A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

GULF COAST



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Dear Readers,

What turns a space into a home and how do we feel the difference? Is it a change within the walls or what those walls protect us from? Is it the language we find inside them or the language we lose when we take that first precarious step out?

As I began to pour over the works accumulated in this issue, these are the whispered questions I heard bouncing off the walls of my quiet Houston apartment. From the porousness of langauge as home and home in translation found in Samyak Shertok's "Dear Unborn Moonbug" to the power of words redacted in M.L. Martin's "& [Gife]," these works remind that language just outside of stable defintion informs our sense of self just as much as what is clearly defined. Or, as Matthew Vollmer poses in his piece "Bones," our language exists as "an unseen network of interlocking secrets" inside us. Readers of this issue will leave more attuned to the secrets of the spaces that make us *us*, that we dare to call *ours* (a body, a state, a language, a home).

Inside the pages of *Altered Space: A poetry curation* assembled by guest editor francine j. harris, readers will experience the myriad ways these spaces can be shaped: (temporarily) willed into a refuge in "This is a room where nothing can happen." by Donika Kelly, for example, or cut through by the news from outside as "cicadas discuss the world while the sun / creeps away" in Niki Herd's "Lyric Sung in Third Person." These poems show that our insides are always reacting to what happens outside us.

To be sure, these instabilities—these myriad causes of change—are not easy to live inside. Whether it's the violent ideologies of nation indicted in many of the poems in this issue like Julie Gibbs' "The Perfect Shirt of America" or the untraversable distance between a child reaching out and her absent parent in Susan Sanford Blades' "Sophie Martineau on Bass" to the various griefs of parenthood in Jennifer S. Cheng's "We Bury What We Cannot Bear to Lose" and Julie Gray's "Run, Zebra," what molds the space we live inside can be as profound and violent as the ever-shifting weather.

Yet, as seen in the art of Lanecia Rouse Tinsley and Inés Verdugo featured in this issue, there are many ways to grant a house a fullness, to honor the bodies inside those spaces and the structures that house them. As the narrator of Travis Eisenbise's story "Honey: A Preface" shows, even when a space a parent or a village—whatever it is that makes a home a home—fails us, it's always a part of us and the impressions left are permanent. In the wake of the mass shooting that occurred just a few hundred miles west of Houston in Uvalde, Texas, I'm left hoping these collective failures can be rectified, that maybe this persistent struggle to understand what we're a part of can help us find the questions we need to ask.

Long after reading these pieces, what resonates most loudly for me is their questions. I think if you read this issue alone in the quiet, you'll hear them too.

Ryan Bollenbach
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THE 2022 GULF COAST PRIZE IN POETRY

Judged by Jennifer Chang

Winner, Samyak Shertok

"Dear Unborn Moonbug" is a breathtaking feat of profound feeling and expert craft. The poem exemplifies how language can make the past and the future ecstatically alive. Wielding the ghazal form with effervescent energy, the poet gives a language lesson that is also a story of migration, loss, and reinvention. It is through language that the poet makes whole what history has halved, connecting us to a parent's tenderness towards an unborn child, to ancestors and all the other ghosts that make the entire endeavor of poem-making/language-learning/life-building so very meaningful.

—Jennifer Chang

Honorable Mentions:
"In the Six Killings of Nazis by Macario Garcia, "There Is a Lineage" by Reyes Ramirez
& "Plot Holes " by Rebecca Martin

Dear Unborn Moonbug,

—after Agha Shahid Ali

What could not be written, Maya, was foretold in Tamang.
The scroll is blank just as the sky is empty: behold in Tamang!

The first Tamang word I learned to speak: .
Some nights I repeat … a blindfold—in Tamang.

Orphaned mother. Star-threshed hand. Phantom ink I drink.
Ta-Mang: Horse-Ghost. I did not say the horse was dead in Tamang.

The horse, fleeing the arrowheads, became thirsty. The horse, feeling
the fire, became the river. We drank her cold cold in Tamang.

"*: the womb not tear to, golden hooves the foal with is born…*" This dream
of the Ghost Translator, bought in jackal howls, sold in Tamang.

Hour of the black danphe. Subzero. We left with only a fistful
of the hearth-ash and a persimmon halved then wholed in Tamang.

A letter to the letter that is only mouth. To read it, swallow the sky,
then : Little Ghost, ghosts never get old in Tamang.

Samyak Shertok

You keep asking me what our ancestral name means. Listen. In tongue
X means "Double-Born," X means "Unburnt Gold" in Tamang.

THE 2022 GULF COAST PRIZE IN NONFICTION

Judged by José Vadi

Winner, May-lee Chai

How do we use writing to critique the structures that shape and impact our lives while honoring the victims of those structures—their stories, dreams, families? This is one of many questions I had after reading Revolutionary Acts. As the author attempts to write about persecuted early 20th century Chinese writer Ding Ling, this piece explores the author's own lifetime of received anti-Asian hate crimes. Tense scenes with a bare, deft prose allow the impact of these truly haunting incidents to resonate across the page into a fever pitch. At its conclusion, the author visualizes how a single decision can feel like an attempt to correct generations of injustice—of how revolution is both intergenerational and accessible—a product of everyday moments and experiences that define who we are, what we stand for, what we fight for. I am thankful the protagonist of this essay reminded me of this, and many more thoughts, upon reading this challenging, well-written, and inventive winner of the 2022 Gulf Coast Journal Prize for Nonfiction.

—José Vadi

Honorable Mentions:
"The Thief of Always" by Alexander Lumans
& "Visiting Mama" by N.R. Robinson

May-lee Chai

Revolutionary Acts

I have been wanting to write an essay about the Chinese woman writer Ding Ling, but for the longest time I could not muster the energy amid the pandemic and the continuing onslaught of anti-Asian attacks.

This past fall, I reported my ninth anti-Asian hate incident since the start of the pandemic. I was walking in my neighborhood in San Francisco around 5:15 pm after a long day of Zoom meetings when I saw two young, twenty-something White men walking towards me. One of them pulled at the corner of his right eye with one finger. I stared at him, wondering, Is he doing what I think he's doing? But of course he was. The universal chink-eye gesture.

My heart fell to my stomach and I was in first grade all over again, thinking, Is he looking at me? Then he put his hand over his mouth and nose and stared straight at me, making fun of my mask. I picked up my pace as the second White man said, "And she was even wearing gloves." The first one snickered, and the second one shouted, "Hey, take off your gloves!"

I crossed to the other side of the street and hurried as fast as I could to the intersection, where it was busier, there were open businesses. I felt safer, but not safe. I felt stupid and shamed and humiliated, the way I had when White girls in school had made fun of the way I dressed, my hair, my glasses. When do I ever grow up? As a child, I'd assumed that once I was grown up, I would be safe.

Ding Ling was one of my favorite writers when I first started studying Chinese in college. I read her most famous story, *Miss Sophie's Diary*, in translation in a Chinese history class then later in the original Chinese in grad school for a literature class. She was considered a "revolutionary" writer, writing for women's liberation, sexual and political.

I had never before read a story centering a young Chinese woman moving to a city, living on her own, writing about her feelings, her sexual awakening, her

perceptions of the world, her rather sardonic comments about the vanities and foibles of the people around her. Growing up in the U.S, I had never been assigned a single book or story about a Chinese girl or woman much less written by a Chinese woman in any of my classes in my public schools. Bookworm friends had tried to get me to read *The Good Earth* in fifth grade but I hadn't wanted to read about a Chinese woman portrayed as a nonstop victim. Here, in Ding Ling, I found the protagonist I'd been looking for: fully human, respected by her author. I could see why Ding Ling had become a sensation when she first published this story in 1927. Two generations later when I discovered her, the writing was still startlingly fresh.

Ding Ling was part of the May Fourth generation of writers who were inventing the Chinese vernacular. Before them, all literature was written in classical Chinese but the May Fourth generation wrote as Chinese was spoken. They wanted to write so that young people could read their writing, not just the elite scholars. They wrote for a new generation. For example in "Miss Sophie's Diary," Ding Ling's prose mixes the vernacular of spoken Chinese with phrases transliterated from other languages, like the name the titular character who decides to call herself "Sophie" (莎菲), reflecting the international character of its Shanghai setting. Told in the form of entries in a diary, the protagonist mulls over her potential lovers, contemplating the men who try to woo her, noting her pleasure or disdain at their efforts, expressing bisexual feelings towards a friend. She writes of illness and exhaustion, of hope and desire. It is the story of a young woman who sees herself as part of a larger world while centering her own emotions and experiences of that world.

Ding Ling is the pen name that the author, born Jiang Binzhi, chose in order to evoke the sound of a bell to wake people up to possibility of revolution.

According to StopAAPIHATE.org, more than 10,900 hate incidents were reported to them between March 2020 and December 2021. More than 60 percent were reported by women. In a patriarchy it should not be a surprise that anger falls upon women's bodies.

Shortly after the chink-eye incident, I hear on my local public radio station a report about White parents of adopted Asian children feeling panicked by the anti-Asian hate incidents across the country. The parents were reaching out to the adoption agencies for help on how to talk about racism to their children. One parent said with dismay that she felt the conversation about racism was going to be so "hard."

Hard for whom? I wonder. I'm sure the Asian children of non-Asian parents are already well aware of the racism they face in U.S. society.

I can't remember when exactly I first heard a racist remark directed at me. Was it in first grade when the White boy in my elementary school in New Jersey sang the ditty, "My father is Chinese, my mother is Japanese, look what I turned out to be" and then pulled his eyes back?

Generation after generation of non-Asians have learned somehow, somewhere to make this gesture. I've seen it on schoolyards, on sidewalks, on television shows, in the U.S. and in Europe. Is there a secret club somewhere, and this gesture the code for inclusion?

I realize that I'm really tired of think pieces that center non-Asian people trying to figure out how to have this hard conversation with their Asian children about racism.

Instead I would like to see an article where non-Asian people examine the first time that they heard anti-Asian jokes or slurs. Was it in elementary school or at home? Were they taught to laugh along? Or to remain politely silent? Did it make them feel powerful?

I want the interviewer to ask when they will start to speak up when they hear an anti-Asian joke or slur. What kind of revolution would it take?

Ding Ling joined the Communist Party as a young woman, followed Mao Zedong to Yan'an to wait out the Sino-Japanese war. She wrote a stinging essay

critiquing the Communist Party for abusing women, for its sexism and patriarchy. In 1942 Mao gave a talk at Yan'an in which he famously, among other things, banned the use of irony in literature as being against the tenets of socialist realism and thus counter-revolutionary. Irony was also harder for his censors to detect. In grad school, I was told this edict was directed in part at Ding Ling. Her bright, mocking pen attracted followers to her critiques. Young people liked her rebukes of the hypocrisy within party ranks, but Mao sensed a threat, and she was forced to publicly apologize.

After the Communists won the civil war in 1949, Ding Ling fell into more political trouble. In 1957 she was sentenced to prison for five years, in an anti-rightest campaign, for not being ideologically pure enough. The sensuous details and emphasis on the emotional life of her characters were now seen as bourgeois affectations rather than revolutionary. Later she was sent to work on a collective farm for nearly two decades, where she said she nearly starved.

She was rehabilitated publicly in 1978 and continued to write. She won prizes. She remained a firm believer in the Communist revolution.

It's been such a long time you've been in love with me, Wei. But has he won me? Of course, it's not my fault at all. It's how a woman is supposed to behave. In fact, I've been very straight with him. I don't believe there's another woman who wouldn't have made a fool of him. Besides, I really and truly feel sorry for him. Sometimes I can't stop my wanting to say to him, "Can't you change your tactics, Wei? The way you're acting only gets me down." Yes, if Wei weren't so stupid, I could like him a lot better. But all he can do is make this sincere parade of his devotion. Wei was satisfied to see my smile.—Ding Ling, "Miss Sophie's Diary" (translated by W.J.F. Jenner).

Late in her life, Ding Ling was interviewed on film praising Mao for his stewardship of the Communist Party and the Communist Revolution. In one segment of the film that I was shown, I recall that she had a wooden slanted board

hanging around her neck. At first glance it seemed like a device for torture, like the "cangues" of old that were fixed around prisoner's necks, holding their hands and heads in place. But in fact it was a make-shift writing desk fashioned for her by a family member. She had spinal disc injuries, apparently suffered during her years in prison or hard labor, she could no longer bear to sit down, could not sit at a desk or table. Still she had a desperate need to write, and so someone had constructed this portable desk for her, which allowed her to stand and write with pen in one hand, paper on the slat.

It's been decades since I've seen the film and I can't find a copy of it online. I remember one refrain in particular, however:

I am writing a book about my mother.

In prison I began this book about my mother.

I am writing about my mother's life, Ding Ling repeated over and over and over, in the film meant to show that the great socialist and revolutionary writer was alive and well.

She was alive, but she no longer seemed physically or mentally well, but still this urge to write remained.

"I am writing a book about my mother," she said.

In 2018 I was invited to give a talk about my writing at Nanjing University, my alma mater in China, because of the book, *The Girl from Purple Mountain*, that I'd written about my grandmother. She had been a young woman in the era of Ding Ling, and she had to fight many battles as a woman: against an arranged marriage, insisting she would only marry a man she had gotten to know first; against her father, who tried to disinherit her after her mother died; against her in-laws, who tried to move into her house and treat her like a servant; against her brother-in-law, who tried to steal one of her sons; against the invading Japanese Army, who were targeting women and girls for rape as a weapon of war. By the time she immigrated to the United States in 1955, my grandmother was no longer young, and the battles she would have to face as a Chinese woman in a White supremacist and patriarchal country were just beginning.

After my talk, many young women came up to me to talk about the stories they wanted to write.

"I want to write about my mother," several of them said.

"I want to write about my grandmother," another said. "She really suffered."

"Nobody has told this story before," they all said.

All these missing stories of Chinese women.

While I am thinking of writing my essay, at the start of the new year and the new semester, I am called a gender slur in a workplace meeting. We'd been discussing our campus Covid protocols, when a colleague mentioned that a certain celebrity had died and there was a digression about just how famous this person was, how many records he'd sold. I mentioned in chat that the celebrity was known as an anti-vaxxer.

Suddenly a man's voice boomed out: *What a cunt! She's glad he died because he's unvaccinated.*

I was so surprised, my heart plunged, my body froze. I felt as though I've been stabbed. The anger in this man's voice was visceral.

My first impulse as a woman was to try to bring the anger down. A man's anger was so often prelude to violence. "I'm sorry," I said. Even as I apologized, I cringed internally, why am I the one apologizing? My heart was racing with fear, and I could not stop explaining, "I'm not happy he died. I don't want anyone to die of Covid." I babbled on. A colleague later told me I said we shouldn't valorize the celebrity who tried to discourage others from getting vaccinated.

I don't remember being so articulate. I just remember the fear, my heart jolting, the shock. Whose voice is this? Why is he so angry at me? What will happen?

The last time I heard anyone say the c-word out loud, I was twelve, and my family had just moved from New Jersey to South Dakota. A White man drove by our house and shouted this word out the window of his car. Later White men would drive by our house shooting, first in the middle of the night, and then during daylight hours. Over the years they would shoot and kill five of our dogs. I

was told to my face by the White children of the White men in our community that God had wanted to keep the races separated and that is why he put them on different continents. My brother and I, as the biological children of a Chinese man and White woman, were a sign of the coming End Times when Satan would reign under a one-world government. At first I thought, This is crazy. But hate being irrational does not make it less pervasive in a given community or a nation. The hate once rationalized by various institutions and people in power can become pervasive, internalized, forming its own reality. Those who know better need only be silent for the hate to continue.

