't the fighter, but he was the puppy thrown in to anger the fighters; the bee in the bonnet. Now he was just walking trauma, with a shelf of incisors I sensed could turn my hand to porridge.

"When he runs at you, his eyes are bad, so he won't know who you are until he's a few feet away," the gunsmith said. "Talk in a squeaky baby voice and give him a treat and he'll back off. Just know that when he's running, he won't look like he's

going to bite you. He'll look like he's going to kill you." I laughed, because I did not know what else to do. Nobody said: "He won't."



In the morning, I jogged along the gravel roadside. Some impulse told me to pre-dial 911 on my phone, and as I ran in and out of cell service, I eyed the cars that passed beside me. They were slick with motor growl and dust. When someone honked, I ran faster. Past the lupines and the parked ATV and the man who sat atop a mower, waxy and shirtless in the light. I envied the cock of his head. The next day, I laced up my shoes again.

"Why does the chicken cross the road?" wrote essayist Lily Hoang. "Because I can't stop walking."



At the cabin, I fell into routines. One was that I drank coffee until my teeth hurt, and tried to spit out 2000 words a day. The other was that when I walked in from outside, I immediately locked the door. I then peeked into every dark space: utility closet, behind the bathroom door, behind the shower curtain, behind the bed. It was a lofted house made from fallen old growth trees, with glassy windows all around and thin bars of window at the top. "Some of the women who stay here get jumpy," Colleen had told me on the first day. "It usually gets better after a few days." She mentioned that one woman became scared each night of what lay beyond the black glass, so she helped her drape makeshift curtains over the windows. "Ridiculous," said Colleen. "It's just forest out there. Why would you block out the trees?" I had nodded along. *Ridiculous*. But now, at night, when I walked around the loft, I was ridiculous. I set my pocketknife on my nightstand and tried not to imagine two eyes outside in the smothered moonlight, tracing the flesh of my ankles through the low windows. By trying not to imagine them, I imagined them. It was not a good fantasy. I shivered. In fact, I was often shivering. I slept with a fan because I did not want to hear the creaks of the night, the

house, the deck, the animals. It occurred to me that this was a sort of willful, sonic blindfold. I chose this over warmth.



The most popular genre of contemporary cabin story—we both know how that ends. The audience feels the smug heat of catharsis, which feels a lot like life: the privilege of blood still moving in your cheeks. This sub-genre of “cabin horror” films rose to prominence before I was born, with 1980s slasher films like *The Evil Dead* and *Evil Dead II*. By the time Joss Whedon’s *Cabin in the Woods* came out in 2012, the genre was experiencing a renaissance of sorts, with a new crop of films that both relied and contorted the viewer expectations set by the first wave. “You think you know the story,” reads the tag line on Whedon’s fog-blurred promotional poster, featuring a sort of Rubix-cube of a twisted cabin dangling in the pines.

I say this as if I have any authority on these films. As if I have watched them, or wanted to. I have not. I only know these movies by osmosis. I live in a world that contains their screams. I have gone on camping trips with those who have watched them, and I have heard their stories. So what I realized at the cabin was that my fear was the equivalent of second-hand smoke. It did not matter if I had never held the cigarette. I coughed anyway. If at first my awareness of this influence was slow, like a pink rash only seen in certain light, the rash soon began to blister.



One day, procrastinating on a social media website I had promised myself I would not go on, I came across an internet meme that a friend had reposted: “Synonyms are weird because if you invite someone to your cottage in the forest that just sounds nice and cozy, but if I invite you to my cabin in the woods you’re going to die.”



I kept the bamboo door-jam in all day and all night, removing it only when I was sitting on the porch, eating popcorn with my feet tucked on a folding patio chair, listening to the distant pop of someone's gunfire and trying to read. Surrounded by forest, the cabin got very little sun. I learned to tell what time it was by how black the trees looked.

Colleen had told me she was only a few miles away. In some places that would feel very close. Here it felt very far.



Before bed, when my eyes began to sizzle with the blur of words, I would pull the quilt up to my chin and watch the newest season of *Girls* on my laptop. I felt slightly sacrilegious watching something so chatty and urban, so I was quietly amused when an episode came on set in upstate New York. Here, the weekend cabin trip curdles when deranged ex-husband Desi—high on his rage and craving Oxycontin—punches a bleeding fist through a small glass window and heads toward the sliding, glass doors, while Marnie and Hannah—shrieking as they clamber around the wood furniture—scramble to barricade him out. I watched the episode, and then I closed my laptop and re-checked the locks, and then I didn't fall asleep.



The week before the residency, I had caught an Amtrak train in Minnesota bound for my parents' home in the Pacific Northwest. I boarded late at night, with a suitcase and a backpack filled with snacks and everything I would now have time to read. Beside me on the platform was a hulk of a man with a bald white head like a giant thumb. Something about his stare made me uneasy and when he claimed a seat beside me for the 36-hour ride, the feeling got worse. I was wearing barely any makeup, an oversized sweater and jeans. Above my socks, my legs were stubbly. This does, you realize, not matter at all. Meanwhile, the man told me he was on the run from an ex who tried to kill him. He showed me a constellation of track marks

along his arms and did not stop talking. At some point I realized I would never fall sleep beside him, and I moved to a set of empty seats in another section of the car, playing it off like I liked to sprawl. I do.

The next morning, the man slid into the seat beside me. “Remember me?” He did not know I was a writer or a teacher, but he handed me a spiral notebook he said he wanted me to read. He said these were “letters to his emotions.” I did not know what to say, so I said very little, and he left the notebook and walked away. “I’ll check on you soon,” he said. After a few minutes of dread, I cracked the cover. I was surprised to see that the letters confirmed my worst suspicions: he was writing about me, and though he was mad at me for leaving him the night before, he wanted more from me. He called me “young” and “maybe evil.” Still, he decided I would be the only human to read these notes. “It’s worth a try,” he wrote. It sounded like he might be planning something.

My panic was tsunami. I photographed a few choice pages and, then, without looking back in his direction, walked toward the conductor’s car. I tried to look like I was going to go pee, and I tried to smile at the people who nodded at me as I passed through the glass-walled observation car, but horror had filled me like a helium balloon. I floated through the train. When I got to a conductor, he took one look at the notes and walked me to an empty sleeping cabin with curtains on the window and a door that bolted shut. He made a phone call, and confirmed that police at the next stop—Wolf Point, Montana—would remove the man from the train. After an hour or so the conductor knocked again. He looked distressed. Wolf Point did not feel they had enough police to safely remove this “very big” man. They were waiting until the following stop. This turned out to be a good thing, because when the police arrived, the man put up a fight and started yelling about meth, which he may have had. I did not witness any of this, but the people in the observation car told me it later. When I sat down there, a man with neck veins like plastic straws turned away from his cards and leaned toward me, half-smiling. *You’re the girl that creepy guy was bothering, right?* He said he had seen us the night before and thought the guy was off. *I felt bad for you.* A few others chimed in to agree. They wanted the gossip. I did not know what to say. None of them had intervened the night before, and now I did not want their pity. I wanted to watch the mountains darken and crack a beer.

With the man off the train, I knew I should have felt relief. But sometime that afternoon I had realized that in going to find the conductor, I had left all my belongings at my seat. I knew that the man had gone back to take his own notebook, and my brain had started running laps wondering what, if anything, he might have learned about me from my things. Had he read the Portland address on my baggage tags? Had me found my email in the front cover of my notebook? Had he seen my ID in my wallet? And what had happened to him after being escorted from the train? Was he still going to make it to Oregon? I knew that it was unlikely the man would find me, but I also knew it was unlikely that we would have met in the first place, or that he would have felt enough about me changing seats to give me the letters. What did it matter about likely and unlikely when my experience was just what had happened when it should not have?

A few days later, I drove to the forest.

The cabin had no cell service, but it did have a landline. One windy day, around 6 p.m., I lost all power. The phone went dead. The wireless blinked out. Like getting sick after a bad oyster, I felt a wave of told-you-so inevitability. How long had I imagined this would happen? After a few hours, just as the sun had dragged itself beyond the horizon, the lights returned. The microwave beeped: *ha ha ha*.

In 1704, English science lecturer John Harris wrote about “the Disease called otherwise Hysterick, or Hypochondriack Fits, or Melancholy.” As the state of unwarranted and abnormal fear about one’s body, hypochondria is inherently inward-facing. Still, I am aware of how easy it is to externalize its triggers, to project one’s anticipation of body pain onto the world outside—the world that could harm it. And 300-plus years later, this sort of fervent, caricatured anxiety is still often seen as “hysterical,” a word which stems from the Latin *hystericus*, “belonging to the womb,” and which gives this whole business of worrywart-malaise

a particular gendered stink. Not only has popular culture prescribed a particular horror-movie slant to a woman's experience alone in a cabin—you are vulnerable, you are watched—but it has given the worry that follows its own gendered stigma, its own exhausted (cough, hysterical) cliché.

Be careful of strangers, said one deep voice in my head. *Stop being so irrational*, said another one. Meanwhile, a third: *Just shut up and write*.



The first person that told me I needed to be alone to do good writing was my undergraduate thesis advisor. He was a poet with a reputation for being the most solitary and eccentric man on campus. When I had taken classes with him, he had entered the room a minute late, carrying what looked a sports duffel—the sort of bag a soccer player might haul his shin-guards and cleats in—from which he would unload a stack of books and a miniature bottle of hand sanitizer, unclipping his watch and laying it like a fork on the table beside him, staring at us stone solemn until someone was brave enough to talk. This man almost never gave us written feedback, but his theatrics cloaked him in some general infallibility. He spoke so rarely that the words he did utter took on an oracle-like weight. One of my best friends, a guy, was also doing a thesis with him, and the two of them eventually found some approximation of man-to-mentee friendship. He would eventually invite my friend to rake his leaves for extra cash.

Our relationship was different: formal to the point of brittle and rife for late-night psychoanalyzing. One week he would stand me up for meetings and the next he would refer to my prose through a glaze of superlatives. He told me that if I wanted to publish a book and have a family, the former should be soon (“that's just biology” I scrawled during one of our thesis meetings, quoting him even after the conversation swerved to my fertility). He told me that my writing was A-level and my willpower got a D. *You can't just be a pretty little white girl riding on good luck*, he told me once. I often left our meetings reeling, buoyed by the rare gifts of his praise, seared by his critiques, and wondering if anything I would ever write could mollify him.

One day, the president of the college approached me at a barbecue to say that this professor had been in touch about me, praising my work while demanding that I not be allowed to edit the campus newspaper because he thought it would distract from my thesis. I had heard this many times in our meetings, but it surprised me to know that he had tried to intervene at a higher level, and resentment coiled in my gut. I had already accepted a job as editor-in-chief, pledging never to complain about the workload to this professor, but I suspected he was waiting for me to fail and prove his point. At the end of my senior year, he told me that my choices had compromised both the quality of the newspaper and of my thesis. *The problem with you is that you think you can be both a writer and a normal person*, he said once, one of the many things I am sure he never said to my male friend. *The best thing for you would be to go to a convent. Or to teach at a boarding school somewhere rural.* There was a wink of laughter in his tone, but I took his words like darts, wincing somewhere deep down. He told me I needed to be alone. He implied I would fail if I was not. He knew I had a boyfriend and campus social life, and he saw them as my shackles, even going so far as to tell me about other advisees who had broken off relationships when they were working with him.

At the time, various female professors had asked how my thesis work was going. They had known that I was working with him, and as they watched my face—a circus of emotions, *Yeah, I guess okay*—they nodded, understanding. They already knew some students had been upset in the past, and they reminded me that I could speak up. But though I considered it, I was never sure what I would say. Many days the professor made me feel awful, but I couldn't pin my finger on anything that he had done wrong. Instead I blamed myself. He was trying to teach me art. Surely there was no easy way to do this; surely I was too thin-skinned. Furthermore, many students raved about his classes. If I took his praise seriously—which I hoped too—then I had to take his criticism seriously too. Though I cringed at the grunt of his misogyny-laced misanthropocism, I remained passive and desperate to please him, choosing instead to fight a silent battle on the sidelines of academic life, dating who I wanted to date and partying when I wanted to party and also writing the damn pages he wanted. *We both know you will do what you want to do, which is perhaps as it should be*, he wrote me after graduation, as I was deciding between

graduate schools. By that point, he had written me letters-of-recommendation, and the few words I heard from him were mostly praise. It was easy to forget about the rest of it. By the time I entered school, he emailed to say it was *time for new voices and approaches*, a statement I found—for once—easy to agree with. The professor dissolved from my life.

