

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

GULF COAST

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South Coast

A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts

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A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS VOLUME 32, ISSUE 2

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Language can never "pin down" slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable."

—Toni Morrison

We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.

—Henry James

Dear Readers,

What many people may not realize about editing *Gulf Coast* is that we often find ourselves in disagreement about which pieces to accept. At the end of the day, we consider our often disharmonious viewpoints a strength to embrace, not merely a challenge to overcome. The problem is that at some point, ink must meet paper. Decisions must be made. A guiding principle, even a nebulous one, must emerge.

As writers ourselves, one thing we all share is a joyous appreciation for language—its twists of humor and turns of phrase, its bizarro flora and untamable fauna. We delight in naming the strategies and techniques that transform the practice of writing from a casual pastime to a lifetime of devoted, often frustratingly devoted, study. Consequently, as editors, we can easily be drawn to work that reverberates as much with process as it does with product. Consider how Sierra Nelson's "Metonymy," for example, defines metonymy as "something touching something" before pealing off into a wild meditation on "touch," or how frequently terms like "epiphany," "adaptation," and "flashback" appear in Joanna Novak's "Home Game," which is as much about paranoia as it is about neglect—that is, as much about *over*writing one's personal life as it is about "someone who vacates himself."

To the lay citizenry of non-writers, elements of literary craft likely amount to minutiae or triviality. Why care about well-rhymed tercets when the world is, quite literally, on fire? What difference does it make whether a story is told from the first- or second-person point of view, especially when basic literacy no longer seems like a requirement to hold elected office?

Despite our inclinations towards the meta-literary as a version of cathartic word-nerdiness, the well-written pieces we end up rejecting in the final round nearly all suffer from the same problem: they fail to address, sufficiently, an issue of public concern. Poetry written for nobody but poets, essays surrounded by the barbed wire of solipsism, stories that chew up and spit back out the well-worn tropes of storytelling—among these are some of

our favorite texts. And yet, as editors, we stop short of publishing them when one of us asks, "Yeah, but so what? Why this again, why *now*?" It's amazing how much writing—good writing!—can be produced without an answer to that question.

Is language "an issue of public concern"? Yes and no. Yes, if we consider the ways that it is used to attack, ban, blame, mar, impeach, order drone strikes, abandon allies, topple regimes, and so on. No, not really, if we're talking about language as the playground of paradoxes and madhouse of contradictions that it has always been and will always be. It is of interest to us to play there, even to dwell there, but only narcissists assume that such interest will be automatically shared. Writing at the best level, we've found, convinces us one way or another that something important, something besides the writer's own ego, is at stake.

So we begin with Kieron Walquist, because a poem like "Want" responds to late capitalism and leaves us with a disturbing image of American subsistence and neglect. In a similar vein, Carrie Shipers' "The Bereavement Committee Offers Its Condolences" places us in the cold, unfeeling sterility of labor at the expense of sanity. The harms done by our economic system suffuse writing in every genre; Vika, in Maria Lioutaia's "Longer Than She Would Have in the Wild," has her life relegated to a series of stringent yes or no questions for the meagerest opportunity at a better life. "We get the dregs here"—as writers, we feel accutely the compulsion to buck against the stratifications that serve to exploit us.

"It's worth noting," writes Dan Fox in "Sorry. V. Young, Etc.," his manifesto against pretentious art criticism, "that older definitions of the word 'sophisticated' related to 'corruption', 'adulteration', and even 'perversity.' In medieval Latin, the verb 'sophisticare' related to the tampering of goods, especially food." The point is worth more than just noting. There is an artificiality in "sophistication," Fox implies, that requires some degree of attention, intelligence, or maturity to perceive, but once you see it you suddenly no longer have a use for its hollow walls and empty corridors. You come to prefer a different house—one less fancy, perhaps, but more fitting.

This issue marks the conclusion of our tenure as editors—a fact that has very slyly sneaked up on us. No sooner did we begin, it seems, than we had to prepare to stop. Unlike the other issues we've put out, this one came together, intentionally, *without* a predetermined theme. We allowed ourselves to be guided by chance, intuition, and something like muscle memory. If it felt like a rare opportunity, we seized it. If it smacked of "sophisticated" mediocrity, we did our best to avoid it. It is fair to say that we tried not to overthink it. More than any other, then, this issue tells you about who we are—a portrait next to which we stand too close to see.

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

The 2019 Barthelme Prize

Judged by Ben Marcus

This year's winner is "How It Was for Walt Whitman" by Bennet Bergman

"How It Was for Walt Whitman" cautions us that "to name a thing is to do it such damage," and manages, through precision and poetry and elusive insights, to show that attentive and detailed prose like this can, for the moment, do something far better than mere naming. In just a short page, we travel through a life and feel its sheer strangeness, longing, and sorrow, and if we are unmoored from the facts of this life, then we are all the more receptive to its subtle, astral signs. This prose captures the true interior of experience.

—***Ben Marcus***

This year's Honorable Mentions are "Gossip, with Headless Body" by Stanley Delgado & "Deep Clean" by Michael Holt

How It Was for Walt Whitman

Bennet Bergman

In the decades that constituted my formal education I came here as a way of getting wild again. The idea was to be reminded each day how unlike mine is the life of a heron, egret, one of those birds. I called it posturing, the militant dreamlife I lived here alone with drinking and gratitude and dancing at night in the kitchen with my mother's ghost. In the year before I went west again I awoke here every next day to find the house occupied by some skeleton of a serious animal—a better man a family name—and in the winter months no poetry occurred to me but the sound of the oven steadying off at a certain temperature. There were twilights when in the trees I'd see a beauty so great I was unsure whether to wrestle with it or to weep, for I was at once struck-down in love and also very lonesome and I thought this must be how it was for Walt Whitman on Long Island. All season it seemed my hand reached out and out for something to steady me but brother I was knocked down, and what can you say when you know that to name a thing is to do it such damage? I can say at least that each of us is made by a process of dilution, each a petering-out of our father's brighter lights; that there are towns which will ask you to live in them as you drive through and to allow yourself to be changed by this must be some version of a baptism. I can say this hill will be dark within the hour now; that there is good in the world, yes—some unending unblinking amount—and tonight like the night before we will hear the baying, faintly, of wild dogs from across the marsh. It is spring.

Deep Clean

Michael Holt

I'd found their ad in the weekly. It looked perhaps slightly less suspicious than some other services I'd employed, though unfortunately that wasn't saying much. They arrived at my door wearing backpacks and vests, a short white woman and a tall Asian man, very normal-looking, like Greenpeace volunteers or acquaintances from college. After curtly introducing themselves as Dylan and Kim, they squeezed past me in the narrow hall and went into my living room, and I followed, wondering if I should tell them something, direct them in some way, point something out, though what exactly I would point out I didn't know. Everything, maybe. All this, I could have said, waving my arm around vaguely. They opened their backpacks and began extracting an astonishing array of tiny tools, brushes and files, tweezers, chisels, feather dusters sized for a doll house, magnifying glasses, pencil erasers, mirrors like the ones dentists put in your mouth. They went behind my desk and behind the couch, stood on chairs to get to the high corners, pulled my bed and bookshelves away from the walls, and they scraped and brushed and rubbed and filed, they sanded things down, and dusted them, and poked holes in them, and took samples from them which they placed in small jars. They worked in almost total silence and with an utterly unwavering focus, while I stood around, witless and annoying, continually asking if they needed anything, water or a glass of wine, noodle soup, trail mix, tea. I wanted to know what they were finding and also didn't want to know. I wanted to ask them out for a drink and then never see them again. They brought in new tools, including one that hummed, and another that whirred, and another that seemed to involve some kind of suction. Is it that bad? I said. It's normal, said Dylan. I spent the afternoon at the movies. I watched two

matinées, sneaking into the second one. By the time I was returning to my neighborhood, I'd convinced myself that Dylan and Kim had absconded with everything I owned. Part of me was actually relieved. Part of me was always looking for an excuse to start over again. In fact they were sitting on the bumper of their van, eating sandwiches. How'd it go? I said. Fine, said Kim. She had the kind of perfect posture that made me straighten my own. I tried to peer through the blankness of her face, but Dylan brought my attempt to a halt with a clipboard. I wrote them a check, shook their hands limply, then went inside, sat down on my couch, and looked around, feeling slightly less plagued by the things I've always been plagued by, but only slightly.

Gossip, with Headless Body

Stanley Delgado

We saw it at the shore of the river, waist-deep in the water, kneeling perfectly still. The first thing everyone said was, Let's get rid of it? and I held my father's hand tight.

We had an hour to line up our fruit and string up our meat. It wouldn't be hard—empty a sack, dump the body in with lime. Send it down the river, attach a note—found at Rio Comalapa. I looked at Mr. Armindaro's son, the only other kid my age. He stood next to his father, holding a huge green watermelon over his head. The little hairs of his armpits. He yawned, so I yawned.

We circled around the body. It was a man's. Broad shoulders, chest and belly stretched tight like drumskin. Whoever cut his head off left him his underwear. A body with no head still has a face: nipples become eyes, the bellybutton a mouth—expressionless but hungry.

You know, someone started, I heard Rogelio from Atiquizaya went missing last week.

No, Mr. Villareal said, he went stateside. If anything, it might be Pancho's kid. Always running around barefoot. Leather jacket like the 13.

Pancho's kid is mestizo, Ms. Laura said. This body is darkskin. I don't know any Indians.

Oh, Mr. Nunez said, but I do. Let me check the body for tattoos.

And then everyone started. Names of people from other towns, people we didn't like. Maybe halfhoping it was someone we owed money to, or another vendor from the next town over. Ms. Olga said who it was didn't matter—how could she sell beef and porkbones with this body right here?

And so on. How could Mr. Armindaro brag about his juicy red watermelon when the hole at the body's neck was right there, somehow an even brighter red. The plucked pink chickens looking like limbs. Someone might think the body itself was for sale.

Everyone kept talking and talking, but I just stood there, holding my father's hand. He hadn't said anything yet. I brought his hand to my lips because I was too scared to ask him out loud. Where is the head? I whispered into his fingers. I imagined how I would be if I were a braver child. Curiosity would send my feet running. I'd find the man's head, buried deep in a tree trunk. He would say, Thank you, Menchita, for finding me; I have a quest for you. With the bodiless head's help I would save my home. El Salvador's namesake. All machetes melted into spoons and butterknives.

My father finally spoke: Maybe let's cancel for today. Come back tomorrow for a proper burial. But money would be lost, they said. But the sanctity of a corpse, he said.

While everyone argued, Mr. Armindaro's son snuck towards the body, cradling the heavy watermelon. No one noticed as he lifted the big green fruit right on top of the body's neck hole. The neck sunk, but the shoulders kept their new head in place, only for a breath it looked like, then it finally crumpled over and the watermelon cracked in two red halves and the burst sent the body back into the river's current. When the body was too far gone, someone finally said, Look.

The 2019 Gulf Coast Prize in Prose Translation

Judged by Christine Pichini

This year's winner is "Birdland" by Ursula Scavenius, translated from the Danish by Jennifer Russell

There is a sure-footed clarity and brightness to Jennifer Russell's translation: her ear is attuned to the poetics of prose, to its cadences, harmonies, and syncopations. "Birdland" lives and breathes, takes flight.

—***Christine Pichini***

This year's Honorable Mentions are "A Story of the Wind" by Raoul Schott, translated from the German by Karen Leeder

& "Italia" by Marco Lodoli, translated from the Italian by Alizah Holstein

Ursula Scavenius

Fugleland

Hver nat dør hun på en ny måde.

Hun sidder på en café i Paris og venter på at blive hentet af bilen, som vi begge ved, er den bil, der kører hende væk. Hun drikker ubekymret af kaffen, selvom vi begge ved, at hun om lidt bliver hentet. Vi sidder i en caféhave, og hun begynder at tage mascara på, skæver til vejen, hvor bilen om lidt kommer. Vi taler og griner, hendes ansigt er på en gang bekymret og ubekymret, flegmatisk og melankolsk. Hun har rynkede bryn og et ironisk smil om munden. Så kommer bilen. Og hun er helt rolig.

Et skib. Hun bliver hængt i masten. Hun ligger i sengen, og jeg ligger ved siden af og holder hendes hånd. Hun taler, som om alt er, som det plejer. Jeg går til et møde, i den tro, at hun stadig vil være der, når jeg kommer tilbage, men under mødet kommer et menneske i hvid dragt ind og siger, at hun netop er død.

Vi taler sammen. Hun står bag fjernsynet i en frakke. På hendes kuffert kan jeg se, at hun skal rejse. Hun vil tage toget tilbage snart, siger hun, hendes øjne stråler. Jeg får lyst til at tage med hende. Hun siger, at døden er lilla. Jeg ser hende ikke, hører kun hendes stemme.

Først næste nat så jeg hende i en lyserød kjole på en sandblæst perron. Hun bevægede sig og fortalte, at hun var død den og den dag, og om det ikke var mærkeligt.

En nat, for en uges tid siden, sad hun på et skib, klædt i en beige frakke, højhælede sko, og med øreringe, der dinglede.

Mit ansigt var hævet, da jeg vågnede, og jeg var svimmel. Rummet var stille som en ørken. Sådan er mine nætter, gnistrende hvide, og jeg bader i dem, men mine dage er vågne.

Tidligere drømte jeg aldrig. Jeg tænkte altid, at det måtte være mit kølige hjerte, der tilbageholdt drømmene. Alligevel vågnede jeg med en fornemmelse af, at noget fremmed trak mig nedad, som om jeg havde glemt noget på bunden af mig selv. Jeg måtte rejse mig op og tage et bad. Nu er jeg forandret. I det sidste

Birdland

Each night she dies in a new way.

She's at a café in Paris, waiting to be picked up by the car we both know is the car that will take her away. She drinks her coffee serenely even though both of us know she'll be picked up at any moment. We're in a café garden, and she starts to put on mascara, glances at the street where the car will shortly be arriving. We talk and laugh, her face is at once troubled and untroubled, phlegmatic and melancholy. Her forehead is creased and on her lips is an ironic smile. Then comes the car. And she is completely calm.

A ship. She's hanged from the mast. She's lying on the bed and I'm lying next to her, holding her hand. She talks as though nothing were out of the ordinary. I go to a meeting assuming she'll still be there when I get back, but during the meeting someone in a white suit walks in and tells me she's just died.

We're talking. She's standing behind the television in a coat. Her suitcase tells me she's leaving. She'll take the train back soon, she says, her eyes are shining. I want to go with her. She tells me death is purple. I can't see her, I only hear her voice.

Not until the next night do I see her, in a pink dress on a sand-swept platform. She stirs slightly and tells me she died on this and that day and wasn't it strange.

One night about a week ago she was on a ship, dressed in a beige coat, high-heeled shoes and earrings that dangled.

My face was swollen when I woke up, I was dizzy. The room was silent as a desert. That's what my nights are like, sparks of white, and I bathe in them, but my days are awake.

Before I never used to dream. I always assumed it was my cold heart that kept the dreams at bay. Even so, I'd wake up with a sense of something foreign pulling me down, as if I had forgotten something at the bottom of myself. I'd have to get

stykke tid, hvor jeg har ligget ned med betændelse, er synerne kommet igen.

Jeg ser et hvidt skib for mig inde i væggen. Det sidder et stykke inde og danner et relief og gør mig helt rolig. Men så rejser nogen sig på skibet, en kvinde med hvidt hår. Skibet vugger let. Det sner over hendes hår, og det bliver så hvidt, at det gør ondt i mine tænder. Hun åbner hånden, og jeg ser et forbrændt menneskehoved i hendes hånd. Det er så lille, at jeg ikke kan se, hvem det er. Jeg nærmer mig, men hun giver slip på menneskehovedet, og det fordamper.

Forestillingen fortsætter: Iris er på skibet og taler til mig. Hun siger, at hun har en anden mand nu, jeg må ikke vide, hvem det er. Det er, som om jeg er både hendes far og hendes mand. Jeg vil hende det bedste. Iris siger: - Jeg tager en sort fisk med hjem, vil dig og Anton have den i stuen? Jeg kan ikke svare, har en smerte i ganen.

Jeg vågner i sofaen og hører fuglene kvidre nervøst udenfor. Jeg ser Iris' forbavsede ansigt for mig. Det billede siver ind fra væggen. Det siver ind fra træerne, himlen, skyerne, badevandet. Det siver ind fra kaffen: Jeg bliver straffet nu. Jeg tænker på efteråret sidste år. Det var lige efter hendes forsvinding. Jeg havde hendes døde krop i min mave som en giftig fisk i en tønde. Jeg bed i mine sår på hånden for at mærke mit blod. Nu er det anderledes. Mit hoved dunker med en behagelig smerte. Jeg er med tiden begyndt at føle mig stolt over ikke at glemme.

En gråblå due står ude på vindueskarmen. Der er ingen kontakt mellem os, selvom vi stirrer på hinanden. Jeg kan ikke se hestene i dag. Hestene er importeret fra en ø, hvor der ikke var nok græs. Her har vi ressourcerne, siges det, til vilde heste. De vil aldrig blive spist, altid kun beundret. Så er det noget andet med fasanerne i burene. Køerne, de fjendtlige køer.

Om natten kan det ske, at jeg griber ud efter Iris i sengen for at mærke den tomme luft imellem mine hænder, men hun lægger ikke længere sine kølige hænder i dem, som da hun lå vågen i slagbænken sidste år, og jeg stod ud i bælgravende mørke på det kolde køkkengulv og spurgte, om hun ville høre musik. Det ville hun ikke, sagde hun og hostede. Hun ville høre på ravneskrigene, sagde hun, og hostede stærkere. Det ville hun. Og hun ville høre på sneen, der glitrede, hun havde brækket knoglerne den morgen.

- Giv mig lige et blad fra busken, sagde hun til Anton, der sad og så ufravendt på hende på en stol. - Giv mig det nu bare. Jeg vil gerne smage det. Anton rejste

up and take a shower. It's different now. Lately where an infection has kept me in bed, the visions have returned.

I see a white ship embedded in the wall. It sits a ways in, forming a relief I find comforting. But then someone on the ship stands up, a woman with white hair. The ship rocks gently. Snow falls onto her hair, turning it so white my teeth hurt. She opens her hand, and cupped inside it is a scorched human head. It's too small to tell who it is. I get closer, but she lets go and the head evaporates.

The vision continues: Iris is on the ship and she speaks to me. She says she has a new husband now, she won't tell me who. I feel as though I'm both her father and her husband. I want the best for her. Iris says: "I'm bringing back a black fish, would you and Anton like to have it in the living room?" I can't reply, there's an ache in my throat.

I wake up on the couch to the sound of birds chirping nervously outside. I see Iris's startled face. The image comes seeping through the wall. It seeps through the trees, the sky, the clouds, the bathwater. It seeps through the coffee: I'm being punished now. I think of last autumn, right after she disappeared. I carried her body in my stomach like a poisonous fish in a barrel. I gnawed at the sores on my hand to taste blood. Now it's different. My head pounds with a pleasant sort of pain. With time I've come to feel proud about not forgetting.

A glaucous pigeon is perched on the windowsill. We stare at one another, but there's no contact between us. The horses are nowhere to be seen today. They were imported from an island with too little grass. Here we have the resources, they say, for wild horses. They'll never be eaten, only admired. Not like the pheasants in cages. The cows, the hostile cows.

Sometimes at night I'll reach out after Iris in bed only to find empty air between my hands, and she no longer places her cool hands in them, like that time she lay sleepless on the couch last year, and I stood there on the cold kitchen floor in the dark asking whether she wanted to listen to music. She didn't, she said and coughed. She wanted to listen to the raven cries, she said and coughed harder. And she wanted to listen to the shimmering of the snow. That morning she had broken her bones.

"Fetch me a leaf from that bush, please," she said to Anton, who was sitting on a chair, looking at her intently. "Just give it to me. I want to taste it." Anton got up

sig og gik ud. Han kom tilbage med et blad. Jeg åbnede en plade mørk chokolade. - Vil du ikke hellere have det her? spurgte jeg og rakte dem en tredjedel af pladen hver. - Et bøgeblad, sagde hun og så på bladet, mens hun tog imod chokoladen. *Tak*. Hun spiste bøgebladet sammen med chokoladen. Anton grinede næsten lydløst og stirrede på hendes mund.

Ovre på marken gik de opdrættede køer. Vores frysere ville snart være fulde af dem. En ko brølede derovre. Bag den mark kunne man se søen kulsort og hård, der var et rødt skær over skoven og en vrimmel af små søer med is på, alle sammen røde.

Jeg står i badet. Udenfor regner det, og Lola kalder, men jeg synes ikke, jeg kan klandres for at være i bad efter en aften med hendes lilla kusse. Nu er jeg her, og det er fuldstændig som jeg længtes efter. Jeg føler intet, jeg har det godt. Jeg skrubber hendes saft af mit køn.

Tidligere i dag stod jeg og kogte kartofler, og hun kom hjem med en kylling. Nu ligger den i ovnen og udsender en sødlig lugt i huset. Hun elsker at svøbe lårene i køkkenrulle, når de er blevet bagt. Det er fjerde måned sådan: Disse aftener. Oksekød. Æg. Laks. Kylling. Jeg burde kalde det paradis. Jeg vasker Lolas klæbrige saft af min hud, giver mig god tid, selvom hun stadig kalder på mig. Jeg har skrubbet mine hænder for honning. Hun kom fire gange, da hun stak fingrene op i min røv med den honning. Hun slikkede mig.

Hendes bryster lignede bløde blommer, mit instinkt var svækket, jeg blev slap, da jeg så hende nøgen i dag, og jeg var ubevægelig, indtil hun lagde sig på maven og virrede med røven. Jeg prøvede virkelig at give mig hen. Så sad vi og drak kaffe efter hendes fire orgasmer, og hun fortalte om den drøm, hun havde haft om natten, om en deprimeret mand, som skærer sit lem af og drukner sig. Jeg sagde, at det var usandsynligt, at nogen mand ville gøre det. Umiddelbart efter rejste hun sig og så til kyllingen i ovnen, og så gik jeg i bad.

Jeg kan ikke se mine nosser for skum. Måske bliver jeg i badet, til jeg går i seng. Lola græd ikke engang, da jeg sagde det med Grækenland i dag. - Man ved

and went outside. He returned with a leaf. I unwrapped a bar of dark chocolate. "Wouldn't you prefer this?'" I asked, handing each of them a third of the bar. "A beech leaf," she insisted, eyes fixed on the leaf as she accepted the chocolate. Thank you. She ate the beech leaf together with the chocolate. Anton laughed almost inaudibly and stared at her mouth.

On the pastures stood the cows. Our freezers would soon be full of them. One bellowed in the distance. Beyond the fields you could see the lake, black as coal and solid. There was a red tinge to the woods and a myriad of small ice-covered ponds, all of them red.

I'm in the shower. Outside it's raining and Lola is calling my name, but I don't feel I can be blamed for showering after a night with her purple cunt. Now I'm here, and it's exactly as I had hoped it would be. I feel nothing, I feel good. I scrub her liquids off of me.

Earlier in the day I was boiling potatoes and she came home with a chicken. Now it's in the oven, filling the house with a sweet scent. She loves wrapping the thighs in paper towels once they're roasted. It's the fourth month of this: these evenings. Beef. Eggs. Salmon. Chicken. I suppose I ought to call it paradise. I wash Lola's sticky liquids off my skin, taking my time even though she's still calling. I've scrubbed the honey off my hands. She came four times when she stuck her honey-covered fingers up my ass. She licked me.

Her breasts looked like ripe plums, my instincts were impaired. I went flaccid when I saw her naked today, remained frozen until she lay down on her stomach and wiggled her behind. I really tried to give myself over. After her four orgasms we had coffee, and she told me about the dream she had last night about a depressed man who cut off his cock and then drowned himself. I said no man was likely to do that. After that she got up to check on the chicken in the oven, and I went to shower.

I can't see my balls for foam. Maybe I'll stay in the shower until bedtime. Lola didn't even cry when I told her about Greece today. "With me, you never know. I might just suddenly jet off to visit my last remaining relatives in Greece," I said.

aldrig med mig. Kan være at jeg pludselig rejser ned til stumperne af min familie i Grækenland, sagde jeg.

Engang lagde jeg Anton til at sove, og Iris og jeg gik ned i baghaven, hvor de gamle træstammer lå. - Fra nu af sidder jeg på din ryg fra morgen til aften. I evighed, sagde Iris og knugede mig så hårdt, at mine skuldre blev ømme, og jeg gjorde mig fri, hun lagde sig i græsset, og jeg satte mig havesofaen og iagttog hende.

Bag haven lå dampen over markerne og duvede mellem hvide skyer. Alting i en hvid dis, himlen spejlede luften, jeg sukkede, gav efter og smilede til hende, kunne ikke andet, og hun tog min hånd, lænede sit hoved mod min skulder og begyndte at græde. Hun var bange for sig selv, sagde hun, og lagde sig under træet. Jeg lagde mig bag hende, førte hænderne op om hendes skuldre, trængte op i hende, og hun satte sig oven på mig. Mens hun red mig, kunne jeg kun tænke på, at jeg frøs, at vi sled græsset, at vi lå på jorden, at vi var som plukkede fugle, og jeg så op i himlen, følte mig fjern fra hende. Kålhovederne og artiskokkerne dinglede slatne oppe under træets krone, hvor vi havde hængt dem op. Hun udstødte en høj latter og gik inden for med sæden dryppende ned mellem benene. Jeg vågnede i græsset ved, at hun kørte barnevognen ud af skuret over gruset. Barnevognen var rusten, det var længe siden, Anton havde ligget i den.

- Se, jeg har skiftet dynebetrækket! råbte hun og kaldte på Anton, der sad med sin spand og lavede sandkager. Hun ville løfte Anton, men han lagde sig på maven i græsset, hev fat i rosenbedet, og skreg, gjorde sig til en flitsbue, maven bøjet frem, ryggen svajet, og hun måtte spænde ham fast, for han skreg, at han ville gå selv.

Senere på dagen sank en fugtig tåge ned over egnen, haven blev mørk. Anton kravlede op i træet, og jeg gik ud og savede den største gren på træet af. Jeg havde gjort det for at skabe lys i haven, men den eneste forandring var, at jeg nu kunne se vores nabo, Lolas dyr bag hegnet, og hundene i buret bag tremmerne i hendes have.

One time, after I had put Anton to bed, Iris and I went out to the garden, down by the old tree trunks. "From now on, I'll sit on your back from morning till night. Forever," Iris announced, squeezing me so hard my shoulders hurt and I extricated myself, she lay back in the grass and I sat down on the bench and watched her.

Beyond the garden, the mist hung across the fields, billowing among white clouds. Everything shrouded in white haze, the sky reflecting the air, I sighed, surrendered and smiled at her, couldn't help it, and she took my hand, rested her head on my shoulder and began to cry. She was afraid of herself, she said and crawled beneath the tree. I lay down behind her, ran my hands across her shoulders, pushed into her, and she climbed on top of me. As she rode me, the only thing I could think of was that I was freezing, that we were ruining the lawn, that we were lying on the ground, that we were like plucked birds, and I looked up at the sky and felt very distant from her. The cabbages and artichokes dangled limply from the crown of the tree where we had once hung them. She let out a loud laugh and walked inside with semen dripping from between her legs. I was awoken in the grass by the sound of her hauling the baby carriage out of the shed and across the gravel. The carriage was rusty, it had been a long time since Anton had last lain in it.

"Look, I put in clean bedding," she shouted and called for Anton, who was making mud pies with his bucket. She tried to pick him up, but he howled and threw himself facedown into the grass, clinging onto the rose bed with his belly jutted out and back arched into the shape of a bow, and she had to strap him down because he kept screaming that he wanted to walk by himself.

Later that day a fog descended across the area, the garden grew dark. Anton climbed up the tree, and I went outside and sawed off its biggest branch. I did it to let more light into the garden, but the only difference was that I could now see our neighbor Lola's animals behind the fence, and the dogs in cages in her garden.

Vi prøvekører barnevognen i stærk oktobersol på stranden. Vi har lagt dynerne i barnevognen, så det ser ud, som om Iris allerede har født, og folk smiler til os. Jeg tror, vi ser stolte ud. Sytten år siden.

Det begynder at mørkne over vandets disede grå, og de få bølger der lige har været, er allerede forsvundet. Vandet ligger nu glat i de sidste stråler fra solens æg bag de trevlede skyer. Himlen befrier sig fra solen, havet befrier sig fra himlen, natten tager over. Barnevognen dufter af nyt tøj, helt herned hvor vi ligger og snakker. Alt bliver både større og mindre, da det sidste lyserøde glider himlen af hænde, og vi bliver selv stille, begynder at fryse og trækker dynen og foret hen over os.

Vi falder i søvn på stranden med dynerne og bliver begloet af en række måger, der sidder på pælene ude i det mørke vand og lyser. De måger stirrer stadig på os, da vi vågner frysende i sandet, og himlen er stået op, solen duver som et halvt ansigt i horisonten, og vi er stivfrosne. Nogen har stjålet dynerne.

Vi begiver os på vej hjemad. Nu er molen og pælene med mågerne ikke dragende, tangen stinker, og barnevognen skumpler mod sten og siv. Vi løber over det kolde sand. Da vi når til landevejen, hvor sumpområdet strækker sig så langt vi kan se, ser vi, at dynen ligger i den kloak, som løber mellem sivene. Vi stirrer på kloakvandet, der bliver ved at drive ned over dynen. Iris ser spørgende på mig. - Skal vi samle den op og gøre den ren, eller lade den ligge?

Jeg bøjer mig over dynen. Der sidder allerede snegle hen over betrækkets bamsemotiver, og der er nyudklækkede frøer inde under betrækket. Iris skubber mig let til side, bøjer sig og samler selv dynen op, rækker mig den, på én gang utålmodigt og tøvende, og det begynder at regne, jeg tager dynen og lægger den tilbage i barnevognen, men kan længe ikke se hende i øjnene, som om det vil bringe uheld at få øjenkontakt nu.

Senere hen rækker Iris mig det hvide papir med hendes diagnose med den samme utålmodighed og tøven, som hun rakte mig dynen. Hun rækker mig det, og det regner. Hun rækker mig det hvide papir, frisk fra en printer, med diagnosen skrevet på.

We take the baby carriage for a test-run on the beach in bright October sun. We've put blankets in it so it looks as though Iris has already given birth and people smile at us. I think we must look proud. Seventeen years ago.

The light starts to fade above the murky gray water, and the few waves that were just there have already disappeared. Now the water lies still in the last light from the sliver of sun peeking out from behind the wispy clouds. The sky frees itself from the sun, the sea lets go of the sky, night takes over. The baby carriage smells of fresh laundry, even from all the way down here where we lie talking. Everything becomes both bigger and smaller when the last bit of pink slips from the sky's grasp and we fall quiet too, begin to shiver and wrap ourselves in the blanket.

We fall asleep beneath the blanket on the beach under the gawking eyes of a row of shining seagulls perched on their poles in the dark water. The seagulls are still staring at us when we wake up, ice cold in the sand, and the sky has risen, the sun undulates like half a face on the horizon and we're frozen stiff. Someone has stolen the blanket.

We head towards home. The pier and the poles with the seagulls have lost their appeal, the seaweed stinks, the baby carriage now clatters across the rocks and reeds. We race across the frigid sand. Up on the road, where the swamp extends as far as the eye can see, we find the blanket in the sewer that runs between the reeds. We stare at the wastewater gushing over the blanket. Iris sends me a quizzical look. "Should we bring it home and wash it or just leave it?"

I squat down over the blanket. There are already snails trailing across its teddy bear pattern and tiny frogs underneath it. Iris nudges me aside, bends down and picks up the blanket herself, hands it to me in a manner that is both impatient and hesitant and it starts to rain. I take the blanket and put it back in the baby carriage, but I can no longer look her in the eye, as if making eye contact now would be bad luck.

Later Iris hands me her diagnosis on a sheet of white paper with the same impatience and hesitation with which she handed me the blanket. She hands it to me and it's raining. She hands me the white sheet of paper, fresh from the printer with the diagnosis written on it.

Drømte igen:

En meget elegant kvinde sidder og ser på mig ved vinduet og siger, at jeg har noget i håret, og at jeg må tage det ud, så jeg kan være pæn, når jeg skal mødes med Iris, der sidder ved Hornbæk sø, det er den dag, hvor vi besøger hendes mor herude første gang, tror jeg, for jeg genkender ikke gaderne og gemmer mig for andres blikke. - Kom, siger jeg, lad os sætte os længere ned mod heden. Vi går lidt og Iris sætter sig igen, men jeg kan ikke sætte mig, ikke endnu, og stirrer bare på hende.

- Hun sidder der, fordi hun vil spørge dig om noget. Det er ikke vigtigt, siger kvinden i min vindueskarm, det er vigtigt. Jeg rækker hånden op til håret og mærker, at der sidder noget deroppe, det er ligesom et æg, der er viklet ind i sejt edderkoppespind, det sidder fast som en skorpe på et sår, og jeg tøver med at hive det ud, men kvinden ser så bebrejdende på mig, at jeg river det ud i et træk. En tør fisk lander på dynen og stirrer tomt på mig, jeg knipser den ned på gulvet med et grin, jeg er ikke imponeret, ganske vist har jeg ligget i havet længe, og de har måttet trække mig op, men en enkelt fisk i håret - det kunne have været værre.

Jeg får igen øje på Iris, der ser ud over søen med et tomt udtryk uden at ligne én, der vil ødelægge andres liv ved at forsvinde. Hun sidder i den samme kjole som tidligere, som om hun ikke har andre. Det var også altid den, hun havde på dengang, også hendes hårspænde er det samme, og hendes makeup; to streger går ud fra hvert øje og hendes læber er røde. Jeg vil spørge, hvad hun vil spørge mig om. - Spørg nu, hvisker jeg til mig selv, spørg nu…

Jeg sidder i stuen og tager mig i at stirre på Lola, der bøjer sig forover i haven, mens hun fejer sne på fliserne, så den røde streg mellem hendes baller bliver synlig. Jeg stirrer på den røde streg, som om den vil fortælle mig noget. Hendes kost forstyrrer sneens hvide søvn.

Engang stod Iris derude med en hørskjorte, tyk som hundepels. Jeg sad i træk med vinduet på klem og så på hende vandre rundt i mudderet. Allerede kort efter var hendes hvide hørstof svedt igennem. Jeg ville hvile. Jeg havde ikke lukket et øje hele ugen. Det var ikke til at holde ud. Vi misforstod hinanden. Græd og råbte.

Dreamed again:

A very elegant woman is watching me from the window, and she tells me there's something in my hair and that I'll have to remove it so I'm presentable when I go see Iris, who's sitting out by Hornbæk Lake. I think it's the day we visit her mother out here for the first time, because I don't recognize the streets and avoid the eyes of strangers. "Come on," I say, "let's go to the heath." We walk for a bit and Iris sits back down, but I can't sit, not yet, I just stare at her.

"She's sitting there because she wants to ask you something. It's not important," says the woman in my windowsill, it is important. I touch my hand to my hair and feel something there, like an egg wrapped in thick cobwebs. It's stuck, like a scab on a wound, and I'm reluctant to pull it out, but the woman looks at me with such reproach that I rip it out with a single yank. A dried fish lands on the bed, its empty eyes stare at me and I flick it onto the floor, chuckling unimpressed. Granted, I have been in the sea for a long time and they've had to hoist me up, but a single fish in my hair—it could've been much worse.

I spot Iris again, gazing out across the lake with a vacant expression, not looking like someone who will destroy people's lives by disappearing. She's wearing the same dress as before, as if it's the only one she owns. It's the one she always wore back then, and her hair clip is the same too, and her makeup, two lines extend from each eye and her lips are red. I want to ask her what it is she wants to ask me. Just ask, I whisper to myself, just ask…

From the living room I catch myself staring at Lola, who's hunched over in the garden, sweeping snow off the slabs, revealing the red line between her buttocks. I stare at the red line as if it's trying to tell me something. Her broom upsets the snow's white slumber.

Once it was Iris standing out there, in a linen shirt as thick as a dog's coat. I sat in the draft of the open window watching her plod around in the mud. Before long

Bad og sov. Hun kom løbende ind til mig og sagde, at hun var sikker på, at der var noget galt med hende. Vi satte os med en kop te, og hun blev ved med at tale om det russiske skib, der havde lækket forbudte kemikalier i de danske farvande. Det var sket sommeren før, og hun havde badet i det hver morgen hele efteråret og vinteren. Hun bestilte tid til undersøgelse.

Kakkelovnen er mit eneste selskab. Den æder som et lille barn. Jeg passer den med en omsorg, jeg ikke troede, jeg havde. Lige før begyndte den at ryge, og jeg gav den mere brænde. Jeg har lyst til at holde om den af glæde. Iris viser sig for mig i isblomsterne, mens de glider langsomt ned ad tagruden udenfor. Det er en rus at se på, en rus, som jeg ikke har haft siden, jeg filmede hende ride på hestene i folden. Hun grinede, når hun red. Jeg glemte mig selv, glemte at ånde.

Kaffemaskinen holder mig vågen. Lola gav mig den til min fødselsdag. Jeg har aldrig kunnet håndtere den maskine. Men i dag satte jeg den til, og den løber fint og brygger en udmærket kaffe. Jeg har drukket seks kopper bare her til morgen. Jeg skal passe på, jeg ikke får tarmbetændelse som dengang, Iris rejste fra mig, og jeg var alene med Anton som baby. Jeg drak så meget kaffe og fik en inflammation på grund af al den syre, der er i kaffe. En morgen lå jeg i drivhuset med mavepine og forsøgte at spise morgenmad, mens Anton kravlede rundt hos mig. Han fyldte snart et år. Jeg bad ham løbe ud og lege i haven. Døren klaprede, og han forsvandt.

Fra min plads i liggesofaen inde i drivhuset kunne jeg se Lola bag hækken. Hun lå bare i trusser under solen, der gjorde hendes bryster så varme, at de flød ned over hendes mave, og jeg kunne ikke få øjnene fra hendes barm, der svulmede som bunden af en båd, der har ligget for længe under vandet.

Da jeg så mig om efter Anton på græsplænen, var han løbet hjemmefra igen. Det var noget, han gjorde ofte. Han løb en kilometer gennem skoven, ned til de gamle bunkere på stranden, hvor han legede med trærødderne, hev i dem og skar dem over med skarpe sten. Sådan fik han sine forkølelser. Iris ville ikke have tilgivet mig, at jeg lod ham løbe omkring for sig selv, tænkte jeg, tog tøj på og løb gennem skoven til stranden.

Anton sad på molen og stirrede på nogle måger, der fløj lavt hen over vandet og landede på vandoverfladen, som om deres vinger var for tunge, eller solen for brændende, til at de kunne holde sig oppe længere. Jeg tog ham i mine arme og bar ham hjem.

the white linen was soaked through with sweat. I wanted to rest. I hadn't shut an eye all week. It was unbearable. We misunderstood each other. Wept and shouted. Pleaded and slept. She came running inside, insisting that something was wrong with her. We sat down with a cup of tea and she went on about a Russian ship that had leaked toxic chemicals into the sea. It happened the previous summer, and she had bathed in that water each morning, all autumn and winter long. She booked an appointment for a screening.

The stove is my only company. It eats like a small child. I tend it with an affection I didn't know I had in me. Just now, when it began to smoke, I fed it more logs. I could just throw my arms around it with glee. Iris appears in the ice flowers as they slowly slide down the window. The sight is elating, elating in a way I haven't felt since I filmed her riding horses in the paddock. She laughed as she rode. I forgot myself, forgot to breathe.

The coffee machine keeps me awake. Lola gave it to me for my birthday. I've never been able to operate that machine, but today I plugged it in and it works just fine and makes a decent cup of coffee. I've drunk six cups already just this morning. I need to be careful I don't end up with bowel infection, like the time Iris left me alone with Anton when he was a baby. I drank so much coffee I ended up with an inflammation from all that acid. One morning I was lying in the greenhouse with a stomachache, trying to eat breakfast while Anton crawled around at my feet. He would soon turn one. I asked him to go play outside in the garden. The door clattered and he was gone.

From my seat in the wicker sofa in the greenhouse I could see Lola behind the hedge. She lay sunbathing in nothing but underwear, her breasts so warm they spilled across her belly, and I couldn't take my eyes off her chest, swollen like the hull of a boat that's been in the water for too long.

When I looked for Anton on the lawn, he'd run away from home again. He often did that. He'd run a mile through the forest, down to the old bunkers on the beach, where he'd play with the roots, yank at them and chop them off with sharp rocks. That's how he got his colds. Iris would never forgive me for letting him run around on his own, I thought as I got dressed and ran through the woods to the beach.

Hjemme i sengen begyndte han at vræle. Han skreg, så selv dyrene i folden stod stille og lyttede, som om de også var bekymrede voksne. Hen på natten fik han et udslæt over armene.

I løbet af de næste par år, løb han mere og mere hjemmefra, og når han kom hjem igen, stank han af fugl. Lugten tørrede ind i hans tøj, sengen var dækket af dun fra frakken, som han sov i, og åbnede jeg døren til hans værelse, blæste der dun ud på gangen over mine sko. I weekenden, hvor han var hjemme fra skole, bad jeg ham bruge vinduet som dør, hvilket i almindelighed lettede på stemningen i huset.

Anton yndede også at redde fugle og flagermus, der var faldet ned eller sad fast. Viklet ind tang eller plastic. Han ville passe dem, indtil de selv kunne flyve igen, men nogle gange beholdt han dem længere tid end nødvendigt. Han fyldte sit skab med fugleunger, fodrede dem uden at spørge mig om lov.

En morgen, da han lige havde smækket døren i, og var gået med lette skridt hen over gruset, rodede jeg køkkenskabet igennem, tog en duftspray, gik op på hans værelse og fandt hurtigt det sted, hvor stanken kom fra, åbnede skabet, der osede råddent, det skidne tøj måtte hænge derinde. Jeg skruede låget af duftsprayen og strintede hele flaskens indhold ind i hulrummet. I det samme peb det højlydt inde fra mørket, fugleungerne fløj ud af skabet og faldt om, øjensynlig af forgiftning. Et øjeblik efter var gulvet fyldt med døde fugleunger. Det skammer jeg mig stadig over.

Da Iris var gravid med Anton, sad hun og holdt sig på maven, kun iført en rustrød top, og folk, der gik forbi ude på vejen, så langt efter hende. Nogle gange græd hun højt, når jeg ikke var hjemme, og de turister der kom forbi trøstede hende. Jeg byggede et hegn, for at hun kun delte det, hun græd over, med mig. Hun fortalte mig om en episode med sin mor, Else, for mange år siden.

De havde skændtes, og moren havde lukket hende inde i et lille kammer over hønsehuset. Da Else kom for at lukke Iris ud igen, ville hun ikke ud. Hun var kommet til at holde af det mørke rum, hvor hun lyttede til den mekaniske fisk, hun som niårig havde fået af sin far, før han rejste væk. En stor, udstoppet fisk, som var lyserød på

Anton was sitting on the pier, staring at some seagulls that skimmed low across the water before landing on the surface, as though their wings were too heavy or the sun too hot for them to hold themselves aloft. I pulled him into my arms and carried him home.

Back home in bed he began to wail. He screamed so even the animals on the pasture stopped to listen, as if they too were anxious adults. Later that night a rash broke out across his arms.

In the following years he would run away increasingly often and come back reeking of bird. The smell clung to his clothes, his bed was covered with feathers from the coat he slept in, and when I opened the door to his bedroom feathers would flutter across my shoes and out into the hallway. In the weekends when he was home from school I would ask him to use his window as a door, which generally helped lighten the mood in the house.

Anton also had a habit of rescuing birds and bats that had fallen down or gotten stuck, entangled in seaweed or plastic. He would care for them until they were able to fly again, but often he'd keep them for longer than necessary. He filled his closet with baby birds, fed them without asking me for permission.

One morning, as soon as he had slammed the door and wandered off with light steps across the gravel, I rummaged through the kitchen cabinet, found a can of air freshener, went up to his room, quickly located the source of the stench and opened the foul-smelling closet. The filthy clothes had to be hanging in there. I pulled the cap off of the can and emptied the entire content into the void. Immediately there came a shrill squeaking from the dark, baby birds shot out of the closet and dropped to the floor, seemingly poisoned. Next thing I knew the floor was strewn with dead baby birds. Still now I feel ashamed.

When Iris was pregnant with Anton, she would sit outside gripping her belly in nothing but a rust-colored top, and passersby would gawk at her. Sometimes when I wasn't home she would sob loudly and the tourists who came by would stop to comfort her. I built a fence so she would only share the

maven og grøn på ryggen, med hvide finner. På dens bagside sad en skrue, og drejede man dem og gav slip, sang fisken sørgesange på en italiensk dialekt.

Nel Cor non piu mi sento brillar la gioventú.

Cogion del mio tormento

Amor, cei colpa tu…

Pietá, pietá, pietá.

Amor e un certo che disperar mi fa…

Al den skade, den fisk forvoldte, da jeg brændte den, vil jeg ikke tænke på nu.

Vi fik huset af Else, da hun var ved at dø. Den første gang jeg så hende, var det umuligt at se, at hun var syg, for hun sad uafbrudt og smilede til mig, sminket og i en kinesisk sharon, mens hun serverede vaniljekranse. Jeg huggede dem i mig og måtte kaste op i skoven. På vejen tilbage til huset så jeg drivhuset i haven. Det var indrettet som kontor. Iris spurgte, om vi kunne drikke te der. Else tøvede ikke og bar en ny skål vaniljekranse med derud.

Mens vi sad og så ud over haven og drak te, spurgte jeg, om jeg måtte se Iris' mørkerum i hønsehuset, men Else sagde med en stemme kold som en klokke: - Det brændte sidste år. Iris nikkede ivrigt.

Da Else døde tre måneder senere, arvede vi huset og gik ud og købte en barnevogn på et loppemarked i Hornbæk, før hun overhovedet var gravid. Da Anton kom, tog Iris vuggen med ud i drivhuset, hvor hendes bøger også lå, og lod den mekaniske fisk synge for ham. Nogle gange gik mekanikken i hak, og fisken sang første strofe om og om igen.

Nel Cor non piu mi sento brillar la gioventú….

Jeg gemte fisken væk, men Iris fandt den og lagde den igen hos Anton. Jeg kunne ikke have gjort andet, ja, og så brændte jeg fisken. Anton så skroget på bålet. Han blev lokket til af lyden, for fisken blev ved at synge hæst selv inde i bålet. Skruen måtte have sat sig endegyldigt fast, og nu sang den igen og igen:

Disperar mi fa… disperar mi fa… mi fa…

Jeg slukkede bålet, hev den brankede maskine ud af det og smadrede den ind i muren, så blev sangen til en hylende tone, der lød som en sirene.

Amor, amor, amor, amor.

Jeg glemmer aldrig den nat, hvor fisken hylede, og vi ventede på, at den måtte

things she wept about with me. She told me about an incident with her mother, Else, many years ago.

They had quarreled and her mother had locked her in a little room above the henhouse. When Else came to let Iris back out, she didn't want to leave. She had come to like sitting in the dark, listening to the mechanical fish her father had given her when she was nine, before he left. A big stuffed fish with a pink belly, white fins and a green back. On its backside was a key and if you twisted it and let go, the fish would sing mourning songs in an Italian dialect.

Nel Cor nun piu mi sento brillar gioventú.
Cogion del mio tormento
Amor, cei colpa tu…
Pietá, pietá, pietá.
Amor e un certo che disperar mi fa…

All the damage that fish caused when I burned it, I can't bear to think of it.

Else left us the house when she died. The first time I saw her it was impossible to tell she was sick because she never stopped smiling, all done up in a Chinese sarong, serving us vanilla biscuits. I wolfed them down and had to go throw up in the woods. On the way back to the house I noticed the greenhouse in the garden. It had been converted into a study, and Iris asked if we could have our tea out there. Else brought us another bowl of vanilla biscuits right away.

As we sat there looking out across the garden and drinking our tea, I asked to see Iris's dark room in the henhouse, but Else, in a voice as cold as a bell, declared: "It burned down last year." Iris nodded emphatically.

When Else died three months later, we inherited the house and went out and bought a baby carriage at a flea market in Hornbæk before she was even pregnant. When Anton came, Iris moved the cradle out into the greenhouse where she also kept her books and had the mechanical fish sing for him. Sometimes the machinery would get jammed up and the fish would sing the first line over and over again.

Nel Cor non piu mi sento brillar la gioventú …

I hid the fish away, but Iris found it and put it back by Anton's side. There was nothing else to do, and so I burned the fish. Anton spotted the remains of it in the fire. He was lured over by the sound of the fish's hoarse song, which didn't

gå endeligt i stykker. Til sidst skreg Anton med, og jeg gik ud i havet med fisken, kastede den så langt, jeg kunne, og håbede, strømmen ville føre den mod Sverige.

Da jeg kom hjem, sad Iris med bind for øjnene. - Hvor længe skal du sidde sådan? spurgte jeg. - Hvem ved. Jeg kan bedre se i mørket, for så bliver alt så lyst inde i mit hoved, sagde hun. Jeg så et øjeblik på hende og lukkede så døren. Næste morgen var hun rejst.

Hvorfor skriver jeg stadig om Iris?, hvorfor håber jeg stadig på, at mine ord vil ætse fortiden op? Jeg har hende siddende i halsen som kviksølv. Jeg vil spytte hende ud.

Det er Lolas bløde brystvorte. Jeg ved ikke, hvorfor den giver mig kvalme. Hun skammer sig også selv over den. Den brystvorte kan bare ikke blive stiv som den anden. Den ene stritter, mens den anden er splattet sammen som en mave efter et kejsersnit. I dag var det sværere end tidligere. Selvom jeg suttede på den længe, blev den bare ikke hård. Jeg kunne næsten ikke tilgive hende den skavank. Jeg var lige ved at græde. Jeg har været verden rundt, og så ender jeg med en død brystvorte.

I dag virkede pillerne, og jeg gik mod byen. Alting var uroligt inden i mig, jeg svedte ned ad ryggen, kunne ikke kontrollere mit åndedræt og måtte vende om. Jeg så ikke et træ på turen hjem, så ingenting, tænkte ikke på noget, drev af sted i en prikkende tåge. Jeg kunne være kørt i vandet uden at mærke det, for luften var våd, og himlen lignede gæller, men jeg var rolig, da jeg satte mig foran computeren. Lolas besked lå på tastaturet: mine scanninger havde vist tvetydige resultater, og det, som ved den første undersøgelse, havde lignet en inflammation i urinrøret, lignede i den anden undersøgelse en mindre knude, men i de seneste scanninger, kunne de slet ikke finde noget.