I saw a portion of the Ding Ling film in a Chinese language class in an Ivy League school many years after her death. I was still a young woman, in my early twenties. I was visiting a friend I'd met at a summer Chinese language program. He wanted me to meet his teacher who was going to lecture on Ding Ling. My friend knew I was a fan of her writing.

However, the day of the lecture, the professor denounced Ding Ling, mocked her in fact. He called her an apologist for Mao. "I would never make excuses for the Cultural Revolution," the man said.

The professor had not lived in China during these decades of political tumult. It was easy for him to denounce Ding Ling, who'd survived years of prison, because he felt superior to her: Who was this weak woman, this apologist?

I was a fan of Ding Ling, but I was young and socialized to respect all teachers, I did not want to make trouble for my friend, who after all had sought the professor's permission so that I could attend and who would be graded by this man. After living for years in a community that devalued my existence, I was shy, unsure of myself, anxious. I did not dare speak up for Ding Ling.

I see how easily one is intimidated into silence, even when the stakes are so very, very small.

Is this excessive when I report every incident of hate, even if it does not result in overt violence? I wonder.

I worry that other people will think I'm overreacting and think less of me. I worry that speaking up will do no good, no one will believe me, they'll think I'm the one at fault, why am I complaining, someone else has it worse.

As a child, I learned to be a pre-emptive worrier. If I could imagine a catastrophe, then I could prevent it from happening. The worst things always seemed to come out of the blue.

Growing up in predominantly White communities, I experienced quite a selection of racist microaggressions. When the White people in our town in South Dakota called my father and brother and me slurs, chink and jap and gook, my mother did not respond. She'd look away. When I tried to tell her about bullying in school, she'd walk away or else she'd get angry. If I cried, she grew even angrier. She could be sarcastic. She could call me a "sourpuss" and tell me to stop ruining the holidays or dinner or a family photo, whatever the occasion, when she wanted me to smile!

"Don't you want to make your mother happy?" she'd exhort, she'd accuse.

But sometimes when I told her about the latest racist incident, something my brother or I experienced at school, she'd crumble.

Even when furious and mean, my mother was at least still an adult, but the sobbing truly terrified me. My heart raced, my stomach flipped, I would apologize immediately, trying to console her. Because when she cried, I felt I had truly lost my mother, and in her place, I was left with this child.

But for all her accommodations to the White supremacists, it didn't spare her their ignorant racist wrath. An anonymous letter was mailed to our house once, addressed in printed black letters to "THE CHINAMAN AND THE FLOOZY."

When I was in my twenties, my mother died of cancer. I was in grad school still, and she and I never got to talk about the racism and violence that our family

had experienced when I was growing up. First I was too young, then I was away from home in college, then working, then grad school, and then she was ill and it seemed inappropriate to worry her. We never got to process our trauma, as a therapist might say.

What would I tell my mother if she had lived? What would I want to tell her now?

But no, I'm not being honest. If she returned, I wouldn't bother with any of that. I'd simply cry out, "Mama, you're back! You're alive!" I'd wonder what the other side was like. Could she remember? Or would death have been simply another horrific experience, like the abuse she'd suffered as a child at the hands of her parents, one more thing that she'd need to block out, dissociate from, re-enact?

This line of thought is absurd, of course. My mother is dead. I am the body she left behind.

Four months after Ding Ling's death in 1986, the *New York Times* ran a review of a series of translations of five Chinese authors under the title "Rebels, Victims and Apologists" in which the male reviewer wrote of Ding Ling's known love affairs with two prominent male writers. He included this assessment, "Her fame rests on this remarkable life, and rightly so. It rests less securely on her fiction." The male writer did not mention any of the known love affairs of the three male authors in the review. This is a choice. This is a misogynistic choice that a man made in a patriarchy when he wanted to belittle a woman writer.

In the unattributed obituary from a wire service that ran in the *Los Angeles Times*, Ding Ling was labeled a "controversial" author but she was given the last word on her own writings: "No matter what we write, we must proceed from life and describe it in depth, warm-heartedly and in a detailed and bold fashion. No matter how much we shock or anger the readers, in the end we must give them strength, leaving them with a picture of the future. Our literature must be thought-provoking and encourage people to march forward."

It takes me a long time to find the proper method to report the hate incident in which I was called the c-word in a workplace meeting. Women in other universities warn me that I may be disappointed by the results. They tell me their Title IX horror stories. I spend seventy hours the first month just collecting information on how to report the incident and to whom.

I steel myself and tell my story to another person and another person and another person, report after report after report.

Finally the union advocate asks me to think about my "asks," what remedies do I ultimately want?

I realize that I don't know what to write in this part of the form.

I want to feel safe again, but that of course is impossible. I am a woman living in a patriarchy, a Chinese woman in a White-supremacist society.

For days I cannot think of how to answer this question of remedy and I consider not filing my report at all. I speak to my female colleagues, and hear more stories of bureaucrats past, of all the years and decades and lifetimes of incidents without remedy. I feel despair like a heavy weight upon my chest. Drained, I cannot finish even the simple two pages of the incident report. I go to bed early, then lie tossing and turning, doom scrolling through Twitter, reading of new variants.

The next morning, I wake up late. It is almost noon and the sun is pouring through my blinds directly onto my face. I cannot remember a single dream. I've entered a state of exhaustion so complete, then I'm no longer aware of feeling tired or despairing or anything at all. I look at my to-do list for the day, finish the university's reporting form, and then hit send.

There is no perfect remedy, but I have chosen three, and in the meantime I have filed my report. I have chosen to bear witness to the unfairness of misogyny and slurs. I am not exactly hopeful, it is not my nature, but I am determined. I feel, rather than hope, a certain satisfaction that in reporting that man's misogyny, I have centered myself as a human worthy of respect. As Ding Ling and her many fans understood, such writing is a revolutionary act.

THE 2022 GULF COAST PRIZE IN FICTION

Judged by Michah Dean Hicks

Winner, Emma Binder

Fast-moving and heavy as a train. Built neat as a house, every brick and shingle in its place. Each sentence full of gunpowder. Cruelty sugared with glee. And oh, such heart, longing wide and sharp enough to cleave you right in half.

—Micah Dean Hicks

Honorable Mentions:
"The Inherent Danger of Repetition"
by An Chang Joon
& "The Proposal" by Nadiya Shabnam

Emma Binder

Roy

In the summer between seventh and eighth grade, my dad's brother, Uncle Roy, came to watch my sister Missy and me while our parents saw our Grandma Lori die. Lori lived in an aluminum shack down in Nebraska; she was our mom's mother, but our mom couldn't travel two states southward alone, couldn't be trusted to drive herself. That summer, she was trapped in her brain's dark aquarium, prone to sobbing while drying dishes or seeing something bloody on TV. Over breakfast, she once glimpsed a prop plane flicker through the window in the sky, wandered out there in bare feet to look at it, and didn't return until the next morning. She needed our dad to chaperone.

Missy and I had never met Uncle Roy, but we'd seen a single photo: in it, he stood on a dirt road outside his slouch-roofed ranch house in the Upper Peninsula, wearing denim overalls and no shoes, head globed in wiry red hair. He looked nothing like our dad. To embroider the scene, Roy held a scrawny raccoon aloft in his hands like it was Simba in *The Lion King*. He and our dad only talked once a year, on Christmas, but he was the only person they could find to watch us on short notice.

We'd also heard stories: Roy drank too much, ate skinned snakes and possums. Roy, at ten years old, tried to train-hop from Iron Mountain to the Catskills to live in a hollowed-out tree. Roy had once hosted a poker game where a man got shot, but when the police arrived, they found no gun and a room full of men who claimed the bullet came through the window.

"If he starts drinking, call us," our dad said to me the day before Roy arrived. "If he brings anyone over, call us. He promised not to bring a gun, but if he does, what do you do?"

"Call you," I said.

On the day they left, Roy careened too fast into our neat gravel driveway in the North Woods, driving an old Ford Ranchero with blisters of rust on its matte black hood. It was mid-July. I could hear aluminum cans and loose tools sliding

around his truck bed. By the time he pulled up, our mom was already in the car with her purse and suitcase, lying fully prostrate in the backseat.

Before our dad left the house, he bent to kiss my and Missy's foreheads. "If there was anything I could do, I'd do it," he said.

From our bedroom, Missy and I heard Roy and our dad exchange muffled words in the kitchen. Then the kitchen door slammed, and we heard our dad backing his car down the driveway. Missy and I crept out of our room. We found Roy drinking a carton of apple juice in the kitchen. He looked like he did in his photo but older: his coarse orange hair wild but tinseled silver, his clothes faded as if leached of their color by rain. A violet scar stretched from his temple to his chin, cleaving his face like a crack in a vase. He looked at us and grinned. A tooth was missing from either side of his mouth.

"My nieces," he said. "In living color. You two look just like your mom."

He put down the juice and started pulling drawers in the kitchen and pantry. He rummaged through the fridge and freezer, opening jars of vinegar and bacon grease to smell what was inside. Then he started on the living room, opening desk drawers, slipping spare quarters and matchbooks in his pockets. Missy and I waited in the kitchen, listening to him scrounge through all the rooms of our house, until we finally heard him make his way to our bedroom.

I marched into the hallway and found him standing in our doorway.

"That's our room," I said, standing before him with my arms crossed. Missy stood behind me, watching. He turned around.

"I get it," Roy said, slowly looking from Missy to me. "She's the princess, and you're the tough guy."

Missy and I both blushed with pleasure.

That night, Roy told us he was off to find a drink, and peeled down the driveway in his Ranchero. Two hours later, he marched into the kitchen with a twelve-pack of Miller, three scratch tickets, and a rifle wedged under his armpit. As soon as Missy saw the gun, she started to cry.

"Don't worry," Roy said. "I'll show you how to hold it."

"We need to eat dinner," I said.

"Sure," Roy said. "I know that."

Roy cracked a beer and got cooking: hamburger helper from the pantry, fried in Crisco and Kraft steak sauce. The room bloomed with steam and the smell of fat. Missy, at eight years old, hung in the kitchen doorway, while I sat at the kitchen table, watching Roy drink two, three, four beers in the span of a half hour.

"Is it true you eat snakes?" Missy said shyly, half-hiding behind the doorway.

"I've been known to eat a snake or two," he said. "But that's not the craziest thing I've ate."

He'd eaten cow tongues, he told us, shoe tongues, cattails, prison food. He'd eaten hundred-year-old pickled eggs from behind a bar shelf in Houghton. You're lying, we said, and he shrugged, then set two bowls before us of hamburger helper that turned my stomach before I even tasted it. Roy himself didn't eat it, just headed to the screened-in porch with a beer in his front overalls pocket and a pouch of tobacco. Smoke wafted through the kitchen window and mingled with the overhead lamplight, at which point I realized that smoke was still curling from the stove. I got up to shut off the burner, and when I turned around, I found Missy dramatically scraping her meal into the garbage.

"When are Mom and Dad coming back?" she said, eyes glassed over with tears.

"Not until Lori dies," I said. I squeezed her shoulder. "Come on. It's not like Mom does much better."

Roy wobbled back inside, garbed in cigarette smoke, and handed us each a scratch ticket. He showed us how to rub off its coating with a penny. Missy gave a yelp: she'd won twenty dollars.

"Lucky girl," he said. "I'll redeem that for you." Missy handed him the ticket and he slid it into his pocket, never to be seen again.

That summer, I'd just become friends with two girls from school named Natalie Golding and Lauren Shipley. I already knew that our friendship wasn't

going to last, but I felt lucky to have friends at all. I'd been eating lunch by myself for years. They treated me like a project they'd undertaken with burdened hearts: they somberly taught me how to braid my hair at sleepovers, told me what music to listen to, sternly chided me when I said something odd. One night they dressed me up in Natalie's clothes, since she and I were supposedly the same size: flare jeans, a tight pink shirt, and a dust-blue patent leather belt. I stood in front of them in Natalie's room while they stared, heads cocked.

"I don't know what it is," Natalie said. "It's like it doesn't fit." She circled me once.

"Can you stand up straighter?" Lauren said.

I pulled my broad shoulders back.

"I guess that's better," Natalie said. "Sort of."

I was already expending huge amounts of energy to look and act more like a girl: tweezing the fledgling hairs between my eyebrows, shaving my legs and armpits, wearing my mom's drugstore lipstick at school. That year, I'd finally quit wearing the loose-fitting boy's clothes that I'd liked since I could remember. None of it felt natural, but what did? Becoming friends with Natalie and Lauren seemed like a fluke, a lucky accident that the universe would soon correct. In the meantime, I tried to learn, copying the way Natalie's sentences curled at their ends, or how Lauren, who took year-round ballet and gymnastics lessons, walked as if led by a firm kite string.

I rode my bike to Natalie's house a few days after Roy showed up. Just that afternoon, he'd taken me and Missy into the backyard, rifle in hand, and set up a line of beer cans on a stump. It was time we learned how to shoot, he told us. My dad's instructions rang in my ears—*What do you do?*—but Roy was unlike anyone I'd ever met, and something told me that if I didn't learn everything he had to teach me, I would never get another chance.

When I got to Natalie's, I told her and Lauren about Roy and the gun. The bone-splitting sound of it. The way I sent bullets into the crowns of trees, and all Roy did was whoop, like I'd done something great. I pulled the front of my shirt down and showed them where a violet-blue bruise was already growing on my collarbone from the rifle's kickback.

"That sounds dangerous," Natalie said, glancing at Lauren.

"It totally was," I said. I felt exhilarated and strange. I plopped down on the floor of Natalie's room. "What do you guys wanna do?"

"We were going to ride bikes to the ice cream shop," Natalie said. "You can come. Unless you want to shoot people with your uncle."

I rolled my eyes and stood up. "Let's go," I said.

I bounded down the stairs and pulled on my white high-tops from the Salvation Army, then walked outside with Natalie and Lauren close behind me. Natalie's mom, Mrs. Golding, was in the yard in a visor and sunglasses, hosing the hedges.

"You girls ride safe," she said, waving as we biked down the drive.

On our way into town, Natalie and Lauren pulled ahead of me, talking in tones that I couldn't hear. Sometimes their friendship with each other seemed coded and secretive, characterized by a barrier I couldn't pass. I pedaled faster, re-playing Mrs. Golding's words: *You girls, you girls, you girls.* I always winced when I heard those words, as if bitten.

Behind them on the road, I tried to pedal faster, focusing only on the crunch of my tires against gravel and the steady pulse of my heart. Ahead of me, Natalie and Lauren erupted in laughter, like two roses blooming at the same time.

Most days Roy slept until noon or one o' clock, so Missy and I spent our mornings watching PBS in the hot living room with the windows open. Dust from the sofa seats wafted through sunlight like flour. When we got bored, we did handstands in the yard in bare feet or wandered in the woods that bordered our backyard, where a skinny creek unspooled like a piece of yarn off Torch River. These mornings, I felt like I was only waiting for Roy to get up and make my life interesting.

Then we would hear the slam of the refrigerator door, heavy boot-steps on the floorboards: Roy had sprung alive and started drinking.