It wasn't until I was staying in the cabin, dredging up memories of college for an unrelated essay, that I started to wonder if his words had loomed larger than I thought them too. His prescriptions for self-isolation had tapped into a longstanding mythos of the monastic writer holed up with his notebook and warmed by the fire of his mind. "Therefore, dear Sir, love your solitude and try to sing out with the pain it causes you," writes Rilke in *Letters to a Young Poet*. Like Rilke, my professor had helped me learn to guard my writing, to protect it like a child, and I appreciated this. But he had also made people—all people—the creatures that clawed at the door. He had made me feel I should burn bridges. He had made me think it was the only way to write. And when the solitude felt unnerving and unproductive—when I lay, heart pounding in the creaking house, counting the hours until dawn, aware how drowsy I would be during my writing time—I felt the shame of his judgment, and imagined the shake of his head at the weakness of my mind. Shame. When I think of my fear of solitude in the cabin, that's what I feel.



In an essay for the journal *Film Matters*, Matthew Grant analyzes the cultural weight of "cabin horror" films through the mechanisms that sway them. The cabin is utter isolation: a rebuttal of "society and any meddling institutions" while still a middle-class representation of the American Dream, replete with a cooler of hot dogs and beer. "A place to transgress by partying, drinking, and having sex," it plays host to "young, virile, and most importantly, unmarried protagonists" who flee society to release their urges. Eventually the cabin—and the woods that bend around it—becomes the vacationers' antagonist. Their haven punishes them back.

There are two stereotyped female leads in Whedon's *The Cabin in the Woods*: one 'virginal' (who survives), and one 'hot' and 'promiscuous,' who—in a nod to the

cultural staging of teen sexuality as both seductive and repulsive—makes out with the taxidermied head of a wolf and later becomes the first of the group to die. She's stabbed in the hand, she's caught near-shirtless in a metal trap meant for a bear, she's decapitated. "I don't really feel that sorry for her," wrote a commenter on the exhaustive Fandom Wiki that tells me the plot to this movie I will never see. "She kinda was horny 24/7."

In a horror film, you cannot be a young woman in a cabin without being sexualized. Your survival hinges on your virtue. Sometimes this feels true in real life. When my professor said *Go to a convent, stop distracting yourself*, I heard: *Swear off men. Save your writing. Save yourself.* Still, for all of my miserable certainty that I had stepped into a horror plot each night at the cabin, some part of me knew that I didn't fit quite right. The horror film wants the girl and her shirtless boyfriend, or the girl and the Ken-doll she should not be kissing, or the women in their bikinis, popping champagne on a weekend retreat. What does the horror film do with the woman alone? The writer with her hair in a haze of frizzed waves? She wears an oversized fleece and is covered in cheesy popcorn dust. She eats stir-fry straight from the pan and chocolate chips straight from the freezer. Sometimes she talks to her reflection in the mirror, just to be sure her throat still works. When she laughs at a novel she is reading, she does not have the tinkling, white-toothed laugh of a Hollywood victim, but the snorting cackle of a Hollywood witch. After all, was that not the other trope of woman-alone-in-cabin? With a cat the color of a cauldron and a tall glass of brew? How could I trick my brain into becoming her?



I used to think having a crush felt like being possessed: your body no longer its old dull shell but a vessel for the rising fizz of pop-song love. Are your thoughts even yours? Or are they just the incepted chorus-lines from someone with slicker hair? *Everywhere I'm looking now, I'm surrounded by your embrace, baby I can see your halo, you know you're my saving grace.* At some point, teenage-me realized how blindly I was following the scripted infatuation laid out for me by pop culture. Did

I even know how to fall in love, or just how to muppet the emotional tenor of song lyrics and romantic comedies?

This was how I felt as a scared white woman in a cabin in 2017. Hysteric. *Lame*. Every shiver pre-choreographed, every moment of blissed-out solitary singing just the calm before the storm. The axe already in the shadows; the man with the lawn mower coming back soon. Beyond the gates of cell service, I felt like a cliché of what America viewed as vulnerable. *Fear is a choice*, I thought, again and again. *The cabin can be anything you want*. But every day I waited for my unease to go away, and every day it lingered like a sinus bug. In the sun, I told myself my fear was gone, and when it set, I was reminded that it was not. No matter how I tried to spin it, the cabin did not feel like a “blank slate.” It felt like a movie I had seen before.



The worst thing about fear is that it means someone has won. Someone wants you to be quiet and small, and you have done it. Somewhere a scared woman does not go to a cabin by herself. She writes, when she can, in a world of traffic and push notifications and children. Meanwhile, a man with a scrubby beard and a tin cup of coffee holes up to write his poems. Nobody scares him on a train. Nobody bothers him at all. When he emerges, brushing the leaves from his pants, the newspaper lauds him as a genius.

In an essay on the cognitive metaphors made by horror movies, Bodo Winter traced the relationship between our minds and our televisions. “When people watch a horror movie, they are usually aware of watching a horror movie,” wrote Winter. “In a romantic movie, for example, a dimly lit room could equally well be signaling intimacy in a love scene. The same lighting conditions would prepare us for something bad to happen in a horror movie.” In other words, we are programmed with a finite set of possibilities we expect from the world around us. To be a certain kind of person alone in a cabin can feel like being offered a very particular tray of could-bes and might-bes. “We are what we can imagine,” wrote poet Robert Hass.



One day Colleen picked me up early in the morning and drove me into town to buy a croissant from a woman who sold them homemade and hot from her truck in the supermarket lot. On the road by the fire station, the car in front of us went 20 mph in a 45 mph zone. Colleen honked and shook her head. “Probably on drugs,” she said. “People, I tell ya.” I thought of something the gunsmith had said about the uptick of local opiate addiction and asked her how big of a problem she thought it was. Colleen waved a paw. “I don’t read the paper anymore. It used to have information and now it just prints little snippets.”

After a minute of tailing the fender before us, she swerved and passed from the left lane, telling me that once her husband had pulled this same move and been run off the road by someone who was “obviously high.” As we drove by, I peered in the window of the crawling car. But it was just another elderly woman, her hair dyed dark burgundy and her eyes sewn to the road ahead.

“Well,” said Colleen. “Hmph.” She did not have to say what we both felt: a little sheepish.

Later, driving home, Colleen told me she was worried about her neighbor, who she had not seen in days, and whom she did not think was on vacation.

“Does he live alone?” I asked.

“Oh no, he lives with his family. I haven’t seen any of them. That’s what’s strange.”

She said she would check on them. A parade of possible outcomes zoomed through my mind: carbon monoxide, murder-suicide, home invasion. For a minute, we were both silent. And then, like many things, that was that. The subject changed. The omen faded.



Maybe you have already guessed that nothing got worse for me in the cabin. The residency was not a horror film. It just held, until its last minute, my loose expectation of horror. In some ways, I realized, that made it not very different from life itself.

One day I drove up to a town on the saltwater canal. It was only the first week of June but there were colorful painted signs for competing firework stands all along the road. ENTERING DANGER ZONE said one orange diamond highway sign. TNT DANGER TNT. Walking on the beach, I saw more danger signs: shellfish NOT SAFE, chemicals, bacteria, DO NOT EAT. It was impossible to walk without killing something beneath me. Buttons of barnacle and fists of oyster shell carpeted the beach. I stood on a hump of sand, mollusks crackling beneath me, as I watched a woman in the distance. She knelt in the sand, and for a second, I could not tell what she was doing. Then she flopped back the wide brim of her hat, harvesting another shell to eat. For a minute, I stood, wind flopping in my hair and heart ricocheting in my ribs, unsure what to do. Had she seen the signs? Did she know it was dangerous? Wasn't she concerned? Should I warn her? What would happen if she got sick? Somewhere in town, a car alarm began to bleat. Somewhere in my brain, I knew to turn away. I wanted to trust her, and I did not want to infect her with my worry. I hoped this was the right thing to do.



One of my favorite childhood stories was the pocket-size book *The Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse*, Beatrix Potter's 1918 retelling of the Aesop fable "City Mouse and Country Mouse." In this story, a beefy country-mouse named Timmy-Willie passes out after gorging himself in a basket of peas. When he wakes up, the basket has moved, and he finds himself in the kitchen of a lavish, city estate. Scurrying out of the kitchen, he dives into a hole, where he tumbles into the dinner party of Johnny Town-mouse, a svelte little creature with a sleek blue waistcoat. Invited to stay for dinner, Timmy-Willie tries to get comfortable, but he's unable to relax with the noises from a nearby cat and a nearby maid. Before hitching a ride back home in the hamper, he invites Johnny Town-mouse to come get a taste for rural life. The next spring, the city mouse shows up to share some herb pudding in the countryside. But he—surprise—soon realizes that he's frightened by life there too: the cows and lawnmowers and damp, ominous chill. Though it is clear that Potter herself is a clear team country-mouse, the calculus never felt so clear when we read

the book as kids. I had grown up falling asleep to the metallic clang of barges and trains from Portland's nearby industrial area, and fear, I knew, could follow you wherever you went. Maybe I was wrong to blame it on the cabin. Maybe the cabin just helped me see it everywhere else.

"To choose to be alone is to bait the trap, to create a space the demons cannot resist entering," wrote Fenton Johnson in a *Harper's* article about a life of monastic and creative solitude. "And that's the good news: The demons that enter can be named, written about, and tamed through the miracle of the healing word, the miracle of art, the miracle of silence." This was, I realized, true at the cabin. I had come to expect more from every minute. Both the terror and the joy were saturated. Unable to distract myself from myself, I was forced to face both the beast of me—the yammer of heart and wobble of limb—and the world that had made me so.



Toward the end of my stay I was jogging around a bend when I saw a fawn begin to cross the road. Legs like a puppet and eyes like Ferrero Rochers, with the gauzy indecision of someone who had just had two glasses of rosé and was trying to remember where she parked her car. I was across the road from the fawn, on the bank that she was, hesitantly, approaching. When our eyes clicked I was surprised how quickly I began to plead, how deeply I wanted her to approach me without worry. I froze my step and stalled my breath. *Please, please, please.* The fawn toddled toward me.

Suddenly a mail truck rounded the bend in a flash of white and motor, and then the deer wasn't moving but I was. All I had ever done was jump out of the path of cars, and now I was leaping in front of it, throwing my hands up like a crossing guard. My palms slapped the hood of the truck as the driver braked. Behind me I could sense that the fawn was going, gone, safe onto the other side. I dropped my fingers to wave at the mailman, my cheeks cherry and my adrenaline hammering. It was the best I had felt in days. *How silly I have been*, I thought. *To think that I am the thing out here that needs protecting.*



At a potluck the board-of-directors held for me over the last weekend, Colleen pulled me aside to say that she had some good dirt on the gunsmith. “I’ll tell you before you leave,” she whispered, eyebrows wagging above her reading glasses. “You won’t believe what’s happened in his life. You seriously won’t believe it.” But Colleen ended up leaving early to follow her husband on a business trip, and then my time was up. The next resident was coming. She would paint or write or compose and she would or would not flinch at the shadows in the night. I left her some jam and potatoes, and then I left the cabin and the gunsmith and the dog and the deer and the sea. I never heard from the man on the train. I returned to the people that I loved. Even then, I was—in a sense, as always—still alone. Still jumpy. Still gripping my pen like a little blade.

“NEW YORK IS FAST PACED, WITH ENTHUSIASTIC FANS AND LOTS OF MEDIA ATTENTION. HOUSTON’S SLOWER PACED, AND THERE’S MORE OF A SOUTHERN CULTURE TO THE CITY. BUT BOTH CITIES HAVE UNBELIEVABLE FOOD.”

- Jeremy Lin

Louisiana

A man walks by the house and says someone tried
to burn it to the ground last week, but I tell him we just got here,
we're renting a room for the night. We stumble through

Bourbon Street, smoking cigarettes, holding beer bottles by the neck,
into a stripclub, where a girl named Elizabeth asks me
if I prefer white girls or black girls and pretty soon

I give her forty dollars and now
she's on top of me and says I can touch her,
so I do. I place my hands on her small pale breasts,

trace my fingers softly across her stomach,
like a child in a gallery. All I want to do is kiss her
because all I want is for this to be beautiful, and maybe it is

in some fucked up kind of way, but the truth is
I can't stand it. I look to my right and Jesús is there
with another girl, riding him with her back turned,

and he gives me this blank empathetic look
like he has nothing left to give, but giving in, and
I have nothing to say. I look back at Elizabeth and picture her

on a tightrope high above the city. I close my eyes and her body
pops out of the colorless sky like a bone
pushed through flesh. Everything

below her is on fire and I don't know
who I'm talking to when I say this,
but I don't want to be the only one held accountable

for my body. Elizabeth floats off of me with a kiss on my cheek
and I run to the bar with Jesús. I ask if I can kiss him
and he says absolutely and I do.