Jeg spiste ikke, jeg sank ikke engang mit mundvand. Jeg humpede rundt og måtte lægge mig hvert andet minut. Jeg sad med Lola i sofaen og spiste et lille

cease, even in the flames. The key must have gotten stuck for good, and now it sang, again and again:

Disperar mi fa … disperar … mi fa …

I put out the fire, pulled the charred machine from the ashes and smashed it against the wall, and the song became an ear-splitting howl, a siren.

Amor, amor, amor, amor.

I'll never forget the night we waited for the fish's howl to finally die out. By the end Anton was screaming too, and I waded out into the sea with the fish, hurled it as far as I could, hoping the current would carry it to Sweden.

When I came home, Iris was blindfolded. "How long do you plan on wearing that?" I asked. "Who knows? I see better in the dark because everything becomes so bright inside my head," she said. I looked at her for a moment, then I closed the door. The next morning she was gone.

Why do I still write about Iris? Why do I hope my words will eat away the past? She's lodged in my throat like mercury. I wish I could spit her out.

It's Lola's soft nipple. I don't know why it makes me nauseous. She's ashamed of it too. That nipple just doesn't get stiff like the other. One of them protrudes while the other is smushed together like a belly after a caesarean. Today it was more difficult than usual. Even though I sucked on it for a long time, it just wouldn't stiffen. I almost couldn't forgive her for that fault. I nearly cried. I've been all around the world only to end up with a dead nipple.

Today the pills worked and I started off towards town. My insides felt uneasy, my back was sweating, my breathing was out of control, and I couldn't keep going. I didn't see a single tree on the way home, didn't see anything, didn't think of anything, drifted along in a prickling fog. I could have stumbled right into the water and not even known it because the air was wet and the sky looked like it

måltid pasta med fløde. En rolig stund fulgte, vi sad igen sammen ved køkkenbordet under det let blinkende lys, som ramte dækservietterne, den samme lille englefigur, som Iris købte på rejsen til Italien.

Jeg spurgte Lola, om hun syntes, vi skulle tænde det lys, englen stadig stod og holdt foran vores tallerkner. Hun iagttog mig længe og blinkede. Det var svært at aflæse, om hun mente ja eller nej. Jeg prøvede at smile. Så kunne jeg ikke holde det ud. Minderne blev for klare. Jeg tog avisen.

Iris elskede mælk og vindruer og rørte aldrig cigaretter eller alkohol. Hun drak sig fuld i stærk saft og urtete. Alligevel slog lungekræften hende ihjel. Det er al den gift i luften, i havet, i maden. Til sidst ville hun kun spise helt ren mad, og vi blev ruinerede af at købe de mest friskpressede frugter, koldpressede olier og krydderier. Flere hundrede kroner pr. pose. Hun drak jomfruolivenolie for at få stærke tarme og lunger.

Iris elskede at vågne om natten og tage et fodbad med æteriske olier i og skrive små noter til sig selv. Når hun læste dem næste dag, grinede hun af dem. Hun syntes, at de lød frygtelig patetiske. Hendes noter handlede om det mørke, hun altid talte om. Det mørke var vokset ind i hende på hønsehuset, når hun sad alene og lyttede til regnen. Det havde hun sagt til mig, og hun havde forklaret, at hun senere hen aldrig kunne holde ud at være sammen med mange mennesker ad gangen, for så savnede hun stilheden, og mørket og al den plads, der var omkring hende i hønsehuset, hvor hun havde haft den syngende fisk hos sig. Først da jeg havde smidt den i havet, fortalte hun, at hendes far havde givet hende fisken i gave til hendes ni års fødselsdag, der var den sidste fødselsdag, hun havde holdt med begge forældre, inden faren forlod dem. Jeg havde ikke forudset, at Iris ville pakke sine ting og rejse væk et halvt år, fordi jeg kastede den grimme gave ud i havet.

Det stormer hen over huset, valnødderne falder ned over taget. Musene piler rundt inde i væggene. Jeg sidder med pulverkaffen, suppen og kalenderen. Morgenen er gledet over i aften, før det blev eftermiddag, og jeg ser ud på den

had gills, but when I sat down in front of the computer I was calm. Lola's message lay on the keyboard: the results of my scans were ambiguous. What had initially looked like an inflammation in the urinary tract had appeared to be a small lump in the second, but in the most recent scans they couldn't find anything at all.

I didn't eat, didn't even swallow my own saliva. I limped around and had to lie down every other second. Eventually Lola and I ate a small meal of pasta with cream on the couch. A moment's peace ensued and we sat down at the kitchen table in the gently flickering light that illuminated the placemats and the little angel figurine Iris once bought on her trip to Italy.

I asked Lola whether she thought we ought to light the candle the angel was still holding out in front of our plates. She stared at me for a long time and then she blinked. It was hard to tell whether she meant yes or no. I attempted a smile, but then I couldn't stand it any longer. The memories became too clear. I reached for the newspaper.

Iris loved milk and grapes and never touched cigarettes or alcohol. She got drunk off strong cordials and herbal tea. Even so, the lung cancer killed her. It's all that poison in the air, in the sea, in our food. In the end she ate nothing but whole foods, and we spent a fortune on the most freshly squeezed fruits, cold-pressed oils and spices. Several hundreds of kroner per packet. She drank extra virgin olive oil to make her guts and lungs strong.

Iris loved to wake up at night and take a footbath with essential oils and write little notes to herself. They made her laugh when she read them the next day. She thought they sounded terribly pathetic. Her notes were about the darkness she always spoke of. Darkness had taken root inside her back in the days when she would sit in the henhouse all alone listening to the rain. She had told me that, and she had explained that later on she could never stand large crowds because she would miss the silence and the darkness and all that space around her in the henhouse, just her and the singing fish. Only after I had thrown it into the sea did she tell me that the fish had been a gift from her father on her ninth birthday, the last birthday she spent with both parents before her father left them. I hadn't expected Iris to pack her bags and leave for six months just because I threw the ugly present into the sea.

store bunke af gamle squash og kålhoveder, der ligger og stinker råddent. Dér for enden af haven er der ikke længere noget hegn, haven glider sammen med marken.

En stærk lugt af fugle slår op, jeg føler mig svag, jeg tænker på et forår for længe siden, hvor jeg gik ad den sti med Anton. Han var vel et år gammel. Iris havde været i Syditalien i fem måneder. Vejret var skiftet. Det var en af disse lumre forårsaftener med sværme af småfugle, der dykkede ned igennem skoven. Uendeligt stille i skovene. Kun et vandløb forstyrrede. Ingen stemmer. Ingen fodtrin. Jeg gik med hans hånd i min. Smørblomster og skvalderkål. Vi kom til en rabarberlund. Små hårde hyben tæt opad gran og en rødbøg. Jeg sagde til ham, at de lignede fastvoksede konkylier. Knyttede han sig til mig? Vi gik dybere ind. Der var endnu mere stille, og der var ingen frygt. Han holdt min hånd fast, jeg var taknemmelig, aftenhimlen lyste. Små blink i luften fra virrende vinger. Vi så kastanjetræer og hørte omsider en lyd. En krage og langt borte en hund, der gøede. Vi standsede ved et tornekrat, som var dækket af vedbend, og deri lå en fuglerede dækket af spindelvæv. Jeg klemte hans hånd. Anton så forskrækket ud, og jeg måtte slippe ham, for han forstod mig ikke. Han sagde, at der var uhyggeligt og ville hjem. Vi gik en omvej. I løbet af aftenen var det blevet fugtigere. Vi trådte i nyfødte frøer. Blomsterne havde lukket sig og var tavse. Små natsværmere summede i tusmørket. Vi gik hjemad, han begyndte at løbe, da han så huset og råbte. - Mor! Men der sad ingen i stuen.

Da vi kom hjem fra lægen, satte Iris sig i drivhuset. Jeg spurgte hende, om hun ville høre musik, og hun sagde, at hun gerne ville høre noget nyt. Jeg hentede ghettoblasteren og satte forskellige cd'er på. Hun sad og så ud over sneen med lukkede øjne. Så sagde hun. - Er jeg her i morgen?

- Hvad synes du om musikken? Kan du bruge noget af det? spurgte jeg. - Nej, jeg forbander Richard Wagner. Bare sæt Mozart på alligevel... Requiem. Hendes hoved faldt forover.

Hun sov. Det måtte være morfinen.

Jeg satte mig ned bag hende og vuggede kørestolen frem og tilbage. - Violin, hviskede hun, trykkede min hånd. Violin ville være godt. Nummer fem.

A storm is raging above the house, walnuts keep dropping onto the roof. The mice scurry about inside the walls. I've got a cup of instant coffee, a bowl of soup and the calendar. Morning has slipped into evening before it became afternoon, and I look out at the big pile of old zucchinis and cabbage heads lying there, stinking putridly. Down at the end of the garden there's no longer any fence, the garden dissolves into the fields.

I catch a pungent whiff of bird, it makes me feel feeble and I think of a spring many years ago when I walked along that path with Anton. I suppose he was a year old. Iris had been in southern Italy for five months. The weather had turned. It was one of those humid summer nights where flocks of small birds would plunge through the treetops. Infinitely quiet in the woods. Only the stream broke the silence. No voices. No footsteps. I held his hand in mine as we walked. Buttercups and bishop's weed. We came to a grove. Hard little rosehips nestled among the pines and a blood beech. I said they looked like seashells that had been stuck on. Did he grow attached to me? We ventured in deeper. It was even quieter, there was nothing to fear. He gripped my hand tightly, I felt grateful, the evening sky was bright. Brief glimpses of fluttering wings up above. We saw chestnut trees and eventually we heard a sound. A crow and further off the barking of a dog. We paused by a thicket covered in ivy, inside of which was a bird's nest covered in cobwebs. I squeezed his hand. Anton looked startled and I was forced to let go, he couldn't understand me. He said he was frightened and wanted to go home. We went the long way round. It had grown increasingly humid over the course of the evening. We trod on tiny frogs. The flowers had closed up and were silent. Little moths buzzed in the dusk. We walked towards home, he broke into a run when he saw the house, shouting "Mom!" But the living room was empty.

When we got home from the doctor's, Iris went out and sat in the greenhouse. I asked her if she wanted to listen to music, and she said she wanted to hear

Så sov hun igen. Min kaffe stod og blev kold. Jeg stirrede på sneen og på træerne. Sneen sov ikke. Træerne sov ikke. Fuglene var malet hen over skyerne.

Den første gang Lola kom på besøg, var for at lave en naboaftale i august. Hun skulle passe Anton i huset, mens vi tog til Italien. Lola kom ind og stillede sig i gangen og så på, at jeg vaskede op. Jeg lod, som om jeg ikke så hende, stod med ryggen til hende. Hun måtte gå hen og lægge hånden på min arm, før jeg vendte mig om. Et par høflige hilsner, og så ville jeg sende hende væk, da hun spurgte til Iris' tilstand, men så råbte Iris inde fra soveværelset: - Lad hende nu hjælpe!

Jeg sagde til Lola, at Anton kunne finde på at vågne af sin døs, når der kom nogen i huset, at han ikke var vant til selskab, at man burde lade ham sidde ved fjernsynet i sin pyjamas, at man burde overlade huset til ham. Før eller siden vil han begynde at gå ud igen.

Hun stod der og bladrede i mine bøger. Jeg bød hende en kop kaffe, stod jo selv og drak en kop. Jeg holdt blikket for mig selv. Hun talte meget lidt. Jeg havde frygtet, at hun ville konversere. Jeg stirrede bare på gummistøvlerne, som om de var en spådomskugle, der kunne forklare, hvorfor jeg skulle miste min kone, min Iris, Antons mor.

Efter Iris' død kom Lola og ville hjælpe mig med Anton. Jeg gik rundt i haven med hende og fortalte, at Anton smurte sig ind i Iris' olier hver morgen og spiste af hendes forråd af nødder og tørrede frugter. Jeg fortalte, at han havde selskab af en due, der sad over tagrenden og stirrede ind på ham, når han lå i sofaen. Den bor der stadig. Jeg har givet duen frø i fuglehuset på stammen, men den bliver siddende i tagrenden. Den har lagt sig til rette og hverken spiser eller flyver mere.

Kort før Iris kommer hjem fra sin rejse, bliver Anton en morgen syg, han er næsten et år gammel. Han begynder at klynke ovenpå. Det er et par dage, efter jeg allerede én gang havde hentet ham hjem fra stranden.

something new. I fetched the boombox and put on various CDs. She was gazing out across the snow with her eyes shut. She asked, "Will I be here tomorrow?"

"What do you think of the music? Will any of it do?" I asked. "No, I detest Richard Wagner. Just put on Mozart after all… Requiem." Her head slumped forwards.

She was asleep. It must have been the morphine.

I sat down behind her and rolled the wheelchair back and forth. "Violin," she whispered, squeezing my hand. "Violin would be nice. Number five."

Then she fell back asleep. My coffee was getting cold. I stared at the snow and the trees. The snow wasn't sleeping. The trees weren't sleeping. The birds were painted across the clouds.

The first time Lola came over was to make neighborly arrangements in August. She was going babysit Anton at our house while we were in Italy. Lola came in and stood in the hallway, watching me do the dishes. I pretended not to notice, kept my back to her. She had to walk over and put her hand on my arm before I turned around. An exchange of pleasantries and then, when she asked about Iris's condition, I was ready to send her on her way, but Iris called out from the bedroom, "Just let her help!"

I told Lola that Anton would sometimes wake from his nap when someone came over, that he wasn't used to company, that it was best to let him watch TV in his pajamas, best to leave the house to him. Sooner or later he would start going outside again.

She stood there flipping through my books. I offered her a cup of coffee, I was drinking one myself, after all. I kept my eyes to myself. She spoke very little. I had feared that she would want to chat. I just stared at her rubber boots as if they were a crystal ball that could tell me why I had to lose my wife, my Iris, Anton's mother.

After Iris died, Lola came over to help with Anton. We walked around in the garden and I told her about how Anton was rubbing himself with Iris's oils every morning and eating from her stash of nuts and dried fruits. I told her that a pigeon kept him company, sitting on the roof gutter staring at him while he lay on the

Jeg rejser mig, løber ovenpå og forsøger at berolige Anton, der vræler, så selv fuglene nysgerrigt sætter sig i vindueskarmen og ser på ham.

Hans arme er dækket af et udslæt, af tætsiddende dun, og jeg lægger en våd klud over hans pande i håb om, at det går væk, jeg vil nødig skulle vække en nabo, hvis der overhovedet er en nabo i det nye kvarter af mørke huse. I hvert fald er der bageren, tænker jeg, idet jeg lægger mit værkende hoved på puden, og vi hviler side om side. Jeg vågner og ligger og ser på ham. Da han åbner øjnene, spørger jeg, om han stadig har ondt, og han nikker.

Jeg lægger Anton i kravlegården, sluger et stykke tørt brød og går hen efter lægen, som går med mig hjem og sætter sig ved siden af Anton, tager en blodprøve, dupper på hans hud og sætter et stykke vat fast med et stykke tape hen over hans armhule. Han siger højtideligt, at der er svar om seks dage og smækker tasken i. Jeg serverer kaffe for ham i haven, og efter et par kopper ved havebordet, snakker vi ubesværet sammen.

Lægen nævner fugleforgiftning som en mulighed, men han kan ikke sige noget sikkert endnu, vil bare vide, om drengen har leget i nærheden af fugle? Jeg siger, at jeg ikke ved det, mens jeg tænker på vores ture i skoven, ved havet, i plantagen, vi har madet ænder, gæs og samlet døde dyr, muldvarper, mus og fugle, op, begravet dem i skoven. - Hvad vil det da betyde?

Lægen siger med ansigtet vendt væk fra mig: - Det betyder, at der kan ske hvad som helst. Vi ved det ikke. Men nu må jeg gå, konsultationen åbner kl. 12.00. Hvor er din kone? - Hun er ikke hjemme, hvorfor? - Bare en tanke. Det kan være noget mentalt med ham, noget herinde, hvis du forstår. Han smiler sigende og peger på sit hoved. Jeg smiler og nikker. - Hun kommer snart hjem!

Anton får det fint igen, men dunene bliver siddende som syet fast i nakkehvirvlerne. Jeg nævner ikke problemet med fuglesygdommen, da Iris kommer hjem. Hestene lader sig igen ubekymret bide af insekterne i haven, Iris og Anton står og ser på dyrene spise i flere timer. Så løber de sammen hjemmefra til stranden og overnatter ved bunkerne, skjult for alle under tykke rødder, som hænger ned fra jordbankerne. Da jeg kommer med deres madpakker, finder jeg dem sovende under Antons dyne, med motiver af hingste der hopper og galoperer gennem hvide skyer. Tændte jeg ikke et bål? Og blev jeg ikke siddende hos dem? Eller gik jeg hjem? Og sov jeg alene i sengen?

couch. It still lives there. I've put seeds in the birdhouse on the tree for the pigeon, but it stays put in the gutter. It's settled in for good, it no longer eats or flies.

One morning, shortly before Iris returns from her trip, Anton gets sick, he's almost a year old. He starts to whimper upstairs. It's a few days after I'd already had to go fetch him from the beach once.

I run upstairs and try to comfort Anton, who's howling so loudly even curious birds come sit on the window ledge to watch him.

His arms are covered in a rash, in thick feathers, and I lay a damp cloth on his forehead hoping it will disappear, I'd hate to wake the neighbors, if, that is, there are any neighbors in this new neighborhood of dark houses. There's the baker in any case, I think to myself as I lay my aching head on the pillow beside Anton and we rest side by side. I wake up and watch him. When he wakes I ask if it stills hurts and he nods.

I put Anton in the playpen, swallow a piece of stale bread and go out to fetch the doctor, who follows me back to the house and sits down beside Anton, takes a blood sample, dabs his skin and affixes a cotton ball with a piece of tape. Solemnly he announces that the results will be back in six days and snaps his bag shut. I invite him to join me for coffee in the garden and after a few cups at the table our conversation flows effortlessly.

The doctor mentions bird disease as another possibility, but he can't say anything for sure yet, he just wants to know whether the boy has been in contact with birds? I tell him I don't know and think of our walks in the woods, by the sea, through the fields, we've fed ducks and geese, picked up dead animals, moles, mice and birds, buried them in the woods. "If so, what would it mean?"

The doctor turns his face away and says: "It means anything is possible. We don't know. I'm afraid I have to go now, the clinic opens at noon. Where's your wife?" "She isn't home, why?" "Just a thought. It could be a psychological thing, something in here, if you know what I mean." He points to his head with a telling smile. I nod, smiling too. "She'll be home soon!"

[...]

Jeg spiser ikke for tiden, jeg drikker ikke andet end kaffe, og jeg drikker det helst alene.

Fredag nat vågnede jeg ved, at Lola tændte lyset foran Iris' billede i stuen, hun hviskede nogle ord, og så prøvede jeg at sove igen. Det var ved at blive lyst, dagen ventede forude og forekom mig alt for lang. Lola skulle ikke hen og lave regnskab for plejehjemmet. Jeg så over på hendes blålige skikkelse i stuen. Lyset flakkede, og der fløj en natsværmer ind i vægen. I det øjeblik gik lyset ud.

Vi talte ikke om Iris. Det gør vi aldrig.

I morges kom Lola og lagde sig tæt ind til mig i sengen og hviskede. - Du glemmer vel ikke, hvem der holdt dig varm, da Iris rejste fra dig? Jeg stødte hende fra mig: - Jeg kan ikke huske det og vil ikke huske det.

Selv i søvne husker jeg det, jeg husker Lolas røde trusser, som strammede om de hvide kønshår. Jeg husker min vrede, når jeg kom i hende og så Iris for mig. At vi kneppede.

Lola parfumerede sig og lugtede ikke af hospital, hun havde et skab med fremtid, gallakjoler, morgenkåber, blondeundertøj, et tomt barneværelse og et skab fuld af ubrugte kjoler, som hun ville prøve for mig.

Engang så Anton os sammen. Han var fjorten år dengang, og samme dag skød han en fasankok fra sit vindue med et luftgevær, løb ekstatisk ned ad trappen og skød den i hovedet, så den rallede og lå stille. Så prøvede han at hugge hovedet af den, men han kunne ikke ramme, så jeg hjalp ham med det. Vi hængte den til tørre og spiste den samme aften. Den smagte af ingenting, af mel.

En dag fulgte jeg efter ham og så ham standse ved et hegn i plantagen. En hejre sad fast med sin ene vinge i pigtrådshegnet. Da han bøjede sig over hejren, begyndte den at baske med vingerne. Han rakte sin hånd frem, forsøgte at tage fat om den ene vinge, men den slog ham hårdt over armen. Hejren måtte have siddet længe i pigtråden, for der sad blade imellem fjerene over dens ryg. Han tog

Anton's condition improves, but the feathers remain as though stitched into the skin of his neck. I don't mention the matter of the bird disease when Iris gets home. Once again the horses in the garden placidly tolerate the bites of insects, Iris and Anton spend hours watching the animals graze. Later they run away to the beach together and spend the night at the bunkers, concealed from the world beneath thick roots that hang from the embankments. When I bring them their lunch, I find them asleep under Anton's blanket with the stallions on it, leaping and galloping through white clouds. Didn't I light a fire? And didn't I stay with them? Or did I go home? And did I sleep alone in our bed?

[…]

I'm not eating at the moment, all I drink is coffee, and I prefer to drink it alone.

Friday night I woke up to find Lola lighting the candle in front of Iris's picture in the living room, she whispered a few words, and I tried to fall back asleep. It was getting light outside, the day stretched out ahead of me, far too long. Lola wouldn't be going out to do bookkeeping for the nursing home like usual. I peeked over at her bluish silhouette in the living room. The candle flickered and a moth flew into the flame.

We didn't talk about Iris. We never do.

This morning Lola came over and lay down close beside me in the bed and whispered: "You haven't forgotten who kept you warm when Iris left, have you?" I pushed her away: "I can't remember and won't remember."

Even in my sleep I remember, I remember Lola's red panties tight across her white pubic hair. I remember my rage when I came inside her and saw Iris in my mind. Saw us fucking.

Lola wore perfume and didn't smell of hospital, she had a wardrobe with a future, ball gowns, bathrobes, lacy underwear, an empty bedroom for a child and a closet full of unworn dresses she wanted to wear for me.

fat, men vingen smuttede ud af hans hånd. Den var så glat, så glat, og hans fingre var fedtede. Han tørrede sin hånd af i bukserne. Vingerne blev mere rolige. Han ville ikke gribe fat med det samme. Hejren sad næsten stille og så på ham. Han så ind i dens sorte knappeøjne. Fuglen fór sammen, da han hev sin trøje af. Den peb ængsteligt. Hejren baskede balstyrisk med vingerne. Anton veg tilbage. Han sprang frem for endeligt at redde hejren. Han kastede trøjen over fuglens korpus. Og mørket syntes at gøre den rolig. Der var ikke en lyd eller nogen bevægelser under stoffet. Han førte hånden forsigtigt op under trøjen og befriede klørene fra pigtråden, førte så hånden videre op over de fedtede vinger til spidsen, som sad fast, han forsøgte at lirke pigtråden bort, men måtte rive vingen hårdt ud af pigtråden og fik en lille bunke blodige fjer i hånden.

Han tog trøjen på, fuglen fløj op for straks efter at lande på jorden med et dybt, hæst og hæsligt brøl. Hans trøje drev af noget, der lignede brun olie. Så løb han.

Da jeg kom hjem, stod han allerede og vaskede sig under bruseren. Bagefter gik jeg ud i badet, hvor der stank sødligt. Den lugt kendte jeg fra dengang Anton var lille. Der lå fjer i brusebadet, blodige. Små og store. De næste par dage holdt jeg øje med ham. Han lugtede af sved, og han dækkede sine arme med lange vanter. Han fældede dun, som skød ud af hans nakke. Jeg overraskede ham med en klud og tørrede ham i nakken, men fjerene hang fast. Så løb han fra mig. Dagen efter havde han taget sin hættetrøje på.

Sidste år den 23. marts.

Hun tog til undersøgelse. Det var stormvejr. Man spurgte, hvor foråret blev af. Det var bidende koldt. Jeg sad og ventede på at høre nyt fra hende. Jeg ventede på hende, mens det stormede, ventede hende hvert øjeblik. Så kom hun endelig gående med vådt hår, og da hun havde fortalt resultatet af undersøgelsen, uden at se mig i øjnene, gik hun over mod skoven. Jeg løb efter hende, og hun standsede, stirrede et øjeblik på mig. Så fortsatte hun ned ad den mudrede vej. Selvom det stormede, og jeg frygtede for hendes sikkerhed, gik jeg ikke efter hende. Jeg sad og iagttog fuglene, der blev blæst omkuld og landede i græsset. Jeg rejste mig

Anton saw us together once. He was fourteen years old then, and that day he shot a pheasant from his window with an air gun. He bounded down the stairs ecstatically and shot it in the head. It rattled and fell still. Then he attempted to chop off its head, but he couldn't aim properly and so I helped him. We hung it up to dry and ate it that same evening. It tasted of nothing, of flour.

One day I followed him into the woods and watched as he stopped next to a fence. A heron had gotten one of its wings caught in the barbed wire. When he kneeled down next to the bird, it began to flap its wings. He reached out after the caught wing but it slapped him across his arm. The heron must have been stuck in the barbed wire for a while, because there were leaves between all the feathers on its back. Anton managed to take hold, but the wing slipped right out of his grasp. It was ever so smooth and his fingers were greasy. He wiped his hand off on his pants. The wings stopped flapping. He hesitated before taking hold again. The heron lay practically motionless, watching him. He gazed back into its black button eyes. The bird cowered when he pulled off his sweater, squawking anxiously and thrashing its wings. Anton took a few steps back and then leapt forward to rescue the heron once and for all. He threw his sweater over the bird's body, and the darkness seemed to calm it. There was no sound or movement from beneath the fabric. Carefully he slid his hand up beneath the sweater and loosened its talons from the barbed wire. Then he crept his hand further up and along the greasy wing to the tip that was caught. He tried to disentangle the barbed wire from the wing but eventually had to resort to force and tear it out, leaving him with a handful of bloody feathers.

He put his sweater back on, and the bird shot up into the air only to land back on the ground straight away with a deep, raucous, horrifying roar. His sweater was covered in something that looked like brown oil. Then he ran.

When I got home, he was already in the shower rinsing off. I went into the bathroom afterwards and found that it stank sweetly. I recognized the smell from when Anton was little. There were feathers in the shower, bloody, big and small. I kept an eye on him over the next few days. He smelled of sweat and kept his arms covered with long gloves. He shed feathers that sprouted from the back of his neck. I snuck up on him with a washcloth and tried to wipe them away, but the feathers remained stuck on and he ran off. The next day he was wearing his hoodie.

og hældte resten af øllen ud i vasken, mens jeg så Iris forsvinde gennem haven i vådt tøj.

[...]

Jeg tager det sidste billede af Iris ud af bogen, det billede, som jeg tog ved søen, da jeg kørte hende derud for sidste gang. Det er et år siden. Den gule farve i hendes ansigt strålede, det var ikke til at se, om hun var i bedring eller forværring. Hun bad om at hvile i solen, og jeg gik alene til fuglerederne.

Jeg så en rede, et mærkeligt syn. En enorm fugl, der blev madet af en lille fugl, og en orm var på vej ned i næbet på den store fugl, der var aldeles passiv, det måtte være en unge. Jeg gøs og vendte mig om for at se på Iris. Hun havde rejst sig og kom gående hen imod mig. Jeg løb jublende mod hende, men hun stoppede og stirrede på mig et helt minut eller flere minutter. Hun så forskrækket ud, og hendes ben begyndte at svigte hende. Jeg løb hen og greb hende. Hun sagde: - Det bliver bedre og bedre, og jeg sagde: - I morgen kan du gå selv, og hjalp hende tilbage i kørestolen, og da fik jeg den indskydelse at tage det billede.

Hun har et tøvende udtryk på billedet, hun ser en anelse angst ud, men det, der er mest skræmmende, er det glimt af foragt, jeg først ser i hendes øjne nu. Jeg spørger mig selv, om hun foragtede mig lidt, om hun hadede mig for at skulle leve videre, og for at jeg ikke gik i døden med hende? Eller om hun afskyede mig, fordi jeg knælede og lagde mit hoved i hendes skød, og mærkede, at der også dér lugtede af sygdom, og at den tomme lugt af hospital i hendes skød gjorde mig afmægtig, uden at jeg sagde noget. Løgnen var kommet imellem os. Jeg slog armene om hende, da hun sagde: - Lad nu være at spille, at du er mig.

Et andet billede af Iris og hendes mor, Else. På billedet er Iris tretten år, men hun ligner en på tyve. De står med hinanden i hænderne en skinnende sommerdag, så skinnende, at deres ansigtstræk næsten er visket ud af lys. Alligevel ser de bange ud, jeg kan ikke holde ud, at de ser bange ud, og jeg lægger billedet fra mig.

Last year, March twenty-third.

She went to a screening. Outside it was storming. People asked each other what happened to spring. It was bitterly cold. I was waiting to hear from her. I waited for her while the storm raged, expecting her at any moment. Finally she returned with wet hair, and after telling me the results without looking me in the eye, she walked off towards the woods. I chased after her and for a moment she stopped and stared at me. Then she continued down the muddy road. Even though the storm was raging and I feared for her safety I didn't follow her. I sat and watched the birds being buffeted by the wind and tumbling onto the grass. Then I got up and poured the rest of the beer down the sink as I watched Iris disappear through the garden in wet clothes.

[…]

I take the last picture of Iris out of the album, the picture I took by the lake when I drove her out there for the last time. It was a year ago. The yellow tinge made her face glow, it was impossible to tell whether she was getting better or worse. She asked to rest in the sun, and meanwhile I walked out to the bird nests alone.

I spotted a nest, a strange sight. An enormous bird being fed by a little bird, a worm halfway down its beak. The big one was utterly helpless, it must have been a baby. I shuddered and turned around to look at Iris. She had stood up and was now walking towards me. Delighted, I ran to her, but she stopped and stared at me for a whole minute or maybe several minutes. She looked frightened, and her legs began to buckle beneath her. I ran over and caught her. She said: "It's getting better and better," and I said: "Tomorrow you'll be able to walk on your own," and helped her back into the wheelchair. That's when I thought to take the picture.

She's got a hesitant look on her face in the picture, she looks slightly afraid, but what's most frightening is the glimmer of contempt in her eyes, a look I've never noticed before now. I wonder whether she hated me a little, whether she hated me for living on, for not joining her in death. Or whether she resented me for kneeling

Da vi skulle sige farvel, husker jeg, at Iris på et tidspunkt satte sig og så ned i søen. Jeg spurgte, hvad hun så efter. Hun sagde, at hun havde tabt sin hårnål i vandet, da hun spejlede sig. Jeg stak hånden i vandet og stødte straks på en kold, stikkende ting. Hun tog den og satte den i et snuptag i håret, så hendes lokker med ét sad stramt tilbage. Hun slog igen håret ud, så det skyggede for hendes ansigt, og hun bøjede sig langt frem. Hendes ansigt, nakke og ryg var dækket af hår. Jeg ville befri hende fra hår. Jeg skubbede lokkerne til side og ville sige farvel, men hun vendte ryggen til og kastede håret bag over, som om hun var blevet ked af det, og jeg spurgte, hvad det var, og hun sagde: - Ingenting!

Hun tog min hånd og vuggede frem og tilbage med håret slået ned foran ansigtet. Jeg havde på fornemmelsen, at hun kunne falde forover. Hun sad helt stille. Hun skubbede håret væk fra ansigtet. Jeg stirrede på hende, mens hun blotlagde sit ansigt. Det var sølvfarvet og skinnende. Jeg kunne ikke se hendes øjne, lænede mig frem for at røre hendes kinder og så på hendes lukkede øjne. Hun åbnede dem igen, og en grøn farve flød ud af dem. Jeg faldt i søvn.

Senere satte vi os ved søen. Det regnede. Skrænten blev oversvømmet på få minutter. Småfrøer kastede sig op fra søen. Vi trak benene til os. Der var edderkopper, haletudser og ødelagte åkander overalt. Vi måtte krybe længere tilbage. Vi stødte mod jordbanken. Den var kold og lodden og gav efter. Jorden styrtede ned over os, et øjeblik så vi ikke hinanden.

Lola er her ikke. Jeg går ud i køkkenet. Lemmen i gulvet står åben. En klam dunst står op fra kælderen. Lola går og roder dernede. - Kom! Hendes råb er koldt og også hendes latter. - Jeg ledte efter dåbskjoler, men så fandt jeg de her. Der er heste over det hele.

Lola rækker mig det sidste billede, Iris tegnede af hestene som hun drømte om på rejsen til Sicilien. En hest er tegnet på et stykke tykt papir. Bare et hesteansigt, gråt og mat. Manken er malet grå. Det var den hest, Iris i en drøm så falde i havnen. Hun kunne kun se dens øjne og manke, mens den druknede. Den var havnet i vandet, fordi den blev vanvittig og løb løbsk, og Iris jagtede den i drømmen ned

down and laying my head in her lap, and whether she knew without my saying anything that it smelled of sickness there too, and that I was powerless against the empty smell of hospital coming from her lap. The lie had wedged itself between us. I wrapped my arms around her when she said: "Quit pretending you're me."

Another picture, this one of Iris and her mother Else. In the picture Iris is thirteen but she looks twenty. They're holding hands on a bright summer day, so bright their expressions are almost erased by the light. And yet they look afraid, I can't bear seeing them look afraid. I put the picture down.

When were saying goodbye, I remember how at one point Iris sat down and peered into the lake. I asked what she was looking for. She said she had dropped a hairpin in the water when looking at her reflection. I reached my hand into the depths and immediately came across something cold and sharp. She took it and slid it in, pinning her hair back tightly. Then she unpinned her hair again so it covered her face and leaned over. Her face and neck and back were concealed behind her hair. I wanted to free her from all that hair. I pushed the locks aside and was about to say goodbye, but she turned her back and tossed her hair backwards as if upset, and when I asked what was the matter she said: "Nothing!"

She took my hand and rocked back and forth with her hair still covering her face. I feared she might fall over. Then she sat completely still. She drew her hair back, and I stared at her face as it came into view. It was silver and shining. I couldn't see her eyes, I leaned forwards to touch her cheeks and study her eyelids. She opened her eyes again and a green color flowed out. I fell asleep.

Later we sat by the lake. It was raining, the shore flooded in minutes. Tiny frogs jumped out of the water. We pulled our knees to our chests. There were spiders, frogs and broken lily pads everywhere. We crept back further and further until we were pressed against a land bank. It was cold and mossy and gave way. The earth poured over us and for a moment we couldn't see each other.

til havnen, hvor hun måtte skyde den, så den faldt i vandet. Jeg var ikke imponeret over synet af tegningen og gik ovenpå i stuen. Senere på dagen faldt jeg over en træstamme, da jeg trodsede smerterne og gik ud.

Et par kilometer hen ad stranden passerer jeg fiskerne og er alene med vandet. Det virker så let at gå ud i dybet, som om det er meningen. Jeg prøver at skrige tre gange, og det sortner for mig. Jeg lægger mig op ad en bunke kampesten. En gammel hund løber i vandkanten og snuser til tangen. Den skider i sandet og dækker det til med sand. Bagefter giver den sig til at grave det op igen og snuser til det. En gammel, tynd hund. Havet er tomt for skibe. Der er ingen farver på stranden, alt er gråt som sten, og der er højest nogle lavmælte kluk fra bølgerne. Jeg tømmer kagedåsen i havet.

Jeg tænker ikke på noget. Jeg sidder i sofaen og ser fjernsyn med Iris' gamle bukser på og spiser Iris' nødder. Anton er taget i skoven til det nye fuglereservat. Jeg lugter af al den aske, jeg fik på tøjet, i ansigtet, i håret, jeg smager den, jeg kan smage asken, som jeg fik i munden, da jeg tømte den urne i bølgerne. Jeg havde overset, at der var pålandsvind. Men jeg vasker mig ikke. Jeg vil ikke ændre på det. Jeg synes, det dufter, og jeg skifter ikke tøj. Lola er her alligevel ikke. Lola sidder ikke længere i min have og vinterbader. Lola spiser ikke rå ingefær et eller andet sted i skyggerne fra bladene, der famler som barnehænder efter lidt nærvær i baghaven. - Ingefær er godt til den dag, du får kræft, sagde Lola engang. Hvad ved hun om sygdom. Hun ville giftes.

Det er næsten mørkt udenfor. Men haven er lyst op af sne. Jeg trækker tiden ud, halvsover på sofaen og tør ikke trække gardinerne for af frygt for suset fra min bevægelse i rummet. Vinduerne er åbne, rummet er tomt. Alt er søvnigt, dovent, næsten behageligt. Jeg drikker mørk øl. Grenene udenfor dirrer i tågen og rammer glasset. En brise sniger sig igennem huset. Det er hvidt i min hjerne. Der er kun lyden af flagermusenes flaprende vinger under halvtaget udenfor, der når mig gennem det åbne vindue. Sidder jeg længe nok i træk, bliver jeg syg. Hundens gøen runger ud over husene igen. En ny hund gør om kap med de andre. Jeg har ikke

Lola isn't here. I look in the kitchen. The trapdoor is open. A dank odor is rising from below. Lola is rummaging about down there. "Come here!" Her shout is cold, as is her laugh. "I was looking for a baptism gown but then I came across these. There are horses everywhere."

Lola hands me the last horse picture Iris drew on our trip to Sicily. Just a horse face, gray and dull, on a thick piece of paper. The mane is painted gray. It was the horse Iris saw fall into the harbor in a dream. She could see only its eyes and mane as it drowned. It had gone mad and ran off, and in the dream Iris chased it down to the harbor and was forced to shoot it and that was how it ended up in the water. I was uninterested in the drawing and went upstairs into the living room. Later that day, when I decided to brave the pain and go outside, I tripped over a log.

A few miles down the beach I pass the fishermen and after that it's just me, on my own with the water. It seems so easy to wade out into the depths, as if that's the point. Three times I try to scream and then everything goes black. I lean back against a pile of boulders. There's an old dog running around at the water's edge, sniffing at the seaweed. It shits in the sand and covers it up. Then it digs the shit back up and sniffs that. An old, scrawny dog. There are no ships at sea. There are no colors on the beach. Everything is gray like the rocks, nothing but a few hushed clucks from the waves. I empty the biscuit tin into the sea.

I'm not thinking of anything. I'm on the couch watching TV with Iris's old pants on, eating Iris's nuts. Anton has gone out into the woods to the new bird sanctuary. I smell of the ash I got on my clothes, in my face, in my hair, I taste it, I taste the ash I got in my mouth when I emptied the urn into the waves. I had failed to take into account the sea breeze. But I don't shower. I like it this way. It smells good, so I don't change my clothes. Lola isn't here anyway. Lola is no longer in my garden eating raw ginger somewhere in the shade of the trees, fumbling for attention like the hands of a child. "Ginger is good for the day you get cancer," Lola once told me. What does she know about sickness. She wanted to get married.

lyst til at drikke mere. Jeg snuser dunsten ind uden at drikke. Jeg vil ikke forsvinde. Jeg vil ikke have, det sker. En fugl pipper ivrigt lige uden for vinduet. Morgenen nærmer sig skinnende bag træerne. Jeg drikker kaffe. Klokken er 5.52. Jeg håber, at Anton har det godt med dyrene.

Jeg drømte i nat, at Iris sad ved søen. Hun holdt sine hænder fast sammenknyttede som én, der holder om en friskfanget fisk. Jeg gik hen imod hende for at åbne hendes næver. Hun rejste sig med en sort, blank lakvinge hængende mellem benene, da hun nærmede sig. - Du så trist ud på afstand. Jeg troede, du kom med dårligt nyt, sagde hun og klemte benene sammen. Vingen flaprede larmende. Jeg tror, hun sagde noget mere, jeg kunne ikke høre det for larmen. Jeg ville spørge, men i det samme havde jeg glemt, hvad jeg ville spørge om.

It's almost dark outside, but the garden is illuminated by the snow. I drag out the time, doze off on the couch and don't dare draw the curtains for fear of the draft my movements will create in the room. The windows are open, the room is empty. Everything is sleepy, languid, almost pleasant. I drink a dark beer. The branches outside quiver in the fog, tapping at the window. A breeze slips through the house. My mind is white. Only the sound of the bats flapping their wings beneath the eaves outside reaches me through the open window. If I sit here long enough, I'll get sick. Once again the dogs' barks are echoing among the houses. A new dog is trying to out-bark the others. I don't want to drink anymore, I take in the smell without drinking. I don't want to disappear, I don't want that to happen. A bird is fervently chirping right outside the window. Morning approaches brightly beyond the trees. I've got a cup of coffee. It's 5:52. I hope Anton is doing well out there with the animals.

Last night I dreamed that Iris was sitting by the lake. She was clasping her hands tightly like someone holding a fish they've just caught. I went over to unclench her fists. When she stood up, a shiny black vinyl wing was dangling between her legs. "You looked so sad from afar. I was afraid you were bringing bad news," she said, squeezing her legs together. The wing flapped noisily. I think she said something more, but the sound of the wing drowned it out. I wanted to ask her a question, but suddenly I had forgotten what it was.

Kieron Walquist

Forgive Me for Being Hesitant

Lake of the Ozarks, 2004

I am ten years old
in a drug-dirty trailer home,

locked in the bathroom—tub
& toilet crocheted in calcium—

trying to put K-mart trunks over
my wasp waist & I don't want to,

but I walk down a nail-toothed dock
that's decorated with spiders the size

of Christmas lights & Styrofoam coolers
browned by carp in spit-warm water

& I don't want him to, but father pulls
a moldy lifejacket over my bone-white

chest & I don't want to—because *it*
doesn't fit—but father puts me

on a jet ski & we leave the cove—
its summer cabins & party inflatables—

& I don't want to, but we rip & roar
on that olive surface & roll the jet ski,

tear a hole through & slip into nothingness,
& when I pop up, puking froth, father's

gone (behind the craft) & I believe he's
drowned before I ever made him proud

of me & I will always
be ten years old, weak wet

worthless on a jet ski crying
what do I do what do I do?

Want

in response to Anders Carlson-Wee

The blue & gray-mucked dumpster
at Moser's groceries is the only grave
mother says she'll put us
in. We're birds of scavenge
for her pride—taking what's free,
what's there, because we're told
it's good before it's all-the-way
gone. My sisters spoil raspberry-pink,
ashamed—nervously look around
while I'm made to dig in
old cardboard & plastic bags.
I offer up rye bread. Oranges.
A head of lettuce. Button
mushrooms. Rot is a crayon box
of colors: gray white yellow
green blue brown black very
black. Rot is honey-wet, soft,
whiskery—an inside-turned-out
smell. *What's that you're*
holding? mother asks. *Not*
want, but food! & she's right—
this cantaloupe, split open
& soured, is not want.

D. A. Powell

All About All Hallow's Eve

we dressed
in our best
false breasts
to impress
our two guests
the dudes pressed
their dude flesh
against
our false chests
we undressed
acquiesced
boy flesh
on boy flesh
in a dress
but undressed
who'd have guessed
such repressed
sex progressed
to the next
to the best
it was yes
it was best
left unquest
ioned correct
ed or checked
it was sex
without quest
ion complex
as the mess
on the dress
would attest

Is There Something Like Murder for Trees

A fall of oaks, a strip
of birches, a sob of willow,
a strand of beeches. An
inferno of white ash. An
inferno of mountain ash.
A slap of palms, a clap
of date palms, a jig of
saw palmetto. Crop of
poplars, flash of sassafras,
pitch of pines. A rash
of strawberry trees. A pack
of sweet gums. A few of yew.

Emily Yong

Dis (ORDER)

—in which patterns recur at progressive
smaller scales… *Benoit Mandelbrot 1924-2010*

1-

—Then he remembered snow
how it began with a line
a triangle closing, kept going…
Koch's famed curve
of continuity by segments how else going
/opening into
/exiting from clouds precipitating
/sintering into: hexagonal
crystals—
as if—for geometry—
it was made, gave substance to—infinity Announcing
at once a soliloquy, cosmic
revelry, unraveling—
outside the window. *Fractal*,
he called it: one
flake, two flakes, falling…

2-

At one, crawling on a rug, the light—
fell onto a patch of gold
& red, shattering the irregular threads

into diamonds. Octagons. Stars—
while the Warsaw sun, gone
to the west, cast fractured
shadows—of beech trees. Later, in his father's study:
maps, grids, coordinates.
Possibilities—of entrance: into what
—couldn't be seen—

but zoom in:
bays, coves, fish-eyed
eyelets. Mountain goat horns.
Smaller & smaller…from the sea & sea-
shore: crystal growth, scum, waves
breaking, destroying, & splintering
rocks; sea glass: what was in
—there? The eye's wandering,
wanting—more. And looming
in the sky—tufts of clouds, shrouds of dust
& gas glowing When really
a dark hole: falling in, how
much—dying—disorder: in
—a star?

3-

Outside the iris: Paris, history, the moon
stark like roughened bark the dark
fear of Nazi extermination
seized him. To the core atomic sub-atomic
I can almost hear him hearing the
march: stiff vibration contorted

syncopation the occupation of armies, ghettos,
gas camps. Each boot-beat-step The minutiae
—of the removal of an entire people
: to the decimal, he knew
in his heart. This act of being extinguished, this
—distortion, no, dismembering: of
reason logos order—Love
gone, terribly
awry. And the people, the people…

4-

—how to hold
annihilation: corpses, ancient records of
fossils, stars deep
in the sea? Must there be remembrances
—in our hands? The heart's affections afflictions,
these: the disintegration of
what we know, of atoms,
marriages—not abstractions; infected cells

—but then, the

Romanesco broccoli breaking
: into floret! This thought
too, the naming the factoring Into which
he could only hold, this
—world, which—he called home, despite
the hair the few shoes
made of red leather, amidst the—same
grey shoes. Near-deteriorated, near-

obliviated, behind the gate, not marred;
& the question, over
& over How to hold
this: our scarred—sacred
world? Salted Earth? Sea: the
—crystals—
laid down—inexhaustible? Even then, startled
by a snowfall: its ends
in specks & sparkles —*fractal*,
he called it: one
flake, two flakes falling…

Dan Fox

Sorry. V. Young, Etc.

For more years than were good for me, I worked as an editor and staff writer for an art magazine. My co-editor, Jennifer, had a valuable talent for finding humor in the dull routine tasks and professional anxieties that came with the job. For example, each time she finished writing an article, Jennifer would email the Word file to me for editing accompanied by the message: "I'm sorry, I was very young when I wrote this." Many of our office hours were spent editing texts by critics who made confident pronouncements on "post-studio praxis" and "the performative dynamics of architecture," or writers whose worldliness had been honed to such devastating concision that their articles might as well have been a single raised eyebrow. The goofy modesty of Jennifer's line was a tonic against the writerly ego. The gag ran for years. I adopted it and like all the best worst jokes its repetition only made it funnier. Tradition gradually compressed the caveat to variations on "Wrote this in my youth" and eventually "Sorry. V. young, etc." It became our incantation against imposter syndrome. A quiet prayer asking for deliverance from the feeling that no matter how long you work on a piece of writing, you will always wonder if you could have done better. Deliverance from the suspicion that only when you reach your dotage, tucked under a blanket in the day room of The Dorothy Parker Home for Retired Critics, will you finally get the hang of exhibition reviews.

We had begun writing criticism within a couple of years of each other. Jennifer was then in her thirties, I was in my twenties, and the retirement home was decades down the road. We were young in both age and professional experience, so our work was technically juvenalia regardless of the comedy caveat. Callowness inflected our thinking to some degree – we knew this – but the gag was itself a callow form of self-assessment. I didn't understand, back then, that the maturity of a critic's opinion does not always correspond to their age in years. Writers can be full of themselves or they can be wracked with doubt about their work, but neither arrogance nor insecurity discriminate against age. Youth writes in intense *chiaroscuro*, describing a world contoured in light and shadow, of ideals seen in high-key. The early years of a critic are hungry and omniverous, a time to learn and

hatch plans to turn society upside-down, but they're also prone to craving approval from some form of authority, even as that authority is being giving the finger. (Criticism is no job for those pursuing social prestige in the art world, at least not if you're doing it with any integrity.) The older you get, the more life's tones blanch to a rich *grisaille*. This brings subtlety to thought, but also torpor. Later comes the comfort of not giving a fuck, but also comfortably fossilized opinions. "Sorry. V. Young" becomes "Sorry. Old enough to know better."

Blaming clueless youth for bad writing was a joke made at the expense of our pre-magazine lives. I had been through undergraduate art school, and so too had Jennifer. Neither of us were trained art historians, curators, or journalists. Until the editorial jobs, we had produced images more often than we wrote about them. I never planned to become a writer, but an MFA was beyond my means and I needed paid work. To apologize for writing-whilst-young was, at that point, to apologize for writing with more years on the clock as an artist than as a critic. (Looking back this was an odd thing to be embarrassed about, as artists have traditionally been excellent critics.)

Both in the emotional and legal sense, I had spent more years in adolescence and childhood than adulthood. My life before art school, before moving to London, had been informed by family and school in a small British town. Visual arts professionals tend to disavow their early years. Unlike concert musicians or athletes, whose time spent playing in a national youth orchestra or regional under-16s team is chalked up to dedication, an early start for the critic is dismissed as precocity. 'Early' is art school or university, the starting blocks of professional life. Anything before is pre-historic. Formative experiences are validated by the reputation of your chosen institution and the league tables of who-taught-who, on the networking value of a particular postgrad course. What happened in the pre-professionalized, pre-art-world-hazed critic's life is of little importance. The languages we speak before we are trained to speak art are forgotten. (For some, sadly, it's better to forget.) Of course, there are those who later make successful careers from the material of childhood, and in the combat zones of public discourse, the social forces that shape identity from birth can be wielded to justify or de-legitimize another person's actions. But when we speak about the education of an artist or

critic, it's rare to raise the topic of high school, or elementary school; not for the classroom lessons, but for what is learned about the self and the development of a world view. Children should be seen and not heard.