First thing, he started making phone calls. He called a guy in Manistique who owed him money, then another guy who he claimed was his friend but never picked up the phone. Then he left a rambling voicemail on the machine of a woman

named Daisy in the Upper Peninsula, who, we gathered, had recently left him for another man. He told Daisy's machine that he was getting his act together. When he got back to Houghton, he would light candles for her, reel in the stars, buy her gold hubcaps, whatever.

"I'm at my brother's place," he rambled into the phone. "These girls need me, honey. But I'll be back as soon as I can, my flower, my love."

Missy and I listened to him from the living room with the TV on mute. Then he readied his tackle-box and went fishing in the back-woods creek. Missy and I trailed behind him through the woods, asking him questions.

"Do you have a job?" I asked.

"I'm a purveyor of what other, lesser men call trash," he said.

"Why do you drink so much?" Missy said.

"To ease the pain of my memories."

"What's your worst memory?"

"Wouldn't you like to know!"

Downstream from Roy, we waded in the creek while he fished for brown trout. We listened to him curse and mumble and sing out-of-tune Hank Williams. I watched him thread worms on a hook with his broad, coarse hands graven in dirt. When the sun started angling slantwise through the pines and mosquitoes came out in droves, the three of us made our way back to the house, at which point Roy started drinking with a real sense of purpose.

Nights, he took off in his truck for the Blue Dog, a gravel-lot bar a few miles down the road with flickering neon in the windows. Depending on if he lost or won money playing pool, he either came back in a grand or foul mood. One late night, he brought a woman home. Tense in our side-by-side twin beds, Missy and I heard her voice through our bedroom door, shining through the dark like an axe-blade.

"Who is that?" Missy said, her voice small.

"How should I know?" I said.

Missy started to cry softly into her pillow. "I don't like him," she said.

"Shh," I said.

Music came on from the kitchen radio and the woman laughed. Glasses clinked, Roy let out a hoot, the music turned up. After not too long, we heard them

stumbling into our parents' room, where through the thin walls we could hear them breathe and moan. Missy put a pillow over her head but I went on listening, trying to imagine what the woman looked like.

The sounds didn't last long. My throat was dry, heart pounding. I felt the way I did when I bought candy from the cashier named Willa at the Rhinelander Sunoco, a high school senior who had long brown hair with streaks of red, ears laddered with silver rings. I always tried not to look at her face, but instead watched her hands as she counted change. They were small and deft. I fell asleep thinking of coins slipping between her fingers, clattering to the counter. Her narrow hands reaching to pick them up again.

My dad phoned one night from the hospital in Nebraska where our grandmother was dying.

"How's everything up there?" he said. "Is Roy drinking?"

I thumbed a bottle of Old Crow on the counter. "No. Everything's good."

"He's not acting strange? He's feeding you?"

"Yep."

"What did you eat last night?"

I thought back to the last dinner I'd had at Natalie's house. "Casserole. And a salad with croutons."

"That doesn't sound like Roy," my dad said. "But I'll take it."

"How's Grandma?"

"Like we expected," he said. A steady beeping noise pulsed in the background. "Your mom's fine. Don't worry about her. We'll be back as soon as we can, okay?"

"Okay," I said.

"Sit tight," he said. "And look after your sister."

Roy shot and cooked a possum living under our porch steps. He rustled between couch cushions for change. He came home one evening with a burst

vessel in his eye, blood stitching the cracks in his teeth, from a pool game gone sour. Some nights he stumbled inside after a night at the Blue Dog and wept into Daisy's voicemail machine.

"I'm hurting," he cried. "I've got nobody. I'm in this strange town, and these girls need me, honey, but I'm here all alone…"

The night after his pool fight, I found Roy on the screened-in porch, looking contemplative. He'd decided to stay home, he said, while his eye and his pride healed. The broken blood vessel made his right eye look livid and evil. I sank into the chair beside him and asked him to tell me about the time he ran away to the Catskills.

"You ever read that book, *My Side of the Mountain*?" he said. "No? I don't know what happens in schools anymore." He sank into his chair and took a long pull from his bottle of Old Crow. "I packed some bread and clothes and my dad's Swiss Army knife. It was easier than you might think. Early in the morning, I took off for the trainyard, and made it across state lines before the police caught me and took me home."

"Why did you do it?"

He drank again and looked out the screened window. The porch light came ablaze in his red and silver hair, dousing him in what looked like a halo. "I just didn't fit in," he said. "Not like your dad always did. I wanted to live in a different way, getting dirt in my teeth." When he looked at me, his eyes were shining. "You're a little rougher than some. You understand."

I nodded. I did, I did.

One evening, Roy drank more than usual and had an idea: we would all go to the casino together.

"You girls play slots before?" he said.

We shook our heads. Before Roy had mentioned it, I didn't even know there was a casino in Rhinelander.

"Let's go," he said. He tucked a half-empty fifth of Jim Beam into the front

pocket of his overalls and pulled his boots on, then stumbled out the kitchen door without tying his laces. We followed him and climbed into his truck. As he backed down the driveway, he veered to the left and drove into a lilac bush.

"Goddamn," he said, and pulled forward. "Fuckin' trees everywhere." On the second try, he made it onto the road. All the way to the casino, he drifted onto the shoulder and braked too hard at stop signs. I thought I was going to be sick. Missy burrowed her head in my armpit. But we eventually pulled into the parking lot of a huge building, as big as a hotel.

"Like riding a limousine to heaven," Roy mumbled.

We followed Roy inside, where we found a brave new world of light and sound and smoke. Slot machines made sounds like coins dropping into bright tin cans. Missy latched herself to my hip, gripping my hand so tightly I had to shake her off. Patrons sat wreathed in cigarette smoke, fixed on machines or broad, green tables with cards and dice. --Roy gave us each two dollars and told us he was going to play blackjack.

"Win big," he said, and wandered off.

Missy and I lingered for a few minutes behind a man playing slots, her head burrowed in my hip, while I studied what he did. It seemed simple enough. We sat down behind a slot machine, and had just fed it all four of our dollars when a uniformed woman walked up to us.

"Hey," she said, squinting at us. "How old are you two?"

"I'm thirteen," I said. "She's eight."

"That's not good," the woman said. "You here with your parents?"

"Our uncle."

"Where's he?"

We pointed him out. Roy sat slouched forward at the blackjack table with one overalls strap falling off his shoulder.

"Let's get this sorted out," she said. The three of us walked over to Roy. She tapped him on the shoulder. "Did you bring these kids in here?" she said.

Roy looked at us. "They're my lucky stars," he said.

"This is no place for little girls," she said.

"Did you say little girls?" Roy stood up and stumbled. I could see the black cap

of his Jim Beam poking out of the top of his overalls pocket. "This one here," he said, pointing at me, "is the toughest guy I know."

"Alright," she said. "Time to go."

"Let me finish this game."

"Not a chance," she said. "Get out or I'll call the police."

Roy raised his hands. "Hey. We're on our way." He pulled the Jim Beam from his overalls pocket and took a sip. "We're on our way."

The woman scowled. We followed Roy out of the casino, the uniformed woman walking close behind us. People stared at us, but I walked with my chest puffed out, proud as hell: *the toughest guy I know.*

Roy seemed more clearer and calmer as we drove home, as if the bright lights of the casino had shocked him into sobriety. He turned the radio on and sang along softly. Back on the dark road leading back to our parent's house, we saw a grouse dart through his headlights. To our surprise, Roy swerved into the right shoulder, hitting it with his right front tire, eliciting a bright shriek from Missy.

Roy pulled over to the right and asked for his work gloves from the glovebox. I handed them to him.

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

"Don't worry," he said. "Just a little North Woods hunting."

On the bench seat between us, Missy began to cry. "It's dead," she said.

"That's right!" Roy said cheerfully. He got out of the truck. In the glare of his headlights, we watched him kneel at the front tire and stand up, holding the bloodied bird in his gloved hand. He held it by its broken neck and waggled it for us in front of the windshield. Missy let out a sob. He circled to the back of the truck, threw the grouse in the bed, and got back behind the wheel.

"It's an ancient rivalry, girls," he said to her. "Bird versus truck. Bird never wins.

The next night, after helping Roy dress and quarter his grouse, I went to Natalie's house for dinner. It had only been a week since I'd last seen Natalie and Lauren, but it could have been years; I felt older from spending time with Roy,

steely and changed. When Natalie opened the door, I felt her looking long at my clothes and face before letting me inside. I followed her to the kitchen, where Lauren was sitting at the table and Natalie's mom stood over the sink, washing pans. She looked at me and paused.

"Sophie," her mom said, looking at my jeans. "Is that blood?"

I thumbed a rusty spot on my thigh. "Me and my uncle went hunting."

"You need to change clothes, sweetie," she said, furrowing her brow. "I'll go get some of Natalie's from the dryer."

She left the kitchen and I stood there, suddenly afraid to touch anything or sit down. Natalie and Lauren stayed sitting at the kitchen table, staring at me. They had chicken and green beans on their plates, paper towels folded into halves.

"You have a feather in your hair," Lauren said flatly.

I rustled around and found it: a single mottled grouse feather, which I plucked from my hair and laid on the tablecloth. All three of us stared at the small brown feather. I should have felt ashamed, but I felt giddy and proud.

"I think I'm gonna go," I said after a long beat of silence. "I have to help my uncle with something."

I turned and walked out of Natalie's house, knowing that it was all over, just like I knew it would be.

That night, I found Roy on the screened-in porch, drinking alone and rolling a cigarette. Shiny, dried grouse blood stained the front of his overalls.

"Back so soon?" he said.

"Yeah," I said, sinking into the chair beside him. "What are we doing tomorrow?"

Roy clumsily lit his cigarette. "What do you want to hang around with an old man for?" he said. "You don't have any other friends?"

My face flushed. I suddenly felt burning mad at Roy. I got up to leave the porch and he waved me back down.

"Sit," he said. "Just teasing you."

We watched bugs circle the overhead porch light for a while.

"You looking forward to your mom and dad coming home?" he said.

"Not really," I said, thumbing the coin of blood on my jeans.

"Is that so."

"My mom cries all the time. She just sits around all day."

"Well, she's an odd woman," Roy said. "I never thought she was right for your dad."

From the dark, a howl gleamed from the woods. Roy got up, opened the screen door. The porch light seemed trapped inside his nest of hair, which he threw back at the sky as he hollered back into the dark. I could see the moon wobbling over the pines, brimful and gibbous, as if about to spill.

"You know your mom and I once made love," Roy said, wheeling back around. He let the screen door slam behind him. "She's a wild horse. I've got a porch around my heart for that woman, to this day."

I sat quietly for a moment, absorbing the idea. "Does my dad know?" I said.

"Maybe," he said, easing back into his chair. "Or maybe he's willed himself not to." He looked at me and shook his finger. "You can't help who you love, Sophie. It's your fate."

"What about Daisy?"

"Daisy?" he said, as if surprised that I knew the name. "Well, sure. A person needs company."

As I was getting ready for bed that night, Roy's words circled around my head: it's your fate, it's your fate. I thought about Willa at the Sunoco, her long fingers, the little shells of her ears. My fate.

I stood for a long time in the bathroom after brushing my teeth, staring at myself. In the two weeks that Roy had been at our house, I'd forgotten to shower more than once or shave my legs. My unbrushed hair had grown matted and thick. I looked wild. A thumbprint of dirt smeared my cheek. I felt different, full of strength and hot blood, like I would never again go back to school, wear someone else's clothes, or pretend to be what I wasn't.

A few days later, the phone rang. It was our dad. Lori had finally died, he told me, and now he and our mom were on the road back from Nebraska. They would be back late that night, or early the next morning.

"Let me talk to Roy," he said.

I peered through the kitchen window. Roy's truck was gone, I told him.

"Well, tell him we'll be there soon," he said. He sounded worn thin.

I laid awake all night, buzzing with dread. At three in the morning, I heard the distinctive sound of Roy's Ranchero pulling into the driveway, then the slam of the kitchen door, and his heavy boots stamping through the living room. Several hours later came another car and the muffled sounds of our parents talking through the window. Dawn crept forward, dousing my bedsheets in pink and white.

I crawled out of bed and shook Missy awake. We met our parents as they were walking into the kitchen, where Roy's gun sat propped against the wall, and beer cans cluttered the table and counter. My mom looked older than she did when I last saw her, her face scribbled with pain, hair listless and greasy. Her arms felt thin as she hugged me. Then we heard a groan, and in came Roy from the living room, wearing the rumpled clothes he fell asleep in, boots still on his feet.

His face changed when he saw our mother. They stood still for a moment, apprehending each other. What passed between them was silent and electric. She stepped forward to try to slip past him on her way to her bedroom, but Roy reached to take her hand. She pushed him away.

"Don't," she said.

Our dad, meanwhile, seemed not to see their exchange. He was too busy staring at the state of the kitchen: the gun, the beer cans and bottles, cards and cigarettes littering the table.

"Roy," he said, his voice quavering. "What is all this."

Missy and I went back to our bedroom before too long. But we heard their whole fight unspooling through our window: our dad cursing out Roy, Roy howling with laughter, our dad throwing beer cans at his truck until he drove away. Cans rattling in Roy's Ranchero bed as he sped down the driveway and onto the road. His bright, unruly hair shining almost audibly through the rear truck window.

Eventually, our dad came into our room and knelt between my and Missy's beds, where we sat with our knees pulled up to our chins. He told us that he was sorry, he should have known better; everything would go back to normal, now. But I knew that it wouldn't, even if I never saw Roy again. I didn't want it to. The room was thick with light. There was a spark growing inside me, calling me into a different future, like a train hurtling fast into the wilderness.