Infibulation Study

what is to border but to cut
thin membrane dividing
a body i can claim &
a body to be sliced like festival lamb
both of them my blood to clot
to my many mothers i only ask
when we became the officers of men
whisperers of spell & prayer & ruined name
to cut away what frightens men
to uproot the fine down of hair
answer me
which knives are for the animals
who drew the first blood
who hurt you
who drew the matching wound
say it say it as you mean
the world & the world of men
a body to be forgiven its breach
a body named for what it daughters
a body named for what it daughters
for the thin membrane of their girlhoods
students of purity for men
wielders of scalpel & sharpened rock
i only ask about the knotting sugar
making slow velvet of our bodies
what is it to border
which ones are for the girls
answer me
who hurt you
who made the first incision

A Case of Two Fakes

Last summer, I received a letter from Yamagata Prefecture. The sender's name was Misao Yamazaki. I had never met or corresponded with this person before, so I was alarmed to read that he was awaiting repayment from me on a hundred-yen loan, and was on the verge of pursuing legal action because of my delinquency. According to the letter, I was lodging at the Harikyū Inn in Sendai when I contacted him about the loan, and, because of my fame, he wired the money. I have never been to Sendai, let alone the Harikyū Inn. Since the letter was sent by contents-certified post, I replied in kind, asserting that the man was unknown to me, and I had no memory of borrowing this money. And then, I departed for Karuizawa, forgetting about the mix-up.

Some weeks later, a second letter from Misao Yamazaki reached me in Karuizawa, forwarded from my Tokyo address. This one came by standard post but its contents were identical, if blunter in tone: I definitely had borrowed the hundred yen and I had better pay it back. It also surfaced that Misao Yamazaki was not a man but a woman, and one who was in very ill health. Naturally, I felt awful upon reading this, but on principle I had no intention of being charitable, and was still aggrieved at being nagged about a debt I had not taken. I wrote her back, reiterating my lack of memory about the loan, and suggested that before she pursue legal action she look into whether this "Ryūnosuke Akutagawa" she had wired money to was in fact me and not an imposter who had ripped her off.

After that, there were no more letters from Misao Yamazaki. Around this same time, I happened to get a letter from an inn at the Iizaka Onsen in Fukushima. According to this one, someone there ran up a tab under my name and the inn was demanding that it be paid.

Now that I think about it, even before these two incidents, there was another experience I had involving a letter of dubious origin, earnestly written but based on lies. It was from a man in Nagano Prefecture expressing condolences about a burglary that had happened at my home. I didn't recognize his name—or the burglary—but

at the end of the letter he thanked me for writing the preface to his book, which I had never heard of before. Needless to say, I had no memory of writing the preface either. Because the letter had no return address I could not send a reply.

As it happens, I'm not alone in having these experiences. Recently, I've been hearing lots of stories about famous artists and writers having their names abused.

My warning to all lovers of art and books: *be on guard, impostaers abound.*

Fake painters and poets are easy to expose: have them paint or write a poem in your presence and they will out themselves. It's the fake fiction writers who are more elusive. In person there's less to judge in terms of performance.

In any case, you should take it from me, it's misguided to watch a fiction writer at work in hopes of catching their secrets. It's like watching an elephant in a zoo.

1925

Kanzan and Jittoku

Last time I visited my mentor Natsume Sōseki he was seated in his library with his arms thoughtfully folded. “It’s been awhile,” I said. “Am I disturbing something?” “Yes,” he spoke sternly. “I was having a vision of Gokoku Temple. The sculptor Unkei was chiseling at two blocks of stone below the great triple gates. Taking shape in the stones were the fearsome Niō, the muscular guardians of the Buddha himself.” Unlike Sōseki, I was indifferent toward art from the remote past, feeling that it was irrelevant to our uniquely torrential age, so instead I steered our conversation toward Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, which did not go as planned. Exasperated by Sōseki’s stubbornness, I took my leave and went to Edogawa Terminal to catch the train.

It was crowded. I secured a strap in the back corner of the carriage and began to read the book I was carrying in the breast pocket of my jacket. It was a Russian novel in English translation about the Revolutions of 1917, replete with harrowing scenes of the Bolsheviks’ bravery: laborers lobbing dynamite at the Whites; women joining the fight; the daily life of a revolutionary, suffused with bleak uncertainty—in all of Japanese literature, there are no words that convey these feelings. I admired the sheer intensity of the prose. Standing there, I underlined passage after passage with my colored pencil.

After I had transferred trains in Iidabashi, I noticed two curious old men trudging down the sidewalk. They were wearing the same ragged kimonos and their hair and beards were long and unkempt. Their carefree, simpering faces had an eccentric cast that made them seem from a bygone age, and yet, there was something queerly familiar about them. I wondered if I hadn’t met or seen them somewhere before. A man grabbed the strap next to mine. He looked like a curio shopkeeper. “Look!” he said. “It’s Kanzan and Jittoku!”

And then I recognized the pair. It was as if they had stepped out of a Taiga painting, Kanzan with his scroll and Jittoku with his broom. But it was too absurd to believe. Even at a rare art auction one would never see the equivalent of Kanzan and Jittoku in the flesh walking through Iidabashi. I tugged on the sleeve of the

man next to me and asked, “Is that really Kanzan and Jittoku?” and he said, “Of course! I ran into them the other day too. Outside the chamber of commerce.”

“How is that possible? Shouldn’t they be dead?”

“Are you blind? They’re alive as they’ve always been, the reincarnations of Samantabhadra and Mañjuśrī. Even their old friend Bukan the Admiral is alive. In Ginza you can see him riding his tiger through the streets and bellowing his poetry.”

Five minutes later, as the train began to move, I tried returning to my book, but its descriptions of dynamite odors fell flat on the page. I was too intrigued by the figures of Kanzan and Jittoku passing from our window and into the rear. In the placid light of late autumn, I could see Jittoku’s broom propped against his shoulder, poking above his bushy head and bobbing with his step. Clutching the strap above me, I slid the book into my jacket pocket and stared through the window at the ancient duo shrinking to the size of beans.

That night at home, I had the impulse to write a letter to Sōseki about what I had seen in Iidabashi. By the time I took up my pen, my skepticism from the train had faded, and the once farcical idea of Kanzan and Jittoku wandering through modern-day Tokyo seemed wholly plausible, if not undeniable.

Date Unknown

Selected Notes from Kugenuma¹

I. Azumaya Inn

I was lying face up with my eyes closed. We were staying on the second floor of the Azumaya Inn in Kugenuma. My wife and aunt were sitting across from each other with my head on the pillow between them. They were gazing out at the ocean beyond the garden. When I said it was going to rain, they kept silent as if I were not even there. Finally, my wife replied, "Not with the weather like this." Not more than two minutes later, an unusually robust downpour came crashing down.

x

I was walking along a street lined with pine trees. There was no one else around. A stray white dog was walking in front of me, swaying his rear suggestively. I could see his testicles, taut and pale rouge from the cold. When he reached the intersection he spun around and beamed at me maniacally.

x

A tree frog squirming in a roadside sand pit struggling to get free. The first thought I had was what would happen to it if an automobile drove by, granted the road was so narrow that the odds of this happening were nil. But say that it did, would the tree frog be squished or would it live? I began feeling grim about the tree frog's prospects and decided to chip it to safety with my walking stick. I watched the tree frog land in a thicket of grass then hop away.

x

A Western-style house among the pine trees: the trees bending in the wind, the house bending with the trees. I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me, but

¹ Written during a recuperative sojourn, the year before the author died of a barbital overdose.

no matter how many times I blinked, the house continued to bend in lockstep with the trees—a ghastly mirage.

x

I went down to the public baths at eleven in the evening. A young man was there by himself in the washing area rubbing his face and body with his hands instead of the customary cloth. He was frightfully gaunt, and sallow as a plucked hen. I was so disgusted by his manner and look that I left without bathing. Once I got back to my room, I found a bellyband coiled on the floor in the entryway. I undid the sash around my waist and patted around my stomach. The bellyband was mine. It was missing the whole time I was out.

II. Rental Home

Even in my dreams I always am who I am. Last night (July 19): riding in a horse-drawn carriage with my friend Mosaku Sasaki, we conversed with the straw-hatted coachman about the cost of living in Peking. Within twenty minutes of waking from this dream I was paralyzed with gloom, trapped in my dark gray tent with no escape, a tear in its fabric letting in sunrays. My destiny is to deteriorate one day at a time beginning with my head.

x

Out walking I ran into a group of children in white bathing suits. They had bamboo husks sticking up from behind their ears. They looked like giant rabbits. When I was five or six steps away from them, I grew terrified of them as if they were really rabbits with razor-sharp ears. I rushed by, trying not to be seen. Even after they were behind me my fear of them stuck, and I continued to walk nimbly without looking back.

x

Lazing around smoking cigarettes, plagued by distasteful thoughts. In the room next to mine the maid was folding diapers. Her back was facing me. Out of nowhere I yelled, “Watch out for the caterpillars in the diapers!” and she cried, “My god, they’re everywhere in here!”

x

The other day, I opened a tin of butter and had a memory from a summer in Karuizawa. I felt a tingling on the nape of my neck and glanced behind me just in time to see a horse botfly swooping across my visual field—an everyday insect in Karuizawa but a rarity in Kugenuma, if not an impossibility. Those unmistakable emerald green eyes, I can’t deny what I had seen.

x

Nothing more dreadful than the dismal windy days of late, the feeling of the world tightening its grip around my neck. Even my unease with lightning storms and dogs doesn’t compare to my phobia of the wind. Day before yesterday (July 18): I managed to stroll by some baying dogs without flinching, while a moderate wind-swell in the pines was enough to send me fleeing to my wife in the quilts midday.

x

Walking alone in the neighborhood, I discovered a house that had been converted into a dentist’s office. A few days later, I was out with my wife when we came to the very spot where the dentist’s had been, except now it was not there. “It was here!” I said. “I’m sure of it.” “Well, obviously you’re wrong,” my wife said. That evening, to settle our dispute, we consulted with her mother, who’s well-versed in the neighborhood’s history, and she too affirmed

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa

Translated from the Japanese by Ryan C.K. Choi

that there was never such a house, though I was certain that I had seen it. I remembered the distinct layout of the sign: the character for “tooth” in the original Chinese, “doctor” written in katakana script.

July 20, 1926
(posthumously published)

Spring Nights

I.

In Marunouchi, on an asphalt backstreet between concrete buildings, the air reeked of salad. I searched around. There were no trash bins and the road was clean. Was it my imagination, or something else?—a defining night in spring.

II.

U: “Are you afraid of the night?”

Me: “What’s there to be afraid of?”

U: “Everything. It’s like chewing on a gigantic eraser.”

U’s words, the definition of nights in spring.

III.

A young girl from China was in front of me about to board the train. The spring night shone splendidly through the electric lights that color all seasons the same. As the girl stepped onboard, I noticed some dirt on her earlobe (more than some, every crevice of her ear was blemished). I bit down on my cigarette. Inside the train the girl sat ahead of me. We began to move and I continued looking at her ears. They were now pleasant and endearing.

IV.

One spring night, I passed by a horse-drawn carriage on the roadside. The horse was white and gangling. I was tempted to run my hand along its bony neck and spine.

V.

Spring night two. I was crossing through standstill traffic when I suddenly remembered my reason for being out. To eat shark eggs.

VI.

Daydream about a night in spring. The windows of Café Printemps opening onto an expansive meadow. Plunked in the meadow, a roasted bird hanging its head in penance.

VII.

Quote from a night in spring: “Yasu took a green shit everywhere.”

VIII.

One night in March, after putting down my pen, I was relieved to discover that my nickel pocket watch was running thirty minutes fast. In the next room, the clock read 10:00. I set my watch on the table and diligently rewound its minute hand to zero. I picked up my pen. Time never strayed as far as it did then in my watch. But when the clock struck 11:00 and I stilled my pen again, I checked my watch and was aghast that it now read midnight. I wondered if the heat from my hands hadn’t caused its hands to spin in haste.

IX.

Someone in the chair is polishing their nails. Someone at the window is darning lace. Someone in the garden is picking flowers furiously. Someone behind the door is strangling their parrot. Someone in the back of the small restaurant is asleep beneath the chimney. Someone on the boat is raising the sail. Someone is wiping char tracks from the fluffy white bread loaf. Someone

shrouded in vapors of gas is shoveling mud into a pile. Someone...no, not anyone, but a rotund middle-aged gentleman with a copy of *Shi'in Gan'ei* open before him, reciting his favorite poems—written in the manner of the Chinese—about nights in spring.

February 5, 1927

Dorothy Santos: 12 Short Films

I watch myself watching myself watch

“Naked and Afraid.”

Don’t drink the water.

Two people (99.9% = Gringos) are dropped off in a POC desert, jungle, swamp and with just one survival item each.

The land just punishes and punishes them.

I find out about an art project called 12 Short Films: Casey Walker. A white girl hires actresses that look like her and in 12 takes they live her life. Meaning that they buy tampons. Watch Netflix. Spit out fat from pork.

