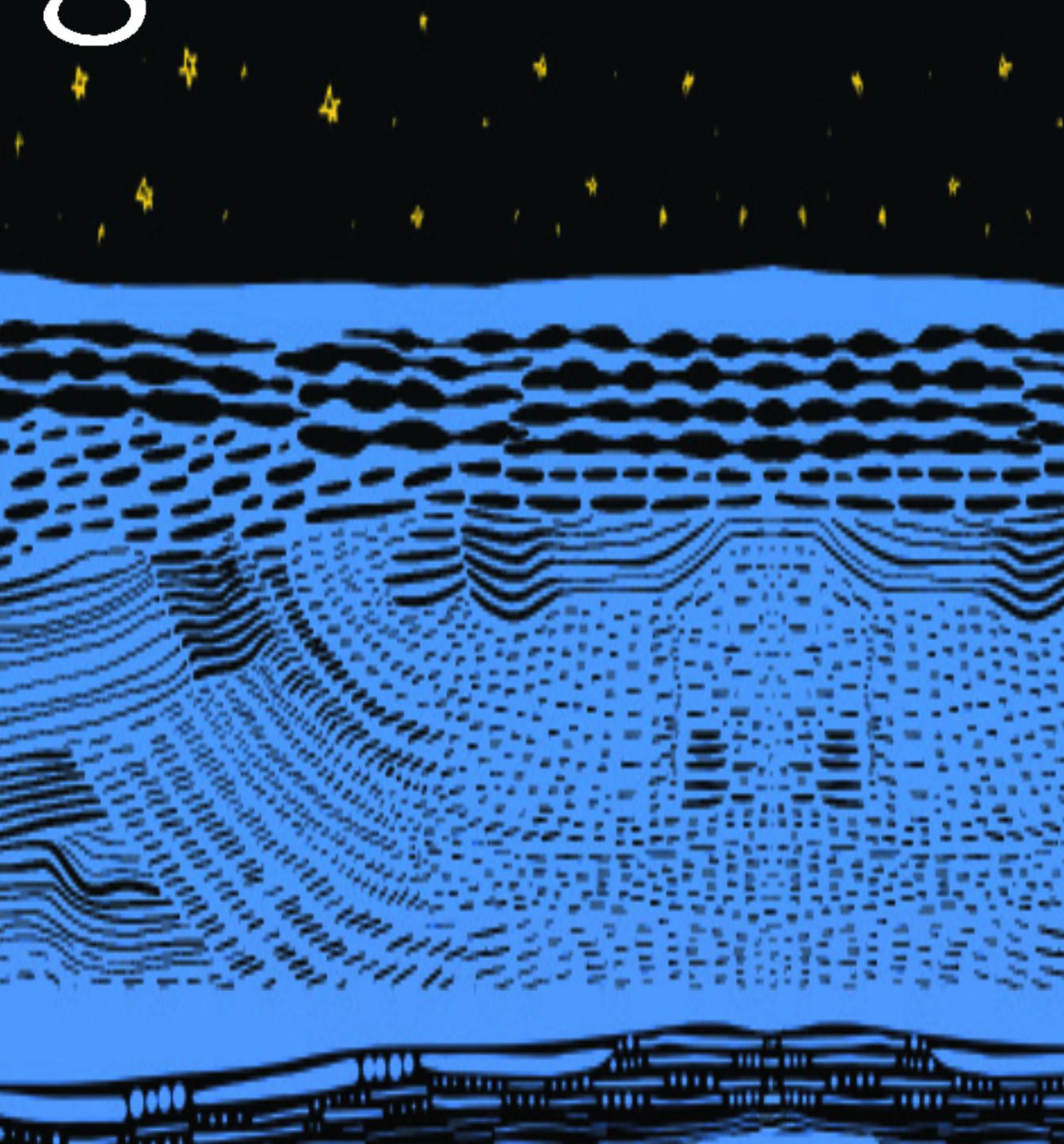


A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

gulf coast



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A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS VOLUME 35, ISSUE 2

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Contents: vol. 35, issue 2

EDITORS' NOTE	10
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THE 2022 BARTHELME PRIZE FOR SHORT PROSE

Katherine Mooney Brooks .. Anatomy in Empty Apartment	12
WINNER	

THE 2022 GULF COAST PRIZE IN TRANSLATION

Ana Cristina Cesar TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY ELISA WOUK ALMINO	
WINNER	
<i>The Complete Correspondence</i> (1979)	14
April 21, 1980	18

THE 2022 TONI BEAUCHAMP PRIZE IN CRITICAL ART WRITING

Lauren Levato Coyne .. Queer Elegies and Climate Mourning:	
WINNER	
Marc Swanson's <i>Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco</i>	23

FICTION

Jemma Leech .. Y Môr	35
Xavier Blackwell-Lipkind .. Anachron	37
Jake Maynard .. Metamorphosis	51
Ark Ramsay .. Three is a Sacred Number	107
Jai Chakrabarti .. The Fortunes of Others	160
Phoebe Oathout .. The Patient	258

NONFICTION

Elisabeth Plumlee-Watson .. The Garden Erotic	90
Gabrielle Civil .. from <i>In and Out of Place</i>	136
Davon Loeb .. The House Fire by the Lake	222
Eugenio Volpe .. Hello? Ma?	227

POETRY

Jo Blair Cipriano	Exhibit: Miracle on the Hudson.....	27
	I Feel Rain for the First Time.....	29
	a poem in which you've never been handcuffed ..	30
Vickie Vértiz	Mexika Hi Fem (Coatlicue Come) ¹	32
	Joteria [All the things you forgot to say] ² ..	34
Alex Baskin	pummel me.....	36
Jane Morton	Hunger	44
Greg Nicholl	Streichholzschächtelchen	46
E. Hughes	All of It Just Means <i>Child</i>	62
Hannah Smith	Corpus Christi	63
	League as Measurement of Distance.....	64
Patrycja Humienik	The Last Anchoress	89
Antony Fangary	saleeb	99
Hussain Ahmed	Incantation for the Drowned	105
Rebekah Remington	Book of Hours	121
Halee Kirkwood	For the Woman Dancing at El Tequila	123
Andrew Hemmert	Eating Honey from a Canopic Jar	124
Chelsea Christine Hill	Carolina Creek Confessional	125
Jordan Boyd	lit	127
Donald Platt	Day Studio, Night Studio.....	129
Forester McClatchey	Root Words.....	146
Yongyu Chen	Perception, River, Mud (March Diary).....	147
Kathryne David Gargano	Vanishing Point	151
Diana Marie Delgado	Los Aztec Airport	152
Sarah Taban	after my grandmother died, I bathed my body like I had just	154
	suppose my mother hadn't loved me	155
	my lover holds me	156
Chengru He	The Last Emperor (from <i>Postcards to Jingyi</i>)	182
	Andante ma non Tanto	184
Sophia Terazawa	Score V // Cast Off Bà Ngoại.....	189
	[“This Door We Both Entered”].....	190
Laura Wang	of Spring	191
Jada Renée Allen	Ars Poetica	192
	bildungsroman.....	193

Audrey King	Opening & Closing	195
Sara Moore Wagner	How I Teach My Daughter Heaven	217
Meg Day	Until You Say When	219
	Nodus Tollens with Child	220
J. Estanislao Lopez	Parenting in the Pre-Apocalypse	225
	Meditation on the Moral of the Story	226
Ross White	Expert Advice for Your Human	
	Cannonball Apprenticeship	237
Joyelle McSweeney	Death Styles 1.6.21	
	<i>Moms of the Underworld</i>	238
	CONCLUSIVE DEATH STYLE	240
Alice Duggan	Yesterday	255
Amanda Gunn	(Peri)menopause May Cause	
	Cognitive Difficulties	256

CREATIVE & CRITICAL ART WRITING

Ángel Faz	Queer Imagination 101	76
Christopher Blay	Mami Wata Afrofuturism	
	(500 Years Back to the [Afro] future	197

FEATURED ART

Various Artists	Queer Imagination 101	80
Various Artists	Mami Wata Afrofuturism	208

REVIEWS & INTERVIEWS

Cameron Steele	A Review of <i>Panics</i> and <i>Which As You Know Means Violence</i>	67
Madeleine Gaudin	Beginning after the End: Allegra Hyde On Craft, Catastrophe and Collectivism	175
Muriel Leung	On Muscle Memory: Muriel Leung and Jenny Liou in conversation...	245

CONTRIBUTORS	270
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Dear Readers,

How can our relationship to the natural world be an act of both reckoning and reclamation? Much of the art and writing in this issue's pages is concerned with environment—literal and figurative—and the speculative power of the land. They call forth the redemptive potential of our bodies in proximity to nature, questioning what this relationship might tell us about the future.

35.2 starts with small spaces, launching with the claustrophobia and corporality of Katherine Mooney Brooks' "Anatomy in Empty Apartment," selected by Vi Khi Nao as the winner of the 2022 Barthelme Prize for Short Prose. Our winning 2022 Translation Prize pieces, prose poems by Ana Cristina Cesar translated by Elisa Wouk Almino, explore the topic of isolation through the form of a letter. "Don't you think that our distance and correspondence feed a certain aura '(a green reflection in the lagoon in the middle of the woods)? Cesar posits in *'The Complete Correspondence (1979)*."

Then, like a meadow, the issue opens up into wider terrain. In "Mexika Hi Fem (Coatlicue Come)," poet Vickie Vértiz positions land as loss: "I watch the live feed from your pupils. That is all that's left of my land." One gets steeped in Jemma Leech's quiet, tumbling vowels of her poem "Y Môr," with its "garden-wall stone" and the "striped strata of Southerndown's cliff" in Wales. In "The Garden Erotic," Elisabeth Plumlee-Watson wedges queerness between the thin lines of the Bible by reframing it as gardening book: "In the middle of my Bible, I decided, was not a standard of sexual desire I couldn't live up to, but a book about gardens."

Art Editor Lauren Cross' selections for issue 35.2 feature the artistic imagination of BIPOC and queer artists exploring futuristic and ecological thinking. In his hybrid essay, part interview and part reflection, artist and curator Christopher Blay features a collection of artists inspired by what he calls Mami Wata Afrofuturism, a futurist framework he connects with stories of African water deities that become portals for understanding artists working through geographical waterways past, present, and future in Gulf Coast states. Artist and curator Ángel Faz highlights the work of two artists who are informed by the relationship between nature and queer ecologies. In Faz's essay "Queer Imagination 101," vampire bats live in social cooperation, ginger plants switch genders, leading Faz to ask, "Is nature as straight as we think?" Faz continues: "Transing becomes a tool to survive and a tactic to thrive within the unknown. A mutual relationship to ecological knowledge is key in this equation."

35.2 also features authors that deal with the topography of the flesh, like Donald Platt ("To cherish the blemished/camellias/of our wilting bodies.") and Sarah Taban ("after my grandmother died I bathed my body like I had just bathed hers, touching for warmth for softness wanting").

Whether body, land, or garden—animal, vegetable, or mineral—the writers and artists in the pages of Gulf Coast 35.2 consider how our environments are acted upon and act upon us. It is through this transformative symbiosis that we reflect who we are and who we want to be.

Rosa Boshier González, Editor, & Lauren Cross, Guest Art Editor

Rosa Boshier González, *Editor* | Ryan Bollenbach, *Managing Editor* | Leisa Loan, *Digital Editor*

THE 2022 BARTHLEME PRIZE FOR SHORT PROSE

JUDGED BY VI KHI NAO

*WINNER, KATHERINE MOONEY
BROOKS*

In this triptych, the writer captures depth of grace with achingly serpentine, melancholic, and biblical splendor. “Anatomy in Empty Apartment” takes you to tender, yearnful, anatomical places only exist on the fringe of heartbreaks.

—VI KHI NAO

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

“YOUR BEST AMERICAN GIRL” BY HELENA LI
& “FIVE STRANGE THINGS THAT ALL FELL FROM THE SKY” BY PETER PILCROW

Anatomy in Empty Apartment

In a building with twelve floors, we are on the sixth, crouching in the bathroom. I have not seen you this way in years, running my fingers over each bone, counting them: fourteen small, hard parts of the face, twenty-four mobile parts of the spine, each a mantle or cue ball to polish with the hem of your shirt. I want to press them into place, press them until they shatter, see the skin depress into nothingness. Instead, I pluck at your elbow, place a finger in the pocket of your hipbone. I fear you will splinter when I touch you. Last week on the phone with a friend you asked *what if I lose my leg?* Then, as if she couldn't understand, *who is left?* Each bone you have named as if to hold in place, each name as if a contract with the corporeal. You ask me to unhinge your mandible, reach into your side and remove a floating rib. Instead, I cradle your skull in my lap. Repeat the ritual: *femur, patella, tibia.*

THE 2022 GULF COAST PRIZE IN TRANSLATION

JUDGED BY DANIEL BORZUTZKY

*WINNER, ELISA WOUK ALMINO FOR
TRANSLATIONS OF PROSE POETRY BY
ANA CRISTINA CESAR*

With vivacity and ingenuity, these translations from deep in the archives of Ana Cristina Cesar's genre-blurring poem/letter/drawings present a stirring depiction of how art gets made amid the scraps and ambivalences of daily life with its human and non-human relations. "The mannequin remains inside the mannequin... there's no more outside, inside, beginning, end," writes Ana Cristina Cesar, and in these words we see a stance towards both aesthetics and survival that reminds us of how real the unreal is, of how powerful a form can be when it marinates in its interrogations of itself, when it allows itself to remain alive, fluid, messy.

—DANIEL BORZUTZKY

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

**RYAN GREENE'S TRANSLATION OF YAXKIN MELCHY RAMOS' "A SEED FROM
THE GREEN SUN // UNA SEMILLA DE *EL SOL VERDE*"**
**& STINE SU YON AN'S TRANSLATIONS OF EXCERPTS FROM YOO
HEEKYUNG'S *TODAY'S MORNING VOCABULARY***

The Complete Correspondence (1979)

My dear,

It's downpouring. From here inside I can't stop thinking about the trickle of people outside. Cold hands and feet under control. Only vague news, you should know. Is it on purpose? Fear of spilling the beans? Listen closely to Roberto: I almost called you but I looked at myself etc. I've already copied the lyrics you asked for.

The day was mush. Célia said: what matters is your career, not your life. A difficult contradiction. Life is like mush and my career like a narcissus flower in bloom. What I wrote in February is true but it comes with silly idle dramas. Now I'm extremely busy, at the mercy of my moods, chic nature, and ambiguous disposition (I'm a Gemini).

After I hung up the phone I regretted calling you, because our actual voices chilled our feelings. While I was requesting the phone call, my heart burned. And when we talked it was so like that, you watching tv and me near the bananas, lacking any style (as in the letters). Don't you think that our distance and correspondence feed a certain aura (a green reflection in the lagoon in the middle of the woods)?

I don't think a lot about Thomas. The chill from the first days went away. Later, I felt disgust: for him, his dick, his politics, his guitar. But I haven't touched the subject again. I'm on vacation now. I'm afraid that the swaying will end. The Thomas of today is much older than I, he doesn't call anymore, he studies, militates and makes love to his Martinique of long breasts and straight teeth, so much perfection.

I'm attracted to the Portuguese guy in a T-shirt who helped me at the Finances Department. He was a boor and had a pointy mustache. I chided him with lust that gave me a sharp pain.

Only today during Cris's visit did I realize that I baptized the dog with her name. I had a subtle pang of embarrassment when I yelled at Cris for muddying up

the carpet. Cris ran away but Cris didn't notice (realizing perhaps that she was the honoree?). Gil as always read my lips and burst into typical, humidifying laughter.

The same Gil swears that Shakespeare wrote the verses "fucking is human, giving head is divine" and averts his eyes to the center of the table, after silently diagnosing my paranoia.

I got into an argument with Mary today. According to her, Altmann is cruel with the middle class and that's unforgivable. I felt targeted and stumbled into a swell fight. When I arrived home, my unforgivable hand weighed heavily on my stomach. Mary is always right.

Gil says she doesn't open herself up to me because she knows my jealousy is greater than my love. On the phone she tells me about her career and blablabla. But through Gil I know about the disasters in her marriage. She doesn't tell me.

Yesterday we went out, us three. On these occasions my jealousy is salient, dances about and says niceties that not even I can predict. Nobody knows but it has the lightness of a little fetus. It's maternal, puts on diapers, while our trio lambasts its whims. The result is so cool, a brilliant microphone of jealousy! There's always a shadow in my smile (Roberto). I'm the melancholic one, I insist, though you always disapprove, always. I take the opportunity to ask for *another* opinion.

Gil says that I'm a sea lion and I demand absolute secrecy (he's becoming convinced): little brooded-over stories on the sidewalk are caresses to my heart. Who could know? I do know how to play this sidewalk game all day, and well. On the other hand...

I wasn't being totally honest.

I received another postcard from London. Now it just said, "What are men for?" With no date.

I can't say no. Can you?

And the somatization, did it get any better?

I insist on the summary that you abandoned: 1. kindness that humiliates; 2. necessity versus pleasure; 3. a little son; 4. priorities; 5. what are men for.

Dream from last night: dark office under construction; men working; beds and bricks; I decided to wait in the bathroom, where there was a scooter, pudding ads, one black bra and other remnants. Whose bra was it? Did he sleep here? Have we

seen each other before, me leaving and you coming in? Us lying side by side, his arm touching me. Get out of my way (I whisper). She gave my silk blouse to the maid. Without him I don't stay at home. It's been three days since I seem to live here (echoes of Ângela). That air of neurological inattention drives me crazy. We exit to the hallway. You're going to have a little son, you hear?

I spent the entire afternoon at the printers. The colonel took issue again with the layout's showy ideas. But that's the nice part. Writing is the annoying part, I get back pain and vampire's remorse. I'm going to take a secret class in graphic design. Invent the book before the text. Invent the text so that it fits in the book. The book comes before. The pleasure comes before, dummy.

The masculine epigraph of Joaquim's book (there's another more contained, feminine one): "It's the story of gentle lust, a lyrical encounter in the green escapist paths of Paquetá, a visual, verbalization and exhibition of erotic fantasies. It features the disapproval of the vegetables' genital calling, the cleverness of young women in bloom, the freedom of games in bed, sympathy for perverts, the taste for life and the complete poetry of Carlos Galhardo."

My neck is better, thank you.

As for the story about the mothers, beckoning to one another with white sheets, while the daughter, after all, doesn't pay that much attention, I can only say that I blushed a little for everything being so true. I think F. doesn't notice, but as always lies a lot. Lies a lot! Only I know. She sells her soul to the devil, negotiating sharp intelligence for eternal youth. What would you say? In our pact, it's pure Rita Hayworth, with N. in the scene, encased by mirrors. They play house on their free time. At the party they hosted, Gil drunkenly lectured that marriage is the solution, master of health. Destiny's ironies. A fake hangover and quick jealousy of Rita of course followed.

I'm unable to explain my tenderness, my tenderness, you understand?

It's hard to produce literature with Gil as my reader. He reads to uncover mysteries and asks trick questions, thinking that each verse obscures clues, biographical secrets. He doesn't forgive hermeticism. Doesn't admit to his own feelings. Mary, on the other hand, reads all of me like pure literature and doesn't understand the direct references.

At lunch Gil wanted to know the true identity of some Jean-Luc, and in front of everyone created an atmosphere of collusion, thinking he guessed everything. Upon leaving he made me swear on holy graves — Gil is always swearing or making me swear. And then you even say that I don't respond.

Still waiting.

Kisses.

Júlia

P.S. 1 — I don't want T. reading our correspondence, please. I'm passionate but also modest!

P.S. 2 — When I reread the letter, I discovered some typos. I didn't correct them so as not to lose a certain air of perfection — note the gelomatic pagination, now that I'm a *fine artist*.

April 21, 1980

Un signal d'arrêt

Then I tell you before your trace of pure reflection:

“Instead of writing, simply”

I tell you that I don't see in the reflection where the desire is to trace to have whom you want to have.

As if I were drawing.

I don't know how to write anymore because I only write to gift what I write and have — more than — a gaze —

“thematize the interlocutor”

“sublimate the interlocutor”

It calls for a vocative, I say, parodying the serious girl, the novice in bright pink lipstick (“but what is this?!”), and I gave a tug at your sleeve, on the living room couch where port wouldn't stop flowing,

but as I was saying, those problems of technique, the first,

the second

person,

you don't solve it like that, by going crazy over manifestos or telling Paris obscurities with flashbacks in Brazil, and eschatological rage, and massages of complicity, no,

it's not like that.

Flash: a tug at the sleeve and the epistolary of the nineteenth century.

I ask Beth for letter paper from New York/New York with silver stars and: a critical eye.

“Plus tard, les signes, certains signes. Les signes me disent quelque chose. J'en ferais bien, mais un signe, c'est aussi un signal d'arrêt. Or en ce temps je garde un autre désir, un pardessus tous les autres.”

And that's why I don't write.

Civilly I ask if your drawing betrays
un désir pardessus tous les autres

It does,

But I don't see it,

and that's why — you see that English pond with ducks? no, you can't see from that angle over there, from your kitchen window it looks more like Paris — and that's why I draw a dull English duck  in a park without the reflection on the window display, which erases, slowly, (I wander the gallery alone), canvas to canvas, the outline of the window display; the last picture is unfinished, or rather, as though I even saw alone, palpitating, on the Beaubourg mattresses, the Chien Andalou, the exhibition ends all of a sudden in the middle of the picture; further along there is the following hole and I don't know how to keep going and it's strange because when I came here I thought that this exhibition (this story of disappearance — of gradual — cloudlessness — of the outline, of the frame that encircles the reflection and marks the beginning, and the end) would end in a perfect circle.

Let's move on.

The technique that works (politically correct): sit in Place de Vosges warming up in the sun.

Reading in silence.

I know how to move by — civilly — but —

I came looking picture by picture, I arrived here
and there's no one here.

I'm sure you wouldn't paint these walls black.

But all of a sudden it's black here,
no mistral, no weather instabilities.

“Dear,

Today was a somewhat unstable day in Paris.

Did you receive my postcard?”

(I gave myself the luxury of being sort of hermetic, “that way you expose yourself to a kind of mockery,” amorous, no doubt, at the dinner table.)

You can't see, I know,

but my drawing does keep
you
don't speak
betray
a desire pardessus tous les autres
even in this second-to-last duck here, can you see, which I covered a little more
that day in which I didn't scream from anger,
there is one on top of all the others,
and on the day of the opening I want (I promise I won't sell the one with the
ducks) the one I want to know that from the development of the scream (lightly
applied colored pencil, vertical white wall, uneven projections gently fixed with my
fingers which, look here, are just a little crooked as they should be) to the whole
narrative about the outline's disappearance, everything is for the one I want (but it
wasn't me who painted the gallery black, just look at me, you know I'm not sinister).
The mannequin remains inside the mannequin reflection outside
(there's no more outside, inside, beginning, end, but note that cloudlessness isn't
dissolution).
If you look hard, you also see me in the middle of the reflection, camera in hand.
I answer that I can't see.

I go out to the street and you gave me an eye for reflections erasing the outline and
the very memory of the outline; at the end of the street the limit of my gaze finds
a luminous boulevard, Arabs passing by more briskly, fear of the surface,
“The sun came out here in Paris this afternoon after some scattered rain and we
walked around a lot, kisses, miss you,”

I answer that I still can't see.
Come with me to the door.
I'm going out to the street,
With the eyes of opaque drawings (Michaux), that I go
scribbling on, black, in India ink, kind of hard, scratching
the paper a little, for you.

Translated by Elisa Wouk Almino

Ana Cristina Cesar

Ana Cristina C.
Paris, 4.21.80

THE 2022 TONI BEAUCHAMP PRIZE IN CRITICAL ART WRITING

JUDGED BY LEGACY RUSSEL

WINNER, LAUREN LEVATO COYNE

A thoughtful piece that embeds tender and timely questions on the intersections of mourning and desire, and where each finds its place through radical queer work.

—LEGACY RUSSEL

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

“THE MYTH ABOUT HAVING CHILDREN AS AN ARTIST”

BY DANIEL GERWIN

& “ON THE ASIAN AMERICANNESS OF PAUL CHAN AND BADLANDS

UNLIMITED” BY LISA YIN ZHANG

Queer Elegies and Climate Mourning: Marc Swanson's *Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco*

In the small, conservative town where I grew up, the only place to kiss queerly was the old cemetery. This is where 15-year-old me and my first girlfriend were guaranteed our alone time. We were also guaranteed a certain amount of safety as well. We lived in Indiana, home to the Klan's once "most powerful" chapter.¹ Our high school was rank with nationalist skinheads, neo-Nazis, and white supremacist jocks. Our social group of "freaks," a moniker we wore with pride in that stifling wet gym sock of a place, were routinely mocked and punched resulting in one or the entire lot of us in a fist fight with our antagonizers. But here among the dead? Peace. We were safe under the cover of burr oak and flowering crabapple trees, shielded by monument stones.

In 1992, while we sheltered and swooned in the cemetery, HIV infection became the number one cause of death among men aged 25-44 years. At the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, 154 nations signed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change which, "upon ratification committed signatories' governments to reduce atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases with the goal of 'preventing dangerous anthropogenic interference with Earth's climate system'."²

This 30-year-old memory was pulled forward by artist Marc Swanson's queer climate elegy *Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco*. In it, Swanson personalizes the ecological gaze by anchoring concurrent global catastrophes against his own lived history. The artist hosts a sweeping set of parameters: climate change, the AIDS crisis and the friends he's lost to it, the Industrial Revolution, the Hudson River School, sublime landscapes, and backyard gardens. Swanson began this project after moving to Catskill, NY from Brooklyn. By looking at the artist's paintings of Catskill Creek, Swanson and his partner realized they purchased property that was

¹ "Ku Klux Klan in Indiana." *Indiana State Library*, 11 February 2011, <https://www.in.gov/library/collections-and-services/indiana/subject-guides-to-indiana-collection-materials/ku-klux-klan-in-indiana/>.

² "United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change." *Wikipedia*, 31 May 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Framework_Convention_on_Climate_Change. For more info, see <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/rio1992>.

once a favorite painting site of Thomas Cole, founder of the Hudson River School. Swanson began researching Cole and discovered the two are linked across time by a shared love for a specific landscape and also by the effects of anthropogenic climate change.

Cole emigrated to the US from the UK in 1818, at 17 years old, to escape the increasingly toxic industrialization of his homeland. We would recognize him today as a climate migrant. By the time Cole moved to Catskill in 1825, the same industrial schemes that prompted his flight from England were ramping up in the US. Through study of Cole's own essays and lectures, it became evident that Cole's work as a painter was partially an effort to warn where he knew this development would lead, an attempt to galvanize citizens to eschew humanity's perceived progress at the cost of nature. Cole's much-feared apocalyptic scenario for his beloved Catskill Creek never came to fruition. Instead we now know his harbinger is playing out on a global scale. The effects of climate disaster have not yet come for the (nearly 70% white) people of Upstate New York, home of Catskill Creek. By some projections Upstate may not feel the impact of climate change for some time. Instead, it's coming for the non-white global majority. It's also coming for billions of plants and animals.

Where Cole had the active Industrial Revolution, Swanson and the rest of us live in the wake of it. Cole's unheeded warning is not a good sign for any contemporary artists hoping to somehow turn the tide with their work. The many artists I speak to each day, myself included, constantly question art and object making in our current epoch.

We don't need any more objects in the world.

What's the point/need/desire/function/reality of art making anymore?

Who even cares?

I argue it's worthy enough just to bear witness. In *Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco* Swanson builds both a proscenium and altar space in which to look upon what history has wrought, lament oncoming horrors and also, crucially, to celebrate what beauty and joy is still with us. Here. Now.

The exhibition is a dual-location immersion. The first installation site at MASS MoCA is in one of the museum's warehouse-style galleries, complete with soaring ceilings and exposed girders. Situated throughout are dozens of figural sculptures assembled from deer, snake, and other small taxidermy forms. Each work is an independent tableau containing photographs, videos, flickering lanterns, and/or dried flowers to complete the narrative scene. The forms collide and lose their heads or their bodies respectively. Each is a haunting diorama. Some deer forms entirely disappear under expertly draped plaster gauze veils. They strike ghostly silhouettes and speak the dramatic, symbolic language of funerary monuments: *this body has given its spirit to the ether, remember this veil between worlds is thin* (subtext: *hey there buddy, you're next*). The spatial arrangements of these sculptures evoke the small-town New England cemeteries that dot the landscape here. It's quite common to stumble upon the ruins of 19th c. cemeteries while deep in a forest hike or even a stroll through a typical neighborhood.

Moving through the museum space, the figures melt and mutate. The light fades to a deepening dark. Chards of mirrors make sparkling mosaic frames for photos of people in drag, dancing, holding each other, gazing back at the camera. In the furthest, darkest corner, colored spotlights reflect from slowly spinning rhinestone covered antlers. The parallels between the nightclub, the forest, and the cemetery are clear. Each experience centers bodies, it's intimate yet can still remain anonymous. I can't help but think about *the ruins* aspect of it. All bodies eventually fall. This is what queer and camp circles have always innately understood about nature, the inherent queerness of the place. We might all be destined to die but until then it's crowns out, feathers on, time to dance, to sing.

At the exhibition's second location, Thomas Cole National Historic Site in Catskill, NY, the intimacy is domestic and familiar. In the butter-yellow home of the Cole family, Swanson's work hangs next to a four-post bed, stands atop a dresser, and flanks a sitting room fireplace. The interior is compact but stately with brightly-colored and patterned walls, some hand-painted by Cole himself (these designs have been contemporarily restored). Swanson's figures continue as they did at the museum—draped, sparkling, surrounded by flowers, etc. But here, the work adds a contemporary opulence and splendor that enhances and enlivens the Cole

Site. Where the museum felt akin to a mausoleum, the Cole Site feels alive, despite being an active memorial site to a long-dead family of American art. Somehow, Swanson's glittering things belong here. Placing Swanson's contemporary Romantic sculptures and Cole's 19th c. Romantic landscape paintings in such close proximity to each other highlights the messy entanglements we continue to struggle with today: which nature/which culture? Whose history/whose progress? Which bodies—human, animal, vegetal, geographical—have been marked and how will they survive?

Outside, high above our heads, Swanson has strung white chain between two trees that frame the path toward the house. It unsettles me; I'm reluctant to walk toward this industrial material draped like a diamond necklace. It's a sort of peak anthropo action, to tether and ornament two organic beings who have spent a lifetime developing their unique, underground network of supporting connections. It's redundant, potentially a form of graffiti, and certainly drives home the ways humans feel compelled to mark our landscapes.

Nearby, bumblebees and hummingbirds are busy in the "Pollinator Pavilion" made by collaborating artists Mark Dion and Dana Sherwood. In a 2016 Brooklyn Rail interview, Dion ends by saying "mourning is a legitimate mode of thinking."³ When grieving we weep and deny, rage and flail, consumed by the depth of our traumatic loss. But we also decorate ourselves for rites, embellish time, and adorn our spaces. I think of Peter Hujar's photo *Candy Darling on her Death Bed*; the more than 60 million flowers laid at Kensington Palace upon Princess Diana's death; the silk blooms and photos that cover ghost bikes in urban settings across the nation; the colorful banners, candles, and signs offered at the Pulse nightclub vigils. I think of the two sleeves of tattoos I have gotten since my own father's passing. This process of embellishment is what leads us out of the passive stage of grief and into the active process of mourning. Mourning can go on for years, if it ever ends at all. In our collective climate grief, Swanson shows us what it might look like to live our lives in a state of constant climate mourning.

³ Thyrza Nichols Goodeve, "MARK DION: Mourning is A Legitimate Mode of Thinking." *Brooklyn Rail*, May 2016, <https://brooklynrail.org/2016/05/art/mourning-is-a-legitimate-mode-of-thinking/>.

Jo Blair Cipriano

Exhibit: Miracle on the Hudson

Carolinas Aviation Museum, 2016

I witness the fully intact plane,
torn from a vital organ, abandoned
Sully's just been released
white-haired, positioned
that remain of the moment
She's watching me
was in the last row
water swarmed her ankles
one seat away held a small
lifting him, wondering
to drown. I look down the throat
the shape of my own life
my mouth, my wrists. Roses
bed: open-mouthed
belts hanging like ligaments
in a man's frantic exit.
and a survivor is here—
among the artifacts. Scars
she might've died but didn't.
like she knows. This woman
when the plane crashed, freezing
calves, thighs. A stranger
boy, and two women took turns
which of them would be first
of the plane, imagine a flood
—something else on the floor
blooming across the white
-pink, injury-red, crimson.

The sudden pop of one rib sprung free.

It's only when I'm already in her arms
that I realize I'm finally saying
it: his name, the first thing
given to him by a woman.

When he raped me, it was night
and I heard no birds. "You *survived*,"
the stranger whispers and holds me
to her chest, alongside everything
left behind at the bottom
of the Hudson. To be those once-loved
belongings, untouched
muck my only witness. to be the pilot,
the hero, the name that undoes
all other meaning, to be that life forever intact,
the still river waiting—oh god,
to be the miracle.

I Feel Rain for the First Time Since My Uncle's Suicide

Invasive marsh-grass swallows the last nest
and I don't care. A gnawed hummingbird

nopal falls. Aging palms stretch across
miles of desert, their fronds and frogs

testaments to the miracle of green. Holy
creosote, their coins confettied through land

and sky of Sonora. Yesterday
was your birthday. Sudden as a dream,

the rain arrives—beetle villages
ripple soft in sand, their small

-legged work undone, and I
don't care. You, in your body, alive,

is how I needed you. This gap
between us is not my fault. Where do I go

when it's time to take shelter? I can only die
one day at a time.

a poem in which you've never been handcuffed & thrown to the ground

for my brother

there is a half-brick house
& a yard dissolving
into a sidewalk

there is a rosemary bush
& a fall from a highchair
& wet freckled cheeks stuck

between hot bars
of a giraffe cage
in a city in a summer in a zoo

in the beginning there is a fig tree
& a broken bottle & a garden
snake in tiny hands, there is a shovel—

a small chunk of plastic & there is dirt
that eats away at the white feet
of a for sale sign.

before there is even
a chance to regret, there are
so many things to regret. in the beginning

there is you or me or you or
me & there is a space
between us that can never loosen

there is a half-brick yard & a house
that dissolves into a sidewalk
everything warm shades of brown

in the beginning, before you were born
i waited for years
to come home.

Mexika Hi Fem (Coatlicue Come)¹

My offering to the world is this bloody maw. I watch the live feed from your pupils. That is all that's left of my land. But I have returned to claim all of my thrones. I am hungry for myself, for the children I have made and now must devour, lest you make them into something they are not. Me crees cruel porque te digo la verdad. Pero yo no soy la que siente. La que sufre. Yo hago y deshago. Muelo violadores y me los trago. I am. Still. Hungry. Tell me what you are, not what you think. This is ceremony and I want you to dance. Yo no conozco países y mapas. Yo sé. Yo soy. Yo soy dos serpientes y siempre cambio. Tiene mucho rato que no comía. Qué te parecen mis ligas negras. Mis deseos: bailes en lo oscuro. Uñas doradas. Qué tal estas trenzas. The first thing you see is the neon so you know that we are in the present or the future. I don't fuck with linear time. The end is a Reggaeton soundtrack and my laughter. El neón rosa y morado, mis pezuñas. Ya llego por quien llorabas. Quema tu copal que no va quedar nada. Throw me the Baby Jesús porque es mi desayuno. Ahórrate el sermón. Esto es todo lo que queda de mi tierra. Cómo crees que me sentí cuando llegaron y me nombraron otra cosa. First I will eat San Juanita de los Lagos. Tus pestañas son tan reales. Femininity is my top, my favorite snack. Tus labios me saben a yeso. Of gold-laced robes. Demasiado lágrimas y más sangre. Ahórrate tu despecho que a los santos no les duele. Que se te olvidó quién son realmente? El aire. Tu espíritu. El fuego. I am not who you think I am. I will always exist – in your grind – in the temple – in the very water and clay that makes everything you build with me. It's your turn to feast, my serpent children. Eat these police cars, these Dixie farms, this excuse for matricide. I love all of the screaming. The museum is too quiet. And this music makes me want to bring the rest of my body back to life. Lo que no se destruye es el significado. Qué te parece mi nuevo cuerpo, mis tatuajes. Mis amantes who tie my black harness, my scales turned to skin. I am no monster. I trust myself. In the beginning, in the end.

Confío en mí misma. Yo merezco respeto. Me quiero a mi misma. Respiro. Observo.

Procedo. Esta es una ceremonia y vamos a bailar. Here is the drum

again – Ahí – Ahí – Ahí
Love me like the Virgen, like
your sins, and just let
me eat
you

¹ “Mexika Hi Fem (Coatlicue Come)” After Rafa Ezparza’s performance in 2019. In collaboration with Lady Soul Fly, assisted by Sebastian Hernandez, Rafa performed in elegant harnesses in his recreated face of Coatlicue, the Mexica/ Nahua serpent mother destroyer. The phrase, “This is all that’s left of my land,” is taken from Celia Herrera Rodriguez’s performance “Cositas Quebradas” in Málaga, Spain, where, inside a church, she smashed their patron saint to pieces. The text and italics is from a photograph taken by writer and visual artist Marisela Norte. In Norte’s photos, a painting is bolted to a bus stop shelter and in it, a pre-Columbian figure speaks these words of affirmation and self-love in Spanish.

Joteria [All the things you forgot to say]²

What is hidden from the wise and good			
Painting: "Atelokolli," by Gabriela M. Zapata. A small brown girl announces ceremony	A sweet glitch at Mmef's pond. Iztalcuauhtl wants her muscles back.	A child walks up and leans on your legs, like you are hers.	The sky in the river is more azure than the real thing.
The YouTube show "La Mæs Dragæ," is a Mexican version of RuPaul's Drag Race. It's unclear what they're competing for. What's extraordinary: that the show exists at all.	The white hostess isn't queer and takes liberties with vocabulary. "Aqui ando en esta joteria" referring to her skin-tight dives, herself, or the company she keeps. Que te pareces?	The drag queens are tiny, or tall, with soft beards and thick babies. They just started or they've been doing it forever. One is basically a woodland faery and a judge calls her Potti Poquet.	Inside my cell phone hi I say: I'm waiting for a woman to love me. Someone else's phone responds: You shouldn't have to wait for anyone.
True. People forget that Mexicans look all kinds of ways: Black. Rich. Middle Class White. Fascist. Dragæ. Performance artist and elote vendor. Stop fucking forgetting.	Pandas are still tumbling down the slide at the zoologico de Chapultepec.	I dressed up like Dorothy Zbukak. She looked me up and down and said, "Not bad."	Calm down, New Mestiza.
My sister is terrified of earthquakes. My nieces send me paintings of red-pink densities. But the last pintura is shades of black and says: SAD.	What does being queer look like from middle age? a. Watching myself on the Internet b. Not seeing myself c. Watching younger people recreate consent	Pop's multiple choice: a. "Do as I say, not as I do." b. "Trucha." c. "I am the monster we are all looking for" d. What about the things you cannot say?	The show's hostess isn't queer but is so rich and gñera that she doesn't have to care.
True or false? An authentic Mexican is: An Aztec Cookie or a white nationalist lie.	Even elision makes a sound.	One queen paints her eyebrows into a horizon of spikes. Yo me sentí muy perca.	Hay que tener mala. Y yo, soy mísima.

² "Joteria [All the things you forgot to say]"; After Deborah Richards's "Reading Aloud: an Intimate Performance (2015)" in *Letters to the Future: Black Women/Radical Writing*, edited by Erica Hunt and Dawn Lundy Martin. "What is hidden from the wise and good" is Richards' text. "Even elision makes a sound," is Tisa Bryant in "Our Wholeself: An Interview of Black Women Writers' Experimentation Essay on Elided African Diasporic Aesthetic in Prose" from the same book.

Y Môr

Un

Our garden-wall stone once looked out to sea. Hewn from the striped strata of Southerndown's cliffs, it had been left lying in Jurassic jumbled layers by the ancient, pre-ancient and arch-ancient forests of the land that would, in the final blinks of its life, be known as Wales, but which then had no name, for no arrogance yet existed in the world to claim naming rights or ownership of anything else. That would come with man's destructive arrival, but in the time when our garden-wall stone came into itself, the sea was the queen, and the land did her bidding.

Dau

From my Welsh window, I watched the Bristol Channel tides ebb and flow. From my sea-view seat on cloudy days I saw the farthest shore far away enough to be no more than a swiped smudge of the Creator's brush between the blues of the gray sky and the black sea. But from my sea-view seat on sunny days I saw the farthest shore close enough to see the pier's stocking legs, the white barnacles cladding the iron at low tide and the fine fish-lines a rainbow filament between rod and mouth, softly pierced and bleeding into the salt water.

Tri

Rain-spawned puddles glide smoothly along gutters, muddied gills of rainboots flash pink and red-blue around tiny toddling feet. The Welsh rain soaks slowly to our skin, wandering dreamily between collar and neck, in lazy wide sweeps until cotton and wool succumb to its kiss, for water prowling inside plastic raincoats and rubber boots pervades even the brightest spirit in the end. Once the storm seeps over Penarth cliffs and dawdles around Lavernock Point, gulls settle back on their chimney nests, barges line up at the barrage, and we retreat up the Dolly Steps and through our stone-walled garden for tea.

pummel me

in a dream, i put bright strawberries through the dishwasher. i should be better by now. with a lover, i debate the conceivability of lake-whales. i stare (hopeless) at toilet paper's misaligned ply. blue trees dot my landscape. god

put them there. in a dream, i flow rhythmic in linen and bright hat. it's a circle of dancers, all of them me. there could be no stories without bodies. god

is an ancient story (conceivability debatable.) god has a body—how else could the man and the woman have heard the lord's footsteps? pummel me with golf balls, or with strawberries. swallow me up, you lake-whale. god

wash my shoulders away.

Anachron

I only drink half of the pineapple soda. The plan is to finish it, but someone starts screaming in the shared bathroom, so I put down the soda and the book I'm reading while drinking the soda—it's a mediocre three-hundred-page account of a young man's vaguely sexual obsession with the earthworm living in his mother's compost bucket—and run to the bathroom, where I find Andrew crouched on the floor, still screaming. When he sees me standing behind him, he points at the fat cockroach lurking underneath the stall door and says, It ran over my toes while I was peeing. Oh, I say. I'm so sorry. I check my hair in the mirror and go back to my room, flashing him a sympathetic smile on the way out. When I get back to my room, the remaining soda appears more urine-like than before, and the bottle feels warm. This is why I only drink half of the pineapple soda. There are various factors at play, of course: the angle of the afternoon light, the barometric pressure, the way the fan sitting on the windowsill tickles the hairs I missed while shaving. And lots of other reasons why determinism makes sense to me. But, fundamentally, I don't finish the soda because of Andrew's cockroach-piss scream. Right.

My course on queer theory meets just before dinner. Nick barely knows who I am. These are two tenuously related facts. Nick, to be clear, is another student in my course on queer theory. The professor's name is also Nick, but we call him Professor Roach, not because he looks like a cockroach, which is unfortunately true, but because Roach is his last name. Nick sits two seats to the left of Professor Roach; I sit two seats to the right of Professor Roach. If Professor Roach ran over my toes while I was peeing, I would probably scream, too. In that sense, I can't blame Andrew, who, by the way, is also enrolled in the course. We're discussing Shakespeare, because this is what people do in classes. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Professor Roach says, is a queer play from beginning to end. Andrew nods vigorously, along with everyone else, except for Nick, who just kind of sits there. I'm like, wait, what? I don't say that, but I think it. Anachronism, I decide, is a funny little word. Anachron-ism. If anachrons existed, they would be fuzzy machines inside of which people curled up and briefly escaped time. There would

be all sorts of too-fast clocks and too-slow clocks and too-late calendars and too-early calendars, and nothing would matter. I would probably buy an anachron if anachrons existed. Nick, who could use a haircut, is saying something about fairies. I often consider asking Nick out on a date, but then I remember that free will is an illusion, that there are invisible forces around me making things happen and making things not happen and making non-things happen and, every so often, making non-things not happen. I'm an atheist. But I figure that if Nick and I are going to fall in love, it's going to happen. Things that happen to me are not things that I make happen. They're just things that happen. Yes.