Matthew Vollmer

Bones

For several years now, my wife has hung, during the month of October, a string of paper skulls above the living room window. The skulls are black, and the outlines of their exteriors and teeth, as well as the wells of their eye sockets and nose cavities, are pale. It is pleasant, on an overcast fall day, to sit as I am now upon the couch and read essays and stories I have assigned my students to read and write, and to pause and look up at the skulls, which are smiling, as so many skulls seem to be doing, and to observe through the window's glass the orange-brown leaves of the oak tree in the front yard of the house across the street, which must be one of the biggest and therefore oldest trees in our neighborhood. I have always admired skulls in general and these in particular. I would very much like to have a real human skull for display and also to hold, marveling that the organ with which I am perceiving the skull resides in a similar interlocking set of bones. My uncle once kept, on the desk of the private office of his dental practice, a skull which he named "Mr. Bones"; when I was a child, he would use it as a kind of puppet to address me in ways I suspect were comical, and though I remember nothing in particular about these conversations, I have every reason to believe that whatever utterances passed between Mr. Bones and myself are living somewhere inside my brain, which lives, of course, in my own skull. I had thought for years that it was illegal for a living human to have in his or her possession the real skull of a once-living person, but according to "The Bone Room," an online store that specializes in the selling of bones, "it is perfectly legal to possess and sell human bones in the United States." In fact, The Bone Room carries one of the largest collections of human skulls, including "Normal Human Skulls," "Demonstration Skulls," "Fetal & Child Skulls," "Pathological Human Skulls," and kapalas: a so-called "skullcup" made from an actual human skull and which is used in various rituals in both Hindu and Buddhist tantras. For about 1,500-2,000 dollars you too can purchase an actual human skull, and if you want one from the "normal" category, your skull will be likely be Indian in origin. Though both India and China have stopped selling skulls, they once were the largest bone suppliers to the US. Or so I learned

by visiting a series of web pages to break up the relative monotony of reading student work, and glancing periodically at the familiar view before me, taking breaks from attempting to decipher student handwriting, which was sometimes beautiful, sometimes sloppy, sometimes deranged. Some students pressed their writing utensils so hard against the paper as they wrote, I imagined I could run my fingers across the page and read what had been written with my fingertips, as if reading Braille. Other students wrote so lightly in pencil that I had to look hard to decipher what was on the page, and if they also insisted on using tiny letters, as one student did, it caused a strain upon my eyes, despite having been aided by a pair of reading glasses. It occurred to me that I used to own a lap desk: a slab of plastic affixed in some way to a cushion, which users positioned upon their legs, thus providing a solid surface upon which to write. I didn't know what happened to those little desks, but in their absence, I tended to look for a large hardback book, often selecting one titled *Malls Across America*, which collected the photographs taken by the artist Mark Galinsky in 1989, the year he traveled across the country taking pictures inside shopping malls. Today, I was using a book that was smaller than I would've liked, but it happened to be the largest book in the shelf of the coffee table where I like to sit in the living room to read my student papers, and I was too lazy to get up and find something better. The book was titled *XANADU: The Computerized Home of Tomorrow and How It Can Be Yours TODAY!* The book's cover featured the exterior of a white house shaped like a series of bubbles and looked as though it might be made of poured concrete: its overall shape looked not unlike the domed abodes that appeared on the fictional planet Tatooine, where Luke Skywalker grew up. The surface of the house appeared to be porous, like bone. A house made not of bones, but of *bone*. The book's first page featured a photograph of a short-haired brunette woman lying in bed beneath floral print sheets, wearing a white nightgown, leaning her head on an arm supported by the bed, and smiling at a robot with an octagonal face, whose arm was carrying a little tray upon which sat a wineglass filled with orange juice, a slim vase containing a single rose, and a basket of croissants. At the top of the page the word "ar*chi-tron*ics" appeared, along with its definition: "the integration of architectural design with electronic technology to create a built environment that actively responds to human needs

and enhances or extends human capabilities," as well as a list of "other words from tomorrow's dictionary," which included "audioasis," "video window," "biotecture," "electronic hearth," "House Brain," "autochef," "sensorium," and "robutler." Although I couldn't remember how I came to own this book, I did remember, as a child, poring over images of this exact dwelling, probably in National Geographic, and wishing I could live in such a house, which seemed impossibly "futuristic." I have always reveled in the depictions of tomorrows, and especially of yesterday's oddball portrayals. "It may seem only natural that an innovative house like Xanadu should have a strikingly original appearance," the book's author claimed. "But in this case, the flowing organic shape is specifically intended to express the structure's most important characteristic." According to the architect who designed the building: "For the first time in history, a house was designed with a brain. We felt it was necessary to emphasize this new architronic form—the House Brain—by making that part of the building really stand out." Sadly, the Home of Tomorrow did not fare well. According to the website Abandoned Florida, "the Xanadu houses were considered a failed experiment. Other architects and designers saw Xanadu as an unprofessional design because of the material used and the odd use of colors and shapes inside the home. Many others dislike the home for its low ceilings, cramped rooms, and curved walls, the latter of which made it difficult for homeowners to hang pictures. By the 1990s, the technology used in the construction of Xanadu-style homes became obsolete. Houses in Wisconsin and Tennessee were demolished, but the Kissimmee home continued to operate until its closure in 1996. It was sold in 1997 and used as office and storage space. By 2001, the house had suffered greatly from mold and mildew, was put up for sale again for $2 million. The house sat for a long time, and the house suffered even further damages as vandals and vagrants destroyed much of the inside. On October 2005, the house was demolished." There's something sorrowful about consuming demolition footage: the purposeful destruction of a structure that once aspired toward permanence. It reminded me of something that my wife had said the night before, as we walked home through the dark from a friends' house: she said she wished Jesus *would* in fact return, despite the fact that she didn't really believe he ever would. "But I don't know if I would be among the ones he would want to take to heaven," she added.

"So," I replied, "you're ready for life to be over?" I craned my neck. A smattering of stars shone above us; I presumed that the lights of our modest-sized town had erased most of what we should otherwise be seeing. The moon had yet to rise.

"Like," I said, "if you knew that the sun was going to balloon into a red giant tomorrow, you wouldn't care?" She said she wouldn't. Why should she? It wasn't that she was depressed. More like, maybe, she'd seen enough. Normally, I might've played devil's advocate, pretended like she was on the wrong side of right. But I stayed quiet. In my head, and out in space, the sun was burning and would reappear once our side of the world had revolved to greet it. We might be there to see it; we might not. Either way, we would've been lucky to bear witness to all that we had, and blessed to ambulate this hallowed ground we called Earth, while our bones—an unseen network of interlocking secrets inside us—held us up and bound us together.

Ata Moharreri

Charon's Song

You won't live as old as your teeth
or keys in your pocket.

No half dollars on your eyes
for a boat ride to the afterlife:
you won't live as old as your teeth.

You'll outlast rabbits and bees,
and a poodle will not outlive you.

You might outshine sons and ladies
but never the sun, seeing that
you won't live as old as your teeth,

though you could make it to eighty,
which is a long shot with a golden tail.

Rings stick around, rivers endure,
and what's unsaid becomes half spoken.
You won't live as old as your teeth.

Translated from the Spanish by Nancy Naomi Carlson and Esperanza Hope Snyder

Wendy Guerra

Bass

I step on the club's carpets which tamp down that intense sound
Low low low
My clothes plucked in pizzicato get ruined go slack at the end of the day
Like taut garters they easily pop, defeated
I break free of everything even when the rhythm of this hour sets the beat
You solemnly play the fibers of my stomach
Now I must surrender to the depth of the sounds
A silvered, moody and humid hour is what remains
Where one plays in a well-tempered key the most serious thing is said
Underground irascible and cunning
That instrument plays dirty with me
It touches what's musty in me and the wooden sound drives me mad.

Wendy Guerra
Translated by Nancy Naomi Carlson and Esperanza Hope Snyder

Bajo

Piso las alfombras del club aplastando aquel sonido hondo
Bajo bajo bajo
Mis ropas en pizzicato se lastiman distienden al final del día
Como ligas tensas se revientan sin más, vencidas
Me libero de todo aun cuando marca la cadencia de esta hora
Tocas las fibras de mi estómago con gravedad
Ya debo rendirme en la profundidad de los sonidos
Una hora argentada taciturna y húmeda es lo que queda
Donde se toca en clave bien temperada se dice lo más grave
Underground iracundo y ladino
Juega sucio conmigo ese instrumento
Toca lo rancio que hay en mí y el sonido maderable me enajena.

Wendy Guerra

Translated by Nancy Naomi Carlson and Esperanza Hope Snyder

Piano

From Russia
From Vienna
From the Carpathian Mountains
From what faraway place does George Sand come fleeing on her horse
Pursued by two insane pianists unraveled in her books Unleashed
She escapes but the sound hovers harasses her in her obsession
An elephant was slaughtered for the sake of the ivory the finger strokes
An arrangement of white your hands suggest as opposed to ebony
From where does the sound come in crowded rooms
Who renounced their velvet shawl red from sorrow
Abandoning this ancestral desolation breaking through in a fugue
The moment the piano tightens its strings moans I surrender
What can I do to console it Nothing

Huge antediluvian immovable inspired and beautiful
From Nigeria
From Abyssinia
From Senegal
From where does this terrifying echo come so strange.

Wendy Guerra
Translated by Nancy Naomi Carlson and Esperanza Hope Snyder

Piano

De Rusia
De Viena
De los montes Cárpatos
De que sitio remoto viene George Sand huyendo en su caballo
Perseguida por dos pianistas locos deshechos en sus libros Desatados
Ella escapa pero el sonido flota la hostiga en su obsesión
Un elefante fue sacrificado en nombre del marfil que el dedo roza
Blanco ordenamiento que sugieren tus manos en contraste con el ébano
De dónde viene el sonido en los salones abarrotados
Quién renunció a su chal de terciopelo rojo por tristeza
Abandonando esta desolación ancestral que se desata en fuga
Justo cuando el piano tensa las cuerdas gime yo me rindo
Qué puedo hacer por consolarlo Nada

Enorme antediluviano inamovible inspirado y bello
De Nigeria
De Abisinia

Gary Jackson

How to Eat a Pepper

I burn my tongue on Nashville Hot Chicken
in a Charleston bar while my mother bats away
an old man trying to spit game even though
he believes I'm her husband which means either
she's aging well or I'm aging poorly. I'm trying
not to think of my wife's tongue being partially
removed in the operating room. It'll be okay,
my mother tells my wife before we leave.
She nods and squeezes our hands. The students
ask if I'm alright when I stand in front of the class
and can't speak. It'll grow back, the doctors tell her,
certain things taken from you will return. No, I say
and cancel class. People say the trick to eating spicy
food is to eat slow or swallow it whole. Years ago
I went to work just fine after my brother
put a bullet in his head, even cracked jokes
for the weeping women at his wake, touched
the hand of a man who couldn't stop sobbing into
the casket, almost reached inside myself, wishing
someone could've at least picked out his hair.

Katie Jean Shinkle

[late at night, right before sleep, I worry about the knife]

Late at night, right before sleep, I worry about the knife as your fingers slip through. Sharp enough? Large or small enough? First, the crown chopped off, delicately placed to the side. Then, halve through the core. You protect the fattest half in your hands, spindly skin to soft palm, as if to avoid impending doom. You run your index finger over the core's perfectly angular edges, and it is here I think *sleep*. You set the palmed baby aside next to the gleaming muted leaves. You slide the knife through the other side of the core, discard, liquid release and stream down the edges to the cutting board. You gut the flesh, ovaries of flowers as berries melded together. A perfect chunk. You say, *open your mouth. The first taste is always yours.* I close my eyes and wait. You lay the piece on my tongue like communion, letting your finger linger between my lips before I pucker around it and pull away. You turn your back to me as I chew, slice the core, rid the skin, gut the flesh, chop.

we can start over whenever we want can't we can't we we can start over whenever we want to

You say, in so many other languages it's called ananas, but in English we brutalize the beauty, just like everything. A sadness to every brutalization. I ask, *how do they grow?* You say, matter-of-factly, *pineapples grow pineapples.* You offer nothing else.

I ask myself today, how do pineapples grow? Answer: Exactly like we grow. Let the crown fall. Remember who you are. Sever our heads. Plant us into the ground. Rebirth. Until we get it right.

Things I have forgotten about you over the years: do you sleep well at night or consistently or how best do you sleep now that you are more comfortable in your body, do you wear clothing or use a top sheet, what is your ritual or is it the same do you still

get mean when you are too tired do you like to be touched or do you do the touching or no touching at all how many blankets or separate blankets or maybe separate beds and rooms altogether and do you need a white noise and light or dark, cool silence do you dream do you remember them when you wake or days later or never do you still yell out or laugh or talk and startle the person next to you?

we can start over whenever we want can't we can't we we can start over whenever we want to

At the end of our relationship, I sleep very little and grow as small as I possibly can. Pineapples are the only fruit I will eat, otherwise I have arbitrarily banished all sources of sugar which includes fruit, even though pineapples only contain sugar and carbohydrates and do not contain fat or protein.

I am folding into myself because I believe if I fold myself small enough maybe you will love me, and I am convinced of this, the smaller I am, the more I beg, you will love me the way I need you to love me.

Your website today says that between this time and that time you were out in the "real world." In the real world was you and I, a real world involved loving me and you did how you could. This I know for certain.

Before I am small, I am large, almost unwieldy. It is here you love me the most. The first time I bring home a whole pineapple, expensive and out-of-season, you do not chastise me. You lovingly take it out of the grocery bag and examine it. You pull the leaves out of the crown and teach me about ripeness. You cut the flesh and feed me. The first bite forever mine. Every time I came home with groceries, you would help me put them away, no matter what you were doing, you'd drop everything. I would never ask. I never had to.

we can start over whenever we want can't we can't we we can start over whenever we want to

Interminably, the late night, the pineapple. I plucked the leaves from the crown in the store, lifted the edges to my nose in rapt inhale. A perfect fruit, almost spoiled. We must eat it before it rots away, before the sweetness betrays itself and turns to tang. We aren't sleeping, fits and starts. I ask you to cut the pineapple. I do not know the correct angle, how to remove the skin, the core, the symmetry. You do not want to. You roll your eyes. You refuse. I say, tell me how and I will do it myself. I go to bed without putting the groceries away.

In the kitchen, you cut the fruit. I don't even know until I open the refrigerator in the morning and there it sits in a Tupperware. No first bites, no fingers through liquid, no witness of the pleasure of the lingering in sweet glut of flesh.

we can start over whenever we want can't we can't we we can start over whenever we want to

Eventually I stop asking for you to cut the pineapple.

Eventually I start buying it pre-cut from Whole Foods.

Eventually there is no longer pineapple in our apartment at all.

Eventually I stop eating fruit altogether.

we can start over whenever we want can't we can't we we can start over whenever we want to

Today you tell me you are okay, alright, but you aren't sleeping well. I wonder about how the ways we are unseen ultimately affects everything. I think about how small until miniscule I became so long ago, how little rest I needed in order to survive, us in the real world, your finger in my mouth, how the pineapple lost its allure. How, years later, I watched so many YouTube videos to learn how to cut my own pineapple and my slices could be featured in a magazine they are so perfect. How today I understand

symmetry and shape and angles. How sharp the knife should be. I remind you no good work happens when we are self-sabotaging by being hard on ourselves. I think, close your eyes, cradle the halves, rock yourself to sleep.

Lena Crown

Domus

The sky is like the white of an eye. A sliver through my venetian blinds, as if my windows are sleeping with their lids half-open. It's the first semester of my sophomore year of college, and I'm hunched over my logic textbook, wrestling language into a different shape—whole sentences into single variables, relative clauses into algebraic expressions, conditionalities into simple proofs. The sentence "Pamela runs away to join the circus" might become simply "P," and if P is true, then other things might also be true, like "She is never seen again," or simply "S"—if P, then S, or P⊠S. The book calls this *transformation*. It feels more like a paring-down, a slicing-away, streamlining the bagginess of prose into its most elemental state. I don't like it. I like language the way it was: loose and muddy and soft, like the stained sweatpants I wear most of the time these days. Language that clouds, cushions, papers over. The point of the class is to turn us into people who do the opposite, who refuse to delude themselves. The textbook advocates for concrete, formulaic *linguistic expression* to represent complex thoughts about s*patially or temporally remote states of affairs, abstract entities, nonexistent things*.

At the moment, I have linguistic expression only for the most immediate, existent things. (S) Pamela is stressed about her schoolwork. (L) Pamela's schoolwork costs the same as a Lamborghini. (D) Pamela is a dancer, and she is always moving. (B) Pamela has a boyfriend. Things are not going well, and thus (A) the stress-induced acid burning at the base of her throat makes her feel as though she's always one hiccup away from a quiet puke. (G) Pamela sinks her teeth into the gravel of a protein bar before dance practice and feels her innards grimace. I'll just eat later, she tells herself. Yes, later.

The variables should be familiar, as well as their outcome, but I am not gifted at logical thinking. I fail the first exam.