I have an idea to make 12 films after myself. Only, I would have 12 white girls pretend to be me.

I talk to a friend about a poet who uses beautiful language to talk around trauma. You can see it like gold leaf around a chalk outline. My friend weeps as she talks about how the language beneath the words are the poet’s refusal

to see herself as a young

and prostrate girl.

Bowing before—

I say but don’t we need beauty.

Isn't it all there is to take us through?

I buy a sewing machine. I am a bad seamstress.

But, I buy yummy fabrics. With a gentle hand
and it ripples through.

A girl holds up a small gold ring and passes the Kashmiri fabric through.
Rippling through.

You see how fine, fine, fine, fine, fine fine, fine, fine fine, fine, fine fine.

Early Mornings in Anger and Thaw

During the worst weeks, I walked.
It was a matter of circling
the neighborhood I knew so well
no looking was needed, down the hill,
then right at Rolling Road to the long
curve that took me near campus.
Sometimes I entered, hoping to meet no one.
I took the lane that led by dumpsters
where students had puked the night before,
violent breakage of beer bottles,
crushed red cups in the dirt.
In those weeks, I barely stopped walking,
stopped worrying about the ones
who were trying to hurt me—
colleagues, I used to call them.
I walked where grass became muck,
litter of cigarette butts,
a torn textbook in the bushes.
I felt most comfortable there, walking
the indecent landscape of the young,
where wanting was not yet
something to be thrown away.
I walked to the edge of a field
where goal posts sloped in the wind,
and the netting lashed itself, little thwack
of knots, almost as if in punishment.
Then right and right again, walking

with the traffic, the rumbling
uncertainty of what was coming next.
How we hear what hurts us often
before we see it—most collisions
approach too quickly to avoid.
I walked alongside the street,
kicking dust and the dust of glass,
then stood at the crossing
where cars were as likely to run the light
as to slam the brakes.
I was tired, and in another time
I would have taken the quick way home.
Instead I kept walking toward
the fenced areas where strangers lived.
And soon there were longer pauses
between houses, long grasses,
and the same castigating wind
like a slap across the face. And there,
except for a listing shack on a hill,
I was alone, a little hunched myself.
Now I walked until Morgnec
changed to River and then turned back.
A few minutes from town, at the turnoff
to the auto shop, I thought about rumors,
the junkyard scraps of meaning
made by words, what we learn when others
show us ourselves in a cracked mirror.
During the worst weeks, I was always
walking through slush and fracture.
I walked to the corner of Cedar
where my house was squat in the mud,
and somewhere beneath the cold,

I had to believe little cups of gold,
the sharp, green stems of crocuses
were poking through, I had to believe,
perennial and resistant, refusing
to be halted by the goddamn snow.

“I JUST REALLY LIKE HOUSTON DESPITE ITS CRAZINESS. THERE IS A SENSE OF ENERGY AND A KIND OF EXCITEMENT, ‘WE’RE GOING PLACES AND GOD KNOWS WHAT’LL HAPPEN NEXT.’ IT’S VERY INTERESTING. IT’S VERY EXCITING.”

-Gail Collins

Erection Before a Burial

For Nicolás Maduro

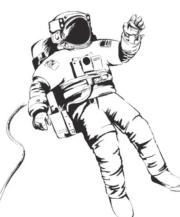
Did you hear the one about Nicolás Maduro?

That one about that band he saved from Honduran prison?

Or was it detention? Whatever it was that Nicolás Maduro said it was, that Telesur TV said it was.

Anyway, I think the band was called Los Guaraguao. They were whisked onto a stage in Caracas (presumably directly from the airport at which they landed) which warranted a breaking news bulletin and the country stopped to watch a band in sweaty black t-shirts placed on a fixed point around which they pivoted for the country to see they were free and they didn't talk to one another and they had these weird smiles despite (in spite of) those sweaty clothes. Despite the gasoline shortage. Despite the 14 million bolivars it cost to buy a chicken. Despite whatever the infant mortality rate was now that Maduro said it was what Telesur TV said it was.

Unaccustomed to performing without instruments, Los Guaraguao's hands moved everywhere: through their hair, over their chests, into their pockets, through their hair again. Old men dancing nervous in front of a Maduro who played the crowd for them, a banner unfurled stage-right that said, "Venezuela is Guaraguao," and you had to think that Maduro was thinking too, "So, this is what it's like to be Guaraguao," when suddenly a guitar appeared and someone started singing, was made to sing, and it felt real for a second. Like maybe it was a real concert and the crowd started cheering—more like roaring, a tuberculosis clap of bloodied lungs—and they really got into it you know, and Maduro just stood there and stared at them in this drapey teal shirt like he couldn't be moved.



And then he caught himself, swayed a little bit before giving this really palmy clap that was kind of never on beat because of the way sound travels and the speed at which cameras transmit to television monitors.

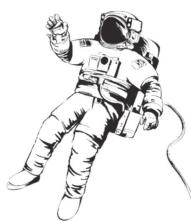
And you could see his mind start to drift. That glassy look in his eye, daydreaming. And you wonder: *what does Maduro daydream about?*

You can only imagine in this moment (right here right now) Maduro daydreams about being Guaraguao, but then you wonder if he daydreams within his daydream. Sleeping in that music. Some kind of feedback loop. Like Maduro's brain standing in one of those tri-faceted mirrors in a department store and facing the outer two mirrors toward each other so that he can't tell where he starts and where he ends. At which point maybe he's in his daydream within his daydream within his daydream in which he's thinking, "I'm going to live for one hundred years." And within that daydream you imagine he thinks about how many more bands he can save. The plight of Venezuelan bands performing in Honduras being grave, you know. And then maybe at one hundred years old he's still saving another band. Some other version of Guaraguao, which is a simulacrum of the Guaraguao he can vaguely remember now, in this very moment, and anyway he's awakened from his daydream by a drone in the sky. This thing carrying a package that gets close, closer. And for that minute where his deepest suspicions are concerned he can see his life clearly. Though it's not his life, not like you'd think.

It's this kind of soothing darkness, a kind of space that feels like a coffin to him, his body banging against the things around him.

I imagine he slithers his body through the complexities of the space he inhabits until his hand brushes up against a swath of fabric, which he immediately feels out and takes too long to recognize as the shape of a chair in which he immediately sits.

He feels the sweat from his pores sinking into the dust of the chair, the smell not unpleasant. More like earth than not. A pleasant reprieve from the acidic chemical

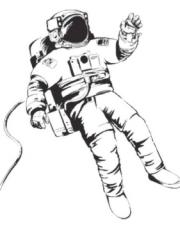


GULF COAST

tang of the air in the hillsides of Caracas which makes everything noisier in his head, like synthetic dust in his brain.

He closes his eyes in the dark and feels, for the first time in maybe years, his surroundings expand around him. The room is infinite. And even if he were to succumb to thirst or hunger, he feels like if he were trapped in here he might die and be ok with it. He feels for the first time that he belongs somewhere—the single seat in Caracas where nobody is looking for him. The last place he'd ever expect himself to be. Not that this seat is beneath him—it isn't. In fact, sitting here is the first time he's realized his constant motion, the perpetual pump of his blood and his heart and his sweat slicking all over his body. Sitting here is the destination he's been searching for. And then suddenly a light comes on behind him. He turns around, sees an engine block on a table.

It shines under the direct light of a coiled tube of fluorescent glass suspended from the ceiling. All greased up it looks as if made from pure platinum, the slick of motor oil polishing each of the seven radials in contrast to the grease shop. Red tarred rags hanging black from a blue fifty gallon drum at the entrance, which is a step down from the street level. Sheets of *El Nacional* strewn pell-mell across the floor, the corners of the newspaper curled from pressure and heat and pan drippings. A crunchy, soggy mess. Darkness in the air, darkness on the ground. A man's voice sounding out from behind the engine. "Heard you ran into trouble this morning," it says.



GULF COAST

If It Ever Leaves, Where Does It Go?

Eye-to-eye with water hemlock, red-winged blackbirds, cattails' coffin-velvet shoots, Captain Jacobs points out bumps in the water: "Gator snouts." In these hot months, the cold-blooded dangle vertically in the Bay, seeking out the chill six-feet below. Exposed noses become small moorings of salted flowers, turtle meat. Their stillness startles as does their presence although Mobile Bay teems with them. Glancing toward my husband, stiff with mourning, I realize I steer away from speaking about his father as if that act can propel the grieving into everyday living. We navigate the boat out of tangled murk toward the glassy scrim of calmer, deeper water. Engine gurgles off. The wake's rush slaps us silent. Then, a heron lifts. The boat lists portside, starboard, back again. Below the surface, chain-like necks, green-black scutes in shapes of pendalogues, and ghost-white bellies light this world. What hangs in the water's harlequin haze sways with us.

The Very Rich

The very rich are richer than us
The very rich are smarter than us
The very rich dress better than us
The very rich are better than us

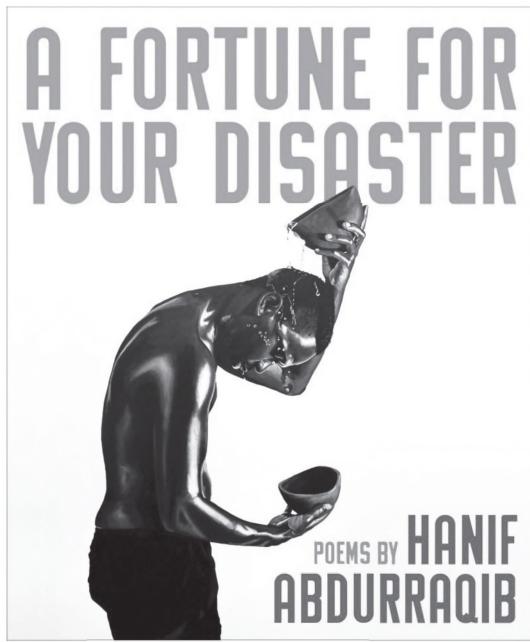
The president loves the rich more than us
The government loves the rich more than us
God loves the rich more than us
I love the rich more than us

The very rich want more than us
The very rich know more than us
The very rich need more than us
The very rich deserve more than us

The very rich love us, love us, love us, love us

REVIEWS & INTERVIEWS

Welcome to Heartbreak: A Review of Hanif Abdurraqib's *A Fortune for Your Disaster* (Tin House Books)



Despite clues from its title which now seem obvious, I did not expect Hanif Abdurraqib's latest poetry collection, *A Fortune for Your Disaster*, to dwell so much on heartbreak and loneliness. This may be due to the fact that his latest poems, or at least those I'd seen appearing in literary journals (including one that was published in a recent issue of *Gulf Coast*), mostly seemed to share the title, "How Can Black People Write About Flowers at a Time Like This," which always struck me as tonally complex. Was the title a question? A quotation? Was it accusatory? Self-reprimanding? Could it be, possibly, ironic, the way (I think)

exceedingly long titles often are, since they subvert the reader's expectation of a sterling, thematic title like "On Fear" or simply "Grace"?

Whichever troubled waters "How Can Black People Write About Flowers at a Time Like This" propelled me into, however, Abdurraqib reliably guided me through them in the body of the poem. His oars were always his eyes (for crystal-clear images) and his ears (for gorgeous lyricism), and by the final line I was usually put down on the shores of a perfect Ending—the kind that echoes through the silence of a breathless audience at a packed poetry reading. I didn't realize it right

off, but I had come to be spoiled by these delights, in a way that only good poets spoil us: Abdurraqib left me wanting more.

But the “Black People Writ[ing] About Flowers” poems comprise less than a third of *A Fortune for Your Disaster*, and if you are about to discover them for the first time, prepare yourself for a spectacular sequence in which many of your assumptions, about “black people” poems and “flowers” poems (not to mention poems about writing), will be trounced. *A Fortune for Your Disaster* is composed, essentially, of three sequences braided together; the other two are about Nikola Tesla and Marvin Gaye, who need no introductions. Additional poems, often drawing on other pop culture references, fill spaces between repeated titles.

I found the Tesla poems to be by far the most perplexing in *A Fortune for Your Disaster*. The problem for me was not that they didn’t fit with the others (Abdurraqib’s style is wide-ranging and inviting, and I would trust his poetic method to render nearly any subject sufficiently interesting and sonically beautiful, Aristotelian unity be damned). It was more that the repeated title, “It’s Not Like Nikola Tesla Knew All Those People Were Going to Die,” often seemed to deflect attention from the poems like some kind of postmodern red herring. In other words, in case I’m missing something, it’s not clear what most of the Nikola Tesla poems have to do with Nikola Tesla, or with people (which people?) dying, and the more I try to bridge these connections the further I get from what feels like the central *impulse* of the poem, and the more longing I feel for the explosive-rhetoric-dueling-with-pastoral-imagery energy of the “Black People Writ[ing] About Flowers” poems.