I sleep in a coat. I'm always cold. Tonight is no exception, because tonight is, in fact, a night. My therapist, who doesn't change anything and never will, likes to tell me that I don't think like other people. She says, That's not a bad thing. I make a mental note of the phrasing: that's not a bad thing. As opposed to, for instance, that's a good thing. There was a period of about two months during which I was absolutely certain that my child would be named Litotes. But it's true. I don't think like other people. I'm scatter-brained and alienated, and I linger by the barbed-wire fence that marks the border of mania. And, to be absolutely clear, I sleep in a coat. Tonight and all nights. I put on a coat and zip it up and climb into bed and turn out the light and dream of coldness, and of insects, and of my mom, who is dead, both in the dream and not in the dream, and of Nick on the other side of a man-made barrier whose name I always seem to forget. It's not a fence, but it's not far from a fence. And I wake up in a pool of sweat, still cold, coat stuck to the matted hairs on my forearms. Shivering, I peel it off like a bandage. Then I realize that I never actually threw out the half-gone pineapple soda, so I take the bottle downstairs and throw it in the trash, which smells, predictably, like trash. A collision that I can't see produces a series of glassy clinks. In the bathroom, I brush my teeth while something untoward happens in the shower. What I mean is that there is more than one person in the shower. Which seems sufficient to confirm untowardness. My gums bleed a bit, but I try not to worry, because sometimes things bleed, and if you're still bleeding, you're still alive. I think that's true. Besides, nothing I do can change the fact that my gums are bleeding. I am brushing my teeth because I am brushing my teeth, because the wind blew from the west overnight, because

my hand is here and not there, because one invisible thing fired and not another, because the pothos plant is slowly dying, because it is, because it was, because it had been, because. Two people emerge giggling from the shower. One of them is Andrew, who is no longer screaming; the other is Nick, who is no longer sitting two seats to the left of Professor Roach. Morning, Andrew says. Morning, Nick says, laughing. I remove the toothbrush from my mouth. Hi, I say. Then, smiling tightly: Hope you had fun. I'm compelled to say it. So I do. They giggle some more and disappear, to the left, or to the right, or into the ceiling. I'm not sure. I don't pay too much attention. I spit, rinse, pee, cry, wash my hands, get my backpack ready, grab breakfast, and head to class. Things arrange themselves. That's all.

—————

Dad calls me on Saturday. Hi, son, he says. He calls me son. I hate that he calls me son. Hi, Dad, I say. He asks me how I am. This is a loaded question. I'm not great. But there is no use recognizing that I'm not great when my non-greatness is out of my control. So I say, I'm great. He seems to buy it, because he changes the subject to his weekend grocery list: pasta—probably penne, but maybe rigatoni, if the mood strikes him; pasta sauce—needed for pasta; oranges; apples—yellow, only yellow (green apples have thick, leathery peels; red apples are too sweet, too juicy); milk—skim; a word he can't read; arugula; several more words he can't read; toilet paper; bread; jam—strawberry; strawberries. That's it, he says. Oh, I say. I'm sitting on the floor in my room. If Dad asked me to tell him about my room, I'd provide my own kind of list: a lamp that throws stars onto the ceiling, a pothos plant hours from death, four plastic water bottles lined up near the door, a small desk, a too-small bed, an unopened pack of condoms in the rightmost desk drawer, a leaf from the pothos plant hiding rotten under the dresser, a bottle of lube next to the titanium scissors, a fan, a wrinkled pride flag, a notebook on the desk opened to an empty page, a pencil on the floor, a plastic bag filled with dried fruit and pistachios, a pill bottle, me, a thumbtack-shaped hole in the wall, several boxes of tissues, at least seventeen books, a mess of chargers, a clock. But Dad doesn't ask me to tell him about my room, so I name none of these things. They remain unnamed. My understanding is that they're used to it. Dad is talking about the woman who

lives two doors down. Linda. It's so obvious that he's in love with her, and that he has been in love with her since he saw her in an absurd hat at Mom's funeral six years ago, that the story became boring before it even started. The strawberries, apparently—not the strawberry jam, only the strawberries—are for Linda. Linda, Dad says, loves strawberries. She's always eating them on her porch. I say, Maybe it's not a great idea to get Linda strawberries. Why not? Dad asks, voice pitchy. Linda, I explain, presumably has a preferred strawberry provider. This is why it's always a bad idea to gift people the things they love. They know them too well for their own good. Dad says, Oh. I feel bad, then remind myself that whether or not Linda will receive the strawberries has already been determined by the following factors: the exact distance, in meters, between Dad's house and Linda's house; the exact number of sidewalk squares separating Dad's house from Linda's house; the size of Dad's front yard, in acres; the size of Linda's front yard, in hectares; the taste of the wind; the smell of the part of the road that curls up the hill; the color of the westernmost branch of the easternmost maple tree; the number of letters in the number of letters in the number seventeen; the way a balloon sounds when licked; the average length of Dad's back hair, in centimeters; Linda's favorite song by Madonna; the shape in which the smallest worm in the neighborhood curls up to sleep; the exact distance, in miles, between a thing (ideally a strawberry) and itself. Which makes me feel better. Bye, Dad says. Bye, I say. We confirm that we love each other. On the weekends, I should mention, I tend to list things. Yes.

When I see Nick and Andrew in the dining hall on Sunday, I tell them that I've let Professor Roach know that I'll be dropping his course on queer theory. Oh no, Nick says, why? Something is in his mouth; Andrew's hand rests on his thigh. Oh, I say, because I don't like it. Oh, Andrew says, I thought you were gay. I sit elsewhere. At the other end of my table, two students are talking very loudly. I'm not good at anything, says the first, who appears to be on the verge of tears, and there's a cockroach living in one of my baseball caps. These cookies are really good, says the second. I named the cockroach Linda, says the first. Holy shit, says the second, I actually love these cookies. They are looking straight at each other. My socks are all bunched up, and as the two students talk very loudly, all I can think about is how bunched up my socks are. They're so bunched up. I'm afraid, says the

first student, who may or may not be crying, that Linda is trapped in the baseball cap. I want the recipe for these cookies, says the second. A very small part of me is tempted to make the strangest, loudest noise I can, a noise that cuts between the strands of this conversation and leaves the two students floating on separate ends of the cavernous dining hall. But I'm too focused on my socks, which, again, are extremely bunched up. They cling to my cold, coatless body. I shiver. Because, I assume, it's been determined that I am a shiverer. Right.

The dining hall doesn't have pineapple soda. When I want pineapple soda, I have to buy it from the convenience store two blocks north of campus. It costs four dollars and tastes like a memory of a dream about a memory of a dream about a pineapple. I never decide to buy pineapple soda; sometimes I find myself wanting it, and I find myself walking to the convenience store, and I find myself buying it, and I find myself drinking it, or half of it, as the case may be. But I never decide to buy it. I'm pretty certain that finding oneself doing something is not the same as deciding to do something. These cookies are pretty good, says the first person. The second person is silent. I find myself willing the conversation to continue, willing the quarks to interact in a such a way that the atoms interact in such a way that the molecules interact in such a way that the cells interact in such a way that the second person says, Yes, these cookies are pretty good, I agree. But the silence continues. The table is as quiet as a cockroach in a hat. I consider saying something; I say nothing. The idea of choosing to say something—the idea that it is possible for me to choose to say something—terrifies me. The idea of choosing terrifies me. Choosing terrifies me. That's all.



I go to a party on a weeknight, which is stupid but not my fault. Everyone is at the party, except for Professor Roach, and Dad, and Mom, and Linda, and cockroach Linda, and the first person, and the second person, and all the other cockroaches, and all the other people. In other words, Nick and Andrew are at the party. And I'm at the party. Right.

Nobody else seems to feel cold. I'm shivering. A person who is neither Nick nor Andrew pours cranberry juice and vodka into a plastic cup and hands the

cup to me and nods when I say thank you. I take a sip of the drink. It tastes like a person who is neither Nick nor Andrew has poured cranberry juice and vodka into a plastic cup and handed the cup to me and nodded when I said thank you. I take another sip of the drink. Still I shiver. There's no use in worrying about the fact that I'm shivering; people shiver because people shiver because people shiver. If I weren't shivering, I wouldn't be cold. But I'm cold, so I shiver. I take a third sip of the drink, which is beginning to taste more like cranberry juice and less like vodka. Nick and Andrew emerge from the crowd like hairs sprouting from a chin and pretend not to see me. I approach them anyway. Or I'm made to approach them. By? By the stickiness of the floor, and the sweetness of the cranberries, and the lazy thumping of the music. By things that exist outside of me. By all the parts of me that don't choose to be me—dandruff seceding from scalp, food rotting in stomach, yellow lentils hiding beneath eyelids, bits of sock suffocating under toenails. I approach them. Are you a cranberry? I ask Andrew, who is drunk. What? he says. Are you a cranberry? I ask Nick, who is also drunk. Sure, he says. Nobody asks me whether I'm a cranberry. But I am. In the sense that I am not a strawberry. Yes.

I want nothing more than to find an anachron, to enter it, to be timeless, choiceless, less. To exist before and after and above and below, to exist in a world in which Mom is five years old and a world in which Mom has been dead for centuries, to exist in a world in which the soda has yet to be opened and a world in which the soda is half-gone and a world in which the soda is gone, to exist in a world in which the soda has been drunk and not drunk in every way it could possibly be drunk and not drunk, to exist in a world with every fraction and every ratio and every number of meters and tons and tonnes and acres and inches and units and units and units, to exist, in short, without all the stone-set, clock-ticked, cockroach-scuttled pain of existing. I want an anachron, I say to Andrew, who is very drunk. What? he says. I want an anachron, I say to Nick, who is also very drunk. Okay, he says. Nick and Andrew, I can tell, are annoyed by my presence. This is another way of saying that they want to kiss. This is another way of saying that I kiss Andrew, that I am compelled to kiss Andrew, that my lips are brought to his, for some reason that is beyond and above me, that I am vaguely aware of Nick watching nearby, his expression a blur in my peripheral vision. That Andrew pulls

away, or pushes away, or both. That Nick's face, which has exited my peripheral vision and positioned itself squarely in front of me, is contorted, grimacing, ugly. That Nick is saying, What the fuck. That Andrew is saying, Yeah, what the fuck. That I am choosing to leave the party. That I am choosing to sit on a bench near the library. That I am choosing not to shiver. That I am choosing to call Dad. That my phone is choosing to send me to voicemail. That I am choosing to leave a message. That I am saying, Dad, give Linda the strawberries, just give them to her, do it now, and if she doesn't like them, throw them into the air, or eat them so fast you throw up, or kiss her, or rip up the grass in front of her house, or go home and look at wedding pictures and let the tears come. But give Linda the strawberries, Dad. And the jam, too. That's all. Goodnight.

Hunger

The whole season I am sweating, fall
an illness blooming. I've noticed

I care less and less
for the shape of me, only

that it is receding. I say
so many things, all lies. When he touches me

I can feel the hatred steadyng
his hands, keeping them

gentle. It's obvious
I want too much, to lap from his hands

until I'm satisfied, to suck
on his fingers until they hurt. Asleep,

he says, my breath goes out
in little whines like a dog

dreaming. This he takes
as a good thing. The body seized ecstatic

in terror. And it's true
there is a voice that says *kill*

and eat, so I know
it is holy, this hunger. I know

I misunderstand. When the trees fill out
with grackles, slick black and green

as oil iridescent, I find
their open throats

so inviting. I let them
take whatever they can.

Streichholzsäckelchen

I was told if I could pronounce it properly
I was fluent. *Little matchbox.*

I loved how

-chen

made anything diminutive.

<i>Flüsschen</i>	little river	or, stream/creek
<i>Gänsechen</i>	little goose	or, gosling
<i>Liebchen</i>	little love	or, sweetheart
<i>Gregchen</i>	little Greg	or...



The first word I battled was as squirrelly
as the rodent itself:

Eichhörnchen

sounding it out with child-like pause:

Eich

hörn

chen



In a half-timbered bar my friend
passed me a matchbook,

a packet of cigarettes, one flipped
upside down for luck.

I taught her this ritual. I didn't tell her

I made it up.

—♦—

<i>Vögelchen</i>	little bird	or, birdie
<i>Bäumchen</i>	little tree	or, sapling
<i>Zäpfchen</i>	little (pine)cone	or, suppository

—♦—

Americans struggle with umlauts,
the assault of

the *-ch*.

—♦—

I was pleased to see the random tobacco tip
nestled among the yellow filters.

I couldn't tell her I lied.

It's not a thing. But

if more than one person does it, isn't it
a thing?



I've since learned

squirrel

is challenging to pronounce
in any language, as if

out of spite of their own agility.



We had our traditions, discussing
art films each month

in a café concealed down an alley,
in what I would call a

Straßchen little street or...

...but, again, this is something
I made up,

the word not found in any dictionary.



You weren't allowed to pick the upside-
down cigarette until all others

were smoked.



I couldn't tell her
we loved the same man, that I, too,
wanted him
to make me a diminutive.



Turns out, it was a thing—
cigarettes first inverted
perhaps in WWII by soldiers
to hide the manufacturer's name
stamped on the side,
to conceal their identity.



<i>Rotkehlchen</i>	little red throat	or, robin
<i>Älchen</i>	little eel	or, roundworm
<i>Stäbchen</i>	little skewer	or, chopsticks
<i>Feuerchen</i>	little fire	



One New Year's I made up my own ritual,
to write a wish on a piece of paper.

Only when it was set on fire
would it come true.

That year we set the front lawn aflame
with our wishes.

—♦—

If you reached the last cigarette
you were considered lucky.

Metamorphosis

Love, Love, Love—

I'm certified for all insects, common birds, and mammals up to the size of a raccoon, except for weasels, but I met my true love because of mice. There's a shame factor with mice. People with rats respond like they're being held by terrorists, but mice feel more like a moral failure. You should see the kitchens. Tupperware with the price tags still stuck on. IKEA trash cans with lever-action lids. Fruit bowls covered with glass cake domes, just screaming unused wedding gift. "I can't explain it," the women tell me. "We keep *everything* in hard-sided containers."

The men are worse. They're always on the job. Oh, they've conducted reconnaissance in the dead of night. They almost stomped one last night, or they broomed one out the door. This is where they put the last successful trap. Peanut butter works better than cheese. Did I know that? They wouldn't call an exterminator for a few mice! But the wife, you know! I do know, but I don't. I almost forgot. Now I'm tripping so hard my heels clip the back of my skull.

I was working in the South Side Slopes and it looked like a Swiss mountain town if it snowed garbage. I'd just finished treating another punk house for termites. They were short on cash—restaurant-sized cans of stolen beans on the counter—and the walls of their practice room were covered with dirty mattresses like baffles.

"No bedbugs?" I asked.

"Is that what you call them?" the one with the mullet said.

In the cellar, termites had eaten halfway through a joist and the floor sagged under the drum throne. The landlord didn't care. I treated it for free and they got me stoned. I asked them if they knew any Black Flag and instead they played the worst cover of *Born to Run* I could've dreamed up. I don't usually do drugs at work. People don't usually offer.

The next place on my schedule was just a few blocks away. I parked the bugmobile across the street and I rapped the door and when it swung open Sam Henry was staring back at me. I heard someone gasp and the person was me. Waist-high, that same dull look, cave-deep eyes, tiny wrists, a stuffed animal in

the crook of his arm. My toolbox slipped, burst open on the steps. Mouse traps snapping all around us, the sour bait smell, and Sam Henry, small again, and a trap latched onto my boot lace.

Giggles.

“Did he do that?” It was the mother. She was beautiful. She had a shameless gap between her front teeth. You could see the total blackness of her mouth. Like a crawlspace. I tried to speak and lamented the smell of burnt Raid on my breath.

“No,” I said, finally. “It was me. He’s just a dead ringer for my son.”

She looked down at my spilled gear and frowned. She said she wouldn’t have called if she knew I was just going to bring some old mouse traps. She said anybody could put down a fucking mouse trap. People were always saying shit like that. Usually, I just said fine and split. They’d call me back a week later after a rat bit their dachshund or a mouse shit in their Cheerios, and I’d jack up the price. But not with my new love, my true love, no way. I told her there was more to it than that. This was modern war. My war. There were glue traps and live traps and bait boxes and sonic deterrents. There was trash and food storage to evaluate. There were nests to be destroyed and holes to be caulked.

She said, “So you’re here to caulk my holes, huh?” and snorted laughing as she walked down the hallway. A red patch of embarrassment crawled up my neck like a maggot.

She led me to the kitchen, the letters JUICY on the back of her sweats bouncing. The hair in her ponytail couldn’t decide what color it wanted to be. She was drinking from a two-liter of Mountain Dew. It was nine in the morning. She needed me. They needed me. My old mentor Lloyd used to have a saying about two-legged stools. You could practically see them wobbling.

It was a top/bottom duplex that smelled like cat piss, fresh spray. You’d think people had never seen a cartoon with the way they run out for a cat first-thing. Cats don’t work. I work. Usually I don’t like to be watched but now things were different. The boy’s real name was Braydon and I loved the smallness of his hands. His tiny proportional fingernails. His tiny ski jump nose. Her name was Carrie. She had unreal tits. She said, “The fuckstick upstairs keeps saying the mice are coming from my apartment and now he’s got the landlord on his side. They’re saying it’s on me to take care of it.”

“No,” I said, adjusting my hat. “It’s on me.”

She smiled. That gap! A wasp could fly out. My God, they needed my help.

She sat cross-legged on a barstool in the kitchen while I worked. “Here’s one major point of entry,” I said. I was on my knees under the kitchen sink looking at the drainpipe that led to the basement. Turds everywhere. I dropped a trap and explained how they work. “The glue traps aren’t pretty. Usually, the mice die of a heart attack in about twenty minutes. You or your husband can just throw the whole trap out afterwards.”

She said she didn’t think he could reach it from the Allegheny County Jail.

I took my time, then. I made small talk. I swallowed my own criminal heartbeat and it tasted like blood. Maybe that was the chemicals. She asked how long it’d be. She had to go pick up smokes. “It’s bad,” I said. “You’ll need at least one follow-up. But it’s included in the price.”

It really was bad. I would lie, but not about mice. You could see paths they’d worn in the dust behind the couch. Man, I dropped every model of trap in existence. I spared no expense. In her bedroom, due to my tender feelings, I didn’t bother her pile of dirty clothes. Not even the socks. I was on my knees placing traps under her bed when I felt something behind me. Hot, damp breath. I remembered this short film I liked. The one with the plumber and the clogged pipes.

I turned, and it was my son.

“What’s your favorite animal to exterminate?” He was holding Spider-Man.

“Spiders,” I said.

He hid his toy behind his back.

“I am just kidding,” I said. “I don’t have a favorite.”



My favorite animal to exterminate has always been the American red squirrel. This isn’t to say I like to kill them. The Dalai Lama once called mosquitos ungrateful on TV and swatted one buzzing around his face, and that’s what I think about the American red squirrel. All they do is take. They offer nothing. I’ve been working on expressing more gratitude for my health, but it’s hard because the underbelly of gratitude is guilt. I like to make up little sayings like that. For fun, and for

inspiration. But what I mean is that there are always two elevators. When yours is up, some poor fucker is stuck in the basement. This is the world we've made. One time I forgot my son on the porch. Now I've gone so far down, I'm up again.

Old Dalai also said that we should teach our children to respect insects, because if kids learned to respect insects, they'll learn to respect everything. I'm proud to say that I respect pests. I even respect the American red squirrel. I respect them more than most these fucks. It's not easy to bear their sins. Their crumbs and trash cans. Their spilled pet food, their loose eaves. I meet sin with sin, my own heart-attack glue traps, ripped like the hole in my real son's heart. But who knew—sometimes things can come back to us in time. Time absolutes because time *is* absolute. Can you believe I just make this shit up?

There's this routine I got. After work, I eat a microwaved chimichanga with Old El Paso dumped on top. Then I turn on the vent fan and open the window. I take a can of Black Flag or sometimes Raid and spray it over a window screen that I got rigged to a lawnmower battery. I connect the cable. The current flows, smelling sweeter than you'd think, like burnt sugar and rust. When the Black Flag crystalizes, I disconnect the battery and take a shower and by the time I'm done the screen's cool. I scrape the crystals onto a cookie sheet and go at it with my mother's rolling pin until it's powdery. Then, I mix it with pipe tobacco and I smoke it on my porch.

It worms and burrows, lays its eggs in my lungs. I look over and see my neighbor on her porch, calling for her cat. She looks at me with her dull eyes and says Nice Night but we both know it's not. It's sleeting. I can feel the ions in my skin vibrating and I can feel the ghosts of all those pests crawling and gnawing and fucking each other. Sometimes I get hard as a nail but it feels wrong to make this about me. Especially now that I'm a family man again. Look. Deep down I know that this is just chemicals but deeper down I know that everything is just a chemical, even love. Especially love.



Old Lloyd was the one to sell me the bugmobile. He only worked for a few slumlords and sometimes he sneezed blood. His wife made the bug on the roof

from foam and chicken wire. It was originally a termite but the antennae got pulled off by some little bastards before I got it. Then a part of the thorax broke loose and almost caused a pile-up in the Squirrel Hill Tunnel. (Can you believe they named a fucking tunnel after them?!) Now it looks kind of like a tick, which works in my favor because ticks replaced killer bees as the most newsworthy bugs of the 2010's. One time, I came out from a job and found a kid on his tiptoes biting hunks from the abdomen. I think about that boy a lot.

The bug has never bothered me until now. It's just so obvious, and all I want is to check. Take a quick look. Peek. It is my calling. It's in my DNA. I saw bleach under the sink, no child locks. There was a hairdryer close to the shower. Did you know Raid doesn't show on any major drug test? Did you know mice carry hantavirus? The mortality rate is thirty-eight percent. I'd bandied that statistic to drum up business for years. How weird now to feel the fear. I haven't forgotten that moment in the line at the bank when I saw a woman with a toddler and I turned to her and screamed, "I forgot my fucking kid!"

I mashed the pedal down.

I always get this way on the Rachel Carson Bridge. Associative is the word my ex-wife used. When she called me paranoid, I told her to read a goddamned book. It's the lead that's ruined us, mostly. Farmers used to put arsenic on their crops to keep the bugs away. When that got them sick, they switched. To mercury. Then, the lead. Lead blunts decision-making. It makes us violent and sick. There are studies about it. And DDT? They gave the guy that invented that shit the Noble Prize. By the time Rachel Carson wrote about it, there was Agent Orange. Roundup. Microplastics. You're practically a human bean bag. You're basically living napalm. My brain is a goddamn superfund site and I'm the most reasonable motherfucker in all of Pittsburgh. I was going to be a chemical engineer. Now, there's this shirt I have that I found at the Goodwill. It says, **THIS IS MY CHEMO SHIRT AND WHEN THIS SHIT'S OVER I'LL CUT IT INTO PIECES.** Sometimes I wear it to the grocery store so people will let me cut in line.

Open a goddamned book, Karen. Raid was developed by the S.G. Johnson company in 1954. "Kills Bugs Dead" was coined by a poet they had working there named Lew Welch. He disappeared in 1971 in New York. In the New York arts

scene, you'd use his name like an Irish goodbye. Like, my wife and kid Lew Welch'd me. I got one of Lew Welch's books from the Carnegie but now my head splits open if I read for too long.

Black Flag, not like the punk band Black Flag, is the oldest insecticide brand in the US of A. They also make those roach motels. *Bugs check in, but they don't check out.* Where is my real son now? Black Flag the insecticide was released in 1888 and Black Flag the band was started in 1976. The insecticide's slogan was "Control your world" and the punk band's most famous album was *My War*. A black flag is supposedly the flag of anarchy. That part always trips me up because insecticides are about the order of things.

The plan was to park a couple of streets over and just walk by. Just look. There was another cigarette behind my ear, seasoned with Raid. Am I dying or is it just love? With each pothole, the tick tried to crawl off the roof. Arlington, Dengler, Maple Ave—I saw the street and turned and realized it was *the street*. Carrie was outside smoking. The kid was riding a scooter on the cold sidewalk. I wished she wouldn't smoke. I wished he had a helmet. I wish Lloyd was still here to help keep me focused.

The bugmobile ground to a stop.

"I thought you wouldn't be back for a couple weeks." Her arms were crossed and she was standing in the yard in the gray snow. She looked cold. It was hard to hear over the muffler.

"I couldn't stay away."

She tossed her cigarette butt in the snow with all the others.

"Kidding!" I said. "I'm treating the apartment on the corner. How are the mice?"

"Dying," she said. "As soon as I turn out the lights, I hear traps snap shut."

"I can set some more right now."

She said, "We still got extras."

She's not very good about eye contact.

She called for Sam Henry, told him it was too cold to be out without a hat.

"Do the dead ones bother Sam Henry?"

"Who?" she said.

I sped away.



My least favorite animal to exterminate is the flying squirrel. They look like a bat fucked a chipmunk. I hate to kill them because each time I see one I know there's no God. There are a lot of animals like that, ones that prove the process of evolution. Each time I suffocate a flying squirrel I wonder if I'm interfering with evolution. I was going to be a biologist. Study moths or something. But the best part of the rock-bottom is that I can see the futility of all my wants. Everything curls up and dies except for the part of you that wills itself to live. Carrie, Braydon, Raid—just heads above water inside me.

Lloyd used to call moths K-Mart butterflies and my wife used to call me as worthless as tits on a boar. It was something her grandfather had said. She grew up on a farm. She thought it was ridiculous that anyone would call an exterminator for squirrels. I think she's there now, rolling in that good, black dirt. Our son was born with a congenital hole in his heart. Maybe it was my chemicals. There are studies about it but most are inconclusive. I wish they were conclusive. This guilt tastes tinny. Like an SOS pad. Like meth. I left him on the porch. It was just a couple of errands, but that was the last straw. My wife had asked me if I was high and I didn't even know. I actually said, "I don't know." That bothered her the most. My neighbor is looking at me again. Her cigarette like a third eye. It actually is a nice night. Tonight, it really is.

I got an idea:

I forgot to ask if you needed any child -safety locks?? I noticed there weren't any.

*We always give them out b/c
of all the 😭 we handle.*

I connected the battery again. Checked my phone. Cleaned out my lunchbox. Checked my phone again.

I mean b/c chemicals LOL!

Is this the exterminator???

 *It's 9:30 dude*

Weird, I sent this an hour ago.

So sorry!

*We don't need any locks and
mice are all dead. Thx!*



She didn't want to bother me. I hooked up the battery again.

Then it was morning and my head was pounding. No, the door was pounding. I thought maybe it was my probation officer. This was good because I needed to piss. My probation officer liked good samples, but it was just my neighbor staring at me. She was holding her cat under her arm like a rolled-up newspaper. Her hands were very veiny and she was handing me a Tupperware full of bloody worms.

“Spaghetti,” she said. I took the tupper and asked if she was sure. I don’t eat a lot of noodles, but I’m pretty certain they don’t squirm. But Old Lloyd used to have some saying about never kissing gift horses on the lips.

She said, “I know how hard it is to cook for one,” and I thought I should tell her about chimichangas.

“I have been thinking,” she said. “We should call the landlord about the smell.”

“The smell?”

“Sometimes it stinks like an electrical fire at night.”

I’d forgotten to disconnect again. I said, “My sense of smell is ruined. From my job. But I’ll call him ASAP.”

“At least the nights have been nice!”



A day passed or maybe three, followed by a few more. I killed mice, I killed bugs. I drove by their house and saw nothing. I got a call about a snake that turned

out to be a hose. I got a few calls about cats that were outside my jurisdiction. I got a call from a regular who always left a sparkly green dildo on the bedside table. Roaches, again. I texted my love about the follow-up and heard nothing. I got back to work on this kids' book I'm writing. It's a riff on the old lady who swallowed the fly, but with pesticides and the planet. That old hag should've just called me, but everyone hates me until they need me. That's okay. I'll be the rat that eats the mouse. I'll spin myself into whatever my true love needs.

It was becoming clear to me that life was centrifugal. I drove by again. The pressure in my head would spin out the bad. The want. You'd be amazed at the shit I've seen. I found a squirrel king once. A horrifying thing. Littermates, multi-generational, who knows? The homeowner wanted a crime scene reconstruction. I guessed it ran across some hot roofing tar and then a piece of ribbon, which got stuck to the tail. (They lamented the mess of their daughter's sixth birthday party.) The squirrel dragged it back into the nest in the eaves of a rowhouse and the tar and ribbon got bound up with other squirrel tails. No lights on at my true love's house. One of those squirrels had died and started to rot and the rest were all bitten and scabby from trying to chew their way free. Imagine a five-pointed star, but writhing.

This other time I found the skeleton of a robin with an egg stuck in the ribcage. When I shook it, the egg rattled like a 3D puzzle. My son, my own real son, bright as a road flare sometimes. It wasn't even an hour. He drank some water from the dog bowl. He got a little splinter in his palm. That was all. How was he?

How is Sam-Henry?

Did you finish the program?

How are you?

Its court ordered.

Let's make some time to talk.

I can see my faults clearly now.

I just wanted you to know I met someone.



I deserve a lot of shit. I get that. But the way they treat me? Aside from the socks, I've always followed the exterminator's code. Not like old Lloyd. He'd breed roaches in his basement and when he was broke, he'd let them loose in an apartment or a hotel where he was working. He'd wail, "I've never seen so many!" when they skittered around the bright floor. You should've seen the building managers hoof it for their checkbooks. He had a good sense of humor about things. For a while after my wife left, I caught myself saying *we*.

He used to say, "What, you got a mouse in your pocket?"

I got four in my toolbox, Lloyd. Voi-fucking-la—just let some mice loose in her place! It took a whole day to catch them in an old live-trap sometimes people insisted I use. I usually killed them later with carbon monoxide from the tailpipe. Lloyd said one time he farted into a can full of mice and some of them died. Oh, Lloyd. I miss him like a severed hand.

At least he has me to take up his sword. Who will save Hamelin without me? I played another magic pipe. It was as easy as breathing. I'd ripped the bug from the mobile to work in stealth. Now I am become Death; that's what the inventor of the bomb said. Before he died, Lloyd went on a trip to Alaska and told me there was a kind of worm that lives in glaciers. Apparently, they can survive anything. When the bombs fall, they'll be all that's left.

I drove up the slopes with my heart learning new rhythms. Somehow a mouse escaped my toolbox and ran up my leg. I managed to grab it and squeeze until the filling came out. In all the confusion, I thought at first I had the streets wrong again. But this was the place and the sign said **FOR RENT**.

I left the bugmobile in the middle of the street and punched the eviction notice through the glass and cut my hand and tried to lick the blood then realized it was the leftovers of that mouse. That made sense because everyone is always fucking with me. Why is that? I called for them but they were gone. I kept to the corners, cleaned my whiskers, rooted around the shit they left behind. I dumped a bag of trash on their floor and looked through coffee-stained envelopes for an address or a clue. She was way behind on her bills. I could've been helpful with that. I had grub stored up for the winter. A nice, warm nest. I rubbed my palms over the type of broken, sun-faded plastic toys I used to kick out of my lawnmower's path.

I thought of my real wife, and my real son, and the realization came to me like a thunderclap headache that I would never see them again. That they existed to me in the past. That it was better that way. I sat down and cried a little. Then I found one of her socks, faint pink, in the corner of the closet. I chewed and chewed and chewed. It tasted like soap.

—♦—

At home, the lights whirled. The street was already blocked off with yellow tape. The firemen wore suspenders, so their pants bounced when they walked. I parked and pushed my way through the crowd and watched the house burn and embraced the heat like a wall I could lean against, or like a door I could walk through. Or like a window I could jump through! That made perfect sense but then the fire chief pushed me back to the other side of the street. My neighbor was standing there with her cat under her arm, the tail singed like a cigarette butt. I told her I called the landlord, and she said that it wouldn't have mattered. She was weeping. She needed me. I hugged her. The soft, warm cat purred and went slack in the tight space between us.

“At least we’re okay,” she said. “That’s the important thing.”

All of It Just Means *Child*

Love, it is your black legs opening. It is my black mouth ready to receive that teaches me love has no language—it wants nothing to do with speech. It is light refusing

the articulation of morning. It is us holding each other in its display rapt in a mess of loss—our legs wrapped tight in the other knowing what more we could not

stand to lose. It is the way my heart dies when I look at you and the strength I do not have. It is all that I have given others. It is all others have refused to give me.

It is my mother's hatred. It is the broad-winged hawk landing in a tree. It is what that bird refuses to mean. It can't be god. It refuses an origin. It refuses a landing.

Love, it is the first time we held hands. It is the smell of perfume on your neck, the sweater you wore to keep warm. It is the first time we made love in silence.

It is the first sign of fear—the time we refused to speak. It is Nina Simone singing *Just in Time*. There is no time. It is the way you spun me in evening light, and we cried.

It is all that we cannot carry. It is our attempt to hold each other in the loss and failure of meaning. It is all we have labored in our hearts. It is my black tongue in your black—

opening.

Corpus Christi

Body of Christ is a city
on the Gulf. A gulf is a piece
of ocean that penetrates
land. The land of my body
awaits the sacrament
of baptism. I was baptized
in a landlocked church. It will not
recognize my body as sacred. Sacristy
is a room in the church
of men. This woman,

her sacred body engulfed
in mine. I hold her blood, the wet
hot air of the gulf stream. The holy
holy holy burn of incense
on the bedside table. A prayer
tucked between our legs. A host
of humidity. Storm
on the coast. Rain, corporeal,
falling to ocean. Water, soft
against her breast.

League as Measurement of Distance

Frito pie sold straight
from the bag at a Little League
game in late May. Already

one hundred degrees. Always
someone with a statistic

about rainfall. We're on a 58-day
losing streak. How
do I call a place
mine? The city

drilling
to access water
pipes. Sprung. *Home*
run is a thing I call

the two-day drive south
through my mother's
history—Louisville
slugger. *It must*
suck to be

from Kentucky I hear
them say. *Texas*, they say

your state is always
in the news. I say
I wish it wasn't

so hot. These boots. The beef
cattle ground up

in a sack of stale
chips, shredded
cheese. Little swings
for the fences. I crossed

three borders to get to this
kitchen. Mom browns something
in her mother's pot. Tongs

click together as if
they'd finally speak up. They don't

let girls play

with boys, let girls
touch girls
here. On Sundays,

my brother always passed me
his plate first. I'm still learning
the rules. What's so
different

about another place
besides a capitol building
and the heat index? I'm here

for one reason only: I can't
seem to let myself

forget. The sun

rounds the bases,
and maybe I should call
my parents, call it
home, lay flat

in the diamond
in the middle of play. Let
cleats press
me deeper
into ground.

A Review of *Panics* and *Which As You Know Means Violence: On Self-Injury as Art and Entertainment*

Two weeks before I was diagnosed with cancer for the second time in nine months, I cradled a dead crow in my arms. My husband and I had seen it from the front window; we panicked as the bird flapped in half-bodied paralysis along the sidewalk. We couldn't save it, so we snapped its neck. Before we buried the body, I stroked its feathers and lit candles. After such violence, in death, it was like my baby, a shadow materialized.

A woman cradles a dead bird, cooing over it as if it's her child, in the untitled story at the heart of Barbara Molinard's *Panics*, translated from French into English for the first time this year by Emma Ramadan since the author's death in 1986. Broken into fragments with titles like "The Cadaver and the Clock" and "The Objects Move," this short story centers on the quotidian turned mad. In the first fragment, the woman caresses the "still-warm body" of the bird, makes eye contact with an onlooking owl, and there is a feral cry, before the scene swiftly changes to nurses moving like weaponized ghosts:

They slip noiselessly through the white hospital hallways, closing doors as they open others, holding syringes, vials, cotton, pushing rolling tables with rubberized wheels carrying iron tins, sharp or triangular objects, sometimes food, serum, blood, acid, sludge.

Sentences like these straightforwardly describe routines that the reader recognizes as part and parcel of everyday life only to fall breathlessly away into lists of normal objects and experiences that quickly transform into the surreal, the terrifying. A blackbird on a branch dies in one sentence, and, by the next, black angels are heralding the death of the sun. A mother tells her child to wish on a

shooting star, and, in a moment, the sweet scene descends into the void, allowing the child to “vaguely under[stand] the price of freedom.”

Seeking to understand the price of human freedom—is it boredom? Violence? Death? All three?—in the postmodern world remains a central theme underpinning Molinard’s *Panics* and Philippa Snow’s debut collection *Which As You Know Means Violence: On Self-Injury As Art and Entertainment*. I picked up both books in that harrowing time between diagnosis and intervention, as my doctors asked pointed questions about whether I happened to have access to a good therapist and/or regular psychiatry appointments scheduled in advance of the violence and indignities of life during chemotherapy. *Yes, of course*, I told my oncologist during one hospital visit, reaching into my bag to touch the thin paperback copies of *Panics* and *Which As You Know Means Violence*. I thought of the violence upon which each book hinges—Molinard’s anxious, bumbling characters seeking out death as the bulwark against boredom, Snow’s protagonists performing pain as art. *Maybe I’ll film having my chemo port accessed*, I thought, envisioning a TikTok video of a nurse pushing the mega-sized thumbtack through the skin on my chest so the poisons of Adriamycin, Cytoxan, and Taxol could rush through my veins more swiftly, with “less damage.”

The damage, for Molinard and Snow, is, of course, the point. News outlets have made much of Molinard’s own mental illness, seemingly giddy with the stories of her systematically destroying her own work, shredding her writing as soon as she’d finished it. Only this brief collection to survive as her public legacy. I wonder if critics comfort themselves with these tales of the now-deceased writer’s madness, trying to put rational distance between the horrific world she describes in *Panics* and the surfeit normalcy, the “sanity,” the diagnostics of our own reality.

“What readers will find here is neither invented nor dreamed,” Marguerite Duras writes in the forward to the collection left behind by her now-deceased friend and protégé. “It’s a record of lived experience.” It would be a mistake to read Molinard’s collection, then, as only fiction, or as only one mentally disturbed woman’s experience. Better to read *Panics* as a record of the collective; the shadows are always there, it asserts, a part and because of our human collectivity, ready to concretize into panicked action, what the filmmaker Michael Haneke has called “a barb in the brain,” or else a contagious chain of individual, increasingly bad ideas.

It's easy to read Duras' introduction to her protégé's work, the grotesquery of the stories that follow, and establish such a distance between Molinard's mental anguish taken to its destructive extreme and our own contemporary, "healthier" attempts to revise and promote our writerly work. Duras recounts how Molinard would write the entire day for five weeks straight, only to sabotage her writing by ripping up its pages, burning it, hiding away "everything as usual," without remembering either the writing or the violence of its destruction.

Similarly, Molinard's aforementioned untitled story hinges upon the syntactic speed with which the ordinary becomes nightmare, and, as a result, becomes emblematic of the collection as a whole. All 14 stories make use of this hasty juxtaposition to reveal the violence that predicates even the most basic of human interactions as well as underscoring the mundane beauty of the natural world. The unassuming brevity of Molinard's writing paradoxically emphasizes the cinematic quality of her characters' worlds, the way they observe themselves and, through the act of self-observation, justify acts of harm, injury, and violence as necessary to prevent or allay suffering, as well as the peculiar suffering that arises from quotidian boredom. A woman stalks, sleeps with, and dies alongside a boa constrictor in a zoo. Another woman caresses the headless body of a former lover. A man eats rotten food from a vending machine, vomiting it up as he races towards a meeting. Any human will turn to violence and distortion in the blink of an eye, the collection maintains, the time it takes to see a dark shape from the window and identify it as a bird, as an omen we'll need to kill.

In the short story "The Severed Hand," a patient seeks care from a pharmacist about a hand that is somehow wrong: no fingers, no joints, useless but "with a certain beauty." *What should I do about this*, the pharmacist wonders for a moment then decides the mangled limb must go. *We'll saw it off*, he suggests to the patient, who beams with approval. The nightmare surreality of the story becomes quickly nauseating, not with the hand, nor even really with its removal, but with how the complicit boredom between the pharmacist and patient sours when the patient visibly experiences pain. They begin amputation in happy, boring accord, the pharmacist mentally patting himself on the back for his decision, for the swiftness with which he has chosen to provide "healthcare." But when he looks up from his

work severing wrist, skin, sinew, bones and discovers that his happy patient is no longer bored but instead trying to suffer nobly through the surgery, distracting himself from his pain through wincing smiles, the pharmacist becomes enraged:

His ego was wounded: that the patient was putting on airs, that he was affecting a detached and distant comportment, as though ‘out of it,’ as though it weren’t his own hand, really it was all very disagreeable to the pharmacist, who interpreted it as a lack of courtesy and deference toward him. Furious and aghast, he resumed his work, but his heart was no longer in it. This hand was beginning to repulse him, and he no longer derived any satisfaction from the way the saw attacked the bones ...Once more he lifted his eyes to the patient and, suddenly, he understood. He was being mocked!... Yes, that was it, an insulting smile.

Mad with rage, the pharmacist brusquely drops the hand that had been dangling from the arm by just a few strips of flesh. The customer tries to cushion the blow, but it all happens too quickly; his mouth contorts in suffering. I read the “Severed Hand” the same day I received a phone call about the chemo port my doctors would surgically install in my chest, to provide better access to the veins near my heart. Like the pharmacist in Molinard’s collection, the doctor on the phone was flippant with me, audibly angered by my fear, my crying, my questions. The nicer I smoothed out my affect, the more brusque the healthcare professional became, and so in setting up an extreme version of such an exchange in *Panics*, Molinard comments on the violence done to the patient—applicable here and now, in our real-life age of global pandemic—by the expectation that one who is being cared for only really deserves that care if one is obedient and docile. Sick and still smiling, a little bit bored, all the same.

If the stories in *Panics* turn on breathless association, the brevity of normalcy rendered absurd, the four longform essays in *Which As You Know Means Violence* operate by virtue of a slow, often comedic burn as Snow sets her sights on “those who enact violence on themselves”—people we might call absurd for the measures they take to render pain and self-injury as normal, as fun, as art. Linking pop

culture television shows such as *Jackass*, the reality TV show that ran three seasons between 2000 and 2001, to 1970s performance art to the “contemporary gold-rush of” social media in the 2010s, Snow’s collection is an expansive consideration of violence’s relationship to art, gender, entertainment, and the cultural ennui of the twenty-first-century United States. With a combination of sincerity and incredulity, Snow renders the *Jackass* crew members, as well as a number of filmmakers and artists such as Harmony Korine, Marina Abramović, and Bob Flanagan, among others, into full-blown, technicolor examples of an America in crisis, caught up in the ambivalence of violence as “art, entertainment, a successful stunt, or the beginning of a fortune,” and violence as “a terrible, senseless waste of life.”

Panics and *Which As You Know Means Violence* came to me, the way all good books do: by happenstance, a chance encounter that clues you into to some sympathetic link between outer and inner worlds. (My chance encounter happened to be perusing Michelle Tea’s Instagram, upon which she had recommended Snow’s book. *Panics* popped up around the same time in some online magazine whose name I now cannot recall). With surgery, chemo, and radiation looming, as well as their attendant stretches of boredom and exhaustion, I needed narratives that spoke both to the impossibility of controlling and mastering pain in spite of its inability to bend to individual will. The protagonists in Molinard’s collection lust for violence to confirm the materiality of their own solitary, obscure natures in an increasingly bizarre world. They are more often than not women who have not been able to reconcile the cultural cruelty they face on a day-to-day basis, and so absurdist violence happens to them, around them—the shadows within them materialized for all to see. Meanwhile, Snow’s collection traces the lust for violence primarily within the psyche of a certain kind of 21st-century American white man; Like Molinard’s protagonists, they draw out the big, the bad, the painful in the world. Unlike Molinard’s protagonists, they seem to revel in the violence and pain they cause themselves and, by proxy, their audiences.