(S ⊠ L ⊠ D ⊠ B ⊠ G) ⊠ C

(C) If Pamela keeps this up, her hair will begin to clog the shower drain, and her hands will go brittle and cold.

The one operation I can handle with relative ease is negation. The symbol for denial is a tiny scritch that looks like a corner, or the Hebrew letter Yod, though the latter flicks up at the top in a cowlick, a flying ember, a tiny flame.

I had always been someone who "did well" in school. People thought it came naturally to me, including my parents, but I knew the truth—I had never been and would never be one of the people who could do well without trying really, really hard. Signs and their meanings existed as separate entities in my head; when I did my homework, it was as if I were clacking two Lego pieces together, hoping they latched onto one another. Even English, my favorite subject, required concerted effort. I had no arguments about literature, only feelings: books existed to be ingested and secreted away in a million tiny hotel rooms inside me, behind doors I could knock on when I needed them, which was any time my parents' raised voices rattled my door on its hinges, or when my autoimmune disorder flared up and I needed to forget the coming pain, or the entirety of the sixth and seventh grades, when my classmates decided I should turn invisible. In a bathroom stall at lunch, I disappeared into worlds that let me feel something new, let me feel anything at all.

Spanish was the only class I rarely had to study for. The cognates helped, of course, but there was also a fundamental negotiation to language that I understood, that moved through me as if it had lived there before. Hebrew bore almost no resemblance to what I knew, and yet when I started learning how to read it in bat mitzvah prep at age ten, there it was—rhythm, meaning; clear water, moving. I liked the notion that the same idea could be expressed in different ways, and that those distinct forms of expression altered the idea itself. Like the Spanish word "acercarse": to approach, to get closer to. The verb was reflexive, meaning it held an echo inside the little pronoun tacked to the end: to approach with yourself, to move your own body closer.

Language comprised both travel and creativity—like ballet, my other language of study. You had a tool kit and a destination, and infinite permutations of tools could take you there. Chassé, pas de bourrée, glissade, assemblé. Unlike spoken language, however, ballet offered rigidity and predictability. I loved the control I

could exert over distinct variables to replicate a given result. Yet perfection was illusory, fickle, tantalizingly impossible. No matter how much I practiced, the effort never went away, not in dance, and not in school. It would have been easier if I'd let myself do just okay, but then I would be someone who did *just okay*, and I wanted to be better than okay. That was what came naturally: longing. I could feel it vibrating all the way to the tips of my fingers, my determination, coursing through my body like a memory. It was its own kind of hunger.

The boy I love has cheekbones like arrowheads and a slender space between each tooth. When he smiles, the emptiness shows through. It makes him look a little like a dinosaur, but I don't mind. I love him in spite of all sorts of things.

We are friends first. We have the West Coast in common, and in the beginning, this feels important, the music and mountains and rocky beaches where the water is always cold. He studies Spanish, like me. We are exactly the same height. We're also both Jewish, and Jewish to the same degree, meaning we have to look up the blessings on Hanukah. We are chatterboxes. We have the kind of conversations I always dreamed about having at college, wide-ranging discussions until four in the morning about socialism and the commodification of sports and all kinds of doctrines. While we talk, we sit all crumpled up on the couch like little kids, our knees around our ears. I can tell he wants me to debate him, but we both know I won't. In the moment, everything he says sounds reasonable, all logicked out. More and more often, I hear myself claim little phrases and facts and assertions of his, and every time I'm surprised, as if I'm listening in on the conversation and not an active participant. His opinions are bombastic, absolute: *Grizzly Man* is the best Herzog; E-40's vocabulary is better than Shakespeare's. The truth is I have no idea what I'm talking about, though I grew up hearing "Tell Me When To Go" on 106.1 KMEL and I watched *Grizzly Man* in the boy's living room last week. I can't stop thinking about Werner Herzog intoning in his sharp-cornered German accent, *The common denominator of the universe is chaos, hostility, and murder.* Sometimes I chant it inside my head while walking between buildings, in time with my footsteps: chaos, hostility, and murder. Chaos, hostility, and murder. I realize that if you

say anything with enough conviction, most people defer to your expertise. While I don't like this person, the girl with the cocked eyebrow and goading grin, I can tell the boy with the creviced smile does, and since he knows best, I defer.

The first night we have sex, I'm so drunk I remember it in flipbook snapshots. Wait a second, let's think about this, I say when he tells me what he wants. He's seated cross-legged on his bed; I'm in his office chair, swiveling. I stand and pace. I dive onto the bed and scramble to tuck my legs beneath me. I don't know—I begin before he cuts me off. If you don't know if it's a good idea, then why are you moving closer to me, he says and grins at me, devilish and sure. Hey, wait, I just—I stutter. I can't think. I've squeezed in beside him on his bed like this a thousand times before. But he's looking at me like he knows something I don't and then suddenly we're kissing and I'm naked and nothing is the same.

He thinks logically, rationally, deliberately. If this, then that. It's easy. It should be easy. So when he tells me he wishes I would think harder about things and refuse an invitation to that frat party my friends are all going to and spend more time with him, I defer. When he tells me we belong together, that he could see himself with me if I would only be realistic, quiet down, get serious, use my time wisely, read different books, watch different movies, read certain newspapers but not others, and have sex with him twice a day, I defer.

A conditional proof: if I spend two hours with the boy with the holes in his smile instead of doing my homework, I'll have to stay up for another two hours after dance practice ends at one, meaning I'll get five hours of sleep instead of seven. If I don't make time for him, he will tell me I'm a bad girlfriend. He will ask me why I don't just start my assignments earlier, write faster. Why don't I know what I think? And when I do, why do I struggle to find the words?

If I do make time for him, he will remind me I'm not eating. He will get angry, and I'll get quiet. I won't know how to tell him that I can't; how could I, when I barely have space enough for him.

I won't tell you what I did, but I'll tell you what I didn't do. I didn't make myself throw up. I didn't go days without eating. I didn't run laps at night when

no one would see, or run very much at all. I didn't weigh myself. I didn't look in mirrors.

There are unique hazards to reading and writing about what happens when someone stops taking care of their body. Even now, I find myself cringing at the notion that the words I use will make you, the reader, cringe away from me. More palatable instead to talk about words themselves, signs divorced from their meanings: after I bottom out at ninety-eight pounds, the words the doctors and nurses use to talk about me fit so wrong I almost laugh, as if while dressing me they've slipped my leg through an armhole and failed to notice. Like *anorexia*. Or *eating disorder*. Even *disordered eating*, though that's slightly better, a classification of the behavior rather than the root.

A conditional proof: if Pamela is an overachieving ballet dancer (P) and she loses twenty percent of her body weight (W), then Pamela has an eating disorder (D). (P ⊠ W) ⊠ D

I know how it sounds, and I know how I look, but I have no counterarguments or explanations, only feelings; words like *anxiety* or *depression* are never uttered, and so I have no replacements for the ones that fail. No numbers, either, since I'm asked to step backwards onto the scale at my weekly visits to the student health center, pinching the cotton smock closed over my thong. All I have is the shape of the nurse's upper lip, which tells me that every week, I take up a tiny bit more room.

After two months or so, the doctors tell me that I am *right on track*. Like my body is a fiscal projection, or a train. When they take my pulse—slow, too slow, but steady—they say I am lucky I'm a dancer. I've been training my heart for this my whole life, and I never knew.

What does it matter, what they call me? I've never found precision important in language before, or at the very least efficiency. But now it's like I'm receiving directions to somewhere I don't want to go, or home from somewhere I've never been. Still—what if they're right? I sometimes wonder. What if these doctors in their white coats speak my body better than I do? In a year or two, the words they use will change to extrasyllabic, extraterrestrial ones like *precancerous lesions* and so

many itis-itis-itises that I'll envision my entire gastrointestinal tract swollen and taut, the 'eye' needle-sharp, the *tis* hissing like air going out of a balloon. Still, even then, I'll wonder if I did this to my body or if my body could rot just fine without me.

My eating disorder doctors ask no questions about my gut. My gut doctors ask no questions about my mind. And because I have no answers anyway, once again, I defer.

Pamela's anxiety and controlling boyfriend made her curl up in a corner of her body, like she did that time she got locked in the bathroom at day care and, for over an hour, no one noticed she was gone (A). Pamela felt herself scrabbling for control (C). Pamela was not eating (E). If A ⊠ C ⊠ E (plus P ⊠ W, of course), then Pamela had an eating disorder (D).

Judging by the invisible numbers, I am a model student. But my anxiety doesn't go away, it just turns itself inside out: instead of worrying about everything but my body, for a while, it becomes all I worry about: my body and other people's worry about my body which is my whole body there is no other substance to me but the worry that I shouldn't be worried about my body.

The same year, Buzzfeed publishes an essay by Larissa Pham titled "Notes on an Eating Disorder." In the piece, Pham creates her own symbology, a new system of language that tries to say what I can't, which is that my body has gone away from me. Words like *worm*, one that *wraps around the edge of my vision and colors everything I touch*. Or *fire*, started by a magnifying glass that she herself holds, *the lens directing the sun into a narrow point of light*, until eventually she feels nothing but the burning. Her body is a shell, scraped clean of muscle by the surf. Recovery, by contrast, is a return to land, an undrowning, like *emerging from a tank into the bright sun, yawning and starved.*

Psychologist Heinz Werner argued that metaphor itself exists to skirt social taboos, to identify through avoidance, to speak the unspeakable. Maybe that's why, like Pham, I start with metaphor. I have to—I am nothing I recognize.

Unlike her, though, when I write about what happened to me—what I let

happen, what I did—I am always one thing: a building. In my head, I can't see it from the outside in its totality; instead I bend before a dollhouse, peering into each room looking for myself. The structure has no façade, and the staircases are jagged razors between the floors, like vertebrae. Still, I can tell it has the gray uniformity of a Soviet apartment, the type with no specific architect—built by an idea, an invisible governing body. The rooms are a hasty shade of vacant, empty of furniture but for the odd armchair shrouded in a cotton sheet; the floors are dusty, and a torn corner of a child's crayon sketch remains stuck to one wall beneath a sliver of tape. There, there I am—seated with my arms wrapped around my knees in the corner of the drawing room like an interloper, or someone left behind.

Why a building? I'm not sure. A longing for permanence, maybe, for fixed boundaries; or perhaps just an associative leap. A few miles north of my college campus in St. Louis, brick thieves tug the chimneys of abandoned houses down with ropes and cart whole walls away in their truck beds, leaving rows of faceless dollhouses behind.

Years later, I come across a famous architecture book called *How Buildings Learn*. The book is a master class in personification; the author, Stewart Brand, writes with the reverence an ornithologist might reserve for a rare flock of birds, or a species that is particularly misunderstood. Buildings are not built to adapt, he says. Humans don't want them to. And yet they adapt anyway, growing wings and stories or shedding bricks. Institutional buildings in particular, the ones we trust to represent the foundational pillars of our society, are "mortified" by change. When I think about the kids at school watching my body empty out, I feel so embarrassed I want to leave and start a new life. But it's too late—I've already gained back all the weight precisely so I can keep the life I have, or had.

I never try to explain this to the boy with the cracked smile. *It is not rational*, Pham writes in "Notes on an Eating Disorder." *I am not rational.*

From my corner, I can see his hands thrust up to the wrist into the rooms of me, groping blindly in the dark. I say the usual, petty thing: You don't understand. What I really mean is, we don't speak the same language. This makes him roll his eyes and sometimes storm out of the room, until I've been okay for long enough that we stop talking about it at all.

Healing is like moving in: long, exhausting, and expensive. There is no fixed end point, just a series of benchmarks. One day, though, right around the time I cut the boy off for good, I look around and recognize the life I've breathed into the blankness. I float from one room to the next on a cloud of wonder at how mundane it is, home.

Growing up, I was taught to recognize a metaphor by an absence: unlike similes, there would be no "like," no "as," just a firm statement, a transfiguration: something is something else. I liked similes, which allowed two distinct things to exist at the same time without one eating the other up. Later, a writing teacher would tell me that my greatest strength was also my greatest weakness: I saw too many connections between unlike things. I wanted to transform too much, but I stopped halfway through. Commit to the transformation, she urged, or else let it be.

What I did: I ate, of course, even when my stomach hurt, ate until it didn't hurt so much. I got a therapist. Slowly, carefully, I started dancing again, alone in the school gym. Or not alone, exactly—the studio was a rectangular box of looking, a wall of mirrors facing a wall of glass that revealed rows and rows of ellipticals and treadmills. In the mirror, I could see any time a student stopped to stare through the glass at the lines and shapes I made. I didn't mind. Together, we watched my muscles remember. Movement sucked my mind into the tips of my fingers, and when I approached the mirror in a chain of tight turns, I approached with myself, my matter mattered.

In 2021, seven years after "Notes on an Eating Disorder," and seven years into what I'll eventually think of as my own recovery, Pham publishes another essay admitting that she regrets how she once wrote about her condition, with metaphor,

with poetry. *It was a way to make sense of a thing I found lived inside me*, she says, *but I regret trying to accept it by making it beautiful.* What I think she means is: I regret trying to make it anything but what it was.

I feel cowed. Confused, a little ashamed. I kneel before my dollhouse, unfold the figurine in the corner and slip her into my pocket. Vacant, the structure reminds me less of a home than of an asylum, with the type of rundown grandeur you see in photographs at gallery shows, decay masquerading as romance. I think about the pictures people like to take of the dollhouses in North St. Louis coughing bricks into the street. Of empty, rust-kissed factories sprouting green shoots from their heads, of any property that has been deserted in an interesting way. I'll wonder if I was trying to make it beautiful, my abandonment, or if I was just trying to make it legible, make it real.

One of my favorite poems is made of a metaphor that unmakes me each time I read it: "The City Is a Body Broken," by Natalie Scenters-Zapico. In the poem, you lie in bed with the speaker. You face away from each other, moonlight falling across the mussed sheets. *Your body*, she says, *a victim of erosion, turns bone.* These were always my favorite metaphors: the ones so sure of themselves they dissolved the *be* verb entirely. No *your body is*. It simply does.

Learning a second language, we were taught that true fluency meant no longer needing to translate in your head from your source language; the thought would simply spring forth, fully formed. Eventually there would be certain thoughts and feelings we could express more faithfully in Spanish, more truthfully, though the expression's substance might be the same. Language leaves a stain, a new sign suctioned to an old significance, which creates a new meaning altogether. Like starving your brain of oxygen, training it not to feel. *A victim of erosion.* Metaphor gave me language for the detachment I felt from any sense of agency. By becoming a building, I became something to be left.

Still, I find it hard to wish I had written about it any other way. By rendering those empty rooms, images began to fill them. My muscles began to remember things I thought I'd forgotten. Like how, when I told the boy that my stomach

hurt, that I wasn't in the mood to have sex, he'd say, Come on. It'll make you feel better. How I curled away from him on the bed afterwards, just like in the poem. See? He'd say. You aren't thinking about your body anymore, right? And I'd answer honestly: No, you're right, I'm not.

In Classical Greece and Rome, the term *domus* referred to both a house and its occupants, together. I am still writing myself back to my body, back to the wholeness of the word. Language has helped me begin to turn the metaphor inside out—from something I lived inside of, to simply a part of me.

I don't understand it, I tell my therapist a few months after leaving the boy with the holes in his smile. How I let it get so bad. And that makes me afraid it will happen again.