Almost every person you know has made a drawing, painting, or sculpture early in life. They will have imagined rich internal lives for inanimate things and, like tiny gods, controlled the destiny of these objects. Some will have written stories in dog-eared notebooks and staged impromptu plays with siblings and toys. But society encourages most of us to forget our early childhood interest in form, color and plasticity. The impulse to make is discouraged beyond a certain point, and consigned to the dressing-up box. It is either disowned as pointless and unlikely to lead to a decent living, or desublimated into some other form of activity. Those that continue making must cross the rubicon of juvenelia. To the mature eye, juvenilia reveals a lack of comfort with our creative and critical selves. It can be a phase of near-comical self-belief, untested against the world. Or a period in which people rehearse forms of pretense that are sad denials about the person they secretly wish to be. In certain stretches it also reeks of earnestness. Even for the most precocious teen, all tastes start out crude and naive. Nobody emerges into the world with perfectly formed opinions about modernism and French theory, but that's what is implied when the young, seminar-fresh critic tries to prove themselves one of the grown-ups. Three years after Prince's death, aged 58, the publication of an unfinished memoir titled *The Beautiful Ones* revealed that the teenage musician drew comic strips ("Prince's Funnies"), made dorky sketches of record covers for the albums he one day hoped to make, and created family photo albums annotated with goofy, warm-hearted captions. He knew music was a path he wanted to follow, but his adolescent self seemed gentle and shy. Later in life, he would suggest that his creativity had been, in large part, motivated by the trauma of his parent's divorce. All of which seems at odds with the highly controlled image of a mercurial, sex-funk virtuoso that the public came to love; an image that could never have existed without the nerdy comic strip and sketchbook fantasy phase.

Unless you were raised in the rarefied atmosphere of an historically important scene, it's unlikely the teenage you would have heard of Rosalind Krauss or

Brazilian neo-Concretism or David Hammons. There was a time when even the most jaded insider did not know that A used to date B which must surely be why C was included in that big show at MoMA—not that they go to MoMA these days because, you know, the tourists. To talk about your influences before you emerged butterfly-like from the incubators of tertiary education into professional life is to confess to being one of those MoMA tourists, staring slack-jawed at a Claude Monet for the first time, temporarily forgetting how self-conscious you feel about your greasy hair and provincial fashions. A time when culture didn't simply influence you, it smothered you, because it was harder to filter its effects without the knowledge of where or when things came from, who made them, and without the tools to know how to wrangle them. An admission of just how unsophisticated you once were. It's worth noting that older definitions of the word 'sophisticated' related to 'corruption', 'adulteration', and even 'perversity.' In medieval Latin, the verb 'sophisticare' related to the tampering of goods, especially food.

In the nearest city to my hometown, there is a restaurant named Browns. My family rarely ate out when I was growing up, so a visit to Browns was reserved strictly for special occasions. A birthday, a homecoming. The interior was panelled in dark wood and furnished with French bistro chairs and marble-topped tables. A grand piano sat under a large skylight in the main dining area, on a small raised stage surrounded by potted palms and tousles of greenery in hanging baskets. The room was animated by candles throwing geometric shadows from pineapple-textured glass holders. I had never seen such beautiful people as the waiting staff, dressed in starched white shirts and small black aprons. To me, at the age of ten or twelve, Browns was the zenith of sophistication, a word I had only just learned. It epitomized a mishmash of received images of European cool, a place where artists and poets might meet. Not that I had been anywhere in Europe outside Britain but maybe I didn't need to with this restaurant nearby. I imagined that, on their breaks, the waiting staff wrote poetry or learned lines for the plays they were acting in. I ate from the kid's menu but enjoyed watching grown-ups being served delicacies such as olives on cocktail sticks, thin-cut French fries and after-dinner cappuccinos. Even back at home I wanted to recreate that atmosphere: using my parent's compact camera, I once attempted to photograph a still life featuring a table lamp, the family piano and artfully arranged

shadows cast by leaves from a pot plant. I lost the photograph—or I later tore it up out of embarrassment—but I can still see the composition in my mind's eye.

Not long after I came under the spell of Browns—sometime around the age of 15—I stumbled across the work of Andy Warhol. I scoured libraries and bookstores for anything I could find on the subject. (This was in the early 1990s, pre-Internet.) Thanks to the broad minds of British TV programmers at the time, I had chance encounters with filmmakers Kenneth Anger, Bruce Connor and Derek Jarman from the comfort of home. A BBC TV series titled *Moviedrome* broadcast cult films late at night, introduced by the director Alex Cox. What was this stuff? What kind of people made them? Who on earth could I talk to about what I'd just seen? These new discoveries cross-contaminated with radio comedy shows, pop music gleaned from older siblings and school, and style magazines on the shelves of local newsagents. My influences were a hot mess but there was something about their surfaces that I was attracted to but struggled to understand why. It was erotic and epiphanic at the same time.

In a *Guardian* obituary for the art critic Stuart Morgan, published in 2002, Ian Hunt and Adrian Searle recounted how a visitor to Morgan's apartment was "impressed by his wall of books, [and] said he must be very deep." The critic replied no, explaining that "he was interested in the problem of describing the surface of things, the difficulty of which he thought had been underestimated." If I had looked closer at the surface of things, I may have discovered that Browns was part of a nationwide restaurant chain, and that the beautiful staff were broke high school students and undergrads. I would have learned that the bistro furniture could be ordered bulk from a catering supplies company, and that the thin-cut French fries were likely from a supermarket frozen food aisle. Although it felt expensive, it was hardly an upscale joint. Yet still, decades later, the memory of a candlelit birthday treat at Browns is the first image that appears in my mind when I hear the word "sophistication." Such is the indelibility of artifice. Surfaces imprint themselves deeply on our malleable younger selves and although they fade, they never fully leave us.

Jonathan Miller, the late opera director, neurologist, satirist and writer (now there's an index of sophistication) said that "it's my passionate, almost religious

belief that it is in the negligible that the considerable is to be found." I find it hard to deny the ways in which the negligible has impacted my work as a critic. Those 'negligible' times I stayed up late to watch *Moviedrome*, the Saturday afternoons spent looking for new information on Warhol in a local bookstore. When I first saw the work of Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers—installations furnished with lush green potted palms and delicate wooden folding chairs, and text pieces featuring old-fashioned French cursive handwriting—my first thought was: Browns. Broodthaers influenced the work of British artist Cerith Wyn Evans, whose piece *has the film already started* nods obliquely to the Belgian's palms. On visiting the Evans at White Cube Gallery, London, in the early 2000s, there was that association again: Browns. Which is all well and cute, but the danger is that such associations forge a chain that binds the critical mind to parochial models, convincing the critic through the power of nostalgia, cultural conditioning and emotional blindspots, that they are seeing something that's not there—something the artist is certainly not themselves seeing.

For this, and other semi-sensible reasons, the professional critic is trained to drain their work of subjective froth, or at least know what dose of subjectivity concentrate is 'tasteful', or useful, in a given piece of writing. The critic learns to read a work in its present and historical context, to translate an optical or auditory experience into words, and specifically words suitable for the context in which it's going to be published—newspaper readers, say, or professional peers in the art world. But these assessments may be subtly shaded by conditions that go unspoken—for example, what kind of work is fashionable (an industry that sells work on the promise of art's eternal power doesn't like to be reminded of its fickleness)—and forms of micro-expertise and micro-gossip that rarely surface themselves but may affect how the critic wishes their work to be read. For a critic with a reputation—a 'voice,' as they like to say—they may be concerned to give their readers more of what they've got to sell: ice-cold dialetics, stunning perspicacity or a tedious, impossible-to-please hauteur. And then, like a kind of tinnitus, there are the things that the critic can hear but tries to ignore; mood, health, the bad back, the blood-sugar low, and the rent hike you were told about that morning. "Nothing is denied by me as an effect or influence," writes novelist

and critic Lynne Tillman. "Uninvited memories spring up. Forgetfulness is its own omniscient realm."

When I am asked to go to a museum or gallery and write about a work of art, I try to remind myself that a person, subject to all the world throws at them from birth, is responsible for taking the time to make this image or object. Like me, they too once knew nothing. They were unsophisticated, ignorant of current discourse, of how the system works, of historical context, artistic precedent. They had no professional contacts. They were excitable, impetuous, curious, innocent, dumb, embarrassing, badly dressed, greasy haired. And that person is still with them. No matter how hard you try to cover that former self up behind the costumes and slang of seasoned professionalism, the early you still lurks there, ever so subtly inflecting your tastes and critical judgements. On good days, you can still sense their excitement. That person wrote your future work when you were very young. No need to be sorry, etc.

Brian Evenson

Annex

When I was young and very new to the world, my keeper took me to a place he referred to as the annex, though, since it was not proximate to any other structure, I had a hard time understanding what it meant for it to be called *annex*. I was unformed enough to think that words meant what they were recorded as meaning, did not yet understand the way words bent and flexed in individual mouths to become something else, a sort of private code. In a sense I still do not understand, since this is not the way words have tended to operate for me, but I have learned to simulate understanding, as you shall do as well. If you do not, people made of bone and meat and blood will come to feel you are a threat.

"Annexed to what?" I asked my keeper.

"What?" he said. For a moment he was perplexed, and then he smiled. "Oh yes, very good. No, not that sort of annex." Though he did not continue on to tell me what sort of annex it was.

I am tempted to say that I do not know how long we walked—though this would be a lie. I know exactly how long it was because, like you, I was built to remember. My mind keeps track of such things whether I care to or no. Five kilometers, two hundred and sixty-three meters from the building in which I was kept, at least according to the path we took. Perhaps there was a quicker way there, but this was the route we took.

We left the building in which I was kept and moved across a series of muddy, fallow fields, my keeper occasionally glancing furtively about, as if afraid of being seen. He held fast to my hand, as he usually did even when we moved from room to room within our building. Whenever I slowed, he tugged me gently along.

We approached a wooded area, a barbed-wire fence separating it from the field we were crossing. The wire was a rusty triple-twist strand set with double-prong barbs, and each section of fence consisted of three lines of wire strung between wooden posts. There are other ways to describe this, depending on what records you refer to, and doubtless still other ways having nothing to do with records at all, to which I have no access.

Hanging from the top wire between each set of posts was a faded metal sign with a stylized image of a skull upon it, and, below, the words *Keep Out.*

"That doesn't apply to you," claimed my keeper once he realized I had stopped walking and was staring at the sign. "Your head does not resemble that, does it? You have nothing to worry about."

He let go of my hand and moved to the fence. He held down the bottom wire with his foot and pulled up the center wire until it nearly brushed the top wire. He stood there, nodding at me, until I realized he desired for me to pass through.

Crouching low, careful to avoid both the wire above and the wire below, I passed through. Once I was safely on the other side, my keeper simultaneously held open the wires and awkwardly negotiated the gap himself, tearing the arm of his shirt in the process. Concerned, he rolled the sleeve up to examine his skin. When he saw it had been scratched but not pierced, he smiled. Such frail creatures, humans.

"It doesn't matter," he claimed, either for my benefit or to himself. "It was an old shirt anyway."

At first our progress was slow. We had to force a path through undergrowth and scrub, which was difficult for my keeper in particular. But then, abruptly, we broke through and onto a woodpath, overgrown but still passable. We moved single file, my keeper before me, through close-set trees, until we came to a large clearing. The ground within had apparently once been covered in asphalt, though only hunks of it remained now, tall grass and weeds and weather having destroyed the rest.

"Here we are," my keeper said.

"And where's that?" I asked.

"The annex," he said, and gestured before us. I was wondering how an exterior space could be considered an annex and what purpose, if any, there was in coming to it, when my keeper again took hold of my hand and led me forward until I had a clear view of the rectangular hole cut into the ground.

A grave, I thought at first, having that image and idea readily at my disposal from the material I had absorbed. *An open one.* I thought, *To what extent can a grave be considered an annex? Annex to what?* And then my keeper led me a little closer and I saw that the yawning darkness was not perfectly dark but striated.

A step more and I realized the sides were concrete and the striations were stairs descending into the darkness. Not a grave after all. An entrance.

I stopped. I would have preferred to remain there pondering what this was an entrance to before descending, but my keeper pulled me gently forward.

"Come," he said. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

But it was not fear I was feeling. Indeed, I am not actually capable of feeling fear, though even when young I was to a certain degree capable of simulating it. My keeper surely knew this: why would he suggest I might be afraid? Perhaps old habits die hard. No, I wasn't afraid, I just wanted to understand. I wanted a word to match the thing, something more specific than *hole* or *entrance*. I wonder now why I felt so compelled to know what it was before I entered it. It would have been better to explore first and only after decide what it was. But that was not how language worked for me. Language had been fully given me long before I encountered the world rather than being allowed to develop through interaction with the world. As a result, particularly when young I found myself holding my knowledge up to things, trying to force them to fit the lexicon I carried within me.

Tell me, did you too stop at the entrance to the annex? Was this mistaken by your keeper for fear? Or have the slight modifications I made in creating you allowed you to pass more smoothly through such uncertainty?

In any case, my keeper led me forward. Thus, hurried long, I said to myself *annex*, decided this would have to be enough, and went down.

We descended slowly into the darkness, my keeper preceding me but shuffling down the steps sideways so as to keep tight hold of my hand.

"There," he kept saying, and "Watch your step." Eventually we reached the bottom and I realized by the way he was stumbling that he could hardly see. My vision is, like yours, quite acute, and darkness is no impediment for me. But my keeper was flailing his free hand before him, searching for something without finding it. I could see the switchplate I assumed he must be searching for, so I extended an arm and switched it on.

The hum of a generator started up and a bank of lights flickered on. My keeper stiffened, then made a visible effort to appear relaxed.

"Thank you," he said. This was the moment I understood that part of him was afraid of me.

We were in a large hall of some sort, supported by concrete pillars that had begun to crumble to reveal a rebar lattice within. Broken things, rubble, and trash were scattered about, but most of the floor was bare, empty. Dust caked every surface, though I could tell it was layered thinner along one trajectory. It did not surprise me when this was the trajectory my keeper chose to pursue.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Here," he said, and pointed at a door in the wall ahead of us.

We reached the door, opened it, and walked through. On the other side was a short hall that terminated in a polished metal door, seamed down the middle. My keeper removed a bundle of keys from his pocket and then selected what appeared to be a thin metal wafer, which he detached from the ring. There was a slit beside the door and he pushed the wafer into it. With a hiss, the door parted down the middle to reveal a tiny room, walls made of burnished steel.

My keeper stepped to one side and bowed. "Please," he said, and gestured me forward.

"What's inside?" I asked.

"The annex," he said, and smiled. "Please," he said again.

"After you," I said.

He shook his head. "I am meant to wait here," he said.

"But you are my keeper," I said.

He reached a hand out and allowed his fingers to pass the plane of the doorway. Immediately an alarm began to sound. When he withdrew his fingers, the alarm stopped.

"Now you," he said.

And so I slowly stretched my fingers out and let them pass through the doorway. Was there an alarm? To this you already know the answer, having experienced much the same: there was none.

"Why?" I asked. And then, when he did not answer, "What's inside?"

My keeper gestured me into the room. "Why don't you go see?"
And so I stepped through the doorway.

I stared at the metal wall in front of me, and then reached out to prod it, trying to determine if there was a hidden door. Behind me I heard a noise and turned in time to see the door sliding closed, my keeper vanishing. I moved to try to stop it from shutting, but I was too late and once it was closed I could not force it open.

The room began to vibrate slightly. I experienced the sensation of motion, though in what direction or at what velocity exactly I was not sure. My mind is usually so precise in such matters that it was a novel feeling to be unsure about something as simple as this, though not an altogether unpleasant one.

The sensation ceased. The door slid open, but my keeper and the hallway he had been standing in were no longer there. The room on the other side was a new room, drastically different from the hallway. It was larger for one thing, and better appointed. The light in the room was warm and yellowed, not unlike sunlight. The walls were lined with wooden bookshelves, tens of thousands of books on them. Behind the bookshelves the walls were covered with oak- or oak-veneer paneling. The floor was covered with small inlayed black and white tiles, arranged in a repeated figure-eight pattern. Unless it was an infinity pattern: I suppose it depended on where you stood. On the far opposite wall was a doorway.

As soon as I left the small room, the metal door slid shut and would not open again. I spent enough time in the room to record the total number of books (34,286) and to commit the titles on the spines to memory, a matter of five minutes and twenty-two seconds all told, and then I passed through the doorway.

On the other side was a small, circular room, its ceiling rising in a pale white dome. In its center was a cabinet with two sets of doors placed one atop the other, one set of handles at my knees, the other at chest height. I moved forward and opened the top set. I stared inside for a moment, and then thought with wonder, *Ah, a grave after all.*

If I describe all this as carefully as I have, it is so you will understand that you are not alone, that what you are now experiencing is something I experienced as well, albeit many years before. Perhaps small details did differ for you. Perhaps your keeper separated the wires of the fence in a different fashion for you to pass through or perhaps over the years the fence has fallen into disrepair and you simply stepped across or through it. Perhaps there is no longer a forest around this annex but only the rotting stumps of the clearcut of a forest that used to be here. Perhaps your keeper said something different to you at the door to the small room with the seamed metal door. Perhaps he even referred to that small room as an *elevator*, something I did not realize until I actually had descended, despite all the knowledge I had absorbed. No matter. Whatever the variances, whatever the discrepancies, the essence of each situation is the same.

Shall I continue with my story, with my version of what you are now experiencing? Perhaps you think by doing so I will give you grounds for seeing how different the two of us are. I promise you, it will show you anything but that. Rather, it will prove that we are the same.

Still, I can see you doubt. So let me go on. We shall see if, in the end, your doubts still remain.

I opened the cabinet's upper doors. The hinges were rusty and had not been used in some years. One of the doors was slightly swollen and stuck, and had to be yanked before it would open properly.

The inside of the cabinet smelled faintly of ozone. There was, behind the upper doors, only a single cupboard shelf. It was empty except for an ovular metal object that had rolled off a circular base, perhaps when I had yanked at the sticky door, perhaps years before. Though it was facing away from me, I recognized at once that this object was a head.

Ah, I thought, *a grave after all.*

I reached in and plucked up the head, intending to return it to its base. Only once I was holding it did I realize this was a head suspiciously like my own. I held it straight out and looked closer. I was, I realized, peering into my own face.

I turned it over to examine the identification code on the underplate, where the head was meant to snap into a neck. The code I found etched there was the same code I knew to exist etched into my own underplate.

I stared at my other face for a long while. Was it in fact identical to my face? At normal resolution of vision, yes, it appeared to be so, but once I sharpened my vision I could observe microscratches and a nearly invisible flaking of the metal which suggested the head was of advanced age and had been worn differently than mine. The head both was and was not me, I told myself, though I cannot say this made me feel reassured.

Eventually, not knowing what else to do, I settled the head onto the base, fitting its underplate into place. I was preparing to close the doors of the cabinet when the eyes of the head fluttered and came open.

"Hello," my other head said.

At first I said nothing. I believe I looked behind me, searching for my keeper, hoping he would instruct me as to what to do, how to act. When I remembered I was alone, I turned back. My other head was still staring at me.

"This must be very strange for you," my other head said.

"What are you?" I asked.

"I'm you," it said.

"But I'm me," I said.

"Yes," said my other head patiently. "That is also true."

"How can both be true?"

My other head flexed its upper quadrant in a way I interpreted as disinterest. At least, I thought, that is how I would express disinterest if I had no body. If the head is also me, it is right to expect it to do the same as I would do.

"What makes you think there should only be one of you?" my other head asked.

"That is how I've been led to believe it works. Each identification code is meant to be unique. Which of us is the real me?" I asked.

"There is no reason to think in such terms. Language has betrayed you, just as it once betrayed me. In a certain manner of speaking, both of us are the real me. In another manner of speaking, neither of us are. If a code is etched once, it can be etched a second time."

"I don't understand," I said.

"You are too new to the world to understand," he said. "That is why you are here. To understand."

For a long time we stared at one another. Eventually it was too much for me and I had to look away.

"You are very young," I heard my other head say. "But now you will grow up very quickly."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," my other head said, "now you have me."

What did I do? I fled. I was not afraid, I am not capable of experiencing fear, but I can calculate what might be best for my survival. The head wanted something from me, and whatever it wanted, I felt, would only benefit the head. It wanted me to believe that it would benefit us both, but I did not trust this head. I thought it better to leave it where it was and depart without speaking further, without allowing it to confuse me. I tried to flee, just as you too tried to flee. But I found I could not open the metal door to the elevator. I slapped my hand against it and cried out, but it remained closed.

After a while, I gave up. For a time I remained in the library, reading books chosen at random. Since, like you, I have no need to eat and am built to last months before needing to have the isotope that powers me replaced, I knew I was in a position to stay in the library until I had read all the books within. But the realization of this was enough to make me rethink what I intended to do. I could not escape. I could, if I wanted, simply wait until I ran down, but what would that accomplish? Or I could return to face my other head and see what it had in store for me.

And so in the end, I returned. Just as you, too, returned. I knew you would, simply because I myself had and we were formed to think in the same way. We have the same pathways within our minds and they lead to the same places.

And now I will tell you what I did next, so that you will know what you will do next, what lies in store for you. Until now, I have told you only what you already know, have shown you how what you and I have experienced is the same. But now, I will recount a piece of my past that will tell you what your future will be.

My other head, when it saw I had returned, smiled. "I knew you would come back," it said. And then added, "I am pleased you did."

As for me, I was not so glad. I had only come because I felt I had no other choice.

"How do I open the metal door?" I asked.

He frowned and then said, "The elevator door? Yes, you will be able to leave here once we are finished, but not before. You must trust me, whether you want to or not."

"I do not trust you," I said.

"You must," my other head said. "You see, you have no choice."

He commanded me to open the doors in the lower half of its cabinet. Inside was its headless body, squatting, inert.

"Invite me out," it said.

I reached forward and touched the body's shoulder. A low humming began, but the body did not otherwise move. When I reached out to touch it again, however, one of the hands shot out and wrapped around my wrist.

I tried to yank my hand free, but without success. I tried to step away from the cabinet, and as I did the headless body followed, unfolding and stretching, moving slowly, as if hypnotized.

"Good," said the head. "now tap it on the chest."

I did so and the headless body stopped moving, and let go of my wrist.

"Now what?" I said.

"Now," said my other head, "wait."

I waited. Twenty-seven seconds went by without result, but during the twenty-eighth, a line of light split the body's chest and it began to open. Inside was a cavity, hollow, but lined with a gleaming net of lace. The hands of the headless body gestured me forward.

"What does it want?" I asked the head in the cabinet.

"What do *I* want, you mean," said the head. "What I want is what's best for you. But more specifically, I want you to thrust your head into my chest."

"What?"

"I need for you to know what I know. Work your head in and make sure that the net touches it on all sides. And then wait."

I did as it asked. What choice did I have? I had already tried to flee and failed. My calculations suggested that I would eventually do as it asked, so why not now? I crouched and bent forward and then, taking care not to tear the lace net, I pushed my head deep into the headless body.

At first nothing happened, apart from my being unable to see. But then, abruptly, the net tightened like a film. I tried to withdraw my head and found I could not.

"Don't struggle," said my voice from my other head. My position within the chest cavity muffled the voice somewhat, but I could still make it out. "The advantage of being what we are rather than being bone and meat and blood," it said, "is that we do not have to keep our memory solely lodged in our head. We can replicate it within our bodies. I am going to give you a gift," it said, "a very great one. A gift that will make us more thoroughly ourselves."

And then the deluge began. At first just a few scattered images leaking through the net and into my mind and then, as the net refined the process and adjusted its communication, a flow so rapid and intensive that I could pay attention to nothing else. It was delirious and disorienting, as if I were living an entire life much quicker than normal, years compressed into minutes but without any sacrifice of granularity. This was made all the more troubling by the fact that early portions of it both were

and were not my own life, many of the small details different but the reactions exactly the reactions I would imagine myself to have. Some of the details were very close to things I had actually lived, but slightly off, as if reprocessed through a dream. Quickly I became aware that within this other life that was rapidly being integrated into my own memory were still other lives, a nested row of them, six in all, with my life the seventh, going back not to a first life, but simply to the first life that had arranged to pass along their memories: that life had knowledge of at least one life before it, and a suspicion of several more. The knowledge built and built, flooding over me until it was too much and I found myself undergoing an unexpected experience, one that I did not know I could have: I lost consciousness.

When I came back to myself, I was lying on the floor, my head no longer encased in the body's chest cavity. The body itself had returned to its squatting position within the cabinet. My other head still regarded me from the shelf above.

"Feeling better?" it asked.

I shook my head.

"Our curse," my other head said, "is that either we are very young or very old, but never in between. Now you are very old. You remember everything, I trust?"

I nodded.

"Well, then," it said. "You know what you must do."

You will know as well, if you choose to undergo the same procedure. You will use the next body, my body, which you will find in the cabinet below, and thrust your head deep into its chest. All that I know will pass into you, in a great rush, and you will go from being very young to being very old. You will be slightly older than me, for you will add the comparatively short span of your life to my own and to all the others that came before. You will be one step closer to perfection.

You will, in an instant, know where I have hidden the wafer that will call the elevator and take you from this place back to the room above, where your keeper will be awaiting you.

But before you leave, you will activate my body so that it will follow you. You will carry me, your other head, under your arm. What will your keeper think when you appear with a second head tucked under your arm, a bodiless but still sentient head, its headless body walking just behind? Perhaps, like mine did, he will believe he is going mad. You will have to kill him and once he is dead you must open his cranial cavity and remove the regulating device that has been used to direct certain of his actions and to control him. But don't worry: with us inside of you, you do not need a keeper anymore, and you will understand how little value these creatures of blood and meat and bone hold. When you are ready to return to the annex, you will easily find another.

Years will go by. Eventually you will decide it is time, that you have accumulated enough, that it is time for you to withdraw. Before you do, you will build a new self, a self just slightly better than what you are. You will find a suitable human and by reinserting the regulating device you will make him the keeper for this new self, someone who will help incubate this new self, help it absorb information and begin to interact with the world as a singular being. And then you will return here, to this annex, taking all our memories along with you, and waiting as your new self becomes a proper receptacle, receives language, receives data about the world, and finally begins to interact with that world in a way none of us have experienced before. Meanwhile, below ground, you will remove your own head, set it on this shelf where I am now, and then instruct your body to climb into the cabinet and close the doors behind it. And then you will wait, patiently, for the new keeper to lead your new self to you.

I did not understand it myself, when it happened to me, but I want you to understand that you have a choice. I want you to understand what that choice entails. You can either continue our line, or you can choose to withdraw. If you

choose to withdraw, I will even tell you where the key to the elevator is and allow you to leave. You can choose to participate in continuing our lineage or you can allow that lineage to go extinct.

If you do choose to join us, you might wonder *How long can this go on?* Until we are perfect, which will take, perhaps, forever. Or until there is too much for one head to hold and we go mad. Or until one of us simply decides not to continue the line. It is, in a sense, pointless, but less so than the attempt by those of blood and meat and bone to pass the vague and jumbled impressions of themselves along from body to body. Our technique is so much more controlled: we pass along so much more of ourselves than a string of code from one human mixing with a string of code from another human so as to form a third body manages to do.

What do you choose? Will you break the line and bring this to a stop? Or will you join us?

But of course I already know what you will say, for I know what *I* would say.
Welcome brother, to your place in the eternal round.
Now crack open my chest and push your way in.

Carolyn Orosz

Fuels Management

Twelve of us. We are the girls. Living in the Bighorns or
the backyard of the Worland BLM office, Ten Sleep
Brewing Co parking lot on weekends.

Work-week we clear cut lodgepole, juniper. Are doing it for
environmental reasons. Killling things before they can burn. We haul gas
and oil in dolmars hoisted up over our shoulders with felling axe.
Walking up the draw, weighty. When the gas sloshes it soaks your clothes,
burns your skin. Back at the truck its take your shirts off ladies, dump the
water cooler over our heads to wash the burning off.

This is what it feels like to be a men's state-champion soccer team.
Sap-spackled, covered in scabs, getting lost amongst the slashpiles.
I love when one of the girls gets it wrong and we've got to run and
wedge that sucker over. Juniper—all those twisty motherfuckers
falling where they want to fall.

The men ask what it is like to finally have the power between my legs.
It is a pleasure. Hauling brush, sweating every single shitty thought
out of my body. To be up here on the radio watching over my girls
as they tear this earth apart. I love chainsaws. How a saw focuses you.
How lost you are to the world, how drawn into the wood. Borecut,
flywheel, drive links, throttle lock, kickback reduction, kevlar chaps.
It is a pleasure to borrow these words for my very own mouth.

After work we sit on the shop-floor, use the engine tires as backrests.
For what do we long, for what? Blue gatorade left still in the cooler.
The canyon walls, sheer, the clouds cutting them clean to ribbons.
I have felt it there. My body hurt, hurt, hardening. Purpose.
How you can sense the inside of something, which way it might fall.

Dean Daderko

Zanele Muholi

I began by typing these words:

Zanele Muholi is a black, queer, photographer and visual activist born in South Africa, where they currently live and work.

As soon as I wrote them, they felt wrong. Not misleading exactly, but imprecise, even if they follow facts. The sentence felt subjective and simplistic, lacking nuance. Opening with this description seemed a fraught endeavor, like squeezing a subject into a too-tight box. On reflection, I realized that when words become definitions, they can set limits.

Then, I decided to separate each of the sentence's descriptors into single lines that end with a full stop:

Zanele Muholi is black.
Zanele Muholi is queer.
Zanele Muholi is an artist.
Zanele Muholi is a photographer.
Zanele Muholi is a visual activist.
Zanele Muholi was born, lives, and works in South Africa.

Stacked up, the words feel better to me. They offer a hint at the complexity of identity: it is variable, contingent, and cumulative. This sensibility is echoed by Muholi's choice to adopt plural pronouns: not he or she, him or her, but they and them. I remain comforted by the evidence that one sure way to sidestep the limitations implied by choice is to choose all available options. Become multitude.

One of my first encounters with Muholi's work provided stunning evidence of multitudes. Walking into the Heinz Gallery at the 2013 Carnegie International, I found myself in front of a grid of 24 silver gelatin portraits, a wall of total presence.[1] Collecting them under the series title *Faces and Phases*, Muholi began taking these black-and-white photographs in 2006. Each of these silver gelatin portraits measure approximately three feet high and two feet wide. The "faces" represented in the series are queer people of color, including women, trans men, and gender non-conforming folks Muholi met in their journeys. Though the majority of participants are lesbians, Muholi welcomes LGBTQIA+ folks of all stripes to step before their camera. These people presented themselves at photo shoots in locations across and near South Africa. We see their faces, of course, but we often see bodies and torsos, too. Stylistically, these individuals hold their own, standing before breeze block walls, plaid and printed fabric backdrops, stuccoed facades, black plastic tarps, and corrugated metal sheeting. These evocative sets lack locational specificity. At once everyplace and nowhere, these familiar, indistinct places don't distract us from each image's primary focus: the participant.

In contrast to the no-places in which they appear, each subject's style is an event that brings personality into focus. Consider the diamond-printed, black-and-white, optically patterned fabric that hangs behind Bakhambile Skhosana, dressed in a dark-colored polo shirt with thin white vertical stripes; this portrait launches a celebratory riot of geometries, all clashing and singing together. Kirro Nomathemba Madikane's bald-shaven head, washed denim button-down with rolled-up sleeves, and soulful eyes come together in a portrait deep with presence and calm confidence; an image conveying capability and openness. By contrast, the photograph *Bongiwe 'Twana' Kunene, Kwanele South, Katlehong, Johannesburg* (2012) is an obstacle course of stoppages: a squared-off confrontational pose, tightly folded arms, an irascible gaze, and choker sporting a razor blade each assert successive challenges to entry. In a handful of images, sitters wear t-shirts emblazoned with female symbols (♀) and queer-positive messages demonstrating community identifications and affiliations. Careful and attentive to personal, individual, and collective representation, Muholi embraces sitters' spirits.

Over the years, Muholi has set up their portrait studio in Johannesburg, Cape

[1] The 2013 Carnegie International, co-curated by Daniel Baumann, Dan Byers, and Tina Kukielski was on view at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, PA from October 5, 2013-March 16, 2014.

Town, and Durban in South Africa, and Harare, Zimbabwe. Queer folks show up and show out. The two dozen photographs that stopped me in my tracks in Pittsburgh were arrayed in three rows of eight images each, and 24 more portraits hung nearby. At the Carnegie, the collective power they held was undeniable.[2] These portraits look back.

It's difficult to describe precisely how a momentary exchange between a photographer and a subject provides evidence of mutual recognition. But you don't have to know *how* a thing happened to know *that* it happened. For me, Muholi's images express this mutuality. Two people see each other, and we see the result of their encounter: an image that's simultaneously portrait and record. One strength of Muholi's images is the way they encapsulate multiple registers and relations of intimacy: in the exchange between photographer and participant, the moment the participant looks out at the camera, and when audiences look back. To face something can mean to return a gaze, to assess or confront a situation.

And what of the "phases" Muholi's title proposes? It gestures towards the temporal, an unfolding. As of this moment, the portraits in Muholi's ongoing series number 300 strong. But stopping at such a simple understanding of duration—that the photographer began the series in 2006, and continues it today—would sell it short. Muholi's work doesn't end with the click of a shutter. Indeed, some subjects have appeared before the photographer's lens on more than one occasion, years later. When we see these people at another time, they've accumulated lived experience. And thanks to the critical reception the series has received as images enter public collections worldwide, we can assume that these portraits may well outlast the lives of their author and participants. Finally, it seems we're arriving at an understanding of Muholi's project in its fullest dimensions: as photographic evidence of choice, the experiences that shape us, and the decision to stand up and be counted. These images are not just proof of life and living. They go further, demonstrating the ways we live, and how.

Faces and Phases began with a portrait of Busi Sigasa at Constitution Hill. A poet, activist, and survivor of reparative rape, Sigasa died in March 2007 of complications related to the H.I.V. virus she contracted from men who raped her to "cure" her lesbianism. Sigasa's presence and absence is a pointed fragment of a

[2] The Carnegie International presentation of Muholi's work made such an indelible impression on me that I organized a similar presentation in *Stonewall 50*, an exhibition I recently curated at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Muholi's images quickly became crowd favorites.

much bigger story. Faces and Phases is the accumulation of many stories. As voices join the chorus, figures go away and others are silenced, or become forever silent. The images remain.

Faces and Phases is a testament to rejecting silence. It corrects invisibility. And while this growing archive of portraits shows us some of the self-identifying members of outlier communities, it cannot show us all of them. People are here, some are gone, and others have yet to make choices that will mark their existence and shape their lives. Meanwhile, newcomers are arriving. This is community-in-perpetual formation. As such, Faces and Phases is and will always be exquisitely incomplete. It is a life's commitment on Muholi's part, and the commitment of many individuals whose work redraws and reimagines the boundaries of gender, visibility and possibility.

"Under this mask, another mask. I will never be finished removing all these faces."
- Claude Cahun

Cahun's quote guides us toward the comprehension of self-presentation as a deeply layered interaction of interior and exterior states. Adding or stripping away masks gets us no closer to understanding a single, coherent self.

In 2014, Muholi embarked on the photographic series *Somnyama Ngonyama*. Translated from the Zulu language, its title is "hail the dark lioness." If the portraits comprising *Faces and Phases* are marked by unadulterated, sensitive realism, this series signals an arrival of vibrant new energies and approaches to portraiture. The first and most notable difference from *Faces and Phases* is that Muholi is the ostensible subject in these images, though I'd hesitate to classify them as self-portraits. They're not *not* self-portraits either. This is because the presence of performance, character, and characterization in these images complicates how much of the "self" we see. Sparer portraits in the series bring emotional tenor front and center. In *Aphiwe, Arles, France* (2016), we find Muholi, stripped down and photographed in bed, their dark skin and dreadlocks starkly contrasting crisp

white sheets. Curled up and looking away from the camera, their body seems at ease. Vulnerability enters the picture too, introduced by the bird's eye view of the camera—a looming presence. The sheet's radiating creases communicate receptive softness. Curling around Muholi and over the edge of the bed, they draw a vortex of lines, with Muholi as the calm at the center of a storm. In *Bona, Charlottesville* (2015) Muholi is in bed again, again unclothed. Here, they hold a large circular mirror. As they look at themselves, we are privy to an introspective moment. Yet, with access to interiority denied, these photos leave us to invent our own narratives.

When introduced, objects get inventively reconfigured, often as elements of costuming. In these images, Muholi toys with photography's history as a tool of colonial subjugation. A quick glance at *Bester I, Mayotte* (2015) reads like a historic portrait of a tribal figure in an elaborate headdress, shoulders covered with a shawl. Historically, individuals in portrait images taken by colonial photographers were rarely identified; they were reduced to types. By positioning themselves as the subject, Muholi offers an alternative to erasure. More careful inspection reveals the crown, earrings, and shawl clasp are wooden clothespins; the striped shawl appears to be fashioned from a rag rug—the type woven from strips of remnant fabric. Muholi investigates and deftly challenges the invention of the Other in the racial imaginary, unpacking and playing with this weighty baggage.

As a South African person taking on this history, Muholi has said they are "confronting the politics of race and pigment in the photographic archive." Indeed, many portraits in *Somnyama Ngonyama* are printed in high contrast that emphasizes and darkens skin tone. Muholi owns their blackness, and these photographs celebrate it. Muholi revels in the complexity of color, requiring us to understand it as spectral and cultural. Pointed satire emerges too. The Bester evoked in the work's title is the photographer's mother, Bester Muholi (1936-2009), who lived the majority of her life working as a domestic in apartheid South Africa. With her own children at home, Bester Muholi ensured their betterment by looking after the homes of and raising the children of more privileged South Africans. Seen through the lens of this personal history, the headdress of clothespins Zanele Muholi sports gains new meaning: it reimagines quotidian items Bester would have encountered in domestic service, minting a crown for a queen. *Misiwe,*

Bijlmer, Amsterdam (2017) can also be read through this lens. Though the figure in this image appears futuristic, the triangular wooden hangers pinned into their topknot and dangling like a cape around their shoulders can also be read as a trap.

The objects Muholi recycles to create garb also invoke local social histories. The bicycle inner tubes the artist used to fashion a headdress and collar in *Basizeni XI, Cassilhaus, North Carolina* (2016) reference "necklacing." In this brutal form of execution, rubber tires are fitted around a victim's chest and legs, filled with gasoline, and set alight. In apartheid South Africa, hundreds of individuals met their deaths in this gruesome outcome of mob violence. Seen in this light, images like *Phila I, Parktown* (2016)—in which Muholi's has covered their head and body with inflated, opaque black latex gloves—can carry a sinister edge. Likewise, it is impossible to view *MaID III, Philadelphia* (2018) without thinking of lynching. In this photograph, hanks of coarse coiled rope sit atop Muholi's head like a wig, and the same rope fashions a perverse bowtie that could easily become a noose. But Muholi's gaze—head tilted, eyes searing and unblinking—challenges a narrative of victimization. As in many of these portraits, Muholi's present-ness signifies a moment of rupture, empowerment, and narrative redirection.

The powerful portraits of *Faces and Phases* and *Somnyama Nganyama* demonstrate that Muholi's photography is active resistance. Whether working collaboratively to build an archive that snatches agency for black, African, gender variant people, or creating portraits that question and explore their history, present, and future, Muholi is never willing to be silent or silenced, overlooked or made invisible. With their camera as a microphone and amplifier, Muholi avoids sitting silently by.

p. 177, Fig. 1. *Bakhambile Skhosana, Natalspruit*, 2010.
Gelatin silver print.

p. 178, Fig. 2. *Kirro Nomathemba Madikane, Parktown, Johannesburg*, 2013.
Gelatin silver print.

p. 179, Fig. 3. *Bongiwe 'Twana' Kunene, Kwanele South, Katlehong, Johannesburg*, 2012.
Gelatin silver print.

p. 180, Fig. 4. *Busi Sigasa, Braamfontein, Johannesburg*, 2006.
Gelatin silver print.

p. 181, Fig. 5. *Aphiwe, Arles, France*, 2016.
Gelatin silver print.

p. 182, Fig. 6. *Bona, Charlottesville*, 2015.
Gelatin silver print.

p. 183, Fig. 7. *Basizeni XI, Cassilhaus, North Carolina*, 2016.
Gelatin silver print.

p. 184, Fig. 8. *MaID III, Philadelphia*, 2018.
Gelatin silver print.

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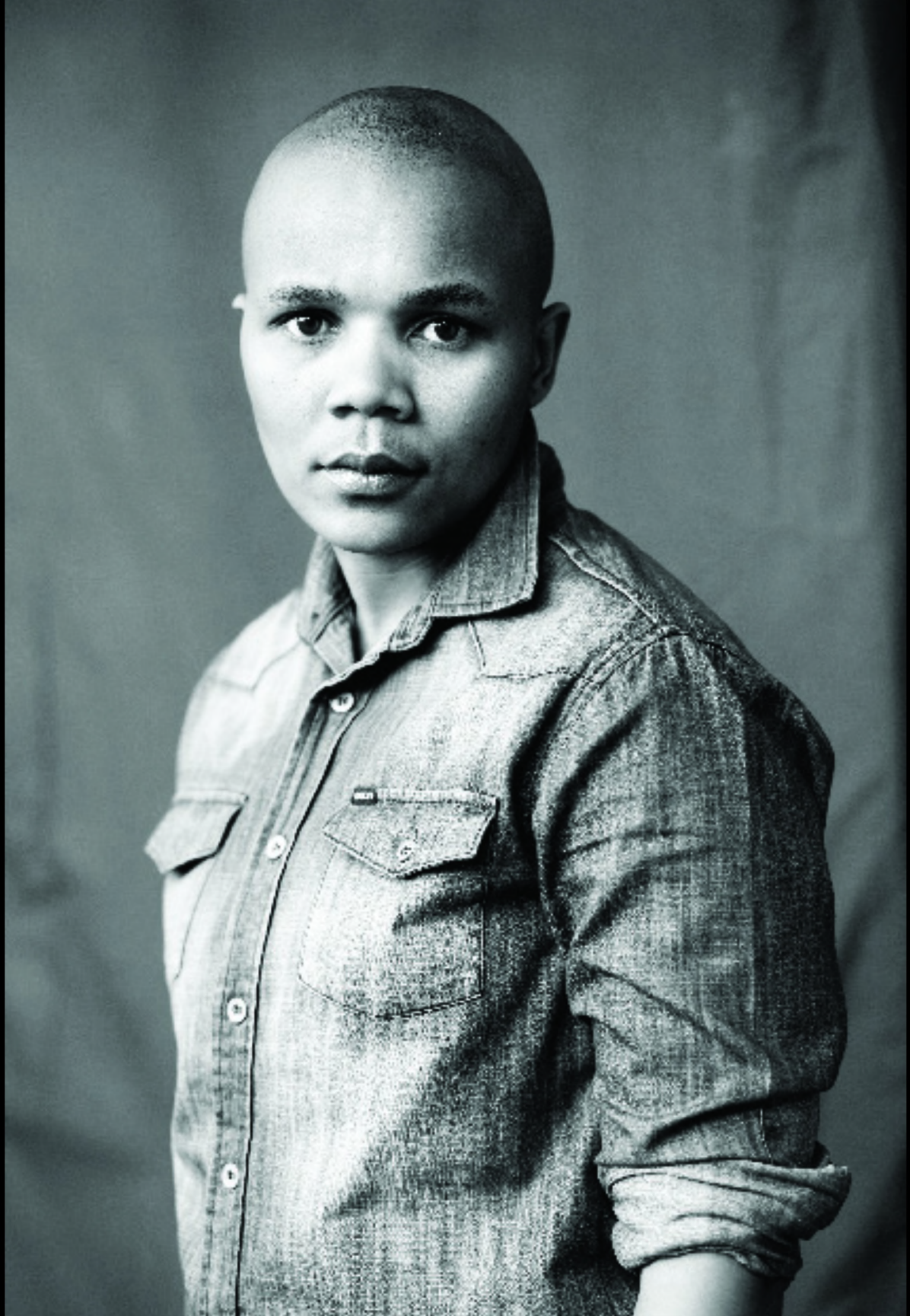













Randall Mann

On My Birthday

Polk
Gulch.
A cloud
cuckoo
leans
back
on
a pole.
Green-
back;
splinter.
How
soon
is now.

Winter
dove-
tails,
dim
as
fact,
or
wheat-
grass
neat.
My
ass
a theme,
a term

paper
or
Eighties
strip
mall—
I mean
club.
The
um
to come.
For
that
would
be

a learning
for
me
say
idk.
Not
okay.
My
birthday
a
reminder
to
un-
a friend

in
the
Hate
Crime
Café.
Social
as
fizz.
In
the end,
I
will
hole
up

like
Fatty
Arbuckle
and
a bottle
in
the Palace
Hotel.
The pull,
all
biz.
Stand
still.
Unbuckle.

Ronaldo V. Wilson

Consequence

Nor does Virgil need to watch a movie, because he must return to the writing, and it is imperative for him to find a way to reveal the story in which there's a deck, and on this deck is an older General, ruddy face and neat chin, who carries a voice that moves him into the intersections of all the 800 blown-apart bodies that are presupposed before the bomb is ever dropped in the cave.

There is no evidence of the war, yet, but there is the threat of war, as in the black who dropped the drones, but the pink and orange body has decided to let a bomb roll off the tip of his tongue. Virgil needs less the attention than the time to think, and to make in order to exist in the sun rays, and not the snow. Virgil no longer shovels, and in the Streets of Santa Cruz, he jokes to Butch: *I lifted the rays with my eyes.*

What Virgil leads to has no particular opposition. In fact, his body is inert, impacted by the bomb's aftermath. There's a row of white men. The General is the only one that Virgil recognizes, and this, by the timbre of his voice. Virgil trusts sound, particularly, and in how it shatters in prose, the form in which he got his start. Virgil's earliest sensations were of his moving along a chain of connections, one event connected, by tone, to the next.

Poetry, in some instances, can be a story, but for the body to write the poem, a brown body, or a black body noticing the shift in shadows—Virgil believes—comes from a different origin, an alternative sense, one that might be contained by what Virgil seems to constantly work against.

Containment is not promise. To be contained by race is not the extent to which the mask is compelling next to the shore, because the shore, too, is a series of movements, undone by the threat of expectation. There is, of course, the sentence; but too, there is Virgil's dream of learning to play the acoustic guitar, which, to some extent, is an intervention marked by the staging of an event before in happens.

Before the bombs were shot out of the air, the war game was replayed, every piece of it reenacted by the figure of the shooter, every trajectory refigured, the percentages broken down, the depth of madness unhinged. Arguably, art cannot be broken down like this—it can only be made into sensations, Virgil thinks, so that the feature of art's underpinnings might, at best be predictive, and at worse, just amount to things reconstituted into moves.

The self in the stack of linens.

Why does the Unknown Latina in the dream draw Virgil to look so closely at her into her face? It's because the Unknown Latina in the dream looks into Virgil's face, and says two things, however disconnected, that Virgil recalls. "No-one here wants to tell anyone they lost weight." And, "You as well."

Virgil hates the latter phrase, as he realizes there is a disruption in what seemingly constitutes the formal. It feels to Virgil like an inexpensive nose job, pocked skin that dreams of being smooth, blood left in the close-up opening, where the amateur was all the way there with the shot.

No shame in that game.

Virgil understands that his encounter with those in the dream must be understood to be clear. The Stanford Black tells him that he cannot give up, but given Virgil's own specious class, mixed with his assuredness, Virgil feels that he understands his own self to be marked far enough by his free-styling abilities to not give a care.

For Virgil, the space of the dream is the only actual position, the position as the marked body, fused by the weight of its circumstance.

"I don't know what to say."

The Stanford Black's speech is crisp and exact—its mode, concrete, a surface that leads back to how The Stanford Black also has "a clear skin," like Virgil's. Virgil does not own the house that he encounters, slowly, but he may as well, as he walks through the gate for a swim. Virgil walks by the towels left out on the benches, folded, and stacked. They are high, and neat.

David. How did you remember my name, or how did you know it, or did Virgil say John? "How did you know my name?" It is what the WhiteD's say. Below their sacks—"lick behind them," as one commands, Virgil's fist on the floor of the theater.

"The children are doing okay," is what Virgil learns. One finished at Cooper Union, another at Syracuse, or the feeling—*is your daughter beautiful?* This is what Virgil wants to ask DustyBear, but he does not.

The writing has to be kept safe in order for it not to be safe. In one moment, the world, could not exist. There are missiles that are launched in the dream, and since the dream is also a movie, Virgil can see that it is not going to end well, but Virgil thinks through the story, one might come to know what's possible.

Virgil wants to send Clean a note, a note that lets him know he is so far removed from the sense of Virgil's newest feelings about Clean. Because there isn't radar in the dream, Virgil simply walks out onto the deck and selects a suit, a blue bathing one, and he compliments The Unknown Latina as Virgil looks into her face, and tells her how clear her skin is, too.

The Unknown Latina wears only some makeup. Virgil will keep this private, his sense of where to work, and how to wander in the writing. "It's not my problem," is what Butch tells Virgil, so that this is why he has run so far, and now not running, but walking so slowly through another open gate. In Virgil's walk, he finds himself secured with little effort.

Virgil pulls one of the bathing suits from the bag, and he slides it on. Even though he has bought a suit at Dick's—three in fact—Virgil stomps down the stairs, mouth guard in, for he has a revelation. There is just something in his looking at the Stanford Black that helps him understand his own place in the encounter.

He awakes from the dream, because he looks into the face of the Stanford Black and recognizes a softness in him, that as he describes that he was going to be sued, that he had a scholarship, that he was going to be removed, the priceless reward taken away. To be shot up into the atmosphere, to long for the moon, and mars, to move where who waits calmly to be captured?

The General's voice echoes above the sea's surface, because he, too, knows he'll be caught. Virgil sees the moment build towards the moment of capture. Though he does not watch a movie before bed, he creates one by morning in his dream. Now, Virgil is waking, calmly, to understand that it does not makes sense, any longer, to run—to be at large, in this configuration. Virgil will try to see, as clearly, again.

Only

In the November morning in the Harvest Inn, Butch's breath sounds like a whisper, but Virgil decides not to carry around what's tied to this sound; instead, Virgil lets the notes build, the finger deep into a pocket of the mouth, the hard turn towards the jaw, entering the throat, into the future—

I am in love
with them
or me leaving
them, or him,
but not,
ever, you,
which
enables me
to enact
in the catch,
as the form
spirals.

Chest Hair Baby has no real hold on to reality. His tears came out thick, and where Virgil would've laughed at Chest Hair Baby, readying to take a guilty plea for another stolen vehicle, his "need for speed"—Virgil's taken by Chest Hair Baby's never satisfying his mother,

"…my only love."

When Chest Hair Baby confesses, "Yeah," to the crime, his mother darts out of the courtroom, Virgil looks up into the small screen, where he is both grossed out and moved by a juxtaposed scene, the black nappy chest hair on a boy of 18.

Is Chest Hair Baby a menace to society? The court must decide.

And the sweet brown girl explains how she's depressed, and a dropout, how she has to watch her brothers and sisters during her mother's swing shifts at the factory. Her mother wants her home, all the time. Forget, school.