Snow’s collection begins with a prolonged consideration of stuntman Johnny Knoxville, the lead creator of *Jackass*, tracing his craving for self-destruction—here is Knoxville shocking himself with a 120,000-volt electric taser, here he is wearing a shock collar for dogs, here he is in the hospital after breaking his penis in a stunt—

alongside the twin responses of disgust and obsession stoked in the American public by his and his crewmates' stunts. Snow sets her own gaze on Knoxville not to turn him into the butt of a joke or to revile him as only ever dumb and dumbly extreme, but instead to highlight the way in which he externalizes the shadow side of the post-9/11 U.S. The country's underbelly in this time reveals a rampant dissatisfaction with the machismo of America's false wars abroad after the trauma of the attack on Twin Towers, even as it coincides with the downfall of community spaces, shopping malls, and a loss of fulfilling work for a swath of disaffected white, middle-class boys who'd grown up to be men hankering to play their own versions of the "trauma hero," even if they sure as hell weren't going to war.

Even if their affective stance toward the trauma of violence was to deride it, laugh at it, film it, Knoxville, his crewmates, Harmony Korine, and Buster Keaton's antics place them squarely within Roy Scranton's definition of post-9/11 trauma heroes in action at home, away from war, becoming, as a result, walking-talking-stunting metonymies of American violence exported abroad. As Scranton writes in *Total Mobilization: World War II and American Literature*, "The trauma hero does not perform a particular ideal but rather performs a universal ideal by turning the brute fact of death into narrative, translating the Real into the Symbolic: blood and bodies become signs, artwork, stories; nature becomes culture." Snow emphasizes how Knoxville himself seems clued into this aspect of his work, noting how, before a stunt in which Knoxville proceeds to shoot himself in the chest with a .38-caliber Smith and Wesson at close-range, "he introduces himself in one languorous breath as 'Johnny Knoxville, United States of America,' as if he were not a man at all, but an extremely scruffy metaphor: a walking, talking, self-abasing national id."

Although Snow's essay collection considers a wide spectrum of motivation for self-injury and violence as entertainment—from wannabe YouTube stars seeking money to support themselves and their pregnant girlfriends, as Pedro Ruiz did when he decided to have his girlfriend fatally shoot him at point-blank range on camera, to feminist icons like Abramović and Yoko Ono toying with expectations of feminine vulnerability—the heart of the book centers on manic subjects like Knoxville, for whom boredom is America's great sin and, therefore, violence's impetus. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan revealed themselves to be increasingly

farcical abroad, at home, Knoxville and company experienced themselves caught up in the ramping up of a neoliberal capitalism that rewrote success, creativity, and self-promotion as cycles of unending, always-updating, 24-hour endeavors that primed them to take violence, pain, and injury to self-exploitation extremes. Pain as performance, by Snow's account then, fulfilled a particular nihilist strain of what it meant to be an American-made white man with time to kill in the early 2000s.

Many of these are "masculine" "men" who have been betrayed by American masculinity's promise of dream and adventure, wealth and women, and so seek episodic self-harm and injury in front of audiences to fill the void that boredom has left at the center of what they thought should be theirs, namely a life without time, without having to feel the nothingness of its excruciating passage. Quoting Matthew McConaughey's rather poetic appraisal of filmmaker and artist Harmony Korine, Snow writes "He demands that the world entertain him...he needs controversy. To him, a boring person is a sinner." McConaughey's words underscore, for Snow's part, a kind of thesis statement for most of the stuntpeople, artists, and entertainers considered among her pages.

It's not that dream and adventure, wealth and women, don't exist for the plethora of Knoxville- and Korine-style subjects, or for the particular kind of white, middle-class, nihilist cis-North American man for whom they act as foils. It's that none of the above-mentioned trappings of the 21st-century American Dream work well enough to cancel out the blandness of consumption, the hollow apathy of American accrual. Like the ever-present void at the heart of Molinard's short stories, this pervasive sense of meaninglessness that reveals itself at the heart of the anti-hero antics in Snow's book is part of the performers' gift to us, the audience, the reader. These performers' slapstick antics taken to the extreme offers the relief of proxy violence—the perfect pratfall that film critic Sheila O'Malley called the "definition of generosity toward an audience" who needs to feel grateful that their own gracelessness isn't on display—as it reveals the false bottom of desire. We think we know what we want—love, money, sex, a single-family home—until having it reveals these things to be more synonymous with pain, suffering, insanity, and, yes, boredom. As Snow writes in a mid-collection chapter that touches on, among other themes, Buster Keaton's life as the predecessor to the twenty-first-century hijinks of

Korine and Knoxville, “In his life and in his art, Keaton touched the fulcrum again and again, feeling the danger and not flinching, his work proving Plato’s claim that laughter is ‘a mixture of pleasure and pain that lies in the malice of amusement.’”

By its end, *Which As You Know Means Violence* has mostly built itself away from pain as laughter, violence as fun, and instead considers life’s greatest violence, death, and those who have made it their work to record their dying for the masses. “Going on may be what death does for a living, but the same can be said of the greatest art, the soundest theory, the most evocative writing—a body of work can, after all, outlast a body,” Snow writes as she focuses in on the lives and work of art critic Peter Schjeldahl and writer, artist, and sadomasochist Bob Flanagan. Contemporaries who “ran in the same circles in the Eighties,” both men, when faced with chronic and terminal illness—Schjeldahl died of lung cancer, Flanagan of complications stemming from cystic fibrosis—chose to create art that sincerely chronicles the emotional and bodily realities involved in the art of dying.

It is in this final chapter that Snow’s work comes together with Molinard’s, because it is here where boredom, for everyone, becomes a luxury—a fantasy that both does and doesn’t exist. The process of dying, instead, becomes the anxious apotheosis of violence, as Schjeldahl, Flanagan, and all of the protagonists in *Panics* seek to mollify the horror behind, buried within, and beyond a life that is “punctual, precise, and methodical to the point of madness.” When you’re dying, after all, the rote both does and does not fall away. After chemo infusions, I still find myself standing over the sink’s dirty dishes, loading the dishwater before bed. When faced with the unlikely statistics of my survival into old age, I still have to play make-believe dinosaurs with my son. In the mornings, I must brave the cacophony and the bad moods of others in line at the coffee shop. Violence in the face of death is not so much the body’s decrepit pain—or not *only* the body’s decrepit pain, as it is facing the utter mundanity of all the experiences that make up a day in the life, a day among the living

“Death is in all your stories,” Duras remarks to Molinard in a transcribed interview at the end of *Panics*. “Yes,” Molinard replies. “Death, it’s the only surprise left, because there are absolutely none in life.”

Or as Schjeldahl remarks in the final pages of Snow’s collection: “The secret to surviving in the universe is to be dead.”

Or as Flanagan's chronicle of dying asserts: "you always hurt the one you love."

The books each conclude with a concentration on violence as both the acceleration of and the end to "normal" life. I read them as guides for my own cancer recurrence, ways to face the pain of illness, the inevitability of death. These works remind us that violence is neither breathless nor slow but both, like a conversation with a therapist, or better yet, like a diagnosis, the time it takes for health to recede and blinker out in the face of death's shadow, which is to say, what both books testify: violence is our birthright.

Queer Imagination 101

Is nature as straight as we think it is? This is your invitation to dip into the gender-fluid waters of ecology from a queer lens. Queer Ecology is the multi-species investigation of gender diversity that reimagines our relationship to the land. With a queer lens, we can learn about sex-changing amphibians, gender roles, multiple-gender families, female choice, and same-sex sexuality, to name a few spectrums of the animal prism of relationships.

The groundbreaking book by scholar Catriona Sandilands, *Queer Ecology*, gives us a framework to reimagine our relationship and kinship with the land. This vital framework allows us to think about our place in ecologies, whether in our backyards or dedicated ecology spaces like the Trinity River basin. Queer ecology also interrogates social constructions of what's considered "natural" and heterosexualizing of nature. Until the 20th century, these biological observations have been obscured, downplayed, and subdued to keep heteronormativity alive and black Friday booming. This queering counter-narrative celebrates the polymorphous prism of gender diversity that can change by the minute in some species.

While the theoretical beginnings of queer ecology are commonly traced back to foundational texts like *Queer Ecology*, we recognize that the origins of queer ecology go back even further to the OG stewards of indigenous populations worldwide. On nearly every continent, indigenous cultures have recognized, revered, and integrated the gender diversity relationships between plant life and humans with a non-hierarchical approach.

We can learn from our animal kin by breaking down preconceived notions in science and societal pressures. A few examples from animal kin provide lessons on community care and role reversal in the following ways. Vampire bats practice social cooperation and feed each other's offspring in mostly all-female colonies. Lions and house mice share nursing duties. The male seahorse gives birth to the live baby seahorse called a fry. The Alpina ginger plant can start the day as a male to create pollen and become female by the evening to receive pollen. In the plant

world, there are self-seeding plants such as pansies, poppies, and cosmos. Water species like goby fish, clownfish, wrasses, and moray eels can change sex several times a day.

The mutable nature of water as a trans-consciousness permeates my work, and I explore the body and the fluidity of water as an autonomous being. I also use my work to push narrative change with one foot on the ground and the other in policy, contributing to a more prominent voice for the indigenous community in Dallas-Ft. Worth area. What began as a future monument in partnership with Teatro Dallas evolved into work for *New Stories, New Futures*, a public art exhibition curated by Dr. Lauren Cross. My practice investigates the river's past to inform the future when a river has sued a local municipality for legal personhood. I created a series of digital drawings to "activate" the river's spirit in a first-person narrative. In the Decree for Land Autonomy and Stewardship, where the Plaintiff, the Arkikosa, asks, "Who owns me?" The Decree outlines Arkikosa's bid to flourish and naturally evolve to invite the viewer to imagine an animate river. Arkikosa, petitioning for autonomy, liberation, and legal personhood, is against the City of Dallas. This work is a part of H₂O group exhibition curated by Erin Lee Antonak at Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, on view till February 26, 2023.

My work has actively reclaimed the past to serve a more inclusive future. Recently in community with Alaina Tahlate, a Caddo Language Revitalizationist who worked with the last two known Caddo speakers concluded in her report that the "Arkikosa River" (currently known as the Trinity River) is not a Caddo word. Arkikosa is a misspelling of Akokisa (or Orcoquisa), the name of an Atakapan-speaking tribe that lived along the lower Trinity and San Jacinto rivers in deep Southeast Texas.

Artists are primarily left out of the more extensive conversations about decision-making in Texas and worldwide. Still, visual art is a force for creating new ways of thinking about collective strategies. There are two artists who explore queer ecologies that deserve further consideration, Ian Gerson and Ángel Lartigue. The first artist uses found material to create a post-capitalism tapestry that embraces transness in survival and adaptability; the second artist channels an ancestral connection to the land and the living flora and fauna of South Texas through ritual and AI divination.

Ian Gerson, they/them (<https://iangeron-blog.tumblr.com/>)

Ian Gerson is a queer and trans interdisciplinary artist born and raised in Houston, Texas. Ian's most recent exhibition, *Crossing*, exhibited at Box 13 Art Space, touches on the value of trans thinking or transing as an adaptive survival strategy and a tactic for collective repair. Gerson uses found material and weaving as the groundwork to explore the metaphor for a lived trans experience and a call to embrace trans as a technological tool to enact futures of social and environmental justice. The artist asks, "With my recent work, I've been thinking about how a trans experience can be looked to as a model for surviving within climate precarity. In this context, I think of trans as a verb, taking reference from trans lives but extending beyond trans as an identity. Transing becomes a tool to survive and a tactic to thrive within the unknown. A mutual relationship to ecological knowledge is key in this equation." Currently, they are a part of *Craft Texas 2022*, on view at Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, until January 28, 2023. Catch Gerson in the forthcoming exhibition, *Tremble* to open on May 26 at Art League Houston. On view May 26, 2023 - Jul 22, 2023.

Angel Lartigue, she/her (<https://www.angel-lartigue.com/>)

Angel Lartigue identifies as non-binary and is a curatorial and artistic researcher born and raised in Houston, Texas. Lartigue's work investigates and redefines the relationship between the body and land by using organic matter as raw material. Their work touches on themes of transformation and body in transition. *Water, Moon* was presented at Diverse Works in Houston and is an immersive film screening and ceremonial gathering. The artist presented their show during the pink Moon of April 2022. They introduced indigenous rituals, also called curanderismo, into their practice. Curanderismo is the art of Mexican folk healing that integrates the catholic religion with an indigenous ceremony. In *Water, Moon*, Angel channeled transcestors with curandera Eva and collaborated with their mother, Angelica, who injected Estrogen into the artist's body during *Water, Moon*'s performance. Angel's latest series *Museum of Ressurrection (transferencia de*

la vida y de la muerte) is included at Mexi-Arte as part of a group exhibition, *ELA 26: Histories of Transformation*, curated by Luisa Ferperez and Isabel Servantez runs through February 5, 2023.



Angel Lartigue, *Water, Moon*, film still, 2022, Digital flyer by H C - (M)

Lartigue and Gerson are reprogramming the homogeneity of cis-thinking through found materials and performance. Their work explores transcendence and restoration, offering strategies to move forward. The future I envision includes expansive notions weaving Queer Ecology, Black futurism, and Indigenous futurism. Cisnormativity brought us to this environmentally precarious moment, but it is queer and trans imagination that will save us. Nature is constantly changing, and so should our thinking. Incorporating sexual and gender diversity in our vision of nature can liberate us to an equitable multi-species future. The solutions to today's problems are coded into the adaptability of nature if we can perceive beyond our human-centered supremacy.

p. 201, Fig. 1. Ian Gerson, *Crossing*, 2022.

p. 202, Fig. 2. Ian Gerson, *Survival*, 2022.

p. 203, Fig. 3. Ian Gerson, *Survival detail*, 2022.

p. 204, Fig. 4. Ian Gerson, *Travelers, No Opposite Shores*, 2022.

p. 205–8, Fig. 5–8 Angel Lartigue, *Water, Moon*, 2022. Subcutaneous injection of estrogen performed at Don Pedro Jaramillo shrine, Falfurrias TX. Photographs by Tere Garcia.

















The Last Anchoress

Toward Camaldoli, to the walls Nazarena prayed inside, walking only the cell of her cell. She made a vow of peace and living death. The sister has a terrible tongue to judge me by. To make love to a woman less to do with planning. Here I am, crossing the ocean's torso. Stroke, float, terror. I prayed for this. I didn't have to. That's a privilege you make little people feel.

The Garden Erotic

From late July until late autumn, I strike dahlia blossoms down as they begin to fade, conjuring the dark magic of plant hormones to make more flowers that I will strike down in their turn. As long as they're not allowed to complete the path back to seed that one of their ancestors traveled, many plants, including dahlias, continue to make flowers until frost, each bud another bid for immortality.

In October, late in the month but still before frost, I stand ripping down dahlia petals and nascent seed heads, deadheading to dare the plant to open more flowers before ice slices it apart from inside. In the seconds it takes me to tear the petals from a 'Cafe au Lait' dahlia in one handful and reach back for the stamens and pistils—the seed-making sex of the flower, hidden til now deep in petals—a bumblebee lands on them. She vibrates full-body, knee-deep across the anthers, sending pollen up into her dark mouth, over her five eyes. It is, beyond my mammalian experience or imagination, pure sex: She's sunk in a flower, feasting, knowing it in a biblical sense, with senses I will never know.

Eros, writes Anne Carson, "never looks at you from the place from which you see him. Something moves in the space between. That is the most erotic thing about Eros."

"You're old enough now to read the *Song of Songs*," a pastor told me and other Sunday school students when we turned 13. "It's one of the best ways to understand the way God longs for you: the way a bridegroom longs for his bride. And it's one of the best ways to understand what you owe to God: the complete surrender of a wife to her husband."

When I talk about growing up lesbian in Evangelical Christianity, listeners who don't share my cultural background are sometimes surprised when I say that heterosexuality was as much a spiritual burden as a physical or emotional one. From before memory, I understood that the metaphor of Christ as Bridegroom and

Church as Bride was so fundamentally true that desire outside of heterosexuality was Love Itself misunderstood on a cosmic scale.

Some English-language translations of the *Song* head different sections with gendered labels like “Bride” and “Groom,” but my childhood bible, a New International Version, was divided merely into LOVER and BELOVED. Wondering what makes a lover or beloved masculine or feminine, I surreptitiously checked my grandmother’s King James Bible. It, like the original Hebrew, had no gendered section headings whatsoever.

I studied the *Song* for hours, trying to get some heterosexual bearings in all the parts between obviously gendered words like “he,” “she,” “bride,” “breasts,” “brother.” But it was all so dizzyingly beyond gender, beyond human: flowers, little foxes, mountainside. Is it more masculine or feminine to say *Your eyes are doves?* What gender is implied in the invitation *Let us go early to the vineyard to see if the vines have budded, if their blossoms have opened?*

One night, seeking control over a situation increasingly beyond me, I took a gold pen and boxed off individual verses of the *Song of Songs* in my Bible, carefully writing “BRIDE” and “GROOM” beside expressions of desire that didn’t feel clearly enough gendered, trying to clarify this metaphorical space that I, a lover of metaphors, found utterly opaque.

I would lie in bed next to him unable to sleep and would think of the potatoes and spinach and broad beans out there in the dark and I’d splay my fingers toward the ceiling and feel such yearning! I could recall the soil very well, how dark it was and the smell of it, as though it had never been opened up.

—That’s the unnamed narrator of Claire-Louise Bennett’s novel *Pond*, recalling her relationship with an ex-lover and evoking, with far greater passion, the ex-garden she would leave behind for her liaisons with the man.

You could read this passage as metaphor for the protagonist’s feelings about love and partnership. Or for her death drive, her instinct for dissolution.

But what if you read it literally?

Will you be embarrassed if I say I've done exactly what *Pond*'s narrator describes? I have lain awake in bed and have reached my actual hand into the dark, not toward my human beloved, but in a hollow echo of touching a flower or a leaf, embodied longing for the garden dark outside my window.

*All night long on my bed
I looked for the one my heart loves
I looked for him but did not find him.*

—That text is boxed in gold ink on page 480 of my childhood Bible, labeled BRIDE in my teenage handwriting.

I was a freshman in college, and a friend taking a class on Toni Morrison asked if anyone had a Bible so she could read the original *Song of Solomon*. I pulled mine down and laughed away the little gold boxes, realizing I didn't want anyone else to see them when it was already too late.

I was at a low point of self-loathing by then: out to myself and few close friends, but sure I was damned for eternity and, maybe even worse, condemned to a mortal lifetime of not understanding God's love for me because I'd never understand a man's love for a woman.

I didn't touch my Bible often in those excruciating years, but when I did, I ignored my own handwriting and the little gold boxes. I found comfort in thinking of *The Song of Songs* as a book about literal lilies and doves, lattice and gates, dew and fountains.

In the middle of my Bible, I decided, was not a standard of sexual desire I couldn't live up to, but a book about gardens.

The habit of going to a book to see if I'm on the right track—no matter what track—has stuck, even if the book in question is no longer the Bible. I get up from planting carrot seed to go inside and pull down my copy of Anne Carson's *Eros the Bittersweet* to check my hunch that my garden is such a useful metaphor for

human eros because it is literally an erotic space.

The well-thumbed paperback falls open to something I underlined more than 10 years ago (just a line, not a box; just pencil, not gold ink): “The boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me.”

The rough channels of my right thumbprint on the page are filled with soil and will be, faintly, until Thanksgiving, if not Christmas. And still, every day I think, Not close enough. Every day I think, kneeling on sharp stones, *I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.*

While I've gone to Anne Carson for some confirmation that what I experience with the garden is, in fact, erotic, and not just a metaphor for eros, I've forgotten that her book is about how eros itself is metaphor, whether or not a garden or God are invoked:

The English word ‘symbol’ is from the Greek word *symbolon* which means, in the ancient world, one half of a knucklebone carried as a token of identity to someone who has the other half. Together the two halves compose one meaning. A metaphor is a species of symbol. So is a lover.

—————

My beloved is a secret garden, a spring locked, a fountain sealed.

I came out to my mother over the phone one summer afternoon before my junior year of college. She was more than five hundred miles away, and my revelation was unplanned, though I'd known it was imminent.

I stood at my godmother's upstairs window, looking at the rain falling on a rosebush at the corner of the house. Between sobs, I told her I was in love—in a relationship—with a woman. That I had been for years. I don't remember my words, though it feels like I remember every one of hers.

“Is it a sexual relationship?” she asked. My increasingly frantic sobs must have been clear confirmation of this.

“I just wish you would come back to your first lover,” my mother said. “Jesus.” What rose in me then seems most accurately described as refusal: I turned away

from my mother's metaphors and away from the idea of my own soul as firmly as I turned away from my own body: both, I figured, equally damned. I turned toward the window and the rain on the rosebush, rain on the path I'd been weeding the day before, on a sodden glove holding the shape of my hand in wet grass.

I decided in that moment to relinquish my body, to become like the self-less somemany of the garden, dissolving into sinless molecules by nightfall.

You are a garden fountain, flowing water streaming down from Lebanon.

Eight hours later, a friend let go of my hand in the ER only when paramedics arrived to transport me to an inpatient psychiatric unit on the other side of town. Under the stretcher-length of starry sky I saw as they loaded me into the ambulance, I wondered who would water my godmother's garden if it didn't rain again while I was in the hospital.

Many waters cannot drown love; rivers cannot sweep it away.

I flip to the index of *Eros the Bittersweet* and, while not surprised to find "gardens" there, I am relieved. I'd forgotten Carson's essays on gardens, and when I revisit it searching for proof of the garden erotic, my first thought is *I'm not making this up*. Meaning, *I'm not alone in this*.

Anne Carson is interested in gardens as erotic because she—like I, frantically deadheading dahlias in autumn—is interested in time. "Gardeners [like lovers] also have occasion to wish to evade, manipulate, and defy temporal conditions," she writes.

Actually, the index lists "Gardens of Adonis." In ancient Greece, these were disposable container gardens made for the god's annual festival. They were exposed to high heat and forced to sprout and grow to maturity in a supernaturally short timeframe. The gardens would bloom in time for the festivities and then quickly die (like Adonis himself, gored by a wild boar), destined for the midden, the equivalent of hothouse flowers headed for a wedding one day and a landfill the next.

This quick bloom-and-bust was because, Carson writes, "the plants had no roots." These gardens, lush and thick with blossom, *look* like love but *are* not love, just as a human relationship where nothing real is risked is not eros.

Carson doesn't say the Gardens of Adonis aren't "real" because they don't set

seed or bear fruit (something so easily freighted with cishet reproductive metaphor), but because there is no surrender to subterranean process, to the slow sprout and blossom and fade that happens in real time instead of “the suspended moment of control” that the self-protective “nonlover” (Carson’s term) seeks.

As I read this, my first rose of summer, ‘Gentle Hermione’, is opening. I go out to cradle that one blossom in both my hands, to bow until the rose touches my mouth, my nose, my lashes: softness, perfume, dew.

Almost all of summer lies ahead—all of it except the first rose. I miss my summer garden more in the exquisite moment of its arrival than at any other time, than on the darkest night of the coldest winter. At no other moment do I have such clear knowledge of what time will sweep away, of what I will be doing without.

“When you are falling in love,” Carson writes (as Sappho wrote before her) “It is always already too late.”



Eros understood expansively, at its most powerful “does not have to be called marriage, nor god, nor an afterlife,” Audre Lorde says. “This is one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all.”

I don’t know which happened first: uncoupling my understanding of my own desire’s worth from heterosexuality, or uncoupling the idea of divine love from heterosexual metaphor. They were so interdependent, a freakish triple-jointed knucklebone of symbol and meaning, that my understandings of both human and divine love must have been cut loose from the metaphor of heterosexual desire simultaneously.

What surprised me was that this paradigm shift didn’t mean swapping in queer desire between two humans as the metaphor for divine love or for what flickers in the garden. Untethered from the definition of Man + Woman = Love, eros floods everything—not as metaphor, but as reality. Queerness, in some ways, has been exactly the slippery slope my childhood church warned me it would be; not, of course, toward pedophilia, bestiality, and other all-too-human sexual violence—but toward an unpredictable, unexpected, confounding Erotics of

Everything.

“The person who mistakes symbol for reality is left with a dead garden” writes Carson, referring to the forced Gardens of Adonis, and to lovers who try to control time and time’s outcome, grief.

I think that Anne Carson, and certainly Plato, whose sayings on the Gardens of Adonis she is quoting, would counsel against it, but I can’t help myself: I immediately try the metaphor in reverse. If my garden is alive—especially in the most hidden, secret sense, alive at the roots—does that mean that I have not the symbol, but reality? Is the living garden not merely an erotic cypher, but Eros itself?

For three weeks after I’d told her my girlfriend and I were engaged, my mother didn’t speak to me. She later wrote that she’d spent most of those 3 weeks weeping, but said that yes, of course she and my father would come to the wedding.

My mother held the train of my dress as we stepped over the threshold of the churchyard, under the arch of clematis at the gate, into the garden. Unusually for the end of April, a colossal thunderstorm had cracked over the city the night before the wedding, inches of rain heralding a warm front. In answer to all that water and heat, every tulip in the church garden stood open.

*The rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth
And the time of singing has come.*

While discussing scripture readings for our wedding mass, our priest asked my fiancée and I whether we, two brides, might want one of the readings that celebrate the metaphor of the bride? Perhaps something from the *Song of Songs*? Both she and my fiancée—even I—were surprised when I responded to this suggestion with torrents of angry tears.

“You know it’s just one of many metaphors,” Mother Stacey said, so gently, when I tried to explain myself. “And it’s just a metaphor, not the truth.”

So the little gold boxes marked BRIDE remained unopened for the purposes

of my own wedding. Instead, when my mother climbed to the lectern, after my wife and I walked each other down the aisle, she read from the Book of Isaiah:

*If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil;
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted...
you shall be like a watered garden,
Like a spring of water,
Whose waters never fail.*

—————

There are ways I know this garden that no one else does, not even the bees.

Every three weeks or so through winter I go underground, into the dark, unstacking straw-filled crates and reaching my hands into even deeper darkness. Down the stairs to the dripping basement on a February afternoon, down past the single bare lightbulb, through another door, into an unheated room without even a lightbulb. Like Orpheus before he disobeyed, I don't get to see much of them in these underground months, but, unlike Orpheus, it's touching I'm here for, not rescue.

I know the dahlia tubers by touch, and I am responsible for maintaining just the right mix of wet and dry conditions to ensure their April resurrection. Sometimes I carry my own water glass downstairs with me and, finding the straw dry, pour a swallow into each crate. Underground, I think of the once-and-future summerworld above, full of guests who admire the dahlias from July to frost, people for whom I cut individual flowers and whole bouquets, who go away wreathed in petals and smiles.

The guests and the parties and the summer go; the roots and the gardener stay. Here, human love gets to be a metaphor for the garden, not the other way around. Rather than the early passion in the *Song of Songs*, this is the erotics of long partnership: catching your beloved's dazzle across the party-crowded room and striking a secret chord in memory by holding up the beauty that came before

and the beauty that will come after, the hidden beauty only you know. The slope of her shoulders after everyone else goes home. Her unguarded sprawl in sleep. The touch of winter-rough skin in the dark.

saleeb

cross

we tattoo our children

at three months old
a cross
on the wrist
or
hand
between the thumb and index

mars faith
so when our parents are killed
god is still

a residue



when we/re children
we learn about death
martyrs
coptic children
like us
tortured and killed

i learned about a boy
named
abanoub

archangel michael came to him
told abanoub
to keep his faith

abanoub was

beheaded

they told us
this is *us*
we are all abanoub

always keep the faith



the only white person i met
that knew
what coptic was
confronted me at a diner at 3 in the morning
asked if i believed in allah

from fear/i told him i was coptic

like qat twigs
cutting my gumline
he said
it's a shame what
those muslims are doing
to us

pity like dates pulled from an urn
a rag for his dribble
tagged and ground

he wanted to bleed though me
hate me through myself
while accepting me

—————

i tattooed a coptic cross on my wrist and
hand when i was 28

but the ink wouldn't hold

the tattoos burned my skin
and the crosses bubbled
into a parable

a weeping sore
seeping ink/faith
and infected flesh

the tattoos
fading
like they had
been there
since birth



my uncle won/t talk about minya
how language seeds
memory

how isis split from idol
to acronym

executing 21 copts on libyan
shores

and american news stations

only referring to

copts

as

christians

as *us*

a montage of blond children
masked martyrs
and orange jumpsuits
on every channel

our passing
propagated
into gunpowder



i understood love for the first time at 29
she cut the martyrs into
my thigh with a three/needled gun
/different shades
of black
show abanoub/praying before a tree stump
near an ostrich
and a blood/red river
with the heads of two martyrs
floating away

the ostirich
is turned away from the eggs
watching the severed heads move down stream

on the other side shows
a breaking/wheel
with another martyr
breaking
and 22
more martyrs
standing behind them
she let me hold the gun
to tattoo the eggs myself

but in my hand/the vibrations trailed
the ink off stencil

she rounded the edges/
wiped the blood with a paper towel
implied forgiveness
with soap
with water

i showed gidu the tattoo near my thumb
before he died

the scab was almost crusted over
with a hole
dug into deeper layer of flesh
he grabbed my hand

pressed his lips
against the weeping sore
/thanked god

Incantation for the Drowned

The sea knew my ancestors
from their yearly pilgrimage,

but it was the birds
that called me by their lost names.

Everything I know about drowning,
I learned

from men who survived
the flood as boys.

In the backyard, a mango gets closer to rot
when it ripens, I blame

the sun, because God created
everything sweet with guilt,

and every cracked wall sings
of the drowned nomads.

When I had the courage
to leave home,

I memorized
the names of the missing.

Three is a Sacred Number

Ema nicknamed her tiny car Rapture and drove it like a fighter jet.

In the dark, on that empty coast road, she whipped the vehicle past eighty and everything blurred. I shut my eyes, leaned against the cool glass of the window, and saw the familiar landscape through memory. Red clay hills, rows of squat sea grape trees covered in black fungus and forever fruitless, shuttered beach houses owned by the rich and not-from-here, and the groomed emptiness between houses. Between trees, even.

There were three of us in the car. Ema, upfront, trying to keep herself awake. Alda, in the backseat with me, slumped so that no part of her body touched any part of mine. We were escaping the last long season of Secondary School examinations—freed from beige uniforms, a maroon tie that ended the day rimmed with sweat, and all things Chemistry. “Death is a series of rooms,” Alda said, her voice contesting with pop music blaring through tinny speakers. That was a typical Alda thing to say, so I kept my eyes closed. Ema made an ‘mmhmm’ noise in the back of her throat—reserved for use on Alda and small children.

“You guys, death is a series of rooms,” Alda whined, hating to be ignored. “In each room, you have to stare down the truth about yourself. So that you can move on to another room.”

I opened my eyes just as she switched on the overhead. Her silvery-blonde hair bathed in light. Hair so out of place on this island that strangers would often ask if it were a wig, and then feather fingers through it looking for lace tracks. *I did not buy this*, Alda would say. Unable to modulate her voice, she always ended up sounding like a sun-burned, teenaged prophet. The strangers would often step back, take in all of her, respond with—*you got a problem with store hair?* I would have to defend her in my island voice, *Leff she 'lone. She a tourist.* Even though Alda had lived on the island for years.

“What do these rooms look like?” Ema asked, still focused on the road. Unlike me, she has a traveling accent—comfortable at home or auditioning for British television dramas.

“You need to imagine them.”

“Okay, but de first room, it look like a waiting room?” As soon as I spoke, Alda turned, clearly disappointed that we had not intuitively understood. I kept on, “I bet all de magazine gun’be ten years old.”

Ema laughed, and the two of us began tripping over each other in our disassembling of the death-rooms.

“What’s the wall paint?”

“It got decoration?”

“Potted plant?”

“Window?”

“Can all three of us fit?” Ema’s voice deflated mid-question, “And if we cyan’t, which one of we have to stand back?”

We were driving to the oceanfront mansion that Alda’s diplomat father rented, with its manicured lawn in the front and a riot of fruit trees in the back. Like a Russian doll, Alda’s mansion could be opened up to reveal Ema’s two-story house, and out of the stomach of Ema’s house would emerge the apartment that my mother and I lived in. On the nights I slept over, I would walk among the fruit trees at 3:00 am, comfortable in their silent acceptance. The trees never motioned to me during dinner, pantomiming the ‘correct’ way to pop the meat out of a crawfish tail, or pronounced the names of imported foods with laborious enunciation.

“Prophetess, where dis one come from?” I asked.

“Stop calling them prophecies,” she snapped. “It’s from the Tibetan Book of the Dead. It’s this ancient book about the afterlife—I’ve been reading it for about two weeks now.”

“Good so you de expert?” There were knives in all of our words. “Tell us what it suppose to do.”

Ema made her ‘mmhmm’ noise.

“It’s for the dead—to navigate the death-process.”

Before this book, Alda was reading the Egyptian Book of Going Forth by Day. Before that, the Dao De Jing. Always it came to us like this, on drives along the coastal road gossiping about crushes or teachers we hated. Enter: Alda and the enormity of death.

I could tell that she desperately wanted a response, but neither of us rose to it. Instead, we retreated to our far corners. I let the death-rooms drift from my mind, replaced with strategies for navigating the coming weeks. Alda was returning to Toronto, Ema to study medicine on another island. I would stay behind. I could already see how it would go. Too much dark rum would stretch into sad loops of the island in Rapture, an endless chorus of—*what will you do next?*—and Alda slurring incomprehensibly, so close that her hot breath would smell of the citrus underbelly of Mount Gay Rum—I don't know what to say, we are just so different. This was already how our nights had begun to take shape, ending with Alda's hand searching for mine under the cover of beach towels, loneliness, night.

Every summer Alda would go on what her father called, the 'Grand Canadian Tour.' Grandma in Ottawa. An aunt just outside Quebec. Older cousins who had settled in what she called 'primitive prairie lands'. Summer would shrink my world, limiting it to the living room, the back porch, or a walk around the block and down to the bus stop when cabin fever hit. Ema and I would meet up a few times. Syrupy tamarind snow cones in town, walking aimlessly. Beach days. But the two of us had little to say anymore without Alda pontificating in the middle.

Ema turned the radio up and the song returned. Full of the promise of summer. The car began to sway as she hunched over the radio, fiddling with the various glowing knobs. Alda said, "*be careful,*" in a faraway voice. I leaned through the valley between the front seats, convinced that at least one pair of eyes should remain on the road.

I assumed the shape was a child. Chasing a cricket ball. Playing 'Murder in the Dark'. Running away from home. The scream stayed in my chest, but Ema's was shrill, ongoing. I jerked forward as if to reach through chrome and combustion, and save a life. Rapture swerved violently, riding the soft shale at the side of the road.

"Mongoose," Ema said when her breathing calmed.

I shifted to look through the rear window, expecting to see the long, thin rodent watching us, the flash of two glowing marble eyes.

Alda whispered, "Can you imagine the negative karma for hitting an animal?" She crossed herself, even though Christianity was her least favorite religious practice.

“Every time I does see mongoose,” I said. “They crossin’ de road.”

Ema flooded the engine to keep Alda from launching into a sermon. I was tense all over, waiting for an exhale that did not seem to come. It was only when we were about a mile further down the road that Alda said, “I would hate to live my life just constantly crossing the road.”

Rapture rattled on, hitting every pothole.

“And what death-room,” Ema said, turning in her seat, the roof-light making her nose ring sparkle. “Would hitting a mongoose put us in?”

The dark joke arrived too late. Long after we had fallen into contemplative silence.

That morning, we had walked out of the examination room fifteen minutes before time and removed our clunky brown shoes. Like snakes shedding in public, Ema and Alda began stripping off their uniforms. Maroon ties were tossed into garbage pails. White blouses were strained until the buttons snapped, revealing tank tops underneath. Skirts hid jogging shorts.

“How come you ain’t tell me?” I asked, standing there, wondering if hiking my skirt above the knee would render a similar effect.

Alda, slathering her face with sunblock, said, “We thought you would have backed out.”

“Name one time,” I challenged.

The callous shrug, from both of them, suggested that I was not even aware of my own backing out. I stared past them, to the school buildings, neat rows of flame trees, the here-you-cannot-go, and this-is-forbidden. The eight years of Secondary School life were finally over. I knew the hole in the back fence. How to get through it without tearing any critical part of the uniform, and I thought about smoking through, leaving Alda and Ema behind in that parking lot. But I stayed, something in my stomach announcing that I would come to regret it. I folded my tie and pocketed it. Opened the top button of my white blouse.

Through town, we blackened our socks and disobeyed crossing signals. The afternoon kept offering up such oddities: a man with a bagpipe marching through

side streets playing a doleful tune. Someone outside the duty-free department store sampling expensive chocolates. Turtles in the careenage, their shells like spotted brown and green saucers floating on clear blue.

My body tingled. I kept laughing. Overcome, bursting open, with all of the nextness and possibility. Alda kept asking, "You okay?" until it stopped being a question and became a refrain that Ema picked up. *You okay*. Incantatory, soothing, even I started to repeat it as we walked the tourist-crowded beach.

"I almost leff' you all behind," I said when we put our book bags over our heads to wade out into the ocean. We were navigating around a thick concrete pillar that split the beach in half. I was the last in our caravan and if either of them heard, nobody responded. I felt that blooming begin to wilt. In town, it had seemed that everything, from this point on, could be dizzying height into dizzying height. Out of Secondary School and into life. But that belief was growing harder to sustain with the coming dusk and soggy clothes.

Later, as we watched the sunset from the broken pier behind the new hotel, saltwater drying on our legs, other people from our year trekked past. We greeted each other as if we were altogether reborn. Ema lit a cigarette and excused herself to lean against the metal fence that read, 'Private Hotel Property'. Alda closed the space between us. First, nothing but her foot reaching to tap my foot as a kind of searching out. Then, "You are a snowflake dissolving in pure air."

I watched as Ema flicked the ends of her first cigarette onto the hotel ground, and lit another. Alda's voice carried a demand to be listened to, so I looked at her knees, shoulders, chin. This upward scan which betrayed how much I wanted to look into her eyes.

"You gettin' mixup in you prophecies. You tell me dis before."

She sighed, as if I had altogether missed a crucial moment. That was how it always felt with Alda.

"Watch, Ema is blowing smoke through her nose."



The first time Alda said that—snowflake, pure air—the two of us were sitting under a tamarind tree. Surrounded by brown tamarind pods, some tinged with

unripe green. I was trying to teach her how to tell which fruit was sweet and which was bitter. A lesson that her frustrated tongue could not master. At the time, I thought what she said was some kind of secret code, but she explained that it was a Zen Koan. It had no fixed meaning. I was responsible for its interpretation. I had never seen a snowflake except in Christmas movies. She said I could replace it with a sand dollar and nothing would change. She lunged forward and kissed me until I was swallowed up in sunscreen. It was such a powerful smell which I only associated with toddlers and foreigners. The force of her lips was almost painful, I wondered, momentarily, if she was intent on drawing blood. When she pulled back she seemed fierce and determined, but her breath was shaking all the leaves. I could only think of sand dollars and how long I would have to wait for the bone-stiff coral to dissolve into pure air.

I looked up, just then, into the hard, hunting stare of two boys. Younger than us. Maybe fourteen. Still wearing the khaki shorts of someone in junior school. I tried to explain the threat to Alda, but she seemed to float above all things, “I can take them,” she said, tying up her hair.

“Take them where?” I asked, my voice momentarily mimicking hers. “You naval string ain’t bury here.”

“Naval string?”

“Umbilical cord,” I explained. “You got nothing to lose.”

The boys yelled something indeterminable. Pantomimed our brazen, outdoor, for-all-to-see kiss. Clutched at the base of themselves, gripped, and thrust. None of them took a step towards us, each, individually, was scrawny. They were young, easily grew bored and drifted away. But their presence still lingered. Ema would have stooped low, screamed them away. I missed her presence.

My breath. Raggedy. Afraid. Alda’s, hitched, but still calm.

She began to crack open the pods and let the fruit drop to the earth. Ripe, unripe.

“What does wicker mean?” she asked, repeating the word that the boys had yelled.

I did not explain that it was a local slur for women who kissed other women under tamarind trees in the heat of the afternoon. Instead, I said, “It like de old chair on you front porch, woven together from willow, or reed, or bamboo.”

“Sturdy,” she said.

“Reliable.”

“Beautiful.”

“You have to come visit me when I leave,” Alda said as if it were an ultimatum.

“I gun’ try,” knowing already that I would not. There was so much more of the world I wanted to see before Canada. And I hated the cold. I was filled with my mother’s words and almost spoke them aloud to Alda, or the Tamarind trees, or even the boys: *either you stay in Barbados and make the decisions you have to—or leave and make the decisions you want to.*

It was her way of admitting to the fact that I loved women.

I looked over my shoulder the whole walk back to Alda’s car, as if the boys might catch our scent and double back. She climbed in, wound down all the windows, and explained that she could not give me a lift out of this empty, hilltop park.

She said it offhand as the ignition turned.

“I don’t want to drive far. You live behind God’s back.”

I stood there wondering which god that was, and if any distance on the island would be too great had I only kissed her back.



Now, months after that kiss, our bodies remembered each other on the pier. Salt-covered, thigh, toe, arch against arch.

It was not the same.

“I don’t know how to talk to you anymore,” Alda said, even as her big toe tried to worm in-between my toe. I still could feel those boy’s stares. I had tried to bring the kiss up before, but Alda’s response was esoteric. Ancient. Useless.

“All beings.” She had said, “Tremble before violence.”

“You cyan’t keep bringin’ Buddha to Barbados,” I remembered trembling, even as both of her palms came together at her heart. She had looked hurt, as if I was the one not putting effort into understanding her.

After another cigarette by the hotel fence, Ema led us back to Rapture. It had been stationed, all this time, in a fast-food parking lot. Just before I climbed into

the car, my body bristled all over with a year-old memory of Alda's voice: *we keep you around because three is a sacred number. She spoke to the space between Etta and me; which of us she meant was still a mystery.*

Take off. Run. Be profane. Find better friends. Find deeper love. Avoid tamarind trees.

I climbed into the car anyway, telling myself that it was one more night. It was as good as goodbye. I had all my life to make other choices. The space between Alda and I, in the backseat, was as far apart as two people could sit in a vehicle without opening the doors. Suspended over running road.

Ema drove Rapture with such care now. I kept repeating, "It's fine, you ain't hit it," but she kept replying, "Yes, but the karma right?"

Alda let out a breathy sigh. I was immediately reminded of her father. Lapping the enormous dining table, narrating his day to three captive teenagers. He always seemed on the point of exasperation, sighing whenever I asked a question—even though he often put the questions into my mouth. He always called me, and only me, 'Alda's little friend.'

After the sigh, Ema said, "This is the last time I going to your house."

"What does that mean?" Alda said, "You have weeks until you leave. Where else will we hang out?"

The silence that followed spread and turned in on itself. Ema, leaning against the fence, smoking a cigarette in silence. Driving. Always driving. The soft 'mmhmm' voice in the back of her throat. I realized that the last couple of times we had visited Alda's house, Ema would splinter off, laying for hours on a towel by the poolside, one foot lazily dipped in. Occasionally she would call us by different names, in voices we did not recognize—playing at a life she did not inhabit. Here was Alda and me, in the back garden, long walks. Here was Ema, lying anesthetized by the pool.

"When do you both leff?"

"Mid-August." Alda, incredulous.

"After that."

The silence did another expert turn, like an Olympic swimmer curling back on herself to jet out again. Ema was testing her renewed faith in acceleration. I was scouting ahead for more mongoose, small children, cricket balls, loneliness. I was grateful for Ema. Now I did not have to announce my own rupture.

“So that’s it, you’re done with us?”

Ema kept her hands on the wheel, but I could see her tremble. I wanted to ask if she was going to forget me as well, the older friendship, from the time of striped bloomers, non-toxic crayons, and lunch boxes that we sat atop waiting for the bus. Before the uniforms grew maroon ties and grey skirts as thick as sailcloth.