Luckily, there are the Marvin Gaye poems, and those I mentioned earlier about heartbreak and loneliness, which are, for me, the best in the book, and it is perhaps no surprise that Abdurraqib, an authoritative essayist on popular music, hits his best grace notes when writing poetry about music and the deep emotions that live between these two artforms. What better example than “Welcome to Heartbreak,” a title borrowed, presumably, from the 2009 track by Kanye West, featuring Kid Cudi. The half-page prose poem begins: “it is the version of me fading in photos that I most wish to dance with.” But it is the ending that delivers a final, masterful sucker punch mirroring with words what has been done to the speaker:

...I wish this type of betrayal on no one: being born out of that which will be your undoing.

Imagine, instead: the place where you have a bed of your own & a table to sit across from someone who laughs thick & echoing at your smallest joy as an open palm & then

the fingers close

The “smallest joy” that the speaker recalls, with touching intimacy, lasts as briefly “as an open palm,” just as “the version of” himself he “most wish[es] to dance with” lives only in photographs. We know nothing lasts. But Abdurraqib has a talent for making the truth felt, for using an image to bring the feeling alive, and for allowing the poem to break open (formally) in its very moment of withdrawal, of “clos[ing].” Whether he analytically scores these decisions or intuitively plays by ear makes no difference—heartbreak is what he promises, and heartbreak is what we get. This poem is almost cruelly sad, the way it waves joy in front of us, only to take it away so abruptly.

The word “unflinching” is applied so frequently in reviews of powerful poetry that, like most clichés, it invites mockery—and besides, what is wrong with flinching, anyway? Abdurraqib’s best poems are rife with qualifiers, with suggestions that maybe there are other ways of looking than prying one’s eyes open and taking tragedy in straight through the retinas. My favorite poem in the book, the latter of two entitled “I Tend to Think Forgiveness Looks the Way it Does in the Movies,” stutters steps elegantly into the depths of the speaker’s therapy session, as his attempts to outmaneuver his analyst with wordplay (“I tell my therapist / *you can’t spell heartbreak/ without art*”) lower him into the underworld of metaphor, where the “meaning” of his condition paradoxically hides—and reveals itself—in the “field” of memory:

I know that we aren’t even

friends but tell me what it meant

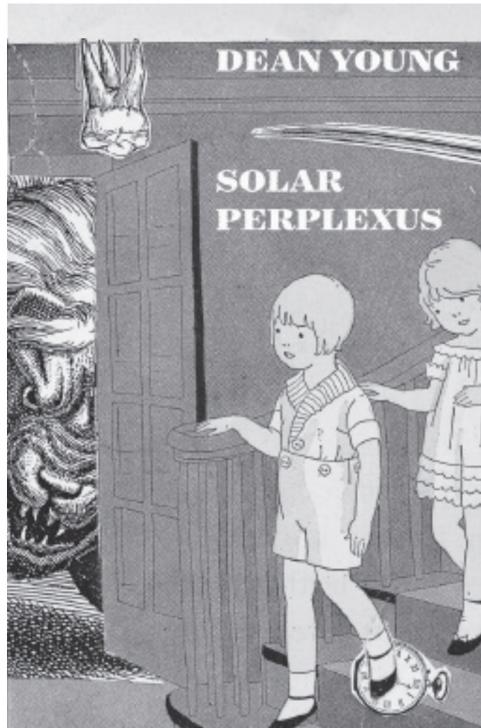
when as a boy
I sat at the mouth
of the gumball machines
with no quarters
in my pockets
twisting each metal diamond
and hoping for a miracle
tell me what it meant
that when the ball first dropped
my hands were not ready
and I watched it roll in slow
motion down the mall floor
until another child more eager
than I was parted
their palms like they were catching
the last living dove

If I might hazard a guess, I would say the gumball represents the erotic “other” that poets have for centuries tried their best “to catch.” Whether it’s a lover or love itself or any other elusive “miracle” of human existence (a cure, a parent, the perfect poem) matters less than the way the pursuit tends to structure the poet’s psyche. Whose “hands” are ever “ready” for the miraculous gumball? Who is ever both “eager” and prescient enough to be the child who waits twenty feet away, certain that luck will roll in his direction? Once again, Abdurraqib refers to “parted” palms as emblems of prayer, joy and fortune. With virtuosic risk-taking the poet finds the “art” in “heartbreak,” and I suspect, if *A Fortune for Your Disaster* is any indication, that the lines in his palm spell another book of highly promising poetry.

Knife Skills Still Developing: A Review of Dean Young's *Solar Perplexus* (Copper Canyon Press)

Dean Young has been publishing poetry for more than 30 years. His first book, *Design with X*, which he has more or less renounced, came out in 1988 and is, by my estimation, his best. In it, Young's signature wit and pop-cultural erudition are on full display, along with his effortless image-making talent and knack for surprising turns. The poems are also much simpler, altogether more unified, and as a result more powerful than the poems we find in his following 12 books—a staggering series of poems that tend to produce, over and over, a surprisingly similar effect. But a gut-punching poem like "Allowance," from *Design with X*, never quite appears again in Young's oeuvre. Here are its first lines:

I don't know how my father's body
was carried from Indiana to Pennsylvania
but we drove and my mother wept when the trooper
wouldn't let me go for doing 65.
I hope it was by sea although
there is no sea between,
but let me have that.



And here are its last:

I've never brushed my mother's hair
but at first the brush drags and snags
then passes liquidly through. Please,
let me have this too.

Poets with keen intelligence and enough skill often evolve to a point at which they can produce innumerable poems that meet 99% of the criteria for greatness. Clear imagery? Check. Control of line and rhythm? Check. Surprise every step of the way? Check, check, check... What they can't always do is nail the *it*-factor, the *je ne sais quoi*, that mysterious quality akin to naivete and vulnerability that secures the reader's trust while at the same ironically ruining it. Love it or hate it, the cliché speaks truth: great poems break our hearts.

I have to go all the way back to "Allowance" to find a poem of Young's that touches me so deeply. To succeed, a poem about a father's funeral must navigate all the pitfalls of sentimentality, and yet Young's control of ironic distance is deployed in exactly the right measure to guide us safely around the weepy rhododendrons and other pathetic fallacies that would tempt lesser poets. But, as importantly, Young keeps the stakes high throughout "Allowance." The refrain of "let me have that," used with classical repetition-with-variation, has something of Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and Bishop's "One Art," poems that famously engage civilians and experts alike. Young's mournful speaker in "Allowance" asks for what every child wants from his parents—tender experiences of adventure and intimacy, even if he acknowledges these experiences as illusions.

Now, in his latest book, *Solar Perplexus*, we find once again the Dean Young that we have already met a dozen times before. He is by no means just a jokester—he delicately weaves sadness in and around humor with a most precise pair of crochet needles. But, here again, is Young's signature hipster attitude that can at times be off-putting, even objectionable. A synonym for attitude is "posture." Another is "performance." One more is "trickery." Undoubtedly, Young is, if nothing else, a type of scholar of these terms. I imagine that he can

expound upon their nuances as well as he can explain the differences between Cabernet and Bordeaux. He's put his faith, as many American academics have, in a French-inflected skepticism that dismisses any notion that might accurately be called "quaint." Presumably, logic is on his list of things to avoid. So is piety, allegiance, integrity—anything high-minded.

The lines of a typical Dean Young poem are like spokes on a hermeneutic Ferris wheel, in which one skeptical remark leads to another skeptical remark in a dizzying ride lasting, on average, about three minutes. Turn to any page in *Solar Perplexus*. The words are different, but the thrills—and disappointments—are the same.

Take, for example, "The Science of Thunder," which begins:

One day while I was alive
in my pajamas, not yet threatened
my love would leave me
to sort out my rebuffed retirement alone
and erase myself with lemon haze
and my knife skills were still developing

The poem, a 32-line sentence, eventually lands on "the fucked up beauty of this world / and not that I'm sure there is one the next." Did you hear that? No, it wasn't the sound of earth-shattering insight. It was something more like a ton of potential hitting the ground with a dud. I wish I could say that I intentionally picked the most confounding poem in *Solar Perplexus* to advance my argument, but by invoking André Breton in the book's epigraph, Young has already moved the goalposts around to suggest that "confounding" is precisely the point. Yawn. It's a point that grows increasingly tiresome each time Young, like other (mostly) white male poets who refuse to give up their boyish attachments to Bretonian Surrealism, makes it.

To claim that it is some kind of treason for a poet to at least try to move beyond his signature style is a tragic capitulation—or at the very least, a cynical one. Young might fairly include himself among the greatest living American poets. He has "revolutionized humor in contemporary poetry," write Cole

Swensen and David St. John in *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology*. To spawn legions of imitators is, in some way, indicative of a poet's originality (it might also be opportunism, or luck, that places any poet on the crest of the zeitgeist's wave, who can say?). But contemporary poets who have made late-career explorations into new territories are outpacing him. Louise Glück's finally moved past her signature starkness and started writing novelistic books like *Faithful and Virtuous Night*, which may displease the loyalists but delight the revolutionaries. Henri Cole's last few books, particularly *Touch* and *Nothing to Declare*, show a courageous embracing of vulnerability; even if some efforts fall flat, he picks himself up again and tries to write past the technical skill that he has mastered. And while Terrance Hayes gives all his *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin* the same title and fourteen-line structure, the book itself detours from the pathway he seemed to be heading along in his previous collection, *How to be Drawn*, which was defined by formal variety and experiment.

The biggest change that *Solar Perplexus* continues to document is not to Young's poetics but to the man himself. He famously underwent a heart transplant in 2011, and many of the poems absorb this biographical data and make Young's own brand of music out of it. He writes, in "More Tales from the Crypt,"

Despite its supposed jeweled movement
and rocket mechanics, my new heart's
no more accurate, bowstring
still snapped, kitten just as frazzled.
They wouldn't let me keep my old heart
because it was sliced out and burned
so I wasn't able to take a bite
like any warrior would his enemy's
to become a greater warrior. Nope.

As much as I might bemoan how all Young's bright colors—his "jeweled movement / and rocket mechanics"—from a certain distance mix together to form one brown-gray sludge, I do find his tendency to avoid cliché rather agreeable. To transform

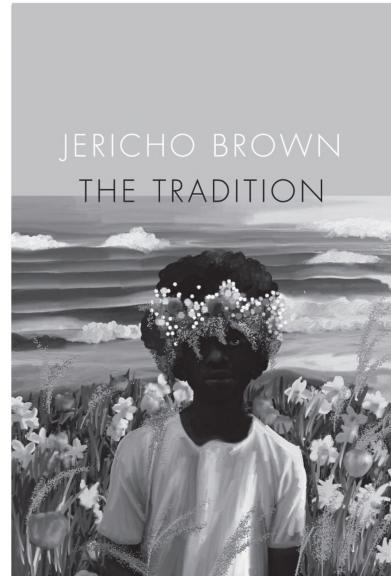
actual vulnerability (say, enduring a death-defying medical procedure) into a highly aestheticized and therefore ironized poem seems to play, satisfyingly, by the rules. In any case, the personal histories of poets are often fascinating, and Young's heart transplant seems like one for the record books. That a now-deceased young woman's heart beats inside the middle-aged male poet's ribcage fits almost too perfectly into a picture of "art mirroring reality" (or would it be vice-versa?). That Young is kept alive by science—extraordinary science!—fairly acts as supporting evidence for his implied thesis calling for the kind of zany, doubled, near-grotesque configurations of humor and heartache that are his bread and butter.

Of course, none of this is lost on Young himself, whose very name (also not his choice, presumably) dramatizes now more than ever his peculiar place in American letters. Dean *Young*? Chancellor of *youth*? If he were fictional, his name would press against the boundaries of plausibility. A cheekier novelist would christen him "Professor Innocence" or "Doctor Romantic." For unless he chooses, in a Hail Mary 14th book, to reinvent himself, he will continue to dwell in what must be an extraordinarily bizarre world. He will outlive both the rise and fall of the Dean Young Poem while still—invariably, dutifully, perplexingly—rewriting it.

A Politics of Intimacy: Jericho Brown's *The Tradition* (Copper Canyon Press)

“Even though every kind of politics needs a public square in order to exist,” wrote Mexican poet and scholar Luis Vicente de Aguinaga, “the politics of poetry takes place in an intimate square”. This means that when the poem addresses events, characters or conflicts that pertain to the public square, the function of the text is to associate the public realm with the inseparable fabric of the subject, its emotional and sensorial privacy. The poem functions as a compression of the enormous apparatus of the world; it's a distillation into an interpersonal subjectivity that creates a territory where the hurt of our bodies and the complexity of our identity becomes intelligible. As the poems in Jericho Brown's third collection, *The Tradition*, accomplish this complex albeit delicate gesture, we are faced with something that is also inseparable from the way poetry becomes thought. As the reader is interpellated by the systems and institutions of our present, inside and outside the texts, Brown's poems also historicize their pertinence in the only way poetry can: with an insatiable hunger for beauty amid our systemic oppressions.