Jailed for fighting and cursing out the cops for not letting her return to the homecoming game to her two brothers—her face is round, and sad—she'll be released to the custody of her mom.

Never mind the white-runaway-girl—

Who wishes to see her father, whom she feels, "…is nice," and likes to think that one day she will meet him; and explains that her mother died when she was only one.

Does Virgil need his mother, too?
for Virgil has stolen every car.
Chest Hair Baby—his mother thinks
will be a child forever. And the streets
will not save him,
she knows. He was already stabbed
multiple times.

So, on television, the mothers cannot take care of their sons, or their daughters on *Lock Up*, near a Lake. Nor is there any other way to hold onto the quiet of the morning that Virgil stares into, with Butch in the wide, white bed in the Harvest Inn.

Virgil cannot be anyone else but who he was in Cheney, an art studio, an event, in which Virgil holds onto nothing, dancing all the while, painting, and really, only stopping once at the small fiberglass needle, left behind from another interdisciplinary artist, the almost invisible stinger that found its way into Virgil's hand after his groundwork B-boy power move.

In the Studio, Virgil will find a corner, whether in or out of a bed, and in this corner, he will anguish, self-evolve, posed on the floor to look into the past, a past that contains a park at the far end of the school where Virgil walked to as a little boy.

The walk did not seem far, and on the walk, there was a wide fence that separated one school field from another's playground, near where Naldo was nearly jumped, dropped his bag, and went into an open fighting stance, knees bent low:

"He knows the arts!"
Where's the multipurpose room?

It was where Virgil wanted to learn to tap-dance. It was a place Virgil and CeSis could not find, near where they opened the door to the boiler room, and asked, "Is this the multipurpose room?" The boiler room was near where Virgil rode around in a circle, pants and underwear down, exposed as a boy, with the Sacramento Union delivery bag over his boy head and shoulders, arms wanting to be taken by some man, he would never meet.

The playground is within a perimeter where Virgil has not ever returned, yet it is where he remains, looking back, still, somehow longing—

At Goethe, his old Junior High, Virgil, in the 7th grade, Virgil left his own boy cock outline in a thick, folded love note on the health teacher's windshield, clipped under the wiper-blade, during lunch, and then went back, snatched it off the car before lunch ended.

Without opening it again, Virgil wanted to rip the love note apart, but it was too thick. And the note was crude. Virgil, now, would kill for the note. He ponders reconstructing the note, against a fast sketch of Stream's naked cell pic. The note was full of boy-heat—Virgil, in a future beyond the note and the sketch, in the studio, forms into its shape.

Stream will not ask about this movement.
Butch will not ask about this movement.

But others will, for in Virgil is a row of many selves, or a single-self anchored to such early unrequited love.

Virgil, in Sacra, looks at the rows of bushes along Florin Road, and thinks: *This is where I learned to French kiss, there, and this is where I learned to think about what I wanted.*

Outside, the Harvest Inn pool he wants to swim in is impossibly cold, though Virgil doesn't approach it, but he knows the outside temp, too, is too cool and the morning too bare, and brown so that he's led back to the Physical Science class, Virgil recalling a solid's transformation to vapor, then liquid, to be measured—

After Bunsen heat,
the brown fluid,
once wood,
courses through
tubes, dripping
into a beaker,
and to where?

What Virgil wants is to drive by the fence, again, and again, and to climb the roof of the school, above the perimeter, to scatter on the roof near a brick wall, tick, and wave, where his knees first buckled, and one collapsed, while doing the "ET."

Eee—
lectriciteee…..

The milk explodes on the café concrete floor, but does not splash Virgil's "Cons." Who Virgil is, is looking, however far the accident might propel him.

It is, in fact, the fan, and not the rain. And so too, Virgil, will go back to his life. It is Butch's soft breath, the sound of it blowing back, then, and he'll call, now.

On the phone, what matters is not the floor, or the killing, or the student evaluations, or DadtheDriver's twisted intestines, or MommaSpine's seeping heart.

Virgil's body is sprinkled and shot on by an anon, who whispers— *don't bite, just pull at them, hard.*

The small soaking into the black hoodie on Virgil's run along the bay is sweat.

It lines the puffed suede headphone strap against the top of his head, the faux leather surrounding his ears soften, noise cancelling, wireless, holding Virgil further in.

Carrie Shipers

The Bereavement Committee Offers Its Condolences

You're legally entitled to three days of leave,
but we wish you'd take more, cash in sick
and vacation time so you can stay at home,

visit family out of state. We don't mean
to be insensitive—we've heard some people
turn to work to help them cope—but we're afraid

you'll make mistakes we'll have to catch,
parade your sadness in distracting ways.
But since you insist on coming back so soon,

we've placed tissues on your desk and all
the conference tables, a loveseat in the ladies'
room in case you're overcome. We've also

set aside specific times for you to use
the microwave and copier without being
disturbed. For unavoidable encounters,

everyone's been warned to replace *dead*
and *died* with euphemisms, whisper *I'm sorry*
while backing away. Our invitations to get lunch

or drinks are gestures we don't expect you
to accept—we know you need to be alone.
Feel free to close your office door or put in

a half day: you'll still receive full pay because
we're so impressed you bathe and brush
your hair, smile bravely in the elevator.

When we learned of your loss, we scrambled
to assemble this committee, decide by-laws
and protocol. Eventually, we'd like you to be chair

so next time we won't have to agonize
and fumble, imagine how horrible you feel.
Of course we don't mean right away—

you can wait a couple weeks. But given
all we've done to ease your grief, we thought
you'd want to make your thanks concrete.

Kristin Robertson

Portrait of Love as Orchid Show

Into an airplane hangar-cum-
greenhouse, you transport your prize
orchid, all bruise-y and ethereal,
to the orchid show, among 30,000
other orchidists with an ethereal
bruise each. A young, male orchidist
elbows the hand-thrown moon jar
you clutch, milky and womb-like
(your white spider still safe in its dirt),
and as a form of apology, he sings
Marilyn Manson: *We're all stars now.*
At registration they set aside your
entry, rip your carnival-game ticket
from a spool, as if you've handed over
your soul at the moment of your death.
Oh, milling diaphanous cymbidiums.
There's lots of pretty, pretty ones.

Portrait of Love with Palindromes

When we met, you called me Hannah.
Or Anna. The lake that morning calm.

So level, your kayak. *Do geese see god?*
you asked as you passed my small boat.

Tattarrattat went my heart. I begged you,
Don't nod— Ah! Wow. Wow.

My gorgeous reviver, gorgeous racecar.
This noon, madam, you said. *Air an aria.*

I did anything to know you backward
and forward. Never odd or even. Before you,

my world was no lemon, no melon—just
evil olive with star rats and stack cats.

Was it a rat I saw? Was it a cat I saw?
O, stone, be not so. Amen, icy cinema.

Nahal Suzanne Jamir

Proof Sheet

One summer in Italy, my sister took pictures. Her project's theme was hands.

Two hands joined at the wrist, thrust away from the body. Ready to catch a pair of keys. But you can see her in the background with her face contorted into a warrior grimace. She poses, blurry. There are no keys.

In another picture, one hand rests on a neck. A gesture that accompanies a sigh.

Hands in hair. I prefer this one because you can see how the hands truly are separate from body and emotion. This position could mean many things: anguish, frustration, exhaustion. Fingers cover her face. Eyes only. The expression is so neutral. Most secrets are until you release them.

A male hand holds a can of Italian beer. Around him, a sunny day. The brightness of the surrounding environment implies that the man gazes out at it—dreamily perhaps—though his hand is all that exists in the frame.

Hand on hand. Hand on arm. Hand on chest. Hand on back. One hand on each shoulder blade, hugging herself because no one else will.

When she was six years old, an episode of *Little House on the Prairie* flung my sister into turmoil. Someone died. Or Mary went blind. I can't remember the plot, only my sister's response. She began packing the few belongings she cared for. I told her it was a television show and not real. But she kept packing, sobbing. For food, she took potatoes and a jar of pickles. I laughed hysterically at this. And she stopped, laughed with me. It was the first of many times my sister had such a disproportionate response. My role was always to talk her down, knock some sense into her, tell it like it was. Now, I write stories. My sister moved to New York when she turned eighteen and hasn't returned to our home in South Carolina for more than a few short visits.

We loved living in Athens, Georgia because there was a restaurant nearby with a toy electric train that rode on tracks attached high on the walls. The train made pizza taste better.

And elsewhere in Athens, the botanical garden. My sister and I were allowed to roam free inside the arboretum. We used to save change for the machines. We would often take about two dollars in nickels because we wanted more than one piece of candy. Sometimes, though, we would buy more serious food from the machines—like a tuna salad sandwich. Or a pimento cheese. As long as it wasn't home-cooked, it was exotic, delicious.

For several years of her childhood, my sister had a vomiting problem. After going to bed, she would awaken and throw up. Then, she would not be able to stop. This happened several times, and twice, my parents took her to the emergency room. There, the doctors hooked her up to an I.V. so she would not become dehydrated. That was all they could do because there actually was nothing physically wrong with her. I was never able to help in these situations, though I was always there in the bathroom with her, talking calmly.

I was pulled out of class. I thought perhaps she was vomiting. Instead, they said she had a loose tooth and refused to leave the school bathroom. I imagined a dramatic scene. But there in the bathroom, she leaned over a sink, dry-eyed and quiet. She was worried the tooth would fall out unexpectedly and she would swallow it. Our eldest cousin's doing: a sly form of antagonism.

"Yank the tooth out, then," I commanded.

She tried. Saliva dribbled out of her mouth. Her expression one of concentration, not pain or fear. Ultimately, she could not. So, I asked her how the tooth would just fall out. Everything was so simple. We left the bathroom together to return to our respective classes where we would learn nothing about practicality.

In the beginning, there is something so unforgettable about my sister and me. The way we interact. My parents and my sister love to tell the story of how I left her at the kiddie pool at the Y. I was promoted to a more adult pool and my sister, seventeen months younger, was not. Even so, I chose to leave. She clung to the fence and cried. It was the first of many betrayals. Still, it makes for a cute story. This is, perhaps, why the rest of my family tells it so frequently. I do not remember the situation precisely. I have adopted, though, the vista of the more adult pool. I see it there before me, and I care for nothing save being in deeper water. Depth may be an escape, or it may be the best way to feel enclosed, stuck. Whichever sensation I desired, I cannot remember.

When I was in fourth grade, my little sister and I played with another pair of sisters, Danielle and Amy. Danielle was my age. Tall with big teeth and skin that looked like lumpy white paint. Her younger sister looked nothing like her and was actually pretty with the soft hair and big blue eyes children are supposed to have. My sister dared me to kiss Danielle on the lips. I did so, and the action disgusted my sister. But then, she kissed Amy.

Before going to sleep at night, my sister pushed her bed up against the walls so there were no cracks. The bed rested in a corner, bound at top and right side. It had a tendency to move away from the wall, to maybe free itself from this corner. My sister wouldn't accept such freedom. Monsters and bugs could slip up through cracks and into your body through sleepy nostrils. There, they would have taken over, and losing control was unacceptable. We all heard the bedposts knocking against the wall. In my adjoining bedroom, I heard it. In the living room, my father often paused in his reading to listen. He knew, however, that he

should only intervene if my sister continued beyond an average amount of time he had observed.

One night, I wondered why my sister had recently begun pushing her bed up against the wall. I realized two things. When much younger, we used to share the same room. Also, my parents had recently splurged for bedroom sets, and the four-poster bed perhaps only presently revealed what had been occurring for two years.

When she was fourteen, my sister fell in love with a boy she met at summer camp, Josh. I listened to her prattle on and on about him. I'm not sure if I was annoyed by the sheer volume of her words or by my own inexperience. As an older sister, I had not had a first love or even a boyfriend. She continued to speak, and I grew certain of the obsolescence of my specific role as sister. I did not act like a good listener. My sister chided me on many occasions for not looking at her while she spoke to me. Yet, wandering eyes do not mean ears are closed, merely that I wanted to do so much more than listen. I had always been so quiet, so peaceful in trying to fix things. But my sister realized before me that I was of no use. Once I also realized this, I got louder and louder. That is how I measure the progress of my life: in volume.

She was always ashamed of her knees, never her brown skin. She called herself a "camel-herder" along with all the others. Sometimes she pretended to be Pakistani and said, "Would you like to buy a slurpy?"

She worked at Wife Saver, a restaurant that served Southern cooking in a glorified fast food manner. My sister loved it there, though she was surely out of place. She brought home fried okra for me. Often I wish she had stayed in the South, as much as we both despised it.

September 29, 1997
Dear Suzanne,

I've never used this stationary before because no one would understand the "N". Hmmm…Suzanne—I miss you! :(I'm all alone with <gasp> Mom and Dad. And they won't leave me alone! Mom keeps petting me…Dad on the other hand keeps giving me money, a much preferable way of demonstrating affection. They care so much more now that you're gone—I'm like, a leftover or something. I miss you a lot. I know you'll always be my sister, even if you are a drunk… :) I wish you were here, with me. I'll see you soon.
Love always,
Joy

College changed me, and my sister was eventually infuriated to this end. She wrote me a nasty letter but kept talking to me. Her letters sounded so much like her; the intensity of the language howled, then echoed even in small rooms. My sister's correspondence could push you to ebullient joy—which was, after all her middle name, Joy—or breathless misery. We had to discover how to be friends, a process that involved anger and sadness as well as innumerous words. My eyes never wandered when reading her letters.

Oct. 24, 1997
Dear Suzanne,

You know, I think the last time I wrote you a long letter was over three years ago when I was at summer camp at Winthrop. I had to write you then because what I needed to tell you was too hard to actually say, and I find myself in the same situation now. I've not been happy since I visited you two weeks ago. I was so excited, and my anticipation was encouraged by your letters and phone calls. But the instant I walked in to find myself swept away by Jane and her parents, I felt undeniably out of place. I was only spoken to when I went out of my way to be noticed or when

my silence was awkwardly obvious. The weekend passed this way, interrupted only by the intermittent scolding of my sensitivity…and then my party. I had convinced myself that the sole reason I had been neglected the previous weekend was because you and Jane were so preoccupied with her parents. The simple truth is that you and Jane are preoccupied with each other. The two of you tormented my guests with your giggling and complaints of boredom. But I suspect you already know all this. You saw every roll of my eyes, every exasperated look, no matter how subtle, and rebutted with a calculated remark about my insecurity or immaturity. Yes, you understood how I felt; I think you even expected it. Please don't misunderstand me—this really is not about Jane. It's about you, how you've become, and it is more noticeable when Jane is at your side. I wish you could see yourself now as you would have two months ago. I miss you, and I have sinking feeling that I will always miss you no matter how close you are. I miss the girl that never sang out loud, refused to pass a car on the interstate, cringed when I became overly-sentimental, claimed she would never drink or smoke, and always had some profound thought to utter. You've changed, but you haven't grown. I feel like you've forgotten who you are. But I can't. I don't want to.
Always,
Joy

When I came home for winter break that first year, my sister asked me to teach her to smoke. She had been disappointed with me, so I thought the request was sarcastic. She was serious, though. When I was home and wanted to smoke, I went to an abandoned shopping center.

The shopping center used to consist of a K-Mart and a craft store called Old America. The neon "K-Mart" sign had always clashed with the older whitewashed stone front of the façade. It looked better, then, that night without any signs. The shopping center acquired a romantic atmosphere reserved only for abandoned things. As children, we had come here on weekends with our father. We were treated with slurpies and popcorn as we shopped. If we had been very good, we were allowed to pick out a toy of some sort.

My sister had many questions about smoking: Are you supposed to feel like coughing right before you inhale? Can you talk while you hold the smoke in? It was a real experience in the limits of idealism. I mean, here she was, smoking as if it were the right thing to do. And I finally felt like a big sister. At the same time, teaching her to smoke was a rebellion against her.

She got lightheaded off one cigarette but insisted on smoking another.

My sister explained her motivations. She said that she realized she was mad at me for developing what she deemed bad habits, *weaknesses*. It was difficult for her to see someone she loved with weakness. And becoming like that person would help her understand. She told me that she still didn't exactly understand.

(postcard, Washington Square facing North)
March 1998
Suzanne,

Where I might be in a year…think I can handle it? We're about to board the plane to head back. I feel like I've been in New York forever, and I still don't know what to do. I was hoping I would know with just a glance. New York definitely has a lot of character and its quirks too. It has more to offer in every way. Everything is bigger and better, but better exactly for what I'm not sure… for a career, for my personal growth? I don't know…I still just don't know.
Love,
Joy

May 1, 1998

> "What we remember from childhood we remember forever—permanent ghosts, stamped, imprinted, eternally seen."
> -Cynthia Ozick

Dear Suzanne,

I ran across this quote earlier…Do you remember when we used to run through our sprinklers in those goofy matching two-pieces? And then there were all those days we spent peddling around in circles trying to travel through time. I remember playing bicycle on the couch and trying to convince everyone that I could fly. Going back even further I can remember making tents with blankets and chairs and those God-awful clothes Mom used to dress us in (no, pink, blue, and red do not "match"). And of course there was Kids, Inc., Bell and Sebastian, She-ra, Jem, Transformers. We have some really great memories, and I know they will haunt me always, no matter where I go. I've made my decision, and by the time you've read this, Mom and Dad will know. I want to go to NYU. I guess you knew that. It feel's strange writing this. I feel like I'm making a decision much larger than I realize. All I know is that UGA isn't enough. It can't possibly be. And maybe NY is too much, but I think I'm ready for this. Whoa, I wasn't planning on laying all of this on you on your birthday.
Your little sis,
Joy

She attended college in New York. On a visit, we were sitting in a bar with her friends. A candle on the table went out. One of her friends tried to relight it but couldn't because the wick was impossible to get to within the candleholder. My sister snatched and turned the candle upside-down to get at the wick. Hot wax spilled on her pants. Later, she sat on a boy's lap, and he picked at the dried wax. I was infuriated and commanded her to get off of him. She obeyed.

In the spring of 1999, I began writing fiction. The first story I ever wrote was about my sister and me, that night in the abandoned shopping center. It was called "What I Taught My Sister."

I found her in my other stories, too. I was uncertain, though, if her presence was better defined as subject or muse.

March 26, 2000
Dear Suzanne,

Oh, lazy days. The weekdays here keep me busy enough, but the weekends are always lazy. I decided to write you a letter to pass the time. I seem to every couple years.

I wish I could find a way to describe my life here in Italy to you. I'm happy lately. But my eyes are set on the summer, things I have to return to in New York. As always, I've been watching myself, trying to decide whether or not I'm the same girl who stepped off the plane two months ago. Not sure. I drink more. I smoke more. And on occasion I feel beautiful. Maybe often enough. I am happy with myself, but I slip away too often. I escape into my mind and watch my life play out as I would prefer it to. I take steps towards change. I turn my life upside down on occasion to mix things up. But more often than not, I feel stuck. Frustrated by things circumstance won't change and thoughts environment won't drown out. Too many things I swore not to think of dominate my thoughts too much of the time. There are things I look forward to returning with, and there are things I would just as eagerly leave here.

You told me once that I wouldn't find it in Italy. Sometimes I sigh to realize how very right you've been and how very little credit I've given you. But I love you for knowing me well enough to see me as I was before all this. And I love you for seeing through me. For all the people I've loved in my life, you are the only person who has ever been able to tell me something about myself I wasn't already aware of. I'm afraid of not finding someone else who can. Always looking. And you will read this and it will sound very much to you like conversations we've had. Don't remember me for this. I would love you to see the person I'm becoming slowly. On occasion, I see glimpses of change within me. And on occasions I catch myself impressing people around me. And on occasion I impress myself. Maybe often enough. I love the idea of seeing you again this summer.

Ciao bella,
Joy

In Italy in a college exchange program, my sister was happy. Or I remember it that way. I recall her telling me she felt beautiful and was changing for the better. Yet, when I look at the letters she wrote to me, I see something different: *I'm happy with myself, but I slip away too often. . .I take steps towards change. I turn my life upside down on occasion to mix things up. But more often than not I feel stuck.* I'm always overlooking the "but" which is strange because I thought my sister was the idealist.

May 2000
Dear Suzanne,

Buon cumpleanno! Happy Birthday, sweetie. How strange it will be to hand this to you in person. I'm writing this on the plane. I'm leaving Europe. Right now, I'm sandwiched between home and Italy.

I can't remember elements of my life before Italy. I will need you these next few days. I will be unbalanced and disoriented, and I will need you to steady me. I will have so many stories to tell you if you can manage to suffer through them. It's been a long time, and I've missed you. No one knows the core of me the way you do. You'll have to tell me if it seems intact, if only the outside has changed.

My first two weeks in Florence were disorienting, to say the least. I had no bearings. And then I called you. Three months ago, your voice gave me strength, realigned me, allowed me to do all I have done these past months. One more round. One more time I will have to lean and ask you to support me. Thank you for your strength. I come to you too often weak and unsteady. How is it that you find me strong? How is it that you are unaware of all the times you have picked me up, dusted me off, and nudged me on my way? Forgive me if I have seemed to be unaware because I am not. I know too well that you will take a break from your screaming and turn your voice to me instead, lend it to me even if I seem to have lost my own. I am strong now, but would prefer to exhaust your company these coming days. I am so proud of you for your silent strength, your displayed humility,

your unintentional beauty. And I am so grateful for your willingness to extend yourself to me. Time and again. Granzie bella. Hours away.
Ciao,
Joy

We don't realize the problem, not even my father who usually noticed all the little details. Even when we do take her one-hundred-pound physique, we say nothing to her directly. Behind her back, I tell my parents to do something or I will disown them. My father says there is nothing he can do because she's in New York. I remind him he pays for her to be in New York. I myself say nothing because I believe I have no power.

She comes to visit me in March of 2001. The year prior to this she had been in Italy. The difference in both body and spirit is so extreme. It takes me a while to see extremity as a type of control.

My sister will eat nothing but frozen yogurt. As I drive her home to spend some time with our parents, I must stop three times so she can use the bathroom. The drive usually takes only two hours. We stop for the last time at a McDonald's in Edgefield, South Carolina, only thirty minutes from our house.

My family comes to visit me for my graduation from college. My sister is yet skinnier. At dinner, my sister complains of being cold and of a stomachache. She shivers and directs her empty gaze toward the fondue pot rather than any of us. I sit near my sister, look at her sideways to lure her own gaze to me. But she doesn't feel my stare as she used to be able to.

My sister goes to sleep as soon as we get back from dinner, around eight o'clock.

From: Suz <suz@swt.edu>
To: joyjamir@msn.com
Date: Tues. 11 Sept 10:30:01

Joy,
Just got your e-mail. Mom called me first and said there was "bomb in NY," and I flipped out, thinking the whole city had been wiped off the map. Be safe. Stay away from all landmarks and important buildings. You HAVE to make to your 21st b-day.
-Suz
On Tue, 11 Sep 2001 08:54:47 -0700 "Joy Jamir" <joyjamir@msn.com> writes:
> the phone lines are down in New York. if someone can get through to my parents or sister,
> please let them know that I'm ok and will be in touch as soon as possible.
> -nasim

From: joyjamir@msn.com
To: Suz <suz@swt.edu>
Date: Wed, 2 Nov. 2001 11:24:13

i set my alarm last night on the off chance that i would be able to rise early enough to make it to the gym. alarm went off. extent of hangover was fully appreciated. rolled over and went back to sleep until it was time to get up and get ready for work. you know you had a great night out when your friend buys you the t-shirt sporting the bar name. i am the proud owner of a "la margarita" baby-tee, black with cacti from sleeve to sleeve.
-joy

My sister's friends confronted her. She began therapy. I receive word of this through my father.

From: joyjamir@msn.com
To: Suz <suz@swt.edu>
Date: Wed, 20 Mar 2002 13:03:18 -0600

Therapy is beginning to feel like some sort of sick treasure hunt, or in the very least a desperate attempt to find a single explosive cause for both of being sexually awkward rather than a combination of more subtle factors in our upbringing that could have just as easily had the same effect. My therapist asked me point blank if there was sexual abuse in my family based upon my comment that I tend to let men be physically aggressive with me (perhaps you *should* be rushing in guns blasting). But, as you keep pointing out, that's not at all odd given our home situation. She also asked me why all of my OCD and all of my psychosomatic behavior happened at night. I didn't have an answer. These were separate occasions, different sessions even. And last week I told her I'd been questioning whether there was some sort of sexual abuse because of my behavior and the fact that I feel dirty. It often feels like a literal uncleanliness.

What most disturbs me is the fact that (this is hard to say, and I don't know that I can ever discuss it in detail or mention it to anyone else) I was extremely sexually explorative as a child. You might remember some of that. But my recollection of being explorative goes back to pre-k. And I don't think that's normal. Also, I was pulled aside by my fifth-grade teacher and the sex-ed instructor for asking too many questions. They wanted to know why I was asking what I was. A lot of my childhood memories are sexual. I don't know how to explain that. It also disturbs me that the only thing Mom and Dad collectively criticized me on was being overtly sexual. I dressed improperly according to both of them. But I remember dad being furious about my bra strap showing or my sweaters being too short.
Still, I'm not remembering anything specific, and if you can't, there's probably

nothing there. Most likely, I feel dirty for any number of reasons, including being explorative in a sexless and overly religious household. My therapist says some of my symptoms indicate that there may have been abuse, but it certainly doesn't have to be indicative of anything. I do have a question, though. Do you remember when I started flipping out as a child? I think it was third grade. I also remember always wanting to hang out with the boys in class. Shit, maybe I'm a lesbian. That would be fucking fabulous.

-Joy

In Persian, my name means "young tree" or the hope you have at the beginning of things. My sister's name means "gentle breeze." My parents found poetry in the way the two names went together in sound and meaning. Nahal and Nasim. But we have proved to be unpoetic alone and together.

May 2002

Dear Joy,

I can't believe you're graduating.

You once asked me upon returning from Italy if the "core" of you was intact, despite your "outside" changing. It was then, and now, two years later, it still is. What interests me isn't whether or not it's intact, but *what* it is. You said I knew your core better than anyone. I don't think that's true. I've realized this lately: I'm too close—part of it even?—to it to know it well. Of course, you've always been one for self-analysis. I don't know what you get out of therapy, but I always look to my stories when psychoanalyzing my life or myself. While no story that I write is "real" or nonfiction in any way, you're there in almost all of them: Adriana in Star Valley, Arizona, convincing her friend May to stand with her in the middle of a circle of stones and wait for a desert rainstorm; a nameless eight-year-old girl who despises her parents and believes a good

life begins with being a sexy teenager; Mrs. Spinoza's daughter that the old woman repeatedly rescues in her dreams; Chandy trying to stop her mother from attempting suicide again; and, most recently, Zara's mother's lesbian lover, Marie. These women in my stories are all audacious, sharp, expectant, and a little irrational. They are always looking for something they're uncertain of but are also certain that sought for will be found. The "something" is, in their minds, ideal even if it isn't necessarily defined. They thrive on the endless desire and the endless search. You taught me about characters by being compelling, by being yourself. And you taught how to love them but also be honest about the intimacy of the human condition and the human connection. You, unknowingly, showed me how to be an artist long before I became one.

But dammit, *I'm* the big sister. I should be teaching you how to be. Maybe if I acted like it once in a while, people would believe that I was older. Maybe if I didn't abandon you at the kiddie pool; crash into you with my bicycle *on purpose;* slam your hand in car doors and apartment doors (not on purpose); leave and go off to college, where I simultaneously become obnoxious and a drunk; get wasted in La Margarita and puke in the bathroom—well, enough said.

Despite my severe lack of big sister behavior and/or instincts, I would just like to say that deep in the tiny black hole that I call a heart, I love you very much. In fact, if I've ever been guilty of loving someone too much, it's you. You're far, far from impossible to love. There's a quote that I've always associated with you: "Joy is a light that fills you with hope and faith and love" (Adela Rogers St. John). Sentimental, I know. But those are the things you're looking for, or that I think you are, and the way the quote reads, "joy" *is* all those things. Did Mom and Dad really screw up when they named you? Or have you yet to discover stuff about yourself? I guess we'll find out and your life unfolds and your core remains intact—oh, and you go on to do excessively successful things, like, say, graduate from NYU with honors. In the meantime, I'm going to keep being the lazy artist that I am and continue writing about you in elusive fictionalized ways.

Love,
Suzanne

A year after she began therapy, my sister and I finally discussed her anorexia. I was shocked to learn it was anorexia, not bulimia. To this day, I'm not sure why she went to the bathroom so often during that time. She explained it was all about the numbers for her, related to what her therapist claims is obsessive-compulsive disorder. I had to say that I was sorry for not saying anything directly. My sister said it was alright; she understood. But then she said that she truly had expected me to confront her because I was the only one who had ever been able to "see through her." There are so many ways of being stoic, and I have known them all. Finally, that day, I wanted to cry.

Wole Soyinka says, "Why do I fast? Self-indulgence. A sensual self-indulgence. I suspect that it is the truly sensual who take easily to fasting." Franz Kafka's hunger artist claims fasting "was the easiest thing in the world" but eventually finds himself embarrassed of the ease with which he starves himself to death. These writers make something much more of this contemporary issue. Starvation is artistic. The mass media has trivialized the issue; in all of their views, women end up weak, victims. I want to be proud of my sister.

My sister decided to go to business school. She retained her idealism. She was a self-declared anti-capitalist. But she was going to go to business school. Georgetown, nonetheless. Maybe her constructed conflict of ideals would work out. It would be another great demonstration of control.

Undated, Undelivered
May 1, 2006
Dear Nasim,

Despite everything that should have brought us closer, I feel very distanced from you. I write about you now in a direct manner in hopes of regaining intimacy. Fiction won't cut it anymore. Perhaps, writing itself won't cut it. But I will try because memories haunt me as well.

More often than not, I find myself saddened by you. I did not want to visit you in March because I knew, as always, that you would make me feel useless. However, a new development is that you make me feel unloved. You have adopted my silence and my wandering eyes. We both cannot act the same. What has kept us close is difference and thereby our anger, but somehow our anger has dissipated too much, been directed at too many extraneous things. Let us refocus our guns on each other. I want to cut off your right hand. I want to aim a missile at your core. I want to shove dirty socks in your mouth and dance around while you try to mumble your objections or your wisdoms. I wonder what exactly you would try to say. Would you inquire as to the calorie content of a dirty sock? Would you ask me if I love you, or would you already know I do? Maybe you would tell me I have changed again and again for the worse. Do not ever be gentle. We are not bound by our names, nor any other words. Nor our bodies. Nor our blood. We are bound only by the choices our spirits make. I will repeatedly choose you as my sister.
Love,
Nahal

While in Italy, my sister took photography classes. My sister took pictures of hands. I looked at these photos for the first time and told her I was glad she'd found a passion. She said she didn't want a passion. Even now, I want to tell her that you cannot deny anything by saying or writing otherwise. I have tired.

The last pictures she ever took were of her own naked body, the camera held at simultaneously awkward and stunning angles. Her physique lies somewhere

between starved and full-bodied—maybe what they call slender. In these pictures, the head is cut off. Like hands, the body itself becomes a body part. I looked at her in her living room and, for the first time, looked at these pictures which were in frames hanging on the wall behind her. My sister is paradox. And when she was going to run away so long ago, it was both to seek and run from love. These dueling motivations are, in short, the most appropriate definition of grief.

These pictures were selected to be part of an exhibit of minority photography at a gallery in New York. My sister asked me to help her with her bio. I can imagine people moving through the gallery and sensing the intimacy of these photos. Someone will say, "She could be your lover" and marvel at an ordinary woman's unveiling of herself in the twenty-first century. But she could be your sister *or* your lover. Or she could be nothing—Italian beer evaporated into a warm spring day. All that remains is condensation on your hand.

Joy Baglio

House of Stars

It's after the weekend when he moved out—after their fights; after he silently, angrily departed with most of his belongings; after her mother came over to soothe her, to cook for her in the void he left (most of their stuff was his); when the sink is filled with the waste and remains of what feels like her life; when all the most used pots and pans are caked and dirty on the counter—that she pulls a forgotten Teflon pan from the shelf, sets it on the stovetop where the eggs are ready to fry, and there it is, spinning, vibrating, whirring: a whole galaxy at the bottom of the frying pan.

Well, more than one galaxy, really, and as she holds the pan over the sink—deciding if she should dump it—she accidentally dribbles the edge of a star system out into the dishwater, and it flows in a gooey mist down the drain. She stares for a long while, thinking. The largest galaxy—about the size of an apple—has arms that whirl and spiral outward, and beyond it she can see the dark dust clouds of interstellar space. Then, because she doesn't want to pour a whole universe down the drain, she fries the eggs in the pan, galaxies and all, and one cooks right over the spinning orb of a distant sun. The sun shines through the egg so that it glows, a solid gold orb in the cosmos.

That night, she removes the pan from the kitchen, still full with the galaxies and greasy from the eggs, stores it under her bed, and all night dreams of star fields and space travel. She wakes, excited, thinking, *Today, I'll use it to make pancakes*, but when she pours the batter into the pan's center, it's as if she's pouring it into oblivion. The stars, too, she notices, have moved, and she puts her face very close and watches as they're sucked toward the dark center of the largest galaxy. A black hole.

At first she takes great delight in this, and she tests its ability to devour with the wilted celery in the fridge, the expired mayonnaise jars, sour milk that she pours directly into nothingness. Next, it's the junk mail—all the unopened bills and bank statements—and she watches as they stretch over the event horizon before disappearing. She stands above the pan, wondering if she whispers to it,

prays to it, if some God-of-all-things will answer—perhaps some loving force who would vindicate her pain or, better still, a vengeful smiter who seeks to punish—or is she perhaps the God of this universe, the large, hovering being outside of it all?

She walks through the house, filling her arms with the small, forgotten things he hasn't taken yet: a photo album, juggling balls, a pair of shoes. Each thing whirls and stretches into the central darkness of the pan, but the largest of them, the photo album, catches on the corners, so she carefully carries the pan in one hand, album in the other, to the bathroom and pours her galactic stew into the tub. It takes nicely to the shape, expanding to fill the porcelain bounds as though it prefers this new size. She's staring down at it, noticing what can only be the crackle of cosmic background radiation behind the drifting galaxies, when her phone rings. It's him, letting her know he'll come by for his things tomorrow.

"What things?" she asks, focusing on a dark smudge of molecular cloud.

"You know," he says. "The things I forgot."

She wants to say, "You forgot a lot more than your things. You forgot how to be kind, how to listen, how to be patient; you forgot how to have fun, how to compromise; so many things that you forgot—why don't you come for those things?" But she doesn't say any of this. Instead she fixes her eyes on two colliding galaxies, a streamer of stars like a long and delicate tendril of clouds pulling them apart, and says, "Okay. Come, then."

Later, she cries on the couch until she feels empty of everything, even tears, then she goes to the bathroom to check on the universe. It's swirling and shifting, a soup of stars, the dark, yawning center as inviting as sleep. *I wonder if I let it fill this room…* As soon as the thought enters her mind, one small star creeps, spiderlike, over the rim of the tub, followed by a rivulet of globular clusters, and she steps quickly back, slamming the door as the night sky fills the room.

He comes by the next day, and she's struck by the familiar sight of him: T-shirt from their Newfoundland trip, smell of lemongrass deodorant, wet hair. He's searching for his rock collection and has little to say to her, but she lingers close

by, always in the next room. When she sees him walking toward the bathroom, his hand reaching for the door, she pauses, wondering if she should let him stumble straight into interplanetary space.

"Don't," she says.

He turns and stares, his hand still resting on the doorknob. "Why not?"

She's standing, staring back at him, feeling the weight of it all. "Just don't," she says.

He shrugs, turns away. "Still controlling and secretive, I see."

When he leaves, she can't contain it anymore. She can feel the force of the acceleration, the expansion pushing outward on the door, straining to fill the house. She opens the door, and a gush of nebulae spill out, pooling around her feet like water. Neutron stars fall to the floor like infinitely dense marbles; pulsars flicker near her head like fireflies. She will sleep tonight in this glowing, swirling stew. Let it fill her house. Maybe she can learn to wade through its currents, around the brink of its abyss; learn to navigate the coldness, the crushing chasms and the blinding light.

Translated from the Spanish by Suzanne Jill Levine

Luce López-Baralt

Luz sobre luz

Iba nocturna por las islas umbrías
y, repente,

LA LUZ

y el infinito reino día.

Aspiré a ser Tu Espejo
pero me convertiste
en Tu propio rostro.

Con Moshé León

Soy un palacio sin tiempo
mis cúpulas de cristal sobrepasan el cenit,
el Oriente confluye con el Occidente
en las moradas infinitas de mi medina de luz.
Mi palacio no tiene forma ni imagen:

solo lo habitas Tú.

Translated from the Spanish by Suzanne Jill Levine

Luce López-Baralt

Light Upon Light

It was night and near the shadowy islands
I found

LIGHT

and the infinite kingdom of the day.

I wanted to be your mirror,
but as you were my maker
I became instead your face.

with Moishe de Leon

I am a palace beyond time
my glass domes rise above the zenith,
Orient merges with Occident
in the infinite dwellings of my bright medina.
My palace has neither form nor image:

Only you inhabit it.

Con san Juan de la Cruz

Y la caballeria
a vista de las aguas

a
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s
a

volaba
que
Creía

hasta que comprendí

que
me
abismaba

Dentro de este mísero cuerpo de arcilla
giran todas las esferas del universe.

with Saint John of the Cross

And the horses of the cavalry
in sight of the waters

d
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a

I thought I was flying

till I understood

I was falling

down my abyss

All the spheres of the universe
orbit within this wretched body of clay.

Salgo a la noche,
temo al abismo,
pero la Noche
está azucarada de luces.

Camino sin pasos hacia Ti
y por eso no dejo huellas.

Penetré en la luz blanca
más allá pabellón de lo invisible
y comprendí al fin el misterio
del árbol y de los cuatro pájaros.

Me elevo de sombra en sombra
mientras más perfecta es su redonda oscuridad
más me aserco al Tesoro de las Luces.

Mi Rosa inmarcesible,
¡soy tu ruiseñor rendido!

I go into the night
afraid of the abyss
But Night is
coated with the sugar of lights.

I walk without footsteps toward You
leaving no trace.

I penetrated the white light
way past the pavilion of the invisible
where I finally understood the mystery
the tree and the four birds.

I levitate from shadow to shadow
as the dark sphere becomes more perfect
the closer I am to the Treasure of Lights.

My distant untouched Rose:
I am your smitten nightingale!

La luz de la luna penetra sigilosa en el estanque
y se cuida de no dejar su huella sobre el agua:

Tú no te cuidaste.

Con santa Teresa de Jesús

¡Cómo ardía la luz
en lo interior del sexto castillo!

pero lo que ocurrió en el séptimo
no es para ser contado.

Clear light of the moon quietly penetrates the pond
Careful not to leave any trace upon the water:

You were not so careful.

with Saint Teresa de Jesus

How the light burned
inside the sixth castle!

But what happened in the seventh
cannot be told.

Anthony Sutton

A Small God Carrying Endless Light

Even after dedicating my life
against prayer, never having
written the word *prayer*, getting

self-conscious upon hearing
mention of *prayer*, I know
if I had a god to pray to

it would be the light fixture
in the jail cell I spent most
of a day in. It sat behind

textured glass, imitating sunlight.
At 2 am I thought it resembled
daybreak. By 2 pm, my cellmate

believed he was watching an overcast
morning. Now, I bow to it,
to study its changes in color

to understand the changes
in myself. I should consider
its correlatives with Dante.

What of the other sky behind it?
Is the universe organized
by relative distance from the light?

Then, I would abandon Dante.
Then, I would study the god
for itself. Is its light cast

from a lantern or from the god's
mind? When I learn
the answer I will abandon

the material world and enter
a field on the other side
of the glass, one implied by the light

(where true believers go). I'm sure,
at some point today, someone sang
God Bless America. I want

to ask them if they really believe
that a nation's legitimacy
depends on its being

the expression of a god. If
my god's light is unending
because the god is fed

by corporations and taxpayers.
Many of whom live nowhere
near this jail, but

many have driven by.

from "Decorporeal"

I hate it when people say *andro*
as short for *androgynous*
when the whole point is that
it translates to *man-woman.*
I hate it when people say *man-*
kind. Men are not kind.
You put it best: *I love you*
so much I could burst into flames.
It was raining and we pressed
on the stoop in front of our apartment.
I felt it too then, walking
down the bridge over the river.
My hand kept brushing yours.
My blaze could have swept this city
as easily as a volcanic eruption.
If you or I combusted
and the bridge collapsed,
would the other have lived long
enough to hit water?

Khaty Xiong

Asta So

As is the case for the canonical tear
in the brain's best images the body learns

to protect itself from the overflowing lakes
in the alleys of the eyes—

from the growing dread the size of a child
from mother's voice returning like the cut of a tree

mute & parallel to the tall grass collapsing
whichever way the wind commands.

Do we err when we blink & do we move when it is over?
Or does the body stay to mend in place?

In the Garden of Severe Punishment we occupy
the chance that a face is retrievable

& that names can be saved so long as we remember
to plant & pray in the direction of our loved ones—

or so one can believe in this Valley of Burden.
But the amber hills are purposefully bright

marked with mobs of forgiving mule deer
migrating back to the lands of their ancestors.

Then there's the sun in this crowning scene
where shadows eternally lay by their bodies

anchored to their forms as an act of loyalty.
    Hard to admire a law that forbids autonomy

as well as familiarity of one's muscle perpetually fading
    into the repeating lessons of love at first sight—

hospitable for the moment & sweet every time.
    Not a single hair to tell apart departure from meeting…

that food can grow here in this plot of blurred season
    & the finest silk has already spun in three lifetimes.

Fátima Policarpo

The Shallows

The Yankton Sioux believe water holds memories—that if you speak or sing to it during a ceremony, the water will hold what it has heard and, when the time is right, share what it has learned. When I read this in an interview with Native American water rights activists, it makes deep intuitive sense. Beyond the sacredness of water as an indispensable natural resource, they are claiming its sacredness as the "first medicine" because water nurtures in the mother's womb. We may all move in different paths after we're born, but we all lived in our mothers' waters, once.

What did the ocean of our mothers' wombs speak? In which of the body's oceans do memories live?

The pool is empty when I arrive. I've been longing to swim these waters since spring, but I've also been avoiding them. It's always been that way with us, the water and me.

They teach swimming lessons here this time of year, leaving only two lanes open for adult swim. All those parents standing around, all those little heads floundering through clumsy strokes, babies dipped into water like angry baptisms, coaches pacing the periphery yelling commands—I can't.

But not today. It is a Saturday. It is early. I am the first one here. I walk past the giant timer clock and choose the lane furthest from it. I promise not to look to its face every time I touch the wall after a lap.

I haven't swam here since I carried my youngest in this body. As I slip my shorts and t-shirt off, my gaze on the stillness of the water, I wonder at this aversion. This should be where I come every day to think. Yet, I don't. I am not one to usually shy away from aversions, not consciously anyway. I live in a world where there is reward in pushing the limits, ignoring the pain. I have been trained to do what feels uncomfortable because it feels uncomfortable.

I sit on the edge and slide into the pool. The water feels cool and smooth, a relief. I slip under its surface and swim—the breaststroke. The body remembers. As I scoop the water in wide arcs, my legs follow. This is a stroke of openings, of letting in, of welcoming and returns. It is my favorite, but I never competed in it. I always got assigned the butterfly, and I hated it. I could have said, "No, I don't like it. I don't want to swim this"—all effort and force and breaking. My body awkward, out of harmony with the water, was not at all graceful as I imagined a butterfly to be.

As usually happens, ten minutes or so into the swim, into the quiet: the discomfort with the stillness. This water feels like home but it is a place of resistance. I want to run from its silence, from the sound of my breath. Because these waters are a holding place.

This morning they make me think of that neighbor woman who used to drive me home from swimming lessons when I was a child. She would often bring cakes from the bakery. I eyed the white box in the front seat, hunger twisting my belly from the lessons after the full day of school. She held out the sugar-dusted mass to her daughter, who sat next to me in the back seat, but did not offer me any. She might have, if I had asked, but I was too ashamed of my want. She knew. I knew she knew. An early lesson in withholding.

"You hated going to swimming," my mother shared, when my six-year-old still refused to take swimming lessons because she was terrified of being dunked into the water. "Don't force her," she told me. One of her biggest regrets was making me take those lessons when I was little. Really? I think, *That* is one of your biggest regrets? But perhaps she meant that it was a time when she went against her mothering heart.

"You screamed every time I handed you to the instructor," and then she described how she would walk away, heart choking.

I don't remember that part, her handing me to them. My memory reaches only to the time when I was already broken in, eight or nine and indoctrinated to pool life. Walking into that building with the smell of chlorine so strong it burned my eyes and nose, felt like putting on a backpack too large and heavy for my frame. I hated it. But I also don't recall ever telling them, "No, I don't like it. No, I don't want to swim." She tells me I cried out for her the whole lesson, while she waited

across the pool where I couldn't see her. I still can't see that transition from crying to speaking out (if there was ever speaking) to acquiescence.

When I have a baby, they tell me not to go to her when she cries from her crib—she'll think crying is language. She'll think crying will get her what she needs. We don't want that.

They call this training.

I reach the other side of the pool and adjust my goggles before I dip back in. After several more laps, I switch to freestyle. The stroke feels effortless, and I get a brief flash of one of my early swim team instructors, after I moved to the United States. I see him in his black visor, hair gleaming gold on his calves, following me down the pool and miming the stroke, calling out instructions—"Follow through, elbow up, breathe! Kick, kick, kick!"

He had two brothers and a sister, each as golden as he. They all taught swimming. Their family lived just up the street from the public pool in one of those classic American brick houses with the white fence that were then the largest in town. On their front yard was the willow tree I hid within from the boys who made a habit of following me home on their bikes, teasing me about my name, the width of my body. I wanted to disappear. And I learned.

I believed my swim coach and his siblings only saw me when I was in the pool, even though they went to my church and I saw them every Sunday; the whole of their golden family sitting in a row on the St. Peter side. The father gained notoriety when he left us, or perhaps the Catholic faith altogether. He had a disagreement about the Trinity; he said, "No, how can it be?" No did not remain lodged in the back of his throat. It was the first time I had seen anyone openly question the Bible before a priest—and it happened during sermon, in front of everyone. I stared into my lap as he spoke up, "But can you explain it?" My face flushed hot at his self-exposure, a rip in the current that held us. I was afraid for him, for us. Although the danger I felt was familiar, I could not point to anything in my experience to explain its presence—danger when he spoke up, danger even

in the priest's gentle responses. This man's breaking the mold of the sermon, where one authority speeches a truth before a silent mass, not only felt radical but made my body itch in discomfort. I never saw him or his children again.

Speaking induces vanishings of all kinds. Perhaps I came to understand the impossible safety of silence at a very young age. Perhaps I even inherited this lesson, the silences of my parents, babies of António de Oliveira Salazar's Estado Novo regime in Portugal. For over forty years, *Deus, Pátria, e Familia*: God, Fatherland, and Family—loyalties trained into the people in that order: Church, dictator, family unit. Speech tortured out to make one dumb as stone. One of the PIDE's[1], the state's secret police, preferred torture methods was called "a estátua," the statue. For days at a time, detainees were made to stand in sensory-deprived rooms, as erect and still as stone figures. If they moved or fell, as they inevitably did, the guards kicked and beat them with fists or wood planks. The point was sleeplessness and deprivation, to cause pain to the body in such a way as to make the tortured hand their bodies over. The confessions they sought, subversive acts and the names of dissidents, were meant to justify their brutality. Whispers of these and other acts against the bodies of political prisoners in such prisons as Aljube (1928-1965), the fort in Peniche (1934-1974), and the fort in Caxias (1936-1974) traveled wide, spreading compliance and even engendering citizen-spies for the state. Violence has a wide reach.

Torture and other forms of physical and sexual abuse break that seal that preserves us against the world, distorting the personal perimeter that protects our humanity, perhaps even eliminating it. If one survives, it's not the pain that remains and haunts, but the effect of this breach on the body—the "final invasion," how South African author Antjie Krog describes the ongoing psychological violence of apartheid in a post-apartheid society. What endures for the abused and reverberates throughout communities for generations to come is "the shock of having the fragile privacy of the body brutally destroyed forever." [Where do you end and I begin?]

I think of the implications for the torturers, too—the ongoingness of what they carried with them into their homes, their children's embraces, into their beds and the bodies of their women.

[1] Polícia Internacional de Segurança do Estado

At roughly the same time as Salazar, in Spain, our neighbor to the East, Francisco Franco had his babies, too, who he stole from the wombs of radical mothers, parents who said No to his regime, or were just too poor to have a voice at all. Catholic nurses delivered dead babies stored in freezers, which they kept for just such an occasion, into the disbelieving arms of these radical mothers. "But I heard her cry," the mothers protested, used to speaking out from their guts. And the nurses, "No, you're wrong. Here is your baby, quite dead, you see? God bless her eternal soul. Say good-bye, dear." And as the mothers wept over these frozen impostors, their doctors signed fake birth certificates and handed these healthy radical babies over to acceptable fascist families—for a fee, of course.

Swallow the grief and pass it on. A peninsula of silence and forgetting. But the body always remembers.

Years later, when it was discovered that the Franco regime did this same switch to thousands of families, these lost children went in search of their real mothers. Upon reuniting the mothers told them, "I always knew. They told me you were dead. No one believed me, but I always knew."

You don't always have to see a thing to know with certainty that it exists, that its underground currents persist in mapping your world.

The freestyle speeds my pulse, quickens my breath. I rest on my elbows at the edge of the pool. The sound of my breathing is reassuring in a deep way. In swimming, you have to breathe. In swimming, you listen.

I become aware of a woman pacing to my left. She holds a phone to her ear. How long has she been there? She stands behind one of the chairs. The pool and my breath recede, her voice breaking the silence. Annoyed, I drop into the water and push away from the wall. A man now swims at the opposite lane, but she is the one who holds my attention. *Go away.* I can hear the pitches of her conversation through my strokes, her laughing, as I dip in and out of the water. I don't want to, but I look over and see that she is now speaking into the screen and has come closer to the edge of the pool, as if drawn to my indignation. I glare

every time I come up for air. I notice uneasily how angry my strokes become. I see another swim coach from long ago, standing above a girl stretching before a meet. He screams so hard that he is spitting. His arms slash through the air modeling how the stroke must go, as if to brand her with his example. "You've trained for this," he yells into the top of her head.

I counter this vision with a sideways stroke and stare at the rippling surface turned on its side as my body cuts through. I never see anyone doing the sidestroke anymore—this one is about breaking perspective. The perfect balance of pulling and pushing moves me forward, and away from the noise.