What I don't say: I need a conditional. If this, then that. If not this, then not that. The tiny scritch of negation: ¬A. Won't happen again not again not ever.

A three-dimensional rendering of the word NAMASTE sits on the coffee table in front of me, tiled in a cloying rainbow mosaic. I stare at the word for so long in these sessions that it fractures into puerile nonsense, a string of meaningless shapes. I start to cry. Again. I cry now more than I ever did when things were bad, like I'm leaking. Google says the tears come from the part of my nervous system doctors call *parasympathetic*, which regulates bodily functions outside of voluntary control.

It's not going to happen again, she says with authority, You won't let it. I cry harder. But since she sounds like she knows, I defer.

M.L. Martin

Biography of the Forest

Listen—

rēotugu
rēotugu
rēotugu

the woods

is

wailing

& [Gife]

offer yourself
as a gift

give in / give yr body / give birth / give them
what they want / give them up / gife

give yourself
to
the army
the tradition
the forest
the aggressor

You are
different / ungelīc.

they / he / this
are bloodthirsty / wælrēowe

Wulf is [redacted] / You are [redacted]

when what is meant

to bring joy
brings pain

think of the long departure—

think of dark skies—

think of [redacted]

think of the branches waiting to
bilegde / embrace you—

Jenny Irish

The Complex Dependencies of Supply Chain

Before Salem, before 1692, it was the men of New England who comprised the majority of accusers, who when their spotted sow birthed a litter all dead, bulge-eyed and barely-bristled, trotters still soft and pink as a newly-born infant's nails, saw maleficium—evil magic, the work of a witch.

Maleficium showed itself most frequently as injury to animal property—the dairy cow who was watched bred by a proven bull, yet failed to calve, her yield seemingly snatched by an unnatural hand whole from the womb, her needed-then milk running dry, or the flock of Wiltshire ewes, coughing, crawling on green stained knees, the heat of their shared fever hot enough to feel on a held-out hand, the grass behind them slicked down deep red, their future lambs aborted.

The cycle of steady reproduction without interruption—the cow whose yearly calf made her body make the milk that a daughter would churn to butter, the butter the preservative for the potting of the meat of the lamb, packed tight in fat, kept good, greased against corruption for a month or more—was the only surety against starvation, and in survival, and in the slow racking up of stores, in fruitfulness and plenty, the demonstration of the favor of a terrifying God.

Was he watching, I wonder, with his great and all-seeing eye, when an infant slipped blue-black as a salamander, four-fingered, and just as small, dead into the living-world where it was interpreted as testimony of his displeasure, and was he watching, and was he satisfied at all, when this would-be-child's father pulled his wife from sheets steaming with her still spilling blood and as punishment made her stand, arms extended, a broom to stay balanced across her palms for as long as it would take him to bury what she had born, or did he pick just then—God, I mean, with his great and all-seeing eye—to look away?

And if God could not find his way to this miserable room, would he even notice, if while absent, another slipped inside, at first invisible as a black cat in the night, a shadow slowly reshaping to fill with a deeper dark the form of a faceless man, a black book in one palm and silver pins sharp as unexpected pain laid across the other, the opacity of his mouth brimful of promises so pretty that their speaking rung like song: *Imagine, to bite and pinch them, to prick their tongues and slit their throats. And would you like a little friend?* and then appeared a yellow bird, bright as the light itself.

And this has, I know, no place in the purifying of the Protestant faith, but there are those who believe that belief itself holds the power of creation, that anything can, through willed imagination, be made real.

Marissa Davis

Ecclesiastes: Deciduous

come December, our permutation: canopies of capillary.
shelter of sturdy bronchiole.

our unanimal
articulating animal. suggestion

of revelation. who can say
which side is mirror. girl, recall
your name. night takes

nothing. yields.
bare alchemy
of rest. below
the asphalt: our roots
work mutely
in such radical slow

it would break you.
in December, you want

to croon *mother*, you want to play viceroy,
forget judgment, forget hunger, melt into something
thicker than thought, become a being
that could forget its skin, too,

unexplain the manufacturing of self,
pull flesh back like orange peel—

divulge the jubilee of tributaries, rouge throb, the you
designating you, circle before it is inscribed as circle,

live tension
between ink
& blank. our leaves drip
into a syntax
of surrender—gild

rubbling to brown,
becoming, with sunstretch,
renewal's muscle—

& the remainder
wants nothing
but its own elements.

What would I be,
if I, too, could be this?—

even your question,
a kind of symptom.

Nathaniel Dolton-Thornton

human fields

US EPA ID ARD000023440—hazard score: 65.46

jade
black, light wades
among glass rocks, cracked, as fishers tense
and cast their lines like fence
plans into the deadening pond

haul
nothing small-
er than the underfoot nothing all
over out. their mouths trawl
the sweet air, spilled, hold and release

it
a snug pit
for thirty thousand barrels of trash
risen to lighter ash
that buds, opens, pollenating

schools
hospitals
parks. the fishers lean against the dock
and wait for dawn to stock
its soft perfume—reeling, breathing

Kayla Massey

WAKE: Past and Present



Installation view of *WAKE* (2018) by Mel Chin. On view May 2022 until early autumn 2022. Photograph Kayla Massey.

Mel Chin (b. 1951) makes poignant, passionate artwork, and the most recent installation of *WAKE* (2018), an impressive 21-foot-tall public sculpture, is no exception. Exhibited twice before, the installation features the fabricated structural wreckage of the USS *Nightingale*, a nineteenth-century clipper ship and a gently moving (and breathing) animatronic figurehead based on the ship's namesake, the opera singer Jenny Lind, known as the "Swedish Nightingale." *WAKE* stands on the corner of Liberty and Power on a previously empty corner lot in Victoria, Texas. Near a largely quiet downtown area, the ship sees little foot traffic in an automobile-focused city. The city of Victoria is situated approximately two hours from Austin, Houston, and San Antonio and is also home to the Five Points Museum of Contemporary Art.

Founded by the late Ann Harithas (1941-2021), this museum shows works by national and international contemporary artists, though many of the museum's exhibitions feature artists with connections to the Gulf Coast. The installation

has been invoked as a tribute to Ann Harithas and her support for the arts in Texas, with the artist saying the work would not be complete until it was installed in Victoria. In 2021, the Five Points Museum exhibited *Mel Chin: Points of View*, and focused on works that express the artist's ideas about economic and ecological responsibility. Mel Chin is an artist whose work spans 30 years of professional artistry, addressing historic, contemporary, and potential ideas for the future. Chin's works are often larger than life, made from mixed materials, and are conceptual with undeniable visual pleasure. Chin's work addresses expansive ideas, sometimes pointedly asking questions of viewers (as in *UNMOORED* (2018), which asks "how will you rise?"), and other times inciting questions through more subtle means. *WAKE*, in opposition to the grandeur of its size, quietly asks viewers to work towards meaning through information given about the work in nearby signs outlining the history of the ship and singer, gently prodding readers in the direction of ecological responsibility.

In 2018, *WAKE* was installed for the first time in Times Square, co-presented by Times Square Arts, No Longer Empty, and the Queens Museum.[1] Nearly 360,000 people visit Times Square daily in a typical year, according to Times Square's website.[2] A New York City viewing of the installation is crowded, surrounded by people from all over the world, and perhaps hurried by the speed of a city of millions. Times Square's penchant for glamorous commercialism adorns the buildings in flashing images and fleeting videos. The multitudinous advertisements beckon viewers to participate in a fast-paced consumer society while the immense sculpture rests firmly on the ground. In conjunction with this installation, viewers were able to access Chin's augmented reality app that showed an alternate image of Times Square in real time, *UNMOORED* (2018).[3] It showed a future for New York City in which the oceans rise and consume the city, and masses of boats hover above viewers in an apocalyptic image of a nautical traffic jam. The image is provocative, showing the wreckage of the *Nightingale* rising and rebuilding itself from in the streets of a New York City-turned-Atlantis. Chin suggests a world turned on its head and the solutions humans might design to respond to the problems caused by our own history. The two installations work together, invoking curiosity in both the physical and digital world which can—and should—call and respond to ecological crisis.

[1] Mel Chin, "*WAKE (2018)*," Mel Chin Artist Website, 2018.
[2] "Pedestrian Counts," Times Square NYC, March 30, 2017.
[3] Mel Chin's website lists Chin as the artist, Microsoft/Listen as the producer, Zengalt as app developer and Krista Albert, Justin Coo, Joe Gamble, Dallas Moore as digital asset creators.

The Victoria installation of *WAKE* evokes other questions of economic responsibility than the Times Square installation. The viewer in Victoria is not surrounded by masses of people as in New York—in fact, the population of Victoria County was 91,319 people according to 2020 census estimates.[4] They are instead surrounded by open skies and single-family homes that line the streets. The area receives little foot traffic and thus the space is quiet and contemplative. Unlike the Times Square installation, *UNMOORED* is not exhibited. Without this component the work feels far more mysterious and reaching the question of ecological responsibility is difficult when not confronted with an underwater future. However, the question of economic and ecological responsibility is close at hand for residents of Victoria and the Gulf Coast at large. Chemical, plastic, and petroleum plants populate the Texas coast, importing and exporting materials that fuel a consumption-focused world economy. *WAKE* resonates with the ripple effect of the United States' continuously harmful economy and its devastating effects.

The work is described as a shipwreck, headed by the mysterious sighing figure, Jenny Lind. *WAKE* is modeled on the scale of a clipper ship, the USS *Nightingale*. Chin's choice of ship is pointed for those familiar with the history of the opera singer Jenny Lind, US shipping trade, and the history of celebrity. Jenny Lind was one of the first internationally famous opera singers, traveling to the United States in 1850 under the contract of PT Barnum. Lind was one of the first performers to receive international celebrity, cementing her place in history in both music and advertising. Lind's tour received mass success due to Barnum's successful marketing of the singer and word of her sense of altruism, as she was known for donating a large portion of her earnings to charitable causes. At the time of her tour, the USS Sarah Cowles was renamed in honor of Jenny Lind as the USS *Nightingale* and launched in 1851. The clipper ship was involved in a variety of economies in the United States and abroad: initially tea, silk, cotton, and passengers but eventually used in the trade of enslaved people and Artic exploration. The ship foundered in the North Atlantic in 1893. The USS *Nightingale*, which once laid telegraph lines in the Bering Strait and explored the arctic is now insinuated in the modern-day problem of melting ice caps, hauntingly returning from the rising waters of the ship's wreckage. A fraught relationship between marketing, celebrity, and the

[4] U.S. Census Bureau; 2020 United States Census.

US economy (based on the labor, oppression, and colonization of enslaved and indigenous people and their land) is associated with the USS *Nightingale*.

This is all to say that there is a tangled string connecting the Times Square and Victoria installations. Times Square is an intensely commercialized and major economic center—in contrast with Victoria and its proximity to large petro-chemical and plastic manufacturing shipping points. A connection becomes apparent between the charitable opera singer Jenny Lind and a ship with a trade history symbolic of the treacherous basis of the United States' economy and wealth. The string becomes a web between the colonialist economic development of the United States, PT Barnum and Jenny Lind's marketing to an American public, the USS *Nightingale* and today's social and ecological problems caused by a now massively complex industrial economy.

United States economic history is tied up in tension between liberty and power. Liberty carries with it the idea of freedom and possibility, yet the issue of power endlessly contradicts the mythologized notion of liberty in the United States. Power can push others down to raise itself up; likewise the US economy sets aside the needs of the world for its own power and profitable gain. *WAKE* rests on the corner of Liberty and Power, one block away from Commercial Street and the lot was inhabited previously by Ann Harithas' grandmother. It seems impossible that this location is a mere poetic coincidence—although admittedly aided by luck in that the lot was empty for many years prior to its installation. *WAKE* at a minimum asks viewers to consider their own space, and the history of a ship and its economic impact. Beyond this, perhaps it asks citizens to seize their own ability to work collaboratively to engineer solutions for immeasurable problems of ecological crisis caused by a historic economic hegemony. As a public work of art, *WAKE* is intended to be seen by average people—who are expected to develop their own questions about what it means to be part of the American economy, as consumer or producer, and what responsibility we hold to respond to societal and ecological problems.

Amy Leach

Vegetumble

Every other Wednesday I drive half a mile down the frontage road to the farm, where I fetch my vegetables and place them on the passenger seat. The vegetables are so heavy that my truck thinks they are not buckled in, which is true. Driving my unbuckled beets and parsnips and squashes home the other day, I had to wait for a train. The train went rumble rumble rumble, and then it went clunk, and then it stopped, and I went wait wait wait. I waited fervently, I waited languidly, I played Boggle on my phone.

Then I thought I'd drive to the next intersection and see if it was clear. But whereas the first intersection was blocked by the back of the train, the second intersection was blocked by the front of the train. I could have driven a sixteen-mile loop up into the mountains and through town and onto the highway to get home, but going sixteen miles to go half a mile seems desperate.

Finally the train started rumbling forward, so I drove back to the first intersection, thinking I'd get to cross sooner, only to find that the *front part* of the train had abandoned the back part of the train, so the abandoned coal cars were still blocking the first intersection. I drove to the second intersection again and went wait wait wait as the train went trundle trundle trundle and my truck went *buckle in buckle in buckle in*.

Waiting for trains is a plight peculiar to human drivers. Animal drivers never have to wait for trains. Porter the driving dog drives around a circular road which is not transected by train tracks. Those goldfish driving their FOV (fish-operated vehicle) never got stuck at a railroad crossing either. Six goldfish in Israel, named Fish 1, Fish 2, Fish 3, Fish 4, Fish 5, and Fish 6, were supposed to drive their motorized aquarium on wheels toward a target, and the report of their performance was glowing: "All six fish successfully drove toward the visual target..."

With all due respect to the successful fish, it seems harder to be a successful human. Humans have to wait for trains as they are driving toward their target and sometimes they forget what their target is—nobody reminds them that it's their Wednesday to pick up vegetables, so they leave their pumpkins and rutabagas

languishing in the cooler for days. Sometimes they do remember which Wednesday it is, but the sign that says "Rocky Creek Farm" has fallen off its pole, so they drive back and forth on the frontage road searching vainly for the turn-off. Sometimes they remember which Wednesday it is *and* successfully find the turn-off *and* successfully make it home with their vegetables but then they put the spaghetti squash in a corner of the pantry and forget it for a year. The human driver asks herself: Do I wish I were a fish?

Sometimes I read posts on a fundamentalist website, all written by people who wish to be fish—supervised fish in a controlled experiment driving their FOVs down a clear path toward a pink corrugated target. They wish to be in someone else's tightly managed experiment, someone else's contrived behavioral arena, with someone else's obvious target to aim for—someone else's idea of success—with protocols, procedures, and parameters that make that success attainable.

It is so hard to be free *and* successful! Oh to be a fish, to be a turnip! Oh to be a train, mechanical, on a track, with someone else conducting! James Baldwin said most humans don't really want to be free: "I have met only a very few people... who had any real desire to be free. Freedom is hard to bear" and "Nothing is more unbearable, once one has it, than freedom."