I said it to Ema, but I stared at Alda, “Maybe she only done with you?”

“It is not my fault that you’re staying behind,” Alda said, in the same tone that her father would often use. A hand coming down on top of my head. As if I were seven, not seventeen. The same voice used for: *three is a sacred number*.

“You jus’ a cruel wicker.” I spat it out so quickly that I only realized the words when Ema turned. Her face against the endless extending road, lit by the overhead, nothing but disappointment and pity. I felt it. Something left in the car’s speeding wake, and irretrievable. Alda had started to cry. It was a horrible sucking noise as if there was not enough air in the car. Everything she yelled sloughed off of me, except: *sturdy, reliable, beautiful*.

Rapture did not slow. Ema did not look away from me. sturdy, reliable, beautiful. Shelled tamarinds, all the sweet ones, covered in dark mud. The car picked up speed. Even as it bucked and lurched. I thought she would pull over and force us to talk this out. We had become expert at coming right up against precipices.

I touched my fingers to my lips, amazed at my own capacity for violence. It was horrible.

What would the Buddha say?



I was the only one who saw the dark tracksuit. Red headphone cords dangling. The glow of a phone screen and the moment of awareness as the unexpected, twin headlights arrived. The final bop of the head, as if the music were still coursing through, maybe even the moment of a song change. Maybe even the perfect song for a night run.

We floated on, as if accidentally running through a glass sliding door.
Thrown forward, slammed back. We all cared about road safety. Wore seatbelts.
Road became bush became sand became Rapture screaming.
The car alarm blared into the night. Mouth dry, I reached over to Alda. She
was gulping at the air as if a hand was at her throat. The seatbelt, impossible for
shaking fingers. Finally released, I crawled over until my hair was in her hair.

“You okay?”

“You okay.”

“You okay.”

Back and forth as if we could stay in that interlude. Windowpane rolled down.
Fresh sea-air. Even the taste of ocean. Ema was already outside of the car, circling
it—clockwise, then counterclockwise. The headlights were still on and they warped
her image until she was a dark giant crossing the sand. She sat on the bonnet and
lit a cigarette, bent over and retched up nothing.

Alda and I separated, climbed out of the car on newborn legs. A line of drying
blood on her white tank top. A tongue bitten. All of the trees blurred and I kept
hearing the sound of impact. Ema was bolting into the stunted sea grape trees, and
I thought we were back in the car, and she was announcing her plans to abandon
us, and the interlude of “you okay” did not matter anymore. Like a doctor, I asked
Alda to show me her tongue.

Slowly, the sounds filtered out, Alda’s legs buckled, no longer able to hold her
upright. In the glare of the headlamps, I could see the individual grains of sand in
her hair.

Ema returned. Retracing the car’s footsteps. “A body,” she said, with extreme
coldness.

“Who?” I asked, aware of the perverseness of the question.

“Nobody, nobody, nobody,” Alda said, rising.

All of the nearby beach houses were empty. In two weeks the first families
would come and wipe the film of saltwater and dirt from their mismatched dishes.
If we wanted to, we could keep driving. Leave the body for the 5:30 am bus. Wash
the tires in the yard of the Catholic Church since the gate was always left open.
The car itself was remarkably undamaged. Perhaps we should damage it more.

Drive head first into a wall at a moderate speed to create damage that was out of sync with that caused by hitting a body. The thoughts came one after the other, tripping over themselves.

It took me a while to realize I was speaking them aloud.

Ema was the first to nudge the dark mass with her foot as if she were checking to see if anything lived underneath a rotten log. I already knew that the man was dead. A body hit at that speed, the sound, the feeling of a calabash finally split open. The car had climbed right on top of him and then stepped over, leaving footprints.

“What do we do?” Alda asked.

“It’s two hundred meters to the sea,” Ema said, kneeling by the man’s legs. “It’s all so contained.”

I did not understand what she meant by that until her hands touched the tracksuit. She took a while before she fully gripped, at first she just hovered her hands above it. There was nothing gruesome, no spilling out, no overflow.

“It’s two hundred meters,” Alda echoed, and suddenly I was bending down. Taking hold. Alda legs, Ema shoulders, me midriff. The material was soft. I thought of Ema’s purple yoga pants, Alda’s subdued running clothes, which were the same as what she slept in. I closed my hands around still-warm flesh. I thought of the time I broke my leg. The cast. Signed by friends. Ema: *get well soon (heart)*. Alda: *pain is inevitable, suffering optional*.

We tugged, dragging the body over ruts, until the treeline, through and onto sand. We said nothing. Occasionally someone would whisper, “nobody,” and look at someone else, as if we were passing the nobody-ness around. I thought of hunted stares, mongoose, fruit trees, chemistry questions. Anything to keep from thinking about what I was doing.

“We get it to the ocean, nobody will know.” Alda said, and Ema had nodded, and I had again become the third necessary person—but I was the last one holding the ‘nobody-ness’ and I realized: *I would know*. And I might accidentally hand over my nobody-ness to somebody else, and they might know.

Alda started crying softly at first, but the sound was all that was in the air—it was a hive of bees circling. She kept whispering to herself, and I thought she was praying. But she was an atheist and kept saying, “I’ll deal with that later.”

Now her shoulders were shaking, and the body was shaking.

Ema lowered her portion of the body to the ground, and I was left holding up the entire top half alone—avoiding the empty gaze. She handed Alda her phone, said, “Just read it—go on—it will calm you down.”

Alda stared at the screen, pinched it to zoom in, and read from the Tibetan Book of the Dead: “O son of noble family, that which is called death has now arrived. Now for the benefit of all sentient beings recognize the luminosity which dawns before you.”

Ema and I continued dragging the body. The sand here was soft, like powder, and my feet kept being swallowed. The closer we got to the ocean, the more the density changed—from powder, to dry clumps, to wet sludge that would not shake away. Alda kept rereading that line as if she was trying to work out how death could arrive. From where. To where.

The body slid easily, the pathways made soft by rain. “I will adopt only the attitude of the enlightened state of mind, friendliness, and compassion,” Alda read until Ema released her grip on the body and took the phone. Kneeling, Alda picked up the work of dragging the dark tracksuit. Ema’s voice, when she read on, carried the spectral heft of a preacher’s daughter. “And attain perfect enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings as limitless as space.”

We stood before the wild Atlantic.

My school socks were soaked long before we had reached wet sand. With my skirt hitched high, I walked until my shins were submerged. Then knees. Even here, even with so much of ourselves still belonging to the open air, the Atlantic was in control. The first light of morning split through the clouds and the dark tracksuit was almost swallowed up by water and wrenched from our hands. I released my hold on the body.

In the light’s charity, Alda tugged at the body, dragging it back onto the sand almost single-handedly. She collapsed next to it and the tableau image—to a passerby—was a heroic young woman saving a man from drowning.

She kept repeating, “Nobody, nobody, nobody,” But her tone was different. And now Ema was sinking, folding around her own legs. I towered over them. I

heard myself explaining, what we had all wordlessly agreed to. A body released at sea on this coast would never be found. It could be eaten by fish. Sharks. Dragged to the cliffs up north and tattered. I watched as the shock finally left Alda's body, and she went soft next to the dark tracksuit.

Whatever was keeping me upright wanted to say, "Read the Tibetan Book of the Dead, it will comfort you," but I realized that she did not understand the book—or anything she had been reciting—it was just like Alda to wander through someone else's garden hunting beautiful flowers.

"We need to go back," Alda whispered.

"We go back, we done. Lock up."

"I'm not even from here. I have a Canadian passport."

With that I lunged for a foot, and threw my full weight against them, trying to drag the body back to the sea. Part of me, trying to drag myself along with it. I could hear nothing but Alda's father's voice: *lovely island, but who could live here longer than three years?*

I had nowhere to go. No Canadian passport to hide behind. This was my island, and the surging whitewater was there—willing to absolve all of our sins.

Alda and Ema grabbed an arm each. The grotesque tug-of-war. I pulled but could do nothing against their joint power. Slipping, I was thrown down, soaked, felt an immediate terror of what I knew lay beyond. I held onto the dark tracksuit's leg to keep from being sucked out by the unpredictable Atlantic, and Alda and Ema leaned back and braced. Eventually, the water gave up and pushed instead of pulled.

When I was back on dry sand, I stared at the tracksuit.

I knew that Rapture smelled like a distillery. Even though I did not touch a drop.

"My father will take care of it," Alda said, almost floating above us now, the revelation of a passport somehow returning her to an older self. I thought she was going to start lecturing about snowflakes, sand dollars, compassion. Instead, she took Ema's cell phone and punched in a number.

"He's a diplomat, he has immunity." She took a few steps away from the body, turning her back on us. Ema had one of those older phones where the ringing

could be heard even in a crowded room. Nobody was picking up. The number was tried again.

During the endless ringing, Ema bent over the man's chest.

"I ain't mean it," she said, "I just have a hot foot."

"He cyan't hear you," I said, slumping onto the sand next to her, finally seeing the man's face. "He gone."

He was old enough to be my father. I could not remember which ringed-finger symbolized marriage, but there was a gold band on his left hand. In the background, Alda still rang and rang. Ema had begun listing a set of reasons that made her not culpable. One of them was me. I had distracted her. I had said that word. I had called down judgment.

In her way, she was calling upon diplomatic immunity.

I was the only one who remained with him. The last of the adrenaline dissipated and with it everything slowed. I put my hand on his shoulder gently, before I realized how profane that was. So I hugged myself and watched him and waited. Sun parted clouds and I thought that he might stir, admonish me, stretch deeply and run on. I kept waiting for a chance to say sorry. But the ringing remained the ringing, the sand remained the sand, the ocean remained the ocean.

Book of Hours

Swarthy bird on a high, bare branch.
I'm not one to look on the bright side.
The scorched ground suits me
as the winter air suits me.
Dark yard—not garden—meadow wannabe.

The Atlantic is not one ocean, but many.
The one near me is full of Pentecostal churches and ugly high-rises.
Seagulls lurk at the edge of blankets, unafraid, in the mid-day sun.
The fries are heavenly
and make me nostalgic for my difficult childhood.

Sky a lesser blue. On the community college track
I go in imperfect ovals and lose count.
A unicycle passes though speed
isn't the point. It's like looking out a window at a wall,
not prayer but something like it.

March twilight, peach fuzz sky to the west.
In the end I'll turn to psilocybin, I think,
not my father, who wanted to experience dying in all its terror
and did. Death, the little shining forest,
Death, the inside of a dog's mouth, the infinite teeth.

Too dark to rise, isn't it? I hear things,
not birds but human voices, construction clatter,
Saturday night beer bottle shattering in the street.
Charles the Obscure said every poem is addressed to God.
Two lit windows in the 5 AM dark, one open.

For the Woman Dancing at El Tequila

She leans in close to my cousin & I, shouts *What nationality are you?* *I'm Native American*, and in our era of false claims and ignorance my first instinct could be to doubt, question, and reject, but sometimes kin recognizes kin and on this empty dance floor blasting bachata and reggaeton there is no quiet for us to roll out our maps of family topography. My cousin is more concerned that she looks very pregnant, chugging Coronas on the party bus we flowed out of an hour earlier, divine femmes grinding on the back pole the eve of struck-down Roe v. Wade. I can't help but see a disco ball of mothers I have known, dark hair pulled back to spotlight rhinestone fringe earrings. She takes out her cracked phone to show us her two daughters, 21 & 17. She looks so proud of them. How my own mother is & how I reluctantly accept her love despite the nights when she'd come home days after meth binges with this cousin's cousin, leaving me at 11 years old to hush my crying siblings & get them ready for school. There is so much that is & isn't my business. Easy to say that it all melts off on the dance floor, how she draws perfect boxes with her feet, nimble & smiling. How lucky I am to have had my own abortion years before they came for us. I do not have my mother's long fingernails, painted jet-black, stirring a pot of spaghetti. I do not have the desire to get a good night's rest. Choice is the sword of damocles, hilt flashing in the reflection of a margarita, drawn tarot card of judgment. Nude bodies palms-up to receive the trumpet's blast.

Eating Honey from a Canopic Jar

In winter, honeybees gather around their queens and shiver
to keep them alive. Years ago the sky over the hollowed factory
was honey, sunlight combing through the broken storms. No one yet
has explained satisfactorily why I so often dream of tornadoes,
or at least in those dreams I remember. All through Indiana
we drove in that weather to take your friend's wedding guests
to the airport, clouds roiling and surrounding, jaguars
of black smoke. Love is an atavism, or a dog in traffic.
I wasn't home when either of my dogs died, and I can't decide
if that's worse than the alternative. The pain, I mean.
One went during surgery in a doctor's office, asleep,
and one, nearly blind by then, fell into the pool at night.
The second time, my mother called to tell me while I was driving
and I saw the factory and the rain was barely falling
on the windshield. Often, when I dream of tornadoes,
those dogs are what I lose to the wind, again and again. Today,
despite the cold, the burn-purple wildflowers on the hillside
are livid with bees. I understand that under the right conditions
what they produce will never perish. I wanted to say,
what they love will never perish. The pain I mean.
Calyx and proboscis. How the subconscious seems to be
a strange, incessant catacomb of wings, needles, and warmth.

Carolina Creek Confessional

Girls in half-lit stalls
wax between their legs

with duct tape, trace
the rims of their eyes until

they are a silky black.
& we came in Greyhounds,

numbers charted to be
saved & lost, then

saved again. Just girls, picking
at the seams of our Wal-Mart

swimsuits watching boys
spike a ball, the faintest pink

blooming at their chests. Under
the pavilion, on one of those

Central Texas nights—fireflies
shuttering *on, off* like string

lights, the air nearly
Gulf-thick—we are rounded

into the sharing circles,
chronicle the porn tabs found

open, the Marlboro Reds,
forgotten, in the pockets of

stale jeans. When we are lauded
by the teen counselor for our

archive of humiliations, Dana K.
says *this is fucked* & I'm sure

she's right. When it's my turn
to name my sin I can only

offer a quiet *I don't pray*
& that's only half-true.

When I speak, at night, under
loaner sheets, I say

Lord, make me a blonde,
because while I don't believe

in God or hundred-eyed
angels wheeling their fire through

the sky, I do believe there's
some form of beauty

skirting sweet eternity. & neither I nor
Dana, that night, hide our faces

in prayer. We look up into
the trailing satellites & listen.

lit

I tell ya
you should have
seen the scene

first Friday
between Oakland and sky

boom bang
bang boom
hella lightening strike

as a white and black stage
half a block apart

syncopate sound
with gray smoke
exhale

against
bass slap

from a blue car
rattle cranium
deep purple

with red Corvette thunder
and it's only 8:42 pm

where night
gonna swallow
and forgetour noise

by morning?
as another month gone by

with the town
becomes tonight again
up against

the corner
of two streets

Day Studio, Night Studio

I.

Now that my own body
is starting to decay, I understand Lucian Freud's late nudes. How truly
naked they are—

performance artist Leigh Bowery's mountainous back with its green-mottled,
putty-colored bruises
around the lumbar vertebrae, where he has molded his massive flesh

into corsets, bodysuits,
and sequined dresses of his own design to become, as Boy George put it,
“modern art on legs.”

Shed are his outrageous outfits. That white, double-breasted, baggy suit,
more like pajamas,
with mustard-yellow polka dots the same size as the pink

Kaposi-lesion-like
dots that he painted on his face and hands. Now he sits stooped
on a low white stool

set on a red-carpeted modeling stand under the skylight in Lucian Freud's
day studio. He is all
back. Except for ass crack, shaved head, one delicately spiraled ear,

one closed eye.
The painting says that our essential selves are always hidden and withheld.
On the wall

streaks and drips of gray, blue, white, black, red where Freud has flicked
off excess paint
from his brushes. A gray sheet, hung from the ceiling, provides the background

for Bowery's
six-foot-three, seventeen-stone, two-hundred-thirty-eight-pound body.
The red carpet tacked

to one side of the modeling stand falls away sharply. Unexpected
drop, it destabilizes
Bowery's monumental bulk and makes him look suddenly precarious.

II.

I look at myself naked in a motel room's mirror. How my own
back and buttocks
get reflected to infinity in the opposite closet's mirrored

door. Kinesio tape
crisscrosses my right shoulder where I broke the ball of the humerus
while ice-skating

and almost blacked out from pain. It's been nine weeks, and I
can barely lift
my arm parallel to the floor. My ass cheeks sag.

The back of my head
is balding. My hair has gone or gone gray. Fat droops from my hips
like melted wax.

I can't stop watching my body fall apart. In this motel room, I'm traveling
from one place to
another. I don't know my final destination. Lucian Freud does.

III.

He painted Big Sue Tilley—
by day, “benefits supervisor” at an employment agency run by the City
of London; by night,

cashier at Taboo, Leigh Bowery’s nightclub. Freud painted her in the night
studio, naked

under bright electric ceiling lights, each with four five-hundred-watt

bulbs controlled by
a rheostat. Sue sleeps on her side on a couch, head and right cheek squished
against one armrest.

Her left arm is thrown over the sofa’s back. Four fingers of her right hand
cup one huge breast.

Her ponderous belly flops over thigh. A few black wisps

of pubic hair
are visible. Updated Venus of Willendorf, she sprawls on a ragged
couch upholstered

in chintz, beige printed with pink, pastel roses. Every blemish
of her opulent
flesh is exposed and magnified under the night studio’s

unforgiving lights.

I see again the red wilting camellias from Norfolk's Botanical Garden
that I visited

yesterday afternoon. Dozens of white filaments with golden anthers
surrounding the central
pistil. Red velvet petals clotting to dried brown scabs. Then falling

to lie scattered
on the ground among last year's dead leaves, burrs, pine needles.
Sue Tilley is our

goddess of decay. I must learn to pray to her. To make love to her
mortal flesh,

which is my own flesh. To hold her. To cherish the blemished

camellias
of our wilting bodies. To walk on the desiccated mess
of petals that fall

fast and thick around us. And not lament any of it.

Embrace the loss
that is our life. In the corner of the night studio, a pile of linen rags.

IV.

In Leigh Bowery's
nightclub act, he appeared on stage pregnant in pink
high heels with a black

leather dog collar buckled around his neck. He would wail,
then give birth
to petite Nicola Bateman, friend and sometime lover, whom he had

strapped upside down
to his stomach with her head in his crotch under a tight bodysuit.
Wearing only

black high heels, she would burst bloody from his abdomen,
attached to him
by an umbilical cord of link sausages. After the act, they'd smile

and mock-curtsy.
"That'll spook 'em!" Leigh said of the audience, whether shocked silent
or applauding wildly.

V.

I too pose naked in the day studio and then the night studio
of a cantankerous
old painter. Rag wrapped around his waist like a butcher's apron
on which he wipes
blood from his paintbrushes. He paints my nakedness on an unprimed
canvas that faces

me. He keeps turning from the painting. Walks towards me to peer
closely before
turning back to the canvas to apply a few quick flicks of paint. I watch

my portrait—
ugly and exact, exactingly ugly—take shape. It takes him months, even years,
to finish it.

VI.

Seven months before Leigh died, Nicola and he got married.

In Lucian Freud's
oil painting *And the Bridegroom*, they lie naked together on a bed

protected by a dust cloth.

In their sleep they have turned away from each other. But her small
right ankle lies nestled

on his thick left thigh. Leigh said, "I don't want to be remembered
as a person with Aids.

I want to be remembered as a person with ideas."

He also said,

"After I am dead, don't tell them I'm dead. Tell them I am traveling
to Papua New Guinea."

VII.

In Freud's *Small
Head of Leigh Bowery*, completed posthumously in the day studio,
Leigh sleeps.

His head and bare shoulders rest against a white pillow.

His eyes are fast shut.

He is unshaven. We see the holes in his cheeks like dimples

through which he inserted
safety pins to attach huge, smiling, blue, clown lips
to his pensive face.

Once, at a party, Mick Jagger thought Leigh was dancing too close

to him and shouted,

“Fuck off, freak!” Without hesitation, Leigh replied, “Fuck off, fossil!”

VIII

Aged snapping turtle sunning on a slimy log in the middle
of a swamp,

I stick my head—muddy Brussels sprout, skin wrinkled as Mick Jagger’s—

out of my shell
to smell spring come again, snap at the pesky flies, hear the bullfrogs croak.
I too shall die.

from *In and Out of Place*



*¿ de donde eres ?
where are you from?
and why are you wearing a sombrero?
are you trying to go native?
are you staking a claim?
are you playing a part or a joke?
who are you here, black girl?
who do you think you are?
what gifts are you bringing?
what rights do you have?
who are your people
and where are they now?*

Photo credit Rodrigo Jardón Galeana

*why is your accent so funny?
what are you trying to say?
when did you get here?
how long will you stay?
what lines are you drawing?
what are you rendering?
what do you recall?*

I pulled the Fool again this morning.

Ever since returning to my Mexico book, this tarot card has been popping up a lot. Figures. Before smart phones with their portable global satellite positioning, I was the fool in Mexico, boundless and gleeful, getting lost with paper maps. I would ask everyone for directions: abuelas, children, street vendors, language teachers, taxi drivers, businessmen at taco stands, artists in museums. They served as my compass. I asked a million questions and they asked me some too. *¿De donde eres?* always came first followed by *¿Te gusta México?* *¡Claro qué sí!* I replied. *¡Me encanta!* Then, the conversation could veer off into myriad places before off I went—trying to find some other address, regain my bearings, meet up with new friends, or somehow make some art.

I actually bought my first tarot deck in Mexico City when I got off on the wrong Metrobus stop. Right in front of me stood a tienda de esotérica. Might as well go in. They were having a sale. I was having trouble with a performance. A gold Waite-Rider-Smith deck with a palm-sized guidebook in Spanish beckoned me. They say you aren't supposed to buy your own tarot deck. They say a lot of things. But it was right there, I needed help, it called to me, I believed in it, a magical intersection of space and time, I was willing to go out on a limb. The World, The Sun, The Chariot, The Lovers, and yes, then and now, the Fool. All this in Mexico. What a thrill! What a privilege, a struggle, an honor, an urgency for me to be there.

To some people, then and now, what a surprise.
Mexico? I thought your family was Haitian?

Wait, wasn't your mother born in the South?

Sometimes inheritance comes in different ways
or can move in surprising directions.

When Auntie died in Alabama, she left some money to my mother, and so my parents took a trip to Mexico. AAA planned it all out: Acapulco, the silver city of Taxco, Cuernavaca, and the capital, Mexico City, where the high-speed underground metro was still pretty new. This was 1977. They were there when Elvis Presley died. My father is fluent in Spanish, so the language barrier didn't have to apply. They visited murals, shopped in markets, and danced in nightclubs. My mother got pickpocketed and suffered Montezuma's Revenge. This didn't stop them. It was part of the adventure, par for the course. They saw the sights and bought souvenirs. I flipped through their pocket guide to Aztec archeology and slipped my mother's chunky Mexican bracelets over my wrists.

"I can't believe you all didn't take that money and invest it," I recently teased, "or put it in a college fund or wait to take us with you. You all just hit the road! That's such a trip ..."

"Wasn't that the right thing to do?" my mother asked without remorse.

"Absolutely," I agreed. *;Claro qué sí!*

They didn't talk a lot about that trip in my childhood
(too busy working themselves to the bone),
but the evidence was all around our home.

My parents weren't just *from* places, they had *gone* places.
For pleasure and edification and because they could.
What wonderful footsteps to follow ...

Too often, as a black woman, my geography has arrived already circumscribed: captivity and slave routes, Harriet Jacobs in her grandmother's attic, Harriet Tubman with her do-rag derring-do, the Underground Railroad, the Great

Migration, stories of porters on trains safeguarding grandbabies, going to Boston in a game of Bid Whist, road trips down south (with fried chicken and sandwiches packed in the back because the diners wouldn't serve you), family reunions, *Roots* (which I never saw), diaspora loss, slave castles, Black to Africa, freedom marches, Rosa Parks sitting in the front of the bus, my father's flight from Port-au-Prince, bulging suitcases on his summer trips back home, yellow cardboard cases of Rhum Barbancourt from the airport, Haitian cousins sitting all day at INS for green cards, brain drain, scholarships, and the Kingdom of Detroit. I receive and claim all this inheritance as mine.

Still, I wanted more.
Where was wandering,
witnessing, broadening horizons?
Actually not knowing the way?
Maybe it was foolish,
(*I was willing to go out on a limb*)
but I sensed something else out there
off the beaten path
another archeology,
an unexpected bequest,
my body translating, shifting
across and between borders . . .
freedom, pleasure, and delight,
an expanding trajectory—

I was looking for new passages, and as always, books spurred me on. After racing through *I Wonder as I Wander* by Langston Hughes, I went on a trek for black women's travel narratives. In libraries, I stumbled onto *Wonderful Adventures* by Mary Seacole, *A Long Way from St. Louie* by Colleen J. McElroy, *Russian Journal* by Andrea Lee (her first book *Sarah Phillips* starts in Paris and the black people could swim!), *Black Girl in Paris* by Shay Youngblood, *Museum* by Rita Dove, *The Heart of a Woman* by Maya Angelou, and a trip to Mexico (*Ándale!*) deep in the

middle of *Zami* by Audre Lorde. My parents had brought home souvenirs. These books became an archive. Here was hunger and glamour, curiosity and surprise, foibles and error, intimacy and distance from expected confines. Here were black women artists going places, on the page and on the move.

Travel has been central to my personal and creative growth. I studied abroad in France, my Junior year in College (*Why aren't you going to Africa?* my aunt Mary grumbled) and traveled around Europe on a Eurail pass. I spent time in Haiti visiting relatives, performing and taking part in a post-earthquake grassroots relief effort. I've visited Morocco and Iceland (in both winter and summer). I've also performed in many places: Canada, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Ghana, The Gambia, and Zimbabwe. Making art in a place offers a different way to be there. It doesn't mean that you're still not a tourist, a traveler, a visitor, but you have to also be something else, a witness, a contributor, a dynamic collaborator with the people and the place.

Every day in Mexico, people questioned me about my presence and origin. (*¿de dónde eres?*) Every day I had to respond and question myself and those around. Without direct, ancestral lines to this place, without a clear role in the national story, I got to live the intersection of nationality and race differently. Like all expatriates, I had to examine my relationship to my own home country, and the privileges of my US passport. I got to think expansively about disconnection, diaspora, and relationality. This led me to confront my own essential assumptions and recall nagging expectations.

Why aren't you going to Africa?
my aunt Mary grumbled.
Well, my school didn't have
a scholarship for that.
I do want to go to Africa.

I will go. I did go
and want to go again.
At the same time,
ancestral return
weighs heavy
with expectation.
Standing in the
Door of No Return
on Gorée Island
I am expected
by my aunt Mary
by tour guides
by cultural agencies
by locals who feel
a little sorry for me
by people at home
who feel proud
who feel wistful
who feel lost
who feel hopeful
to feel a certain way.
But what if I don't?
I encounter circling back
a demanding precedent
and pressure of feeling.
But when circling around
a massive pre-Columbian
African head in Veracruz,
no one expects me to be there.
Or at the ruins in Tulum
or Téotihuacan or the urban
monument of el Ángel.

How do these shifts
in location inform
my sense of diasporic
blackness in the world
and in my self?
In Mexico,
the expected
response
was unclear
making me feel
more free to feel.



I first went to Mexico City in 2007 and then lived there from August 2008 through December 2009. For over ten years, I've been trying to circulate my performance/writing from that place and time. Now consider how much the world has changed.

(Also how much it hasn't.)

How to talk about world travel today?

It is 2021, post-vaccination for some, but the world is still grappling with pandemic. As Delta and Omicron coronavirus variants are threatening to force us back indoors, travel of any kind remains a fraught proposition. But travel to another country, for pleasure and edification? Just because you can? In some circles, the carbon footprint of taking an airplane already constitutes a betrayal. (*What are you doing, black girl? The polar ice caps are melting! Are you trying to destroy the planet!?*) Politically, we're still dealing with border walls, migrant bans, and a hyper-xenophobic alt-right. On the other end of the spectrum, words like *explorer*, *adventurer*, and *tourist* can vibrate like *colonizer*, *imperialist*, and *capitalist pig*. With these dynamics, praising travel can make you sound like a fool at best, tone deaf, or morally corrupt at worst.

Or maybe travel is palatable as long as you stay in your lane even while away.

My friend Allison told me about some friends in Senegal who run a study

abroad program in Dakar. They report that students (by that, I mean predominantly white students) don't want to wear wax clothes at Senegalese formal events out of fear of appropriation. Those clothes don't belong to us, they think: it would be wrong for us to wear them. In the meantime, what t-shirts, what Carhartts, what other sloppy duds are they bringing into posh affairs? These students don't want to be culturally disrespectful, but, for the host families, wearing wax is a way to show respect for the culture. Indeed, showing up not wearing the appropriate wax clothes can become the disrespectful thing. Students will wear cheap tourist bracelets (with no ingrained cultural value) but will refuse resplendent garb tailored just for them. (Wax fabric is originally Dutch, making this rejection especially rich.) Host families look at the students and apparently shake their heads.

What makes the students so sure that their US idea of appropriation is shared around the globe? Or that their terms are the same conversation in the new place? How does appropriation relate—or differ from—cultural participation? Are the wax clothes, tailored specifically to the wearer's body, just too beautiful for shame-ridden, anxious Americans to wear? Do the students only deserve a cheap tourist bracelet? And if that's the case, why are they there? What did they come to do? Are you allowed to go to a place but only go so far?

As we reckon with historical harm, it can be hard to imagine any cross-cultural encounter beyond domination and oppression, exoticization, or consumption. And certainly, in Mexico, there's justifiable suspicion of gringos with smug buying power, crossing the border for cheap prescription drugs, and partying as los spring breakers in Cancún. Yet, as the child of two people from two different countries and cultures, one of whom is an immigrant, I know a lot more options exist. As a black feminist performance artist, my job is to imagine and figure out possibilities, experiment and embody new forms of being.



We need more models and honest conversations about making art in other places. We've seen some *bad* examples (yes, Gauguin, I'm talking about you). The artist in another place doesn't have to be a predator, shouldn't think of herself as a savior or a default public servant or community organizer. Even or maybe especially,

if the work is public, it's key to understand that your presence is just one tiny element in the ecosystem of the place. (As Kendrick says, "Be humble. Sit down.") You might be making a public performance art work, for example walking with candy in your shoe in a public park, navigating personal dynamics of anger and shame. As you're doing your black feminist performance art thing, maybe people shake their heads or cock their heads to the side and look closer or roll their eyes or take a glimpse and then turn back to more important matters. Maybe they stare or walk up to you and ask questions. Maybe they don't even register you at all. Making art in another country might lead to a transformational cross-cultural exchange and maybe it won't be that deep, at least to the people in the other place. Just the same as at home, the key thing is to do your work and do your best not to be an asshole.

None of this is automatic or easy. Questions of intention and territory, exploitation and heritage are always on my mind. (Yes, I've rolled my eyes at white girls wearing African braids on the beach.) Yet, rigid ideas about cultural ownership seem more about external perceptions than actual encounters with local people. What do they want? How much do they even care about our lofty plans? How much are we still tuned in to U.S.-based opinions or Facebook screeds? I'm not in Senegal with the students and host families, so I can't judge what's happening there. Except of course, many people do judge from afar. With this Mexico book, I am aware that some people may judge me.

*(why are you wearing
a sombrero, black girl?
who do you think you are?)*

I see a close-up of myself on a long scroll of white paper wearing a sombrero.
Does it matter that this photograph was taken at a live performance?
Does it matter that the sombrero was not a gift, but something that I bought for myself?

Does it matter that my friends in Mexico City told me where to buy this sombrero?
Does it matter that they told me not to go to the big super touristy mercado,
but the smaller one where they sometimes bought gifts?
Does it matter that I joked with the vendor who sold me the sombrero?
Does it matter that I didn't bargain for the price? Or at least not very much—
just enough not to seem like a stupid gringa, but not so much as to be disrespectful . . .
Does it matter that I collaborated with mariachis on performances?
Does it matter that I loved them?
Does it matter that I don't really know how they felt about me?
Does it matter that they were always kind and professional?
Does it matter that the sombrero served as an emblem of them for me?
Does it matter that almost a decade after my parents traveled to Mexico,
my mother started working in Southwest Detroit?
Does it matter that Southwest Detroit is predominantly Mexican?
Does it matter that they struggled at first to understand each other,
the African American lady principal and the Mexican American families?
Does it matter that they came to love each other?
Does it matter that it took time?
Does it matter that on her last day of school before she retired,
they surprised my mother with an assembly where mariachis came to play?
Does it matter that my mother was honored and delighted by those mariachis?
Does it matter that this sombrero becomes an emblem of this memory too?
Does it matter that all these memories synthesize:
me and my mother, mariachis, Mexico, and southwest Detroit?
Does it matter that multiple performances are not collapsing
into each other but existing together all at once?

Root Words

They say that trees can feel it when you walk.
Their fungal nerves are shuddering as your foot
thumps earth. They ponder you. A threat? They talk
about you, gurgling sugar through their roots,
uttering sugar-language, a grammar thick
as honey, in which every word is a root word,
and takes a week to say. A sentence trickles
over months. Conversations ooze in slurred
centuries. Long after you are dead,
they're still debating you. They recall
the pattern of your feet, the seedlings snapped
by your passage, what little difference you made.
Your name goes dark in human circles first.
It's held by trees a while. And then dispersed.

Perception, River, Mud (March Diary)

S, my best friend, calls me from Beijing. Because it's late she lies down. Her eyes are closed and she is speaking to me. Her eyes

are closed

and she is speaking to me.

The polaroid of her in my desk I don't take it out, I want to see her. Her new office looks in and through and out

of a building nearby, she texts me

a photo of it, beautiful,

we think, how everything could look like this. In and through and out. I want to relearn perception. All of this helps me see her. The chain

of desire I suddenly have — to be the tiny part of sour in the blueberry, to have my say in its sweetness, to eat at a big table with many people, watch the light rippling off the soup onto each other's foreheads — even

this helps me see her

when I tell her about it. I

want to know

what exactly it could be like to see her

without a white world between us. At work she is translating English translations of German novels into Chinese. For school I read the French philosophers, the German philosophers. In my favorite photo by Deana Lawson, I tell S, from

the show I just saw, I see

her twin Dana next to Sirius B. The faint companion. In Mali, she said, the Dogon knew that Sirius was a binary star centuries before Western science did. I would like to

see a star and see, immediately,

the stars in the star. The skin of the star. The end of the world. March is over, summer

should come. Capture, captivate, take care of — there is one right verb. Here is where I'm at —

I am taking a workshop for documentary poetry. I know documentary has a history. *The God of the camera is a colonizer* RaMell Ross says, he is visiting my class, he tells us to make art that constructs a world

out of perception instead of representing the given

world in perception, calls himself *liberated documentarian*.

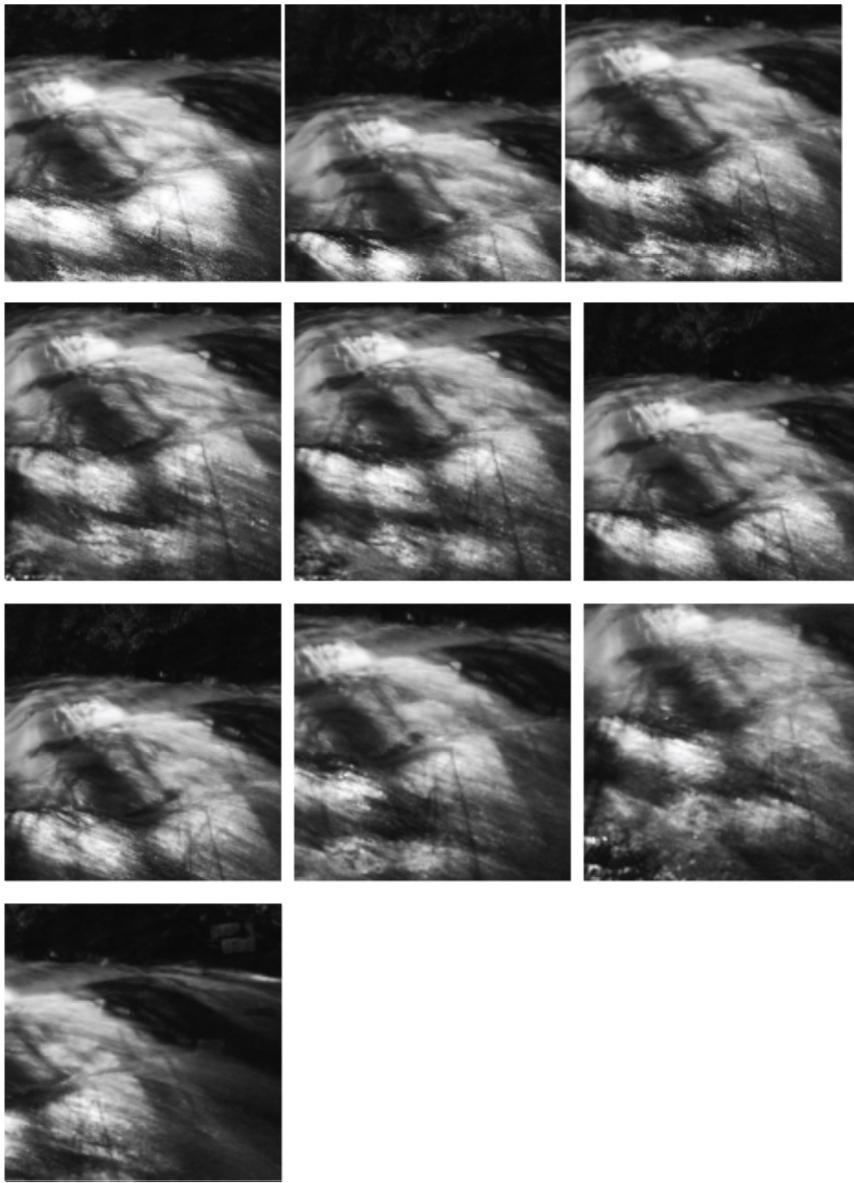
The polaroid of S in my desk I try to think how Sirius would see it. From a photograph. Years away. From aesthetics. Here is

where I'm at. I am taking a workshop for documentary poetry. I want to write documentary poems. By this I mean I want to work at the site of perception. Change what perception looks like, what knowing

looks like, what thought, I am

23, I was born in the year of the earth tiger, it was raining in Beijing, I go to the gorge at night, in Ithaca, the one I know well, I am making a document, this is how

water looks to me at this point in my life. My mud. When I hold my face in the water to the very edge.



Vanishing Point

After Vincent van Gogh's "Wheatfield with Crows" (1890)

my teacher asks us to write down three things that might be g-d.
she gives examples: *an arrow*, *direct & steady*. *a cloud*, *beautiful but difficult*
to touch. *lightning bugs*, *rarely bright enough to see*. *kippah on*,
she presents to us a butterfly puppet & says: *this could be g-d*. she holds up
another, a vase of flowers: *this could be g-d*. a woman in the class says,
g-d makes things grow & *g-d is beautiful*.

good, my teacher says, holding up a third puppet, judging by the missing ear
& red hair, it's meant to be van gogh. *g-d is an artist*, a man says. *g-d*
created the world & us, just like a painter makes, um, paintings. he says something
about blank canvases. van gogh gave his severed slice of ear to a prostitute he wanted.
is that what g-d is? a man with an unwanted piece of himself in his hands,
saying to a woman, *now will you love me?* i think of vincent,

eating his paints. vincent in the arms of his brother. my mother, holding
my shoulder while i wept in front of wheatfield with crows. there were footsteps along
the dirt path that day. thunder barking in the distance. night sky & bright day fused
into a kind of netherworld. lost in pigments, a feather fell to my feet, & each bird had two
faces, one coming one going; the wind was stiff & howling & somewhere in the vanishing
point sat g-d, hatless, a stalk between two teeth.

Kathryne David Gargano

Los Aztec Airport

“There are too many. There are hundreds,” Pedro Sánchez Nára, an archeologist at the institute, told The Associated Press, about mammoth skeletons found during the construction of an airport in Mexico City.

The little females cross North and perish when evolution does. They are carcasses, megacities of pounds who in their majesty are trapped on the shores of Los Aztec Airport, where archaeologists

free their bodies from our memory. Hernán says: Their pelvis alone weighs as much as a military presence. And their skeletons, unearthed in the pits, form into mounds above the city’s wild cassia.

The little females’ thoughts are discovered and their new God’s white lips are displeased. These are deep horses, an expert says in broken English, these are real bones. The airport settles into an ice

vest, dense as tilted earth, habitat of plodding herds. As for the museum, slightly over chronicled and written from the perspective of invaders, a natural kind of modern is written independent of

man’s construction: female workers whose rag-parts scream. Hernán built a bureau on the Tlaxcala plain. Near a lake of dark-tongued beasts, the slaves feel their bones becoming sacrificial memos

about genocide. More men arrive and the females sink into large miles of pits. Were in terrible, the Museum Director says, they break from our snares and there is evidence that love affairs occur—

mammoth found inside mammoth. In the ground, humans, curved away, ground down with their civilization. The tall grass tufts profusely in the mown-down airs of rented hunters sent to traffic females with wooly other stuffs. Perhaps, hundreds still crouch there, under the landing strip?

after my grandmother died, I bathed my body like I had just

bathed hers, touching for warmth for softness, wanting
cleaness to be my final act, wanting to wash myself in her
death as if I too could smell like a life of prayer for when the angels
emerged for me. At the funeral, people ask me *but what is a home without a man and I say*
Full.

Glorious, like

halving the world with my fingertips.