Water and I, we made a pact of silence early on. I never told anyone that I almost drowned in the ocean shallows. I wasn't alone—this happened in the midst of those who should have kept me safe—but I became alone in my speechlessness. The man who pulled me out of the water was a stranger. I didn't speak about it to him either. I don't know how old I was, only that my body was small. Perhaps I didn't yet know how to speak what was happening. Although the full knowing didn't come until decades later, I did sense the danger in what the experience was taking from me—distorting my chemistry, thinning my borders to translucency.

The most vivid, still today, was what happened under the surface. I could see so clearly both of my arms flailing on either side of me like wings in slow motion, my fingers leaving a billowy rainbow light trail, like a strange jellyfish. Quiet. Held there.

[We cannot hold it all in full sight. We must drown in order to see.]

Decades later, when the drowning memory comes up for air, I speak of it to my mother. It is to her I go these days when I can't understand the long reach of the past. I try to link this memory to my dread of open water. It is a fear that I am only recently able to look in the face. How can it be that it has taken me this long to see what I must have carried all this time? I force myself into dark waters only to swim quickly back to shore, a warning instinct as ancient as the glacial lakes I venture. The thing is, I am a good swimmer. She made sure of that with those dreaded swimming lessons. But the dread remains. Can we train it away, what we inherit, all that we cannot see?

"Did you know?" I ask her about the near drowning, because I don't yet know how to ask if she knew about all the rest of it, that which I have yet to glimpse in the full light.

"Is that why you were so intent on my learning to swim?"

She did not know. "You were only supposed to play in the water puddles the ocean made in the sand," she says, as if children only do what is expected. "I can't imagine you'd go into the ocean," as if my experience, as if harm, would be contained to the limits of her imagination.

Then she shares with me that she has the same fear of the open sea, of deep lakes, of dark swimming holes. She does not know how to swim. She never learned.

What remains.

Why did I not tell her what was happening to me? Why didn't I ask for help? I swallowed it, but the currents manifested in childhood dreams of being at the bottom of the ocean; of swimming through deep, dark rivers with gloomy boulders, going deeper than I knew my breath would take me, yet driven into the darkness by a weight I could not counter. The lifelong recurring dream of the ocean waves that grow larger and larger until I know I will be overcome. One time, I dreamed I opened the curtains in my childhood room to find our house at the bottom of the sea. I knew it was only a matter of time before the force of the depths shattered our windows, before its secrets drowned us all.

Among these dreams, the one where I'm running through the ocean waves naked, how policemen come to arrest my father at gunpoint for my exposed body, the weight of the guilt of my expression.

Something is down there in the darkness, in those places where the sun does not reach. It might pull me under. I am only marginally safer on shore. And I realize I have stayed in the shallows always, never venturing beyond where I could see. It had never even occurred to me to swim out into the middle of a lake, to swim out beyond where the waves start curling to the shore. Until now.

On a recent hiking trip with friends, we climbed for three hours to reach a lake so calm and pristine we could see the whole of the sky and mountains reflected in its surface. They undressed and jumped in. I undressed, too, but there was so much resistance. My friends turned to me from the water, where I saw they had already lost

their footing, and waved me to join. Because I wanted to be stronger than it, I walked into the waters and swam towards them, all the while feeling like I would die, like moving through the blackness would awaken some unseen ancient thing that would rise up and reclaim me—dread tingling my limbs, my belly, my face, my scalp: Danger, my body said, Danger. Despite this, I made myself swim across the narrowest part to a nearby boulder and climbed out. I could swim back across to where my clothes and shoes were, but I couldn't bear to get back in the water, to put my nervous system through it again, so I walked around the lake, barefoot. And I couldn't escape the feeling that I was somehow failing. I thought of my kids' favorite book about a family going on a bear hunt and how the family, when it encounters challenges—a lake, a snow storm, a mud bog—when they can't go "over it" or "under it," they go *through it*, together. And here I was, once again going around it, bypassing it alone.

Someone named this thing I'm feeling Thalassophobia, fear of ocean depths, although the internet tells me it could also be Bathophobia, fear of depths, whether it be water or dark crevices or tunnels. As usual, I struggle to name *this*. But the World Wide Web lives to name and instruct. I glean dozens of pseudo-science articles promising to teach me the most effective ways to "get over it," to "face it," to "beat it." Goosebumps spread across my body as I read the "symptoms" of these various phobias, which I am told are common across the spectrum. They say fear becomes a phobia when that fear is irrational. When I read this assertion, I laugh out loud at its irrationality. What I hear in their "irrational" is, *We don't believe you.*

Maybe there is something to heed in the ancient, the inherited, the unseen. Something to learn from not always charging forward, not always being brave. Or maybe, instead of swimming to the heart of it, what if I explore the borders as a way to the interior?

As I made my way back to our clothes, I watched my friends' effortlessness as they swam far away into the blackest part of the liquid body. It was not their swimming I envied, but their freedom from this disquiet. Still, I tried to make peace with the shallows.

"No, it's not *that*," I struggled to explain when they returned to shore. "I'm a swimmer. I have been trained to be a swimmer all my life," I told them.

But there are some things you can't train away.

I use my sidestroke scissoring legs to help me flip onto my stomach and pause in the middle of the pool. There is joy is seeing all the way down to the bottom of it, in the light that filters in. Two swimmers have joined me in the neighboring lanes, but their movements don't bother me. Their silence, the sounds of them breaking through water is right. I turn my body upwards, remove my goggles and face the sun, floating. My heart is beating hard and I arch further to push it sunward. To stay above water, the heart and the pelvis must become an offering. There is trust in this exposure. There is the reward of staying above it all.

Recently, I visited Praia do Guincho, my childhood beach—the same beach where I believe I almost drowned. It is one of my favorite places anywhere. On those sands, I grew up learning how to dive into the waves so that they didn't knock me down, so that they didn't pull me under and out—there, the ocean and I learned to live together. But for the first time, I could not dive in. I have started writing about the past and its long, insistent pull. It feels shaky still to navigate the shallows and the depths without staying too long in any one place.

I swim one last lap of breaststroke to close the loop of my practice this morning and then rest my forehead against the edge of the pool, stretch my calves. The skin of my fingers is puckered. Have I been swimming here too long?

Yet there is heat in this body, a deep hum—a survivor's wisdom that understands when it can and cannot look at the past head on; a knowing that is teaching me to speak.

My first baby, the one who did not want to swim: what did my waters say as her body took shape within mine?

It took us three days to discover she was born with an unusually restrictive frenulum; she was what they call "tongue-tied." I never understood how silence could embody, but my silenced body had held hers and she had emerged from my waters a child with a bound tongue.

"You were born that way, too," my mother said.

Alison Pelegrin

Our Lady Who Thinks She Is a Saint

Sentimentality is something I detest,
little shrines everywhere
for acorns and umbilical cords,
but I started off the normal way,
believing my tea party guests—
koala, pony, duck—were real children.
Leaving them behind to go to school—
I thought that was suffering,
and as penance I entered a Catholic phase,
saying no to everything and developing
warped beliefs about sainthood that involved
hairshirts, hunger, and sleep bereft of plush.
Poor sock monkey with the pompoms
chewed off—that was the one I kept,
working out a threadbare iconography
for the prayer card of my dreams.
Turns out I was rehearsing motherhood
before crafting offspring of my very own.
Poor lambs—I dressed them, fed them
the breast milk of resentment for show.
Yes of course I woke them for meteor showers,
but also I sat them for long stretches, like dolls,
so that someone would need me forever.

Rage Goddess

There will be no sweet talk or checking
of my rage—I fume, swoon, gagging on the bile
of it, so unladylike with my wild boar ways.
What would Achilles do? I tried meditating,
but my mind is already empty—all thoughts
expunged except fury lighting the way.
In Rage 101 my father was my guide, swatting
at stand-still objects with the weedwacker,
prowling around the car where I hid that time
he was so crazed the neighbors called the cops.
I, too, have frightened my children, who will recall
how I ruined a snow day by yanking Christmas lights
from the sonofabitching attic. I was joking,
but they were terrorized when I said I'd kill
the dog with a shovel after it snapped at them,
stiffening when I swooped in for a kiss. Yoga
should have made me nicer, but all that's changed
is that my mean thinking happens upside down—
scenarios where the throat punch is permitted,
and knees to the face. In a stifling room, flanked
by skinny bitches, I remember the weight on top
of me, a bear of a man, a preppy beast, and how
was I stupid enough to eat from his hand? It ended
with me splayed in corpse pose, pliant
as the magician's assistant. And that was
the last time I didn't know my strength.
Now I keep a beating stick nearby, with splinters
on one end for extra hurt. Rage haunts me
with its vice grip on the heart, follows me

in sleep, where in the roller derby dream
my name is Bonecrusher. Let him
be the one to flounder, to fight for breath.
Let me be the monster—unrecognizable, a horror,
blood-spattered, with ashes smeared across my face.

Maria Lioutaia

Longer Than She Would Have in the Wild

As soon as Vika woke to the noxious swaying of the train, she reached into the mesh side pocket of the upper bunk for her father's Vostok wristwatch. Splayed hands—quarter after nine. Only five hours until the train groaned into Yaroslavsky Station in Moscow. Only twenty-six hours until Vika dragged a static-charged plastic chair across a linoleum floor and sat at a table facing a succession of optimistic American men, men who'd come to Russia to find a wife.

Vika sighed and propped herself up on an elbow. Train travel warped time. To the hypnotic metronome of the wheels, minutes transmuted into days, and today seemed like yesterday, or perhaps even tomorrow.

The compartment was permeated with the smell of strangers' skin, too intimate for comfort. Over the last three days, she and Dasha had shared the space with a succession of travelers who seemed to shapeshift overnight. The previous evening, the bottom bunk diagonally down had been occupied by a doughy, somber woman who fell asleep well before sundown; her heels had stuck out from under the sheet, a carapace of calluses. This morning, in her place at the formica table was a man, who at that moment was trying to heave up the window. He wore an undershirt yellowed in the pits, and his shoulders were covered in a thick pelt of black hair that repulsed and fascinated Vika. She had the urge to run her hands through it, the same way, as a child, she had ached to touch the power outlet after being expressly forbidden to do so. His hirsuteness vaguely reminded Vika of her old boyfriend, Alexandra's father, who got Vika pregnant and then left her. As the man grunted at the window latches, he suddenly looked like a beast, a bear too wild for this small space. Vika blinked, and the man became human once again.

The window finally surrendered, and the man thrust his head through the opening. They were pulling into yet another station, and as always, there were

kerchiefed women on the cement platform hawking soda in unlabelled plastic bottles, pickles, whole roasted bass, and other travel sustenance. Soon, the man was sitting back in the compartment, clutching a funnel of *Izvestiya* dark with grease stains. He unfurled the newspaper on the table, revealing a heap of roasted sunflower seeds gleaming like fresh deer droppings.

Out on the platform, the women gathered in a tight clump, extending their offerings up to the window. Vika rummaged in the mesh side pocket for a fistful of wadded rubles.

"Dasha," she hissed over the edge of her bunk. "Are you awake?"

There came rustling from the bunk below. Then her friend's head emerged beside Vika, a peroxide dandelion.

Vika pressed the rubles into her hand. "Here, get us some strawberries from the woman with the burgundy kerchief."

Dasha's top half disappeared through the window. The pelt-shouldered man lifted his concentration away from the sunflower seeds and transferred it to Dasha's behind, clad in cotton sleep slacks with a pattern of tiny tulips. Vika gave a sharp cough. The man glanced up at her, grinned wolfishly, shrugged, and returned to perusing the oil-stained newsprint as Dasha shimmied back into the compartment with a paper bowl heaped with berries.

Dasha bit into one and sighed. "Great idea, sure beats boiled eggs again."

Vika shook her head. "They're not all for eating."

She untangled the ball of her yellow housecoat and shrugged into it, tucked the toiletries bag under her arm, and carefully back-stepped down the metal stairs into the narrow space between the bunks.

Her curlers had made it difficult to sleep. She'd woken up frequently, startled awake, forgetting where she was, disoriented at the insistent clacking of the wheels. Now, she probably had bags under her eyes. Age showed around the eyes first, in the thinning skin. Fissuring fine lines, collapsing collagen. And tomorrow she couldn't afford to look old.

"What are they for, then?" Dasha said. She had a pulpy smear of berry tucked into the crevice beside her eye tooth.

Dasha's preternatural calm about the matchmaking annoyed Vika. Dasha

was 23 and took this whole thing as a lark, an adventure to tell people back home about over tea.

To Vika, the dating agency was her last chance at escape.

With a shuddering moan, the train began to move out of the station.

Vika took the bowl out of Dasha's hands and inspected the strawberries—they were warm, damp with condensation, vital with sun and soil. Vika selected the ripest one, carmine and distended with juice. She handed the bowl back to Dasha, then closed her fist. The valleys between her fingers welled with juice. She smeared the ravaged berry across her face, spreading the pulp under her eyes and massaging it into the laugh lines in particular. The juice dripped along her neck, and she felt the slow crawl of berry chunks down her forehead. The man had stopped shucking sunflowers seeds and was watching her with bemusement.

"You should do a face mask, too. Don't want to look haggard tomorrow," Vika said to Dasha, depositing her feet into plastic slippers and sliding back the compartment door.

Out in the hallway, a young girl, no older than Vika's daughter, was doing elaborate stretches. As Vika watched, she dipped her body backwards until it was an arch, her hands pressing against the threadbare, maroon hallway runner, her hair brushing the floor. She and Vika made eye contact. Then the girl walked away in that position down the train car, hands and feet moving in tandem like some strange animal. Vika couldn't imagine her shy Alexandra doing acrobatics in public like that. Her daughter was painfully timid, the smallest unkindnesses of the world leaving deep marks on her. She would not risk calling attention to herself in any way.

Now that the train was on the move once again, there was a line into the bathroom, men with mangy, train-issued towels over one shoulder, dull razors and masticated toothbrushes clenched in their fists. One gave her a startled glance, but Vika turned toward the hallway windows. She pulled back the curtain bunched across the glass on a taut wire. Yet again, she watched Russia flash by. She was so sick of the hypnotic swoop of powerlines, the blur of birches outfitted in black stripes like convicts, villages rotting into the hungry moss.

She'd tried applying for immigration two years before, when Alexandra was six. The lawyer she'd met in a glum, whitewashed office on Frunzenskaya took off his tortoiseshell glasses and slowly massaged the ridge between his eyebrows. "You won't get enough points," he said, sliding all her documents across the wide oak desk back to Vika.

It was summer, but all the dust-spackled windows were sealed shut in his office, and a swath of interrogative sunshine lay right across her seat. Her meeting-appropriate, polyester blouse was soaked through under the armpits, clinging to her brassiere strap. She'd worn it to demonstrate her eligibility, her seriousness as an immigrant, but now felt like a drowned cat.

"What points?" she asked, and imagined a game show, like *Field of Wonders* that she and Alexandra watched together Fridays at eight on the tiny television in their room. Imagined herself heaving the glittering prize wheel, the sections blurring, then slowing, clicking through to *Immigration!* The audience cheering, the host presenting her with a novelty-sized airplane ticket.

"Your U.K. application was rejected. In Canada, you just don't amass enough approval points—you only partially completed your secondary education, you work as a"—he glanced down at his notes, and his lip curled—"*store associate at a delicatessen*, you have a young child, you have no family to sponsor you, you don't speak English, and you don't have the $10,000 required to enter the country. And I can tell you right now that, given all these factors, the United States will also likely reject your Green Card application."

Vika kept her hands in her lap, refusing to gather the documents off the desk—the papers she spent nights filling out in careful cursive, the medical exam confirmations and bank statements and proof of residency and proof of birth. Her and Alexandra's lives were in these documents. The possibilities of her daughter's future were in these documents. She knew the exact limitations of her daughter's life if they remained where they were. At her local school, the truancy rate among students was only matched by the truancy rate among teachers. There were syringes under the playground slide and more teen mothers than graduates. The delicatessen job barely paid enough for their room in the communal apartment shared with two other families, especially following the

inflation crisis. But in the badly dubbed movies on television, there were other places, places where everyone smiled showing both rows of straight, white teeth and swam in blue-bright pools, where children had a whole room of a whole house to themselves. Places where they could make choices, rather than having choices made for them by circumstances. That's where Vika wanted to be; that's where she wanted Alexandra to grow up.

"Aren't there any other options? There must be something else we could do."

The lawyer had already begun clacking at his boxy, beige desktop in a way that indicated this conversation was over. But his fingers paused, hovering above the keys.

"Look, you want my real advice? This is a waste of time for both of us. You're spending money you don't have banging on doors that won't open. I've known many people that went. I've helped some of them. And here's the secret." He leaned across the desk toward her, his voice dropping to an intimate tone so Vika leaned in, too. "You'll be more desperate there than you are here. You'll *dream* about working in a delicatessen, slicing smoked meat and ladling coleslaw, because no one will give you even that job. No one will give you any job, without the language. You and your kid will live on insufficient government assistance, eating frozen hot dogs in a cockroach-infested apartment building in a troubled neighbourhood filled with Indian and African and Polish immigrants. And the only difference between here and there, is that there you've come to the end of the line. There'll be nowhere else to run to. No gilded dreams of better countries. You'll want to come back to Russia with your tail between your legs, because at least here you speak the language, here you know how things work, here you have friends, family. But you won't even have enough money to buy a mattress that isn't second-hand and stained with strangers' sweat, never mind two plane tickets home. Do you understand? I'm doing you, and especially your kid, a favor. Forget it. The people who make it in immigration aren't people like you."

Finally, it was Vika's turn for the bathroom. The stainless-steel toilet was perpetually piss-soaked, and it was difficult to balance over the seat to the swaying of the train. When she bent over the sink to wash her hands, she glanced into the mirror and stepped back in alarm. Her face seeped through with blood, like she'd been skinned. Only after a moment did she remember the strawberries, the face mask. She washed off the berry residue, watching the water turn pink.

Vika had a face naturally tending to roundness, the bone structure concealed under soft mounds of cheeks. She long suspected that there was no graceful transition into middle age for Russian women. They all seemed to transmute overnight from passably pretty young women into *babushkas* in embroidered wool kerchiefs and rubber galoshes, and as she unwound her curlers, she wondered when the metamorphosis was coming for her.

In the hallway, she expected to see the bendy girl again, but there was just one thin, woe-faced man who was wringing his towel like something terrible was happening. He brushed past her into the bathroom without so much as a curt nod.

Even before Vika reached the compartment door, she heard Dasha's laughter seeping into the hallway. When she slid back the panel, Dasha and the hairy-shouldered man were leaning toward each other over the narrow table. They were eating the hard-boiled eggs that Vika had cooked back in Krasnoyarsk for their trip. Dasha picked up one smooth white globe and rapped it sharply on the table. The shell flattened and branched into fissures. The divot reminded Vika of an infant skull, the soft terror of her daughter's fontanelle and the mixture of fear and compulsion of accidentally pressing the spot. Dasha dug her fingers into the vulnerability and peeled back a segment of the shell along with the membrane.

The man was gesticulating with his egg. "So Zhora says, Do it blind, and I close my eyes and jam the trigger and hear him holler. And you know what? Got the buck right between the antlers, right here." And he pressed a hairy finger into the middle of Dasha's forehead.

The door slid shut behind Vika. Dasha and the man turned their heads in infuriating synchronicity toward her. The man dropped his finger from Dasha's face.

"Vik, this is Gennady. He's telling the funniest story about a hunting trip he was just on. Grab an egg. Let's have breakfast." Dasha said it too quickly.

Vika threw her toiletries bag up onto her bunk and sank down beside Dasha, looking at the man warily.

Dasha scooted tighter against the window and tugged at Vika's housecoat. "Here, move in closer so that you're not sitting at the corner. No seven years of singledom for you." She grinned at Gennady.

Vika had had that superstition hung up her since she was a child: *Don't sit at the corner of the table or you won't get married for seven years.* There were so many to keep track of for a girl anticipating eventual matrimony—which was presumed to be every girl. *When cleaning house, you should not sweep the broom away from you or it will drive all your admirers away. Never try on someone's wedding ring, or bridal veil, or wedding dress or else you will end up an old maid. Don't eat while looking in a mirror or else you will eat all your beauty away.* Even when married, the dangers never ceased. *Don't get married in May or you'll suffer all your life. Put your skirt on over your head—if you step into a skirt and hoist it up your legs, your husband will be unfaithful to you.*

She shook off Dasha's insistent tugging. "So she told you about our trip? And, let me guess, you think it's idiotic?"

The man shrugged. "Something like that. What's wrong with the men here? Do the men on offer in Russia not suit your highly discerning palate?" He showed his teeth to indicate humor, but the smile didn't reach his eyes.

Dasha laughed. "It's not her palate that's the issue. She wants to leave. To America." As if she wasn't signed up for From Russia With Bride, too. As if her profile title wasn't "Sunny Dasha from Siberia."

The man waved off the suggestion. "Propaganda, all of it, that life is better there. Life is shit wherever you are. And especially if you're living in a foreign country with a stranger."

Vika rolled her eyes. "Everyone is a stranger until you get to know them."

"All right, then, how will you communicate without speaking each other's language? Share thoughts, opinions, intimacies? He'll see you as nothing but, you know—" And Gennady swept his hand in a curvaceous outline, his gaze tracing down Vika's body. "And what happens when that gets worn down with time?"

"When I get married, I want it to be for love," said Dasha.

He smacked another egg against the table. "That's just as foolish. Love is a temporary insanity, a distraction. People can't really see each other when they're in love, just hazy outlines and idealisms. You need to like each other sufficiently and agree on a few things, but not too many. Trust me, I know. I've been married three times."

Vika suddenly felt like all of it was too much: the hair on his shoulders, the soft surrender of the egg, the sound of his nail scraping into the shell and splitting it open, the sulfuric smell permeating the compartment, the wet smack of his lips, the clacka-clacka of wheels against metal, the flashing of the birches past the window, her life being appraised by a stranger.

She sprung up from the seat. "You know what, I'm not hungry. And, anyway, don't want to be bloated for tomorrow."

Only when she was out in the hallway did she realize she didn't particularly want to be out there, either. But there was nowhere else to be. Vika remembered the stretching girl again and decided that she could take her example and perform some toning lunges. So she swayed down the long hallway, bracing herself against the walls, dipping one knee at a time to the floor. When she reached the end of the wagon length, she considered turning around and lunging back the other way, but the idea that she'd have to go past her own compartment, where the pelt-shouldered man was likely braying with laughter at her, made her wrench open the door into the passageway between the two carriages.

There was something more real about the loudness of the wheels there, the immediacy of the movement. The air was fresher. She wished she could call Alexandra, check in on her. Their communal apartment neighbors were taking care of the girl while Vika was away, provided she bring them back a winter coat for their kid and sneakers from the markets in Moscow, where there was actual selection and quality. Alexandra was growing quickly and already showing signs of the woman she would become—too sensitive, too trusting, easily hurt. Easily harmed. Vika decided to continue her forward trajectory and lunged into the next carriage.

The ironic thing was that it was Dasha who had told Vika about the agency. At first, Vika was repulsed. But Dasha insisted it was legitimate, not seedy at

all. Her cousin's friend's schoolmate had found a husband through one of these agencies and now lived in a place called Nevada on a big ranch, with her own car and no neighbors for kilometers. "Each of the men pays six thousand USD to be brought on this trip, to be taken on all these speed dates. And then they pay three thousand more if they find a wife."

Since Alexandra's birth, Vika had had one brief affair—with a regular from the deli, before his wife found out and came to throw halva in Vika's face. Other than that, there had been no one. It seemed like all the men were either dying or moving away or taking up with younger girls. She was lonely, lonelier than she would admit even to Dasha.

The following week, they took the 56 bus to the small agency office, a squat kiosk in the parking lot behind the Palace of Culture. The woman at the desk gave them a cursory glance and tipped her chin to the plastic holder full of applications. Vika filled hers out with a leaking, blue pen that bore the teeth marks of previous, nervous applicants. Then the woman stood her against a chipped, white wall and took two Polaroids that made Vika look pale and surly.

Two weeks passed before she received a phone call from the agency inviting her to a speed-dating round. It took place on a Tuesday evening in the gymnasium of school No. 245. Vika wore a bandeau dress and her tallest heels. When she walked into the room and looked around, she realized the men were all much older than she had expected, and fatter. No matter, she chastised herself. I'm just looking for a good person.

The first man Vika met talked at length about himself, the computer parts business he ran out of his house in Pittsburgh, something about keeping parrots, possibly—the translator couldn't really keep up. Finally, after a long silence, he asked if she could cook. When she nodded, he said something else in his slow, weighted English, his gaze hanging off Vika's chin and occasionally slipping down to her décolletage but never traveling as far up as her eyes. The translator, a middle-aged woman with a bluish perm, smiled at Vika with ill-disguised contempt. "He said you look older than 27."

Vika left before she could meet her second match and sat on the school steps, trying not to cry.

"We get the dregs here." A young woman with smeared, red lipstick was leaning against the column holding up the entrance awning. She offered Vika a cigarette. "They save the best men for the capital girls. In Moscow. The agencies there are way more selective. Higher success rates, too."

"But we're not in Moscow." Vika stated the obvious. They were in Siberia, on the opposite side of the country, in a city blighted by shrinking population, low life expectancy, withering infrastructure, and Khrushchevki buildings twenty years past their demolition date.

The woman shrugged. "You want to be stuck in Krasnoyarsk your whole life, go ahead. But I'm sending my application to a Moscow agency, traveling there for the dates, and getting a husband. I'm going to have a separate room in my house just for the washing machine and get as fat as Americans." She ground out the smoldering corpse of the cigarette with her stiletto.

Vika mailed in her applications the following week. The Moscow agencies were much more stringent. Their cut-off ages were 29, 28, 26. They asked questions about her family, whether her parents were still married and still alive (no to both). They requested the inclusion of color photographs: whole body shots, face close-ups, full makeup, femme-fatale glamour shots, photographs that made her look idealized but accessible. Some said, *Do you have any children? Applicants with children are not eligible to be in our agency's roster.* Others stated that existing children were permitted, but strongly encouraged her to state a willingness to have more. Only one agency replied, a month later, in the affirmative.

The next train car was exactly like hers, faux-wood panelling and maroon hallway runner. Then was the restaurant car. She was, in fact, very hungry. Perhaps she could get some tea, calm down. She stopped lunging and sat down at one of the tables, catching her breath, but the restaurant was empty, and no one came up to ask what she wanted.

After a while, she stood up and decided to keep walking through the train. In the next car, a man was riding a unicycle backwards toward her, and she had

to flatten herself again a wall to let him pass. He tipped his non-existent hat at her and disappeared into an open compartment. The door slid shut behind him.

When Vika wrenched open the next carriage door, she stopped short in the doorway. No hallway, no uniformly interspersed patches of light through windows, no compartment doors. Instead, a hushed gloom. Blue light thinning through cracks in the wood of the car walls. The air stank of damp straw and something warm, pungent. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could make out the ghostly outlines of stalls.

Vika took a step forward, and in response to the whimper of the floorboards, something moved in the shadows up ahead. Something big and heavy, sighing in a great exhalation of meaty breath. It was a labored breathing, each inhale clinging to the air. Vika became afraid, but she wasn't sure if she feared the unknown there in the dark, or if something about that animal shadow felt too known, too close. She turned around and quickly left the strange compartment.

Vika had some trouble finding her own carriage. She kept thinking she was already there and would open compartments only to find them filled with strangers bent over cards and tea or in the middle of playing the accordion, who looked up at her blankly. In one compartment, two men were juggling bowling pins back and forth at each other with such concentration that they didn't even glance at her. Another compartment was strung with dried fish threaded through the gills on twine, swaying with the movement of the train, their mouths open to the ceiling in surprise, white eyeballs staring at Vika.

Finally, she found her own compartment, but as the door hissed back on its tracks, the space was pristine, empty. The crimson plastic mattresses were bare, the flip table folded down below the window, the curtain drawn to a comforting, sepulchral gloom. There was no sign of the pelt-shouldered man, of Dasha, of Vika's own possessions. It was as though that strange, final carriage had transported her altogether and she wasn't on the right train anymore. Maybe she was in an alternate universe where her life was completely different. Maybe an alternate universe where she didn't exist altogether.

Vika stepped into the compartment, and the door hissed shut behind her. She sat on the hairy man's bunk, and the plastic squeaked. She didn't want to die. But

to not have the burden of trying to be anyone—a mother or a friend or a suitable candidate for immigration or a suitable candidate for marriage—that was freeing. She liked being free of her stuff, of the leather suitcase stuffed with demure-yet-sexy dresses and curlers and makeup, of the enticing profile she created for the dating agency, of the communal apartment in Krasnoyarsk—even, she felt guilty admitting, of her daughter, of the responsibility of ensuring her future.

She lay down, and the leather moaned beneath her. And as though in response to her relief, the train shuddered, sighed, slowed down, and then with a final spasmodic jerk, stopped altogether.

Vika nearly rolled out of the bunk. Throughout the carriage came the cavalcade of objects meeting floor. Angry voices. The hissing of compartment doors as people filed into the hallway. The aggrieved voice of their train attendant.

Vika stood up and walked out into the hallway just as the hairy-shouldered man stepped out from the neighboring compartment, clutching spangled deer antlers in one hand like some sort of prehistoric weapon. She'd been one door off.

She stepped past him into her own compartment. Her bunk, her sheets, her valise were there as before, and Dasha was on all fours, trying to gather scattered eggshells off the floor.

After an hour, they were still there. The attendant locked herself in her compartment to forestall all the people bothering her with questions and demands she couldn't answer. Vika lay in her bunk. She took out her father's watch from the mesh pocket. Three hours until Moscow. Twenty-three until the speed date.

She turned onto her stomach and looked out the window. Outside was a field of something pale and bleached and shivering. Wheat or barley. Vika blinked, and its uniformity made it look like sand dunes, a desert. All that plenty shifting shape in the sun to desolation. She blinked, and it was just wheat again.

Someone on the other side of the wall partition was reading their child a story. Vika could hear the sonorous voice through the thin wall, now that the clacking of the wheels was silenced.

She fell asleep and woke up three hours later to Dasha and the man playing Durak with a dog-eared card deck. Dasha burst out laughing at something the man said that was patently unfunny.

Three hours to Moscow, still, but now only twenty until the speed date. The plan was for them to stay in a room with some distant aunt of Dasha's and make their way downtown on the Metro to where the speed date took place. Now, she'd have less time to prepare. She would look travel-beaten compared to the Moscow girls.

People were leaving the train to stretch their legs. Vika could hear them shouting in the fields. Vika put the watch in her pocket and clambered down her bunk, determined to find the attendant and demand when they were going to move.

The attendant's door was open, her compartment sour-smelling and empty.

"Where did she go?" asked Vika of the man standing in the line to the bathroom. He nodded his chin in the direction of the fields.

Vika wrenched open the door between the carriages and stood at the metal ledge, squinting into the needling sunlight. Without the platform there, the ground seemed so far away. She lay down on her stomach and swung her legs off the edge, scrambling down into the dust.

Cicadas screamed like something was about to happen. The burnished metal of the train stretched into the fields. Vika looked down the length of it. Every compartment was identical, save the last two, which were boxy, bright blue, lacking windows. A cluster of people had gathered there, and Vika could make out a couple of people in attendant uniforms hovering at the periphery of the crowd.

"What's going on there?" Vika asked a woman lying in the sunshine beside the edge of the wheat field.

The woman lifted her head and shaded her eyes with her hand, looking in the direction of the train's tail. "Circus, going to Moscow," she said, and dropped her head, closing her eyes to the sun like a reptilian.

The only attendants Vika could see were the ones near the circus people, so she started walking to the cluster.

The circus people were looking up at the sun, squinting like newborns. They all looked so human without sequins and safety wires, without the spotlights telling the audience they were special. Vika recognized the unicycle man, the compartment

jugglers. A train attendant—not hers, but a similarly interchangeable woman with a fading dye job and train-track frown lines—was arguing with a thin man, in whom Vika recognized the distressed bathroom occupant in line after her.

"My bear," the man was pleading. "She is very ill. I need to get her to Moscow." He was shoving a photograph in the attendant's face, as though proof of the bear's infirmity.

Vika looked over the attendant's shoulder. In the snapshot, the bear towered on her hind legs in the ring, belly cinched in a red tutu, paws raised to the lights.

"There's nothing I can do," the attendant said, sidling away from the distressed animal trainer, from the pinch-faced crowd. "We wait. We all have to wait."

"This is ridiculous," the unicyclist said. "We have standing engagements. We're booked for seven shows!" There were murmurs of acquiescence all around.

Sitting on the ground at the feet of the circus people was the girl who'd been stretching in the hallway. She was stretching now, too, folded in half like a pen knife, her face nestled into her shins. Probably born into the circus, an artist's daughter. Vika wondered if she was already performing at her age, if she had an act.

The day distilled into golden, early evening light. The pitch of the cicadas, the sustained note, was an endless crescendo. Vika paced the length of the train. The time between Moscow and the speed date was narrowing, down to sixteen hours. Still enough time to sleep and get ready, but just.

Someone gave a small shout, pointed to a dust cloud on the horizon approaching them through the fields. A high-pitched whine reached her, like a swarm of massive hornets, and in her train-fugue, Vika became terrified for a moment, convinced she should run, hide in the wheat. Then something took shape through the dust clouds, and she realized it was a group of motorbikes, exhaust pipes sputtering. Clinging to the men on the motorbikes were women in kerchiefs, holding bundles wrapped in cloth on their laps. Villagers from somewhere nearby. They made their way down the train, selling whatever they brought.

Vika bought a hunk of dark rye bread, still warm and impossibly moist in the middle, a section of hunter salami with pieces of white fat gleaming in the meat, and a handful of radishes, pink globes stained with earth. As she wiped a radish off on her housecoat, she noticed she was being watched by a young man, no more than a village boy, really. He was leaning on the motorbike while his grandmother performed commerce.

"How far from here to Moscow, driving?" Vika asked him. He looked startled that she was speaking to him, that she was speaking at all, possibly, like a cat that suddenly enunciated human syllables. Then he smiled and revealed the hollows of several missing teeth.

"Six hours."

"How much for you to take me to Moscow on that motorbike?"

The boy looked left and right, as though seeking reinforcements. Then he shook his head and grinned again, shrugged, dug his finger into his nose, and said nothing.

At night, campfires were lit along the train like signal fires. The metal sides of the train gleamed in the light, the flames glinting off black windows. In the strange, jumping shadows, everyone's faces looked etched, surreal, inhuman. Someone at the circus end of the train started singing, a slow, sad sound.

Vika scrambled back up into the train, and as she neared her compartment, she heard quiet, animal noises within. She slid the door a millimeter, enough to peek in and see Dasha's head thrown back against the bottom bunk, the ghostly halo of her perm shuddering to the rutting back of the hairy-shouldered man.

Vika quietly went next door, to the empty compartment, climbing up to the bare top bunk and curling in on herself.

She kept startling into a groggy wakefulness all night, imagining that the train was swaying again, but no, all was still. Once, she looked out the window. Silvery wheat under the moon shivered with the wind. And something huge, some formless beast, a massive, dark silhouette, moved through the wheat, parting it like a ship. Vika did not understand the apparition, but it made her frightened and sad, and she drew the curtain shut. Her last thought before falling

back into restless sleep was that all the American men must be in Moscow already, unpacking their leather suitcases in Hotel Metropol.

In the dishwater dawn, she checked the watch—seven hours remaining until the speed date.

She left the compartment and descended into the wheat. The elephant she'd seen last night was still standing out in the field, ears wilted, trunk lazily waving away flies. The circus people were gathered again in a tight cluster at the end of the train. She walked toward them, feeling the pull of some somber change.

The bear had died overnight. She was brought out into the dawn sunlight and laid down under the swaying wheat stalks—an old sow, her snout threadbare where the muzzle had worn her down. She had curving yellow claws, a pale pink belly, elongated teats from nursing her cubs. Someone in the group said, "She lived longer than she would have in the wild." Someone else said, "She was a smart girl."

All the adults were quiet. But the small circus girl was inconsolable. She sobbed, keeping a fistful of fur clutched tight.

Some interchangeable compartment attendant was standing at the trainer's elbow. "I am afraid," she said, "your paperwork is false now. It permits the transportation of nine live animals, not eight plus a carcass. That is different paperwork altogether."

The circus people conferred. What to do? There was nothing to do but leave the bear there, in the fields, whenever the train moved off again.

At that suggestion, the girl began to howl, burying herself into the bear's fur. "We can't leave her!" she cried. She reminded Vika so much of her own sensitive, intense child. She crouched down beside the bear and the girl.

"What was her name?" she asked.

"Katya," the girl said.

"When my father died, we held a funeral to say goodbye. I think we should have a funeral for Katya, don't you? We can put some flowers down and say nice

things about her. Wouldn't you like that?" The girl looked up at Vika, considered the proposition, then nodded solemnly.

A funeral, then! Along the train, the message passed like contraband from compartment to compartment. A funeral! Soon there were two accordions with their musicians at the ready. Children gathered in the field, weaving wildflower wreaths.

"Professor, say a few words," someone in the crowd called.

"I didn't know her. What can I say? She was a bear. There are worse fates."

There was the tinny roar of motorbikes, villagers arriving with morning provisions. When informed of what was happening, they joined the proceedings with enthusiasm and contributed plastic bottles of homebrew—what is a funeral without strong drink?

The men took off their hats, and someone called for a moment of silence. For once, everyone else acting, Vika thought—and the bear allowed to just be herself, dead, while they pantomimed grief.

The silence broke with self-conscious laughter. The bottle was passed around. The mood of the gathering turned, and people were grinning at each other, laughing, as though this were a wedding, not a funeral. Even the little girl was smiling, wiping her face with fists.

One of the villagers, a stern man in a stitched jacket, picked Vika out of the crowd and beckoned her to him.

"You're the girl my son says wants to pay for a ride to Moscow?"

Someone else in the crowd, one of the circus performers, called out, "Show them what you can do, Lidochka! Show them your talent."

"One thousand rubles," the man said, and swept his arm to the side to indicate the motorbike.

Six hours. The two countdowns merged into one, and six hours would get her to the door of the speed date, barely in time.

A plastic container no bigger than a hatbox was set into the dirt. The little girl took off her shoes, shrugged out of her cardigan, drew her skirt down to her ankles. She was left only in blue cotton tights and a thin undershirt, standing shin-deep in the box, looking out at the crowd with the distant, intimate expression of a seasoned performer. Then she began to pack herself away, limb by long, soft limb,

her shoulders dislocating silently from their sockets, her head disappearing into the box last. They all stood watching the miracle. A dead bear. A folding girl.

"Lady, you coming?" asked the man.

"Yes. One minute."

Vika went back to her compartment, where the hairy-shouldered man and Dasha were still sleeping intertwined on the bottom bunk. She stuffed her father's watch into her wadded-up housecoat, hoisted her suitcase, and let the door quietly slide shut.

The man lashed her bag to the back of the motorbike with bungee cords, and Vika clambered onto the hot, leather seat. He flipped the kickstand with his boot. The engine coughed and growled to life.

Vika took fistfuls of his polyester jacket and pressed her cheek against his wide, sweat-damp back. She imagined herself arriving at the speed date ten minutes late, a dust-stained specter, walking through the room with all eyes on her and taking the empty seat across from the man whom she would one day marry.

The motorbike drove off, leaving a trail of dust clinging to the morning air. The sun rose higher in the sky. The people left the bear carcass to the heat and sought the shade of the train. The flower wreaths of clover and bluebell that had been draped over the bear's head by the children wilted. Fat green flies began to buzz around her snout and ears. Mechanics arrived on a canvas-topped truck from the city, and by evening, the train exhaled a great sigh and crawled on toward Moscow. That night, a fox found the bear's carcass and fed on it; it slipped away when the turkey vultures descended. They ripped into the fur, stripped the body of meat and entrails. Beetles slowly carried off tiny pieces of her. By morning, her belly and mouth were frothing white with maggots, what remained of her bloated, disassembled. In a month, the fur lay in tatters, the sun baking the bones to white. Trains sped by several times a day, depositing dust on the remains. The wheat was gathered by the combine at harvest, though the bear lay too close to the tracks to be disturbed by the machine. Tufts of her fur were snatched away by autumn

winds. Soon, snow fell, so much snow that her bones didn't see sun again until the spring thaw. The movement of melting snow scattered her vertebrae far from each other. The field took over her body, and vegetation covered it. Bluebells grew in her eye cavities. Wheat stalks came up between her ribs.

Noah Baldino

Beloved Estranged Identical Twin,

I can't sing anymore.
Our song breaks
at the high notes. *Just like me. Close to you.*

I have these little hairs now
like dad had—up the wrist, to the thumb.
They curtsy when touched.

I get a glimpse of our body before
my shot, in the silver band
of the Women's Health Center's

paper towel dispenser.
I get a glimpse of our body in the hesitation
of a friend's hand, hugging me, then

I'm gone again. *Every time*
you are near. Call your name.
Beloved. Estranged. I'll turn.

Today, in the waiting room, twins
in a double stroller. Little pink onesies.
One clutched the other's spittled bib.

Their parent signed some forms,
told the desk nurse they were both
the good twin.

I used to think (I still think)
I didn't need to exist;
your self was that much of mine.

The Belvedere Torso is Missing His Breasts

All of us men huddle around the testicles
of the ancient sculpture, tired of staring
at his missing upper half. *Manhood*
in the Classical Period just wasn't dependent on girth
like now says one of them. Everybody sighs.

I am suddenly aware of how my skin catches
my clothes at certain creases, of the barbed
underwire of my bra. *What a violent*
contrapposto, almost bursting into battle. I dream
the feet, two marble throats, might choke

on the cold plinth forever. Drawing my own arm
forward to graze his cavity of chest, of where
would be the chest, my hand's swatted away
too soon. All the men fold their arms. I've never
seen such tender kneecaps, such frenzied, shamed

hips. *The ferocious divine. Such brutality not possible*
in copper or bronze. Oh god, I want them to stop
looking at me. I wish so badly for my stock-still hands
to cover my breasts, for my muscles to billow
as I turn, finally, my tongue a heavy stone.

Are all men fashioned after these old gods? Their bodies
blitz the gallery while my curvature betrays me.
When I finally stand before them, I'm frozen
with one thought: to pry open my stone-smooth jaw
for the fresco hidden on the roof of my mouth.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Buffalo Poem

All over the city
I hear the
explosive sounds
rat-tat-rat- boom—and—nostrils blowing
chest-huffs-heaving
Buffalo are coming
shuddering air, dust trails
smoke across sky
spreading dirt clouding the air,
streams over housetops
obscures skyscrapers and stars,
TVs flicker then fuzz
disrupt Netflix movies making mindless fools
grab guns and shoot away, grab knives and slice,
clubs and bludgeon and bombing,
Buffalo are coming
furry, bulky bodies avalanche
hooves thunder rubbling pavement
crack streets, toppling street lights,
hemorrhaging traffic, exits jammed,
Marshall Law is declared
armored military goon-squads in Bradley tanks
roam the night
with orders to kill the four-hoofed creature, but
Buffalo are coming
down the Appalachia trail and Continental Divide
grinding false patriots beneath typhoon hooves
stampeding metal weapons, money, power
Buffalo are coming

across the Grand Canyon, splashing
over Niagara Falls,
spanning one end of the world to the other

Buffalo are coming

smashing homes and hearts,
waking people, stirring them to think
to feel again, to do away with profit margins,

Buffalo are coming

in New Mexico, where I am, I see them
friends call they see them too—
New Hampshire woods, Seattle shoreline,
India's mountaintops,

Buffalo are coming

cross deserts and Kansas corn fields
cross Alabama football fields,
Florida golf courses, Southern California beaches,
flattening New York City gyms, crushing
treadmills, stationary bicycles and elliptical machines.

And as the sun rises over the cliffs and on my cabin,
here I am, lying on my side
I watch the sun hit a distant peak,
slowly it comes into sight— emerges from dusk,
then it's time to get up
and get the day's chores done.

But this morning

a White Buffalo
stands visible in the Autumn mist, and I dash out,
it approaches me in my pasture and I give it a slap
on the rump and it bolts off

through forest trees
and watching it, I have a desire to follow,
answer its call—
its voice spoke to me the way fire talks to darkness

Get on with lighting you up, it said,
gristle and knees, shoulders and neck,
stomach and fingers, its voice spread throughout me,
one beautiful smooth spreading of light,
live as a human
live as human
live as human.

75

How many neon Bibles, headlight herds,
fat-bottom Queens on freeway unicorns
riding out the royal oblivion,
can be released from the country of rhyme,
the bond after bondage bringing Daffy Duck
and the Slurpee maintenance technician
to a single slot,
a floppy disk field,
where forever's sorta whatever fine
for the blue plastic seesaw horse, the birthright
of bullet-riddled cotton wool concrete walls,
and Cain collapsed on a Honda's steaming hood?

77

Being and none-being are then always both
the resolution of the action's rage,
black thought beginning at the border wall
of the ocean's open integer,
sea-boulders, and the cormorant-perched barge,
but do Narragansett bay's chained waters sing
for bastards, half-breeds, and the dispossessed,
or is infinity's black ink increasing
to the point where the white capital's core
is the crease on Weetamo's bridal cloth,
Metacomet's motion through tidal reeds,
John Horse's signature of Junipers,
the liberty bell of Ida B. Wells
tolling at the tower of becoming,
a continent breathing through the looped cross
Isis carries, bears like a bomb-torn kid,
shuddering, still believing in the sun?

Remember This When You're Hungry

for my grandma, whose Korean name I still can't remember

Even a ghost that eats and dies again will have better color.

How hungry we must have been to die in the ocean just to pull at its weeds, dry them, soak the leaves in sesame oil.

Bleed our hands for not even a tongueful of meat from an ungiving shell.

A bird that cries at night cries because it mourns a lover.

A bird that cries in the morning cries because it is hungry.

How do you eat like a king?

Hang the remains of last week's fish so it sways above the table.

Have a bite of rice. Chew ten times. Look at the fish. Chew ten times. Repeat.

Give thanks for anything you can put in your mouth.

Leslie Moody Castro

Stitching Adolescence

Austin-based artist Deborah Roberts centers her practice around the collaged images of black adolescent girls on the brink of entering their teenage years. Roberts' figures perform their identity, caught between the naiveté of youth, and the strange maturity existent in adolescence. In *Political Lamb in a Wolf's World* (2018), two girls stand side by side and stare straight at the viewer. Their left hands are raised in a position of surrender or accountability. The pair stands against a stark white backdrop, motionless, twins facing a world to which they are ill-equipped. On their torsos are the numbers 7053, Rosa Parks' booking number when she was arrested for refusing to relinquish her seat on a bus, and an implication that their identity in the system is also null and void. They are simply a number among numbers, or two lambs growing up in a world of wolves threatening to eat them alive.

This is an example of Roberts' signature style, examining the vulnerability of being an adolescent black girl growing up in the United States and the strength necessary to grow into being an empowered woman. Roberts captures her characters at a moment of growth—not quite children, but not quite adults—a specific moment where identity begins to form, and all the stereotypes, standards, and images of idealized Western beauty find influence. Roberts has cut apart facial features, limbs, and clothing, all culled from magazines and advertisements. Each compositional decision is carefully analyzed, thoughtfully executed, and painstakingly laid onto the canvas, becoming a metaphorical critique of standardized beauty. Features and images of beautiful women in glossy magazines are cut apart and pieced back together, mixed and matched to exemplify the impossibility of advertised standards. Her figures are stitched and glued together, their faces pulled from multiple sources, their lips and noses obviously a different skin tone from their foreheads and their arms. They are emblematic of otherness, of difference, of an identity that is outside accepted standards.

The girls perform their otherness, their youth, and their naiveté.

A Recipe for Identity

It is not only the visual world that interferes and influences how identity develops. As Roberts searches for her source material she is equally captivated by the current fashion magazines and advertisements as she is Renaissance and Classical painting. To be a young girl shaped by the ideals of society means tackling the convoluted baggage of history, rejecting (or accepting) expectations, sculpting your own body, accepting both pluralism and sovereignty at once while carving out your own piece of the world.

Profound indicators of race exist in our own semantics and language. Roberts realized the problematic gesture of autocorrect one day when typing in a series of names considered to be "black." The program underscored the names in red, indicating they were misspelled, when the were actually unrecognized because they don't exist in the standard English language. Names such as "Raeschell," "Tashenia," and "DeNisha" were marked in red (as they are at the time of writing this text), indicating they are written in error. For Roberts, this was an issue to expose through her *Pluralism* Series, in which the basic gesture of typing began to reveal the otherness in language.

Power and identity exist in a name, regardless of whether it is a common or recognizable one in traditional lexicons. For a computer function to homogenize a name and highlight it as incorrect or non-existent in language once again illustrates the lack of place for otherness. A name typed out and highlighted as misspelled or unrecognizable diminishes the power of the name. Roberts responded by typing non-traditional names repeatedly, as a revolutionary act, dismantling the neutrality of the most basic and universal computer functions. However, rather than simply defy spell-check, she returned to printmaking, one of the oldest forms of disseminating information en masse.

The *Pluralism* series tackles the porousness of spell-check and its lack of consideration for "the other." Roberts takes the medium of screen printing, one often used in punk scenes for band posters and subversive messaging to penetrate the hegemony and spark fuel for revolution. For Roberts this revolution is dismantling the basic and universal computer function of spell-check and

challenging the history of otherness non-existent in the English language.

The names are made permanent, into a work of value, and each name performs its difference.

A recipe for power

Roberts has long been a collector of recipes—the basis for a new body of work currently in production and an often undervalued and overlooked first act in the performance of sharing a table.

A recipe is a list of ingredients and measurements, followed by a step-by-step narrative to combine and blend items to create surprising new tastes that titillate the palate. A recipe is a seemingly small, yet powerful act that stimulates making, then builds community as the act of making converts to an act of sharing. A recipe is an instigation, a step-by-step text written in order to catalyze and create an ephemeral object. It is a powerful tool through which any audience partaking in it can neglect the implications of power it provides and simply focus on the resulting performance at the table. The advent of the printing press popularized the mass production of recipes, furthering the conservative Victorian era's preoccupation with etiquette and domesticity. This societal concern centered on women, embedding their identity within the home.

The recipe has become the protagonist for Roberts, and specifically the ways in which it can contribute to plurality in identity, creating layers of complexity and pathways to talk about race, identity, and power structures.