Early in the book, the reader encounters a discourse that challenges the way we have grown accustomed to the naturalization of inequality. We have seen black men shot and killed by police; we have seen them protesting on the streets. And yet we also have rendered those images invisible, as if they were the natural state of things. In this sense, Brown's poems address the violence and oppression the African American community has experienced in recent years, especially black men who are murdered in plain sight; the poems are obviously political in the way they articulate a



dissent towards that violence and its causes. But their brilliance doesn't reside only in the way the texts bring our complex reality to the foreground. Brown's body of work builds upon the idea of *tradition* through the obvious—though often overlooked—notion that the current pains of black people in America are the result of a historical continuum. In other words, they are a result of a traditional set of factors that cannot be overstated. This becomes evident in the sonnet that titles the collection:

Aster. Nasturtium. Delphinium. We thought
 Fingers in dirt meant it was our dirt, learning
 Names in heat, in elements classical
 Philosophers said could change us. *Stargazer.*
Foxglove. Summer seemed to bloom against the will
 Of the sun, which news reports claimed flamed hotter
 On this planet than when our dead fathers
 Wiped sweat from their necks. *Cosmos. Baby's Breath.*

In this poem, Brown uses italics to distinguish the names of perennial flowers from the rest of the text. As if they were scattered on a plot of land, their proper names blossom inside a seemingly innocent tale of young men planting them in the garden. At first glance, the reader is faced with an ambivalence that can be read not in terms of place, but of time. With a clear reference to manual labor that can be read as a reflection on slavery and, thus, ownership, Brown creates a space of indetermination that invites a political reading. As the poem continues, the past that is only suggested in the first part of the text comes rushing towards the present:

Men like me and my brothers filmed what we
 Planted for proof we existed before
 Too late, sped the video to see blossoms
 Brought in seconds, colors you expect in poems
 Where the world ends, everything cut down.
John Crawford. Eric Garner. Mike Brown.

The distension of time towards the past accelerates with the blossoming of the perennial flowers. They are the fruit of labor, a connection to a shared racial experience and to the history of life that gets cut short. And, suddenly, the circular form of the poem is completed. Three names of perennial flowers in a poem where the world ends are now the names of three black men killed by police in 2014. John Crawford was 22 years old when he was killed by police in Ohio; Eric Garner was 43 when officer Daniel Pantaleo put him in a chokehold in Staten Island, that ended his life; Mike Brown was 18 when he was killed by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. The presence of these names, also in italics, creates the continued metaphor of *The Tradition*. Men cut down short in the continuity of death that haunts black men in America resemble the premature deaths of flowers that are supposed to blossom every season of the year.

Composed by poems that shine for their formal achievements—especially the form that Brown invented, the Duplex, a 14-line poem composed of couplets of 10 syllables that is part ghazal, part sonnet, and part pantoum—*The Tradition* is a collection of both pain and beauty. “I promise if you hear / Of me dead anywhere near / A cop, then that cop killed me.” Brown writes in “Bullet Points” to show an *I* that is prominent and certain of the threat posed by just being who he is. That same risk is palpable in “Stake”, where the *I* multiplies into a communal subject: “I am they in most of America. / Someone feels lost in the forest / Of we, so he can’t imagine / A single tree. He can’t bear it.” Often with short verses and a rhythm that is both continuous and breathless, Brown articulates a discourse that is often a denunciation of the threat black people face.

Nevertheless, these are not poems written solely with that purpose. Brown makes *The Tradition* not only a pertinent but a necessary work of art, exploring a politics of intimacy. When the poet articulates a political discourse, he works from the inside out: “I love a man I know could die / And not by way of illness / And not by his own hand / But because of the color of that hand and all / His flawless skin,” Brown writes in “Of My Fury.” The sense of the intimate in his work is a confession of emotion that goes out to the public square. In other words, if politics can bend us in our most intimate affects it’s because it is profound enough that an individual story can be everyone’s story. It is a body of work that shows in its vulnerability how poetry can say the unspeakable.

What's Out There: An Interview with Richard Powers

For his twelfth novel, Richard Powers wanted to do something different. This will come as no surprise to his fans: his books explore diverse topics, from neuroscience, to the rise of the modern corporation, to genetics, to music, and more.

But for *The Overstory*, which won the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, Powers says he needed to “unblind” himself.

“When you stand in front of a 1500-year-old redwood, and realize that the mountains had been covered with them, and there are only very small pockets now remaining, it’s tough to turn away from,” he told me. “I simply had to say: I’ve missed a huge part of the story of who we are, and I need to educate myself.”

The Overstory follows several individuals who make the same discovery and change their lives based on what they learn. It invokes myth and storytelling, and it embraces an extended timeline to reflect the lifespan not just of its human characters, but of the trees they learn to see.

In early January, I discussed the book with Powers over the phone. We talked about trees, the transformative power of storytelling, and how writers might respond—and stay responsive to—the unique demands of this moment in both human- and tree-time. The following is an excerpt of our conversation, with minor editing for clarity. To read the full interview, go to www.gulfcoastmag.org.

Charlotte Wyatt: So many of your books explore and integrate science and art, and I’m curious about the treatment of the concept of “progress” in this book—especially with your character Nick’s ancestors written about early in the story, one of whom “succumbs to the disease of improvement.” I love that in the same paragraph, his Kodak No. 2 camera is introduced. And it has a slogan, “You push the button, we do the rest.”

Richard Powers: Right! The by-word of all modernist, individualist technosublime fantasies!

CW: Exactly! It read a little to me like a Faustian bargain, especially given how much we see his immigrant ancestors go through, and since so many of your other books—and I’m thinking especially of *The Echo Maker* and *Gain*—cast human progress and technology in a sometimes ambivalent light. So I wondered: *The Overstory* takes that idea quite a bit farther. What made you want to write this book now?

RP: So, it seems as if there are several things on the table. One is the relationship between technology, humanity, the non-human, living world, human destiny within that world, on one hand – but also this question of social time, and the aptness of the novel at this moment in cultural or social history. So let me talk about the first component of the question first, whether and where what you called a “Faustian bargain” comes into play. All of my books have been concerned with exploring this question of human destiny and human transformation, to some degree. Trying to take the human story out of the merely personal, the individual, the local, the domestic, and to place it back into an historical context.

**WHEN YOU THINK OF FIRE, TO FLINT-KNAPPING,
ALL THE WAY DOWN TO WRITING, EVERY
ONE OF THESE TECHNOLOGIES IS A HUGE
REVOLUTION THAT TRANSFORMS OUR OWN
SENSE OF WHAT WE'RE CAPABLE OF DOING**

The one that asks this question about where are we going, where did we come from? How are we getting there, what do we hope is waiting? I don’t know the answer to the question of what or where the “Faustian bargain” gets introduced. I don’t think it’s

necessarily implicit in the technological transformation of human kind. And for that I think we have to widen our lens a little bit, and remember that to be human is already to have a relationship to technology, and the transformation of the rules of living on earth. It’s one of the distinguishing features of our species, that we manipulate tools and that we create and project our powers with various leveraging devices, that change the terms of time and space for us. And we’ve been doing that from the beginning. In fact, the very most powerful technologies in the human drama are often the earliest ones. When you think of fire, to flint-knapping, all the way down to writing, every one of these technologies is a huge

revolution that transforms our own sense of what we're capable of doing, and what we want to do.

So to tell the human story is to tell the story of an uneasy relationship with legacy, versus desire for future, and more powerful, manipulations. But the point is, the real Faustian bargain, the real villain in the story of human destiny as I've identified it in *The Overstory* is not technology per se but the myth that certain technologies have allowed us to become susceptible to, which is this belief in human exceptionalism. The belief that somehow we will, with the accumulated leverage of all our technologies finally cease to have to live here on earth, within the boundaries of what the planet can supply. And this notion that somehow we have reached the level of technological dominance that leaves us exempt from the reality of biological systems, the reality of climate systems and so forth, that we got seduced into believing in our own omnipotence.

I think that's the heart of the story—we have had a reciprocal relationship with nature from the beginning, and we have integrated tools into that reciprocal relationship, and we have been ourselves profoundly shaped by the very wildernesses and living systems that we've left our mark on. It's the inseparability of those two things that lie at the heart of my story. Not necessarily the idea that we're doomed by the first stone that we pick up and attempt to use as a tool.

Are there technologies that lend themselves more to human exceptionalism than others? Yeah, I think there probably are. That's a deep and complicated question. That's a question that deserves lots and lots of stories being directed to it.

So on to the second part of your question, which is, why now? That has both a personal component and a public component to it. The personal component is I had simply, after eleven books in a third of a century, I had matured to the point where I was suddenly confronted by my own tree-blindness, my own blindness to the nonhuman. By my own oversight, and the realization this was an essential component, perhaps *the* essential component, to the story that I

THE REAL VILLAIN IN THE STORY OF HUMAN DESTINY AS I'VE IDENTIFIED IT IN THE OVERSTORY IS NOT TECHNOLOGY PER SE BUT THE MYTH THAT CERTAIN TECHNOLOGIES HAVE ALLOWED US TO BECOME SUSCEPTIBLE TO

was trying to understand and tell about the uneasiness of our situation here on this planet.

This transformation in my own consciousness came about six years ago when I was living in California and acquired a kind of very dramatic confrontation with these enormous trees, 98% of which had been destroyed. When you stand in front of a 1500-year-old redwood, and realize that the mountains had been covered with them, and there are only very small pockets now remaining, it's tough to turn away from. It's a kind of "Road to Damascus" moment. I simply had to say: I've missed a huge part of the story of who we are, and I need to educate myself. I need to un-blind myself.

So that's an interesting question of why this book now, as far as my capabilities, in my personal development and growth, as someone who is trying to see what a kind of human exceptionalism and modernism prevented me from seeing.

The question of the social timing is interesting too. I didn't anticipate when I started this novel, to write this novel five-and-a-half years ago, that my more or less historical drama—this tale of a group of people in the late '90s and early 2000s—would have such resonance for the world the book would be published into.

I didn't foresee the Trump administration, I didn't foresee the roll-back of fifty or sixty years of environmental legislation. I didn't even see at that time this huge aggregation of tree disasters. That now, North America looks like a battle

**I DIDN'T FORESEE THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION,
I DIDN'T FORESEE THE ROLL-BACK OF FIFTY OR
SIXTY YEARS OF ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATION.**

the complete destruction of the arboreal landscape, that's not something that was in my head six years ago.

zone on all fronts. The fires, the agricultural deforestations, the devastation by disruptive ecosystems in the form of exotic pests and destructive beetles. All this conjunction of

But I'll tell you that I probably could have used another year working on the book and really was reluctant to let it go a couple of years ago, but realized with the complete change of the political climate in the country, I had to get it out there sooner rather than later. I really wanted it to be part of the conversation that it seemed to me was in danger of being completely overwhelmed by this tsunami of political revolution that happened in 2016.

CW: I can only imagine what it has been like for you to see the book go out into this particular moment! On that note, I'm fascinated by how thoroughly the story interweaves with America, with events in American history, especially. I'm not sure how much of that was meant to be foregrounded, but with the call in the book from the radicalized environmentalists, who talk about becoming indigenous again, I wondered how you saw the role of specific place and ecosystems in the book. I'm thinking especially in parts of the United States in and around Houston, where places and environments have changed radically in recent years due to climate change.

**THIS UNDERSTANDING OF THE WAY IN WHICH
GEOGRAPHY IS DESTINY IS AN IMPORTANT THING THAT
FICTION CAN REVEAL, AND I DO TRY TO INTENSIFY
A PALPABLE SENSE OF WHAT LIFE IS AFFORDING.**

RP: It's a very important question. This notion of place was so central to me as I was working on the book. And I was trying to do two things that sound almost incommensurable: on the one hand, I was trying to move the book around as much as possible, and you'll see in the book a kind of geographical sweep. Sections that deal with the mid-west, sections that deal with the east, sections that deal with the southeast, and of course this kind of culminating, dramatic showdown that happens in the Pacific Northwest. I really—to the extent that I could, I really wanted to move the book through a lot of different places, even internationally. There is an extended passage where Patricia Westerford goes to Brazil, as part of her seedbank work, and experiences tropical ecosystems, and is overwhelmed by them.

This was important to me because when writers talk about the importance of place, we often talk about it on the microscopic side. The essential way in which the local makes us who we are. And that's an important thing. I'm living now in the Smokies, where to go over one ridge is to enter into a very different ecosystem, and this understanding of the way in which geography is destiny is an important thing that fiction can reveal, and I do try to intensify a palpable sense of what life is affording. What the local constraints of geography and climate are giving to the affordances of local life. And I do love fiction that does that, and when I was working on this book, I was reading the kinds of

people whose work is steeped in the particulars of the living system in a world where the characters unfold. Writers who know the names of the plants and animals of the area where the story unfolds in, and whose geography you can actually experience in a very sensory way.