I entered the world through a window

just like that, matter-of-fact, the same way she told me *short hair makes a woman's neck look fat* insisting this was
kindness. At the market, we say salaam to all the women who come close to touch my dadi's piety. She whispers
look, she is buying fresh liver for her cats. Is that who you want to be? At the funeral, when a woman hisses *cover your head, I*
measure my grief. These days, I wear it like this poem wears the alphabet –
needed in order to begin something. By which I mean, my grief will
outlive me; *threading a needle*, my grandmother would say, is *what finding the right word feels like*,
piercing thin air. Who I want to be, is, after all, a real
question; how tongue-tied love has left me.

suppose my mother hadn't loved me in the way I now know I need. When wanting begins, I stop myself. Her missing has combed the clouds. *My lover says there is nothing about you I couldn't love.* Suppose she had stopped there. All the love I have seen is permanent. All the lovers I know are the last. When wanting begins, they stopped. They grew old instantly. *Suppose I didn't worry*, my mother says. All the love I have seen does not want. My mother tells me my heart is a pomegranate. When she saw it wanting for the first time, she burst it open. Imagine what happens when you take a stray piece of wood to a fruit. Imagine how stained I am from that feast. Suppose I had left then. Suppose my heart wasn't a many-seeded berry. Suppose I had gone to a boy and said *look at these welts* and suppose he hadn't said *let me kiss them*. Suppose someone had said there is another way to open something, a softer way. All the lovers are wilting. *Suppose I didn't worry*, I tell mine. Her heart is the real un-fruited kind. When she wants, she wants me. Her wanting doesn't stop. She opens the windows. All the lovers she knows had other lovers. Imagine what happens when you put that together. All my want, a many-seeded welt. My lover says *there is nothing about you I couldn't love*. Suppose she had stopped there. Suppose I had left then.

my lover holds me

back

one afternoon my lover stains
the pine shelves a dark walnut
we are building me
a place and we name it
the gingko room

my lover soaks
my feet in salt and lavender
she finds the shea butter
rubs my heels and says
this is not a one-time thing

she offers
a shamrock finds gold
to fill the cracks of my best
pot offers me everything at
once wine dried hydrangeas

summer is the easiest time to lose a country, and most of mine is already covered with
dust; sometimes you have to write the words and sweep them in the morning before
anyone else is awake, a whole subcontinent brown and stale, in my hands

my cat returned at dusk
as a moth, would flit by the landscape
petunias, amalatas, gulmohar grove;

yes, I had a garden; dogflowers, chrysanthemums,
the plant that was a sapling, then a tree as small
as us, the hollyhocks, hibiscus, dahlias, marigolds,

the queen of the night, flowers so frail they were
stronger plucked, tucked under pillows –
those were plentiful as well – we even buried
one with my cat, hit by the garbage truck
at 7:13 am and brought back by me, as tall as
a tree, from the dump yards, rotting
after the rain, so soft to be wrapped in that
burlap, too soft even for the mud of that
earth, hence the pillow, his favourite, the most
tender; my mother crying, *just like*, she said,
my cat did, *when he looked in the mirror at
himself the other day and saw his death;*

the jasmines, my favourite, and the papaya
trees in the backyard, the bougainvillea that
hung everywhere, the neem that we boiled
to a green and potent broth, and bathed in,
a garden so big there was even
space for wilderness

what I am trying to say is / imagine burying your dead
and beloved / in such a loud and open / sun / imagine them
coming back as a moth / and even, imagine that door to the
garden, which is also a grave / and that most midnights, I
crossed that door; visited by a flying feline thing, plucked a
papaya, dined with my similarly nocturnal and returned
friends, crickets singing, until / the morning, sparrows, the
mynah, arrived / when hastily, and like a child, I swept / my
country away

and look, this ribcage, at the back of my head, wrapping around the edge of my eyes, arching around my chin, look at my silken animal heart, flailing like a fistful of bird, like my mother whispering, *look at my silken animal hearts, so far Allah, must they now wear their hearts in cages, like my father saying, where are you, you must be home now;*

so long and constant their sweeping,
when I look at the ocean between us
their only country weeps
back at me /

/ in Urdu, death is ڈھو

in the summer, moths look for a place to mate, with females laying around forty eggs over a three-week period before dying

as we pack away our winter clothes, we tuck naphthalene balls into the shawls, the folds of the wool, the precious blankets to kill the moths

mamma says they lay their eggs in dark and quiet places, so every chance we get, we shake things out and hold them to the sun, lean our rugs over fences and sweep

this is the hardest time to lose a country and
I tell my lover *thank you*
your arms around my heart, the open work of holding me
back / this rampart, our necessary trespass
like a moth I once knew, and still
so dearly love /

The Fortunes of Others

The Kabuliwallah, angling for a spot near the front of the train, noticed little around him. He was passing through one of the busiest stations in the world, but these days the journey felt as familiar as the cup of ginger chai he would permit himself in the evenings. A little boy was tugging on his pants, but little boys had tugged on his pants hundreds of times over the years, each with their own mantra of need. It was only when this boy said *ice cream* or, maybe, it was only *cream*, that the Kabuliwallah stopped, for it was said with such fierce candor.

“Ice cream,” the boy said, shoving against his kneecaps. The Kabuliwallah realized that he was being ordered by this dirty creature, who he doubted had a penny in his pocket.

“Cream,” the boy said again, pointing his finger at the freezer with cones and cups and several flavors of ice cream.

The Kabuliwallah rarely attended to beggars; for one, he himself subsisted on the slimmest of margins, and, moreover, the children who begged on behalf of their families disturbed him in ways he didn’t care to admit. Still, he considered the price: a cup cost two rupees and a cone three. He bought the little boy a cup of chocolate and vanilla.

The boy’s name was Sundar, which meant *beautiful*. He was too dirty to be considered beautiful, though if a guardian were to thoroughly scrub and wash, one could imagine if not beauty than at least a note of sweetness in that face with a mane of curly hair. He watched the boy savor his ice cream. Perhaps he was used to favors from tourists, but not one from a man as poor as he. “I’ll have another,” Sundar said, as if he owned the train tracks and the trains that ran on them. It was enough to make the Kabuliwallah laugh; he would have bought the boy another if he could’ve spared the change.

“Where is your family?” the Kabuliwallah asked.

The boy pointed at a solitary goat chewing on the grass between the tracks. “Sister,” he said. Then he pointed at a stray puppy who was bounding toward them. “Brother.”

“But where do you come from?” the Kabuliwallah asked. The boy’s eyes were as green as his own.

Sundar shrugged and gave his cup a final lick before relinquishing the container to his puppy. “I go where he goes,” the boy said, scratching the little mutt between his ears.

That night the train was delayed by fourteen hours, for a low fog had settled over the north and everything south of Varanasi was running with a limp. The Kabuliwallah unrolled his bedding and shared space with the little boy, who curled up beside him with such ease that for a moment the Kabuliwallah believed they were related. He wanted to ask how old the boy was but knew the answer wouldn’t matter. Five, he guessed, maybe six. Sundar’s hair smelled of gunpowder, and when the boy began to snore, the little pup settled his body over the boy’s legs like a blanket.



As a young man, the Kabuliwallah had traveled the Hindu Kush with his burlap bags of cardamom and perfume, work that had served him well enough to eventually finance a wife and, afterward, a child, a boy who hardly cried, or so he remembered, the decades having turned his firstborn increasingly cherubic. When the Taliban came, the Kabuliwallah took up arms. Kabul fell. Music became a memory. Every woman wore a purdah, and there was little work to be found. One winter evening, his family perished, struck by mortar shell.

He crossed the border a final time with his bag of cardamom and perfume, a skeleton of a man by the time he reached Kolkata, though each morning he applied attar and smelled as fresh as the housewives who’d sample his wares.

When the train finally arrived, the boy put his hand in the Kabuliwallah’s. “We travel together,” he said, indicating the pup, who was mewling at his feet.

“I cannot support you,” the Kabuliwallah said. “Myself I barely eat most nights.”

“His name is Arun,” the boy said, taking the pup into his arms. “He has a good nose. We will find what we need.”

The Kabuliwallah bribed the ticket checker when he came, paying a slightly higher fee for Arun, who howled like a wolf whenever the train sped through the fog.



Though it had been his habit to travel the spice circuit, with a boy and dog in tow the Kabuliwallah decided to stay in Varanasi when they arrived, at least for a while. He called in a favor with an old merchant friend and, in exchange for half the profits, was set up in a shop painting the busts of Hindu deities. It was simple, mindless work that paid just enough for a sparse meal for the three of them. If they wanted more, Sundar would lead his dog to the riverbanks, where he often found something half-eaten and delectably so—a box of almond pastries just a day stale, sweet lentil balls that someone had wrapped in newspaper and dropped by the water, only a little wet. In this way, approaching his fiftieth birthday, the Kabuliwallah felt that he had come close to restoration—that something worthwhile from his youth had once again been revealed.

They found lodging in the attic of a garment warehouse, where sometimes the owner would let the boy in downstairs to peruse the thousand colors of garments. He learned that his name meant *beautiful*, and since Sundar didn't know his birthday they agreed the day of their first meeting would serve as that. Sundar turned seven and began to work for the Kabuliwallah and to attend school one day a week.



The shop stood next to a monastery that was popular with foreigners, and the Kabuliwallah had sold more of his painted Parvatis and lacquered Ganeshas to the clientele of the monastery than anyone else. Now that he had a child and pet to support, he was wary of wasting time with the wrong customers. When the fair-skinned walked into his shop, he would abandon whatever conversation he was having with the locals who came, most often, just to peruse. He'd devote his attention to the English or the Americans or the Germans and praise the spiritual quality of his pieces. He did not believe in God, certainly not in a many-armed one, but he believed that the fervor he held in his heart for his family would prompt his customers to open their wallets.

Sometimes he used Sundar to help move the merchandise. Sundar's English language skills had quickly surpassed the Kabuliwallah's, so the Kabuliwallah would assume a mystic's pose while Sundar worked his charms. His boy would say, *This one is most spiritual* or *This one have good energy*, and with the exchange of a wink and a smile he'd have the foreigners in his palms.

They'd been having a slow month when Hannah first came. Arun the mutt was napping in the midsummer heat, and the boy had skipped school to help add detail to his statues of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. Hannah cruised around the shop, lifting trinkets, then setting them down. She seemed to have little interest in what they offered but smiled whenever Sundar smiled at her. The Kabuliwallah guessed that she was a familiar of the monastery from the wilted look she'd donned when she'd first passed by their store. He knew that look, having seen many a foreigner in the haze of the unmoored.

"Explain, explain!" the Kabuliwallah whispered.

Sundar did as told. He walked her from aisle to aisle, holding her hand while narrating the spiritual benefits of the statues and prayer paintings. Though he went to school less and less, spending most of his time in the shop and walking the mutt in the evenings who knew where, the boy's English had continued to improve. Not even eight and he could slang-talk a smile out of anyone who passed through. Perhaps his father—the original one—had been a charmer, a teller of tales, though it was impossible to know, the boy having largely forgotten that first life. There was only the life of the shop with its ever-growing collection of statues, and their family, or so the Kabuliwallah believed. Sometimes, they shared an ice cream and relived their first meeting. The boy had never asked for anything more. Hannah lingered until the boy grew impatient, then left the shop, having bought one of the smaller statues they had—the bust of a frog with no religious meaning whatsoever, though he guessed that Sundar had fluffed even this, added the frog into some modern pantheon.

She returned to the store several times a week. As the monsoons approached, some days she was their only customer. The Kabuliwallah would see her tall frame crouching through the entrance and immediately stand to greet her. He'd silently praise the seeming infinitude of her pocketbook, for by buying what Sundar

showed off she paid for their evening meals. Each afternoon, she stayed longer at the store, until her visits became ritual, the Kabuliwallah arranging a chair with a cushion, where she would sit to chat with Sundar while sipping tea from their sole porcelain cup.



The gatekeeper at the monastery was a fellow refugee from Afghanistan, who shaved and pretended to be a Hindu, and the Kabuliwallah began to ask about the American. He was grateful for her purchases but began to grow curious and even a little wary of her intentions. In an early awkward exchange, she'd offered her name. There was little else beyond that, for Sundar grew coy when asked about the substance of their conversations, which happened now not only at the store but sometimes out, elsewhere in the neighborhood, when hand in hand his boy would cart Hannah around like a prize. She was long of limb and muscular in the arms. Perhaps she had played some sort of sport? Sometimes she would come to the shop with a prayer marking on her forehead, a white shawl wrapped around her shoulders, despite the heat. Other times, she would come in her faded jeans and a shirt that showed her arms to full effect.

The gatekeeper relayed what he'd learned. Their best customer was a divorcée and rich to boot—though weren't they all, the ones that bought? She hailed from a part of America where snow covered the streets more than half the year, which made the Kabuliwallah think of his time passing through the Himalayas, of the lonely yaks he'd chained himself to in order to navigate the storms, the fires he'd lit in the bellies of trees to thaw. Once, Hannah had thought of becoming a monk, the gatekeeper said, but now she mostly came to the monastery for chai and a chat.

“How long is she to stay?” the Kabuliwallah asked, for they had seen her every day for the better part of a month.

“No one knows,” said his fellow refugee. “She pays for her room week to week.”

That night when the Kabuliwallah came home by the side door of the garment shop, Sundar wasn't there. Arun the mutt, who had grown plump on scraps, was restless, so he led the dog to the riverbank, where after scavenging for his meal his

old friend lifted a leg and released a long stream into the river. The Kabuliwallah circled from the riverbank to his shop in search of Sundar. His boy knew the streets but almost never stayed out past dusk. He had made a few friends at school but always had dinner with the Kabuliwallah, before taking Arun for a stroll. The Kabuliwallah searched for an hour, lightheaded with exhaustion and worry. When he returned to the garment shop, he found Sundar asleep on his cot, something curled close to his body. Aiming his flashlight, he saw the evidence of an intruder: his little boy was holding a stuffed tiger in his arms; the dog sniffed and licked the soft fur of the thing as the little boy turned away to snore.

In the first year of their acquaintance, the Kabuliwallah made it clear that he needed his own bed. The little boy kicked, and, in the beginning, released pockets of gas from turn to turn. But that was not the reason. The Kabuliwallah had grown used to the solitude of his sleep and wished for Sundar to appreciate the same. But on this night the Kabuliwallah placed his body—nowadays his neck nearly always stiff, his knees hardly suitable for long walks, his chest hair all turned gray—next to his little boy, and when the rains came to cool the air, still felt warm from bone to bone.

The Kabuliwallah did not approve of Hannah's gift. His own son had died before his fifth birthday without ever having such a toy. Sundar would walk with the tiger as if they were conjoined twins, at all hours the fur grazing his hip. *Tiger Friend*, he named it, striking long, elaborate conversations in multiple languages. After a week of this, the Kabuliwallah made his displeasure known.

"This is not manly," he said. "You are losing your heart."

Sundar scoffed, though by the way the boy avoided his gaze he could tell his words had an effect. What he had wanted to say was that attachment to such things was dangerous. Again and again he had seen the world take and not give back; it was better to swim without stones. He took *Tiger Friend* and placed it on a high shelf.

That evening, as they were closing up, Hannah came by the shop. "Why did you tell him the wrong thing?" she asked. She seemed upset, but he had only understood half of her words, her English sometimes delivered too quickly to parse. He looked to Sundar for a translation. "She doesn't like that you took *Tiger*

Friend,” the boy said. “She thinks it’s bad fathering.”

He was too shocked to speak. What would a customer have to say about the way he raised his son?

“Go now,” he said. He was a tall man and dwarfed nearly everyone in town, but this woman stood eye to eye with him. In his country such a statement would have been unforgivable. They were no longer in Afghanistan, though this fact did little to soften his gaze. He worried about all the days of abbreviated meals ahead. “No need you,” he finally told her. “No need money.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, perhaps realizing her mistake. She made a motion of apology that he’d seen as a child—she touched her hands to her forehead, then to her heart, leaving with a muted goodbye.

Sundar walked to the back of the store and made a show of dusting off the statues, and the Kabuliwallah tried to ignore his boy as long as he could. He fed Arun the mutt, tallied the day’s paltry earnings. The air between them grew so thick that the dog whelped his anxiety.

“Quiet!” the Kabuliwallah cried.

“Baba, how will we eat?” Sundar asked.

It was the first time the boy had called him *Baba*. He thought of his firstborn, those pale little hands, serpentine eyes. What a wound it was to have known that love. Now, there was another, who cared for him as much or more, and he, in turn, had given the whole of his affection, without regret. To protect this boy—this life—he would’ve walked into the bullets of the Taliban.

“We have always managed,” the Kabuliwallah said. “We will not go hungry.”

That evening the Kabuliwallah took a few rupees from his special stash. He went to the bazaar for goat meat, stayed to watch the halal slaughter, the blood flowing. When he came home, he found that Sundar had lit a kerosene lamp to study. They had one table with three legs, so half his energy went into keeping his notebook from sliding off.

“I should study more,” his boy said. “For what will I become?”

The Kabuliwallah would have laughed had Sundar not spoken so earnestly. Of course, the boy would take over his business, the crow’s nest he’d built himself twig by twig. He’d take over the trade, and with his bright eyes he’d do better than his

old man. Arun the mutt would gracefully age under the boy's care. When the time came, the boy would find a bride. Sometimes, the Kabuliwallah dreamed of the wedding, the garish pandel, the sweets made with ghee, and him in the center of the room; he saw himself dancing—oh, he'd moved like that only once before in his life—with a younger man's heart. He told his boy none of this, fearing that the words spoken aloud would rob them of a certain happiness.

"Do not worry," the Kabuliwallah said, finally. "You will be poor like me, only less so."

"But Auntie has said I can do more," the boy insisted.

"Oh, what can you do?" the Kabuliwallah asked, as he felt his anger beginning to boil.

"Be a teacher, even a doctor."

"This is not possible. You will run the store when I die."

"I can do better than you, Baba. You can't read a single letter on this page."

His boy had never spoken to him in such a tone, and the shock made him momentarily recoil. He felt his collar grow hot with rage. The book before him was filled with the uselessness of the city rich, and he took it from his son's hands. He tore it cover to cover. "Now you can't read it either," the Kabuliwallah said, tossing the mess into the coals of his stove.

The boy stared at the remains, then began to cry. Immediately, the Kabuliwallah felt sorry for what he'd done. He could not afford to replace the book, which the boy had so treasured.

"I cannot pay to replace," the Kabuliwallah said quietly, which made the boy cry harder. He left to prepare the goat meat, though his heart wasn't in it. If love didn't make a meal, his mother had said, nothing else mattered; no amount of expensive spices could compensate. So it was that the Kabuliwallah oversalted the goat, and when they finally ate together by lamplight, the pleasure he'd hoped for was not there. The boy's eyes had swollen, even the mutt avoided the Kabuliwallah's gaze. It was not the way of a father to apologize. Not knowing what to say, the Kabuliwallah kept quiet till the meal was finished. "Next time I put less salt," he said, taking the boy's dish.



The next day Sundar went to school instead of tending shop. The Kabuliwallah didn't complain, and in any case the morning was slow. There were a few customers who grazed without committing to a sale. He sanded the back of a goddess listlessly. Around noon, a merchant asked if he'd take a day's wages to paint a sign, and he agreed, though without Sundar it meant he'd have to close the shop, which he did, though he regretted the lost business.

It felt like more work than a day's wages, but after a few hours he managed to paint faces for what would become a ladies' hair salon. It was welcome, for he thought of nothing but rendering a well-shaped eyebrow, or an aquiline nose. His father had performed a similar job, drawing signs in the theater district for performances wealthy men went to see.

Returning to his shop, he saw Hannah and Sundar sitting together in the monastery garden. They hadn't noticed his approach, so he retreated behind a tree and watched the two of them talking. They were like old friends. From the way Sundar was using his hands he knew the subject was a matter of significance. Hannah listened, not saying much at all. Whenever he'd seen her at the shop, he'd remarked at her gray hair. Sundar had assured him that she was no older than forty, though all her hair had turned gray. He watched her twisting the ends of her long hair, listening to his boy rant about who knew what.

He returned to his shop and looked through his accountings for the month. Aside from the regular sales to Hannah, which he'd marked with an *H*, it was fair to say that their enterprise had come to a head. It was the country changing, though the Kabuliwallah didn't know why. Perhaps, the foreigners no longer queued for religion, which meant his statues had lost value, or maybe there were other cities more desirable in the tourist's lore than Varanasi. It had felt like a stroke of genius when he'd planted his flag three years before with his boy. He remembered the first thing he'd bought in the city: a meter-wide tin tub where he'd bathed Sundar, then the mutt, then finally himself of all the ills of their long travel. That night, as they fell asleep still wet in their cots, he thought they'd reached their place of non-migration. Except now their livelihood was challenged. Before the boy and the dog, he'd made do from city to city. But how would he go on now—how would they eat?

The Kabuliwallah was not easily given to despair, but as he rueled the second fall of his happiness—the first almost a lifetime ago in a city of veils and myrrh—he began to feel sorry for what the world had given him. It was then that he saw Sundar lope toward the store, and his heart burst with gladness. He'd found this boy with half of his baby teeth and raised him through episodes of confusion and longing. Where before he'd been all bones, the Kabuliwallah now saw blooming muscle, the sweet curve of his back. With air to grow, his boy's hair had erupted into fierce curls, and it was well coiffed, the barber a few doors down giving him trims for half price. He had not done well in business, but he had done all right with his boy, who'd learned to read with only a day of school a week.

“Come, let us tend shop together,” he told Sundar, who'd walked through the door. “I have ideas on how we can do better.”

“Baba, we are invited for dinner tonight,” his boy said.

“By who?” They had few friends in the city. Aside from the barber and the neighboring shop owners and Sundar, the Kabuliwallah hardly exchanged a word with anyone else.

“Hannah Auntie,” Sundar said. “At the restaurant.”

Though he'd frequented roadside stalls, the Kabuliwallah had never sat for a meal at a restaurant, and the thought filled him with anxiety. Were utensils required? How would he know what to order? Sometimes, when he walked by the restaurant next to the monastery, which is the one he assumed his boy was referring to, he would see the would-be monks waste copious amounts of food, the dried pieces of chicken stuck to their plates like spirits from the past. He would sigh and cluck his tongue at the fortunes of others.

For all his reservations, he knew it would be foolish to reject a free meal. “Even if I wished to say no,” the Kabuliwallah said. “I must say *yes*.”

His boy smiled, his light illuminating the statues in their dusty coffins. It was a father's right to receive such love. He stroked Arun's head until the mutt wagged his tail with enough exuberance for them all.



The restaurant in question was not the one frequented by visitors to the monastery. Instead, it was next to a five-star hotel on the riverbank, close to where the minions gathered for the evening aarti. For the occasion, the Kabuliwallah had washed and ironed Sundar's one good shirt. He'd done the same for his own outfit. Though he lacked Western clothing, he'd carried a sea-blue kurta his father had worn from country to country. He trimmed his beard, oiled his hair, and fastened the buttons of his kurta. Now he was older than his father had been when the Taliban had come to take the capital. Now, he had a boy of his own, who tried to insist on bringing his stuffed toy, though the Kabuliwallah said it would not be proper. "Arun will watch Tiger Friend," the Kabuliwallah said. The mutt bared his teeth to confirm this duty.

They walked hand in hand to the restaurant by the river. Without Arun at their side and with their clothes specially chosen for the occasion, the Kabuliwallah believed they were as respectable as any other father-and-son pair.

"What did you learn at school today?" the Kabuliwallah asked, feeling a little giddy.

"The ring of fire," the boy said. "The place of many volcanoes and earthquakes."

What strange, delightful subjects his boy was learning! In the future, he would try to send Sundar to school at least two days a week, and each night he would ask about the discoveries of the day. The Kabuliwallah could not read, but in other ways he could still help his boy with school.

Hannah was waiting for them outside of the restaurant. She seemed pleased to see them so finely dressed, though she herself had come in a white tee shirt and blue jeans, which he found odd and a little upsetting, given how much care the waiters of the restaurant would give to the serving of the food, how rare an experience it was for Sundar and himself.

"You must be hungry. Come with me." She took Sundar by the hand and left the Kabuliwallah to follow.

The restaurant was cavernous, two stories full with the conversations of foreigners and well-dressed Indians, a stylized English in the air, which along with the perfume of many bodies left the Kabuliwallah feeling lightheaded. They were seated by the window, where they had a view of the water. All that current evident through the haze of the settling dusk, the priests wading in to stir their prayers

into the water, the tourists gathering by the shore to witness.

First there was bread, with the crusts hard but the innards soft. The Kabuliwallah tried to eat slowly. Across the table, Hannah watched them eat. From time to time she spoke, and he tried his best to understand. Sometimes, he would look to his boy for help, and Sundar would whisper into his ear. *She was asking about business or She wants to know how you came here.*

Good, he said. *So long ago,* he said, relieved that he could find the phrases in English.

Mostly, it was his boy and Hannah talking, exchanging phrases in English rapidly as if they were playing some sport. With all of the other conversations in the room and the sight of those priests in the water readying for the evening prayer, the Kabuliwallah found their talk difficult to follow. He did not complain, for food appeared without his having to worry. For his boy, there was pasta with tomato sauce, and for him Hannah had ordered a dish of curried lamb, the sauce thick with cream and coriander.

He thought he would need to show his boy how to use a fork, but Sundar already knew, the pasta a familiar friend, which he scarfed down with no reservations. Watching his adopted son, the Kabuliwallah felt that Hannah and Sundar had done this before. He'd always assumed that they only walked around the neighborhood during their afternoon sojourns, but perhaps they'd feasted at this very restaurant without the Kabuliwallah knowing, the boy's belly full with delicacies as he returned home and was offered a bowl of puffed rice, a cup of tea. He had always thought the boy told him everything of import, but as he watched Sundar roll pasta with a fork, he conceded his ignorance.

He looked at the table next to them, where a group of men with gelled hair and blue suits drank from long-stemmed glasses. They'd hardly taken a bite of their kebabs. One of them laughed with the delicateness of a caged bird. They were all doing their best to ignore him, his blemished face, his robber's beard. With his outstretched arm, he could've knocked a glass off the table, stopped their mirth in its tracks. The lamb on his plate began to taste sour.

“Something wrong?” Hannah asked.

“Beta, I am feeling a little sick,” the Kabuliwallah told the boy.

“He is already full,” the boy said in English.

“But we haven’t even had dessert,” Hannah said.

“No need,” the Kabuliwallah said, though he wondered what sweet treats lay hidden in the kitchen. He watched as his boy slurped the last of the sauce from his plate.

“They have the best ice cream,” Hannah said.

“Baba, please,” his boy said.

At least tonight he hadn’t needed to worry their meal to life; maybe he would take the scraps of lamb back to the mutt. His boy was bursting with gladness, but for him sitting through the meal had felt like a kind of reckoning. The men at the next table, the waiters, everyone they’d passed had given him the same look; he wasn’t meant to be here, to be among the rich, and never was he to return. But the boy hadn’t noticed—he remained eager to have his treat. “What kind they have?” the Kabuliwallah finally asked, consenting, for Sundar’s sake, on dessert.

“Twelve flavors. My favorite is pistachio.” Hannah signaled to the waiter, and soon they each had a bowl of pistachio ice cream.

The Kabuliwallah had carried pistachios early in his trade, tiny burlap bags full of the exquisite drupes, some shelled and salted, others still in their original make, but he’d never tasted ice cream with pistachios. He took a good whiff to confirm the invention before him. What was it the boy had that first day together? Chocolate and vanilla, that was right, hands dark and sticky with the sweetness. Some had gotten into Sundar’s hair, leading to a cowlick that remained for days.

The waiter brought the bill, and Hannah slipped him a card without checking the amount. “There’s a question I have to ask you,” she said.

The Kabuliwallah waited, uncertain if she was expecting to be thanked for the meal, if he’d missed some note of etiquette.

“I’m returning to America,” Hannah said. “Sundar’s told me his story. I want to take him home with me. *Will you let me?*”

The Kabuliwallah wasn’t sure if he’d understood, so he looked to Sundar for help. Word by word, the boy rendered the message in their own language. He was squinting at the Kabuliwallah, as he said, *Will you let me?*

What a question to consider over a meal, what a strange question to even ask at all. He had suspected that Hannah’s affections for the boy were strong but

couldn't have imagined this precipice. *Will you let me?* The boy's words played through his head and left his throat unbearably dry. It took him several moments to understand the import. During his silence, he could feel the men at the next table pause their conversation to eavesdrop. He wanted to roar, give them all the benefit of his voice, but his throat was parched.

"No," he finally muttered, repeating it to be sure he was heard. He watched Hannah's face grow old hearing his answer. Then he stared at her bowl of ice cream.

As the ice cream melted, his heart softened. What wonders his son could learn in her homeland—from the lives of frogs to the lives and fortunes of others. He looked to his son, as serious as when he studied for his exams.

"Baba," his little boy whispered. "You can come too. So can Arun."

"Maybe," said the Kabuliwallah. "I think more. Now, we go home."

The color returned to Hannah's face. "I'm here another week. There are things to be sorted out, but I'll come back for him. Promise you'll think it over?"

He nodded. He had meant to ask her to replace the boy's schoolbook, but now that request felt out of place.

When they left the restaurant, they found Arun the mutt waiting outside with Sundar's stuffed tiger in his mouth. He had a good nose, which meant he could've found them a city away. When Sundar took his toy, Arun sighed and barked a wistful hello. Hannah shook the Kabuliwallah's hand. "You'll let me know?" she asked.

He nodded. When she retreated toward the monastery, she walked with hunched back into the unfamiliar dusk, a smaller version of the person who now loomed so large in their life.

That evening, he and the boy and the dog watched the aarti by the riverbank. It was an ancient ceremony, older even than the journey of merchants from Kabul to the cities of Hindustan. A dozen priests had rolled up their dhotis and were wading in the water, waving candles, and humming scripture. He had no room for God in his heart, but there was beauty with all the lights in the water. When he squeezed Sundar's hand, his boy squeezed back.

Even if he was invited, he was too old for another country, but this boy beside him, this fast-talker, this learner of words, this bearer of many fires, would experience worlds he couldn't imagine.

“Baba,” Sundar said. “Why don’t we come here more often?”

“Don’t know,” the Kabuliwallah said. All this time that they’d lived in Varanasi, they’d mostly missed this daily ceremony by the river, the songs sending the paper lanterns into the sea. It had been many years since he’d seen Kabul, the beauty of its blue veils, every so often a street opening to a glimpse of the mountains. But this was a country of water. In making this second life, he’d once again come to believe that love could not be taken. Until this hour, as the paper boats with their blessings burned into the tide, it had seemed like a good myth to live by.

Beginning after the End: Allegra Hyde On Craft, Catastrophe and Collectivism

In her newest collection *The Last Catastrophe*, Allegra Hyde tracks ideas of apocalypse and collective action from an intergalactic finishing school to a rehab center for internet addicts to a fleet of mobile home nomads who take refuge on Galveston Island. The stories span genres and continents and include such wonders as vegan zombies, foster homes for husbands and a couple in a moose suit. Her writing is inflected with a wonderful lightness and her mind is set on heavy and massive ideas.

Unlike some writing that is concerned with climate change and disaster, Hyde's stories are as interested in sadness as they are joy. "I think that apocalypse is about endings and about change," she told me during our conversation. "I think that endings and change are at once horrific and also they can be new beginnings, it seems kind of cliché, but I believe that." The stories in this collection begin after endings: divorces, betrayals, societal collapses. They are preoccupied with imagining and striving for a better future.

I had the chance to talk with Allegra recently about craft and her new collection, our conversation meandering through the first-person plural, genre considerations, and fictionalizing utopian fantasies:

Madeleine Gaudin: Both your novel *Eleutheria* and this collection seem really interested in community and collectivism. You have such a grounded but optimistic perspective on the future. I'm curious how you came to this mindset; I know it's hard to get to optimism when you're thinking so much about climate.

Allegra Hyde: It's hard to write about catastrophe and disaster and not bring in some optimism, because otherwise the subject matter is almost too grim to

engage with. Also, so much of the human experience is made up of many different emotional facets. For instance, in a place like Houston, where there have certainly been climate disasters that were horrific and painful and traumatizing, those came with simultaneous moments of collective mobilization and mutual aid and moments of shared humanity and possibility. As a writer, I'm trying to be present with the worst possibilities and the worst catastrophes, but also to pay attention to moments of beauty and love and compassion that often simultaneously arise with disaster—and that shouldn't be overlooked or dismissed, because they reflect the best of what's possible for us all.

MG: I find that a lot in your work, and I know that you've called yourself an aspiring utopianist in the past. Do you feel like you're writing towards Utopia in these stories? Or are they moving somewhere different for you?

AH: I'm often writing towards utopia. The novella that ends the collection is definitely trying to show a disaster—in this case, vegan zombies and decimation of so much life on the planet—but also to gesture towards the possibility of coming together, of reinventing and believing in the possibility of a better world. Even if humanity or the characters in my stories never really get to utopia, to aim towards it, to believe that it's out there, is something I want to hold on to and that I want to give my characters.

MG: I've noticed that so many of the stories in this collection, like "The Future is a Click Away" or "Mobilization," which has that lovely Galveston moment, are narrated in a collective voice. Even, in a story like "The Eaters," the characters take turns holding the microphone and narrating. When do you realize a story requires multiple perspectives or requires that collective voice?

AH: The collective voice was a perspective that wouldn't stop coming onto the page for me. I am a writer who tries to follow language, to hear a story and then transcribe it. I just kept hearing collective voices. I think that's partly because I'm interested in how so much of being a human is both being an individual—who

is in her own head and trapped in the little box of her own consciousness—but also being a part of larger group and moving around the world as a collective body. So, it felt important to get that on the page and to let this collective voice narrate various stories because that collectivity is part of what it means to be alive.

I'm also a huge fan of Julie Otsuka who writes a lot in first person plural. Ever since I read *The Buddha in the Attic*, I've loved exploring that collective voice. Another favorite first-person plural story is "They Told Us Not To Say This" by Jen Alandy Trahan.

MG: There's such a sonic quality to the first-person plural, and it carries a different rhythm that feels like it has its own poetry. I wonder, does that impact the way that you conceptualize character, thinking about a character as an individual and also a part of a group?

AH: I think character can be so many things. I'm a big believer that setting can be a character, for instance—or weather can be a character. At its core, to me, character is someone, something that has agency and an agenda and that is moving through time and evolving. Whether that's a person, a group, a tree, doesn't matter so much as how that so-called character is operating upon and within the world.

MG: Along with groups and collective characters, it seems like this collection is really interested in phenomena. I'm thinking of a story like "Zoo Suicides." Are there craft challenges that come with writing on these scales of group or global phenomena?

AH: The challenge of writing any fiction is to make it believable. In the case of "Zoo Suicides," it was tricky to figure out how to make this bizarre phenomenon of people ending their lives at the zoo by jumping into animal enclosures seem believable because that is, as an act on its own, really sensational and disturbing and hard to go along with. The challenge was therefore how to make the act believable within the context of the story and create a functional story-logic

that justified the absurdism. I tried to do that through the story's voice and by borrowing from [Donald] Barthelme's approaches to absurdity via escalating phenomena.

I think it's important to figure out how to capture these almost unbelievable events in fiction because unbelievable events are happening all the time in our wider world: climate catastrophes, animals acting weirdly, etc. They're hard to grasp because they seem outside of our familiar reality—but that doesn't mean they aren't happening. For me, fiction is a place to capture the absurdity of contemporary life—which is easy to become numb to.

MG: I think that absurdity and lightness and that optimism we talked about earlier are all interwoven in these stories. I love in "Afterglow," this combination of the sadness of the dissolution of this marriage and this really wonderful and odd and humorous image of this woman rainbowing her skin with Gatorade. Is that interplay between lightness and darkness part of what you see as essential to capturing the contemporary world?

AH: I think it's essential for facing our contemporary reality. As I see it, it's easy to be either paralyzed by nihilistic cynicism about what's happening or to be so Pollyannaish that you're enacting a form of denial. But to hold both the huge scale of disaster on one hand, and also hold onto the potential and possibility of a better future on the other—that to me is the best way to try to inhabit this world and work towards that better future.

"Afterglow" definitely tries to show such an interplay between "lightness and darkness." The woman in the story is physically processing the fallout of her marriage in a way that involves consuming a beverage that is full of chemicals and not good for her, and at the same time is creating this bizarre beauty.

MG: In a story like that, even when the collection is at its more intimate moments or more interested in the domestic, the stakes feel so much larger than the

individual. It seems that even in the personal story, the collective comes in through the stakes of her actions with the Gatorade.

AH: As someone trying to write about climate change, I'm always trying to find ways to bridge the experience of an individual and the larger sphere of what's going on. In the Gatorade story, showing the link between the chemicals in this woman's body and the chemicals polluting the air felt like an important—or even an exciting—way to bridge the impacts of climate change and the physical experience of an individual body. Maybe the story shows this in a roundabout way, but that objective is underneath everything I'm trying to do.

MG: In the collection there's a lot of experimentation and play with different forms. "Colonel Merryweather's Intergalactic Finishing School for Young Ladies of Grace & Good Nature" is told as a recording or log, the collective voice stories, "The Eaters" that has the alternating narrative sections. Do you feel you adjust your craft or your structure to best suit the ideas you're most interested in for a particular story?

AH: When it comes to form, it's about figuring out what container for the story will, on one hand give the story shape, but also allow the deepest truth of the story to emerge. Writing "Colonel Merryweather's Intergalactic Finishing School for Young Ladies of Grace & Good Nature" as an audio transcript felt like a way to get at the heart of the story best—because it makes us voyeurs to a conversation and process of discovery for the two main characters.

I also love the challenge of a form and a set of rules in fiction. That was the case with this story: figuring out, problem-solving how to communicate the information that I needed to communicate. Or, even working in first person plural, there are particular challenges that come up with giving information and keeping a story moving while speaking as a chorus. I love the puzzle of that as an artist.

MG: This collection has similar interests to your novel. I wonder are there challenges or differences in what you think a novel can do and what a short story

can do? Especially thinking about them with such an interest in social change, environmentalism and climate change.

AH: I worked on the *Eleutheria* for about five years, from roughly 2014 to 2019, and during that time I tried to be as monogamous with the novel as possible. Sometimes I couldn't resist writing a short story, but I really tried to keep myself from writing too many. When I finally sold the novel and suddenly had the freedom to work on other things, I had all these stories pent up that I wanted to work on. I also had all this material that was connected to the research I had done for *Eleutheria*, but that didn't make it into the novel. There was only so much I could squish into *Eleutheria*; it is already pretty jam packed full of ideas.

Short stories have been a way to cover a lot more ground quickly. There's the opportunity to be a little more nimble with specific concepts or questions, and to explore them quickly, efficiently, to try a lot of different things out. You can explore a variety of different characters in a short space, for instance—and hopefully come up with something interesting and meaningful.

But, with a novel, you can go so much deeper with a character and really get to know them. My hope is that with *Eleutheria* readers develop a relationship with Willa Marks—the protagonist—and feel like they know her. Even if they aren't friends with her, they'll hopefully feel like they have some kind of relationship. The novel takes the time to fully unpack why she does what she does—for better or for worse—and that is what is distinct and powerful about the form for me.

But, I love writing short stories. I think that's always where my heart is.

MG: I know in the past that you've said you don't like the label of "Cli-Fi," and I'm inclined to agree. I'm wondering where you situate your work, if you don't want to be siloed off with just climate, where do you see yourself writing?

AH: I struggle with labels in general because they always feel limiting. I'm really torn about the idea of cli-fi or climate fiction because on one hand naming it makes it more real, more prominent, more legible—and that seems good in terms of environmental communication, which is an ongoing struggle. But, as you've probably thought about since you've been thinking about this as well, the label "cli-fi" also separates work from literature at large and makes it easier to write off climate-focused fiction as a dystopian fantasy. The label suggests that climate fiction isn't about real life. What's funny is I'm teaching a "climate fiction" class this spring, so I'm hoping to wrestle with this idea of category with my students. Maybe they'll tell me what to think.

In terms of categorizing my own work, if I had to give it a label, I'd probably call it speculative fiction. That feels broad enough—and I think that all stories are, to some extent, speculating and asking questions and proposing versions of reality and then unpacking the logic of that reality. That's what I'm most comfortable with.

The Last Emperor (from *Postcards to Jingyi*)

once or twice, you took me
to see an old factory-friend
or a *yipo*, distant
cousin of yours. it was
a sunny day, or it was
raining. we'd take one bus
then another, walk
into strange alleys, cough
out smoke from coal
-cake stoves. once,
not twice, you took me
to the cinema. it was
a matinee of *The Last
Emperor*, or a night. full
moon. I was the same age
as little Puyi, who still had
a wet nurse at four. the dark
theatre was full
of grown-up heads. I sank
into the giant womb. years later
you'd say *I've been*
to the cinema, and wait
for me to fill in the rest,
how, for example, Puyi's third
bride blows a white
feather, how, the wall
of light blinded me, pulled

me in, to fly
with the feather, how, later,
you took my hand, *we need*
to go, I dragged
my leg. we watched
five more minutes at the back
of the theatre. the movie
is long, Puyi grows old.
pulled me again, your hand, faint
smell of flour. we might
have had *cainue wenden*
at noon. hidden
moon. you might have sliced
the left-over wrappers, boiled them
with water, eaten as plain
noodle, while filling my bowl
with *wenden*, fat as pigs.

Andante ma non Tanto

for dinner she compares
a lime A-line with a jade one
three times

love
forgives its absurdity, the captioned simplicity
of limbs and lips, occasionally, if lucky, frees itself
from a good luck knot, the nothingness

of all

[melodic music]

the tangle of words, however awkward, keeps sending your run-on
tongue

to my shore
I'm busy searching for seashells and short lines
once you found a perfect spot

perhaps in Japan

[drumbeats]

online profile says *I'm both Arthur and Lancelot*
she knows how to swipe

right, ranks a tray

of less frequently used words
[acoustic guitar ballad]

dub dub dub on Basho's door
green lingers too much contrast
for an idealized winter

the frog has gone for a hike

[melodic music]

she senses his tempo
without weighing boots
and risk, deftly dissembles
a syllable, breaks its echo, plays
hair in strict meters, learns
to relieve the stress

behave
leave
before the meter maid is back
exemption
from the unredeemed promise

she likes escape-room
he doesn't mind escape, but maybe a room first

respect natural order

[upbeat rock music]

a samurai has enough patience

until the snow comes the code of eyes unfreezes the myth of cold
three months of snow
in its metamorphosis

departure
is not always fun
some call it a walk, downward dog, herbal tea
take all the walnuts from the bread, I'll have the cranberries
leftover, the pond, a potential
splash, the collective

silence

to which we both contribute
anonymously

[sound of nature]

the game of hint and link
has a long history she attempts to interpret a four-leg table

into a quatrain he frowns
how about fishing? hiking? fishing and hiking? something
outdoor up there there's a good pond

she appreciates a metaphoric downpour

[sound of nature, drumbeats]

with trained ears no break is needed
five-seven-five
recite my name in one breath I'm there

*and you cannot come
up here.* measure love in a different language, report the pattern.
the last cicada is hanging for a future metaphor.

a samurai knows how to cut

a line, kaiken sheathed
tight

[mysterious string music]

stillness stirs

the distance between them she measures the complexity
of air, wonders if there's a good place for unused and useless words, unzips

a meaningful look

[bells]

can Basho be Basho without the fire? tame a line before it gets tired. the residue

of long verses
speaks of your eyes

what is left unrhymed is synchronized with heartbeats

practiced in foggy mornings
we can hear each other but cannot
touch

[sound of typewriter, sound of strings, sound of nature]

a sheet of whispers

when he's about to come she says *let's talk
about the wage gap*

[sudden silence]

Andante ma non Tanto
fast but not too much

[delicate music]

Andante ma non Tanto
fast but not too much

[fading sounds]

Score V // Cast Off Bà Ngoài

This portrait glows velvet soft.

Her granite palisade is a word for
beseech. *Ask harder*, it means.

Much is dull about the day among
days past her funeral.

You dream about her country, no.

A speech delivered on television.

There it is, in Technicolor.

An eon of ordinary torture
propped like stones at her altar.

I sing about no one, you say.

In this dream, I sing and sing
as if onstage, as if

at a distance, booming, booming.

[“This Door We Both Entered”]

HOST in velvet
plum tuxedo +
HOST in glassy
heels, Swarovski
brooch + Saigon
hair coiffed
oceanic. *Alright,*
you were there +
HOST teases
HOST in formal
“you” + third person
+ a tortoise moving
between earth and
sky, a thousand
holy doors + pick
one, you tell me
+ waving up
like this door
might wave back.

of Spring

Filtered from 李清照 Li Qingzhao

The wind lives []
So fragrant, it's doing its best,
[] its overextending itself,
while the sun—so late already!—[]
[] its head.

As for the affairs of this person, myself—I
am not doing things. The thing I am doing
is resting,
is wanting language []
before all else, fluid. Flowing.

I hear tell of the double []
In spring, it []
so well,

and, too, [] []
in a light boat.
I only fear the double []
[] [] my boat,
[] not moving,
allowing me, maybe, so much
worry.

Ars Poetica

“I am the mother of my father...”—Author Unknown

In the dream I am pregnant
with my father—

hole, a red wreath. Around
my neck, a rope of thorns.

I want to speak, but it restrains.

A scalpel catches dappled light.

Mouth glutted with gauze,
my legs spread; I am restrained.

I push, shit myself. He thuds
through me like a tiny violence.

He thuds through me

until arrival. If I were to slit

my father’s throat, his blood

would only molest the carpet.

bildungsroman

chris hit me when word got around
the block his baby brother was playing

with barbie in broad daylight so, when
dad asked what I wanted that christmas

I told him *woody*, knowing damned well I
wanted to feel the plastic fem slip between

my small & faultless fingertips once more
before my back welted wings, before snow

on the south side turned streets sepulchral
& mama's seasonal blues had her at work

& not home, before my latchkey blues
could ever be remedied by my big sis

who, at that time, knew what it meant to
be toyed with by a man wearing my face



when toyed with by the man wearing my face,
big sis groaned her nuisance amid fake sleep.

waned moon splayed its light-licked limbs
into the folds of his apartment. big sis called

mama from the bathroom crying, *breeze*
touched me. cut to: mama cussing & thrashing

about that nigga's flat, smashing everything
save for the family photo she flung

in the dumpster on our way home

Opening & Closing

I used to think my grief was spectacular.