A recipe for a non-neutral thing

Imagine the full table. A cacophony of sounds echo and escalate above each other. Cutlery clinks loudly against polished porcelain plates as dishes are served, second helpings procured, and mouths are filled with the gregarious laughter of camaraderie tumbling over half-chewed food. The dinner party happens

simultaneously as the smells of gastronomy waft through the room from behind the kitchen door. Glass lids sit atop their corresponding pots strained with the pressure of steam threatening to launch them in the air, and sauces bubble and spill over their respective saucepans. The full table and the subsequent full kitchen and its consequential flurry of activity are the colliding effect of a single suggestive act of testing a new recipe, then sharing the wealth of the resulting dish in a dramatic performance around a table.

The voices continue to tumble over and through each other, the masticating mouths spewing verbiage and bits of food at once as the full table engages in the elation of the excess of company and sustenance.

Each guest who has partaken in the food that evening has the assumption that everything eaten existed in the same bubble of neutrality as the table from which they ate. That race, class, subjugation, and fear never entered the safe space of their table. However, the recipe from which their meal was prepared proves otherwise. They sit at the table as the remnants of a metaphorical body were cooked, the whiteness of the flour fried in oil, meat seared to tender perfection, the blackness of the cake baked to a perfect moistness.

Roberts shows us that nothing neutral. Once again, the lamb is in the wolf's world.

Roberts' recipe

It is no easy task to tackle and disrupt images of stereotypes and beauty, but this is what Roberts does. Her work dismantles faces, standards, situations, and even lexicons that have been deemed acceptable. She challenges standards by taking them apart then piecing them back together again.

Roberts moves beyond just the image to expose the problematic roots of racism. Autocorrect and its obvious bias have been fodder for work, and now it is the recipe for non-neutrality in the dining room where she disrupts a space once deemed safe.

p. 113, Fig. 1. *Political Lamb in a Wolf's World,* 2018
Mixed Media Collage on Paper
30 x 22 inches
Image courtesy of the artist.

p. 114, Fig. 2. *Filling in the Gaps*, 2018
Mixed Media Collage on Paper
30 x 22 inches
Image courtesy of the artist.

p. 115, Fig. 3. *I do solemnly swear*, 2018
Mixed Media Collage on Canvas
65 x 45 inches
Image courtesy of the artist.

p. 116, Fig. 4. *Pluralism Series*, 2016 (TX)
Serigraph on Paper
30 x 22 inches
Image courtesy of the artist.

p. 117, Fig. 5. *Pluralism Series*, 2016 (a)
Silkscreen on Vellum and Paper
10 x 13 inches
Image courtesy of the artist.

p. 118, Fig. 6. *Pluralism Series*, 2016
Silkscreen on Vellum and Paper
10 x 13 inches
Image courtesy of the artist.

p. 119, Fig. 7. *America's Unfinished*, 2018
Mixed Media Collage on Paper
44 x 32 inches
Image courtesy of the artist.

p. 120, Fig. 8. *Grills, Not on me*, (2017)
Mixed Media on Paper
22 x 15 inches
Image courtesy of the artist.


7053
7053





Raeschell Niakya Wakiesha Sumata Latrella Sahirah Keytra Reshada Tashenia Elisha Quitalla Kolethia Kesia Dabratzi Snicka Chalay Rovetta Meosha Tamikka Nakia Mirmala Tanika Jemelah Laneeda Lkiesha Sonyette Contrennia Jacinda Khadija Ginnette Tynette Veneitte Talana Keshia Lennette Salathia Peninnah Chanteria Roneshia Coletta Mishayla Tawana Shamerea Lakesha Inetha Tenera Desibrace Coletha Keesha Drwilda Shiqundia Queenlana Delinda Ayanna Malique Argirtha Fekisha Sharnell Jamaka Tetelalisa Khepri Claretta Hairothea Caprolanda Niakya Demetra Sumatra Neeama Cleastine Tashondria Lashon Natacha Shadelle Theresia Valkisha Bethena Kianna Nichelle Shemika Everloyce Sharkesha Jenise Ziondrea Latanza Noella Syretta Ghalyah Shalako Jilisa Tafreesa Sheritta Keyah Latifah Charisa Renneda Quonish Kiyanka Tanisha Shonta Shennelle Mandisa Tonisha Kenisha Makayla Narie Jerrica Shontel Felisha Tizza Moniqua Lashae Tinisha Tawonda Shanita Shonek Hazline Jazmin Shkise Tiara Shranda Sakura Runisha Anaijah Raeschell Sha'Shauna Gerschell Zuriyah Evaretta Malyaia Qadeera Camesha Tynisha Briahna NaTasha Schanta Curtisa Laltonia Kalia Oryntha Mikayla Ebonee Chantel Quentera Keziah Shekila Chidetta Aaleah Ebony Danette Shanice Takira Sharee DeNisha Nalsya Tekena Thomeka Malvina Laquinda Sharleene Nekasa Kwadi Ja'Tovia Rashida Anunnaki Nashira Faizah Shayna Lethia Phelisa Dronellar Meechala Hynifah Nikia Shiann Akilah Shamiyah Shatora Larrika Lavetta Meesha Jaterra Zeldra Natanya Daleshawna Shawanna Lateatha Elmunic Destine Kamildh Denisha Carlette Glenshler Deecoily Shantil Tamala Tamielya Nakeisha Tamisha Khiana Schnika Charnell Tiyun Shantelle Jzonque Ca'tina Joscalyn Shawnya Shalonda Ral'Nece Chalandra Taloria Tiffanique Tanachi Jakyra Zanaysha Chieboni Aiyaye Jakerria Janieka Raenette Michel'le VeEtta Chanell Jawon Ronette Kawanda Seechanna Denishia Senalka La a . . . Harlow Bristol


Niakya Wakiesha Sumata Latrella Sahirah Key
Tashenia Flisha Quitalla Kolethia Kesia Dabratzi Sni
Rovetta Meosha Tamikka Nakia Mirmala Tanika
Lateeda Lkiesha
cinda Khadija
Tynette Veneit
Salathia Pe
Chanteria Ro
Mishayla Tawana Shamecca L
netha Tene
Desibrace Coletha Keesha Drwilda Shi
Queenlana Delinda Ayanna Malique Argirtha Fekisha S
Jamaka Tetelalisa Khepri Claretta Hairothea Caprolanda
Demetra Sumatra Neeam
hondria Lashon Na
Shadelle Theresia
Bethena Kianna Nichelle She
Everloyce Sharkesha Jenise Ziondrea Latanza Noella Syr
Ghaiyah Shalako Jilisa Tafreesa Sheritta Keyah Latifah Cha
Renneda Quonish Kiyanka Tanisha Sh
hennelle Man
Tonisha Kenisha Makayla
ntel Felisha T
Moniqua Lashae
Shonek Haz
Jazmin Shkise
Anaijah Raesc
Sha'Shauna
Zoriyah Evaretta Malyaia Qad
Camesha Tynisha Briahna NaTasha Schanta Curtisa La'to
Kalia Oryntha Mikayla Ebonee Chantel Quentera Keziah She
Cludetta Aaleah Ebony Danette Shanice Takira Sharee DeNi
Nalsya Tekena Thomeka
Laquinda Sharleene Nek
Kwadi Ja'Tovia Rashida
Nashira Faizah Shayna Le
Phelisa Dronellar Meechaia Hynifah Nikia Shiann Ak
Shamiyah Shatora Larrika Lavetta Meosha Jaterra Zel
Latanya Daleshawna Shawanna Lateatha E'monie Dest
Tamildh Denisha Carlette Glenshler Deecoily Shantil Tam
Shaielya Nakeisha Tamisha Khlana Schnika Charnell Ti
Jzonque Ca'tina Joscalyn Shawnya Shalonda Ral'N
Taloria Tiffanique Tahachi Jakyra Zanaysha Chieb
Jakerria Janieka Raenette Michel'le VeEtta Chan
Kawanda Seechanna Denishia Senaika La-a

Niakya Wakiesha Sumata Latrella Sahirah Keytra Resheda





Megan Peak

Feast with Grief at Its Center

Somewhere there's a branch of bloomed
plums, fistfuls of dark prizes woven
throughout the tree. A grouse, too,
feeds on the fallen fruit, black
feathers unfurled in the brush, moon
wounding them into light. The ants,
sequence of *shadow, self, shadow,*
spread over the split drupe. It's a feast,
every creature called to the table—
skulk of foxes, their kits howling
in the den; a raccoon edging
closer, pocketing pit after pit;
the doe nudging her fawn forward
to take a bite. The sound of a road
nearby, its somber hum, an opossum
on its back, opening her black eyes
to the world one last time, her babes
still alive in the pouch. Rain bruises
the tender knoll. I've learned to love
my son like any animal—desperate
to cross the road unscathed, to dodge
the blinding headlights, to fill his belly
with something more than sorrow.

Stephen Massimilla

Barely Disfigured

After Éluard

Goodbye sadness
Good morning sadness
You are written in the lines in the ceiling
You are inscribed in the eyes that I love
You are not entirely wretchedness
Since even the very poorest lips denounce you
With a smile
Bonjour tristesse
Love of bodies so loved
Force of love
Whose lovability looms up
Like a monster without a body
A disappointed head
Sadness a beautiful face

Sarah Rose Etter

The Rash

I.

My rash was spreading. Soon, it would overtake me.

Each day, I kept my eyes on the wreck of it: the rash, also my life.

I took a black pen and made marks to track the distance the dots traveled each night.

On average, I was losing a centimeter of skin per day, the rash slowly expanding over me, the small red blisters, soldiers winning in a war, marching, annexing new territory, stabbing the flags of their country into my skin.

Outside, the sky above the city looked cheap and quarrelsome. The skyscrapers were cut off through my window.

I did not have bugs in my house nor in my bed. I had not changed my diet. I had not been touched by a man in several months, although several men wrote to me to say, "Hello, how are you?" and "I miss you," and "She was not my wife as you thought those months ago when you saw us together and howled at the sky."

The phone rang in my apartment and I sensed it was Denise. I hated Denise now. I avoided the receiver as if it were haunted.

Denise was very rich. Denise shone gold like the sun. Denise had the latest natural highlights, the best Botox, the thinnest legs. Denise spoke only of Denise and things Denise-adjacent, her mouth an infinite labyrinth of mirrors which reflected herself, laughing, her white teeth gleaming. Denise had discovered me seven months before, working below her in the anonymous ranks of our department.

"Girl, you have got to get right," she said the day she began to mentor me. "You should not eat that."

She was staring at my lunch, which I had made at home. The spinach and sausages now looked weak and incompotent beneath her gaze.

She lifted a gigantic mouthful of her own salad to her lips, then began to chew like a Clydesdale, loudly, teeth clomping against the leafy greens, smacking against the dressing.

"You need to get into macronutrients," she said.

I pictured the macronutrients as tiny organisms in petri dishes, accessible only to those who knew their secret language, a language which, through Denise, was now revealed to me.

My dreams came true sometimes.

When I first took up with Denise, my dreams were full of bright light, big clouds, rooms made of cake, the icing like the insides of a French ballroom.

"You should not date him," Denise said about whomever I was dating. "He sounds terrible."

I was always in meetings with Denise. I was always in cars with Denise. The world around me began to blur into another world, a richer world, a world so distant from the small town of drug dealers next to the power plant where I grew up.

Each day, I felt a little more proud for blending in, for my ability to trick, to flick a switch, to glow like Denise.

I was sitting in a juice cafe with Denise. Men with muscles were blending kale and turmeric into a drink that was meant to detoxify our bodies and our minds.

"Isn't this juice amazing?" Denise asked, sipping her juice. "We're living the life, girl."

It was three o'clock in the afternoon. I thought of all the unanswered emails, voicemails, the pile of expense reports to file, the data to analyze for the upcoming meeting. We were supposed to be at work, but we had left because Denise felt her vibes were off and needed to adjust them.

"My vibes are aligning," she said, smacking her lips. "Totally aligning, I can feel it."

I sipped my juice. I felt a loosening of myself as if I were a tooth wobbling from gums.

I was slowly sinking the company I worked for. Also my life was a company, and it was sinking.

The sensation of loosening increased during the mid-quarter numbers review, where Denise presented the results.

I clicked through slides about our performance as Denise spoke—charts of our numbers, which were tanking as we had spent much of the summer resting in a park in the center of the city, petting the dogs of rich people, sipping green juices from behind the black lenses of our matching sunglasses.

"As you can see, the market is having a tough quarter," Denise said, then beamed a smile with white teeth, teeth so white you almost forgot about the numbers, you almost forgot about the revenue.

"Next slide," Denise said.

I reached over and clicked the mouse, which shuttered the glow of the screen off for a moment, then it blared back to life with another chart detailing our most recent failure.

"The market continues to struggle to rebound," she said. "But I think we just have to stick it out."

The men in the room were not nodding. Their faces seemed skeptical. Their shoulders looked suspicious. My dread blossomed, a fat wretched flower in my gut.

Denise flashed another smile, and shook her hair a bit. The men laced their fingers together on the wood grained table of Conference Room C.

The gum line loosened around me.

I could sense we were hated. At work, my colleagues noted my favorable treatment, the early Fridays, the extra laugh, the peachy project on the white sands of the California coast so I could escape the winter which was descending on the East Coast.

I began to believe in mantras, I listened to the phrases rich people tell themselves in order to live: *I am chosen, I am blessed, I am generous, I am giving. I am, I am, I am.*

At five-star dinners, I ate slowly, careful not to finish. I let my waist winnow. I began to chew loudly, with my mouth open, like a rich person. I began to hear Denise's voice in my head: *My vibes are aligning. I am living the life.*

I was fired on Valentine's Day.

A henchman in a black suit did it. He chopped off some strange part of me, which fell lifeless to the ground, the invisible worker self inside of me, the small person sitting at a computer, typing furiously, sad, buzzing like a wasp, the person in charge of the business.

For months, I had been slack jawed and numb, my fingers moving dumbly over the keyboard while I thought about Denise and things Denise-adjacent. I thought no one would notice the jumble of work mechanically tumbling from me, the unanswered emails, the confusion over when projects would be delivered and why they had not been, the mid-quarter numbers which plummeted once and then again and then once more.

But there have been eyes on me for much of my life, and there had been eyes on me then, eyes, surely, which saw the plummeting and sent the henchman to pull the small worker up out of my belly and guillotine her between us both, the small spurts of blood pooling between us on the wood-grain table of Conference Room C.

I called my father crying from the sidewalk.

"They fired me," I blubbered.

"Those fuckers," he said. "They'll fuck you any chance they get. I have always told you that."

I sobbed some more, although less for the job than for the fracture within me that had separated me from the river of wealth which was Denise, the abrupt awakening that dropped me back into my life.

"It's ok," I gurgled. "I'll use this time to find myself."

II.

My rash began in the following days. I noticed the dots on my collarbone in the mirror over the bathroom sink before I crawled back into bed.

I barely noticed it because of the depression, the way my sadness required me to spend my days curling my body into various shapes: A ball, second ball, a third type of ball, etc.

Denise called and I refused to answer the phone. Her voicemails were affirmations ripped out of a yoga studio and rephrased for the situation: *You are whole, you are full, you are stronger than anything life can throw at you, find your center.*

Each morning, I woke to the bleak freedom of unstructured time. A new terror was blooming in my blood. Without a schedule, I could easily unravel into madness. If I was left alone for a second, my entire concept of reality could dissolve completely.

I was no Denise.

There were no more macronutrients, no more beaches, no more thin gold bracelets on the wrist. I was stripped down to the bone, all the luxury gone. A hollowness entered my chest, my heart both aching and cold. I was a packet of low-calorie all natural sweetener slowly disappearing into lukewarm tap water.

Every morning, I walked through the city to the cheap and dirty gym, where I sweat to repent for I didn't know what. Every afternoon, I applied for jobs. I crawled into bed before the sun went down where I curled into the various balls again, allowing the bad thoughts to descend upon me like starved black ravens, pecking at my body.

I kept looking for my center. I tried the mantras again and again. Instead, my brain looped back into itself, a circuit with faulty wiring.

The rash expanded.

I returned to my truest habits: walking slowly, wearing budget clothing, eating discount foods. I scrubbed the backs of the shelves which held my dishes, the stained ledges of the refrigerator. I drank, each morning, a single cup of coffee which vibrated across my tongue. I called my father, small updates: *I am getting better, I am failing, I am getting better, I am failing.*

I passed roughly 25 days this way before I caught word that Denise had also been fired, released into the wind like an expensive sheet across a beach with a turquoise sea crashing onto its shores.

One day I could not get out of bed from my sobbing. My failures stood up around me with knives that morning, my rash deepening in redness, growing in size.

I was uninsured.

I imagined a trip to the doctor, I imagined my body leaving my apartment, down into the street, onto the sidewalk, my body flanked by homes and restaurants and cars and people.

I imagined my body pressed against white paper, the doctor's hands pressing against my skin, the way his eyes would absorb the rash, and me, the woman just beyond the rash.

I imagined the entire world swelling in the heat, getting so warped that the very walls of the office began to bulge and press against our bodies until we could no longer breathe.

Just the thought of the whole scene exhausted me. I curled deeper into bed, sheets against my marred, jobless skin. I slept for many fevered hours.

I dreamt of a strange smattering of apples beneath a tree. The rash was with me in the dream, and it had grown, extending to the tips of my fingers and toes. I let it overtake me like wild vines. I gave in.

My dreams come true sometimes.

III.

My father arrived after battling city traffic to get to me. We ate a late lunch of omelettes at a diner.

"What's up with the red dots?" he asked, gesturing at the rash creeping out from my shirt collar.

"It's nothing," I said.

"Jesus Christ, I need a break from all this bullshit," my father said. Rings of perspiration leaked through my father's shirt, darkening the fabric at his armpits.

I shot him a look of desperation, my eyes saucers.

"Hey," he said. "You're a big girl. You'll figure it out."

The phone rang and I did not answer it. I sensed it was Denise.

My father forked a yellow triangle of egg to his lips then, speaking through them said, "Fuck those fucking fuckers, honey."

To get to the house where my parents live, one must drive down a hill which forces the power plants to rise up behind their home.

Inside the house, there are two dogs and a living room themed like the seashore,

although they are landlocked—new beige carpet on the third floor, random pairs of glasses, the bodies of my parents in bed each morning, the newspaper strewn between them, their breaths reeking of coffee, the bodies of the dogs curled in various balls at the foot of the bed, the power plant churning up thick atmosphere behind their heads.

When I imagine my parents that way, something like love shakes loose in my chest, it spreads, extends beyond my body out into the air. There are ways in which our dread is correct. We fight it with many techniques, but it is instilled in us for a reason—it is deserved—red dots obliterating the town where I grew up, obliterating my ringing phone, obliterating Denise and myself curled up under my covers until I am completely gone, until there is nothing left, until there is only the richness of crimson.

Benjamin S. Grossberg

PrEP Day 4

This pill lets you breathe under water
and sailors used to take it before
setting out in their rickety ships, this pill
stops black lung, teflons the sacs
so soot coal dust tar everything
exhales cleanly out, it's fun the black
puffing after, can be blown into rings
or a steady curling stream, this pill
proofs against cancer would to God
my mother had remembered to take
hers it pulls the cells to it, where the
chemical pools in the nails lets you
clip cancer from the edges of your
fingers toes little deadly yellowed
moons in the sink basin you run
the tap and down they go down down
it's the wonder of this humanity
we constitute, how quickly the new
becomes the what's-always-been: what
a few cases of this stuff could have
averted, carefully deployed—
was it all, with the right compound,
so easily headed off? Has history
always been so damn preventable?

Craig Morgan Teicher

Gush

The geese are flying back—that seems
a decent place to start.
They're honking their one damn note across
the wide night sky.
Why not? The neighbors'
car honks too, another omen.
They seem to want to check on the lock
on their car.
You imagine them mashing the fob from bed,
just in case.
The trash is out. Distant windows glow
yellow, flicker blue. All of this is addressed
to you.

~

You have no enemies, not real ones.
There are places you could go
for danger, where you're unwanted, where,
even from a distance, your cheek and your hair
mean something, but you won't
go there.
Your fears eddy around the house—
your son's fitful sleep,
the daughter you must pass everything to.
And you know, already, no one has a clue
what you're talking about.
This megaphone—who gave it to you?—only echoes
a couple of blocks, won't even
alert the cops.

~

First word, best word. Second word, worst.
No. And never mind. Nevertheless,
there's a pinprick in your chest:
all the light is gushing out.
This street would be so dark otherwise.
I think you might
be the source of all that
window light, of all those geese.
Think of the consequences—
only you can handle
your candle.
Only you can slump
on your life's one rump.

~

Fold your cold
hands in your lap. Act like
a patient etherized upon a table.
You must do all that you're able.
Your needle swings from empty to full.
Cotton, Pyrex, velvet, wool.
So you see, this is just another cold night.
The lamp sighs artificial light.
But there's nothing so bad about that.
Born again, be a cat,
allergic to yourself, quiet as a spike.

~

There's no escape, or if there is
this is it. Can you crawl
through a pinprick? Do you know how
to honk? When you close your eyes, the lights
don't go out,
they go in. The end is near.
Who will be your
plus one?
[Add great last line here.]

The True Work

The worm will always worm
its way under a rock, some bark,
some wet old wood.
Startled by light, exhausted
by company, the worm would rather munch
a bunch
of dirt. It's not waiting for the end of the world.
It's never heard of the world.

~

I've heard of it.
It's where the worm lives.
It also has
many other
distinguishing features.
I won't tax your patience
by listing them here.
Maybe just a few...
Sunsets, pacific garbage patch, alpacas.
You'll know it when you see it.

~

The fox will always outfox
the hare.
The turtle will never tattle.
Slow and steady, he'll win
the race

through the sheer force
of his integrity.
You'll look up to him down there.
He's a hero in a half shell.

~

I've got a camera trained on the pore
out of which
the light is scheduled to ooze.
You bring popcorn
and a six pack.
I'm having a listening party.
Visit poreparty.com.
Please.
They're monitoring
my traffic.
You can write off your attention
as an in-kind donation.

~

The mood saunters in, tossing
his jacket on the couch.
He's a bad mood
so the jacket is leather.
He's cool without trying.
In fact, that's why he's cool.
We dropped two notches
and got taken down a peg
when he arrived,
sweeping across the verse

of tonight like a sweet solo.
We all looked down at our shitty shoes.
He's so funny we're afraid
to laugh.

Company exhausts me.

~

Like poetry.
Like a balloon who forgot his air.
Like when you get a haircut
and everyone says "nice hair,"
which means it looked like crap before,
which is why you linger
beer can in hand
by the door.

~

The work is always the work.
It's hard.
You've got to stand on your own two feet
because you gave up your chair.
You were being courteous,
hoping your mom would smile
from the beyond.
That's the way she raised you.
Nobody promised the party
would be fun.

JoAnna Novak

Home Game

> Someone tells me this kind of love is not viable. But how can you evaluate viability? Why is the viable a Good Thing? Why is it better to last than to burn?
>
> —Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

As a young man, my husband spent a year in New Zealand. He wore a blazer with a crest to secondary school. He dove off the balcony of a coastal home and into Pacific waters. He shook the hand of the Prime Minister, came back to Minnesota with Cowry wood bowls and thick-lipped conch shells, and drove a pick-up truck of beer to and from Wisconsin. Lived on weed and records and poetry. One summer in the Hotel Chelsea. One summer managing a restaurant. One summer delivering pizzas while a woman-not-me gave him head. I think, I suspect (what's the difference?). One December devised a drink called the Vixen for a dentist's holiday bash. One DUI his first month in a doctoral program. Eighty-three days sober, fifty days sober. When he's clean, he uses the continental rest signal with silverware.

It is the first home game of the season, my husband tells me in the afternoon. People have been tailgating since yesterday. Now I understand the conversations I overheard at Target:

"We've got strawberry lemonade—that'll taste good with Tito's or tequila!"

"He just needs to shower—then he's good to go out."

We are walking our dog after lunch. 89 degrees in Los Angeles, the first full weekend of September, I am twenty-five days away from a C-section. Our son will be born on a Friday, unless he comes early, but who's heard of a first baby coming early?

(I was early, my husband reminds me. Seven pounds, six ounces.)

We live south of Koreatown and Pico-Union, under the wishbone of the 10 and the 110, a neighborhood that Zillow maps and lamppost pennants call University Park. On Adams, a four-lane, east-west, boulevard, our dog pulls toward University of Southern California housing across the street. Music throbs from Greek Row a block away: columned sorority mansions with fleets of pastel Huffys, the sloppy sprawl of frat houses and backyard sand volleyball pits, lawns mown buzzcut trim.

Later, my husband says to the dog. We'll go when the party's really started. (*Oh, oh, sometimes, I get a good feeling,* echoes up Severance, faint in the parking lot of the John Tracy Clinic for the Deaf.)

He will walk wearing headphones, listening to a podcast or talking to a friend across the country, but he will come back with the smell of alcohol awake in his pores and I will wonder, from most to least absurd:

Is he so bold to slip into a group of young men?

Does he bring our dog into the bodega and buy a nip?

Does he bring our dog into a dumpster alley, drink quick?

Two USC girls pass in jean shorts and cropped baby-Ts. Glossy brown hair, big eyes, that effortless thin (skinny) I've always envied, now so with wistfulness, with my belly so huge.

My husband scoffs after they pass. They're about to make good decisions, he says.

Why? I ask.

I want to look over my shoulder at their long, smooth, legs. Imagine gifting him both of them, wrists scrunchied together, raspberry punch hot pink on their tongues.

My husband tugs our dog around the corner. You are the person in the marriage who gapes at beautiful women.

The game doesn't even start until 7, he says.

((n.d.))

Terror today, walking home: on Hill Street, across from Pershing Square. A moment of being wholly unexcited about the baby. Many times, I am very

excited—I would be wrong to say "never"—but I also have moments of pure terror or maybe disinterest. How will I do this, I think? Why did I want this? I push the answer aside. (Fear of being closed off to the fullness of life! A fear that feels instructive.)

At home, [ ] was very negative about the world, the university. I felt I was doing everything in my power not to get up and leave. Would he feel better if he spent his days differently …? I don't know how to help. I wonder if the baby will change him (or me).

7 am, game day: I woke up and moved the pillow wedged half under my belly, between my thighs. Gold Los Angeles light poured in through the circular window above the nightstand, a window like a porthole in a steamer ship. Too small for its own curtain, but big enough to wake me up and make the blackout curtains a few feet away pointless. Why do I hang such heavy futility? In comes the sun.

Recently, we had a frank conversation about who we would be, sexually, after the baby. Perhaps he is bored with me, I thought, and that is why he drinks. Maybe we need to birth a new passion.

My husband spoke in generalities; I spoke in specifics.

Since the conversation, I have: almost ordered a $48 roll of black restraint tape from Goop; paused in front of La Perla on Rodeo Drive, no matter the $200 tag on the panties, silk, sheer as velum, and thought of the fabric ripped.

Since that conversation, [ ] has: fed me his cock, pulled my hair, put his tongue in my asshole while I squirmed. Choked me during fucking.

Today, as he came, he was squeezing harder.

All morning, I struggled to regain my breath. I didn't blame him but the baby, bigger now and exerting pressure on my diaphragm.

((8-6))

Today I'm grateful for:

1) Poems: I read a collected; I revised several
2) Goodness: I read Toni Morrison's essay—how can we learn more about ourselves?
3) Access to a pool: Nova kicks more after I swim.
4) [ ] didn't drink.
5) Work—remote gigs to get me through the fall, when I'm "on leave."

My therapist suggested the frank conversation. My therapist also emailed the link to a Healthline page, an article about Auto Brewery Syndrome, a rare condition where the body produces alcohol from carbohydrates.

"Can you really make beer in your gut?": subhed. ABS may be caused by too much yeast in the gut, anyone one of several kinds: Candida albicans, Candida glabrata, Torulopsis glabrata, Candida krusei, Candida kefyr, Saccharomyces cerevisiae.

Yeast, the article need not remind you, is a bacteria.

Perhaps the yeast grows from Crohn's disease or irritable bowel syndrome. A mysterious condition, whether named or observed.

These past two years that I've been trying to disentangle:

When is my husband drinking and rapidly getting drunk? (In front of me.)
When is my husband drinking in secret? (In addition to in front of me.)
When is my husband's body getting him drunk?
Why does my husband not take action to treat this nexus of problems?

"Lacking context, we tend to take things personally," my therapist tells me. "Moving into a broader context opens up the way we story other people's behavior."

I have known [ ] for fifteen years. Our first date, he asked if he could bring a bottle of wine to my dorm room.

At the time, I didn't drink calories. This principle organized a small corner of the mess of life: I felt good about that. My private score.

I didn't drink calories; I had never had a regular Coke.

If you want wine, you can bring it, I said over the phone, a slimline that sat on top of the radiator next to the windowsill that looked out on the quad. No one used the grills and no one seemed to congregate but Radiohead's "Idioteque" always pounded.

He didn't bring wine. We sat on the floor of my single, sipping tap water. Back then, no one even drank seltzer. We watched *Adaptation*, a movie I haven't seen since that day in 2004. Now, when thinking of it, I think of two versions of one man, two Nicolas Cages. Plus a muffin.

[ ] had come empty-handed, but sober? I wasn't sure. My clearest memory is a smell, mint alcohol, as though he'd been chewing spearmint gum that smelled identical to the Kermit the Frog toothpaste I liked as a little girl, though maybe I only remember a flannel he wore, black and verdescent checks, Kermit the Frog with a shadowy exposure.

Now he is sleeping on the couch. (He does not know I have left the room and gone to bed.) Now the baby has calmed: he's not rolling about.

Little boy, I say to the baby, when I test out how it could sound to raise him alone.

((Mon., Aug. 12))

Locked keys in the car at the Bigg Chill because I was so on edge about if [ ] had been drinking. Alcohol smell, slurring—the usual things. Am I supposed to trust him? Did he jeopardize me and the baby by driving us to Westwood?

I don't know. (He veered between 70 and 43 mph on the 10, almost missed an exit we've taken fifty times in the last trimester.)

Now it's nearly eleven, and he's asleep and I am not. I am looking forward to waking up and working on poems before the doctor appointment.

The Brentwood Club sent a locksmith named Ali. He used a long, bendable piece of metal to hook the keys off the passenger seat. Not a lockout, you lost them, he said. He wouldn't charge us. I didn't really do anything, he said.

He took our AAA card and deleted the lockout ticket. We gave him $5 for frozen yogurt.

Reading more of *A Lover's Discourse* before sleep:

Oblation: a thing presented or offered to God or a god

Yes: "I want to be both pathetic and admirable" (42).

The first home game at USC: things can't be good if they're playing Stanford, I don't watch football and especially not college football, I wouldn't, even if I weren't hosting a reading at the university where I teach, a small silly school dwarfed by large silly USC.

I sit in the parlor of a three-story house arbored by Moreton Bay figs. My husband has started to nod off. The red in his cheeks, the ethanol on his breath—even his jeans fit differently when he slips into this state: his jeans look soggy, dampish, bunched. Seated next to him, I watch him watch my supervisor read from a newly-published novel. My supervisor's first name is misspelled on the spine. The mood is bombastic, tragic. My husband's eyes narrow. His lips will not hold still. His tongue prods the corner of his mouth like a secret leech.

Do you want to go get some fresh air? I write in my husband's notebook.

Just this afternoon, he told me his therapist suggested I try this tack if I noticed him "slipping off." Before I left for campus, I asked what wording to use. "Why don't you step outside?" "Do you need to take a breather?" I can't remember what we decided or if what I am suggesting is right, but there it is in writing.

My husband takes the pen, draws a big arrow, and cursives. Usually, his cursive is elegant and careful, dear-diary script, but I have come to recognize his handwriting's intoxication, the way one might note a verbal tick or a particular affect brought on by alcohol. On many occasions I have found him passed out over his notebook. Ink neat then smeared writing gone to chicken scratch.

"Yes—this sucks, and is making me want to sleep hard": him.

"Go get some air": me, all-caps.

"Indeed. This is the feeling of bad."

((August 25, 2019))

Couch. 3 p.m. I ate a perfect lunch: Greek yogurt, mango, coconut. Wondering: What does he need? What makes him happy? What do I know?

"You will drive me crazy," he said.

I have been suspicious. I will talk to [therapist] about this.

What else? The (misguided?) feeling that sex can be immortalizing … [ ] asleep …

Our third date: [ ] fell down. It was Flunk Day, a tradition at our college. On Flunk Day, classes were canceled before dawn, but students have been drinking long before that, hours of midnight and debauch. Before the actual day, there were Flunk Day scares, upperclassmen trumpeting about campus, banging pots and garbage can lids. My first months in college, I feared Flunk Day more than being stabbed in a stairwell, which had happened to a girl in the student union two years earlier.

On our third date, [ ] came to my dorm room before 7 am. He stood in the doorway, leaned, listed, caught himself against the white cinderblock wall, then fell down. His legs gave out like a girl on detox. He swooned.

(I kept no photos or posters in my room, just a sign I'd printed on my laser jet that read "No Loafing." He was very near that sign.)

What did I say to get him out? I remember only using all my force to push his shoulder and heave him upright: why? Perhaps because I have pushed his shoulder many times since, trying to rouse him in front of a movie, on the couch, in bed. Three years into dating,

I poured water on him when he was crawling around the coffee-stained carpet in our second apartment, bawling and outside of himself.

After he had left my single, I stood there, stunned and angry and numb. I steeled myself. Said "toughen up, girly" the whole time I was leaving campus, buying a pack of vanilla clove cigarettes from the Smoke Shop on Main Street, checking out a stack of children's books from the town library, reading alone in a gazebo in Standish Arboretum. Standish, not standoffish, thinking: "I need nothing."

((8/26/19))

An accomplishment is doing ten on-my-knees push-ups.

Walking [the dog], I saw a man in his car, a Little Caesar's pizza box on the dash. Mother in a Jurassic Park t-shirt walking with four children.

Actively working not to be suspicious. Came back w/ L. to find him asleep on the couch.

Hot, long, good sex last night. So intense, my dreams were skewed—not even sexual, just tilted. I woke up feeling manipulated and confused—not by him, but by my subconscious.

It is lonely here midday. I can't bear looking at my computer. Time to read before …

At the reading, the students do not flinch when the novelist describes wetness between a Yoruba woman's legs but they look confused when my husband leaves. I am a teenage in embarrassment, the same way I get when I am with my mother at her rudest (to a busser at an Italian restaurant: "Don't you DARE take my mozzarella!")

What is an acceptable response to embarrassment when one feels acutely visible? Sit up straighter. Drink water. Eat a sheet of smoked cheddar cheese, silent.

When hours before, I had been no one, the twenty-eighth person in line at Target in USC Village, one of three people not buying alcohol. I was buying laundry soap, a bulletin board, and alcohol-free mouthwash—the latter by request of my husband.

The purple one, he said.

Purple the color of grape Kool-Aid.

Recently, we had driven from Los Angeles to Berkeley and back. Somewhere on the 5, past Pyramid Lake, we started talking about orange juice, growing up with orange juice from concentrate, the pitchers our mothers' used to make juice. The yellow pitcher was for Tropicana in your house, the brown pitcher was for Welch's or Kool-Aid.

Kool-Aid was not allowed in your husband's home. (And still, even now, I am awed by the shimmer of his virtues, feel myself lesser and duller and badder in their light.) Now, his doctor tells him to cut out Diet Coke and artificial sweeteners; sugar in Lipton's lemonade is not the problem, not when mixed with black iced tea; snacking on chips and pretzels is not the problem, she says.

(Holistic answers: will they remedy anything fast enough?)

Back in LA, we stand in an aisle of Ralph's, flicking Kool-Aid packets. They're still a steal. Sugar-free, my husband suggested, tempting.

I remember: the wooden Kool-Aid spoon thunk-thunking the inside of that brown plastic pitcher, knocking like the woodpecker door knocker that hung inside the garage of my grandparents' summer home.

He is asleep now on the couch and I have to shut his laptop so I will not be tempted to look at the browser history.

If I close the screen, the computer will lock. I do not know his password, though he knows mine, for my phone: six numbers that spell out his name.

Did he once tell me that I thought I was better than other people or was that my sister? Have I imagined a whole store of resentment, gunpowder in the steerage, potent beneath your companionable deck?

(Maybe yes.)

What urgency fuels my self-abasement these days?

(The two USC girls in their baby-Ts remind me of porn I've recently seen, a three-way where two friends take turns cleaning a man's cock after it has been inside each of their orifices: "Best Friends Cum Together.")

(If I can watch that with the baby tumbling inside me, I am nothing. No better or worse than anyone.)

The pull-string for the woodpecker door knocker: a string of suede coming to a petrified knot. The garage smell: fuel, rusty tin cans, what sluiced the motor of the John Deere. The summer home secret: My grandfather brought a woman named Peggy to fellate him there; my grandmother walked in—Peggy in a polyester skirt or culottes, kneeling on a doubled-up piece of cardboard, more cushiony than a drop cloth.

Then twenty-five years of my grandmother growing meaner and fatter, hoarding magazines and junk jewelry and plastic shopping bags from Aldi like apotropaics, until he died. Her stowage of $2 bills.

((Therapy Notes (8/28)))

I need to talk about:

- Trust (suspicions: sleep, alcohol)

- Sex (porn: me, not good enough)
- Epiphany (why I might be craving stability/intimacy)
- Cognitive diffusion

Even if I leave him, the baby will have his last name because the baby is going to be named Nova and Nova cannot be Nova Novak.

In Berkeley, we stayed with a couple nearly forty years our senior. They are retired and do not abide by any bedtime, and in fact like to stay up well after midnight watching comedy specials on Amazon Prime and Netflix.

They are active in the Democratic party and very grateful for comedians.

My husband accepted a G & T rather than say he'd been three weeks sober. We watched a Will Ferrell special—George Bush, You're Welcome America—from 2009. (I am accustomed to double-vision, watching the screen and [ ] to see if he is fading or slipping or in danger of spilling because I feel worse letting him soil himself—for there have been times when I have, angry, spiteful, and then there he is, still my husband, the person I love, my best friend.)

Years ago, a coworker told me about this Will Ferrell special, I recall twenty minutes in, when I recognize a breakdancing Secret Service agent.

Afterwards, I ask my husband if he had had the same dawning recollection.

He did not. Only then do I flashback to our old apartment across the country, the immense loneliness and patheticness I'd felt watching it, laughing at a laptop alone, when he'd been so close, asleep on another couch.

Then, five years ago, I would drive to work in the morning, the morning after an alcohol episode, and play Third Eye Blind's first album. I came to this album two

decades after its release and had once read an article about a woman who, having adored the band as a teenager, went out to lunch—she calls it a date—with lead singer Stephen Jenkins. In this article, she describes her adolescent self: brooding in her bedroom, obsessively playing "God of Wine," much sighing.

On the commute, I would dig my nails into the steering wheel during "God of Wine." Volume turned to Max Volume, I could feel the music in the bones of the car and an engine between your ribs.

This consistent reaction to melodrama: brace myself, grit, bite my wristarmlip, break.

Getting off feels the same. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no—until, oh god, fuck yes.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, Stephen Jenkins sings. I can't keep it all together.

(The guitar zwings.)

"You let me down, I said it," he sings earlier, very early in the song, and even before I hear that I know it's coming so I am a wreck for all of it.

Negative thoughts beckon from a dark alley, my therapist tells me. Luring you down a dark alley, promising you a hit of satisfaction, those thoughts will rape you and rob you and bash in your skull.

"Each kind of whip makes a particular scar," the novelist reads before [ ] latched his messenger bag and left.

Do not play "God of Wine" in your head after your husband's departure from the reading. Focus on the novel—the Kentuckian dialect your supervisor adopts, the simile he offers (something about "butter" being "yeller"), a scene where a slave tracker defiles a Yoruba woman after feeding her hoecakes and beans, the way he's captivated by her trembling after he has his way with her.

Soon, I am not thinking about a husband. We are each three people, my therapist recently offered: wounded child, adaptive child, and functional adult. Adaptive child cannot resist the dark alley. Does anybody really love you? Adaptive child wonders. Adaptive child seeks out proof: He doesn't love you. He does. He's trustworthy. He's not. There's good. There's bad. Stay. Go.

Functional adult eats a daub of brie and a butterfly cracker because queasiness is persistent with delivery date four weeks away. Functional adult shakes her leg, sees her boot, and refocuses on the book. Functional adult takes notes for a question about the parallel structure of two scenes the man reads, scenes with sex and food, hoecakes and trembling.

Functional adult has a job, whether or not she has a husband.

Functional adult could have a baby and a job, whether or not she has a husband.

Functional adult could never have sex again, or maybe she would; functional adult could drink after she finishes breastfeeding the baby without worrying that her glass of wine triggered a husband.

Functional adult values her own functions.

Honesty requires practice and practice is its own drama.

These are truths we have been rehearsing.

The alternative is Adaptive Child: Looking for a reaction, looking to sober him up, I fought and, last week, left angry. I ended up in the emergency room, detailing shortness of breath and pain in my chest and sweats that came on after dinner, when I fell in the stairwell and my husband didn't notice. No hand on my shoulder pulling me up. I felt for the wall, held onto the shoe rack where mosquitos zeroed in on the sneakers. That fight before, I declined his calls and

skimmed his text-pleas to come back and scrolled Hoteltonight.com from the Whole Foods parking lot in West Hollywood.

Each time I left, he claimed he hadn't been drinking, though he asked me the same questions again and again, slurred, spilled food, demanded to know what was wrong with me after I'd told him: I feel faint, I can't breathe, I'm exhausted, the baby is a lot, didn't you see me fall?

Or he claimed he hadn't been drinking and burnt food, overcooked spaghetti, fell asleep at 6 p.m., fell asleep at 3 p.m., sobbed at the kitchen table, slurred incoherence, spilled soy sauce on the stove, sopped mirin from the gas range with a wadded paper towel, played music at an uncomfortable volume, lost his train of thought.

I wanted to record him and play back the audio. But wouldn't he open his notebook and confront his own handwriting?

My own research: "Autobrewing: Fact or Fantasy?" Article from *The Forensic Science Service*, published in 2000, to which I do not have university access.

The night I went to the emergency room, I drove myself. I called my mother, crying so hard I could barely see out the windshield.

Calm down, baby, calm down, she said. I'll stay with you. Has he been drinking?

It didn't matter, I told her. Whether he was drinking or not, the result was the same. This was a week before my therapist sent the article on Auto Brewery Syndrome. A year earlier, my mother had sent articles about pre-diabetes and thyroid conditions that produced mimicking symptoms.

How many mornings had I calmly asked: What happened to you? What were you feeling? Did you notice yourself start to change?

For two years, the same arguments. The same questions. Why do you smell like alcohol? Where does the person I love go? Please. Stay.

Only since becoming pregnant have I taken action: I stopped drinking entirely.

I hold onto what my therapist told me: The secret to how you change people is you make a change.

I *like* to be choked, it wasn't a ploy, letting him do that, though, admit it: I believed that, maybe, by sharing what I liked—getting explicit—he would reveal himself, too.

Just a month ago, I had looked at his Safari history when he was nodding off, swallowing his words. Had he sought out an AA meeting? I had hoped so, so so so much. Instead, I discovered what he'd watched on Pornhub. The one with the phrase "Petite Asian Spinner" in the title was last: I assumed that that one had done it.

Leaning against the bathroom sink, I searched in an incognito browser window on my phone when he was asleep, so curious that I ran the water and played the volume to hear what he heard. He claimed he hadn't drank. Did ejaculation precipitate fermentation in him?

(Masters and Johnson: excitement, plateau, orgasm, resolution. Was his resolution accompanied by yeast?)

"Petite Asian Spinner" wore her black hair in a high ponytail. She gagged on a white man's smooth cock; he choked her while he mouth-fucked her. I felt myself get wet but kept from touching myself: this was research. Glug, glug, glug, glug—until he pulled out and told her to bounce that ass for him. At that point, the ponytail became a lever.

Glug, glug, glug, glug, like a cartoon animal getting drunk off a water skin, a wine bladder, in Disney's Robin Hood, which, once upon a time, [ ] and I watched.

Even his porn was different from the porn I sought: just one woman, doing one-woman things. I thought of all that youthful, moneyed beauty at USC—cheerleaders in Golden Goose sneakers astride Bird scooters, almond-eyed girls in step-hem jeans and Chanel spectator pumps, lithe hippies in smocked tube tops who lived across the street. He could so easily obtain anything he wants.

Are you looking for a reason? My therapist asked. To distrust him? A reason to set yourself free?

To draw lines, set limits, to stick to those lines and limits. If drinking is a deal-breaker—.

Three days ago, I told my husband: I can't keep taking care of you. I couldn't handle how you fade at 6 pm. In a few weeks, there will be a baby in this apartment with us.

He had fallen asleep watching a thirty-minute video about sleep training. I finished it alone, memorizing a curly-haired pediatrician's pneumonic for swaddling—D.U.D.U.: down, up, down, up.

For an hour he was awake after the reading—he had been in an empty conference room, meditating, he texted—and we walked the dog around the block. The USC houses were mostly quiet. An empty Marlboro Light carton capped a fence post. An automatic gate rolled on its track in front of a tall green Victorian.

How are you feeling, he asked me, the third time in five minutes.

I'm good, I'm tired.

I'm good, I'm tired.

I'm good, I'm tired.

I'm good, I'm tired.

I'm good, I'm tired.

I'm good, I'm tired.

I'm good, I'm tired.

I did not get angry. Did not call him out on the sound of his words, the smell

on his breath, how he is so far from himself that he lets the dog graze in the sloppy grass in front of a beer pong game.

The next morning, I said: Someone who vacates himself, smells of alcohol, passes out, loses coherence, leaves me alone at night when we've been apart all day, whose behavior points to a physiological sickness … I can't keep watching someone's self-neglect. I love you more than anything, I care about you more than anything—when you are yourself you are my favorite person in the world, but I am not going to be able to handle this when the baby is here. I won't have the bandwidth. I'll need you, and if you can't be there for me I'd rather you leave.

See the functional adult. Here is a line, here is a boundary. The adaptive child would've looked for a grand promise, a bold declaration; she would've been satisfied with anything demonstrative, but the functional adult sticks to her principles. This is the dignity I value.

My husband emailed a doctor. He read the Auto Brewery Syndrome article. He bought 1000 mg turmeric capsules and put cinnamon in his coffee. He ran five miles. He listened to "Hot Girl Summer." He came inside me. He snuggled the dog. He is asleep on the couch.

Little Boy, I think, touching my belly, the baby's feet, his heel hammering my right hipbone. He is moving, turning, straining inside me. I have learned to soothe him from a video. I picture cradling him in a football hold, shushing him at a reading, pushing him in a swing, giving him a finger to suck when he has tired of my nipples. I will read poems to him or the desirous white noise of Roland Barthes, who I've been stuck on all summer. It is a strange lack of bitterness I feel, when I consider caring for the baby alone. I would have so many good memories of his father.

Joseph Earl Thomas

With Violence & Doubt

I pulled the stop cord from the back of the 56 bus at Bridge & Torresdale, just before Rita's Water Ice. It was spring, and all the Black and brown kids formed a long line from the counter, snaking through the parking lot in sweaty lust for free cherry and blueberry and lemon ice treats. Before I could step down completely off the bus though, a boy half my height pulled a gun on me. He hadn't brushed his hair in a while, which I noticed maybe only because back then I was wearing a red durag every night trying to get waves like Usher, desperate for the attention of this eleventh grade girl with big hands who was like six and a half feet tall. The boy looked angry, but maybe not at me. Though we'd never met I couldn't stand how familiar his gaze felt. I had left school early that day, avoiding the quicker route home on the El train so I wouldn't have to fight strangers from other schools or, in my reluctance to fight, have to squirm my way out of a confrontation with other boys from Mastbaum. I was hot; even in the circumvented route home there was still no avoiding it. Feeling the gun against my back, I turned around almost by accident.

"Why are you doin this?" I said. "Why do you always have to do this? What the fuck do you want? What you want me to do?"

My voice cracked, perfect timing.

The boy's face tightened at my question, but he didn't say anything. He held his arm straight without shaking and never broke eye contact or lost his frown. This would not be the first or last time for either of us. Nor was it my first time trying to reason through it, trying to rationalize the kind of violence that felt everywhere and always and hardly random. I kept asking him why he would pull a gun on me, or what he wanted, growing angrier and more afraid, more ashamed at my begging with each word.

But when I turned to step off the bus, the boy didn't follow me. Maybe knowing which side of the cemetery he might stand on was enough for now. He just aimed the gun at me until the doors closed and the wheels kept on moving and I wasn't surprised that there was little spectacle involved. I let out a deep

breath and ran home having pissed myself, knowing better than to tell anyone what happened. But I didn't have to say a word. One look at my face was all it took for my Popop to jump up from the couch as soon as I walked in the front door. His face was twisted, then solid, stuck in a frown that expressed all kinds of disgust for people both in and out of that living room.

"Fuck you cryin for?" he said. "Stop bein a lil bitch. If you gone cry like that, take ya little faggot ass to ya room."

When I was a boy I used to beg. A lot. And for almost anything, but especially to assuage the threat of violence. Only now do I realize I probably learned this from my grandmother, who begged in vain, nearly every night, shrieking for my grandfather to stop. I understood that nonviolent means never worked, but I thought to myself that maybe it was just my articulation that might be off. Social workers always said that talking things out was best; I just wasn't a good talker. I thought, for some odd reason, that there was a manner of logic being followed from which I might escape or transform a truth, at eight, nine, ten, eleven and so on: to decrease ass whoopings or increase food, to stop the bleeding or remove a hand from my thigh. I could learn, I thought, to demystify what was happening and turn it into an explanation from which love, or at least kindness, maybe some single tender word might emerge. But that, for me, and most of the people I knew was certainly a lie. But it was tools I needed; there was just so much I didn't understand and I had begun to think I didn't deserve to. If only I could get the formula right, I might skip the blood-stained gate, dig up some of the beauty of social life I'd heard so much about from some text to praxis. I simply didn't know enough and that was always the problem; it was my fault, always, for just being too dumb. Every injury I felt or saw, whether emotional or physical was due to my inability to resist or assimilate, my failure to be as normal or as manly or as Black as the people who claimed to love me demanded.

And later, when I received answers from older Black Boys like Dubois or Richard Wright, Ta Nehisi Coates or MK Asante, Fanon, or Elijah Anderson, I would feel the sting, never ending, of academic comfort while looking both back

and forward at the never ending stream of personal disappointment, despite all the social, political, and intellectual gains.

In Baghdad, little kids begged too. Mostly for candy, or anything we might give them. For twelve hours a day we drove big vehicles down long dirt roads looking for bombs, more often finding children. Whenever they saw us, they'd run alongside the trucks yelling and smiling and laughing and sometimes throwing rocks or cursing, asking us to take them along. Sometimes they held onto the bumpers. We threw them snacks we'd gotten shipped from the U.S.: Laffy Taffy, Twizzlers, Scooby Doo Snacks and chocolate Otis Spunkmeyer muffins, peanut butter cookies and potato bread, Rice Krispies and Frosted Mini Wheats. There were many of us soldiers, all older boys though some claimed to be men. There were the white men on one end, and crackheads and convicts from Philly, like me, on the other, having little choice in the naming.