But there was this other issue at stake too, which is to get beyond the local and show the way in which the vitality of life and especially its larger essence creates hugely diversified and varied challenges and opportunities for understanding ourselves and for living within the nonhuman world. There are at least sixty-thousand species of trees in the world. Perhaps more, depending on how species are counted.

And you know, there are the differences between what a tree does here and what a tree does in Maine, and what a tree does in Iowa, and what a tree does in Oregon and the Cascades, is important. We don't want that to drop down into a single reified concept as if trees were one thing.

**[IT'S] IMPORTANT FOR US TO UNDERSTAND THE
RELENTLESSNESS AND THE INVENTION AND
THE DIVERSITY OF NATURE. TO ADOPT OUR OWN
VISION OF THE POSSIBILITIES OF HUMAN LIFE.**

In fact, one of the startling things I learned while working on the book is that this basic plan of getting up on a wooden trunk, and sticking your solar cells out, and turning sunlight into food, is so powerful and so essential, that it gets developed

by natural selection at least six entirely different times. Six completely different coevolutionary events. And that's important. That's important for us to understand the relentlessness and the invention and the diversity of nature. To adopt our own vision of the possibilities of human life. Accordingly, we can't—we can't continue down this cultural sense that we can create single conditions of comfortable or desirable life that are independent of where we are. It's crazy.

CW: In similar terms to the way landscapes affect individuals and individual experiences in the book, *The Overstory* struck me as being just as much about the role of storytelling and its transformative effects on these people. You've spoken in other interviews about the different levels of storytelling, in terms of the psychological, and conflicts between people, and then people in conflict, somehow,

with the natural world. How did that idea of storytelling as being transformative affect the genesis of the *The Overstory*?

RP: When I had my revelatory moment in northern California—and it was just a visceral thing, you know?—it was just falling in love with trees. I mean, plain and simple. Having gotten to the ripe old age of fifty-five without ever really taking them seriously, they suddenly seemed like the most astonishing and beautiful and essential things in the world. It really was a kind of affective transformation. It was just a love affair. I wanted to read everything that I could about them. And see every kind of tree that I could within reach of where I was. And it produced a series of long days when I would just go out into the world with my field guide, and stand in front of an individual tree. And not necessarily to say, what is it? But say, what is it doing? And what is it doing that no other tree is doing? What is it doing that I spent half a century not noticing it doing? And really it was this completely passion-driven and ecstasy-driven adventure. I ended up reading over 120 books about trees. And it was there that I started to begin thinking about stories. Because the more I read about trees, the more I understood their essential and fundamental relationship to all the cultures of the world. And the role that they play not just in the cultural social and industrial development of all the different regions of the world, but the role they played in the imagination and spirit and literature of all the different places.

THE MORE I READ ABOUT TREES, THE MORE I UNDERSTOOD THEIR ESSENTIAL AND FUNDAMENTAL RELATIONSHIP TO ALL THE CULTURES OF THE WORLD.

You mentioned Ovid and how he becomes a recurring motif throughout the course of the book, but he's not alone. The book is completely peppered with indigenous myths, Golden-age myths, and legends of as many cultures as I could fit in. And it occurred to me, retroactively, after discovering how essential and important trees were to most of the stories told by most of the people in the world throughout most of human history, it became kind of a shock to realize the deficit that happens in western literature in the last two hundred years. And they effectively become exiled, or you know, stage props. At best. And rarely that.

So that, to me, was a kind of a moment as well. When did they disappear from story, and why? What would it take to place them back in center stage? Because as I mentioned, it would have been inconceivable for anybody setting out to tell a story about humans trying to make their way in the world prior to western modernism, inconceivable to try to tell a story without putting the non-human squarely at the center. We have traditionally understood ourselves in terms of what the rest of the living world affords and allows us. So it really became clear to me that this would have to be a recuperative kind of project. It would have to be saying, something has disappeared from western literary fiction that leaves the story incoherent at best. And misleading and trapping at worst.

CW: Have these ideas of storytelling as being transformational—has that affected your sense of the responsibility the writer? Or your responsibility as a writer?

**THE RESPONSIBILITY THAT THE BOOK INVOVES
HAS TO DO WITH THE RECOGNITION THAT THERE
IS NO SEPARATE THING CALLED HUMANITY.**

RP: Well—what is the responsibility of the writer? That's an interesting question. I would say it must have something to do with trying to turn honestly to this question of who do we think we are? And where are we? And how did we get here? So, in some ways, I've obliquely answered, in my previous answer: What it did was alert me to that portion of my responsibility that I wasn't living up to. Mainly, that I was taking seriously the psychological and the social, without taking seriously the inextricable, reciprocal relationship to everything that we call human and everything that we call nonhuman. So really, the responsibility that the book invokes has to do with the recognition that there is no separate thing called humanity. No separate thing called nature. That if we do want to tell stories about ourselves, it's only going to be as a small component of vastly complicated and webbed-together networks of things we've kind of been neglectful of for a long time.

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927), born in Tokyo, Japan, was the author of more than 350 works of fiction and non-fiction. Japan's premier literary award for emerging writers, the Akutagawa Prize, is named after him.

Kazim Ali's work includes poetry, fiction, diary, essay, translation, and cross-genre work. He is a professor in the Literature Department at the University of California, San Diego.

Toby Altman is the author of *Arcadia, Indiana* (Plays Inverse, 2017) and several chapbooks, including *Every Hospital by Bertrand Goldberg (Except One)*, winner of the 2018 Ghost Proposal Chapbook Prize. His poems can be found in *Colorado Review*, *jubilat*, *Lana Turner*, and other journals and anthologies. He holds a PhD in English Literature from Northwestern University and an MFA in Poetry from the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Bill Arning is a Contemporary art advisor, curator and critic based in Houston, Texas. From 2009-2018 he was the director of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, where he organized solo exhibitions on Mark Flood, Melanie Smith, Matthew Day Jackson, and the late Stan VanDerBeek. Upcoming commercial exhibitions include Stonewall 50/50 at 1969 Gallery in New York, Paulina Peavy at Andrew Edlin Gallery, Mark Flood/sam Jablon at Mindy Solomon Gallery, Miami and Texas Extravagant Drawing at Fiendish Plots, Lincoln, Nebraska. Previously, Arning was curator at MIT's List Visual Arts Center (2000-2009), curating shows on AA Bronson, Cerith Wyn Evans, and Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler. From 1985 to 1996, Arning was director of White Columns in New York. His writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *Apollo*, *Art in America*, *Out*, and *Parkett*, and he has contributed to many international publications, including exhibition catalogues on *Keith Haring*, *Christian Jankowski*, and *Donald Moffett*.

Erica Berry's essays and journalism have been published by *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *LitHub*, *Colorado Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *Pacific Standard*, and *Guernica*, among others. Winner of the 2018 Steinberg Essay Prize and a 2018 AWP Intro Journals Award, she has also received awards and fellowships from the Minnesota State Arts Board, the Bread Loaf Writers Conference and Tin House. Born in Oregon, she was a 2018 graduate of the University of Minnesota's MFA program in creative nonfiction, and is now the 2019-2020 Teaching Fellow at the National Writers Series in Traverse City, Michigan.

Julia Brennan is a writer and performer from central New York. She is the author of *Hunting Season*, which won the 2019 Tarpaulin Sky Book Award and will be published by Tarpaulin Sky Press in 2020. She holds an MFA in fiction from Brown University, where she won the Frances Mason Harris '26 manuscript award. Her work has been published in *Hotel Amerika* and *Big Big Wednesday*, among other publications. She lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Ana Portnoy Brimmer is a Puerto Rican poet and performer, writer and ARTivist. She holds a BA and an MA in English (Literature) from the University of Puerto Rico, and is currently an MFA candidate in Creative Writing (Poetry) at Rutgers University-Newark. Her chapbook manuscript, *To Love An Island*, is the winner of YesYes Books' 2019 Vinyl 45 Chapbook Contest, forthcoming in 2020. Ana is the recipient of The Ancinas Family Scholarship; the inaugural recipient of the Sandra Cisneros Fellowship; a 2019 Pushcart Prize and Best New Poets nominee; and a #PoetsForPuertoRico organizer. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Winter Tangerine*, *Foundry Journal*, *Sx Salón*, *Huizache*, and *Anomaly*, among others.

Burke Butler lives in Houston, Texas, with her husband, son, and daughter. She is an attorney at a non-profit law practice, where she specializes in the defense of prisoners facing a death sentence. Her writing has appeared in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Marshall Project*, and *The Texas Observer*. Burke dedicates "Returned to God" to her mother, Norah Morley.

Izzy Casey was born in Los Angeles. Her poems have been published or are forthcoming in *BOAAT*, *Bennington Review*, *New York Tyrant*, and elsewhere. She has an MFA in poetry from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she works as an editor for The University of Iowa Prison Writing Project. She is a recipient of a fellowship with the Poetry Foundation.

Ryan Choi lives in Honolulu, Hawai'i, where he was born and raised.

Margaret Cipriano's visual and written work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Quarterly West*, *McSweeney's*, *DIAGRAM*, *West Branch*, *Ninth Letter*, *Mid-American*, *Copper Nickel*, *Poetry Northwest* and others. She was recently a finalist for the Greg Grummer Poetry Award and the former Managing Editor of *The Journal*. She lives in Seattle, WA.

Lydia Davis's most recent collection of stories is *Can't and Won't* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2014). Her translation of Proust's *Letters to His Neighbor* appeared in 2017 from New Directions, and a collection of her essays is forthcoming from FSG (Fall, 2019). She is currently preparing a second volume of essays and completing a translation of stories by the Dutch writer A.L. Snijders.

Michael Dhyne grew up in California. He earned an MFA from the University of Virginia where he was awarded the Academy of American Poets Prize and the Kahn Prize for Teaching. Recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Adroit Journal*, *Denver Quarterly*, *The Journal*, *River Styx*, *Salt Hill*, *Washington Square Review*, and elsewhere. In 2019, he was a work-study scholar at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.

Sharon Dolin is the author of six books of poetry, most recently *Manual for Living* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016). Her translation of Gemma Gorga's *Book of Minutes* (Field Translation Series/ Oberlin College Press, 2019) received grants from PEN and Institut Ramon Llull. Her current project is translating the Selected Poems of Gemma Gorga. She lives in New York City, is Associate Editor of Barrow Street Press, and directs Writing About Art in Barcelona.

Carlina Duan is the author of the poetry collection *I Wore My Blackest Hair* (Little A, 2017). Her poems can be found in *Black Warrior Review*, *Narrative Magazine*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *The Margins*, and elsewhere. She received an MFA in Poetry from Vanderbilt University, and is currently a PhD Candidate in English & Education at the University of Michigan. 2017).

Jehanne Dubrow is the author of seven poetry collections, including most recently *American Samizdat*, and a book of creative nonfiction, *throughsmoke: an essay in notes*. Her eighth book of poems, *Simple Machines*, won the Richard Wilbur Poetry Award and will be published at the end of 2019. Her work has appeared in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Pleiades*, and *The Southern Review*. She is an Associate Professor of creative writing at the University of North Texas.

Safia Elhillo is the author of *The January Children* (University of Nebraska Press, 2017), which received the the 2016 Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets and a 2018 Arab American Book Award, and the novel in verse *Nima on the Other Side* (Make Me A World/Random House, 2021). She holds an MFA from The New School, a Cave Canem Fellowship, and a 2018 Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation. A co-editor of the anthology *Halal If You Hear Me* (Haymarket Books, 2019), Elhillo was listed in Forbes Africa's 2018 "30 Under 30" and is a 2019-2021 Stegner Fellow in poetry at Stanford University.

Micah Fields is from Houston, Texas, and has published essays and photography for the *Oxford American*, *The Baffler*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Sonora Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and elsewhere. He holds an MFA from the University of Iowa, and was the recipient of the Oxford American's 2018-19 Jeff Baskin Writers Fellowship. He lives in Helena, Montana, and his book about Houston and its story of development and storms is forthcoming from W. W. Norton.

Sarah Gambito is the author of the poetry collections *Loves You, Delivered*, and *Matadora*. She is Associate Professor of English / Director of Creative Writing at Fordham University and co-founder of Kundiman, a non-profit organization serving writers and readers of Asian American literature.

Gemma Gorga was born in Barcelona in 1968. She has a PhD in Philology from the University of Barcelona, where she is Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Spanish Literature. She has published six collections of poetry in Catalan. Her most recent collection *Mur* (Barcelona: Meteora, 2015) won the Premi de la Critica de Poesia Catalana. Her new book of poems, *Viatge al centre*, is forthcoming in 2020.