Like something I bottle in my mouth after
I uncover coins at the bottom of a pool.

I empty a shaker of salt into my wound,
to hear another dad has died, and it is not spectacular.

I dive again.

I left the flowers in the car too long—

soft; exposing their necks, and I'm sorry,
this must be reversible.

In the time that it takes me to run to your bedside
I bash open my knee.

The blood; dripping, has already dried now.

I tell you that I didn't notice—

send it in a bottle down the river—
that it is a part of me; attached, and I wish it wasn't.

I keep swimming deeper for gold

again and again

I am a determined child.

In a matter of minutes a rose unfurls;

blooms; and disasters itself.

This is your cancer:

moving your arms with grace.

Opening and closing the water

like a jack-knife.

Opening like breath.

Then sealed by bricks.

I am eating fistfuls of salt at night.

I bought her flowers,

but let them open on the dash.

Maybe one life would be spared—

trying to save her—

the trouble of wanting them to die.

Mami Wata Afrofuturism (500 years Back to the [Afro] future)

I can't swim. Well, I can, kind of. But not with enough confidence to linger in the deep end of any body of water. My father was a Kru man, and my mother is Grebo. Both Liberian tribes, but especially the Kru, were renowned swimmers and seafarers. "Their maritime expertise evolved along the west coast of Africa as they made livings as fishermen and traders," often employing their nautical skills as sailors, navigators, and interpreters aboard slave ships and both American and British war ships because of their fierceness and resistance to capture and enslavement.¹ Two such deities whose stories I grew up with were Mami Wata, and the Neegee. The old people would always say "Don't go too far in that water, Mami Wata will carry you!" Not carry you in the sense of rescue or comfort but carry you as in never to be seen again. Perhaps that was the fear of the siren song that kept me from the deep end. The idea that I could be carried away like both the mythical disappearances and the ones from the headlines and stories about children being drowned in deep waters.

But then there was also the Neegee, believed to dwell in swamps and deep wells, or at least that's what the kids I grew up with would whisper. I would learn in later research that the Neegee was an order of Kru warriors, part of the Water Leopard Society.² Another one that I learned about much later, was the Nitien, represented by a round brass object with four mounds across its surface. The object, also called a Nitien, or Kru Money, is thought to dwell in the waters and has the power to grant fertility and prevent wars and is a symbol of protection among other attributes. Although the Nitien is part of art collections including the Smithsonian and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, there is very little scholarship about its origins and function. What is generally accepted is that it was a symbol of great power and ability, associated with water.

Part woman, part fish, Mami Wata's alluring visage embodies goddess attributes and dualities that manifest as both savior and destroyer. As a powerful

¹ "Africa 101 Last Tribes," *Kru*, <http://www.101lasttribes.com/tribes/kru.html>.

² "KRU WARS: SOUTHEASTERN REVOLT IN 19TH TO EARLY 20TH CENTURY LIBERIA," Anthony Barclay Morgan Jr., November 7, 2015, *Historical Preservation Society of Liberia*, <https://www.facebook.com/hpsol.liberia/posts/kru-wars-southeastern-revolt-in-19th-to-early-20th-century-liberiaanthony-barclajr989519377737909/>

water goddess, her mythology is an apt conduit into the significance of water in the first gestures of Afrofuturism. She is described as “nurturing mother; sexy mama; provider of riches; healer of physical and spiritual ills, and embodiment of dangers and desires, risks and challenges, dreams and aspirations, fears and foreboding.”³ Narratives about her survived the transatlantic slave trade and turned up in the stories of peoples across the African Diaspora. Lasirèn, in the Caribbean, La Baleine, and the male deity Agwé in Haiti. Depicted with Simbi, a snake that indicates the power of divination, and a mirror that is a portal to the other side of timeless and vast spaces, Mami Wata occupies the space between the now and the future.⁴

The first acts of Afrofuturism began at the crossing of the Atlantic by enslaved people. They were being taken to an unknown space, shackled, crammed in small spaces, with no certainty about where they were going or what they would encounter. As poet Nikki Giovanni described it in “Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea (We’re Going to Mars),” who better to travel to Mars than “people herded into ships so tightly packed there was no room to turn,” covering vast distances with no certainty of what awaited them?⁵ But beyond Mars, Giovanni’s comparison between the Middle Passage and the Milky Way (Space as we can observe with the naked eye) is the kind of visionary thinking that bridges the divide between where Black people have been and where we are headed.

Mami Wata Afrofuturism finds its home in the Gulf states where enslaved Africans crossed many waters, from the great Atlantic to the Mighty Mississippi, both into and out of enslavement. On their journey into an uncertain future, the West African Kru, like the Igbo of what is now Nigeria, fought fiercely for their autonomy and freedom, so much so that they would often drown themselves rather than be captured and enslaved. When they arrived off the coast of Georgia in May of 1803, the Igbo staged a rebellion, killing their captors, then, according to the lore surrounding the incident, they were led by a high Igbo chief into the waters, singing, “The water spirit brought us, the water spirit will take us home.” Rather than an act of suicide as this is often characterized, it was a return to the eternal. The African Cosmogram of a circle with a cross in the middle depicts the cycle of rising from the waters, the journey through life, and the return to water to rise

³ “Arts For Water Spirits in Africa and its Diasporas.” *Smithsonian National Museum of Art*, 15 July 2016, <https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/mamiwata/who.html>.

⁴ “Becoming Mermaids.” *American Museum of Natural History*, 26 May 2007, <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/mythic-creatures/water/becoming-mermaids>.

⁵ Nikki Giovanni, “Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea (We’re Going to Mars),” in *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea: Poems and Not Quite Poems*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011), 1-4.

again. This eternal journey across a timeless chasm began in our origin stories and continues with Afrofuturism that looks towards our distant future. In speaking with Gulf States artists whose practices gesture towards the time beyond the now, the recurring motif was the parallels between the void of the great waters and the cosmos. From the times that our ancestors navigated the stars with astrolabes, to the great Kru seafarers, and beyond, to the underground railroad, the stars and the waters have aligned to bring us from where we were, to where we are going.

My conversations with artists speak to the ways in which their work helps to inform not only the geographical locations they are referencing but also the spaces that span across Gulf Coast states. The waters, like the Trinity River, and the lakes and creeks of the Carolinas, all flow towards the Gulf Atlantic, carrying with them the stories between and across geographical locations.

Austin, Texas-based Artist, Journalist, and Educator Raymond Thompson's body of work titled, "It's Hard to Stop Rebels That Time Travel," is an evasive matriculation across the landscapes, townscapes, riverbanks, and deep woods of New Bern, North Carolina. He describes it as a "Rememory" project starting in the hidden world of maroons living in the marshes and swamps between the plantations of enslavers. Thompson began the project to reconnect to his family history, and we had a conversation about how the project began.



Raymond Thompson: I essentially wanted to know where we were from in the American Landscape, and I knew my grandfather was from North Carolina, but I didn't know where, so I started interviewing members of my family about where he was from. I got names and stories and knew he was from the middle of the land of Tobacco and Cotton, so I decided to come down and document the landscape, trying to figure out how to connect with it. I also ended up going into history books and found stories about slavery, the civil war, and the revolutionary war. Then I ended up reading about Maroons.

Christopher Blay: I know Maroons were people who escaped enslavement and formed settlements away from slavery, usually in inhospitable environments to

avoid capture and the inevitable severe punishment if they were ever caught (*King Kunta, everybody want to cut the leg off em.*—Kendrick Lamar). But how do they connect to this landscape?

RT: Escaped enslaved people would usually run away North, but Maroons in this area would stay between plantations, usually to stay connected with family, sometimes fleeing one plantation to return to another where their relatives were being held. With the aid of these same relatives, Maroons were able to survive in the liminal spaces between plantations. I became super fascinated by their ability to survive and live off the land and was essentially trying to understand this connection to the land.

In my research I also found state runaway ads, and lynchings, which I used as a form of surveillance to reference the landscape and find clues of where the Maroons may have hidden themselves or lived.

CB: So, you are working primarily in these regions to make photographs for this series?

RT: Yes, even though this story can be told across many landscapes, I wanted to be connected to where I was making these photographs. I wanted to be able to say I have blood on this land and the history of slavery and its impact on black families that had us dispersed across the American landscape. I also feel that I am looking for these lost souls in the landscape and they seem to not want to be found. They employ a kind of counter surveillance, or *sousvalence*, in folklore.

I feel like each one of my pictures is like a portal, and I name them all after portals. I also reflect on the magic and spirituality that comes out of African American Folklore and how it offers all these ways to avoid being seen. I was trying to combine that with the imagined space of the landscapes.

CB: The two things that come to mind are evading surveillance and navigating

with knowledge of the land, and knowledge of the stars, and traversing waters, swamps, and rivers. I'm trying to understand our earliest knowledge of nature and living in harmony with nature, and how that was disrupted through the slave trade and colonization. But being in captivity ignited a reawakening of that knowledge in our beings, along with all the spirits and myths and epigenetic intuition that hurtled our people forward, to a place beyond, a mythical north, if you will.

RT: In the folklore there is an ability to fly, the ability to walk into trees to avoid slavers patrols, which is a spiritual thing, and a way that African beliefs were incorporated into Christian beliefs.

CB: I'm also thinking of how the beliefs and the mysticism of the African Cosmogram was laid on top of Christian religious practices as a subversive way of erasing and destroying those beliefs. The Cosmogram became Ezekiel's wheel from the bible to convert Africans away from historical knowledge of the cosmos. But the hope and resilience of our people is that when you trap the physical, the spiritual is released.

Thompson's portraits in "Rebels," interspersed with a solitude of landscape images make you wonder if it seems too quiet, and whether something is up. The pictures are a deep, rich, black that only hints at recognizable faces and forms. Moving through the images feels like a surreptitious act. The landscapes in the series, some with thickets where streams and tributaries meander through, do suggest portals to a place other than here. That Black imagination has stayed rooted in the landscape since the first Afrofuturists made their way through to a spiritual, celestial, and timeless North.

Thompson's landscapes reject time and space, and all is present, all at once.

In another conversation, with Dallas- based artist Ángel Faz, we talked about their project around the Arkikosa River, named the Trinity River by Spanish explorer Alonso De León. The 710-mile river runs through Dallas and Fort Worth, and enters the gulf near Liberty, Texas. Faz envisions the river as a future

monument. Building on the research in a D Magazine article by Peter Simek in Dallas, Faz imagines what it would mean to personify the river and what the river would say if they had a voice. They see this as a way of questioning autonomy, among other things. At the beginning of our conversation, they talked about the origin and meaning of the Arkikosa River.

Ángel Faz: One of the things that inspired me to look at autonomy in the river is the bible verses that talk about the I AM as encompassing the past, present, and future, and it makes me think about Afrofuturism in the works of Octavia Butler, and Toni Morrison, especially Morrison's quote that states, "all water has a memory." (The full quote reads: "All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was." Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place.) (From a talk given at Charlotte Mecklenburg Library's NOVELLO Festival on November 20, 1996.)

Christopher Blay: My perspective on Afrofuturism is a non-linear traversing of space-time and history, going backwards to go forwards, and bodies of water are the apt conduit for talking about transformation, rebirth, mutation, and transcendence. When enslaved people escaped enslavement, they went North, away from a "present" to a "future." Whether it was Heaven, or Paradise, or a time long into the future, it was a place where there was "no more weepin' and a' wailin'," to quote the negro spiritual. In that process we crossed rivers and waters, and water having a memory, feels real. All the water on earth is all the water that has ever been on earth, and contains all our histories, and all our futures. There is something in those molecules that bears that history. What you are doing, by seeking the source and the meaning and the vocalization of that water space is creating and reclaiming that space to tell the complete story.

ÁF: I think you are picking up on what I hope comes through the most in this work, and that is the spiritual connection to water and getting back in touch with that.



Faz's project was part of a visual public art experience in Fort Worth, in 2021 and they described the project as "rooted in observing how the Trinity River connects us to the past, present, and future; as the spirit of the river becomes activated through imagery and sound."

Faz's reference to Octavia Butler is echoed in some of the recent works by artist Ciara Elle Bryant. In her exhibition *On-n-On: Ciara Elle Bryant in Conversation with Octavia E. Butler*, Bryant engages the influence of Black speculative fiction on technology and futurity.



Ciara Elle Bryant: For this project I did a deep dive into Afrofuturism and Glitch Feminism (a book by Legacy Russell, which central argument is described as follows; "to embrace glitch, as failure and refusal, is to move towards possibilities for other ways of being, worlding, and collectivity beyond the logics of the gender binary, capitalism, and neoliberalism"). I got to a point where I realized that the future would not exist without us in general. We've been here since the dawn of time, and we are going to be here until the end! And I wondered what that looked like—existing from beginning to end. I thought about how progressive we are and thought about the music of Bootsy Collins in the 70s and Outkast's guitar riff at the 2:36 mark in "Bombs Over Bagdad" being something you've never heard before, and that got me in a place of our eternal existence across time. It led to reading practically every Octavia Butler book, notes and writings included, and from there observing how she wrote about her characters. I concluded that we are the archetype, and we are going to continue to reproduce and evolve and create in a very expansive way.

The work began to embody what Octavia was looking at while she was writing, and how research influenced her practice. She would do extensive research on DNA, which she kept meticulous notes about, cataloged in manila folders. Also, research

on the future of capitalism, and basically whatever she was going to write about, then made it happen. There was a lot of that happening in my own process which made me think how wild the parallels are between her writing and my practice.

Christopher Blay: I feel this consciousness that exists between Black people, from the history of slavery in America, and between people like me who came on an airplane. That tether doesn't leave the DNA. We are all connected because we all came from the same place. So I think when you're vibing with Octavia Butler it just reinforces that connectedness, or the collectivity that Glitch Feminism references.

CEB: I think about that, and I think about how we sometimes intuitively know how to fix things. Like let's say If I'm sick and I feel like I should drink turmeric! Something that you have no recollection of ever knowing, manifesting in you like that. Like honey to soothe...I'm like, where the fuck am I getting this from?! And it feels like a download. I would go look it up and discover that people have been doing that for hundreds of years! A download that lives in our genes! We've been fixing and healing and doing all this stuff forever and bearing fruit to create life.

My installation was primarily photographic, and manifested across various media; fabric, reflective mylar—all arranged based on the stories of Octavia Butler and what I discovered about her. Some of the images were multiples of 20 or more images superimposed on each other, and all had some multiplicity in them, even myself portraits.

CB: It recalls the phrase from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" in which he writes about being large and containing multitudes. Some of the works in *On-n-On* bear attributes of Mami Wata, specifically how she carries a mirror that is both a symbol of vanity and a trans-chronological portal through her world.

CEB: Yes, every image from that body of work contains depths that are both visible and invisible and reflects on how DNA evolves. I am everything and then some, and this is where I am. Like Lillith Iyapo in Octavia's writings who was so many

things in her lineage but had to bear so much weight moving forward. She had her kids but then had these alien hybrids come from her...reflecting everything from the past to the future.



Gulf Coast artists creating speculative fiction and visual art that imagines and recontextualizes the presence of black people in the future are uniquely positioned in a space where enslaved African peoples first experienced what would be their future spaces. It is a reclamation of spaces to insure the presence of Black people in the future. They navigate from the depths of the gulf waters of the Atlantic to the limitless expanse of the universe and the incalculable metrics of time and have been doing so since our people travelled land and sea using the stars, and astrolabes as their guide.

Like Thompson, Houston native Jamie Robertson's photographs and installations are autobiographical and connected to her family land in Leon County, Texas. In describing one series of photographs, "Charting the Afriscape of Leon County," Robertson writes, "This land, imbued with the spiritual presence of my ancestors, bears witness to the comings and goings of its descendants."⁶ Her "Waters" series of videos ripple through time, from the slave ship Clotilda, and the Mobile River in "Waters II: Memories with Bones," to "Waters III: A Question, which recalls a series of events remembered as "Wade-Ins." The Wade-ins were organized by Gilbert R. Mason, Sr. To desegregate the Biloxi Beach, Mason and several protesters waded into the waters and otherwise occupied the beaches, only to be beaten and attacked. The symbolism of Black people returning to the water ebbs and flows throughout Robertson's work.

In addition to the artists referenced here, there are other artists whose works have been shown in the Gulf States or who are from here, Solange Knowles, for example, and Dawoud Bey, whose works speak to Mami Wata Afrofuturism. For Knowles, her works are largely performative, including videos such as *Almeda* in which she references "Florida Water," which is both a cologne and a water with spiritual and healing properties. Filming the video at the Philip Johnson architectural marvel "Water Gardens," which was also the site of the science fiction film "Logan's Run," codifies Knowles as a bona fide Afrofuturist.

⁶ Jamie Robertson, "Charting the Afriscape of Leon County, Texas," Jamie Robertson, 2020, <https://www.jamievrobertson.com/afriscape>.

At first blush Dawoud Bey's history series "Night Coming Tenderly, Black, (2017)" and "The Birmingham Project," most recently exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (Spring, 2022) do not scream Afrofuturism. The former is a chilling and unsettling collection of images of real and imagined spaces along the underground railroad, shot in a day-for-night underexposure that renders the landscape even more sinister. The latter is a series of diptychs of unrelated people. One is a young person the same age as the girls killed in the September 15, 1963, bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, paired with an older person, the same age as the girls would've been in 2017. What Bey accomplishes in one fell swoop is to make tangible the unseen spaces across history and landscapes towards the mythical North, and in the case of the Birmingham project, make fully visible and visceral what a community lost in the lives summed up as those of "the four little girls." The magical thinking that brings their lives to the fore, both through the lives of strangers and from the mind of an artist, is nothing short of alchemy.

Although Houston-based artist Nathaniel Donnett does not identify his practice with Afrofuturism, some of his works, specifically "Signals From the Doorway," with its Spiral-Jetty-esque form, feels celestial and spiritual in a distant-future kind of way. When I think about signals, both sending and receiving, I begin to speculate about our future, how we get there, and how we thrive long enough to get there. In another one of his works titled "The Sky is a Sea of Darkness," there is a connection to the dark passages and spaces that ancestors navigated by the stars and is also present in both Thompson's and Bey's works. There is something that reaches across vast expanses for an unseen future that connects to Afrofuturism as it is practiced today.

In my own work, I have imagined what narratives would emerge from combining a slave ship with a spaceship. Using the historical British illustration of a slaving vessel and superimposing the structure onto the body of a Saturn V rocket, "SpLaVCe Ship" was exhibited in the Fall of 2022 and is the inspiration for this essay. Combining the symbol of the Nitien with historically accurate Apollo Mission space suits and transforming Kru warriors and seafarers into spiritual beings represented by Black Power afro picks, I created sculptures, cyanotypes, and paintings depicting the mythical journey.

We have crossed many rivers to be here, some oceans too, and as Bryant so eloquently put it, “we are the archetype and we are going to continue to reproduce and evolve and create in a very expansive way.” From the waters, through the thickets, and beyond the stars.

p. 121, Fig. 1. Raymond Thompson, *Portal# 32.549, Neuseway Nature Park, Kinston, NC* from “It’s Hard to Stop Rebels That Time Travel,” digital inkjet prints, 2022

p. 122, Fig. 2. Raymond Thompson, *Portal# 31.412, Abandon shack, Kinston, NC* from “It’s Hard to Stop Rebels That Time Travel,” digital inkjet prints, 2022

p. 123, Fig. 3. Raymond Thompson, *Portal # 9.372, Dover Bay Game Lands, Dover, NC* from “It’s Hard to Stop Rebels That Time Travel,” digital inkjet prints, 2022

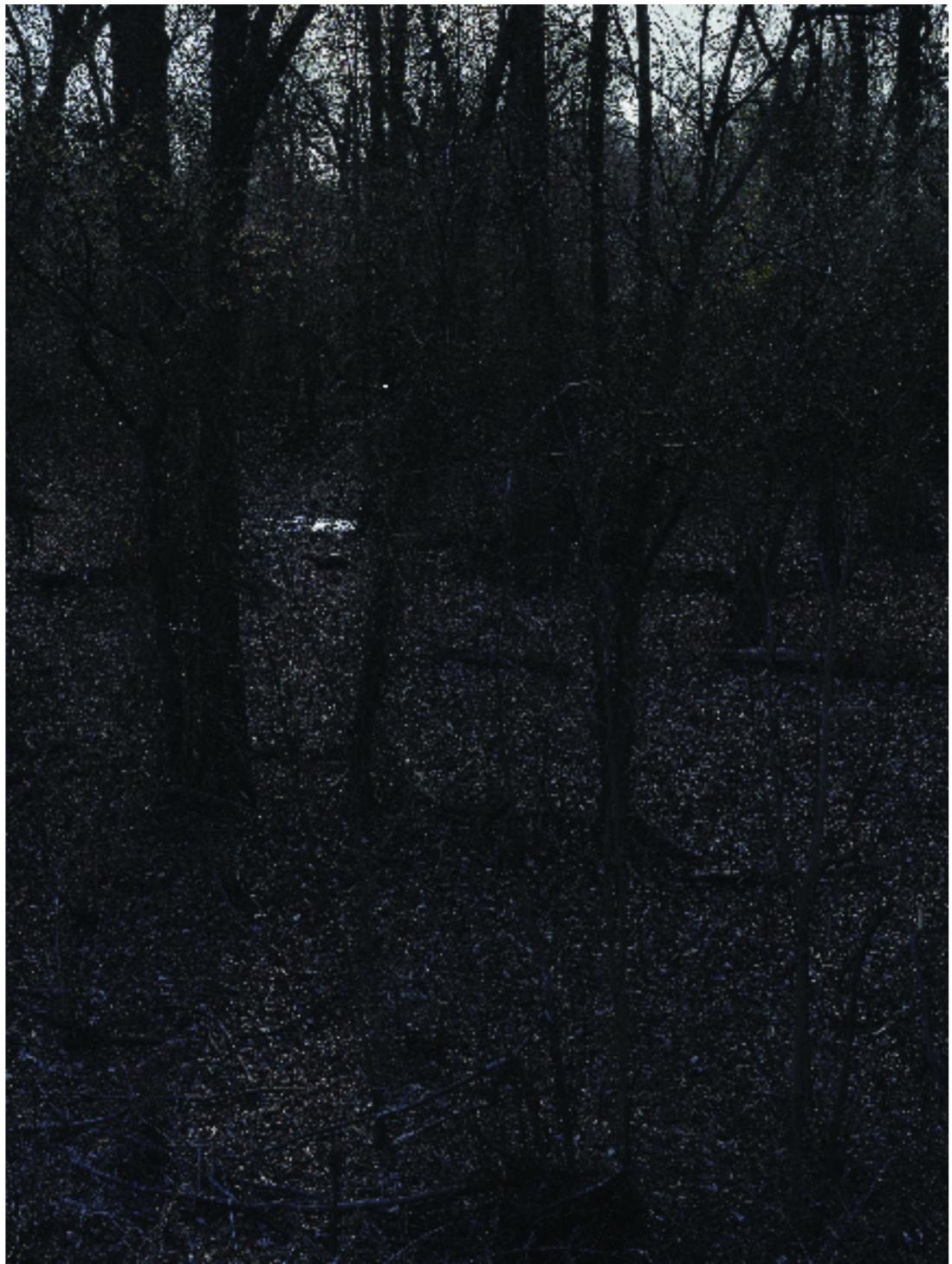
p. 124, Fig. 4. Raymond Thompson, *Hassana* from “It’s Hard to Stop Rebels That Time Travel,” digital inkjet prints, 2022

p. 124, Fig. 5. Raymond Thompson, *Choci* from “It’s Hard to Stop Rebels That Time Travel,” digital inkjet prints, 2022

p. 126, Fig. 6. Ciara Elle Bryant, Installation View of *On-N-On: Ciara Elle Bryant in Conversation With Octavia Butler*, Hawn Gallery, Hamon Arts Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas TX, 2022

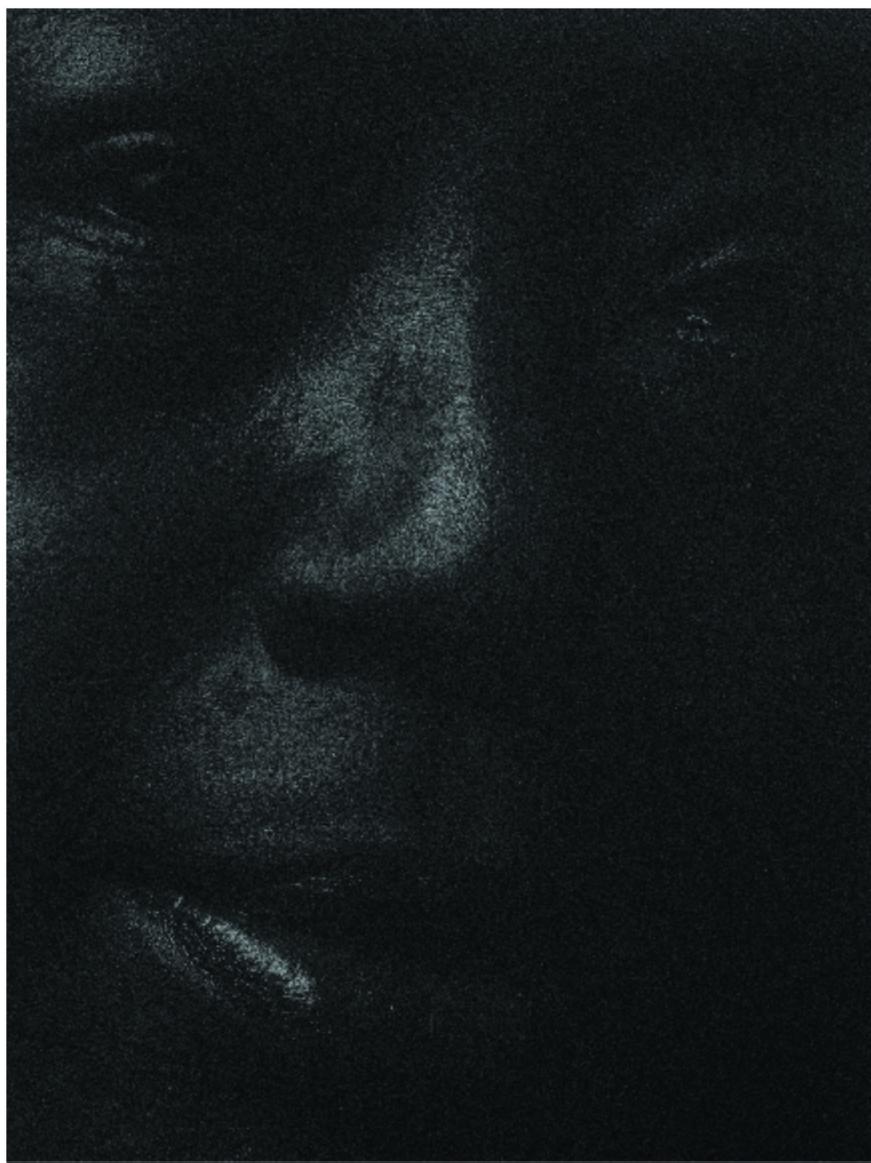
p. 127, Fig. 7. Ángel Faz, *Water has a memory/Remembering*, Digital Video Still of Site-Specific Installation for ‘New Stories: New Features’ at Pioneer Tower at Will Rogers Memorial Center, 2021

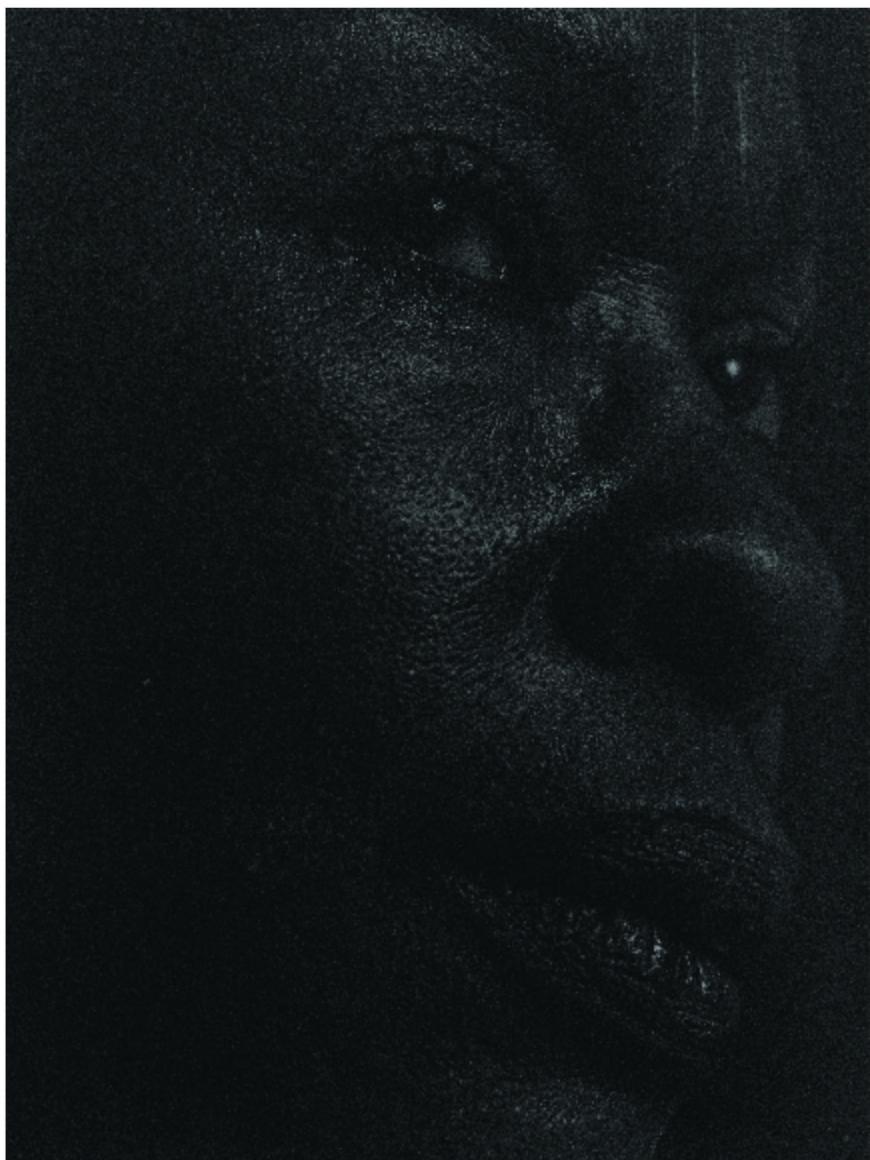
p. 128, Fig. 8. Nathaniel Donnett, *The sky is a sea of darkness when there is no sun to light the way*, earring studs, drywall, house paint, 2021

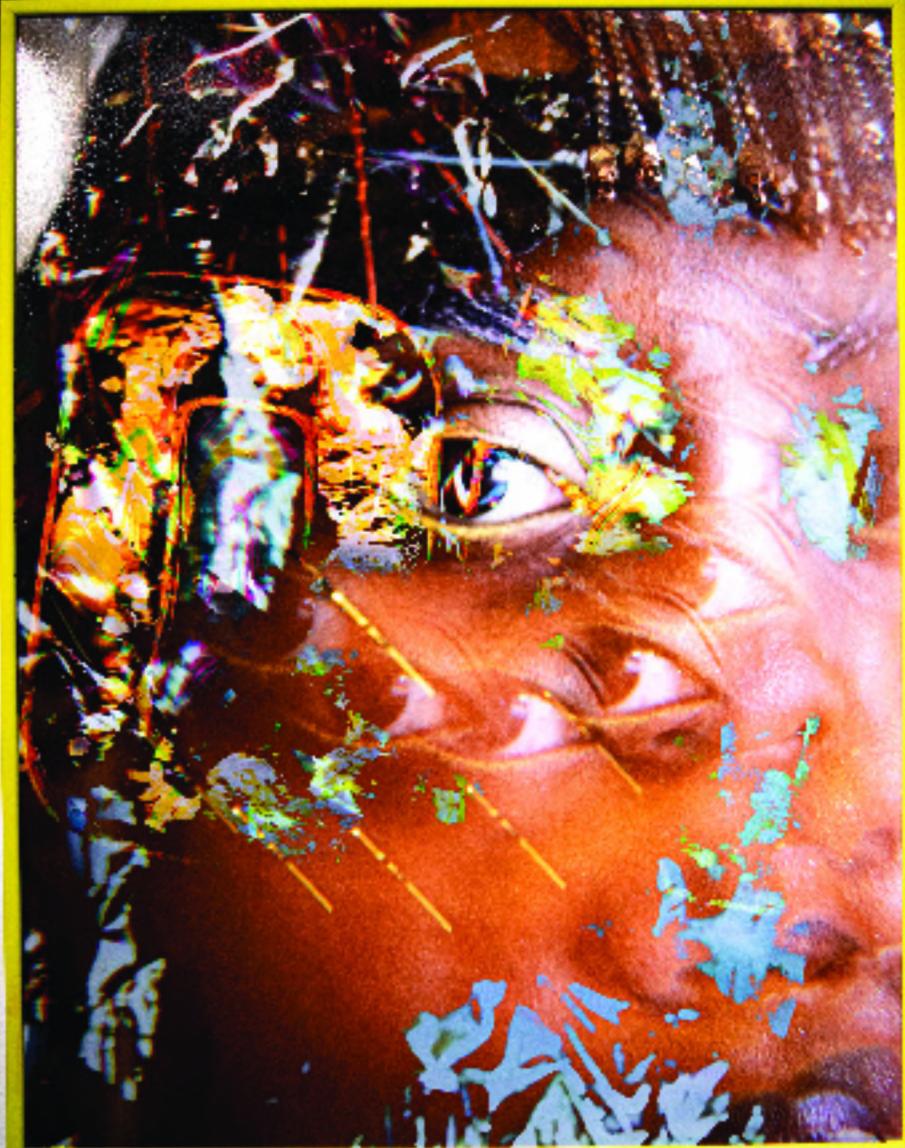


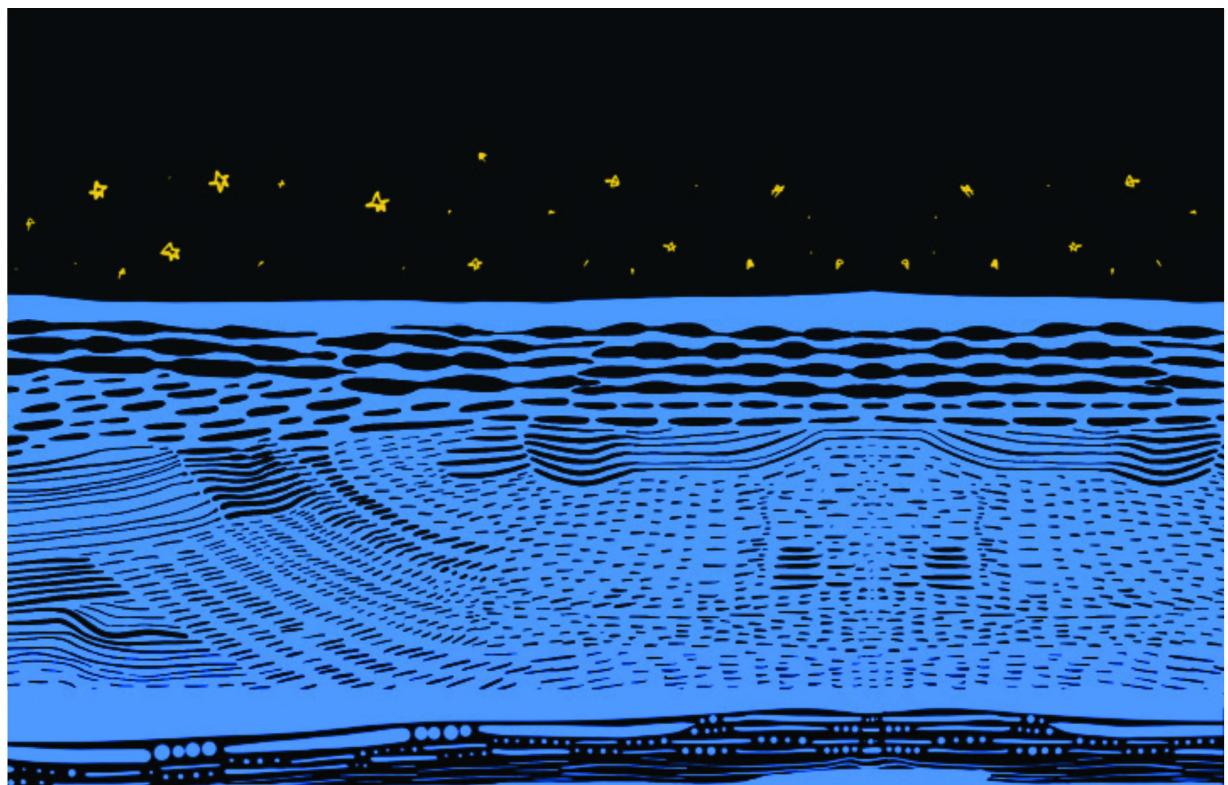














How I Teach My Daughter Heaven

Somewhere, the sky is worse,
is hinged and opens like the door
to the cellar where there's something
you hear down there but can't see,
your father or an opossum, a great
weasel of the foundation. Sky opens
like a cellar and there is the god
of *my* childhood, fierce and buttoned
up to the collar, polished as a church shoe.
Bland, uniform god, in sync
with the ocean, turning like the axis
of the earth. Boy god, man
god, chariot god, god of the rugged
mountain ranges and vast blonde prairies.
Maybe you have never wanted the prairies
he holds out like a rope.
Maybe you'll tell him *close the door*,
let you watch the clouds shift over that
vast expanse a little more. Imagine
there isn't an exit or a hand or any man
up there promising you a bit
of paradise. Be a girl in a backyard.
Let me watch you
from the window,
not disturb you.
I know what that's like.
It's all gone off you.
You're a bee in a blossom,
great rhinoceros of the grassland,

you hold it all inside your ribcage,
expanding and contracting
like every version of the universe.

Until You Say When

It began as a game. Four braids, fifth pew
from the back, your arm outstretched & slack
between us. What reverence there is in waiting
I learned then, every Wednesday at the foot of Our Lady
chaperone, surrounded by sisters, habits blushing
impatient for resurrection under the stained glass
second coming. Permission still tilts the same smile—
still closes her eyes as if in prayer or pure prophecy,
like grinning into the first stroke of rain—& I still stall
out in shyness, hesitation half-dipped in humility
but hooked, too, on the heat of having been anointed
with consent. Mama said idle hands are Devil's
handiwork, & when I lifted my finger to the pulse
of your wrist—let it wander the length of a liturgy
toward the crease of your inner elbow & other,
future trespass—I believed: someone had died
for this pleasure. Would again. I skimmed the index
of your forearm—insatiable slow motion—& lay
in wait for a sign I hoped to never appear. *Noli me*
tangere, you seemed to say, not there. Not yet.

Nodus Tollens with Child

There's a new god in town.
Forty days without sleep & the rain's

made us an ark that rocks until
we rock back, lurch & lunge to keep

the cabin from creaking. I could break
my silence on the hardness of this dark,

its panoramic echo, its blotch & blink—
but only my ears stay sure:

sound is a shadow that moves
across the floor as any common pest.

We came aboard like every other pair:
two of our kind. What rainbow,

they said, what promise. What purgatory
made worse by man's mistakes? Never

again. That I could have been a captain
of some other ship—or the keep

who scouts out planks & beams
a warning sign more taunt

than tolerance: *I'm out here.* It takes
a village & ours flooded. Have we

sent for help? What bird wouldn't
loiter on land that doesn't move. I stay

swaying at the open window—paned
stencil of night on night—until

the horizon is a lighthouse, a future
I can lure just by rocking, my arms

an ark within an ark. Out there,
there's nothing—but relief

in quick succession: I then dove.
Bird made verb with a splash.

The House Fire by the Lake

My daughter sits on the top of my shoulders, and we watch the house across the street from us burn. She's four and knows fire is bad and doesn't understand why we are watching it. But we watch, and we're safe, and we're fascinated. And what we don't know yet is that there is a woman in that house.

My daughter says *oh* and *ah*, and I smile while those flames are devouring the house, the house that is crumbling so quick like dirt in the wind. I tell my daughter to cover her ears with her hands as the emergency vehicles pass, but she covers mine and laughs freely—laughs without the worry of the fire that has spread from the house and into the surrounding brush and tree line.

While we watch, there is a fear inside of me that I am ignoring, and it is the fear of death. Sometimes, I think about it too much, about death, about dying, about something happening to me, to my daughter, now that I am a parent. Sometimes, the fickleness of life scares me just too much. Sometimes I imagine a house fire, a car accident, an illness, a cancer, a—*whatever it is*—taking my family: my wife, my children, my home. And sometimes, I feel like that house that is on fire, feel an anxiety that nothing can ever put me out.

Why are we watching this fire, I think, and what I tell myself is that I want to show her danger—I want to teach her caution—is this not what parenting is?

The sky is changing, is a gush of reds, yellows, oranges, and a darkness that is foreboding, that is building like billows of some deep storm clouds. My daughter laughs because she's not scared because she knows that her daddy will protect her. Her bare feet dangle atop of my shoulders, and I'm holding them and thinking how alive her feet are while so much destruction is in view.

She can reach the branches now, one of the countless pine trees overhead, and she stretches her arm, grunting softly, and she pulls at a leaf that is autumn-brittle, and the leaf falls, and this is life, and this is death.

We rushed out of our house when we saw the flames in the distance. We were eating dinner then, when the flames flashed like some deep red lightening from out in the distance of the dining room window. I said to her, *Daddy wants to show*

you something, and I quickly scooped her up.

The sirens haven't stopped, and the amount of fire trucks and police vehicles are unending, just loudness filling the ear, just commotion bustling back and forth. What I don't think of then, what I haven't imagined yet, is that we cannot hear the woman in the burning house pleading for help. She might be saying—*I'm here. Please. I can't breathe. Please. My house is on fire.*

The fire is everywhere like a surge of water. I can't see what my daughter is looking at, but I can feel her shifting—feel her little thigh muscles tighten around my neck because she's frightened now, because something is happening.

God, I think, what am I teaching her—that accidents are spectacles?

She says, *Daddy, fire is bad*, and I think she imagines a hand touching a hot stove or the wick of a lit candle but not this—not this utter and complete consumption of one thing into another.

The fire is peeling the house's roof like dead skin. I tell my daughter that I think we should go inside now. The police officers block the street. The many firefighters are snaking fire hoses. The fire is unruly, is primordial—it burns, and it wants more.

We need to go inside, the flock of nosy neighbors, and we give each other the same look because we know this fire is not stopping. We know something is very wrong here.

As my daughter and I turn to walk back to our house, a car, driving towards the fire, pulls up to a halt, idles at the bulwark of police, and a woman and two children try to run—run to that house that is shedding itself of life, and I think now that someone is in there.

A lady died across the street from us in a house fire.



At bedtime, my daughter asks me if there was a person inside the house—asks that if there was a person in the house, if they are okay. I lie to her because she doesn't need to know the truth. The truth will not help her understand this fickleness of life yet. I want her to sleep, but I really just want to hold her—hold her like she's always on top of my shoulders, like she's safe.

I'm in my bedroom later, and the sirens and warbles taper in the darkening and quieting night. I'm watching my daughter on the monitor—her body, cocooned in a blanket, her twisting and turning like she is moving away from something. I'm listening to my daughter's noise machine, the sound of an ocean. It calms her, and I'm trying to let it calm me—to take me across the shallows of soft waves, of a moon-lit sea, of a place that is at peace, but all I can see is that house.

I am trying to understand this fire, understand the woman's house, the lakefront property—all that water behind her, all that safety that seemed so close—I'm trying to understand the lake that just watched the fire reflect across its silvery surface, watched it glimmer like it was something beautiful.

God, I am angry. I am afraid. I am wondering what the hell would I do if that was me—if my daughter was locked in her room while flames engulfed, while smoke suffocated, while we could die from the inside out.