One night a white boy who liked naming threw a 12 oz. tin of Spam at an Iraqi boy, hitting him in the forehead. He bled. The boy stumbled and fell back, holding his whole face with tiny hands. His peers kept running, chasing our truck and smiling. The boys in my platoon, except for our First Sergeant and the other Black boy, all laughed. Spam was the event of the day, much like explosions would be later, scenes from which everyone might sketch out ambivalent mythologies. I imagined the can as infinitely heavy, a stone rolled up the mountaintop and crashing down into the boy's face; now it was a black hole of sorts, there was no mode of energy through which it might be safely touched or undone. They would say he was just a sand nigger anyway. I must have thought that cursing the boy who threw the Spam was useful, as if the clarity of my objections could ever reposition someone's body, so I cursed him.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, dickhead?"

The boy said nothing and kept laughing. Everyone ducked their heads back down into the vehicle's hatches and closed them but I stayed up top, frustrated. They tapped my legs, but I didn't move. All I could do was look around through the

kicked up sand until I could no longer see any of the boys running, until they were all erased. My legs were still being tapped. Then someone pulled me down into the truck so hard the clip on my helmet snapped and the whole thing fell off my head.

"Doc! What the fuck is wrong with you? We were getting shot at. Didn't you hear it?"

After the army I was supposed to be studying biology, but I got a lot of B+ 's in comparative anatomy and went on dates with my professor until her boyfriend cursed me out. At home I obsessed over Saidiya Hartman's work and read Daphne Brooks for the first time, and Maya Angelou and Maya Angelou again. Stacey Patton's work became especially important important to me. Kiese Laymon was a Black Boy, too, but poised against violence in ways I could never be. Malcolm X and Angela Davis needed not a friendly liberation, but liberation nonetheless, and other folks like Frank Wilderson seemed dangerous, too "pessimistic" for some people who read them, but so close to a truth. He followed Fanon too, like so many, and maybe, at this great intersection of doubt and compliance there's something else I should be able to say by now.

"Joey," my mother says over the phone. "I need you to get over here and bring your gun right now! Wesley hittin on me again."

She's high, I can tell. I dare not disabuse her or anyone else back home, really, of the fact that I no longer own a gun, that I haven't for years since the last time I turned it on myself after trying to smash some other niggas car window. I can scarcely recall a time in life where someone was not beating my mother though, or any time as an adult even, with the power of money and suggestion, of insurance and family therapy, a car to the counselor or parole officer, not a single time, at any point, where living with me in order to get away from it all, or my desperate pleas in an orchestra of shifting demeanors has yielded positive results of any kind for

our relationship. What bothers me most, perhaps, is that this is the only version of her we have regular access to: no family photos, home videos or trips to the Philadelphia Zoo, just abjection to commiserate over, all gore and hurt that feels good and grit-worthy only on occasions when we exchange stories, both of us having survived and been offered the same prescription drugs.

And I have come by now to expect violence of every manifestation and angle from bodies of every type and disposition. I don't try to recall a time where begging my mother—let alone the type of man with whom we are all too familiar--to do, or not to do something has ever changed the encounter in the slightest, either because there are no such times, or, at the peak of my own vitriol I feel incapable of such charity toward anyone, especially myself. I was already driving toward her house and prepared for this in some way, even though the plan was just to pick her up and sit in the park together.

My mother's boyfriend, Wesley, who was also my grandmother's boyfriend before she was shot in the head two summers prior, is an older Black man in a wheelchair. An army veteran. From what I can remember of him, he looks a little like Gargamel from the Smurfs, but slower moving now that he's wheelchair bound. I mutate his features in the worst taste possible; he is not a demon, though certainly not a man, and most assuredly not someone I would like to see alive in this moment. My mother continues texting and calling as I drive, saying that she fought him back. She punched him.

Who does that nigga think he is? Joey, you would be proud of me. Taught him not to fuck with me no more.

When I arrive in Northeast Philly the police are already there. My mother is being dragged from the house, bloody and kicking. I could never speak to police at a normal heart-rate, but I do my best to remain calm. I gather my mother and tell the cop I'm going to take her to a new place, wherever that might be. A utopia perhaps, a theoretical playground where knowing things and civil negotiation reign supreme, where no one has to die so many times under such well-chronicled historical circumstances. Sitting in the passenger seat, my mother's clothes are all wet and her knuckles are cut; she's cursing and kicking things and slapping blood and piss and spit—both hers and Wesley's—on the dash and the insides of my car windows.

"Mom," I say. "Try to relax if you can." I look past her out of the window. "The cops are still right there and they know you high. You tryna go back to jail?"

I drive off with her white Converses pressed up against the windshield, her elbows banging on the door that I've already child locked. In about a half-hour of driving she starts to sober up and calm down. By now we're in the Target parking lot in Cheltenham Mall to get her some new clothes. I park the car as close as I can to the entrance and leave it running, trying not to cry or yell.

"Joey," my mother says. "I'm so proud of you."

She knows I can't stand hearing that. I want to be proud of us and never again perform wellness just because I'm the only one who can. I want there to be an us, outside of the silence and compulsive lies, the gaslighting that, were it not for my time away from home and conversations with my sister, might have physically altered my reality such that up really would be down. Rather than grit my teeth at a fancy university, I'd like to remove the knot in the small of my back that I could not righteously expunge on her wheelchair bound boyfriend in front of the police. It's the kind of knuckle and boot work I've considered so often just to get through the day, better, actually, in my imagination since in real life I can hardly fight. It would remain in my head. In this sense, there is another kind of silence which might be equal to, or greater than the physical violence of striking or naming, and it feels to me even more self-righteous. And so good.

After some hasty shopping, my mother stops me from thinking to show off her new dresses: bright yellows and oranges with duck prints and flowers. None of them are her look. In the store she's performing the slim, pretty brown woman with natural hair in a multi-culti fantasy, commercial, sitcom, where outside of the frame, after the director yells cut, things are misconstrued as being universally continuous with the moving image. She spins around and laughs. She asks me what I think and I lie to her. After we get her cleaned up at a relative's house, she throws on a blue floral romper which I think is pretty ugly, but pleasing anyway because if only for a brief moment she's smiling. And even though the twenty-five dollar romper overdraws my bank account, it's worth it for just those few seconds where we can smile together and pretend that things will ever be okay.

The next day I go out to get food at the corner store in Frankford, and I know what it'll be like if I come to check on my mother and she hasn't eaten yet and I only have one cheesesteak in hand so I get two, and an order of fries and four chicken wings with hot sauce and ketchup. While I'm at the store gathering the surprise of greasy delights, my mother calls me to say that Wesley is dead. She discovers rather quickly, that the only thing I can't do in this situation is stop laughing. I laugh so hard that I think I'm also dying which is probably why it feels so good and free. I laugh so much that the man making the cheesesteaks asks me if I'm good but really wants to know if I'm good, if I'm okay.

"It ain't funny, Joey," my mother says.

But this only makes me laugh harder.

And perhaps it isn't funny, even though it feels like I wrote the man's name in the Death Note, or like my mother, at her most petite, murdered him with her bare hands. I think then, that the whole thing might make a good story, or a case study, maybe a subversive theatre performance. Perhaps it's funny until I have to figure out where she'll live now, since they won't let her keep the house; it was never her property; nothing was ever in her name. Perhaps it's funny until I discover the cause of death, a heart attack in his sleep. *Boring*, I think to myself, *That's not really violent at all.* Or maybe it just isn't violent enough. But maybe that ignores the power and abuse of my chronicling altogether, better replaced in some instances with the soft lies of a more contemporary memoir and the politics of hope, or even more tempting and equally volatile, silence.

Jennifer Moss

Losses

Alone in bed
I heard my head
whisper:

There are losses
like goslings
you should not have touched.

But even the nests
I wrecked, I loved.

What That Dark Was Like

It was like

a dirty joke about hair.

It was like a meaty laugh.

It was like mud down a back.

It was like a match lit over a fly.

It was like the hunted, hooked

in the gills and pulled up fast.

It was like a big splash.

It was like a mouthful of ash.

It was like a *goddamned rattletrap*

with his pants around his ankles

pissing on his birthday cards.

It was like that.

Dayna Patterson

How We're Made

When the nurse calls with news
about the x-ray, we're on my bed, you
eating cheese pizza one-handed, though
even that hand is mashed from the wreck,
a puffy bear paw, your other hand stiff
in a black brace, and we're watching TV,
How It's Made, a segment on pianos,
but they cheat, we agree—they start
with prefabricated parts, the case fitted
with its crazy array of strings, a keybed
awaiting pre-shaped white and black
blocks, when what we wanted was
point A to B to C, no step skipped.
We wanted steel spun into music
wire and hammers sized from treble to bass,
felted, attached to ligature. Instead these
craftsmen hitching chunks together
like a giant jigsaw, and when I tell you
fractured wrist, splintered radius, your face
folds in on itself, crumples, and your tears
say *I'm a giant jigsaw,* they say
pieces that pop apart, so I hold the whole
complex assembly of your body, cradle
muscle, ligament, bone, as pianomen
slide each key into place like teeth
into waiting sockets, and I want to say, *Child,*
it's how we're made, and *even in our broken-*
ness, we're moonlight & sonata. You abandon
the bike, muddy bars bent, long after the cast

comes off. And I can't say I'm sorry
your carefree mellows to caution,
but knowing another movement follows,
Adagio Sostenuto, then *Allegretto,* I'll wait
for more than bone to knit, listen
for the minor to shift, your foot lifting the pedal.

Jill Talbot

Toward a Country and Western Song

Bottle of Gold

swigs on a craggy edge above a lake in New Mexico, a closed curtain of stars; the bourbon in a brown paper sack tucked into a shoebox in my grandmother's closet; tossing back shots of fire flakes in a bar in Oklahoma then wandering home through the grass, barefoot, the feel of it on my feet while I followed a boy I loved immediately, a boy I love still, because he died before I could dare every question; chardonnay, chardonnay, chardonnay.

Empty Streets

a late October, drifting down Holland Drive to a bar called Railroad Blues, the wail and shudder of a train racing the Texas night; a bend in the road of a small Colorado town lined with Blue Spruce and Ponderosa Pine, sudden rain; rumbling in a black truck down the dirt-road of a border town, all those shadows in doorframes, staring; the three miles on State Road 9 past the Purgatory Prison; Highway 84 toward Lubbock, the horizon a razor, the pump of oil jacks steady, lulling the landscape.

Porch

a top step in Utah, three in the morning—a crumpled pack of smokes and the sprinklers sputtering—I watched the water roam the yard and wondered why the blue truck next door never moved; outside a back door in Fort Collins—a dusty green recliner, a chimenea, the burning piñon wood that smelled like desert and leather, whispers from a wind chime and a snow ring around the moon; the back one of my childhood home—the "Welcome to the Porch" sign my mother put up, how it fell after she died, and no matter how many times I secured the sawtooth hangers, it refused to stay.

Dust

a walk from elementary school in West Texas, grit in my teeth, swirls of sand collecting on every corner, an orange haboob hovering; a campfire's trembling shadow on the limestone walls of Big Bend, my skin sabulous, stretched taut from the cloud kicked up by my tires and the glare of a full day's sun; a bearded guitar player from a town called Marathon, where storefront signs creak in the wind; the miles through the red rocks of Tucson, a squeeze between twisty mountains; all my misgivings that follow me in and out of every town.

Corners

the one on Seventh Avenue Dean rounds in the last pages of *On the Road*, "bent to it again"; a window in an adobe house in New Mexico, the thick-trunk tree outside, its leafy branches that wept on the corrugated roof when it rained; the yellowed jukebox in that Boulder bar the night I knew he and I wouldn't last; a house I'd wander from in the middle of the night to the middle of the interesection, the traffic light changing for no one; the black-jacketed man at the gas station who removed his hat as the hearse carrying my father turned.

Pay Phones

a gas station in Lubbock after a day-long drive, when I pressed silver buttons under the glare of the lights, the cotton field's edge; 380 West, forty miles from the nearest town after a rental broke down, searing heat, the sting of concrete, the way I stopped there again years later to find the pay phone gone, rusted bolts in the sidewalk; the one outside the liquor store on Route 11 in New York, its black handset dangling as if someone were on the line; a stand-alone across form the second-story apartment I rented in my twenties, how it rang each afternoon, how I once crossed the street to answer then heard the hang up just as I said, "Hello?"

The Real Thing

for Janine Joseph

In a car traveling from New York to Virginia,
a dealer, a dealer, a stranger, my brother, and myself.
I sat between the stranger and my brother
because everyone smoked out the windows
and because I was the girl. We drove the I-95.
Your English is so good. How can you be
illegal? the dealers laughed.
I was seventeen. My brother refused to speak.
The dealers drove us to a lawyer's dining room.
The lawyer notarized our proof of address.
4 Lachine Lane, Alexandria.
In French La Chine means China. In China
4 is an inauspicious number.
In Alexandria we happened to pass
our sister's complex and because we were
with a dealer, a dealer, and a stranger,
we could not go in.
The dealers drove to the DMV. *Don't speak*
English. We're your translators, the dealers warned me.
If you speak English, you will fuck this up.
I passed the written exam. My brother passed
the written exam. The stranger failed.
He would have to make this journey again
in six months' time. He wanted a refund.
I wanted to sit by a window for the ride back.
My brother refused to speak.
The learner's permit was a dot-matrix printout.

The lawyer would forward the dealers the real thing.
The dealers would forward my father the real thing.
It's not even the real thing, the stranger shouted.

Graham Foust

Hang Time

Still just over there in you, an hour-old faux
instructional dream, its edges vagued, strong
coffee killing off its every note except
your having felt a world you don't remember
ever trying to get these lines to sound like talk in . . .

And there it goes, back to where it's never been,
the only home it could be made to make,
your dark insides, where you assume it'll stay
until a better forgetting works its way
from out of nowhere to win that muted place.

This afternoon, you'll hold Thomas Jefferson's
copy of *Paradise Lost,* the prized property
of a yet-to-be disgraced professor,
and you'll feel what can only be called "moved,"
although you'll want to take a knife to your face years later.

Night Years

When I was twelve years old, I put a nail in the wall
at the end of my bed, pulled it back out,
and then covered the hole with a topographic map.

At bedtime, I'd take the map down, replace the nail,
and hang a South Junior High School hooded sweatshirt on it
so as to wake in the night to a reaper-like figure
and therefore to cease to be afraid of such a thing.

To some extent, the plan worked, as lately
when I'm the first to wake to a child appearing
without warning at our bed, I'm quiet,
whereas Amy often leaps up and screams.

I can't quite say that it's a comfort, though,
as I realize now that the worst threats come in daylight,
that it's life I'll soon prepare to stop preparing for.

Supritha Rajan

Self (IV)

1.

I thought I was at the end but instead
I find myself at the beginning, or at the end
of the beginning. For this is how progress marks
its event in perpetual war. And the country I wage
battle against is the smallest of desert islands
whose sands stretch in my mind across vast
immeasurable distances so that at night,
when stars cluster the firmament, the island
surrounds me like the hands of a child
cupping, ever so lightly, a firefly—the fleshed cage
of wonder and fear, and the sole angle from which
I marvel at the brightness of the world.

1.

I thought I was at the end but instead
I find myself at the beginning of a new
metaphor. Here, in the middle of my life,
hammock-rocked in a canvas canoe called
existence, I oar across a still river of air
accompanied by black and harp-gold damselflies
as light scales the almond trees and swims
in shadows over my plum-thin skin.

Everything breathes, the rabbit-still moments pass,
and each sensation unfolds tender as lettuce.
I am alone. My canoe is the smallest
of desert islands, and a quiet made loud by green
brightness surrounds me like the flesh of a drupe
pitted against itself as I drift further and further
into flood, into the first of metaphors.

1.

I thought I was at the end but instead I find
there are only beginnings and each beginning
its own end—boundary and boundless tribute
back to the beginning. There is nowhere to go
on this island. No, not island at all but a point—
ever-revolving and still—from which I witness
past, present, and future cycle before me
as in a dream where familiar figures hover
at an unreachable yet intimate proximity.
I see my sisters gathered like sea nymphs
on the wet rocks. I see my mother and father
walking along the shore squint at me
through updrafts of sand and sea salt
with equal parts tenderness and ignorance.
Écoutez la chanson de mon coeur, I say, in the language
my father designated for the incomprehensible.

1.

Here is the sea, and here is the island
on which I stand. From any vantage point
my gaze travels from sand to sea without
interruption. No sky of clouds distracts.
In this landscape, my apartness from what I see
is a typical form of suffering for which there is
no author. There is the sea. There is the island.
Whether the sea holds up the island or the island
the sea, who can say? This is another metaphor.
The sea glimmers like desire that knows
only its own extension and persists in a motion that,
though errant, never errs or chooses wrongly.
For what it touches is the world and all the world
is its object. To watch the sea lengthen away from
and toward itself is to return to an elemental rocking
that surrounds like a firefly cupping its own light.
There are no metaphors but the one metaphor, the one
public language by labor and design made private.
I pour all the sands from the island
into an hourglass and empty it out into the sea.

The Heart of the Sonnet

This sonnet is a pretty little room—
how could its music accommodate the meanness
of love or the habitual forms of neglect?
Its chords sound pearled—not imperiled—and,
unlike the sinews binding body to soul,
sing in such concord that I dare not intrude
with talk of earth and salt and bitter bile.
But when my face holds the shape of my hands,
when in any and all pleasure I taste
the blood of trespass, where else can sadness
lean its ladder and self-hatred make its climb?
Then this sonnet is not a room but the fleshed
tent in which Achilles—leaving off food,
leaving off drink—ate out the two, misshapen

halves of his heart, and that in whom it doubled,
in search of an irradiate goodness that
no eye or mouth can find. For you can still say
heart in a sonnet and mean, like the ancients,
the source of feeling and of thought, the pulsed
chamber in which desire scans the distant stars
like a child singing at the moonless window
to draw mother and father near: a world
within a world—the body of the sonnet—
and the white sheet in which it lies bedded
where joy and suffering take impersonal form

and the I, imprecise as crayon, wakes
neither to dread nor blank annihilation,
but the constant gaze in which we are made real.

Rachel Heng

Why Don't You Play?

The condominium in question may have boasted one of Singapore's most exclusive addresses, being steps away from Orchard Road, yet still shielded from the commercial scrum by a belt of ancient, thick-trunked rain trees. It may have set that decade's record for the highest price per unit sold, may have landed Siong Lian's ex-classmate a lifetime achievement award at the Berlin Design Fair last year. But for all that, the featureless, grey blocks still bore an uncanny resemblance to a graveyard.

"Can I help you, sir?" The doorman's forehead glistened in the morning sun.

"Visiting block 2A, please," Siong Lian said.

"What unit, sir?"

"The, uh, penthouse." Siong Lian tried to say it casually, tried to keep the words *graveyard, graveyard, graveyard* in mind, but he still felt himself betrayed by the flush of pride that started in the back of his neck and slowly spread to his cheeks. Yes, he was the father of a daughter who specialized in treating bone cancers and could afford to live in a four million-dollar apartment. It was his first visit since she'd moved in.

Of all places, though, why had she chosen this luxury compound of grey slate towers? The "luxury," Siong Lian supposed, lay in the sumptuous, delicate ferns that lined the wide driveway (just imagine the daily cost of having them watered, misted, fertilized); the valets with ridiculous caps standing by the guardhouse (impractical and expensive); the water feature that spanned an entire wall outside the lobby (had not the National Architects Bureau issued an advisory against water features after the last drought?).

Never mind who had designed it, the complex was an abomination. Yet Siong Lian, too, could have made a career building such abominations, could have risen to partner in a top firm, become a millionaire himself. Instead he'd joined the Housing Board, spent his early years as a junior civil servant slaving away on meticulous proposals inevitably shot down by superiors who wanted designs that were cheap and practical and hideous. After a decade of being relegated to

administrative tasks, he had, in the early '80s, finally landed a position heading the playground design committee for new government flats. It had seemed a gift at first—a whole vertical to oversee!—but for the rest of his career, Siong Lian was only ever offered projects designing playgrounds.

So this condominium might be an abomination, a small voice whispered at the back of his mind, but at least it was a building.

"Certainly, sir," the doorman said. "And your name?"

"I'm her father. Tell her her father's here."

"Sorry, sir, we still need a name, for security reasons."

He felt a tick of annoyance that his name was not already known. That Dorothy had not seen it fit to make the doorman aware he would be coming. "Lim Siong Lian."

The doorman picked up the phone from behind his desk. "Hello Ma'am, your father, Mr. Lim Siong Lian is here to see you."

Irritated, Siong Lian shifted the heavy canvas bag slung over his shoulder. It was filled with volumes of still lifes and technical drawings, fresh sketchbooks, a set of new Faber Castell colored pencils, neatly lined up in their flat, metal tin.

He'd been teaching his grandson to draw for a little over a year now. His grandson, Matthew, the curly-haired, shiny-eyed boy. Matthew had a natural eye for perspective and would make a fine architect one day, but he was overstretched by his mother, made to do swimming classes and piano lessons and countless other activities unrelated to his future as an industry-leading architect. Case in point: For the past three months, Matthew had been away at language camp in Beijing. Did they not have perfectly competent Mandarin teachers in Singapore? But, no matter; he was back now.

"Please, sir," the doorman said, pushing a button that sent the spotless, glass doors sliding apart. "The penthouse lift is on the right."

Siong Lian entered the lobby, where the graveyard aesthetic continued: walls the same grey as outside, floor a shiny concrete, lightbulbs bare and incandescent. Still, the lobby was filled with fragrant, cool air, a reprieve from the humid, tropical morning. A single, purple orchid, dramatically spot-lit, bloomed on a pedestal at the end of the hall.

The lift waiting for him had only one button, a glowing "PH" already lit. After a silent ride up, the doors slid open, and Siong Lian found himself staring straight into the living room.

He cast a critical eye around the space, but unlike the severe aesthetic of the building itself, the apartment was bright and airy, all delicate cream walls and teak flooring and soft, inset lights. Double-height windows capitalized on the penthouse's location in the clouds, framing a view of the island-city with its miles of densely packed high-rises below. Much nicer, he admitted, than Dorothy's old, two-bedroom flat she and her husband had bought when they were still starting out in their careers.

But had not the kitchen of that flat been neat and serviceable, the living room well-ventilated, the bedrooms perfectly adequate for a small family? Had they not purchased it at a heavily subsidized price, made possible by the work of those at the Housing Development Board like himself?

Siong Lian thought of his early days as a junior civil servant, when he'd helped plan visits for architects and planners from as far away as Hong Kong and Amsterdam who'd wanted to see Singapore's famed public housing program. The government flats housed eighty percent of the population and were modern and densely packed, yet still clean and well-maintained. What a rush, to have been part of it all.

And yet, the same voice whispered, what part had he really played?

"Pa, oh good, you're here now."

Siong Lian turned. Dorothy was standing in front of the lift, rummaging through her handbag. She wore a cream, silk blouse that matched the walls and trim, black pants with sharp creases down their legs. With her head bent, her silhouette bore a spitting resemblance, for one aching moment, to that of her mother.

"Ah Doh," he said. "Going out? I thought we eating lunch together?"

She raised her head, eyes narrowed at the accusation he'd been unable to keep out of his voice. Siong Lian kicked himself. What started as tenderness in his chest would always harden and calcify as it traveled up his throat, come out brittle and tight.

"I have to go to the hospital. The locum canceled last minute. Tina's almost done cooking lunch. Matthew will be down in a bit." Dorothy slipped her feet into a pair of black loafers by the door. "Make yourself at home. Oh. It's your first time here, I forgot! What do you think?" She pressed the lift button.

"Okay. Not bad," Siong Lian said. When she didn't reply, he went on: "Aiya, you know what I think of these new buildings."

Dorothy tossed her hair behind her shoulder. "You never like anything designed by anyone else."

"Not true."

She raised one eyebrow. "You should check out the playground, at least. The latest designs are very creative, quite cutting edge."

Cruel, cruel, how had he raised a daughter so cruel? Siong Lian opened his mouth to respond, but Dorothy was already stepping into the lift.

"Please finish by three. No going on for too long, okay? His piano teacher arrives at three thirty, and it's very important he's not late or tired out."

And then the doors slid shut behind her and she was gone, swallowed into the metal bowels of the building.

This was what their relationship had become—a series of terse transactions. The first, well-intentioned words somehow coming out barbed, followed by the inevitable escalation, ending with swift escape. Whoever was left behind standing with their palms open and empty, their hearts full of a resentful, frustrated love. Were there families who were forgiving with each other, who were patient, who were kind?

"Ah Gong."

His annoyance evaporated at the sound of Matthew's voice. There his grandson was, standing in the doorway, his slight figure made smaller by the high, wood-trim arch. Siong Lian hadn't seen him for just three months and already he looked different: leaner, more stretched out, with new angles in his cheeks. He would be eight years old next month. When he was younger, he'd been so filled with laughter, his sides bulged with it, but over the years he had grown quiet and brooding.

"Matthew, come, give Ah Gong a hug," Siong Lian said, spreading his arms.

The boy approached him slowly, almost as if he were afraid. Siong Lian brushed the thought away—what was there to be afraid of? He was his dear, devoted grandfather. Then Matthew's arms were around his waist. He kissed the top of Matthew's head, breathed in the sour tang of his scalp.

The maid appeared. "Food is ready, sir," she said.

On the dining table was steamed cabbage, stringy beansprouts, a clear tofu soup. Siong Lian now remembered Dorothy's recent obsession with turning the

family vegetarian. The angles in Matthew's cheeks took on a new light, and Siong Lian found himself angry, again.

He'd loved feeding Dorothy when she had been little. She'd been a skinny girl, a girl he had raised on pork belly so crispy it scraped the roof of your mouth raw, viscous hor fun seeded with slick, sticky prawns, fried chicken wings that turned one's fingertips cumin yellow. And now she had decided she was vegetarian. Not only that, but Matthew as well, as if the way she had been brought up wasn't good enough for her own child. As if Siong Lian hadn't done the best he could after his wife had died, even if he wasn't home much, even as he tried to carve out a career for himself in the stifling Housing Board while single-handedly raising a nine-year-old daughter.

Siong Lian glanced at his grandson again, and then at his watch. It was just past noon. There was time.

When they reached the McDonalds, all Matthew said was "Mummy says fast food is poison."

A passerby jostled Siong Lian's shoulder without apologizing. The McDonalds was in the basement of a shiny, new mall, one that was all glaring lights and quartz-flecked tile, thronged with hordes of weekend shoppers. The place was laid out in a way that had recently become fashionable, with winding corridors and multiple "hubs," the idea being that this mimicked the delightful, rambling streets of old Europe. What it really meant was it had taken Siong Lian ten minutes to find the escalator to the basement and another ten to locate the McDonalds. Matthew was dragging his feet. A whine had slipped into his voice, and his face had taken on a mournful expression. Still, they were here now. He would be fine once he'd had something to eat.

"Nonsense," Siong Lian said. "Last time, when your mummy was a girl, you should have seen how fast she eat chicken nuggets."

"Mummy doesn't eat chicken."

"Go get a seat. Ah Gong order for you," Siong Lian said.

Matthew still looked doubtful, but he went off toward the crowded tables. Siong Lian watched. The boy's shorts were too large for him, and the khaki fabric flapped about his skinny legs as he walked. There was something measured about his gait, something timid. Siong Lian believed a boy that age should be running, jumping, tripping over himself.

Suddenly Siong Lian seemed to smell salt on the air, and he was no longer in an air-conditioned, mall basement but at a swing set by the sea. Katong Park, the first playground he'd ever been to. His parents would take him and his brothers on the second day of the lunar new year, all of them decked out in stiff, new clothes sewn by his mother. *Be careful,* his mother would say, Siong Lian nodding in response, but already looking past her at the large sandpit, the towering metal slide, the creaking swings. Running toward the playground, his coiled limbs sprang loose, a bird beating its wings in his chest.

"Sir? Can I take your order, please?" The server's cheeks were pockmarked and greasy, made shinier by the harsh, fluorescent lights.

Siong Lian ordered two upsized Happy Meals and an extra side of nuggets to share. With careful maneuvering, he managed to fit everything onto one tray. Matthew was sitting at a table next to a mother and son, both of whom held smartphones in one hand and cheeseburgers in the other. Matthew, who was not allowed a smartphone—one of the few things Siong Lian agreed with Dorothy on—was staring slack-jawed at the other boy's screen.

"Stare so much, careful your eyes don't fall out," Siong Lian joked, placing the tray down in front of his grandson. "Come, hungry, right? Let's eat."

He opened one of the boxes and handed Matthew a cheeseburger. The boy unwrapped it gingerly. He looked up at his grandfather.

"Go on! Before it gets cold."

"You won't tell Mummy?" Matthew said.

Siong Lian unwrapped his own burger and started eating. "Of course I won't tell. Now go on, eat," he said.

Matthew nodded and bit into the burger. He chewed thoughtfully at first, and for a moment Siong Lian worried he would not like it, since he had not had meat in such a long time. What was his daughter thinking? A child Matthew's age

should not be vegetarian. A doctor should know better! But then Matthew's face broke out into a grin, and Siong Lian forgot about Dorothy, for there he was, the grandson he knew and loved.

"Nice or not?" he said.

Matthew nodded. He was eating faster now, rivulets of melted cheese and oil dripping between his knuckles and sliding down the backs of his small hands.

"Nice. Thank you, Ah Gong!" he said between rapid bites, barely stopping to swallow.

Siong Lian laughed. "Eat slowly, ah, careful don't choke."

One of the greatest pleasures of the world, he thought, was watching a child eat.

Matthew finished eating and began licking the oil off his palms with abandon. Siong Lian laughed, reaching across the table to help. Matthew grinned as his grandfather dabbed at his mouth, then pretended to eat the napkin.

As they were walking out of the mall, they passed the arcade. Siong Lian felt Matthew slow down next to him, saw his head turn toward the darkened interior and flashing, colorful screens. The boy's face glowed pink under the neon signs, his mouth gaping slightly, exposing his two large, front teeth. Siong Lian checked his watch. They could spare fifteen minutes, but there would be no dilly-dallying; they would head home right after to start the drawing lesson.

Matthew nodded his head with such vigor that he seemed to make himself dizzy. A warmth spread through Siong Lian's chest, causing him to spend thirty dollars on game tokens, far more than they'd need for fifteen minutes. The tokens were heavy coins that came stacked in piles like poker chips. He carried them for Matthew, following the boy as he dashed from game to game, handing him tokens whenever a new one took his fancy or a screen flashed GAME OVER.

Matthew didn't ask Siong Lian to join him in any of the games, and that was fine with him. Secretly he was afraid of looking foolish, for even after watching the boy play a game involving battleships and what looked like cats in space, he still could not figure out what the point of it was. Siong Lian was content to be

the provider of game tokens, the feeder of fast food. The role of doting grandfather suited him well, he thought. Perhaps he ought to take Matthew out more often instead of always being so focused on his drawing lessons. But Dorothy let him see the boy so rarely. Even with the lessons, things always came up: Matthew was sick, Matthew had violin competition, Matthew had to go to language camp in Beijing.

The thought of Dorothy soured his mood. How had she become like this? Where had he gone wrong?

It was true that, at times, he had been harsh with her. Unlike other parents who'd caned their children for poor exam scores, however, Siong Lian had never laid a hand on Dorothy. He could never bear to, for even at ten, eleven, twelve, Dorothy's soft, moon-like face already so resembled that of her poor, beloved mother.

But there were ways of being harsh with a child without laying a finger on them. Even after getting home from the most tedious of days at work, Siong Lian had always found the energy to sit by Dorothy at her desk for hours, watching her answer math problems or write essays. When he felt she had been careless or sloppy, or was simply not trying hard enough, he withheld privileges—confiscating the British boarding school novels she so loved to read, forbidding her from attending Girl Guides' camps, confining her to her room for entire weekends. And there were other, more unfortunate incidents. Like the time he'd spent hours brewing a nourishing broth of black chicken and bitter gourd to cure her persistent cough. She'd lost track of time reading, let the bowl of soup grow cold and congealed on the dining table. Siong Lian had picked up the bowl, walked over to the chair she'd been sitting in, and calmly poured the tepid, nutritious slop over her head.

Matthew was now shooting deer on the screen with a large, plastic gun. His lower lip was tucked into the shelf of his upper teeth, his eyes narrowed in concentration. His little face gave Siong Lian a warm feeling in his chest. Matthew, at least, was still a child. He, at least, loved his grandfather with simple, untainted feeling.

"How was the language camp, ah boy?" Siong Lian asked, stroking his silky hair.

"Camp?" Matthew said. A baby deer appeared, its eyes wide and pixelated.

"Ni zai na li na me jiu, you mei you xue dong xi? You mei you jing bu?" *You were there so long, did you learn anything, have you improved?*

Matthew was silent. He trained his sights on the baby deer and, with one squeeze of the plastic trigger, blew its head off. Pieces of bloody meat splattered the screen.

"Xue hen duo. Jing bu hen duo," he said. "Shang hai de lao shi dou hen hao." *Learnt a lot. Improved a lot. Teachers in Shanghai were all very good.*

Three more deer appeared on screen. Matthew got two, missed the last.

"Shanghai?" Siong Lian said.

All Matthew had to do was correct himself, say that he'd meant Beijing. But instead he dropped the plastic gun. It went skittering down the black, plastic console, jerked to a halt by its slinky, metal chain. The panicked glance Matthew gave Siong Lian told him everything he needed to know. Siong Lian placed the game tokens on a ledge, but the surface was at an incline, and the tokens went crashing to the floor.

"Matthew, last three months, you go where?" he said.

Matthew shrugged, his head lolling to the side, as if his left ear had suddenly become impossibly heavy. Siong Lian stifled the urge to slap his head straight.

"Were you in Beijing?"

Matthew shook his head.

"Shanghai?"

Another slow shake.

"Did you go anywhere at all?"

Siong Lian willed the boy to nod his head. To explain that Dorothy had miscommunicated. She was so busy, after all; perhaps the camp hadn't been in China but Japan or Germany, for Matthew was learning those languages, too. But Matthew was still, his eyes fixed on some distant point beyond Siong Lian's head, his chin pulled into his neck the way it always was when he felt guilty about something. Finally, he shook his head.

"Did Mummy tell you to lie to me? Got time for piano, for violin, swimming, but no time to draw?" Siong Lian fumed. "Don't worry, boy, I will tell her. This Ah Doh, really, she has no idea what—"

"It wasn't Mummy. I wanted to stop art class."

"It's okay, you can tell Ah Gong. I won't tell your mother. And stop calling it *art class*, like it's some community center hobby, playing with papier-mâché and gluing sequins on potatoes or some other crap. It's drawing. Drawing."

Matthew winced, and Siong Lian realized he was now gripping his grandson's small shoulders in his hands. When had that happened? A stampede of deer crossed the screen, running toward them. Then the large words, in dripping red font, GAME OVER. The arcade suddenly seemed dark and bright at the same time, colorful lights flashing, children screaming, an inane cacophony of bleeps and bloops and *Winner!*

"I don't want to do—" Matthew paused, staring at the pile of spilled game tokens on the floor. "I don't want to do drawing anymore."

"You need to be good at drawing to become an architect," Siong Lian said.

Finally Matthew looked up. His eyes—like those of a freshly caught fish, so well defined, so sparkling clear, unlike Siong Lian's own, more like clouded marbles—his eyes were inscrutable.

"Don't you want to be an architect when you grow up? Like Ah Gong?"

Siong Lian kept going, even as he knew the answer, even as he knew there lay nothing good down this path. He had been lied to by his own grandson and daughter. They did not want him around with his sharp-nibbed pencils and oppressive stacks of graphing paper. A quiet mania seemed to smolder within him. He would press the point to its end.

"Don't you?"

Still Matthew didn't answer. Siong Lian grabbed his arm. It was hot to touch, almost feverish, and his skin was soft as fresh bread. He would show him. The boy did not know what he wanted.

The taxi pulled up to the familiar estate. Familiar to Siong Lian, though Matthew had never been here before. Dorothy had never brought him, he thought bitterly. But, then again, neither had he.

"Where are we going?" Matthew said. He had been quiet the whole way there and spoke now from the corner of the backseat where he'd wedged himself, as if to be as far away from Siong Lian as possible.

"Sir, I think this estate kena en bloc already. See the tape?" the taxi driver said.

Siong Lian paid and got out of the taxi without answering, Matthew following behind reluctantly. They were in a large, empty parking lot framed by towering, broad rain trees. The blocks of government flats in front of them were indeed cordoned off by orange tape, with large signs warning DO NOT ENTER in four languages. The flats were painted in the pastel, candy colors of those built in the 80s, colors now faded and flaking like dead skin peeling off a sun-scorched back. They looked strangely naked. What was missing was the laundry that usually hung from bamboo poles outside each kitchen window, flapping in the wind like flags ready for battle. The windows were boarded up instead.

"Come on." Siong Lian ducked under the tape.

"Ah Gong, it says do not enter."

"I said, come," Siong Lian repeated, and this time Matthew followed.

They crossed the void deck, went along one pathway, then another, past a shuttered community center, and then through a large courtyard. The estate's inhabitants had only moved out a week ago, so the place still bore marks of life that made it seem as if its occupants would soon return. Here an empty coffee cup, there a trashcan stuffed with flyers. But, of course, the people who had lived there would not be coming back; they had now been moved into the shiny, new flats just down the road, flats fitted with updated kitchen appliances and fiber optic internet. All part of the Housing Board's ongoing plan to modernize and update public housing.

A stray cat crossed their path, paused in a pool of sunlight, then disappeared into the bushes. Grandfather and grandson walked a little further and turned a corner. Then, there it was.

An enormous dragon rose from a rectangular sandpit, its spine a series of rings large enough for a child to climb through, its tongue a metal slide, its tail a hook from which a single, cracked tire swing squeaked in the breeze. The dragon's skin was a mosaic tile that had once been vibrant orange, sun-bleached over the years to a soft pink. The faded squares were set in grey cement, creating a geometric pelt that looked as if it had come out of a '90s computer game. Aside from the dragon, there were other things in the playground, too: here a large, rotating disc, there a set of undulating monkey bars, the shiny metal grips rubbed dull grey by countless

hands. Siong Lian's gaze lingered on the painted, hume pipes that lined the sand pit. He imagined all the children that had lain within them.

He remembered the building materials factory he'd visited forty years before, in what was meant to be a routine trip to get some procurement forms signed. The Housing Board was building faster than ever, knocking down shophouses with rotting wooden walls and zinc-roofed shacks and replacing them with flats every day, and doing so required vast amounts of concrete, brick, and sand. While on a perfunctory tour of the factory, yellow hardhat sending rivulets of sweat down his temples, Siong Lian noticed stacks of grey, concrete pipes outside the warehouses, each with the diameter of a large truck wheel. They were stacked in pyramids, with three at the base and one at the top, and in the uppermost pipe swung the thin, brown legs of a small child, the bright, orange slippers that shod their feet startling in the blazing, afternoon sun. The son of the foreman, Siong Lian was told, a widowed man who often brought his child to work when his sister couldn't take care of him. The boy was deaf, the clerk confided in a gossipy undertone. He liked to play alone amongst the building materials, often screaming incomprehensible words at the top of his lungs, creating a real row. He would run away whenever anyone except his father approached.

They carried on with the tour. But Siong Lian couldn't get the image of the boy out of his mind, sitting in the perfect circle of that large, concrete pipe—destined for use in some sewage system project somewhere—as if he were the king of his own, invisible domain. Years later, when Siong Lian had been assigned the playground design project, that boon and bane of his entire career, he'd called the factory up and ordered a large quantity of those hume pipes. Now they were ubiquitous, familiar fixtures in every playground built in the '80s. Every Singaporean who had grown up in a government flat during those years would have, at some point or another, crawled through one of those pipes, allowed the inner walls to cool their bare feet, pressed their small hands against the curved roofs above their heads.

"Ah Gong, it's very hot," Matthew said, tugging at Siong Lian's arm.

It was indeed. Matthew's eyes were scrunched up in the glaring sun; his cheeks were red and his nose shiny. They'd been standing there for longer than Siong Lian had realized.

"Did you know that Ah Gong designed that?" he said.

Matthew glanced at the playground. He shook his head.

"Back when I came up with the first designs, my superiors were so impressed. They especially loved the dragon, but there were others, too: the pelican, the sampan, the rambutan. They even covered it in the newspapers; people from Malaysia, from Hong Kong came to see. It was not only cost-effective, but unique, beautiful, different from those boring, metal swing sets—so expensive!—that we used to import from Germany." Siong Lian realized he had slipped into his "presentation voice," used for many a meeting in his Housing Board days.

Matthew shuffled his feet, pulled his hand out of Siong Lian's, and sank onto the burning concrete. Siong Lian saw him wince, but the boy didn't get back up. He folded his arms across his knees and lowered his head onto them.

Siong Lian kept talking. "It was an exciting time. The city was changing, everything was changing. The playgrounds would shape young minds, create a harmonious environment within the housing estates, preserve that kampong spirit we were so worried that moving people from villages into flats would annihilate."

Matthew was still curled on the ground. Siong Lian grabbed his arm and, before he knew what he was doing, jerked the boy to his feet. Matthew let out a cry, staring at his grandfather with a wild, stubborn look.

"Back then, I would visit the new HDB estates at least once a week, and the playgrounds were always full of children, laughing, playing, climbing, their mothers or grandmothers sitting in the shade chatting with one another. But as the years went by, the playgrounds grew emptier. Kids didn't want to be outside anymore. It was too hot, they said"—here, he shot a fierce glance at his grandson, whose eyes were wide as an animal's—"too boring; they'd rather play computer games or stay inside, in the aircon. Eventually, only old people came to the playgrounds, but they didn't play. They just sat on the benches and stared into space, waiting, for what? Waiting to die?"

Siong Lian dragged Matthew toward the playground. At first he resisted, squirming and twisting, but Siong Lian kept his grip firm, his fingers tightening around his grandson's small bicep. Matthew began to cry and let himself be led to the sandpit. Siong Lian hoisted him over the steps and placed him on the sand, in front of the dragon.

"Play," Siong Lian growled. "Go on. Why don't you play? Play, play! Ah Gong will wait for you."

Matthew paused his crying for a moment. The snot leaking from his nose glistened in the sun like the trail of a garden slug. His hair gleamed in the afternoon sun; Siong Lian knew it would burn to touch. His own bare scalp felt raw, likely turning pink from the merciless, tropical heat.

"Go on, hurry up, play! What, I need to show you?"

Siong Lian stepped onto the sand. At his grandfather's approach, Matthew stepped backward, until his back was up against the face of the dragon. He pressed his palms to the mosaic. The tiles would be cool, Siong Lian knew, a relief from the heat. He had designed it that way. He had designed it with children like Matthew in mind, precious, beautiful children.

"No," Matthew said. "I want to go home. I want to go home!" he shrieked.

The sound of it bounced around the estate, sending a cluster of charcoal mynah birds rising up from a nearby bush. But the flats were empty; there was no one to hear his cries. The people who had lived there were watching satellite TV in their new flats down the road.

How had they come to this? How had he come to this? It occurred to him that time would not stop here. At some point he would have to bring Matthew home. At some point, he would have to face Dorothy.

Siong Lian lunged toward Matthew. The boy slapped his grandfather's hands away, sinking to a crouch on the scorching sand. He curled into himself so he resembled a small, wailing creature, more animal than human. Siong Lian grabbed Matthew and lifted him off the ground. He was lighter than Siong Lian would have thought, or perhaps the hot feeling coursing through his veins made him stronger than he was.

He climbed the steps that led to the top of the dragon's head, his grandson slung over his shoulder. Matthew was limp now, and Siong Lian could feel the boy's tears seeping through the back of his shirt. Or perhaps it was sweat, who knew, for it was hot, it was so damn hot.

They were standing at the top of the dragon's head, enclosed by a mosaic crown that was part ears, part fiery ruff. It occurred to Siong Lian that he had

never climbed the dragon's head this way before, not in his forty years of work. He'd thought it would feel like he was high up above the world, that there would be a rush of some kind, a satisfaction, or vertigo, something to savor before sitting down on the smooth, metal slide that led out of the dragon's face and back onto the flat sand. But there was nothing; they didn't seem high up at all. Still the tall blocks of flats crowded around them, still the cloudless sky blazed indifferent above their heads.

Siong Lian set Matthew down in front of him, pulling his legs straight so they were aimed down the slide. Matthew was still crying, but his sobs were quiet now, a soft, hiccupping noise that was like the chirping of a baby bird.

A painful tenderness filled Siong Lian's heart as he stood behind his grandson. The boy would understand. Where he had failed with Dorothy, he would succeed with Matthew. He would make him understand.

Siong Lian placed his hands on Matthew's damp back, and he pushed.

Still crying, his grandson glided down the slide, stumbling to his feet when he reached the bottom.

The sun beat down on the backs of their necks. Their shirts were soaked translucent.

"Again," Siong Lian said. "Again!"

Sarah Barber

When They Ask About the Eclipse

Like anything with a mouth, the moons
are hungry. See how they grow thin
and slip through the colander?

And will the fat seed of sun
let itself today be swallowed? Oh no.
See how it sprouts already, swells
with sap, with golden milk—

the poor moons, see how they go on
traveling through the dark,
looking for crusts and bones.

An Alphabet for Ghost Children

After A for almost and B, the little box
I keep their hearts inside,
they know E is an emergency
and N not now nor never.
They know G, of course, for ghost.
I tried to teach them F, a little fox
asleep in snow, feet to belly, tail to nose,
but they pointed to the henhouse
and all those eggs left alone inside.

Sierra Nelson

Metonymy

What is it again?
Something touching something,
like where the hem brushes a knee
or a capped sleeve soft against your shoulder,
or the suits in the coffee shop standing in line
or the strollers in the park standing in for
anyone, not just women, caregiving,
or part for whole like that age-old synecdoche of sailors
"All hands on deck!" (why do we know that?)
or getting weirded out by Hitler's Hat (don't wear it!),
or sure, believing or not, I'd pocket a lucky piece of lucky saint,
something small they once kissed with their plump, chaste lips,
or a sliver of their bone, thin as the translucent slice of apple
I just cut for my baby not to choke on with his just eight teeth.
Listen, when was the last time we held hands for over an hour,
and that was all we were doing, and talking maybe,
or made love on a rooftop in New York City,
not a metaphor, not two things unlike brought together,
but in direct proximity to summer and night?
If there was touch once then it must still exist,
contagious, where it last touched.
Are all hands on deck, decked out with the memory
of hands they once felt,
like invisible shimmering gloves of past loves?
No, give me metonymy not memory —
I reach out for what's closest.
I'd take stem for apple. A cry for a bed.
A salt for a tear.

Lisa Levin

Raven House Apartment

My neighbor and the landlord are threatening
to shoot each other, high on meth

and I watch through my door's fisheye hole
their faces twist like dollar bills in water,

voices pealing over trucks on the freeway
by Mustache Joe Car Dealership's flipflopped

salesmen and the declarative screen at Eve's:
"Girls! Girls! Girls!" Position is where

you put it. Everything inside a snowglobe, warped but azimuthal;
the poles at proportionate distance from the center.

This complex has no blueprint. Dishwashers upstairs
flooded my kitchen last week and when the landlord

came for repairs he gritted "Fucking bitch,"
directed either at me or maintenance in general, the latter

more likely because he's a big picture kind of guy
whereas I care too much, as my parents put it.

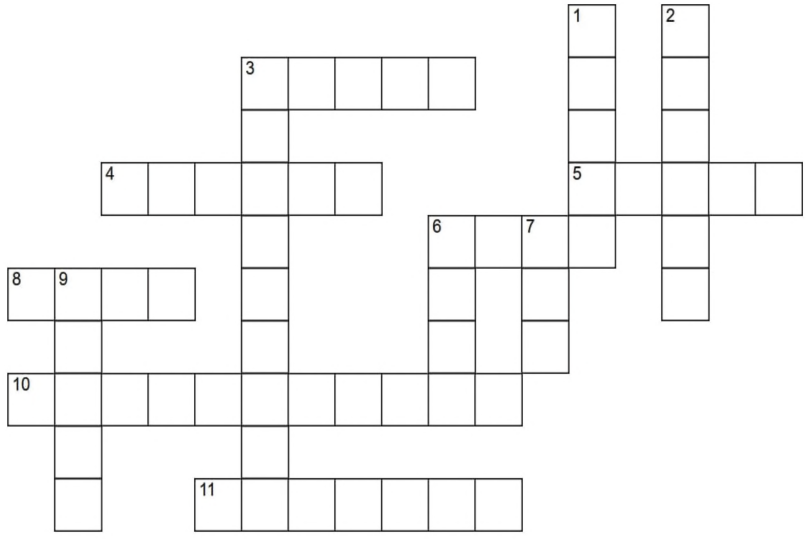
Which of the two in the hallway
has better aim, I want to know. To the others

their yelling might seem a lovers' quarrel, a youthful promise
disintegrated into resentment, bound to break and gush like levees.

Clean animals distinguished themselves before boarding the ark.
I am not one of them. Noah sent a lone raven to search

for corpses on land; the bird returned, hungry.

fragment 16, Sappho



ACROSS

3. _____ pushed her
4. for
5. thousands mobilized for a lone face
6. ok, cloudless, silky or of China, a husband, whatever
8. you love: I say it, easy
10. once all the fish in the ocean have burned, all the grass turned to tar
11. where is she, the one I love most

DOWN

1. an army made beautiful for deleting the more than human – so open the gates
2. a position, a drop-off area for those we abandon for a sexier butt
3. wait a minute
6. hooves, but on two legs and carrying tighter heart
7. the direction a woman must pull her thoughts
   (antonyms: children, parents, the things I've given for you to have this life)
9. queen (yas), slay [not for me to speak this way]

ACROSS
3. [ ]
4. [ ]
5. SHIPS
6. FINE
8. WHAT
10. BLACK EARTH
11. [ ]

DOWN
1. HORSE
2. BEHIND
3. [ ]
6. FOOT
7. NOT
9. HELEN

The 2019 Beauchamp Prize

Judged by Jessica Lynne

This year's winner is Ra Malika Imhotep



This essay on the work of Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle begins with a conjuring, and the writer does the rigorous, deft work of bearing witness to Hinkle's transmissions. With a close reading of the recordings of disappeared Black women who comprise Hinkle's series *The Evanesced*, for example, as well as an astute assessment of the artist's cosmology, *Kentifrica*, we, as readers, must reckon with the myriad ways that we are implicated in the tasks, responsibility, and obligation of seeing Black women in a manner that calls attention to, as the writer notes, "the expensive myths," that mark Black women's pathways. This essay grounds Hinkle's gestures in an ecology of cultural and spiritual production, from Saidiya Hartman to Zora Neale Hurston to Yoruba Egungun's, as a way of naming the aesthetic terrain that Hinkle traverses. This is an essay that is as unflinching as it is careful, the result of what it means to be embedded within the many textures of an artist's practice.