I have experienced not being a fish or a train and I can certify that freedom is hard to bear. Being free means spending a lot of time wondering, waiting, and getting lost. Still I don't think trains or supervised fish ever had as much fun as the people in "Jingle Bells." The people in "Jingle Bells" are unsupervised and unsuccessful—they are not really achieving anything, dashing through the snow like that. Still they are laughing all the way. It doesn't say all the way to *where*, like they're not laughing all the way to the bank. They're just laughing all the way and you get the sense that even if they tumbled off their sleigh into a snowdrift and their one horse ran away they'd keep at it.

I try to keep a jingle bell in my pocket to remind myself to be a person in "Jingle Bells," laughing all the way, even if it's never to the bank, never to the Oscars, never to an Olympic medal ceremony after I never win the pole-vaulting competition, never to the inauguration after I am never elected president; even if I lose my horse; even if I get so impatient waiting for the train that I drive up

that swervy little mountain road to get home the long way but it starts to snow but recently one morning before driving the children to school I had started the car and turned on the windshield wipers to clear the snow off the windshield while I went back into the house to find the backpacks and the shoes and the math homework and the tangerines for snacks but since the wipers were encased in ice they couldn't move so the motor burned out and I forgot to get it fixed so I drive off the road and hit a tree so all my vegetable passengers fly out the window—volleys of vegetables bouncing away, rutabagas rolling into squashes skidding into cabbages crashing into beets bonking into carrots caroming into pumpkins tumbling down the mountain!

Jingle Bells. I am not going to mention "Jingle Bell Rock," even though the people in that song are having bushels of fun, because then the melody would be stuck in my head for a month.

Buckle in buckle in buckle in. My truck thinks my vegetables are very irresponsible.

Successful human. One time an unsuccessful human showed up on our doorstep, having been out hunting in the hills, having gotten lost. My husband let him in and as the hunter leaned his gun against our couch I ran out the back door with the baby and went knocking on the next-door neighbors' door—there was a chain-reaction of knocking on doors. They weren't home; it was raining; I stood with the baby under the neighbors' eaves until the hunter went away. I am always happy when hunters are unsuccessful but I do not want them bringing guns into my house.

After I never win the pole-vaulting competition. A likely scenario.

After I am never elected president. A likely scenario, too, as the only thing on my platform is no more shooting animals. Actually no more eating animals sounds good too. Actually no more shooting humans also sounds good. My platform consists of those three ideas.

After I am never elected president. I have seen a television show called *House of Cards* where the main characters are super-successful, having reached the super-obvious targets of the presidency and vice presidency, and also super-miserable. For them success is like a song they can't hear, or honey they can't taste, and I noticed that they never laugh.

They never laugh. Attila the Hun reportedly never laughed either. When I was little somebody told me Jesus never laughed but they must have gotten him mixed up with Attila the Hun.

If I lose my horse. Never mind, I forgot, I don't have a horse.

Julie Gray

Run, Zebra

I am out, I am gone: *I just can't do this*.

See me, flying over I-10 in a Volvo the color of mud. Something's amiss with the wiring; none of the charging ports work. We just had the battery fixed last week and now everything is off, and this doesn't seem right. My phone is losing power, so I am losing the music, all my sad piano girls. The FM presets sing me through Sealy and Weimer, all the way to Luling before the San Antonio stations begin to break through, Tejano rhythms cutting the static, cutting me off. I've gone too far.

Also, my breasts. They tingle as the milk lets down—a technical term: the let-down—so that I feel them pushing into my armpits the longer I am away. The swell isn't painless, nor would I say that it hurts. It is, most of all, impossible to ignore. My breasts are the loud stage whisper, hissing, *Go home*.

I take an exit, circle around and make my way back east—back to the house, back to the baby inside. Soon as I make that turn, the wildness in me dies and the dread settles in. Behind me now, the sun begins to slide behind the clouds and then, behind the trees, before it, too, is gone.

The baby sleeps, her cries hushed away by the stock I keep in the fridge. I leave her alone and empty myself with the pump plugged in next to the couch, filling a clean bottle with a fast five ounces of fresh, warm milk before setting it in the fridge on the shelf with the butter and an expired carton of eggs.

My wife says little to me. She isn't happy that I left. Maybe she isn't happy I've come back. She is cooking chicken in some fashion that smokes up the house. I do not look. I do not ask. I ignore her offer to make me a plate and stare at the TV instead. The local news is showing a zebra that broke loose from one of those wildlife parks people go to just to pretend they're not in Texas. The animal found an open gate, saw her chance and ran like hell. She's still oceans away from the plains where her kinfolk run free, but she soars, unaware. At press time, she's still in the wind.

A week or two ago, I stood in the bedroom cradling my baby. I was running on so little sleep, I could feel the exhaustion in my teeth, like they were melting into my head and the rest of me would be next, just a puddle on the floor of melted teeth and bones and milk. I held my child in the crook of my arm, one hand clutching her soft, chubby thigh while the other hand held onto a bottle of sixteen pills: Norco, prescribed for the C-section pain—there were twenty of these little bullets. I had already taken four the first week I'd been home. Not all at once, of course. But how many would it take? I stared at the bottle then back at the baby, and then at the bottle again. I stared at the bottle of sixteen pills and imagined what it might be like to swallow them all. And then I put down the pills and found the chair, rocked my daughter to sleep.

The day after I take off, my wife's sister comes to help. I know this because when I wake, the baby is not in my room and I hear the husky tenor, the smoker-sister's voice, on the other side of the door. She is talking to my son, and he is saying something back: "*James James Morrison Morrison Weatherby George Dupree…*"

It takes me a minute to understand this isn't a dream. I sit up and look around the unlit room. I hear my son climbing the staircase, then footfalls overhead. My wife is there, working upstairs. Then I hear noise in the kitchen, water running in the sink.

The sister is running water in the sink.

I come out of bed and stop, considering my pajamas, how dirty and soured by milk. My hair is an unwashed matted mess, and what time is it? I have been sleeping long enough my breasts are heavy and hard. Without the baby here to cry, I slept through the tingle, the let-down, and now I am engorged, and water is running in the sink. I open the door.

"Have you warmed that bottle yet?"

My sister-in-law holds the baby as one might a doll, her tanned forearm wrapped around my daughter's chest. She lifts up the bottle and says, "I just ran it under warm water, but it's still cold." She gives it a shake.

"I think," I say, taking the bottle and pressing it in into my palm, "I think I'll put

this back and just nurse her instead." The handoff is awkward, and I move slowly so as not to reveal the sudden panic I feel rising in my throat. When I lean in, I smell the sister's perfume. I smell the smoke on her clothes. When my baby and I are back on my side of the bedroom door, I sniff her hair. She smells like a lounge.

Bathing her is now the most important thing. I move into the bathroom, start the water, begin filling her little tub. There's a knock on the door. "Sweetie, you need some help?"

I pause, doubting if this really happened, if I really heard her say that, then answer, "No, I've got it. Thanks." The baby goes into the water and blinks her shiny blue eyes. She purses her lips and seems to enjoy the wash I give her, the gentle rubbing and sudsing of shampoo. I repeat the cycle one, two more times before lifting her out.

I wrap her in a towel and carry her this way into my room. I dress her in a clean pink getup that zips from neck to toe. I hold her warm body against mine, climb into my bed and give her my breast. I turn on the TV and there again, on the 11 a.m. news, I see the zebra. She's been caught. They found her adrift in some woods, and now she is dangling from a tether dropped from a helicopter, her belly resting in a sling while her front and back legs hang useless out of both ends. The chopper lifts her up and away from the earth, and now the poor girl appears to be flying over so many houses and trees, and I know she is not flying and she is not free. That backdrop of sky is illusion, and isn't she scared, hoisted this way, the ground on which she ran now receding farther and farther away?

I scare myself sometimes, like when I stare at a bottle of pills and consider taking them down, all of them down, in one long gulp. Then some level-headed version of myself steps in and says, *Don't be stupid, put down the pills. Pick up your baby.*

Pick her up now.

I wanted my children. We wanted them, my wife and I, wanted them so much we paid a doctor thousands of dollars to thread a catheter through my cervix and deposit an embryo into my uterus seven times. I braved the needles, watched over time as the bruises bloomed on my skin. I put the tiny blue dot of estrogen under

my tongue three times a day. Every third day, I peeled the hormone patch from my gut and put a new one in its place so that, if all went as planned, my wife could then shoot progesterone into my backside every night for two weeks. There were seven transfers, yes, but even more cycles that didn't progress. Every time we failed, I'd take that regretful call from the nurse like a punch to the gut, knocking the wind out of me and snatching the ghost of the never-there baby right along with it. The pain was immeasurable. I felt robbed. I felt crazy. Foolish and crazy and angry and sad.

But now they are here, my children. Healthy, and, by all accounts, darling. These are the children I longed for. Put my body through hell for. Emptied the savings bank for.

My dreams, they came true.

The day the zebra and I took off, I had an appointment with my OB, one that I missed. I was due for a post-partum checkup, six weeks after she opened my belly to take out the baby then sewed me back up. Or glued. I believe I was glued, on the outside at least. It itched for a week, or maybe more, but now I don't feel it at all. Still, I need to be seen.

I make up the visit, taking my baby girl with me. "Oh *Julie,*" croons the nurse. "She is *perfect.* She's a doll, an absolute doll, my *god.*" I smile and say, "Thank you," force a laugh and add, "I think so too."

My doctor comes in and says softly, "How are you doing? We were worried, you didn't come in."

I start apologizing too hard. "I'm sorry, I know. I'm so sorry. I didn't—I didn't—" and then I begin to cry. Not a hard, sputtering cry, but the kind that happens just behind your face. Eyes welling, throat closing. I feel my skin turning red.

So we talk about antidepressants. I knew this was coming. "I want to keep nursing my baby." The doc says, "You can."

I say, "What if it isn't postpartum? What if my problem is life and all the shit, all the shit"—debts and lies, shaky marital ground, the two-way threats of

divorce—"that's making me feel like, like…"

"Like you want to go to sleep and never wake up?" She looks at me, knowing.

"No. No, I'm not there." It isn't quite true; in my head I add, yet. And even though I don't say it, she answers, "I don't want you to get there, ever." Then she pitches the drug.

I leave with a prescription and promise her I will return in two weeks.

I might be looking for a reason not to take the medication. I tell the pharmacist I'm nursing, hoping she'll tell me that taking the antidepressant might hurt the baby and let's reconsider. And she does, sort of. I press her on the risks, and by the time we are finished, she tells me to wait, to talk again with my doctor. She isn't confident. Neither am I.

It's a similar story when I call up the nurse the next day. Truly, there are concerns, but of course the risk-benefit analysis revolves around the remote possibility of any potential problems compared to a mother who blows out her brains, which, I'm told, would be worse. I decide not to decide, putting the pills on the kitchen counter, next to the drying rack filled with bottles and nipples, valves for the pump. All things I need so that sometimes, I can go, take my breasts out for lunch, or a drive. If only for a bit.

The zebra is dead. I don't know how she died, only that she was sent back to the ranch and now she's deceased. I am sad. I am sad, and relieved.

I am not getting better, but some days, I look better. I do better. The baby naps and my son, Jack, busies himself with his blocks, building castles with three-car garages, his die-cast models tucked inside. I do four loads of laundry and mop. There are no dirty dishes. I vacuum the rug.

But another day, I wake, and my wife is late for work, rushing to find her shoes, her files, her phone. She darts out the back and here we are, the baby, my

boy, Jack, and I, and I start to panic. I look at the clock and tell myself, *an hour at a time*. The mornings are long, but then we have lunch, and Jack naps, and then when he wakes it will be three o'clock, maybe four, and then only two hours left, maybe three. How I hope it isn't three, but what if it is, what if it's seven o'clock? Oh god, what if it's eight?

I should be able to spend a whole day with my children, alone. This is not a monumental task; other mothers do it, so why can't I? What on earth is wrong with me, and why is this so hard? I am sitting and holding the baby, nursing the baby. Always, it seems, I am feeding, am nursing the baby. Jack is eating cereal out of a bowl with his hands, watching the tablet and I can't see what he sees, but it sounds like cartoons. It's 8:30 a.m.

The morning ticks on but my anxiety doesn't lessen. I feel glued to the couch, my body a mountain to move. The baby sleeps in my arms. I fear putting her down, that she will wake and cry and need me to nurse her again. I am fearful, and I am quiet. Jack says, "Mommy, talk," but I don't know what to say. I am afraid of myself, afraid of what might come out of my mouth. I don't want to scare him, I don't want to cry. I just want my wife to come home and save us all.

I do something I have never done before. When my wife doesn't pick up her cell, I call her office's main number. This is new, and I don't know the woman who answers the phone, but she puts me through, and my wife, annoyed, answers with, "What? What is the problem now?"

"Please come home," I say. "I can't do this, I don't know what to do—"

"Yes, you do, and you know I can't come home. Come on, Julie, get it together. This is not okay."

"No, wait, please, please," I cry. "Please just come back, I can't—I can't—"

She grunts her frustration through gritted teeth, and it's guttural. She is fed up. I am ashamed and hang up the phone, but it is too late. Jack heard the whole thing. I sit quiet again on the couch. The baby is still sound asleep, and tears fall from my eyes and land on her soft, pink sleeve. Jack scoots himself off the loveseat and walks over to where I am sitting with his sister on the couch. He looks to the right of my lap, and sees my cell phone sitting there, and gently picks it up and moves it to the coffee table. He does the same thing with the remote control, and a pillow,

he moves to the floor. Then he climbs onto the couch, everything cleared from his way, and sits beside me, putting his head against my arm and patting my chest as he says with all the peace I don't possess, "It's okay, Mommy. It's okay."

Someday, when I am stronger, I will remember this, and I will see in my son's words something other than my own shame bouncing off them. I will see that somehow, somewhere along the way, I—we—someone—imparted empathy into our son. And I will feel the ache and the shame, but I will also see the beauty in the pat of his little hand, and in his words, both silver and sad.

But it will take a while.

That night, and every night, Jack picks a book from the gray bookcase that stands beneath his window. Lately, he's been pulling down the big blue anthology of poems, a book curated with children in mind. Yellow stars glitter on the cover.

He flips the pages and we read, and he says, "This one," turning to a poem that spans two pages and includes an illustration of a boy—a prince—frowning as he holds a spyglass, standing next to his father, the king. Jack points, and I read:

James James
Morrison Morrison
Weatherby George Dupree
Took great
Care of his Mother
Though he was only three.
James James
Said to his Mother,
"Mother," he said, said he;
"You must never go down to the end of the town if you don't go down with me."

The poem is A.A. Milne's "Disobedience." I haven't heard it until now. I wonder why the mother queen took off. And I don't.