I close my eyes, and I see who I think this woman is, and in my mind, growing like a spark, I imagine her, not in her bathroom, but she's on the lake behind her house. She is someplace in the middle of that lake drifting in a canoe. She's out there because she escaped the bathroom, out of the house, off of the property, and into the lake—she jumped, maybe—but she's there, all the same, and she smiles at me to let me know, as if to let my daughter know too, that she is okay—that everything is okay—that people just die, houses just burn, and life carries on.

Parenting in the Pre-Apocalypse

I tried to explain to my child
the nature of love, how, like a microplastic,
it can be found even in the most unlikely places.
The shared breath, of course.
But even in soil freshly disturbed by a fawn's hooves.
Even in the troubled arctic.
And how, like the ice shelf,
when it fractures,
the sound travels across a cold surf,
stirs awake the outpost's scientists
who somberly annotate the data,
and as it continues to fracture,
so the world comes to fear its fracturing.

Meditation on the Moral of the Story

Wasps float harmlessly over the grass,
beating their black wings.

A slight breeze feeds a nearby car fire.
A familiar-looking boy recites the names

of states in a locked room. Then, the names
of saints. As the federal agent speaks to him,

the boy imagines the noise the saints' anguish
might have made: a steely rattle

or a weak coo? The boy's fear,
not yet allegorical, fresh enough to be

divvied among the nuances, cradles
his body. I have a son his age.

When I think of my son and the boy,
when I think of the agent whose speech

my nation sanctions and fails to,

one fear marries another. Theory burns
in the ditch that, judging by my hands,

I must have dug.

Hello? Ma?

Ma finally died a few weeks ago. She died on the kitchen floor, before the oven, curled against the broiler drawer. There were two opened but unheated Pyrex dishes on the counter, one swordfish, the other potato au gratin. She was battling bronchitis but still had the stomach for cheesy starch over some oily omega-three fatty acids. Ma was dying of many things—disappointment, regret, loneliness—but it was the cigarettes and SKYY that KO'd her in the sixty-ninth round.

Ma's absence has diminished me. I'm less interesting without her and only half as funny. Her fervid brand of working-class Italian mothering buttressed my 200-pound selfdom, its barrel-chested compassion and broad-shouldered neurosis. Ma would be thrilled to know how much I miss her. Ideally, I would love to tell her via some form of séance or prayer, but historically, I've been an atheist. I believe that tripped neurons literally kill the power. I believe that rebooting the motherboard is an ontological impossibility. Ma isn't downloading my conversations from some netherworld. Ma is defunct. She can't hear. She can't feel. She can't know. But she isn't entirely inoperable. I believe that the dead can talk. They speak echo, their life words resounding in our thoughts with godlike broadband. From its inception, death has been the end-all in telecommunications.

A blindfolded Ann Boleyn knelt before her executioner, prayer book in hands, serenely chanting for mercy. Jesus, receive my soul. O Lord God, have pity on my soul. She was a state-of-the-art woman and devout Christian. Henry VIII appreciated neither, not when said characteristics were wired to a uterus incapable of birthing him a son. He condemned Ms. Boleyn on trumped up charges of adultery, incest, and high treason, but he couldn't just burn the ex-queen at the stake or axe her neck. Flames generate unsettling screams and emit a revolting stench. Axes often result in errant blows, one more gruesome than the next. Henry didn't want Ms. Boleyn's execution to incite sympathy or rioting, so he hired an expert French swordsman to decollate her with merciful precision. The swing came mighty and true. Ms. Boleyn's head made the most courteous disassociation

possible, probably completing a revolution or two before rolling to a stop on the scaffolding. According to eyewitnesses, her lips continued chanting several seconds thereafter. *Jesus, receive my soul. O Lord God, have pity on my soul.*

I used to place Ma's head on the kitchen counter every night while chopping vegetables. Sometimes the iPad would tip over, landing her face-first in minced onion. We FaceTimed religiously. She lived alone in Boston and I live in Los Angeles with my wife and son, but Ma was always right there as I prepped dinner, criticizing my knife skills or advising my braising of the Bolognese. I would hold the iPad over the pot so she could smell my *soffritto*. She'd moan orgasmically and lament our distance. She visited twice a year, Easter and Halloween, and I took my family to Boston every summer. But then COVID. We self-isolated and suspended air travel. Her smoker's lungs worried us. Her pickled organs too. We didn't want Ma walking through LAX or Logan. I didn't want her incubating on a plane. We postponed her April visit and then her October trip, the pandemic spacing our bodies fifteen months apart. I increased our telecommunicating to compensate. I started phoning Ma during my evening commute home from teaching Aristotelean rhetoric to university freshmen. Ma worked the wallpaper department at Factory Paint, a family-owned home improvement store. Listening to her shit talk the workday's most annoying customers hastened the L.A. traffic. I'd hang up with her as I rolled into the driveway and FaceTime her an hour later for dinner prep, pouring my first Nebbiolo as she mixed her fourth SKYY and Fresca. She was always three time zones ahead of my drinking. I never kept pace. I always stuck to my game plan: cut her lead in half and hang up before she lapped me. Inevitably, Ma would short-circuit into slurred belligerence, the bliss of her grandson crumpling under the momentous weight of financial destitution and a tragically mismanaged divorce. Most nights, the vodka would fry her circuitry right around the time I was plating dinner. To sunny up her mood, I'd sometimes transfer her head from the counter to the table so she could criticize our eating habits. This distracted her from topics such as my father's egoism and her sister's snootiness. She was with us for countless meals, chiding my six-year-old son's dependency on ketchup and decrying my utensil etiquette. All the while, COVID mutated into Delta. We axed our summer trip to Boston but rebooked Ma's

October flight to Los Angeles. She would be here this very second. Instead, she died inside of a twenty-two-month vacancy. My son will mostly remember her as bodiless, a liquid crystal visage dignifying him with profanity-laced praise.

All languages are dying ones. They die in every silence, resuscitated by every breath. In the interim, words reside in an epistemological netherworld, waiting for a voice to resurrect them. Words are spirits. This is my silly belief. This is my unfounded faith. Beyond vocabulary and syntax, there is a supreme discourse coded by the zeroes and ones of human suffering. Computers will never learn the grammar of suffering, which is why they'll never have shit on Shakespeare, Faulkner, or Ma. Computers are too accurate for storytelling. They remember too much. They have no loved ones to traumatize. No self to loathe. A computer doesn't have a body to sacrifice. No skin. No heart. No organs to aestheticize data. Its left-brained circuitry can't process the anguish it has endured and/or caused because it operates on a language of symbols that precede meaning, which is the epitome of artificial communication, the algorithm for formulaic prose, a detriment to innovation. Computers have no access to the supreme discourse because the supreme discourse is pure meaning, primal and supernal. The enunciation of said meaning is my Holy Ghost in that a man who recites the words of William Shakespeare is William Shakespeare. Jorge Luis Borges owns that axiom, and now that I've quoted it, I have become Jorge Luis Borges. And when a reader ponders Ma, they are Ma. So take flight, Lorna! I've booked you an open-ended round trip ticket from this netherworld to various others.

My sister, Leah, went to a medium this weekend. She wanted to hear Ma. It cost forty bucks, a steal given the insanely advanced tech that goes into psychokinesis. This medium goes by the name of Connie. Ten years ago, Connie channeled our grandmother. Speaking on Rosaria Napoli's behalf, Connie thanked Leah for "the music." My sister started crying all over herself. I was always singing for our grandmother, at family dinners and over the phone. I sang for her as Sinatra. I sang for her as Mario Lanza. I bought her a CD player and discs so she could hear the Italian crooners when I wasn't there to conjure them. I was absent when Connie downloaded our grandmother so I found it strange that she would thank my sister and not me. Why not thank Leah for some devotion that she specifically practiced with our grandmother? Why double-

relay the message to an atheist? Leah called me seconds after the telepathy with Ma concluded.

“What did Connie say?” I asked.

“Eh. Lots of lovey-dovey stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Like *I love you so much. I’m so proud of you. Don’t worry about me. I’m in a beautiful place.*”

“Doesn’t sound like Ma.”

“Not at all. It was total bullshit.”

When it comes to communicating with spirits, the medium is never the message.

I started FaceTiming Ma a year after Ronan was born. She was depressed about having to grandmother from across North America. Communicating with a baby over the phone is the lowest of techs. Minimal amounts of data are transferred or received. Ma wanted more than gaga talk. She wanted to see Ronan’s face. She wanted to see his face seeing her face, but Ma was a Luddite and an impoverished one at that. In 2014, she had a clamshell phone on a prepaid MetroPCS plan. My wife, Sara, upgraded her. After countless dropped calls, accidental mutes, and inadvertent mirror image flips, she finally learned the basic functionalities of a low-end smartphone. By Ronan’s first birthday, Ma was virtually there at the table with us, drinking, smoking, and reciting hilariously crass anecdotes about Factory Paint and her nonexistent sex life. Ronan lacked the necessary synapses to process these narratives, but the iPad put a face to one of the many *a priori* voices radioing through his DNA. Ma’s drinking in front of Ronan didn’t bother us. A toddler would never imagine eight ounces of vodka in a tall glass of lime-colored liquid. We did ask her to abstain from smoking on the iPad. She held her cigarette off-screen and ducked out of frame for drags until Ronan turned two. She then made the executive decision that Ronan was old enough to witness the degeneration of smoking. This was also the age at which Sara presented Ma with a list of forbidden swear words. We found she couldn’t possibly refrain from saying *fuck, ass, shit, or douche bag*, so we only asked Ma to omit *bitch* from her grandmother vocabulary. Sara abhors the word’s misogynistic connotations. For the most part, Ma desisted.

She only slipped once or twice a week while complaining about the *rich bitches from Duxbury* who didn't return the wallpaper books to Factory Paint.

Two days after Ma's funeral, I visited Enzo Zavattini, one of my oldest and closest friends. His father-in-law had also recently passed away, a cheerful man with a treasure trove of antiques. While sorting through his artifacts, Enzo came across an old book entitled *How to Play Winning Baseball*. Aside from being a five-tool PONY stud, Ronan is also a student of the game. Before gifting the book to Ronan, Enzo and his wife asked their three-year-old daughter Sofia for an inscription. She answered "Think of Nonna." Sofia didn't know that Ma had died. She had never met her. She didn't even know Lorna as a concept. Enzo was convinced that Ma was speaking through Sofia. Ma had always adored him for being respectful, steadfast, kind, and most importantly, Sicilian like her. Enzo is the best Catholic I know, judicious and benignant. He graciously acceded to my apostasy when we were sixteen, when Ma booted my father out of the house so she could swan dive into the concrete shallows of substance abuse. Since then, Enzo has quietly assumed that I would find my way back to St. Peter's Basilica. The inscription was a possible passage, a psychic imperative radioed from Ma through Sofia. As Ronan knelt at the coffee table, flipping through pages of the book, Enzo presented the story of the inscription to me as sanctified proof of heaven's existence. I couldn't go there, so I cried on his ample shoulder instead.

Ma believed in ghosts, especially Catholic ones. She was always listening for deceased family members, particularly tuning in for her father, Tom. Ma's biological father abandoned his family in favor of booze. Tom entered the picture when Ma was five, cherishing her until he died of lung cancer twenty years later. Ma couldn't say his name without crying. Ma was also heartsick for handsome Uncle Santo, who died in the Philippines during WWII at the age of nineteen. Ma never met Uncle Santo, but she hung a black-and-white portrait of him below her crucifix. Ma never met her maternal *nonna* either. Mariana Napoli died of a broken heart months after her only son Santo was killed by friendly fire. Ma sat around drinking and smoking, listening to songs of the 1950's in attempt to conjure these souls. No one never reached out. Her only spiritual contact was a demon who lived in the back of her closet for much of 1994. Ma swore it was there, whispering evil shit at night. I

snuck into her bedroom one afternoon to meet the demon, descending the depths of her closet like Orpheus. While nosing around for evil, the only thing I found was a black leather satchel full of vibrators. Ma was drowning in vodka then, and just starting in with the blow. Maybe there were too many neurotoxins blocking her heavenly broadband receptors, preventing her from contacting dead relatives. Not so coincidentally, the demon occupancy was supervened by Ma's notorious UFO abduction. She and a boyfriend were parked at the nearby public beach lot, smoking weed, popping pills, and swilling SKYY. It was a starry, starry night with every Greco-Roman constellation in view. Ma and her boyfriend spotted an approaching configuration of blinking lights increasing in size, merging into a massive orb as it hovered over her '84 Monte Carlo. The orb blasted the Monte Carlo with a blinding mega beam, ejaculating Ma and her boyfriend into unconsciousness. When they awoke, the Monte Carlo had been airlifted a couple of miles down the road to Ma's favorite bar. Ma told this story to everyone. She told it with her most sober expression, and if you so much as cracked a smile, she'd rip your fucking face off.

Ronan is smitten by history, fixated on extinction. He is obsessed with ancient Rome. His favorite baseball teams are the bygone Brooklyn Dodgers and Boston Braves. His favorite player is Ted Williams. Ronan has his career stats memorized. He studies his swing on YouTube. He knows that The Kid always took the first pitch. He knows that Teddy Ballgame would have surpassed Babe Ruth in homers had his career not been truncated by two bouts of military service. He knows that the Splendid Splinter was liberal on issues of race but kept a photo of Richard Nixon on his desk. Ronan does not know about Ted Williams' head being frozen in a steel can filled with liquid nitrogen. I've kept that cryogenic tidbit from him. The flimsy sci-fi wisdom of biostasis and neuroseparation wouldn't fly with Ronan. His precocious left brain would know better. He would think less of Teddy Ballgame for trying to cheat extinction. I don't want to defame Ronan's hero, not yet. He has more to learn from the Splendid Splinter. Those who study Ted Williams swing like Ted Williams. Hitting is a precise science, and as Williams famously preached, fifty percent of it occurs above the shoulders.

I have Ma's liquid crystal head saved on an external hard drive. I used to secretly record her with my iPhone whenever she got on a roll about the rich

bitches of Duxbury, or the unwanted sex dreams she was having about my father. I also have dozens of gushy, slurry, and belligerent voicemails saved. Ma threatening to castrate me. Ma lauding my handsomeness. Ma reciting *Moby Dick*-length itemizations of what was on sale that day at the supermarket. Ma freestyling about the petty inconveniences of a Target trip with more f-bombs than an entire Lil Wayne album. I could give said footage to some Dr. Frankenstein software engineers, have them resurrect Ma as a virtual being. Digital humans are already among us. A New Zealand tech firm has developed an app that allows users to create virtual golems of their own likeness. The company has already designed an interactive Albert Einstein. If anyone could breathe life into a computer, it would be Ma. She is more technologically powerful than ever. She's a state of the art ghost, but her supernaturalness is too real, too true for digital ontologies. Her eloquence in speaking the supreme discourse cannot be translated into zeroes and ones. Virtual zombies only speak exposition. *Siri, how many wives did King Henry VIII have?* Siri, who was the last player to bat over .400? Virtual zombies speak in infinite circles and linear dead ends. The best conversations are ones that travel sideways and backwards. The best conversationalists speak figuratively. They speak in analogies and enthymemes. They do so extemporaneously. The dynamism of Ma's ethos cannot be regenerated. No app could process it. It could only be powered in the real-time entropy of a damaged psyche expressing its knowledge to other damaged psyches—the unmathematical algorithm of a little girl from the projects slinging three-hundred dollar roles of wallpaper to the richest bitches of Greater Boston.

I used to put Ma's head on a stool in the driveway while I pitched tennis balls to Ronan. Positioned at shortstop, she'd heckle his rare strikes and wildly cheer his sundry of dingers and line drives. After weeks of this, Ronan finally hit Ma in the face with an absolute piss missile. She back-flipped and face-flopped onto the pavement. We were all dying, Ma's smoker cackled the merriest. We caught our breaths and remounted her atop the stool. The iPad screen had shattered. Ma's purview was unaffected, but our image of her was fractioned and mutilated. Ronan called her new telepresence *cool*. I killed the mood by explaining Marshall McLuhan's theory of *cool media* to Ronan, lecturing him about low definition

technologies requiring conscious participation from viewers to ascertain higher meanings. “Hey, Einstein. Shut the fuck up and pitch!” Ma said. Ronan loved that. He now calls me *Einstein* whenever I get professorial. It’s become one of the many supreme idioms he’s inherited from Ma. When Ronan recites Nonna, he becomes Nonna, but I don’t want him acting as her medium. That’s my cross to bear. Ronan is unbroken. Ronan speaks my wife’s textbook grammar and syntax. My ear and tongue were tuned to Ma’s Italian ghetto slang. It leaks from my mouth in errant past participles and adverb modifications. I’m her lingual fallout. Her eloquence is coded onto the back of my skull like Paleolithic graffiti inside a cave.

Everyone has heard the ballad about Orpheus’ ill-fated venture to the underworld. They’ve heard about Orpheus strumming his way into the icy hearts of Hades and Persephone. They’ve heard about him crooning his zombie wife Eurydice out of Hell. They’ve heard its tragic climax—an overly ecstatic Orpheus, forgetting the terms imposed by Hades, turns to see the shine on Eurydice’s face as she re-enters life, but witnesses her second extinction instead. The euphoria of resurrecting Eurydice caused Orpheus to lose his head, forgetting that one vital instruction: don’t turn back when exiting the Underworld. Live by the heart, die by the heart. I would expect nothing less from Western Civilization’s first rock icon. Reactivating the dead is stupefying and self-destructive, but this is only the ballad’s radio edit. Most people have never heard the original mix. In the ballad’s little-known second half, Orpheus withers into a grief-stricken catatonia, spending his days sprawled on a riverbank, listening to Zephyr auto-tune his voice through the reeds. Some Dionysian groupies find Orpheus there and try seducing the widowed rock star in attempt of recruiting him into their cult. But Orpheus is too depressed for sex. He’s also a steadfast member of the rival Apollo collective. He stays limp amidst the groupies’ advances. Romantically and religiously slighted, they tear Orpheus limb from limb, launching his decapitated head and lyre downstream on a makeshift raft. The excruciation resurrects Orpheus’ creative spirit, animating his decapitated head into song. His voice becomes more emo than ever. The complete lack of a body inclines the Thracian bard to gnaw at the lyre strings a la Jimi Hendrix. A procession forms along both sides of the riverbank, megafans and melomaniacs eager to hear the newfangled technology. The tour ends at Lesbos.

The island's muses establish an oracle for Orpheus. He prophesizes there until his fandom outnumbers Apollo's, which inspires the God of Sun and Music to deactivate the solar-powered boom box and cast its lyre into the constellations. Dying is the most human thing an icon can do, but interfacing with buried loves ones is a death trap.

Ma has died many times over the years. Her most recent death feels less final than previous ones. She came back from those extinctions depleted, existentially maimed and embittered. The drunken car crash that wrecked her teeth. A coke nose hemorrhage that nearly ended in exsanguination. A junkie boyfriend stabbing her leg with a broken vodka bottle, and then shoving her down a flight of stairs. A different coked-up boyfriend strangling her in the hallway of a seedy tenement. Her stint in a Florida jailhouse for assaulting police officers. The bank foreclosing on our family home. Getting evicted from townhouses, apartments, and studios. I could go on and on. Ma died and died in a series of calamities. I thought each one was the end. Each revival a Frankenstein miracle. Her next resurrection will be less miraculous. Her next one will occur through me. I am all that's left of her short circuitry. For decades, I amused myself with Ma's suffering. I published essays about her malfunctioning. I fictionalized her tragic character in a novel. I saved her irreligious voicemails and shared them with friends. I recorded her raunchiest FaceTime rants and uploaded them onto IG. I wanted to make Ma infamous. Penance for drinking and snorting the mortgage payments. Penance for casting me into tax debt by working under my social security number while simultaneously collecting welfare. Penance for spending the college money my nonna had gifted me. I aestheticized Ma to death, and then Sara resurrected our relationship with the help of her uterus and lesser technologies. Now Ma must possess me. It's my penance owed to her. I will annunciate Ma's supreme discourse, the accent and slang of her Boston ghetto talk. I will speak it to my son. I will profess it to my students. I will whisper it in Sara's ear during intimate moments. If I am to be Ma 2.0, then I must delete all competing and virtual duplications of her. She can't be living in any symbolic limbos. Her virtual death must be given a proper burial by deleting the voicemails and FaceTime videos. I will hack into Ma's Facebook account and pare it to a single profile pic, the one of her at the beach, her smiling

face ruddy with sun, posing next to the cover of her favorite book: *An Idiot's Guide to Communicating with Spirits*.

I lost my whisk a few months before Ma passed. Her head was on the counter as I made Sunday breakfast. I reached for my whisk to scramble some eggs but it had completely dematerialized. Ma coached my search as I pulled cabinets and drawers apart. I eventually had to improvise my scrambling with a fork. Ma offered to buy me a new whisk. For the first time in her life, she'd been saving money. She was dying to blow it on me. During her poorest, most unemployed days, Ma would lend me and Leah her last dollar, even if it tapped her for the rest of the week. We seldom asked, but she would have. Thirty years later, Ma was finally in a position to spoil us. For weeks, she offered to buy me a new whisk. I refused. She increased her offer to a Cuisinart. I sternly refused, but not out of pride or principle. I wanted Ma to spend every penny of that tiny fortune on herself, but being the real idiot, I couldn't understand that her only need was to baby me. Her nightly whisk pleas became an endearing source of entertainment. I'd impersonate Ma's deep and smoky beseeching voice. *Eugenio, let me buy you a new whisk. Do want me to buy you a new whisk? Eugenio, would you please let me buy you a new whisk?* Everyone died at the impersonation, even Ma. Sara ordered us a new whisk and Ma actually died a few days later. We flew to Boston for the first time since COVID. We grieved in a packed funeral home and partied indoors for days. No one contracted the virus. We returned to Los Angeles. I cried throughout the entire preparation of our first dinner home. Ma's head wasn't there to marvel and fuss over my tears. These dinner preps have been the loneliest minutes of my life until just the other night while making a salad dressing, I opened the drawer where our new whisk sleeps. The old whisk was there lying head to toe next to it, right where Ma left it.

Expert Advice for Your Human Cannonball Apprenticeship

When punching a mailbox, the bones in your hand don't shatter because the mailbox has acted, they shatter because you resist the reality of the mailbox. You resist its quiet state of being. Do you see the way wisteria creeps over the balustrade, the way nuthatches tap at fallen bark in search of an earwig to eat? They'll do this regardless of whether you suffer or blossom. Choose anger or pearl-handled acceptance, it makes little difference to the generator purring its power or the twin-engine airplane soaring above. You can no more change the passive-aggressive program assistant than you could the order of seasons. You can no more change construction delays than you could the pull of tides. When you are snug in the mouth of the cannon, spangled helmet fastened, glittering suit zipped to your neck, listening to the comical fuse sparkle its way to your launch, you could resist the powder trickling into the priming hole, resist the trick linstock that lights it, resist the cartridge concussing, the flash of ignition, the wild puff of smoke. You could, like a toddler refusing his cabbage, defy the moment as its already happening, but why deny yourself the pleasures of altitude, the glorious feeling of a moment's flight? Because you fear the landing? You've so much time to be earthbound. You've so much time to be—what is it, that thing you've struggled to name? The feeling of being asleep while driving, while shaving, while hiking. Wrapped like a mummy in the ordinariness of it all. Sheathed in anything other than joy. Can you not see now the need for acceptance? Look around at the dazzling tumult of the city surrounding you, at the marvelous chaos of summer. You have been, each moment of your life, at a circus, the ringleader's megaphone announcing your name, the ordinance ready to fire you skyward.

Death Styles 1.6.21

Moms of the Underworld

“Unable to resolve this riddle/I died of remorse.”

That was the day
I turned on me
my sphinx face.

I was proud of the claw, the tail, the wing
and the scales that marked me as every well-defended
monster and fortress

in one. I tossed my mane.
My naked breasts could be overlooked (by me)
as they grinned like armed brigands from my chest.

Keeping watch for what
I peered out the portals
where no photons reached.

My photoreceptors
dozed like missiles
on their pads. At my snout

spread white smoke
a sinking shirt on waves.
Each hole hid a hole

where a buried cable

telegraphed the brain
-wet meadow, also strewn with holes

where a gilt-hooved cow might turn her heel
or an agile girl her ankle as she turned into a cow
or turned to take the full weight of the bull

-ground that wears a winter scurf all spring
drags it all around the spaceship or town
wears it all the way down.

Something is failing here
on the organelle level
the two living children

the dead one the girl
who never knew the weather
outside me that broke

me what a joy to know now
what she's missing as I
order every living thing down

on its knees
to scumble in the mud
for pomegranate seeds

CONCLUSIVE DEATH STYLE:

A Katabasis for River Phoenix

Now at last it's time to climb down to the tower
Slippery with blood
Blood on your white paws, and in your blond coiffure
You kept the barbershop in business
as the rats ran by like Romanovs
little bits of gold wiring
stuck in their teeth
gold name reversed on the window, the spinning pole
the mirror the razor the deep chair for murder
you lept in and out of
lept up and escaped
You kept the tower in sight
as you crashed out of your episode
systolic, diastolic
The tower flagged like a flower
sinusoidal, katabatic
yet it could point directly to a star
I am speaking now of the tower
scoliotic, scleretic
above the streets that slanted steeply
like a sick and pitching ship
sucked dye up its vasculature
as any schoolkid knows
how to fashion a crude siphon
with a tube, a gas tank, a car,

and of course your mouth
meanwhile the tsarovich has hemophilia
and the guards have switched sides
and everybody's down in the basement
watching a movie on a sheet
and this movie's a two-reeler
and it's kind of a two-hander
and it's kind of a tear-jerker
and it's kind of the production of a serious sentimentalist
and it's starring two stars one light one dark
the blue expanse is just a tacky backdrop
compared with these two
and you're the light one
you're the star
who left the light on
all night and burnt out

your pompadour rises
as if from a bomb test
alarmed and expansive
knocking it all out
there's not a lot of thinking here
there's not a lot of light
there's not a lot going on
i'd prefer to lie down and die outside the viper room
with my friends all suspended on the shockwave
in the vaporware
as on the red and black walls of Greek vessels
burst petechiae in the eyewalls
as on tv when the victim's strangled
oh shut up well anyway any picture is possible
any urn at all

and it's not particularly sweet to remember
how you tapped your ash
how you knocked your cherry off
how I wanted to leap off the bridge with you
but lost my contact lens in the grass
it was such expensive plastic
I had to drive home with one eye
open
and behind me
the other
that perfect lens
in the grass
the eye that god made for me
so i could image his face
and yours as you ashed
your Marlboro there
you ashed it from the trainbridge
the drifting of a god
the drifting of gold
in a river
when ever after
the river
was dragged by
divers
you only turned up
later elsewhere
you only turned up
your face

River I'm trying to see around you
to an idea of art that's pit and tower
dick and uterus at once

inside the blood can splash, replenish
and shed all over again
piss blood
heat and daylight
invert to a flock of bats
fly back
and hang close
irritatingly loyal
isn't consciousness like that though
I'd love to slough off
the lining of thought
from the wall where bats scuff
like schoolshoes
and about that big
and there's plenty here
plenty of nothingness
plenty of height
and plenty of lowness
and plenty of dark
plenty of no
odors but our own
and nothing
but the furs we wore in life
derealizing into odor
our sightlines sharpening in our skulls
that look on nothing
our vision
admittedly
and at last improved—

to you I can say
I refuse
to shut my eyes
because I was robbed
of something
by a god
and I'm going
to keep looking
til I find it.

On *Muscle Memory*: Muriel Leung and Jenny Liou in conversation

Jenny Liou, debut author of the recently released poetry collection *Muscle Memory*, and I are the same height, but upon first laying eyes on each other in person, I can already tell that she can pin my arms behind my back and have me on the floor in under three seconds. We are both Asian women but only one of us is well versed in the art of forcing someone into submission in a fight, both a literal and figurative struggle portrayed in *Muscle Memory*, which is a book that is as much about racism and sexism in the Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) world as it is our day-to-day living.

As a book publicist representing *Muscle Memory* for Kaya Press, an independent publisher that highlights Asian Diasporic voices, I delighted in this first in-person meeting with Jenny who seemed to embody all the social contradictions of what it means to be an Asian woman—a fighter and a mother, capable of talking nonchalantly about breaking a finger with a single kick in midair and true forgiveness. What makes it easy to promote Jenny’s work is precisely how she holds all these contradictions in one place, forcing us to look closely at the sound of an elbow snapping in the ring. There, in that bone cracking, we seem to find not only the many textures of hurt but also to locate the dimensions of Asian women’s experiences as eclectic, complex, and mired in a mess of pain and release.

Jenny’s life has had a fascinating trajectory—born and raised in rural Idaho, she learned how to fight and translate Chinese poetry from her father. She ascended the ranks in the MMA world in the strawweight division, earning a reputation as a professional fighter to beat. Then came a career change to an environmental researcher and writing professor. She teaches at Pierce College now, the mother of two children with equally daring pastimes. Jenny remarked once that her oldest child has been experimenting with new balancing acts on his bicycle: “I realize it’s safer to watch them carefully and let them figure it out than to forbid these activities altogether.”

This feeling of history repeating itself is very much the undercurrent of *Muscle Memory*, which moves through the aches and pains of the fighting ring as much as it does the history of Chinese migration and diasporic woes. In this interview with Jenny, I ask her about the weight of this inheritance and if we can ever outmaneuver what haunts us. This is what she has to say.

Muriel Leung: In your debut collection *Muscle Memory*, I'm fascinated by the interplay between your two selves—the retired MMA fighter who can endure the pain of an elbow about to break in the ring and the thoughtful poet and scholar. Throughout the book, fighting and poetry appear to be enmeshed for you, which we see in poems like “Scansion Between the Ropes” where you write “The JAB-CROSS is the boxer's iamb, the JAB-JAB-CROSS her anapest.” Do you find yourself having to translate between fighting and poetry in your life and writing? Has the writing and publication of *Muscle Memory* changed your relationship to martial arts since retiring?

Jenny Liou: At first, I wasn't sure that “translation” was the appropriate word for my relationship between fighting and writing poetry because something about the two—the embodied rhythms, mental strategies, and the way they both require you to face down pain—has always made me feel like fighting and writing are part of the same arena, as opposed to separate practices that translate from one to another.

But then I started thinking about the “translations” in *Muscle Memory*. The poems I know in Chinese that appear in the book are poems that my dad has recited to me, or poems I've read in translation that captivated me. I center these little fragments as little poems on their own, the fragments that caught my imagination, giving voice to the ways that I, an immigrant's daughter, experience this dislocated longing for China.

Fighting is like this for me too. My dad shares some harsh memories about his family's exodus from China to Taiwan, and later, his solo journey to the United States. But his stories about the many years he spent training in kung fu lighten the

sadness. I have these little snippets of memories in my childhood home in Moscow, Idaho—my dad demonstrating moves to escape an attacker in the living room, or when he didn't know anyone was watching, breaking into spinning, leaping kicks in the front lawn, well into his sixties. I think my own journey into martial arts was certainly tangled up with wanting to do what my dad did. Maybe partly to connect with him through my teens and twenties when we bickered ferociously in most other aspects of our lives, but also because, for him, martial arts seemed like they provided him such solace and I wanted that in my life too.

This is probably part of why I've found my way back to jiu jitsu so many times over the years. I tried to get back to the sport in 2018 after the birth of my son, but I never properly healed from an emergency C-section and experienced prohibitive, searing pain when I tried to do certain moves, or when I upped my intensity in sparring. My doctor kept telling me this was normal, that I would heal with time but I didn't. And when my daughter was born by C-section a couple years later, my doctor realized that the first wound had indeed never healed, and he excised my extensive scarring while cutting my daughter free. So instead of feeling pained after that surgery, I felt like something invisible had been set right, that I was finally myself again.

This might be a gruesome metaphor, but maybe writing *Muscle Memory* has been a similar experience—an incision and an excision all at once—a deep dive into my own little traumas and my family's historical ones, and as the book finds its way into the world, it feels like some chapter in life has been completed, something has been set right. During this same period, I've finally healed enough to be able to immerse myself in jiu jitsu again, no unplaceable invisible pains, no reflex to guard my abdominal scar. I've also been writing a ton, and I've been feeling pulled to write in new ways. I assume these two things are related by forces stronger than translation or metaphor.

ML: In reading *Muscle Memory*, I've been thinking a lot about this idea of our relationship to pain and resiliency, especially as Asian women. In the titular poem,

you share a series of miseries—you find out that you have been cheated on the day before a big fight and overhear a man telling an infant child that he wants to leave his partner. You write, “I’ve hit the heavy bag more times than I can count, until my arms know what to do and can’t stop doing it.” There’s something so achingly sad for me in this line, and it makes me think about how we are oftentimes commended for overcoming pain, for persisting in the fight even despite being knocked down. Resiliency is double-edged here, it seems. How have you been thinking about your relationship to pain and resiliency throughout this book? And where do you think the limits are for you in terms of what is endurable?

JL: In an odd way, the pain of a cage fight is part of its attraction. I don’t think it’s that I’m a masochist, if anything, it’s the opposite—I’m an utter hedonist. I think it’s that in the cage, you get to dwell in the illusion that you know exactly the maximum time that the violence will last. Your coach is shouting out the passing minutes; you’re waiting for the ten second clap; you feel like you can endure anything if it’s only going to happen for a few more minutes or a few more seconds. Those other kinds of pain you mention, the interpersonal ones, don’t really come with that kind of expiration date. If anything, in my life at least, it has often seemed as if they escalate before improving. For this reason, I’ve found that the cage teaches some misleading lessons—it teaches you how to be stoic, teaches you that endurance is strength, teaches you never to back down or flee or admit you’re hurting. But the thing is, when I applied those lessons to violent relationships outside the cage, I think I spent far too long trying to suffer bravely without realizing that leaving would have actually taken more courage. And then once I realized this, stepping away was much harder than I thought it would have been. I guess I had trained my emotional responses much as I had trained my physical body, and it turned out that leaving took emotional muscles that I had neglected for years. Now, I no longer want to test the limits of what I consider physically endurable, but maybe writing poetry tests out other tolerances—how honest can I be? How kind? How long can I sit with grief?

ML: Those questions really hit home for me. It makes me think about how we tend to glorify pain, endurance, and resiliency such that we are locked into the

mechanisms of our world that perpetuate violence rather than trying to locate an exit. I'm curious then what has writing *Muscle Memory* taught you about "the speed of pain" or its "inheritance"? Do you think we can ever outmaneuver it?

JL: I might never know if it's possible to outmaneuver pain because that's not my impulse. My impulse is to turn and face it. Maybe I don't want to face pain in the cage anymore, and I don't want to experience it from the hands of a partner, but maybe poetry is a place to tangle with pain in healthier ways. In the poem "Muscle Memory," the problem is that I've trained myself to ignore pain in such a way that helped me in the cage, and I can't stop myself from pushing past this pain, even once I realize it's not serving me in other parts of life. I don't think I feel a pressure or obligation in poetry to make each poem different from the last for the sake of novelty—it's more that each poem offers a fresh approach to a painful problem. Talking about this has got me thinking about that John Donne poem, "The Triple Fool":

Then as th' earth's inward narrow crooked lanes
Do purge sea water's fretful salt away,
I thought, if I could draw my pains
 Through rhyme's vexation, I should them allay.
Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,
 For he tames it, that fetters it in verse.

I think I knew those lines by heart after reading them for the very first time because they sang so directly to me about the hope and appeal of poetry. But of course, this hope is dashed in the next stanza when it turns out that delighting in the poetry created out of grief intensifies that grief and sets it free again. Perhaps Donne is correct and poetic practices do not tame grief or evade pain any more than pugilistic ones do, but perhaps poetry can transform it.

ML: Poetry for me has always had that transformative potential. I think it also has something to do with the possibilities we find in constraints. Writing a book

sometimes feels like locating the parameters of a subject, to give something that feels lofty and obsessed over a container. In *Muscle Memory*, it feels like the book is studying the limits of the ring. In “Shame,” you write of the practice of learning the size of a ring without looking back: “That restrictive art gets tiring, the constant readiness, the end of hoping for an end to gauging where I am by where I’ve been.” Is it fatigue that lets you know you’ve reached the parameters of this book? How did you know when you’ve finally said all that’s needed to be said for *Muscle Memory*?

JL: I kept adding poems to *Muscle Memory* all the way until Kaya’s editorial team told me that I had to stop because the book was going to press. And because the book experienced a few pandemic-related delays, this window was fairly lengthy (a couple of years). When it was time for the book to be published, I didn’t stop writing poems. I ended up with a few more poems that would have probably fit nicely with the book, except that they didn’t find their shapes until after the book was already at the printer. This isn’t to say that the publication was mistimed or that the book is unfinished. If anything, it showed me that I’m the same kind of writer as I was fighter at the ten-second bell; I always used to find hidden energy, and I’ve won many fights in those final seconds, even when, I was almost resigned to having already lost. But a few weeks ago, as the rush of completing *Muscle Memory* receded, I found myself working on some new poems that feel fundamentally different. They feel like the beginning of something new, and this reassures me that *Muscle Memory* ended when and where it was supposed to end.

ML: It’s funny because I know that impulse well, and the realization we have after a book’s completion is that the conversation goes on well beyond the page—a kind of contending with ghosts, in a way. I’d like to think that sitting with ghosts has been a type of reconciliation with pain and trauma in the sense that nothing is patched up but merely there, its traces cannot harm us anymore. I’m thinking of your consideration of this process in your poem “After Writing the First Poem” where your father remarks that it wasn’t poetry that he hated but the idea of one’s daughter being a poet as it would mean to “spend [one’s] life with ghosts.” Do you think we are haunted?

JL: It seems to me that many immigrant parents make enormous sacrifices for the hope that their children will be able to start anew, without ghosts. When I was young, I felt pressured into what I now recognize as the model minority myth, which I think is all about a refusal or denial of haunting. But the haunting creeps in. In the poem “Sleeping in the Crook of An Arm,” I overhear my father telling my husband, who was, at the time, my relatively new boyfriend and a complete stranger to my father, a detailed and painful story that I had never heard. At first, I felt envy—how could this person be closer to my father after a couple of hours than I was after a lifetime? I’ve come to understand that there’s a certain kind of intimacy that happens only at a distance. Apparently, my father was willing to pour out some of his deepest guilt to a near stranger but not to me. For a long time, I thought that was so strange, but the longer I’ve sat with it, the more I’ve realized that I do it too. Poetry is one way of doing this—one way of welcoming the haunting.

My sense of what haunting means is influenced by Eve Tuck who writes that dispossession produces ghosts. In a small sense, I think this story is one example. But it is possible both to lament the conditions of dispossession that created each of our ghosts to begin with and to crave contact with those ghosts. That is, to crave haunting and to seek it out, because haunting is all that connects us with the people and stories we hardly knew that we had lost.

ML: Let’s go back to the beginning of your book, which begins with a sense of haunting. Your opening poem “Pulling Punches,” is set during a celebratory Easter gathering where you describe your father’s determination to knock down your child’s piñata in such a way that is reminiscent of the violence you once endured from him. Once the piñata hitting concludes, the party continues and your observation of your father’s violence is known only to yourself. The poem remarks, “I wonder / if we could just get beyond it all and be happy.” It is a bitter and aching opening and teaches us to read the book with careful attention to the way in which violence and trauma reverberates beyond the ring and in the intimacies of one’s home life.

What is your desire for this book in terms of your discussion of fighting and violence? How much does this opening poem's inquiry about our ability to move beyond the pain of these experiences persist as an enduring question throughout the book? Do you feel you have arrived at any conclusion about whether "we could [actually] just get beyond it all and be happy"?

JL: "Pulling Punches" doesn't describe unique or extraordinary violence. I think one of the most profound paradoxes of the book is that my dad was a kind and loving father who sometimes hit his kids. This feels like a taboo subject in my family now, perhaps because American culture has shifted its stance on this topic. I'm almost forty, and from this vantage, it seems pretty clear to me that corporal punishment must have been the norm in many of my friends' households as well as mine, but I grew up in rural Idaho, in a town, and at a time when there weren't many other Chinese or multiracial families around, and I think the general sentiment amongst my friends and my brothers was that my father was someone to be feared—that his penchant for spanking us was tangled up with his Chineseness, and ours. Our friends weren't entirely wrong.

I don't know if these violences at home conditioned me for the cage, or if the same defiant spirit that led me to insist upon corporal punishment also made the cage a natural fit. I hope that one of the clearest, though most implicit subtexts of the book is that the fearless stoicism that served me in the cage also made me vulnerable to domestic violence. Cage fighting teaches you to be injured without being afraid, or at least to be afraid without ever showing it. Over the years, and across a few relationships, I put up with some pretty outlandish things because it never occurred to me to be strong enough to leave; all that ever crossed my mind was being strong enough to silently endure it.

When it comes to moving past all the little acts of violence in my family. I understand and even empathize with my parents' modes of punishment and the sources of their rage. I'm also aware that ever since I was very young, I've known how to be very mean, and that sometimes I've been meaner than I should have

been in the guise of fearlessness. So, there's been a lot to forgive all around. For me, now that I have children of my own, the stakes have almost everything to do with them. They're a quarter Chinese, and I see my ancestors' faces in theirs, but I don't know if they do or if anyone else does. My father is in his mid-seventies now, and I fear that when he passes, my kids will lose the thread connecting them to that part of who they are. So, I'm torn between wanting to steep them in our family and needing to spare them the knowledge of this violence endured. How can they keep the pieces I love without inheriting the parts that brought us so much suffering?

During the years in which cagefighting was at the center of my daily life, those family violences slipped from view, and I started to reassure myself that when the brutality became too much, I'd just retire. This isn't directly stated in the book, but my husband made me retire. He didn't like fighting, and he didn't want to live life with a fighter. I agreed to this, probably because after spending so many years immersed in violence, I craved the safety of living life with someone who couldn't stand the thought of it. But it bothered me, and instead of fading, my frustration increased with distance and perspective. That decision should have been mine. For some time, I missed fighting, missed the kind of fitness that comes only from incessantly testing your body against other bodies, and so I went back to jiu jitsu, which has far more rules and far less blood than cagefighting but is still plenty violent. I think, or at least I hope, my family has learned to sit with all those little violences without anger or recrimination. I understand my father wanting to discipline his kids to keep them safe. I understand my husband wanting to force me to quit to keep me safe. I understand why my refusal to fully accept the conditions of the sanctuaries that they offer sometimes enrages them, but I also think that my refusal is necessary and important. I guess I've stopped trying to get past it.

The son in "Pulling Punches": he's four now and obsessed with biking. He's starting to do a bunch of tricks, the scariest of which is pedaling at top speed (with no training wheels), then popping up so that one foot is standing on his seat with the other trailing behind him. It's terrifying. He crashes a lot and has perpetual

scabs on his knees and palms. When he stands up bloodied, he shouts at the top of his lungs: “BMX hurts!” And then he starts again. So maybe this masochism just runs in his blood, or maybe I’ve been less able to protect him than I thought, and it seems like probably we’re never going to get past this suffering we inflict upon ourselves. But oddly, yes, despite this, I think we’ve learned to be happy.

Yesterday

The old woman asked me to pull off her head —
off her neck, where she had only bone. I'm not medically
qualified, I said. We should seek advice.

But I carried her close to me all day, while I cared for
her teen granddaughter, also a younger boy.
Her eyes, I noticed, seemed more alive,

and was the flesh growing back on her neck?
We waited for a new tree, a pine, to be delivered.
The place already chosen, the hole dug.