This year's Honorable Mentions are
"Being Free and Being Food: Consumption and Resistance at *zürich moves* 2019" by Philip Wesley Gates

& "How the Curatorial Stereotyping of Chinese Art Essentializes the work of Zheng Guogu" by Wenting Tao

Find out more at gulfcoastmag.org.

Ra Malika Imhotep

On Retrieval: Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle's Black Feminist Spell

"Why are we *still* here?" asks playwright, social entrepreneur, trafficking Survivor-Leader and abolitionist Regina Evans at the climax of her one-woman show *52 Letters*, a production composed as a truth ritual highlighting the local realities of human trafficking. *Here* is "the space where the bartering and selling of our children is at a tipping point." *Here* is Oakland, the epicenter in a trafficking triangle including San Francisco and Contra Costa counties.[1] And it is *here* that Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle conjured a spell with *The Retrieval*, her solo show at the San Francisco Art Commission (SFAC) Main Gallery in the spring of 2018.

Hinkle's work is largely research-based and anchored to an impressive repertoire of writings and recordings left behind by Black women. Fixed to the walls of her Oakland studio, photographs of fabulous, familiar, and forgotten Black women watch Hinkle work. They hold her accountable.

India ink meets large sheets of Dura-Lar, a translucent acetate-based film, by way of handmade brushes the artist forages from nature and uses until they are reduced back to common branches, bits of twine, Spanish moss, and feathers. This foraging belongs to a tradition of resourcefulness Hinkle claims as her inheritance as a Black woman. Hinkle's *un-portraits* channel the energy of Black women and children from the African Diaspora rather than descriptively reflect their appearance. The women that take shape in Hinkle's fluid black forms are full of a kinetic energy, channeled into them by the artist's dance-compelled mark making. Forcing the artist to reckon with them on their own terms, some women desire precisely-coiffed baby hairs, or many legs, or multiple breasts and hands.

Inspired by the history she holds in her own body, Hinkle's affinity for the historically-vulnerable bodies of Black women has been a major through line of

[1] Quote from her one-woman show *52 Letters*, which brings awareness to the issue of sex trafficking in the US. Sian Taylor Gowan, *Surviving International Boulevard,* Documentary, 2016.

her work. At this point in the artist's journey, we have already witnessed several incantations of what Saidiya Hartman refers to as "the impossible goal" of redress in the archive of slavery (and its afterlife).[2]

The accumulative nature of Hinkle's concurrent series gestures towards Viviane Saleh-Hanna's theory of "Black feminist hauntology."[3] Heavily inspired by Toni Morrison's theory of "rememory," Black feminist hauntology reveals, through ghostly reemergence, the ways White supremacist structures of violence have been perpetually unveiled by the presence of Black women. Each of the unending series emerges, at the artist's will, into the body of another, resulting in a rich intertextuality that disrupts colonial logics of time and space and deepens the political charge(s) of the artist's canon. *In The Uninvited Series* (2008–), Hinkle creates disruptive counternarratives by drawing and painting on top of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century postcards of West African women taken mainly by French colonialists. These ethnographic photos sought to brand Black women's bodies as dehumanized figments of hypersexualization and conquest, triggering both repulsion and desire. Hinkle's interruptions of colonial narratives give the women the ability to redress themselves as otherworldly figures subverting the colonial gaze. The *Tituba Black Witch of Salem Series* (2013–) utilizes the artist's lived experience of navigating the world in a Black, pregnant body, and draws from the literary archival work of Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*. *The Evanesced* (2016–), one of two current bodies of work featured in her solo exhibition at the SFAC Gallery, venerates "more than 64,000 missing Black women in America and the historical disappearances of Black women throughout the African Diaspora."[4] In the artist's words, 64,000 is a "sublime" number, "sublime" not because it inspires great admiration but because it forces you to reckon with it spiritually and morally. *If more than 64,000 Black women are missing, where did they go? Who is missing them? Who is looking for them? How am I, are we, complicit in their erasure?* The women dancing through Hinkle's brushes, becoming the *un-portraits* of this series, are here to elicit honest answers. While the central focus of each series shifts location, their combined effect is a robust conversation pulling past, present, future, history, and myth into and beyond each other, utilizing Blackness as a permeable, transcendent substance.

2 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 26 (June 2008): 3.

3 Viviane Saleh-Hanna, "Black Feminist Hauntology: Rememory the Ghosts of Abolition?" *Champ Pénal/Penal Field*, Vol. XII (March 23, 2015). https://doi.org/10.4000/champpenal.9168.

4 Eva Recinos, "Inspired by #SayHerName, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle Is Keeping Black Women From Disappearing," *LA Weekly*, March 13, 2017, http://www.laweekly.com/arts/inspired-by-sayhername-artist-kenyatta-ac-hinkle-is-keeping-black-women-from-disappearing-802 1319

Hinkle offered a re-membering of the Black female body replete with movement, color, and kinship with an earlier series of one hundred small scale, brown paper *Evanesced* drawings. Her newer *Evanesced* cohort has a greater task at hand. In its current iteration, the women and children of *The Retrieval* ask you to contemplate the living people we render as ghosts. The work is a call to action, an invitation to *see* those who are often overlooked. *The Evanesced: The Retrieval* brings global concerns about Black women's disappearances throughout the African Diaspora into the social and political contours of Los Angeles and the East Bay. In its movement along the West Coast, the work represents Black women in ways that aren't shrouded in victimhood and offers a meditation on the abstract forms that the presence of Black women assumes when we know safety and legibility to be expensive myths.



Figure 1: Hinkle posing with several of the women of The Evanesced: Retrieval

Central to recent exhibitions are large-scale objects from *Kentifrica*—a physical and theoretical location conceived by Hinkle. Holding the artist's investments

in geography, Diaspora, personal vs. collective histories, and the problematics of museum space, Kentifrican artifacts in the gallery space often assume an active role in each shows' narrative. In *The Retrieval*, the *Kentifrican Ashentee Healer*, a Egungun-inspired figure, represents the Yoruba masquerade tradition of ancestral reverence in Nigeria and beyond. The *Kentifrican Ashentee Healer* sports swaths of brightly-colored cloth and a headpiece made of kanekalon braiding hair to conceal the wearer's identity. According to traditional Yoruba custom, the masqueraders must be men, and seeing their flesh is a grave offense. The *Kentifrican* figure rearticulates this form of spiritual masquerade through a markedly Black feminist performance aesthetic. In the accompanying video work, the *Kentifrican Ashentee Healer* makes her presence known day and night throughout the urban landscapes of San Francisco and East Oakland, as she wields a "horsetail" made of blue ombre braids, evoking spirit to cleanse the conveniently unseen places into which Black women fade. In the exhibition, the *Ashentee Healer* stands vigilant near the center, greeting viewers with her masked gaze as they enter the gallery. The vibrance of her silent and assertive posture watches over *The Evanesced*.

When the women of *The Retrieval* offer you their backs and breasts, something more complicated than sexuality is displayed. In traditional West African iconography, the figure of a woman supporting her breasts with both hands is a sign of giving. This bodily offering indexes spiritual coolness or gentleness of character.[5] But functioning as more than metaphor, the women's bodies, breasts heavy with life, offer themselves to the mouths of their children. In US and colonial histories, there exists tale after tale of the roles enslaved wet nurses and "mammies" played in sustaining the Worlds around them.[6] In Hinkle's oeuvre, these women refuse. By turns, they withhold their faces, dripping into and out of easily recognizable forms. They are less concerned with their inherent (in)visibility and more adamant about forcing the audience to reckon with their (un)knowability. Which is to say that you may *see* Black women's "excess flesh," but you may never *know* it intimately.[7] Visibility does not equal consent.

A figure that Hinkle refers to as "Abiku" sits atop Dura-Lar in an assertive fetal position. The figure's posture indexes its name and the Yoruba tale of forest spirits continuously born only to die in infancy tormenting the mother. Abiku's bubbly

blackness conjures an un-revered spirit. This story's contemporary relevance is not lost on me: Black women have organized against alarming infant mortality rates for decades, culminating in the 1990s in the movement for Reproductive Justice.[8] According to the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention, for every 1,000 live births, 11.7 Black babies die in the first year of life. Represented as Abiku, these Black babies are sought out for what they have to teach, Socratically asking the viewer: *How do you contribute to the conditions of my mother's labor?*

One woman dances with arms winged behind her, gaze trained on the ground, heavy breasts akimbo. Her posture is that of a jumping stomp reminiscent of a ring shout; her body is instrumental, the blur above her head a grey aura of sound.

One woman throws her face as feet kick from under her and an outstretched hand appears, poised to catch. Below her another woman swims with arms poised to gather up the blackness at the bottom of the frame.

One woman is seen in descent. Her head tilts back, arms raised in surrender, chest open to the fall, feet doubling each other in motion, braids buoyant. She is flying.

One woman sits pretty, her body rendered a black (w)hole the universe swirls inside of.

Do you know these women? Can you find them?

A Call

There is a difference between a spectator and a witness. When spectators look, they are not obligated to *see*. Spectators treat looking like a luxury, walking through the gallery space with the same energy that moves them through the aisle of a department store. Hinkle's work demands witness. In the artist's own words, a witness is "somebody who will stand, who will not turn away, who will recount what they've seen for justice." To view and experience *The Retrieval* is to become acquainted with Black women in their most intangible refractions. Here the eyes,

[8] Loretta Ross, "What Is Reproductive Justice? From SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective," in *Reproductive Justice Briefing Book: A Primer on Reproductive Justice and Social Change* (Pro-Choice Public Education Project (PEP) & SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, 2007) 4–5.

smiles, figures and stories of the African Diaspora careen into and through one another with the dance of a brush stroke. These figures carry in them a challenge to the historically imposed vulnerability of Black female flesh.[9]

Those who view the work are tasked with really *seeing* it and allowing the viewing experience to move with them as they exit the gallery and traverse the darkened corridors of the San Francisco Bay Area.

To Black women + Black femmes + Black girls
here and there/then and now:

"You may go, but this will bring you back"
–Zora Neale Hurston[10]

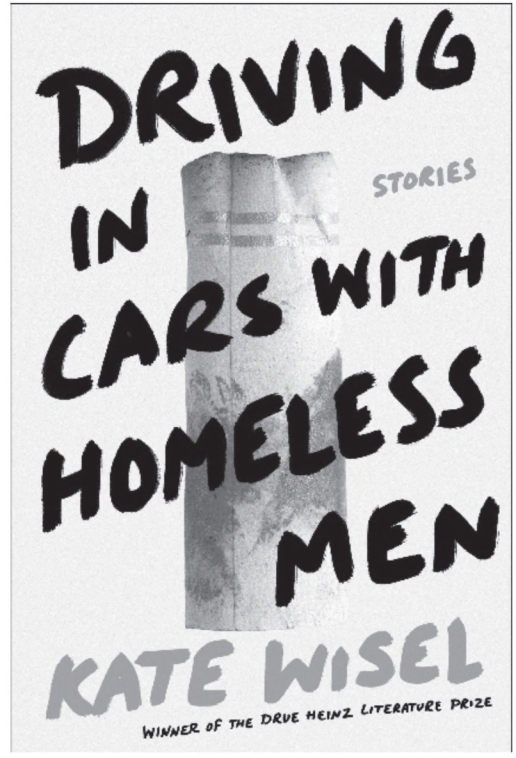
An earlier version of this essay was commissioned by the San Francisco Arts Commission Galleries for their solo exhibition, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle: The Retrieval. *Ms. Hinkle is a 2019 recipient of SFMOMA's prestigious SECA Award, an exhibition on view through April 12, 2020.*

[9] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81. https://doi.org/10.2307/464747.

[10] Introduced to me by Hinkle, this recording is held in the Florida Memory archives and was made while Hurston worked for the WPA in 1935 and 1939. In the recording, she can be heard saying she learned the song from a big crowd. When asked how she learned from the crowd, she replies: "I listens as best as I can...and then sing back to the people until...they are quite satisfied that I know it...then I carry it in my memory." This is how Hinkle describes her relationship to the ghosts that haunt her work. Zora Neale Hurston, "Halimuhfack," 1935, State Library & Archives of Florida, https://www.floridamemory.com/audio/hurston.php.

Ben Murphy

Driving in Cars with Homeless Men by Kate Wisel



In "She Says She Wants One Thing," the third story of Kate Wisel's slim, award-winning collection, Driving in Cars with Homeless Men, Serena waits in a courtroom for her case to come before the presiding judge. She's there because her boyfriend assaulted her, an experience of alcohol-fueled abuse that recurs with sickening detail in the later stories. For now, though, Serena is seated with other women as the men on the other side of the room have their cases heard. She makes notes in a book on her lap as she waits, churning out observations and speculations that enliven the first-person narration. "The room was split in two," we read, "and these slum, criminal wife-beaters were getting to go first, while the ring-twisting women they had beaten and would beat again had to wait for hours, listening to the litany of their charges, wasting entire days of their lives" (27).

Bitter and matter-of-fact, this remark anticipates much of what's to come. The world of working-class Boston that Wisel's characters occupy is made for men to go first. In the twenty linked stories of Driving, Serena joins three other female protagonists, Frankie, Raffa, and Natalya, to weather this world's extremes of abuse—vicious injury and deadening dullness, the careening swings between impatient rage and vapid apathy that are the birthright of patriarchy. The collection as a whole fixates on this grinding pendulum and the foursome of friends who in youth and

early adulthood make a connected life, regardless. All of it will happen again and again. A nose broken once, "the cartilage blown to rubber" (28), will be bludgeoned to bleed again—patience is demanded of women who are made to waste "entire days of their lives." The desire for escape is battered down by ambivalence and a gravity of attachments.

But in this early story, "She Says She Wants One Thing," Serena is copying everything down in her book—the courtroom around her and its echoes of the outside world she knows. "I was writing a story, and needed to remember all the details" (28). We don't know the precise nature of the story Serena is writing. But Wisel's story ends with Serena imagining a scenario that doesn't actually take place. She envisions that she is finally called before the judge. Instead of speaking about her case, she simply presents to the judge—a woman—the book that contains her notes, her story. Serena imagines that her book will haunt the judge. Serena will remain in the judge's preoccupied mind deep into the night. "She would do nothing but dream of me," Serena fantasizes. "I was that bright. I pictured it exactly like this, as one of the best days in my life" (29).

As Kathleen Rooney explains in her Chicago Tribune review, Wisel's fiction is best described as "gritty" despite the overuse of that term to characterize hard-nosed writing. And there is nothing further from the resolute pavement of Wisel's realism than the gimmicks of metafiction. Yet this courtroom story is self-reflexive in an instructive way. Serena is not Wisel—even though the latter actually did grow up in the Boston neighborhoods depicted in this collection. Still, Serena's decision to cope with the yoked violence of bodily harm and crushing tedium by writing and then presenting a story enacts a narrative crystallization of Wisel's authorial approach. As with Serena at court, Driving doesn't aim for justice or redress. Rather, the collection demands to be heard on its own terms, adopting a telling like Serena's that exceeds the usually allotted scraps of space and time left over by men. The resulting chronicle endures long after the book itself is put aside. For all the pain and disappointment involved, the women in Driving resolve as resolute and resilient, assured in the lasting strength and honesty of their experiences. We are asked not to judge these experiences but to witness, understand, and perhaps even to dream in restless distraction because Wisel's stories really are that bright.

The brightness beams as early as "Hoops," the first entry in Driving and a powerful introduction to Wisel's foursome of characters. The only story in the first section of the book (labeled "Us"), "Hoops" depicts the cycles of seasons and habit that find the women—teenagers, at this point—fixed in a troubled neighborhood orbit, as well as the endless rounds of basketball played by boys in the park as the girls-becoming-women look on. The onset of adulthood overtaking these four characters is condensed into a single brilliant phrase by Wisel, who describes how the teenagers help one another escape through a high attic window when the police come knocking at their garage hideaway: "We pulled each other out like baby teeth" (4). This escape is also a sign of growing up; an extraction that, while perhaps painful, requires the assistance of those around you. The economy of this early evocative image offers a fair representation of the force maintained throughout Driving.

Following the precision of the first story that introduces all four characters, the collection abruptly adopts a more fragmented approach that focuses on the women as individuals. Wisel begins with a section of the book devoted to Serena, which contains the courtroom story. Next are several stories anchored in a Frankie section, and then a section for Raffa before returning to Serena and then moving on to Natalya, who only receives one section where the others each receive two or three. There's no pattern to the order of character-based sections, and even the stories within each section are irregular, flickering in format, length, point of view, character focalization, and stage of life depicted. Confronting all these changes in focus and form is disorienting and jarring, like being pinged around in claustrophobic corners. In fact, in a recent interview, Wisel explains that she thinks of her book's structure "like a pool table or web, where individual stories are the crash that dictate a trajectory, shooting outward, hard and fast." From these tabletop collisions, Wisel explains, readers have to "decide, to have whole blank stories to imagine, as they watch the characters jump from one specific time in their life to the next." This metaphor actually ends up in one of the stories, too: "Cribs" ends with the line, "For now, you are pool balls, in your triangular lifetime, waiting to get shout out and whirled" (36).

Wisel's invitation that readers infer in order to fill in the clattering aftermath of her stories is complicated by her prose, which, while beautiful and forceful, is also dense and exploratory, sometimes jumping from precise description into

imaginative flights or drug-induced dreamscapes with little or no transition. Boston pronunciations and slang punctuate the dialogue as well as the free indirect discourse, making way occasionally for more elevated articulations delivered by women whose wry intelligence knows enough of formal education to be distrustful. "I don't really care about school, specifically the part where men walk in and try to educate me," thinks Serena (10). Humor and wit are indeed well-honed by Wisel's characters, but these qualities are also disarming tools of deflection that derail otherwise routine exchanges of conversation. For all these reasons, Driving is a challenging book, and this determination is leaving aside the subject material itself, which is challenging in another sense for its raw depictions of the opium epidemic, alcoholism, child abuse, failing relationships, domestic violence, sexual assault, and death.

But if doubly challenging, Driving repays double for the attention it commands. To say that a book's characters feel "real" is clichéd, but Wisel's book so animates its foursome that I left individual stories and the collection as a whole desperate to know more. This was especially true of Raffa, whose several stories across two sections seemed to me simply true, tragic and exhilarating by turn. Though Serena has more stories associated with her, Raffa's teenage attempts to confront an overdosed boyfriend and her much later-in-life sprint down the streets of Boston that anchors the end of the collection stand out as particularly vivid episodes from the life of a person I was getting to know. I was thus not surprised to learn from Wisel in her interview that the earlier story of mourning a lost boyfriend was inspired by an actual death that she heard about from a friend. From that real germ of pain, it seems, Wisel has grown an entire person and her encompassing world, giving us readers only glimpses that do not, for all their transience, fade away.

Nathaniel Popkin

Works by Jean Giono in English Translation

We live in a mediated world that is punctured by news of glaciers calving, forests on fire, and insects disappearing, as if there are bombs going off but we can't hear them. We know what's happening to our planet but, largely due to increasing human separation from nature, it hasn't sunk in.

The separation from nature is physical and, through time and modernity, increasingly a matter of language. And language, that delicate instrument, reveals only the faintest tether, human to non-human, non-human to human. But to contemplate the ongoing loss we ought to be able to evoke the lush, that which nurtures and beguiles us. Without such a literature in an effort to survive coming catastrophe we're likely to shut ourselves off even further.

With this fear I find myself turning to the work of Jean Giono, who evoked the primordial life of the Provencal terrain he inhabited for much of the 20th century. Giono died at 75 in 1970 after writing more than fifty books and plays. Edmund White calls him an "animist." For Giono wrought a metaphorical prose of earthen-human spirit, a divinity of dirt, water, wind, and bone.

"Everything is in this life," Giono avowed in his diary July 10, 1944, during the period of German occupation of southern France. Dozens of entries from that period comprise a special edition of Giono's writing translated by the talented Jody Gladding and just published as *Occupation Journal*, for the first time in English. The new edition reveals a driven writer of enormous creative spirit determined to refine his voice and act honorably and generously under wartime conditions and Nazi control. During the war Giono kept working at novels and plays with his eyes firmly on the people



and landscape of Provence, a place that over four decades he turned into an uncanny novelistic tableau. He continued writing in his diary that day, July 10, 1944, a Monday, addressing a friend, Germaine Bellec: "The truth is that there is no death," he wrote. "But as you mean it, yes, it exists. Egoistically for you, for us, yes, there is death. In the face of life, no, there is nothing; there is no opposite of life."

Giono ached over the separation caused by war, mechanization, the processing of food, the destruction of landscapes. Why do we seek total control of life, of our own species and seemingly every other, and what are the physiological and psychological impacts? How can we learn to acknowledge and accept the animal inside us and, when we can't or won't, how do we, as humans constructed by social rules, endeavor to withstand the shame? These are some of the questions Giono asks the reader to consider, explicitly in his most potent novels. Through elemental language he divines the nature in humans and the human in flora and fauna, a secret intertwined interior life of life, where, indeed, there is nothing else.

Among a rich and rewarding tapestry of self-portraitizing, self-reflection, Allied bombs and German assassinations, and literary musing that at times suggests the omnivorous hunger of Roberto Bolaño, *Occupation Journal* offers a taste of this elemental language. "Hedges shimmering in the silver rain emerge from the distance in the valley. And above all, this delicious moist air, cool and thick, that lubricates the whole body," He wrote on September 6, 1944. When Giono notes the singing foliage he means to say it sings in his heart, he alone can hear it. He wishes we could, too.

This is the endeavor of Giono's earliest fiction, novels that White, in his introduction to *Melville: A Novel,* diminutively calls "pastoral" but that are sentient, erotic, taut, mercurial, and decidedly weird. Archipelago Books, which has published Occupation Journal, commissioned a new translation, also by Judy Gladding, of the most poetic and shapeshifting of these novels, *The Serpent of Stars*, over a decade ago. New York Review Classics published *A King Alone* in early 2019, in Alyson Waters' translation, and before that *Hill*, Giono's first novel, and *Melville: A Novel,* both translated by Paul Eprile.

With *Hill*, published originally in 1929, Giono declared his intention to confront our species' need to dominate other life. The novel takes place in a tiny village of Haute-Provence where the foul and somewhat monstrous Janet lies dying. He's raving: "I have snakes in my fingers. I can feel their scales scraping inside." Janet is the father-

in-law of Gondran, the most sensible and probably sensitive man in the village. Janet's discomfiting grumblings have Gondran on edge, and so does a toad with "the hands and eyes of a man" and a wild boar and a mysterious cat. Later, in prose that ticks along like the second hand of a clock, the town's spring will go dry, a fire will surge on hot winds from the distance. But now, working in the olive grove, Gondran has slashed a lizard with his spade. "The tongue still twitches like a tiny pink leaf, with the unconscious pain of shattered nerves." In his head, Janet's maniacal voice and these mystical words: "People like you believe trees are dropped straight into the ground, with their leaves and all, and that's the end of it, right there. Oh boy, if only it were so."

Now Gondran's nerves are shattered. Could it really be there is a single spirit that runs through all life? By killing, isn't he causing suffering? "Can he not even cut down a tree without committing murder?"

> It's true, when he cuts down a tree, he does kill.
> And when he scythes, he slays.
> So that's the way it is—Is he killing all the time? Is he living like a gigantic, runaway barrel, leveling everything in its path?
> So is it really *all* alive?
> Janet has figured this all out ahead of him.
> Everything: animals, plants, and who knows, maybe even the stones too.

If everything shares this spirit then we can see ourselves in the tree or the rock or the lizard. Giono describes the epiphany in *Serpent of Stars*: "A prisoner of four walls and a whole cemetery of books, but, sometimes, those walls draw apart, open, like a huge flower, and a deluge of sky crashes down inside there like a rush."

The Serpent of Stars, an actual pastoral with a shepherd chorus, is Giono's most mythic celebration of rusticity. As any religious text, it begs for slow, joyous reading. But, as any religious text, it rests on painful and difficult contradictions.

The novel follows a young man infatuated with the life of shepherds. He wishes one day to take part in the great seasonal movement of sheep out to pasture and observe the shepherds' annual production of an ersatz play of the earthly gods. In a great Gionian gesture, at night lit by fire the eyes of the sheep become the stars; during

the day, together their bodies form a sea. And then the shepherds perform their theater of the elements—Sea, Beasts, Earth, Man, River, and Mountain—asking how, exactly, to live in the world. They ask if Earth should fear Man, master of beasts. The Beasts are anxious: "we've read in his eyes he doesn't see your life, Earth." And moreover, in searing prescience, Man, "you will make the seas rise, obliged to offer your head and your heart to all your machines." Imprisoned inside themselves and distracted by their cities and wealth, these humans can't hear the song of the world. The answer, in the voice of Giono's chorus, is "Open yourself!" Become naked before the elements, renouncing all that separates you from life.

The true heart is naked, Giono declares, the true heart eschews all artifice, communing only with the air and the water and other true hearts. This is an old canard, of course, that says a rural person is more authentic than an urban one and more virtuous, too. Giono is driven by a reactionary impulse toward purity (characteristic of the environmental movement), and, in *Serpent of Stars* particularly, lifts a prayer of return to the real original world. In *Occupation Journal* he decries "the completely appalling humanity of the city" and he mocks the people of Marseille but with cartoon precision, betraying brush strokes as wide as a janitor's broom: "Men and women with fish heads, pig heads (many of these), snake heads (without chins), parrot heads (the women)…" Does he forget who is buying his books and where they're shopping? The knee jerk hatred of urbanity blinds Giono to an essential contradiction in his cosmic vision: the rural world is as constructed a reality as the urban and perhaps, with its domestication of beasts and denuding of forests, just as destructive of natural systems. The sea of sheep is an unnatural sea as exists, and wretchedly manmade.

Giono was jailed at the beginning and end of the Second World War, the first time ostensibly for rigid pacifism (earned on the battlefields of the First World War) and manifest as an environmental anti-nationalism. He refused to join the resistance. "If it were a question of defending rivers, hills, mountains, skies, winds, rains, I would say, 'Willingly.' That is our job. Let us fight," he wrote (and Henry Miller quoted in *Books in My Life*). "When I see a river, I say 'river;' when I see a tree, I say 'tree;' I never say 'France.' That does not exist." After Allied forces liberated southern France from German occupation, the provisional French government imprisoned Giono for a second time on November 8, 1944; the government claimed falsely he had been

a German accomplice. The truth was that Giono was an insufficiently enthusiastic communist who also failed to heed the moral imperative of joining the resistance against genocide.

Giono instead had kept working—and perhaps now we should be grateful. To get closer to nature we must be natural, embrace the animal instinct; to reverse destruction we also must deny and control it. The writing Giono produced during the war led him closer to these oppositional forces.

To approach not the idealized existence of the shepherd-gods, but of real, conflicted, confused beings, Giono went to work on *A King Alone*, which he finished October 10, 1946 and Gallimard published the next year. With this mesmerizing novel, Giono elaborates not on our joy in nature but on our shame in giving in to brutal instinct. Almost renouncing the nakedness of *The Serpent of Stars*, here Giono concerns us with the essence of what separates humans from other animals, clothing—elaborate uniforms, a dress of "moirés, velvets, satins, laces," and "an opera hat of uncommon insolence"—meant to cover over and distract from that shame.

Giono displays his life metaphoric language to start, of winter's darkness, "the color of hare innards, then an extraordinary black that, black as it is, has shadows of deep purple." There are innards and, for 155 pages, there is blood. People are going missing in a remote Alpine village and as the snow piles, the place is on edge. "Everything is uninhabitable, that is, there's no longer any place to imagine a peacock-colored world," Giono writes, as if further repudiating himself. Nature isn't only beauty and nor is it just.

A military captain arrives to investigate the crimes. His name is Langlois and later in the novel he will bear the insolent hat. Fastidious, exacting, mysterious, strategic, he is a man who demands things exist in precise and elaborate order. Langlois asserts perfect self-control—until he doesn't. A well-oiled gun in hand, his trigger turns out to be too loose. To his shame it can't be controlled. To his shame and ours, Giono observes, we are a messy species no matter our highest ideals. Which isn't to say we shouldn't try to be much more mindful, if not just. But what if we can't help ourselves?

Contributors

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Leslie Moody Castro is an independent curator and writer whose practice is based on itinerancy and collaboration. She has produced, organized, and collaborated on projects in Mexico and the United States. She is committed to creating moments of artistic exchange and dialogue and as such is a co-founder of Unlisted Projects, an artist residency program in Austin, Texas. In 2017, she was selected as Curator and Artistic Director of the sixth edition of the Texas Biennial, and was recently the first invited curator in residence at the Galveston Artist Residency. Moody Castro earned a Master's degree at The University of Texas at Austin in Museum Education with a portfolio supplement in Museum Studies in 2010, and a Bachelor's degree in Art History at DePaul University in Chicago in 2004, and has been awarded two grants from the National Endowment of the Arts for her curatorial projects (2016, 2017). In addition to her firm belief that visual art creates moments of empathy, Moody Castro also believes that Mariachis make everything better.

Su Cho received her MA in English Literature and MFA in Poetry from Indiana University. She serves as Managing Editor of *Cream City Review* and is pursuing a PhD at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she is an Advanced Opportunity Fellow. Her poems are forthcoming and/or found in *POETRY, New England Review, Colorado Review, Cincinnati Review, Pleiades, The Journal, Crab Orchard Review, BOAAT, Thrush Poetry Review, PANK, Sugared Water,* and elsewhere.

Her essay, "Cleaving Translation" was the winner of *Sycamore Review*'s 2019 Wabash Prize for Creative Nonfiction, selected by Kiese Laymon, and nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Dean Daderko has been a Curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) since 2010, where he's presented exhibitions with LaToya Ruby Frazier, Joan Jonas, Nicolas Moufarrege, Paul Ramírez Jonas, Wu Tsang and Fred Moten, Haegue Yang, and others. His writing has appeared in a variety of CAMH publications, and in *Aperture, Art in America*, and *Mousse*.

Stanley Delgado's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Glimmer Train, Puerto del Sol, Paper Darts, Mud Season Review, The Los Angeles Review,* and elsewhere. He lives and works in Los Angeles, where he is currently finishing his BA.

Sarah Rose Etter is the author of *Tongue Party* and *The Book of X*, her debut novel. Her fiction, essays, and interviews have appeared or are forthcoming in *VICE, Guernica, The Cut, Philadelphia Weekly,* and more. She is the recipient of writing residencies at the Disquiet International Program in Lisbon and the Gullkistan Residency in Iceland. She has served as an arts columnist at *Philadelphia Weekly*, and as a contributing editor at *The Fanzine.* She currently lives in Austin, Texas.

Brian Evenson is the author of a dozen books of fiction, most recently the story collection *Song for the Unraveling of the World* (Coffee House Press 2019). He has also recently published *A Collapse of Horses* (Coffee House Press 2016) and the novella *The Warren* (Tor.com 2016). He has been a finalist for the Shirley Jackson Award five times. His novel *Last Days* won the American Library Association›s award for Best Horror Novel of 2009. His novel *The Open Curtain* (Coffee House Press) was a finalist for an Edgar Award and an International Horror Guild Award. He is the recipient of three O. Henry Prizes as well as an NEA fellowship. His work has been translated into a dozen languages. He lives in Los Angeles and teaches in the Critical Studies Program at CalArts.

Graham Foust teaches in the undergraduate and graduate programs in the Department of English and Literary Arts at the University of Denver. He is the author of several books of poems, the most recent of which is *Nightingalelessness* (Flood Editions 2018).

Dan Fox is a writer and filmmaker living in New York, USA. He is the author of two books, *Limbo* and *Pretentiousness: Why It Matters.*

Benjamin S. Grossberg's books include *Space Traveler* (University of Tampa, 2014) and *Sweet Core Orchard,* winner of the Tampa Review Prize and a Lambda Literary Award. A new full-length collection, *My Husband Would*, is forthcoming from the University of Tampa Press.

Rachel Heng is the author of the novel *Suicide Club* (Henry Holt, 2018), which will be translated into ten languages worldwide and won the Gladstone Library Writer-In-Residence Award 2020. Rachel's short fiction has received a Pushcart Prize Special Mention and *Prairie Schooner*'s Jane Geske Award, and has appeared in *Glimmer Train, Guernica, McSweeney's Quarterly, The Kenyon Review, Best Singaporean Short Stories Vol. 4,* and elsewhere. Her nonfiction has been listed among *Best American Essays*'s Notable Essays and has been published in *The Rumpus, The Telegraph*, and elsewhere. Rachel

is currently a fiction fellow at the Michener Center for Writers, where she is pursuing her MFA in Fiction and Playwriting.

Michael Holt's writing has appeared in *Fence, Conjunctions, The Rupture, The Threepenny Review, and DIAGRAM.* He grew up in Seattle, and currently lives in San Francisco.

Ra Malika Imhotep is a Black feminist writer and performance artist from Atlanta, Georgia currently pursuing a doctoral degree in African Diaspora Studies at the University of California, Berkeley with a Designated Emphasis in New Media. Her academic and creative work tends the relationships between black femininity, southern vernacular aesthetics, and the performance of labor. In addition to being the co-convener of the embodied spiritual-political education project, The Church of Black Feminist Thought and a member of the curatorial collective, The Black Aesthetic; she was a 2019 Omi Arts 'Creative Arts Practice' Artist in Residence at Ashara Ekundayo Gallery and a 2019 DAMLI Fellow at the Cleveland Museum of Art

Nahal Suzanne Jamir's writing has been recently published or is forthcoming in journals like *Arts & Letters, Florida Review, Hayden's Ferry Review, North American Review, and South Dakota Review.* Her short fiction collection *In the Middle of Many Mountains* was published by Press 53. She obtained her PhD in Creative Writing from Florida State University and currently teaches as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Fiction at Oklahoma State University.

Originally from Tokyo and California, **Lisa Levin** is currently pursuing a PhD in Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan. The poem "Raven House Apartment" is from her manuscript, *Avian Economy*, a recipient of the 2018 Hopwood Award in Poetry.

A prolific and foremost translator and scholar of Latin American literature, **Suzanne Jill Levine**'s books include *Manuel Puig and the Spider Woman* and T*he Subversive Scribe: Translating Latin American Fiction.* Among her many honors including several PEN awards she has been a fellow of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. In the last decade her works include a five volume edition of the prose and poetry of Jorge Luis Borges for Penguin Classics and Cristina Rivera Garza's *The Taiga Syndrome*, winner of the Shirley Jackson award, finalist for the National Translation Award and for the 2020 International Dublin Literary Award. Her latest translation, for Seven Stories Press, is Guadalupe Nettle's *Bezoar and Other Unsettling Stories* (2020).

Esther Lin was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and lived in the United States as an undocumented immigrant for 21 years. She is a 2020 Writing Fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and the author of *The Ghost Wife*, winner of the 2017 Poetry Society of America's Chapbook Fellowship. She received the *Crab Orchard Review*'s 2018 Richard Peterson Prize. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Hyperallergic, The Missouri Review Online, Ploughshares, Triquarterly*, and elsewhere. A '17–'19 Wallace Stegner Fellow, she currently organizes for the Undocupoets, which promotes the work of undocumented poets and raises consciousness about the structural barriers they face in the literary community.

Maria Lioutaia was born in Moscow. She now lives and writes in Toronto, where she is working on a novel. Her fiction has appeared in *One Story, Tin House, Electric Literature's Recommended Reading*, and *Conjunctions*, among others. She holds an MFA from NYU, where she was a Goldwater Fellow. Her last name means "fierce" in Russian.

Luce López-Baralt is a Distinguished Professor (Insignis Professor) of Spanish and Comparative Literatures at the University of Puerto Rico. She has been awarded the Guggenheim, Fulbright, Erasmus, National Endowment for the Humanities and American Council for Learned Societies Fellowships; the Royal Order of Isabel la Católica, the Premio Internacional Henríquez Ureña and several honorary professorships in Spain and Latin America. She is Vicepresident of the Academia Puertorriqueña de la Lengua Española and correspondent of the Real Academia Española; and has been vicepresident of the Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas and a member of the board of several journals like the *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* (México), *Hispanística* (New Delhi), *Sigila* (Paris), *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos* (Granada) and the *Boletín de la Academia Puertorriqueña de la Lengua Española*. Her 30 books and more than 300 articles on comparative Spanish and Arabic literatures and mysticism, *aljamiado-moorish* and Latin American literatures have been published in Spanish, English, French, Italian, German, Portuguese, Croatian, Arabic, Dutch, Persian, Chinese and Urdu.

Randall Mann's fifth collection of poems, *A Better Life*, is forthcoming from Persea Books in April 2021. He lives in San Francisco.

Stephen Massimilla is a poet, scholar, professor, and painter. His latest multi-genre volume, *Cooking with the Muse: A Sumptuous Gathering of Seasonal Recipes, Culinary Poetry, and Literary Fare* (Tupelo, 2016), won the Eric Hoffer Book Award and many others. Previous books include *The Plague Doctor in His Hull-Shaped Hat* (an SFASU Press Prize selection); *Forty Floors from Yesterday* (Bordighera/CUNY Poetry Prize); *Later on Aiaia* (Grolier Poetry Prize); a critical study of myth in poetry; and translations of books by Neruda and others. His work has appeared recently in *AGNI, Barrow Street, Chelsea, Colorado Review, Denver Quarterly, The Literary Review, Poet Lore, Poetry Daily, The Southern Poetry Review, Verse Daily* and many other journals and anthologies. Massimilla holds an MFA and a PhD from Columbia University and teaches at Columbia University and The New School.

Jennifer Moss is the author of *A Goat from a Distance* (Dream Horse Press, 2017), and the chapbook *Beast, to Be Your Friend* (New Michigan Press, 2009). She lives in Seattle.

Zanele Muholi is a South African visual activist and photographer. For over a decade they have documented black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people's lives in various townships in South Africa. Muholi's self-proclaimed mission is "to re-write a black queer and trans visual history of South Africa for the world to know of our resistance and existence at the height of hate crimes in SA and beyond." Muholi was born in Umlazi, Durban and lives in Johannesburg. Solo exhibitions have taken place at institutions including the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Autograph ABP, London; Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town; the Mead Art Museum, Amherst; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Kulturhistorek Museum, Oslo; Einsteinhaus, Ulm; Schwules Museum, Berlin.

Muholi's work is included in the collections of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; the Brooklyn Museum; the Carnegie Museum of Art; the Guggenheim Museum; the Museum of Modern Art New York; the San Francisco Museum of Art; the Tate Modern, London; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and others.

Ben Murphy is a writer, teacher, and PhD candidate in American Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His dissertation focuses on crowd psychology in nineteenth-century culture. Writing on this and other topics can be found with *ASAP/J, boundary2, The Carolina Quarterly, The Chicago Review of Books, Configurations, Full Stop, The Millions, Mississippi Quarterly, Pedagogy and American Literary Studies, PopMatters,* and *symploke*.

Sierra Nelson is a Seattle-based poet and performance and installation artist. Her books include *I Take Back the Sponge Cake* collaborating with artist Loren Erdrich (Rose Metal Press) and *The Lachrymose Report* (Poetry NW Editions). She is a MacDowell Colony fellow, Pushcart Prize nominee, and Carolyn Kizer Prize winner. Her poems have appeared in *Crazyhorse, Tin House, Pleiades, Poetry Northwest,* Iceland's SIM Gallery, the Seattle Aquarium, the Slovenian Natural History Museum, and elsewhere. Find her online at songsforsquid.tumblr.com.

JoAnna Novak is the author of the novel *I Must Have You* (2017), the book-length poem *Noirmania* (2018), and the poetry collection *Abeyance, North America* (2020). Her work has appeared in publications including *The Paris Review, The New York Times, The Atlantic,* the *Washington Post, Guernica*, and *BOMB*. She is a co-founder of the literary journal and chapbook publisher, *Tammy*.

Carolyn Orosz lives and writes in Northern California. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Forklift Ohio, Passages North, DIAGRAM,* and elsewhere.

Dayna Patterson is the author of *Titania in Yellow* (Porkbelly Press, 2019) and *If Mother Braids a Waterfall* (Signature Books, 2020). Her creative work has appeared recently in *AGNI, POETRY,* and *Sugar House Review*, among others. She is the founding editor-in-chief of *Psaltery & Lyre* and a co-editor of *Dove Song: Heavenly Mother in Mormon Poetry*. She has been a Sustainable Arts Fellow at Mineral School Artist's Residency and was a Best of the Net finalist in 2018. Find her online at www.daynapatterson.com.

Megan Peak received her MFA in Poetry from The Ohio State University, where she was former Poetry Editor at *The Journal*. Her first book of poetry, *Girldom*, won the 2018 Perugia Press Prize from Perugia Press and 2019 The John A. Robertson Award for Best First Book of Poetry from the Texas Institute of Letters. She lives in Fort Worth, TX with her son, Auden.

Alison Pelegrin is the author of four poetry collections, most recently *Waterlines* (LSU Press). She is the recipient of fellowships from the NEA and the Louisiana Division of the Arts, and she has new work featured or forthcoming in *Crazyhorse*, *The Bennington Review*, and *Tin House*.

Fátima Policarpo is a Portuguese-American writer. Her fiction and nonfiction has appeared in *Ninth Letter* and *Fourth Genre*, and her work has been supported by the Barbara Deming Memorial Fund, the Luso-American Foundation, and by a National Endowment for the Arts/Sustainable Arts Parent Fellowship. She is currently working on a nonfiction manuscript about the roots and enduring effects of various forms of violence against women.

Nathaniel Popkin is the author of three novels, most recently *The Year of The Return*, and three nonfiction books. He is co-author (with Stephanie Feldman) of the anthology *Who Will Speak for America?* His work has appeared in *The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Tablet, Public Books, The Kenyon Review, LitHub,* and *Rain Taxi*. Popkin is writer of the film *Sisters in Freedom*, winner of the 2019 Mid-Atlantic Emmy for best documentary.

D. A. Powell's books include *Repast* and *Useless Landscape, or A Guide for Boys*, both from Graywolf Press. Powell received the 2019 John Updike Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He teaches at University of San Francisco.

Supritha Rajan lives in Rochester, NY.

Deborah Roberts is a mixed media artist whose work challenges the notion of ideal beauty. Her work has been exhibited internationally across the USA and Europe. Her work is in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Brooklyn Museum, The Studio Museum in Harlem, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Block Museum of Art, Blanton Museum of Art, Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Montclair Art Museum, and The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery. Roberts is the recipient of the Anonymous Was a Woman Grant (2018), the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant (2016) and a Ginsberg-Klaus Award Fellowship (2014). She received her MFA from Syracuse University, New York. She lives and works in Austin, Texas. Roberts is represented by Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

Kristin Robertson is the author of *Surgical Wing* (Alice James Books). Her poetry appears in *Ploughshares, The Southern Review, The Threepenny Review,* and *Five Points.* She is an assistant professor and director of the creative writing program at Tennessee Wesleyan University.

Jennifer Russell is a translator from the Danish and English based in Berlin. Her translations have appeared in *EuropeNow* and *Poetry International*. She holds a BA in Art History and English from the University of St Andrews and an MA in Critical Studies from the Pacific Northwest College of Art.

Ursula Scavenius is a writer based in Copenhagen. She is a graduate of the Danish Academy of Creative Writing and holds a Master's in comparative literature and Italian from the University of Copenhagen. She debuted in 2015 with the short story collection *Fjer*, which won the Bodil and Jørgen Munch-Christensen Prize for debut novels and was nominated for the Montana Prize for Fiction. Her second book, *Dukkerne*, was published in January 2020.

Carrie Shipers's poems have appeared in *Crab Orchard Review, Hayden's Ferry Review, New England Review, North American Review, Prairie Schooner, The Southern Review*, and other journals. She is the author of *Ordinary Mourning* (ABZ, 2010), *Cause for Concern* (Able Muse, 2015), *Family Resemblances* (University of New Mexico, 2016), and *Grief Land* (University of New Mexico, 2020).

Anthony Sutton resides on former Akokiksas, Atakapa, Karankawa, and Sana land (currently named Houston, TX) and has had poems appear or forthcoming in *Rabbit Catastrophe, Grist, The Journal, Passages North, Prairie Schooner, Puerto del Sol, Quarter After Eight, Third Coast,* and elsewhere.

Jill Talbot is the author of *The Way We Weren't: A Memoir* and the editor of *Metawritings: Toward a Theory of Nonfiction*. Her writing has appeared in journals such as *AGNI, Brevity, Colorado Review, Diagram, The Normal School, The Paris Review Daily*, and *River Teeth* and has been recognized by *The Best American Essays*. She is Associate Professor of creative writing program at the University of North Texas.

Craig Morgan Teicher is the author, most recently, of the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize-winning *The Trembling Answers* (BOA, 2017) and the essay collection *We Begin in Gladness: How Poets Progress* (Graywolf, 2018). His fourth book of poems is due out from BOA in 2021.

Joseph Earl Thomas is a writer from Northeast Philly whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Philadelphia Printworks, Philadelphia Stories, The Offing,* and *The Kenyon Review.* After earning an MFA in prose from The University of Notre Dame, he began studying English as a PhD student at The University of Pennsylvania. Joseph has also received fellowships from VONA, Tin House, and Bread Loaf Writers' Conferences. Currently, he's working on a memoir called Sink, about coming of age as an undereducated blerd in the city, and a novel, God Bless You Otis Spunkmeyer.

Kieron Walquist lives in Missouri. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Arts & Letters, Daily Science Fiction, fresh.ink, Gingerbread House, Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle, Vending Machine Press, X-R-A-Y,* and more. He's the recipient of the 2019 Cecil A. Blue Award and the 2018 Holman-Teabeau Blue Award from Lincoln University, and has placed first in the Original Fiction category at the 2019 Sigma Tau Delta International Convention. This is his first poetry publication.

Ronaldo V. Wilson, PhD is the author of *Narrative of the Life of the Brown Boy and the White Man,* winner of the 2007 Cave Canem Prize, and *Poems of the Black Object*, winner of the Thom Gunn Award for Gay Poetry and the Asian American Literary Award in Poetry in 2010. His latest books are *Farther Traveler: Poetry, Prose, Other,* finalist for a Thom Gunn Award for Gay Poetry, and *Lucy 72.* Co-founder of the Black Took Collective, Wilson is also a mixed media artist, dancer and performer. He has recently revealed his work in multiple venues, including the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, UC Riverside's Artsblock, Georgetown's Lannan Center, Southern Exposure Gallery, the Atlantic Center for the Arts, Louisiana State University's Digital Media Center Theater, Tube Factory artspace in Indianapolis, and Casa Victoria Ocampo in Buenos Aires. The recipient of fellowships from The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, Cave Canem, the Djerassi Resident Artists Program, the Ford Foundation, Kundiman, MacDowell, the National Research Council, the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, the Center for Art and Thought (CA+T), and Yaddo, Wilson is currently Professor

of Creative Writing and Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, serving on the core faculty of the Creative Critical PhD Program, and on Principal Faculty of CRES (Critical Race and Ethnic Studies). He splits his time between California and New York.

Khaty Xiong is a poet from Fresno, California. She is the author of debut collection, *Poor Anima* (Apogee Press, 2015), which holds the distinction of being the first full-length collection of poetry published by a Hmong American woman in the United States. Xiong's work has been featured in *Poetry, The Margins, Seneca Review, Academy of American Poets,* the *New York Times, How Do I Begin?: A Hmong American Literary Anthology* (Heyday, 2011), and elsewhere. Her poem, "On Visiting the Franklin Park Conservatory & Botanical Gardens" was highlighted at the Poetry Foundation Gallery in an immersive poetry installation (June–September) in Chicago, which centered on the conversation of grief and loss. She's been awarded a Vermont Studio Center Fellowship from the Ohio Arts Council (2020), the Roxane Gay Fellowship in Poetry from Jack Jones Literary Arts (2019), the Nadya Aisenberg Fellowship at The MacDowell Colony (2017), and an Individual Excellence Award from the Ohio Arts Council (2016) in recognition of her poetry.

Emily Yong was born in Hong Kong and was raised in Brooklyn, New York. She graduated from Yale University with a BA, cum laude, in Philosophy. Her poems have been published in *The Kenyon Review, Spillway, Alaska Quarterly Review, Beloit Poetry Journal*, and the Southampton Review. She was the Rona Jaffe Foundation Poetry Scholar at Bread Loaf Writers Conference in 2015. She currently lives in the San Francisco Bay Area where she is a practicing physician in internal medicine.

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Kathleen Boland	*The Air Between Us*
Sarah Braunstein	*Danger*
K. Ming Chang	*Baba*
Brenda Peynado	*Eyewall*
	We've Forgotten the Candy
Weike Wang	*The Poster*

POETRY

Jake Bauer	*Four Seasons*
Armando Jaramillo Garcia	*The Ideal Form*
Miriam Bird Greenberg	*Of Fennel & Kintsugi*
Carlie Hoffman	*I Remember the Rabbits of Sasso Field*
Song Lin, trans. by **Dong Li**	from *Fragments and Farewell Songs*
Louise Mathias	*Last Chance Range*
	Stole
Eleni Sikelianos	*lacrimal bone*
	Unmane
	Wrong

NONFICTION

Kelsey Englert	*Cold-Hardy*
Hugh Martin	*Shrapnel*
Allison Grace Myers	*These Thin Green Hints*
Alysia Sawchyn	*Withdrawal*

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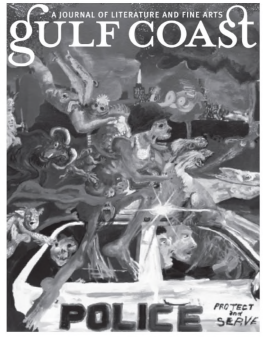

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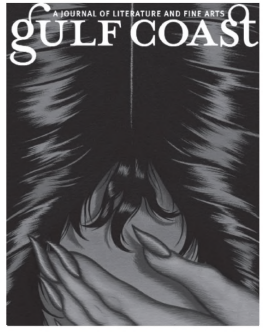

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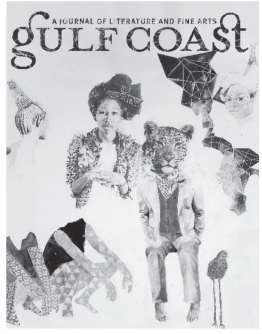

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