Brett Hanley is currently pursuing a PhD in poetry at Florida State and has an MFA from McNeese State. Her work is forthcoming in or has recently been published in *Yemassee*, *the minnesota review*, *Juked*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Underblong*, *North American Review*, and *Hotel Amerika*.

Chloe Honum is the author of *Then Winter* (Bull City Press, 2017) and *The Tulip-Flame* (Cleveland State University Press, 2014), which won the Foreword Reviews Poetry Book of the Year Award, and was a finalist for the PEN Center USA Literary Award. Her poems have appeared in journals including *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, and *The Southern Review*, and she was a guest poetry editor for the 2017 Pushcart Prize anthology. A 2019 Grimshaw Sargeson Fellow, she was raised in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, and currently lives in Waco, Texas.

Mahak Jain is the author of the picture book *Maya*, a CBC Best Book of the Year, a Kirkus Best Book of the Year, and winner of the South Asia Book Award. She completed her MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Guelph and has received scholarships from the Sewanee Writers' Conference, the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, and the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley. Born in Delhi, Mahak has also lived in Dubai, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Montreal. She currently resides in Toronto, where she is a professor of creative writing.

Min Kang's poems and other writings have been featured in *Asia Literary Review*, *Bone Bouquet*, *New Delta Review*, and *Tender*. She lives and works in Houston, Texas, as a high school English teacher. *Diary of a K-Drama Villain* is her first book. She is a Kundiman fellow.

Mark Levine is the author of four books of poems, most recently *Travels of Marco*. A twenty-fifth anniversary edition of his first book, *Debt*, was published in 2018. He teaches at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Lisa Lewis has published six books of poetry, most recently *The Body Double* (Georgetown Review Press, 2016) and *Taxonomy of the Missing* (The Word Works, 2018). Recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Crazyhorse*, *New England Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Four Way Review*, *James Dickey Review*, *Florida Review*, and elsewhere. She teaches creative writing at Oklahoma State University and serves as poetry editor for the *Cimarron Review*.

William Logans's most recent book of poems, *Rift of Light* (Penguin), was published in 2017, and his books of essays, *Dickinson's Nerves*, *Frost's Woods* (Columbia University Press), last summer.

Lindsay Lusby's debut poetry collection *Catechesis: a postpastoral* (2019) won the 2018 Agha Shahid Ali Poetry Prize from The University of Utah Press, judged by Kimiko Hahn. She is also the author of two chapbooks, *Blackbird Whitetail Redhand* (Porkbelly Press, 2018) and *Imago* (dancing girl press, 2014), and the winner of the 2015 Fairy Tale Review Poetry Contest. Her poems have appeared most recently in *The Cincinnati Review*, *Passages North*, *The Account*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*.

Teo Mungaray is a queer, chronically ill, latinx poet. He holds an MFA from Pacific University of Oregon and is pursuing his doctorate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He is a co-founder and co-EIC of *Cotton Xenomorph*. His poems have recently appeared in or are forthcoming from *ANMLY*, *The Shade Journal*, *Waxwing*, *Sycamore Review*, *Drunk Monkeys*, and *Birdfeast*. He has a cat named Lysistrata.

Thirii Myo Kyaw Myint is the author of the lyric novel *The End of Peril, the End of Enmity, the End of Strife, a Haven* (Noemi Press, 2018) which won the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature and the family history project *Zat Lun*, which won the 2018 Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize and is forthcoming from Graywolf Press in 2021. She holds a PhD in creative writing from the University of Denver and an MFA in prose from the University of Notre Dame. She is currently a visiting writer at Amherst College.

Charlotte Pence's first book of poems, *Many Small Fires* (Black Lawrence Press, 2015), received an INDIEFAB Book of the Year Award from Foreword Reviews. She is also the author of two award-winning poetry chapbooks and the editor of *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics*. Her poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction have been published in *Harvard Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *Southern Review*, and *Brevity*. She is the director of the Stokes Center for Creative Writing at University of South Alabama. Her next book, *Code*, is forthcoming May of 2020.

Daniel Peña is a Pushcart Prize-winning writer and author of *Bang: A Novel*. Formerly, he was based out of the UNAM in Mexico City where he was a Fulbright-Garcia Robles Scholar. A graduate of Cornell University and a former Picador Guest Professor in Leipzig, Germany, he's now an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Houston-Downtown.

Alycia Pirmohamed is currently a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh, where she is studying poetry written by second-generation immigrants. Her forthcoming chapbook, *Faces that Fled the Wind*, was selected by Camille Rankine for the 2018 BOAAT Press Chapbook Prize. Alycia is a recent recipient of the 92Y/Discovery Poetry Contest, The Adroit Journal's Djanikian Scholars Program, and winner of The Ploughshares' Emerging Writer's Contest in poetry. Her work can be found in *The Paris Review Daily*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Best Canadian Poetry*, and *Poetry Book Society* among others. She received an MFA from the University of Oregon.

Jillian Polaski is a writer and therapist living in Iowa with her family. She holds an MFA in nonfiction writing from the University of Iowa.

Jianan Qian writes in both Chinese and English. In her native Chinese, she has published four books. In English, she is a staff writer for *The Millions*. Her works appear in *The New York Times*, *Guernica*, *The Bare Life Review*, and elsewhere.

Courtney Queeney's book, *Filibuster to Delay a Kiss*, was published by Random House in 2007. Her work has also appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *The Believer*, *Black Warrior Review*, *McSweeney's*, *The New York Times*, and other journals and anthologies. She lives in Chicago.

Robin Reagler is the author of *Teeth & Teeth* (Headmistress Press, 2018), winner of the Charlotte Mew Prize selected by Natalie Diaz, and *Dear Red Airplane* (Seven Kitchens Press, 2011, 2018). She is the Executive Director of Writers in the Schools (WITS) in Houston. She also serves as Chair of the AWP (Association of Writers & Writing Programs) Board of Trustees.

Bruno Ríos is a poet, novelist, translator and PhD candidate at the Department of Hispanic Studies of the University of Houston. His academic and creative work has been published in numerous magazines and journals in the United States, Mexico and several countries in Latin America. His most recent poetry collection is called *Cueva de leones*.

Max Seifert is a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin. His work appears in *The Adroit Journal* and *Tupelo Quarterly*. He is the author of the chapbook *The Hole of Everything, Nebraska*.

Natalie Shapero is the author of the poetry collections *Hard Child* and *No Object*. She teaches at Tufts University.

Beth Steidle is a writer, illustrator, and book designer living in Brooklyn, NY. Her work has appeared in *Indiana Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Territory*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *Drunken Boat*, and *DIAGRAM*, amongst others. She is the recipient of a poetry fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts, and her first book, *The Static Herd*, was published by Calamari Press.

Essy Stone's Essy Stone's first book, *What It Done to Us*, was awarded the Idaho Prize in Poetry and published by Lost Horse Press in 2017. She has received a Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University, holds an MFA from the University of Miami, and is currently a Wallis Annenberg fellow at USC, where she is completing her PhD. Her work has been published in the *New Yorker*, *32 Poems*, and *Prairie Schooner*.

Roberto Tejada is the author of *Still Nowhere in an Empty Vastness* (Noemi, 2019), essays toward a cultural poetics of the Americas; and of poetry collections that include *Full Foreground* (Arizona, 2012), *Exposition Park* (Wesleyan, 2010), *Mirrors for Gold* (Krupskaya, 2006), and selected poems in Spanish translation *Todo en el ahora* (Magenta, 2015). Recent writing in art history includes an essay for the exhibition catalog *Pop América, 1965–1975*, edited by Esther Gabara (Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, 2018).

Debbie Urbanksi's stories have been published or are forthcoming in *The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*, *The Southern Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Sun, Nature, Conjunctions*, *Terraform*, and *The Best American Experimental Writing*. She lives in Central New York.

Preeti Vangani, originally from Mumbai, lives in San Francisco and is the author of *Mother Tongue Apologize* published by RLFPA editions in February 2019. Her poetry has appeared in *BOAAT*, *Juked*, *The Threepenny Review*, and *Glass Poetry*, among other publications. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from University of San Francisco.

Julie Marie Wade is the author of ten collections of poetry and prose, including *Wishbone: A Memoir in Fractures*, *Small Fires*, *Postage Due*, *When I Was Straight*, *Catechism: A Love Story*, *SIX*, *Same-Sexy Marriage: A Novella in Poems*, and the newly released *The Unrhyables: Collaborations in Prose*, co-authored with Denise Duhamel. A recipient of the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Memoir and grants from the Kentucky Arts Council and the Barbara Deming Memorial Fund, she teaches in the creative writing program at Florida International University and reviews regularly for *Lambda Literary Review* and *The Rumpus*. She is married to Angie Griffin and lives on Hollywood Beach.

Elissa Washuta is a member of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe and a nonfiction writer. She is the author of *Starvation Mode* and *My Body Is a Book of Rules*, named a finalist for the Washington State Book Award. With Theresa Warburton, she is co-editor of the anthology *Shapes of Native Nonfiction: Collected Essays by Contemporary Writers*. She has received fellowships and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, Creative Capital, Artist Trust, 4Culture, and Potlatch Fund. Elissa is an assistant professor of creative writing at the Ohio State University.

Jim Whiteside is the author of a chapbook, *Writing Your Name on the Glass* (Bull City Press, 2019). He is the recipient of a Tennessee Williams Scholarship from the Sewanee Writers' Conference, a residency from the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and, most recently, a 2019-2021 Wallace Stegner Fellowship in Poetry. Jim's recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Ploughshares*, *The Southern Review*, *Pleiades*, *Crazyhorse*, and *Washington Square Review*. Originally from Cookeville, Tennessee, he holds an MFA from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and lives in Berkeley, CA.

Hannah Withers has an MFA from the University of Montana. Her work has been published at *McSweeney's*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Barely South Review*, *The Believer Logger*, *NPR*, and *Kenyon Review Online*. She's been honorably mentioned by *Glimmer Train* for their Family Matters Contest (2013) and their Short Story Award for New Writers (2016), and was one of ten winners of McSweeney's Annual Column Contest in 2013. She was a finalist for the 2016 Tobias Wolff Award for Fiction and a 2017 Tin House Summer Workshop Scholarship recipient. She's currently working on a novel about cowboys (female) and rage (also female).

GULF COAST ONLINE EXCLUSIVES

FICTION

Joy Castro	<i>Betrayed</i>
David James Poissant	<i>Parable of the Dead Dog</i>
Thomas Kearns	<i>Crackhead Clint</i>
Jonathan Duckworth	<i>Salvation</i>

POETRY

Alicia Mountain	<i>Hollow Pockets for Resting</i>
Wendy Xu	<i>Tian'anmen Sonnets</i>
Amanda Auerbach	<i>Cheerio Petals</i>
Joshua Burton	<i>History</i>
Jane Huffman	<i>The Worm and Returning</i>
Liliana Ponce , tr. by Michael Martin	from <i>Fudekara</i> <i>Houston Astros Sign Osuna Despite Local</i>
Shea	<i>Outrage</i>
Iliana Rocha	<i>You and I Were on a Train,</i>
Roger Reeves	<i>and It was Storming Outside and Into the</i> <i>West</i>

NONFICTION

Rachel Z. Arndt	<i>But were it not for the caps lock key, and a pinky, I'd still be waiting to stop shouting</i>
Kathleen Blackburn	<i>The Evangelist</i>
Ernie Wang	<i>Hurt Locker</i>
Caroline Sutton	<i>Perfect Kill</i>

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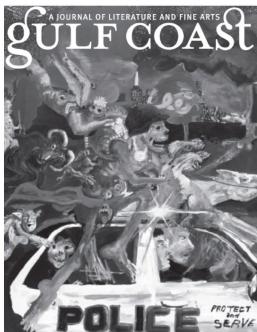
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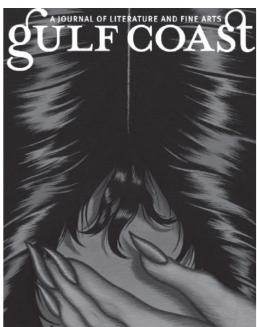
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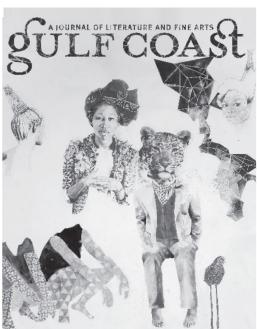
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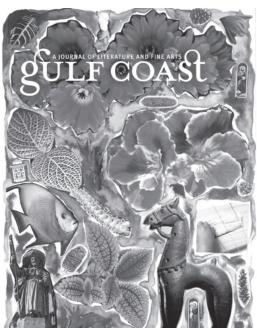
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