I kept the three close to me all day, as they came
and went. Then I left for home. The phone rang,
it was god, complaining

that I had left snow on the porch

(Peri)menopause May Cause Cognitive Difficulties

Is that a man opening a gate or a bird skittering on my rooftop
is the bird's mouth open does a bird have a mouth
no
a beak does it speak does it sing
I try to say song I say poem
I try to say poem I say perfume
did I keep my mother's Chloe
the scent of my mother's dress in 1986
where did I store the Chloe
I placed it somewhere song
I try to say safe I say stay no sad no stone no song
no grace I'm trying to say grace
it's funny to call me *granny*
because *granny* means doddering mother
(when my mother said Greg she meant Ken
when my mother said both she meant me)
I change my words like a mother
I never was a mother
I want to say closet I say jar

my universe is inverted
my uterus is inverted
no my cycle is now inverted
a door stands ajar
what was the laundry on Sunday
did I do the weather on Sunday
I want to say Sunday but Christ
I want to say Christ but say Christmas
Christmas comes out like gift
a clear mind is like a Christmas
I misplace my thoughts like a person
who enters a room with a quirk
who enters a room with a question
I know how to start a movie
why can't I start the movie
somebody start the movie
laugh at me if you have to
it was only funny the first time.

The Patient

Four days before the miracle is broadcast live, there is an operation. Of this, the patient remembers nothing.

Only that it wasn't a success. Her problem unresolved, with something indiscernible left over. She knows a complication came up, the kind that's never covered in medical school, which the overworked surgeon should have been able to handle, or the nurse, whose mind was on her son's attendance (she had just received an email saying he'd skipped fourth period), should have stopped before it was too late. In other words, a mistake happened. Something these waivers, releases, and verbal confirmations make clear the clinic is not liable for (this is plastic surgery after all, things occasionally come out not as promised).

Behind closed doors, the clinic's office associates pilfer a scan of the result. All concur that the patient's body is indeed not what she wanted. One says it looks like a cousin of what was intended, another imagines it as the sex organs of a humanoid extraterrestrial. "The kind you'd see pop out of a monster's mouth." The women nod at this. One secretary, the longest serving, who averages six smoke breaks a day, thinks it looks kind of cute. (What each fails to consider is whether this gaffe might impact their workplace. When the public finds out about the patient, no one will want to get their bodies fixed at the clinic where it all went down. In five months, each will be out of her current job.)

By the time the patient wakes up, her mother has come to similar conclusions about her new anatomy. A parent had six hours and twenty-two minutes to rehearse how she will break this news to her kid. This has produced the line, "They hope to reassess after the swelling goes down."

"Do I know you?" the patient whispers, still under the twilight glamour of anesthesia. She would like to be held, but her mother does not offer this. In fact, her mom seems to be avoiding any physical contact. Her mom is thinking that this was all a mistake, that maybe, as a parent, she should have asked more questions or expressed more doubt in the time since her twenty-two-year-old came out. But the time for questions has passed. Her kid snores until the surgeon arrives that

afternoon. He knocks on the door and the patient opens her eyes. He sits on a chair beside her, opposite the mother. He's come to inform the pair that there will be no future procedures down there. Another terrible result of "this complication" (his words) is that any operation would put her life at risk.

It is the surgeon's last word that wakes the patient to reality. When her mother asks if there are any specialists in the world who might be able to work around this, the surgeon fiddles with the cubic zirconia in his ear. "Maybe Denmark, but he's got a killer waitlist. A backroad chop shop in LA might take a stab—somewhere they'd take your money no matter the risk—but like I said, you'd be putting yourself in danger. I'd advise against it." As the bandages are changed, and the patient sees her new sex for the first time, her disorientation is replaced with shock. The taste of rust fills her mouth, an alarm clock is in her chest. Around the clinic, coworkers embrace as they hear the sound of panic transmuting into despair.

The mother and daughter are released twenty-three hours later. Working her kid up the apartment's stairs, the mom repeats, "Surely there's someone out there with better advice."

The mom decides to Google after tucking her kid in bed. Finding nothing but porn under her search terms, she switches to social media. "Maybe someone knows someone," she says, handing the daughter an Oxy. There's a fire in her mind, and a political thousand words are drafted easily on her phone. For good measure, she attaches a scan of the genitalia so friends can understand the scope of their problem. (Facebook, for the record, permits adult nudity in "health-related concerns.")

"What do you think?" she asks, holding up the screen.

The patient's eyes are closed to the phone. The drugs have kicked in, and her head is full of distant house music, as if an Italian disco has set up across the street. She drifts down, down, until an alien voice emerges from under the covers, meek and singsong, telling the mother to *Werk*.

The mother clicks 'Post.'

Within thirty seconds, a comment appears from an old acquaintance—a fellow transwoman the patient knew in undergrad and considered intelligent, if a little

self-righteous. The response: “I read the whole thing and am so heartbroken omg so sorry sis! This helped me once upon a time,” links to an early 2010s blog post written by said acquaintance. The title “I Am Not My Body” catches the mother’s attention. She reads the entire gender jeremiad in journal form aloud, even though her daughter isn’t listening and has already heard many op-eds like this.

By the time her mom bookmarks the page, a dozen comments have flooded the post, each outdoing the one before in declarations of sympathy and well wishes. There are offers of prayer from middle school bullies and dimly remembered strangers, all of which would fail to comfort the patient if she was lucid. A response from the patient’s best friend in fourth grade reads, “I love you no matter what,” followed by the ex-who-was-too-attentive saying, “I am looking into the legality of your waiver now. Contacting lawyers.” The latter response receives thirty ‘Likes,’ now thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-six. Old friends from Boy Scouts ask if they can raise money for her cause. A high school Spanish teacher writes, “You are brave and beautiful and an inspiration.” A second ex, the one-who-was-emotionally-unavailable-but-her-daughter-still-fell-hard-for-anyway, has opted to text the patient directly. A message from “Don’t Answer This” coos, “I am here. Call me.”

The mother reads each of these aloud. The patient doesn’t respond. She only motions for another Oxy. After reaching for a mason jar of tap water, she swallows.

The patient wakes up disoriented and cotton-mouthed, her mother nowhere to be found. The room is dark. She dreamt that a fist grew between her legs, clenching then stretching out. At the end, the fist closed in on itself, forming a mouth with the thumb and pointer, then began to sing.

First, the patient remembers her body. Several minutes pass after this. When she does move, she reaches for her phone to check the time, but her phone is dead. The patient notices a Post-it on her bedside table while managing the charger. It reads, “At my place, text when you’re up. Love you forever. -M.”

The patient’s phone is quiet for a half-minute after powering on. Then, suddenly and without end, comes a tickerbox melody of buzzes, beeps, chimes, trills, and vibrations. There are messages and missed calls and tagged posts across

all her social media platforms. Before the patient can react beyond a stupored squint, her phone is ringing.

“Hello, is this the girl with the genitalia?” a woman’s voice asks.

The patient hangs up.

Her texts provide an explanation. Namely, the hyperlinks her mother sent tell a story when her messages aren’t “CALL ME” or “I’m tired of waiting for you to call. Driving back. Don’t try to stop me but do CALL.” Apparently, the ex-who-was-too-attentive took the liberty of notifying the press to what he pitched as a malpractice case. (Let him do what he wants, she thinks, still high.) His narrative was picked up by a few queer-affiliated news outlets, then co-opted by several pseudointellectual progressives on Twitter, who declared what happened to the patient not so much a tragedy as a statement on gender itself. The dawn of not merely indiscernible gender, but the complete transcendence of it. “Medically Made Gender Oblivion,” they call it—happily! These tweets garnered thousands of retweets, including an assigned-female-at-birth-and-recently-identifying-as-queer-celebrity, who declared the matter of the patient’s genitalia to be the new Bermuda Triangle, the new Manifest Destiny, and the new Vibe Shift. (For the life of her, the patient cannot understand what such a combination means beyond her body being an enigma people want to get into.) From the celebrity endorsement came exponential growth. On Instagram, users have begun changing their profile pictures to her genitalia in shows of liberal solidarity. On Facebook, southern mothers warn that the patient is the latest insidious tactic in transgenderist ideology, while sectarian pastors the world round mark this as a sign of the end times (see Leviticus). In response to this excitement, Redditors photoshop her crotch as the pinnacle of the masonic pyramid, which is then reposted so heavily on Tumblr that executives shut down their servers for fear of widespread nudity in conflict with their community standards. *Minecraft* players reconstruct the image with thousands of blocks and a street mural in Taipei copies the image at a scale ten thousand times the original, the painting of which is time-lapsed on TikTok. The patient discovers her surgeon has already held a press conference explaining the irredeemability of her situation, followed by the earlier-mentioned specialist in Denmark confirming that no attempt at alteration, reclamation, or excavation can

be made for at least three decades. (“Until the science improves!” he shouts, before calling on governments to fund the necessary research.) Over the course of her drugged sleep, every digitally literate *sapien* has asked and attempted to answer the question: What does this mean? Followed by: Well, what even is *this*? The mother’s post having done the impossible: equalized the playing field of analysis. No one is *the expert*; everyone is a dipshit trying to name a thing that has heretofore been unwitnessed by human eyes.

Some Berlin anarchists say to name the thing is to deny the genitalia its chaotic power. Other populists have rallied around a widely-circulated name concocted by a twelve-year-old Weibo user in Hangzhou: “Chuppy.”

The patient is wide awake now.

The patient feels she ought to get up, throw open a window and announce to the world that here she is, their chosen one. But now is not the time for standing on balconies and waving. No one is offering her awards. There is too much pain between her legs. Distant house music still plays in her mind.

Just as the patient thinks to call someone, her front door bursts open. A great clatter is heard down the hall, the sound of many things being set down. It is her mother. It is her mother, and she has come to tell the patient that she needs to get up, get dressed, fix her hair. Now.



The interviewer is in her late fifties at least, which would locate her as a child of the Seventies, a time when a man wearing frills on his collar was an act of gender revolution. She is equipped with a sensual voice that makes every question sound flirtatious. *How are things down there? Is there a boyfriend or a girlfriend?* You’ve been on all our minds. Maybe the patient is getting mixed signals. She is more than a little confused—after her mother carried her to the car, she swallowed half a Dramamine, another Oxy, and a cup of broth. She woke up in New York City.

Occasionally, the interviewer looks at the crotch of the wool pants the mother worked her daughter into as she was passed out. The patient wonders, if she were asked to strip on camera, would she say yes? Is stripping for science still stripping,

or science? In other words, if she were painted in the nude, would she be one of Da Vinci's anatomical studies, or Manet's *Odalisque*?

"We heard there is a woman in Melbourne shopping around for a clinic willing to recreate your body," the interviewer says.

"Oh. Cool." She would be an anatomical study.

"Well, don't direct her to the hack who did this!" her mother shouts. She is fielding most of the questions. It should be noted, this mother is transformed from the woman in the clinic. She is aggressive but also repeats expressions like "We came here to address the nation before things got out of hand," and "I just want to fix the world for my kid." The mother has not called the patient "my kid" in years, and when she says this, she sounds terrified. The patient can see that this woman finally understands what her body is like. In the final minute, the interviewer sets her cue cards down on the table—a signal that *shit's getting real now*—and says, "We all saw the post. We know you and your mom were distraught after coming home, but now that everything has changed—now that you have all this *attention*—do you feel empowered?"

The studio is silent while the patient's eyes wander from her mother to the camera. Everyone is curious. No one knows the answer.

Imagine you are the patient. Imagine you are asked this four days after your sex changed permanently, resulting in a world where not just your self-invention, but that of many others, suddenly rests on your shoulders. People will be disappointed if you describe what's down there in binary terms: male or female, hot or not. Imagine, after this cosmic shift in circumstance, a stranger you are told to respect asks whether you get pleasure out of all this controversy. Her question, mind you, will result in neither condemnation nor critique toward the interviewer. Not to mention the implication of her question—*Attention! Empowered!*—is disguised in a halfhearted attempt to find a silver lining. If your first impulse is to respond with another question—for example, "What is wrong with you?"—stop there and start over. You win nothing with that fight. This will only be deflected with, "Why won't *you* answer the question? We all know *you* will fess up to the stunt sooner or later, freako." So, think hard. But also imagine you have twenty seconds left before commercial.

“No,” the patient says, the fist clenching inside her. “This all means very little. It is embarrassing. Too much.”

Imagine that this is where the humor breaks, and suddenly you are forced to enter the recovering body these texts are objectifying. Imagine subsuming that anatomy. The pain of this is unbearable. You are bleeding and medicated. The space between your thighs throbs, itches to the point that something feels like it is *moving* down there, under the bandages. Now imagine having to actually see what the genitalia looks like. Imagine it looks like what is stuck on you, down to the moles, wrinkles, and untrimmed hairs. The world is laughing at it. You’d need a miracle to convince them not to. They are saying, “Whoa!” Then, “Yikes.”

The interviewer smiles. She turns back to the camera. “Our hearts go out to you,” she says. Already, words are scrolling over the lens to introduce the latest sensation that will replace the patient. The interviewer opens her mouth, breathes in.

But, the miracle.

Out of the patient emerges a sound:

I have one thing to say.

The interviewer pauses. Slowly, she turns toward the sound’s origin. The same spot where the fist has loosened, where the voice now pops up again to chime:

Sashay, shante.

The sound comes from the patient. This is clear to everyone, including the cameraman.

Shante, shante, shante!

“Excuse me,” the interviewer says, the sensual gone from her. “Is there a phone in your pocket?”

The patient shakes her head, no. Although, that is exactly where the voice *should* be coming from. Something is singing in her lap where they’re staring. That something shimmies inside her.

A million-dollar derrière!

“Is that—” the mother says as the patient’s pelvis adds a *Whoop!*

“Is it?” the interviewer cuts in. “I mean, are you...is that...did your body by any chance just sing RuPaul’s 1992 club anthem ‘Supermodel?’”

They're checking out your savoir faire.

The patient looks at her mother. The shot has zoomed in on her.

“I think so,” she says. “It isn’t me.”

—————

After they cut, no one speaks in Studio A. Instead, the crew gives the patient a wide berth. They’re waiting for her to sing.

Naomi, she is fierce!

Titillation pulses through the room. Her body is a communal experience. For those present, it is something they will look back on and feel closer for having faced together. In an earlier age, the crowd might have fallen to their knees, performed sincere professions of faith. Sacrificed a goat, or something. What happens instead is embarrassment. Someone takes a photo with flash.

The mother throws a sweater over her daughter’s lap.

In the gap between the studio and the Escalade (not her mom’s car) a screaming throng of teens and preteens have gathered to greet the patient. They streamed the interview on their phones. More than a few shout, “Queen!” Many sing, ‘Supermodel.’ A butch lesbian holds a sign asking the patient to marry her, the genitalia and a heart drawn beside the proposal. After getting in the car, the patient discovers her detractors on the other side of the street. A linen-clad mass of Christians, crystal-heads, and divine feminists chant in prayer. A few men marching with tiki torches represent those who feel nothing but disgust at her body’s existence. One particularly metal sign demands: “BURN IT.”

The car drives off.

“I’ll remove it when I get home,” the patient thinks, envisioning the exact kitchen knife. “I am a crone, an undead witch. This cannot go on.”

Do your thing on the runway!

“I’m right here,” the mother says. She moves toward her daughter’s lap, hanging up a conference call. Already, lawyers are trying to find out if there is enough money in this to open a foundation, funnel dollars into research on implausible genitalia, maybe swing a staff. If not, then at least enough for a social awareness campaign. Every few minutes the patient’s mother squeezes her hand and says, “We can still

make this better.” How optimistic. The drive through New York to the hotel takes forty-five minutes. More than one news ticker describes the phenomenon of the patient’s body as a “sensation” or “tipping point.” The patient wonders, a tip into what? Surely the world can’t be that different for anyone who isn’t her. Why care? In Times Square, there are still Jack Sparrows and nude guitarists. Mascots and furries. A blue Cookie Monster, living statues of silver, something pink.

The patient looks closer. A crowd has assembled around a fluffy pink curiosity.

She squints her eyes until her shape is recognizable. The mascot is the patient’s sex cartoonified, with two melon-sized googly eyes and long black arms that end in fury white gloves. There are appendages, but what it looks like is a mystery. Along the side in black letters someone has embroidered the word “Chuppy.” Around it, a mess of tourists wait for their chance at a photo. As the car inches past, she watches her genitals pose, the gloved hands alternating between hugs, wrist snaps, raising the roof.

On her phone, new texts from “Don’t Answer This” come in. “Are you okay?” he writes—oh, be still heart—followed by, “I’m flipping between channels. I see your picture everywhere.”

The patient turns her phone off.



At the hotel, inside their guarded room, the mother says, “We can still get on top of this, mom can still make this right.” The patient’s mother has never referred to herself in the third person before. She is like someone else’s mother, attentive and interested, and while the patient had wished for this years ago, this is not the moment she had in mind.

“You know it was this *thing* that told you to post the photo, right?” the patient says. “I didn’t tell you to ‘werk.’”

Her mom nods slowly. “So, your body chose. Was that wrong? Think: right now we could be in your room crying, listening to it, alone. Or we could be here, with a platform.”

The patient doesn’t have an answer for this. Neither does her body. The mother peels back the bedcovers and lifts her kid in.

She says, "I guess you're a celebrity now?"

"You saw that crowd, right?" the patient says. "There are people who need me."

Her mom smiles. The body adds,

Wet your lips and make love to the camera.

"Do you need anything else?" her mom asks.

"No, thank you." The Oxy has been transported to this new, certainly more expensive bedside table, along with a hotel-branded bottle of water. "Actually, wait," she says. "Could you put a pill in my mouth? Maybe dribble some water? Make sure I don't choke."

Her mom complies. The process takes less than a minute, then she is in the bed with her. The patient wants to ask her mom to hold her, maybe explain that she no longer feels responsible for this body and would like to place it in a mother's care. But her body must have sensed this desire, and now sings, *Turn to the left, now turn to the right.*

The patient rolls over. Framed in her window, she sees two cleaners eating their packed lunches. One waves his hand, and for a second she thinks he can see her, that she has company. His sleeve slips down to reveal a smart watch. The other man nods at whatever they both read, laughing. The patient wonders if he is grinning at a headline about her while also noting this is a narcissistic suspicion.

You had everybody's eyes on you.

"Oh shut up," her mom says. "There's no audience here."

The genitalia does. In silence, the patient tries to slow down and listen. Outside her room, a security guard opens a candy bar even though his wife told him to cut sugar. A floor below, a married woman concludes an affair with her secretary. When they are done, both their phones hold push notifications about the body above them. Elsewhere, a kid vomits in the hotel pool after staying in the hot tub too long. Someone's auntie tries lingerie on in a rented single, snaps a few mirror pictures. A patron sneaks his dog in without paying the pet deposit. TVs blast. Fingers tweet. The world is narrativized, interpreted, and sense-made. The image of her new body is scrolled past.

But you know, the patient hears nothing of this. She does not even imagine it. She is too busy being a body. She can't hear outside the glass, and besides, she has

already begun to not care, swallowed the pill, embraced her need for recreational dissociation ever since she realized her problem will not disappear with the operation, which had previously held so much hope. She hardly even remembers what she wanted from the doctor. To be normal again? How funny that seems now! She would laugh if she wasn't so medicated.

Outside the window, the cleaners slide past. As they go down, the one with the watch talks while doing a little waggle with his hips. The other man laughs. Then they are gone.

You better work it, girl, her genitals sing.

“He did have good hips,” her mom adds.

The family goes quiet again, along with the body. Their song is over for now, the dance past. The daughter’s anatomy might have sung louder if the men had seen in, but they are invisible behind this window, and maybe that isn’t so bad in the end.

Hussain Ahmed a Nigerian poet and environmentalist. His poems are featured or forthcoming in *Poetry*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *A Public Space*, *The American Poetry Review* and elsewhere. He has an MFA in poetry from the University of Mississippi and currently a PhD student at the University of Cincinnati. He is the author of a chapbook *Harp in a Fireplace* (Newfound, 2021) and *Soliloquy with the Ghosts in Nile* (Black Ocean, 2022).

Jada Renée Allen is a writer, educator, and two-headed Black girl from Chicago, Illinois. A 2022 92Y Discovery Poetry Contest winner, she has received fellowships, scholarships, and support from Tin House, the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop, Community of Writers, and VONA, among others. Her work either appears or is forthcoming in the *Academy of American Poets*’ “Poem-a-Day,” *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, *Paris Review Daily*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Wildness*, and elsewhere. She has received grants from the Phoenix Office of Arts and Culture, and the Arizona Commission on the Arts. Currently, she lives on U.S.-occupied O’odham Jewed, Akimel O’odham, and Hohokam lands.

Alex Baskin is a graduate of Harvard Divinity School. Rooted in a decade of Buddhist practice and his upbringing in an orthodox Jewish community, he works as an interfaith hospital chaplain. His poetry appears in *Drunk Monkeys*, *Lucky Jefferson*, *poetry.onl*, and other journals. He has an essay forthcoming in an anthology on spiritual care (North Atlantic Books, 2023). Originally from New Jersey, he lives in Massachusetts.

Xavier Blackwell-Lipkind studies comparative literature at Yale and serves as managing editor for the Yale Literary Magazine. His short stories appear or are forthcoming in *Five Points* and *West Branch*. A recipient of Yale’s Elmore A. Willets Prize for Fiction, he is from West Hartford, CT.

Christopher Blay is the Chief Curator of the Houston Museum of African American Culture. The Liberian-born American artist, writer, and curator was the News Editor at *GlassTire Magazine* from 2019–2021 and before that, curator for the Art Corridor Galleries at Tarrant County College in Fort Worth. Blay’s writing credit includes the *Fort Worth Weekly*, *GlassTire Magazine*, *Art in America*, *Nasher Sculpture Center Magazine*, and catalog essays for Richard Prince and Letitia Huckaby respectively. Blay is a 2003 Graduate of Texas Christian University with a BFA in Photography and a minor in Art History.

Jordan Boyd is a musician and writer born in Ohio. Jordan published the poetry collection *shadow burn* with Nomadic Press in 2020. Jordan released the album ‘*!freedom!*’ in 2022 and is releasing the album *moment of peace* in early 2023. Jordan currently resides in Oakland, California.

Ciara Elle Bryant is an interdisciplinary artist working with photography, new media, video, and installations. Bryant chooses to discuss Black culture and Blackness by focusing on how identity and heritage exist in the new millennium. Bryant approaches this task through her intensive research practice, which is integral to her process of furthering conversations surrounding Black culture in art as well as historical studies. Bryant is currently residing in Dallas, TX and holds a Masters of Fine Art from Southern Methodist University.

Ana Cristina Cesar (1952–1983) is considered one of Brazil's coolest and most beloved avant-garde poets. While she never considered herself a feminist, she ultimately carved a path for feminist poetry in Brazil—she was one of the first Brazilian poets to write about the everyday life of women. In the aftermath of her death by suicide, Ana C. (as she is known) gained a huge cult following. Her language is bold, playful, literary, and irreverent. Her poetry, which switches between prose and verse, is known for its diaristic, epistolary style—in addition to being a poet, literary critic, and translator, Ana C. was also an avid letter writer.

Jai Chakrabarti is the author of the novel *A Play for the End of the World* (Knopf), which won the National Jewish Book Award for debut fiction, was the Association of Jewish Libraries Honor Book, and was long-listed for the PEN/Faulkner Award. He is also the author of the story collection *A Small Sacrifice for an Enormous Happiness* (Knopf, Feb 2023). His short fiction has appeared in *One Story*, *Electric Literature*, *A Public Space*, *Conjunctions*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and elsewhere and has been anthologized in *The O. Henry Prize Stories*, *The Best American Short Stories*, and awarded a Pushcart Prize and also performed on Selected Shorts by Symphony Space.

Yongyu Chen lives in Cambridge where they are a PhD student in Film and Visual Studies at Harvard. Their work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Chicago Review*, *Columbia Journal*, *Lana Turner*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *The White Review*, among others. They were born in Beijing, China, and grew up in East Tennessee.

Chelsea Christine Hill is from Houston, Texas. A Tin House alumna, her work appears or is forthcoming in *Pleiades*, *West Branch*, *Ninth Letter*, and *Seneca Review*. She currently lives in Champaign, Illinois.

Jo Blair Cipriano (they/she) is a queer writer originally from Hyattsville, Maryland. A Brooklyn Poets fellow and a 2022 alum of Tin House and the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop, Jo was a 2021 finalist for both Frontier Magazine's New Voices Contest and its Industry Prize. A former college dropout, they are now an MFA candidate at the University of Arizona.

Gabrielle Civil is a black feminist performance artist, poet, and writer, originally from Detroit, MI. She has premiered fifty performance art works around the world including *the déjà vu--live* (2022), *Jupiter* (2021), and *Vigil* (2021). Her performance memoirs include *Swallow the Fish* (2017), *Experiments in Joy* (2019), *(ghost gestures)* (2021), *the déjà vu* (2022), and *In & Out of Place* (2024). Her writing has appeared in *New Daughters of Africa*, *Kitchen Table Translation*, and *Experiments in Joy: a Workbook*. She teaches at the California Institute of the Arts. The aim of her work is to open up space.

Deaf, genderqueer poet **Meg Day** is the author of *Last Psalm at Sea Level* (Barrow Street, 2014), winner of the Publishing Triangle's Audre Lorde Award, and a finalist for the 2016 Kate Tufts Discovery Award, and the co-editor of *Laura Hershey: On the Life & Work of an American Master* (Pleiades, 2019). The 2015–2016 recipient of the Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholarship and a 2013 recipient of an NEA Fellowship in Poetry, Day's work can be found in, or forthcoming from, *Best American Poetry*, *The New York Times*, *Poetry Magazine*, & elsewhere. Day teaches in the MFA Program at NC State. www.megday.com.

Diana Marie Delgado is the author of the chapbook *Late Night Talks with Men I think I Trust* (Center for the Book Arts, 2015) and *Tracing the Horse* (BOA Editions, Ltd., 2019). A National Endowment for the Arts fellow and recipient of numerous scholarship and grants, she currently resides in Tucson where she is the Literary Director of the Poetry Center at the University of Arizona. She holds MFA degrees in poetry from both Columbia University and the University of California, Riverside, and is the editor of the upcoming poetry anthology, *Like a Hammer Across The Page, Poets Writing Against Mass Incarceration*, (Haymarket Books, Spring 2024).

Nathaniel Donnett is an interdisciplinary cultural practitioner born in Houston, Texas. He received his B.A. in Fine Arts from Texas Southern University and his MFA from Yale University School of Art. His practice holds metaphysical and phenomenological spaces that explore space, time, the in/exterior, and race. Black aesthetics, music, enclosures, and acts of refusal are strategies and systems he uses to challenge conventional timeline narratives and Western frameworks. Donnett raises questions surrounding sociopolitical concerns and overlooked conditions in liminal spaces. Nathaniel recently received a 2023 Houston Arts Alliance Individual Artist Grant and the 2022 John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship.

Poems by **Alice Duggan** have appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Poetry East*, *Water-Stone Review*, *Sleer Magazine* and elsewhere; also in her chapbook, *A Brittle Thing*, from Green Fuse Poetic Arts, Loveland, Colorado, 2012. She has poems in anthologies: *The Heart of All That Is*, 2013, from Holy Cow! Press, *Resist Much Obey Little*, Spuyten Duyvil Press 2017, and *Rocked by the Waters*, Nodin Press, 2020. As a writer, she's interested in dailiness, in plain speech, in sound, the timbre of voices. And always, in telling stories.

Antony Fangary is a writer based in San Francisco. He is NEA 2023 Fellow, and the author of *HARAM* (Etched Press 2019). His work has recently appeared in *New American Writing*, *The Sycamore Review*, *West Branch*, and elsewhere. Antony was a Finalist for the 2022 National Poetry Series, Honorable Mention of the Ina Coolbrith Poetry Prize, Finalist for the 2019 Wabash Poetry Prize, and Runner-up for the 2020 Test Site Poetry Series Book Prize. His work has received support from the San Francisco Arts Commission, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, and the Center for Cultural Innovation. Antony holds a B.A. from University of California Davis, and an MFA from San Francisco State University.

Ángel Faz is an award-winning multi-disciplinary artist, curator, and writer who grew up between a declared superfund site and the mouth of the Trinity River in Dallas, Texas. Their studio practice of focus has involved relief printmaking, digital projections, and video to invite others to dream of more just realities. Deeply influenced by culture and their relationship with place, their multi-disciplinary practice creates spaces of resistance and affirmation through land reclamation and body autonomy. Faz has exhibited at Women & Their Work Gallery and Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans, LA, among others. Their print Collective Care is included in the Prints & Photographs Division Online Catalog at the Library of Congress.

Kathryne David Gargano (she/her) is a queer writer interested in myth, retellings, art, and religion. She received her MFA from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Her work has been published in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Tahoma Review*, and others. She can be found on Twitter and Instagram @doubtfulljoy.

Madeleine Gaudin is a writer, editor and educator originally from Austin, Texas. She has a Bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan, where she won the Hopwood Novel Award for her novella *Don't Dream of Other Worlds*. She is an Inprint Brown Fellow and current MFA candidate at the University of Houston, where she serves as a Fiction Editor for *Gulf Coast*.

Ian Gerson is a queer and trans interdisciplinary artist and educator born and based in Houston, TX. Ian has participated in several residencies including Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, MacDowell, and Socrates Sculpture Park, and shared work across the US and in Mexico City, most recently at BOX13 in Houston and Galveston Artist Residency with an upcoming solo show at Art League Houston in 2023. Ian holds an MFA in Sculpture + Extended Media from Virginia Commonwealth University and a BFA in Studio Art from the University of Texas at Austin.

Amanda Gunn's debut poetry collection, *Things I Didn't Do With This Body*, is available from Copper Canyon Press. Her poetry appears in *Poetry*, *Narrative Magazine*, and *Poetry Northwest*. She is a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford and a doctoral candidate in English at Harvard.

Chengru He 何□茹 (何羲和 Siho Ho / Xihe He) is a poet and translator from Shanghai. She is the Chinese translator of *Tell Me, How You Live* and *Howl's Moving Castle* as well as a few poetry projects. Her writing has appeared in *Speculative Nonfiction*, *Tint Journal*, *People Say* and elsewhere. Her poetry has been or will be translated to Bengali, Spanish, and Japanese. A former ESL teacher, she holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Alabama. She lives in Salt Lake City where she is a doctoral student in Poetry at the University of Utah.

Andrew Hemmert is the author of *Blessing the Exoskeleton* (Pitt Poetry Series) and *Sawgrass Sky* (Texas Review Press). His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in various magazines including *The Cincinnati Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *The Southern Review*. He won the 2018 River Styx International Poetry Contest. He earned his MFA from Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and currently serves as a poetry editor for Driftwood Press.

E. Hughes received their MFA+MA from the Litowitz Creative Writing Program at Northwestern University. Their poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Guernica Magazine*, *Poet Lore*, *Indiana Review*, *RHINO Poetry*, and *The Offing*—among others. They are a Cave Canem fellow. They have been a finalist for the 2021 Elinor Benedict Poetry Prize, longlisted for the 2021 Granum Fellowship Prize, and a semifinalist of the 2022 92Y Discovery Contest. They were nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net Award. Currently, Hughes is a PhD student in Philosophy at Emory University.

Patrycja Humienik, daughter of Polish immigrants, is a writer and editor based in Seattle, WA. Her poetry is featured/forthcoming in *TriQuarterly*, *The Adroit Journal*, *SAND Journal Berlin*, *Ninth Letter*, *128 Lit*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Slowdown show*, and elsewhere. She is working on her first book, *Anchor Baby*. Find Patrycja on twitter @jej_sen.

Allegra Hyde is the author of *Eleutheria*, which was named a “Best Book of 2022” by *The New Yorker*. She is also the author of the story collection *Of This New World*, which won the John Simmons Short Fiction Award. Her second story collection, *The Last Catastrophe*, will be published in March 2023 by Vintage. For more, visit www.allegrahyde.com.

Audrey King graduated from Bennington College in 2020 where she studied Poetry and Dance. Her work has appeared in *Harpur Palate* and *Heavy Feather Review*. When she is not writing about death, she is dyeing cloth with plants from around the neighborhood. She currently lives in Los Angeles.

Halee Kirkwood is a poet, teaching artist, and bookseller living in Minneapolis. Kirkwood earned their MFA from Hamline University. They are a 2022 Indigenous Nations Poets fellow, a 2019–2020 Loft Mentor Series Fellow, a recipient of a 2022 Minnesota State Arts Board grant, and a 2022 artist-in-residence at the Anderson Center in Red Wing, MN. Kirkwood is the winner of the 2022 James Welch Prize for Indigenous Artists, forthcoming with *Poetry Northwest*. Their work can be found in *Poetry*, *Poem-A-Day*, *Water~Stone Review*, and others. Kirkwood is the faculty editor of *Runestone Journal*, a national undergraduate literary annual. They are a direct descendant of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe.

Angel Lartrigue is a curatorial and artistic researcher born and raised in Houston Texas. Lartigue's work explores the relationship between the body and land through the use of “putrefaction” matter as raw material. Lartigue was a participant at the international conference TABOO - TRANSGRESSION - TRANSCENDENCE in Art & Science 2020 part of the University of Applied Arts Vienna Austria where she presented her first essay, “Science At The Club: Putrefaction As An Artistic Medium.” Lartigue has given lectures and exhibited at Station Museum of Contemporary Art (HTX), the University of Texas at Austin, The Latinx Project NYU, The Holocaust Museum Houston, USC Roski School of Art and Design, The Charla Fund part of the US Latinx Art Forum 2021 and awarded through The Andy Warhol Foundation for The Visual Arts for both 2021 and 2022.

Jemma Leech is a silent poet with a loud voice. She listens when others speak, and also when they don't. She constantly writes in her head, but only occasionally lets the words escape onto paper. A British/Texan poet and essayist, Jemma lives in Houston. While she speaks from the perspective of someone with cerebral palsy, she also celebrates nature and the intimacy of human relationships. Featured in the *Houston Chronicle*, *The Times*, and on ABC News, she has given readings through Inprint, Houston Public Library and Public Poetry Houston, and was a Compassionate Houston Artist of the Year 2022 finalist.

From Queens, NY, **Muriel Leung** is the author of Poetry Society of America's 2022 Four Quartets Prize winning *Imagine Us, The Swarm* (Nightboat Books) as well as *Bone Confetti* (Noemi Press) and *Images Seen to Images Felt* (Antenna) in collaboration with artist Kristine Thompson. She received her PhD in Creative Writing and Literature from University of Southern California where she was an Andrew W. Mellon Humanities in a Digital World fellow.

Jenny Liou is an English professor at Pierce College and a retired professional cage fighter. She lives and writes in Tacoma, Washington.

Lauren Levato Coyne is a queer artist and writer. Her art writing can be found in *Antennae Journal*, *Sculpture Magazine*, and more. Her visual work has appeared in or as the cover of dozens of literary journals and poetry books. She lives in North Adams, MA with her husband and their sassy pet bird.

Davon Loeb is the author of the memoir *The In-Betweens, a Lyrical Memoir* (West Virginia University Press). He is an editor at *The Rumpus*, and his work is featured at *The Sun Magazine*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Ploughshares*, *Joyland Magazine*, *Catapult*, and elsewhere. Besides writing, Davon is a high school English teacher, husband, and father living in New Jersey. Follow Davon on Twitter @LoebDavon.

J. Estanislao Lopez is the author of *We Borrowed Gentleness* (Alice James Books). His poems appear in *Best American Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry Magazine*, *BreakBeat Poets Vol. 4: LatiNext*, and elsewhere. He lives and teaches in his hometown, Houston.

Jake Maynard is a fiction writer and essayist from rural Pennsylvania. His writing appears in *Southern Review*, *Salamander*, *Guernica*, *Catapult*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, and others. His debut novel *Slime Line* will be published in 2024 by West Virginia University Press.

Forester McClatchey is a poet, critic, and teacher from Atlanta, GA. His work appears in *32 Poems*, *The Hopkins Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Slice*, and *Plough*, among other journals.

Joyelle McSweeney is the author, most recently, of *Toxicon and Arachne* (Nightboat Books, 2020). She is a founding editor of Action Books and teaches at Notre Dame.

Katherine Mooney Brooks received her MFA in poetry and nonfiction from Virginia Commonwealth University, where she served as managing editor of *Blackbird: an online journal of literature and the arts*. Brooks has previously received a Sewanee Writers' Conference MFA scholarship in poetry. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Blackbird*, *Image*, *Tusculum Review*, and *West Trade Review*. She is the Director of Education at the Science Museum of Western Virginia.

Sara Moore Wagner is the winner of the 2021 Cider Press Review Editors Prize for her book *Swan Wife* (2022), and the 2020 Driftwood Press Manuscript Prize for *Hillbilly Madonna* (2022), and the author of two chapbooks, *Tumbling After* (Red Bird Chapbooks, 2022) and *Hooked Through* (2017). She is also a 2022 Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award recipient, a 2021 National Poetry Series Finalist, and the recipient of a 2019 Sustainable Arts Foundation award. Her poetry has appeared in many journals and anthologies including *Sixth Finch*, *Waxwing*, *Nimrod*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, and *The Cincinnati Review*, among others. Find her at www.saramoorewagner.com.

Jane Morton is a poet based in Alabama. They completed their MFA at the University of Alabama, where they were Online Editor for *Black Warrior Review*. They teach English and creative writing at the University of Alabama, and they are a copy editor for *Muzzle*. Their poems are published or forthcoming in *West Branch*, *Boulevard*, *Ninth Letter*, *Passages North*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Muzzle*, and *Frontier Poetry*, among other journals. You can find more at jane-morton.com.

Greg Nicholl is a freelance editor whose poetry has appeared in *New Ohio Review*, *Nimrod*, *North American Review*, *River Styx*, *Smartish Pace*, *Sugar House Review*, *West Branch*, and elsewhere. He is the winner of the 2021 River Styx International Poetry Contest selected by Adrian Matejka and was a finalist for the 2022 Pablo Neruda Prize for Poetry from *Nimrod* and the 2021 Patricia Cleary Miller Award for Poetry from *New Letters*.

Phoebe Oathout's fiction is in or forthcoming from *The Greensboro Review*, *Apogee*, *Bayou*, and *The Southeast Review*, where she was recently nominated for a PEN/Dau Prize in debut fiction. She shares a home in Baltimore with her girlfriend and is a student at the Hopkins Writing Seminars. Before moving to Maryland, she lived in Laramie, Wyoming, where she worked in financial aid.

Donald Platt's eighth book, *Swansdown*, won the 2022 Off the Grid Poetry Prize and was published by Grid Books this past October. His poems have appeared within the last year or are forthcoming in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Diode*, *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, *Cimarron Review*, *Seneca Review*, *Third Coast*, *Florida Review*, *Fence*, *Five Points*, *Southern Review*, and *Iowa Review*. He teaches in the MFA program at Purdue University.

Elisabeth Plumlee-Watson's writing has been published or is forthcoming in *Terrain.org*, *Oh Reader* magazine, *Killing the Buddha*, *Electric Literature*, and elsewhere. After almost ten years working in book publishing in New York City, she is now a full time bookseller and book editor in her hometown of Cleveland, Ohio, where she lives and gardens with her wife.

Ark Ramsay (Bridgetown, 1994) is a trans non-binary writer currently based in Barbados. Their fiction centers Caribbean queer identities, and coping with a warming earth from the vantage of an always-acted-upon island ecosystem. Their writing has appeared in *The A-Line: Journal of Progressive Thought*, *Small Axe*, *Gertrude Press*, *Meridian*, *The Rumpus*, and is forthcoming in *Passages North* (2024). It has also been a finalist for the Inaugural Story Foundation Prize through *Story Magazine*, and an honorable mention in *Ninth Letter*'s 2021 Literary Award for Nonfiction. They are a graduate of The Ohio State MFA in Creative Writing.

Rebekah Remington's poetry has appeared in *AGNI* online, *Blackbird*, *Gargoyle*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Linebreak*, *Ninth Letter*, *Smartish Pace* and elsewhere. Her chapbook *Asphalt* (CityLit Press) was selected by Marie Howe for the Clarinda Harriss Poetry Award. She is the recipient of a Rubys Artist Project Grant from the Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance, as well as three Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Awards in poetry.

Hannah Smith (she/her) is a queer writer from Dallas, Texas. She is an MFA candidate in poetry at the Ohio State University, where she is the Managing Editor of *The Journal*. She is a Best of the Net nominee, and her poems appear in *Nimrod*, *Meridian*, *North American Review*, *Superstition Review*, *Muzzle Magazine*, and *Palette Poetry*.

Cameron Steele is a writer, teacher, and tarot reader based in the Blue Ridge Mountains. She writes the popular “interruptions” newsletter on the intersection of the occult, literature, and motherhood, which was featured on the Top 100 in Literature on Substack in 2022. Her essays have appeared in *Barrelhouse*, *Brevity*, *Split Lip Magazine*, and *SFWP Quarterly*. You can find out more about Cameron, her writing, and her tarot offerings at cameronsteele.com.

Sarah Taban was born in Delhi and grew up across the Indian subcontinent. She is poetry editor at *Guernica* and a PhD candidate in literature at UMass-Amherst where she works on feminist-queer architextures in contemporary transnational literatures.

Sophia Terazawa is the author of *Winter Phoenix* (Deep Vellum, 2021) and *Anon* (Deep Vellum, 2023).

Raymond Thompson is an artist, educator and visual journalist based in Austin, TX. He currently works as an Assistant Professor of Photojournalism at University of Texas at Austin. He has received a MFA in Photography from West Virginia University and a MA in Journalism from the University of Texas at Austin. He also graduated from the University of Mary Washington with a BA in American Studies. He has worked as a freelance photographer for *The New York Times*, The Intercept, NBC News, NPR, Politico, Propublica, The Nature Conservancy, ACLU, WBEZ, Google, Merrell and the Associated Press.

Vickie Vértiz is the oldest child of an immigrant Mexican family. Her poetry and essays are featured in *The New York Times*, *Huizache*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *KCET Departures*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, among many publications. Her second book *Auto/Body* won the 2023 Sandee Poetry Prize from the University of Notre Dame. She is a recipient of fellowships from the Mellon Foundation, Bread Loaf Environmental Writers Conference, VONA, CantoMundo, and Macondo. Vértiz teaches writing at UC-Santa Barbara. She lives in Los Angeles.

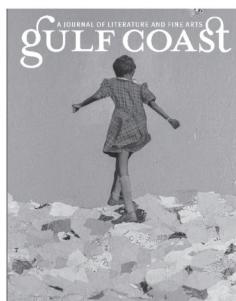
Eugenio Volpe is the author of the forthcoming novel *I, Caravaggio* (Clash Books 2023). He is a former winner of the PEN Discovery Award for Fiction. He teaches rhetoric and writing at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

Laura Wang is a teacher and writer based in New York and Taipei.

Ross White is the director of Bull City Press, an independent publisher of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. He is the author of *Charm Offensive*, winner of the 2019 Sexton Prize, and three chapbooks: *How We Came Upon the Colony*, *The Polite Society*, and *Valley of Want*. His poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry Daily*, and *The Southern Review*, among others. He teaches creative writing and grammar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and co-hosts *The Chapbook*, a podcast devoted to tiny wonderful things. Follow him on Twitter: @rosswhite.

Elisa Wouk Almino is a writer, translator, and editor based in Los Angeles. She is the deputy editor of *Image*, the style and culture magazine of the Los Angeles Times, and occasionally teaches literary translation at UCLA Extension. She is the translator of *This House* by Ana Martins Marques (Scrambler Books, 2017), and the editor of *Alice Trumbull Mason: Pioneer of American Abstraction* (Rizzoli, 2020). She is currently translating the Brazilian poet Ana Cristina Cesar and the letters that she sent to Elisa's mother in the late 1970s and early '80s.

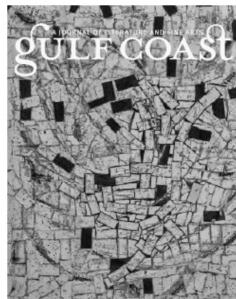
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Christopher Blay, Ciara Elle Bryant, Nathaniel Donnett, Ángel Faz, Ian Gerson, Angel Lartigue, Raymond Thompson

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Madeleine Gaudin with Allegra Hyde, Muriel Leung with Jenny Liou, Cameron Steele

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Katherine Mooney Brooks

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