Sometimes we run, zebras and queens. Most times, we run back.

p. 121, Fig. 1. Lanecia Rouse Tinsley, *Beyond,* 2022.
Paper + 23kt gold leaf on discarded book cover, approx 8x5.5 in.
Image and photograph courtesy of the artist, Houston.

p. 122, Fig. 2. Lanecia Rouse Tinsley, *it keeps on breaking*, 2021.
Acrylic, newspaper, found papers, giclee paper and
23 kt gold leaf on canvas,
40 x 50 in.
Image courtesy of the artist. (Photo by Alex Barber).

p. 123, Fig. 3. Lanecia Rouse Tinsley, *roots,* 2021.
(Title informed by a Lucile Clifton poem of the same name)
Acrylic, paper, and 23 kt gold leaf on canvas, 30 x 40 in.
Image courtesy of the artist. (Photo by Alex Barber).

p. 124, Fig. 4. Lanecia Rouse Tinsley, *this joy that I have*, 2021.
Mixed media on canvas, 40 x 50 in.
Image courtesy of the artist. (Photo by Alex Barber).

p. 124, Fig. 5. Lanecia Rouse Tinsley, *Knit Together*, 2022.
(Vignette from Lanecia's "Otherwise" Perceptions installation
in round 51: Local Impact of Project Row Houses).
Coffee, ink, paper, raw canvas and thread
mounted on discarded wood, 12 x 14 in.
Image and photograph courtesy of the artist, Houston.

p. 126, Fig. 6. Lanecia Rouse Tinsley, *Collage works on paper*
from the "Sighs Too Deep" Collection.
Book papers and found images
on Arches Watercolor Paper, 12 x 14 in.
Image courtesy of the artist. (Photo by Bethany Brewster).

p. 127, Fig. 7. Studio shot of my wall adorned
with photos of women in my family.
Image courtesy of the artist. (Photo by Bethany Brewster).

p. 128, Fig. 8. Houston Studio.
Image courtesy of the artist. (Photo by Bethany Brewster).








GS
THIS






ROCK&



Anthony Pinn

On Being and Seeing: An Interview with Lanecia Rouse Tinsley

Over the course of several weeks, Lanecia Rouse Tinsley and Anthony Pinn used email to have a conversation concerning Lanecia's work.

Anthony Pinn: We both come from a community—the African American community—in which what we know about an individual is connected to their ancestral ties. To speak about ourselves in isolation is to ignore all that went into shaping us. Like me, I bet you've heard the connection put this way: "Who are your people?" So, I'd like to begin our conversation with that type of context and with that question. Lanecia, who are your people?

Lanecia Rouse Tinsley: I love that question. I come from a lineage full of Southern creatives who were ministers, farmers, community activists, artists, educators, and factory workers mostly in the Carolinas.

I was born to a mother who is an artist (writer, stage actor, singer, and dancer) and a father who is a retired United Methodist Pastor from the NY Annual Conference, but I really consider South Carolina home. We moved around the state a lot due to the UMC itinerate system. Looking back, the only constants in my life growing up were change, the deep love bond between my sister and myself, my family, the church, and the arts.

Faith mattered to my parents whom I love, therefore it mattered to me. I was born into it. As much as the Christian story seemed claimed for me, I wholeheartedly accepted it. I also grew up in a home where creativity, artistic expression, imaginative play, and dreaming was not only encouraged but fostered. My parents had an insane record collection and music (singing, playing, and listening) was definitely

a love language in my family. My parents made many financial and time sacrifices for my sister and I to explore different creative expressions and travel experiences. Oh, and the books. I loved to read and get lost in other worlds.

There were a few decorative paintings, but family portraits and photographs of memories/achievements adorned our walls. My first in person encounter with a painting that brought me to complete stillness and made me curious about the artist behind the work, was seeing the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh. I encountered them at the age of twenty-six at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. I literally wept at the telling of his story because it resonated so deeply with my own secret desires and need to create. But I was so afraid.

AP: That's powerful—the encouragement of creativity. I really appreciate your reflections on the presence of the arts in your upbringing, and how you define the arts in such an expansive manner. You include a ministerial moment when answering my last question—I assume the artistic dimensions of the preached word—and you couple that with so many other ways in which the body is positioned and performed in such a way as to open us to ourselves, others, and the world in more expansive ways.

You talk about the presence of the arts in your family, but could you expand on that and reflect on the impact that the arts had on your development? How did your parents' sense of the arts inform and influence your identity, your view of the world as you grew up in the South? What are some of your earliest memories related to your contact with art?

LRT: The arts—both creating and engaging them—made space for me to push boundaries, imagine something into being out of nothingness, take up space with my body and voice, as well as give me so much joy. It helped expand my vision of beauty and understand ways of being (and seeing) in the world. It that made me sit with questions and explore the answers, which only led to more questions (ha)!

My earliest memories related to the arts were singing in worship services. The church of my early years taught me how to sing, how to improvise, the poetics of language, the generative nature of creative collaboration and my own creative capacities. It wasn't until the seventh grade when I didn't excel in a visual art class and was discouraged by a teacher's honest evaluation of my work, that I began to question if I was an artist. But the arts provided respite from the everyday realities that at times were exhausting. The arts provided not only the opportunity to see the world through another person's eyes, but also a way to better understand myself. Art echoed what seemed true for me even at an early age: my heart and my mind were good, and vulnerability may bring more scars, but it could also be a source of strength and beauty. By the age of five, I knew I would be an artist.

AP: I appreciate you sharing these memories, particularly because they speak a certain vulnerability, a type of openness to the world that exposes us. Two ideas stand out for me: questions and body. You mention the arts encourage you to sit with questions. This reminds me of one of my favorite thinkers, Albert Camus, who argues that the arts exists because we don't have answers. You said that these questions are contextualized by embodiment. It seems to me both the minister, as you witnessed with your father, and the artist experience something of a 'calling' which motivates them to commit to that particular vocation—a sense of yearning that demands response and shapes one's self-understanding. You mention you knew you were an artist at five, but how did you know? What form did that 'calling' take?

LRT: Whenever thoughts from Camus are shared, my curiosity is peeked. Actually, I have some of his phrases written on my studio wall. I'd agree that the arts provide a powerful medium for wrestling with mystery and the things we don't understand or fail to represent accurately. And, as you get to through your explanation of embodiment, I think it's a matter of representation and representation*s* really. I've practiced in different mediums, but I consider myself an abstract painter and mixed media collagist that still embraces abstraction, primarily, but even that expression has to come through my body.

My artmaking is a particular kind of description related to a unique set of questions I have as an artist and a cis-het black woman with a peculiar set of experiences related to my body. So, yes, descriptions, questions, revelations often lead me to more questions, but I don't think one can get away from the space the arts offer for representations and/or embodiment as you put it.

I knew I was an artist by five partially because the world had yet to tell me I was not, but mostly because of the joy I found in creativity, my eagerness to learn, the encouragement/naming of that part of my identity by my parents and community, and the delight I found in what my singing, dancing or creative productions evoked within others. Over the years I had allowed doubts about my creative capacities stifle my full embrace of that part of myself as a career, though I always found ways to cultivate and nurture the artist within me. And there came a point in 2013 when I made myself show up and do the work.

AP: I appreciate your attention to how the world hampers our expression, but it's wonderful how you follow that up with a subversive turn, a determination to wrestle with a question that recenters the creative self that the social world attempts to warp. I would argue that much of the language you use to describe your approach to art, and narrate your artistic embodiment, pull from your familial relationship to the Church.

Something you said keeps coming up for me: "I grew up immersed in Christianity and church life. Faith mattered to my parents whom I love; therefore, it mattered to me. I was born into it and as much as the Christian story seemed to claimed me, for years I wholeheartedly claimed it." There are lots of ways to read that! Maybe you moved to religion for the sake of your family, to religion as a personal stance? Or, maybe you are beyond the years of claiming the Christian story"? That said, I don't want to make assumptions, or filter your thinking through my own relationship to religion. So, I'll ask a two-part question instead: Do you still consider yourself a religious or spiritual person? If you are, how does religion or spirituality inform and influence your art?

LRT: I have a deep spirituality that often expresses itself through the religious rituals I've come to know. Religious communities are still important to me for how they structure my orientation to and in the world. I was shaped in a predominately white USA mainline tradition and worked within that system for several years before pursuing a career in the arts full-time, but I've become frustrated with what I perceive as the limits of religious traditions, their institutions and sources for thinking about realities that are of concern for me, and that have been vocalized by so many others.

That said, Anthony, it's in me, you know. The songs, language, spiritual practices, and some of the stories from the Christian tradition work their way into my art and studio practice.

I make space for contemplation daily. I journal and/or meditate on at least one piece of writing that speaks to our everyday experiences often before I begin tangibly creating. For instance, many of my works like, *roots* and *It Keeps on Breaking* were born from time meditating on the poetry of Lucille Clifton during 2020-2021. Many of my titles are informed by poems and literature I am reading. I also see how my early formative years within the black church, where I often experience the profound mystical beauty of the "call and response," work its way into how I construct my collages. Also, when you look closely at works like *Beyond* and some of my other book cover collages you will see some of the symbols and language/music that have formed me abstracted within the layers of the work. It's in me.

The musings I have in my art, and how I think about notions of God, the self, others, space, accessibility, possibility, socio-politics realities, what it means to be human and decent in the world—all these things shape my interior life. I don't think my art and the projects I choose to participate in the world can ever really be divorced from that.

How I may place bodies upon or within the layers and textures of my work, or the works I create centering black girls to depict the universe of magic possibilities

within them, or even my abstractions, are deeply spiritual works for me. Hopeful they bare some of the complex layers of the storied soul from which they flow. I curate what I think of as expansive spaces for deep reflection on our humanity. And I've found in them rhythms that help my self-understanding and relation to others and practices that help me think through my negotiation in this world. Yet, it is also true that it is very hard for me to claim any Christian identity anymore.

AP: I'd like you to say a bit more concerning the transition you imply. You mention you've become frustrated with the inability of religious rituals and traditions to adequately name and respond to the concerns that motivate you. You moved from those traditions to the art of human inquiry. What are some of those questions and concerns? What are some of the ways art does a better job of articulating and exploring them? Does your preference for the arts to respond to these questions and concerns have anything to do with how art frames and presents human values?

LRT: I have always been concerned with the question of *being* human—about the perceptions of goodness, beauty, creative capacities, limitations, possibilities, power and fallibility, and about who, what, and how these things are determined. I have preferred the ways the arts, both as a maker and as one who engages the art of others regularly, have pushed me to think more imaginatively and honestly about the human experience, as well as lean more into that experience rather than seek to escape it, deny it, try to perfect it or in some ways be saved from it. I have art.

AP: You mention Baldwin, and I think there's a lot to unpack regarding his essay, but I'm wondering if you would speak about some of the other artists and religious figures who inspire or challenge you? I'm also wondering about the ways in which your academic training at Duke Divinity School informs how you connect artists and faith leaders? But there's an assumption in that last question. Are there ways in which those connections and academic training inform your sense of awe and wonder with theological categories of transcendence?

LRT: There have truly been a rich textured collage of people over the years who have been conversation partners or persons I've studied as a way of thinking more deeply about the artist I desire to be in and outside of the studio. This is by no means an exhaustive list: Lucille Clifton, Theaster Gates, Dr. Willie Jennings, Toni Morrison, Gordan Parks, Alma Thomas, David Driskell, Howardena Pindell and bell hooks— just to name a few.

As for my training at Duke Divinity School…well, you know, I think the ways I extend my practice beyond my studio and faith tradition has been informed more by my desire to support arts as a means of discourse and community work with local artists, academics, religious leaders and activists through the ImagiNoir Collective based in Houston, TX. That group of people challenge me, inspire me and bear witness to me through how we think together, each in our own unique way based on our professional practices, toward imagining and building newer ways forward. Here I see myself as an "active participant(s) in the reshaping of nothingness" (to borrow words from Theaster Gates) in order to create a more equitable, just, beautiful, and humane world.

My studies at Duke and years of formation within the Church have provided me a language and a theological perspective that enable me to uniquely guide others in exploring the relationship between theology and the arts, as well as challenge/question some of the boundaries religious community may place upon artists, the arts, and how the arts can be experienced within their community when invited to. This is making me think about a lot. We need to get that coffee?

AP: Looking forward to that conversation, for sure! Right now, I'm thinking about your list of influences. Some of them, particularly Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and Gordon Parks seem to work to illicit an emotional response (maybe even a 'spiritual' awareness). Whether it's through the unpacking of love, of fear, and so on, they stimulate, I think, a heightened sensitivity to more than our biology and, in this way, they pull us beyond the physical to "see" the undergirding psychological and emotional conditions and capacities that inform who we are, and how we move through the world.

What is your artistic process, and what kind of emotional response does working produce in you? What type of emotional awareness or response do you hope to generate through your art?

LRT: Those artists and writers have all been influential to me in that they have challenged me to question and work out some answers to questions regarding what some call the normative gaze, or the ways that not only black cultural life has been represented historically but also how humanity in general has been represented through such white-dominant gazes. These artists also summon within me a sense of vocation via the arts, as you've mentioned, and a vision of art and art making that does actually participate in the imagining and creating of better worlds.

So, my artistic practice is contemplative, slow, intuitive, and playful/exploratory in nature. Sometimes it feels like a dance with certainty/uncertainty as well as past, present, and future possibilities. My process usually starts with me meditating on poetry (my love for the poets is deep), a newspaper article or a memory that I want to process, speak to, or respond to visually. Then, I explore the results of this inner work through the possibilities of a variety of materials like paint, paper, found or discarded items patinated or textured by time, images, words and thread that I layer, deconstruct, reimagine, and re-construct to birth a new thing. The work, then, is an embodiment of the deep emotive and spiritual yearning of me.

That birthing process is always doing a work within me as I create, in ways that are constantly being revealed to me as I *make a life* for myself. It is in this work that I am able to dive more deeply and honestly into the complex layers of myself and come to better understand the collage that is me as well as the world we all inhabit. So yeah, my artmaking, I'd like to think, continues in a long tradition of creative practices that speak to the deep spiritual longings of a people.

Michael Mlekoday

Self-Portrait as Landscape with Biofeedback and a Blood Moon

Maybe the animals have astrology enough
to make the blood moon hold meaning—
scat patterns telling of the end times,
sacraments souring on branches.

Maybe the moonflower, Datura, wafts data,
nightly computations of celestial curves.
Breath is information, the Buddha says.
The moon turns peach.

I want to hide behind the Matilija poppies
like a grandmaternal tablecloth.
I want to be passed down like rings and roots,
to grow gingerly underground

until the field where families beckon the eclipse
is bursting rhizomatic and alive.
Yes, to be perennial, to lie dormant
as a heavens under sextant scrutiny

until everything in me, as me,
flickers the breath from warm bodies.
Which constellates and drops dew.
Which catches in the silk nets of hunters.

It's all here: the quickening of the grasslands,
the wide berth of starships, the pull
to quantify spacetime and say God—
I believe the body remembers.

C. T. Salazar

Four Snakes Makes Our Flag

—after Frank Bidart

cast iron and lo cast your sunlight low
-ly boy snakebit with love liquored
luminous because sky starred open be

causing more trouble in the barn
his hair brown against the rust ruin
-ed his hair he had his mother's

wrists she left for the city we weren't
we walked the field we weren't the dead
underneath but could be convinced

eventually back then how a bottom lip
could be described as beestung the plane
with kudzu'd propellers I've seen shadow

come heavy over undergrowth song
-first I've crawled in under overcast

Four Snakes Makes Our Flag

+ sparrows spring sometimes the resurrection
fern drips blood all the boys who didn't come
back what distance does to a song is a little
kinder than what it does to a phone call at first

my mother thought my father was an angel
who broke down fleeing some unnamable wrath
his western paperbacks I saw him mend a teapot

like it was her heart wind a clock at a funeral so
I could appreciate the death of things a kiss alone burning
his flag for just a moment a wedding dress in its glimmering
I don't know who I am when I wish the violence so inherently

mine like a horse memory alone made blue like
the bombers flying through our country so quiet
they don't wake the frigate birds gliding in their sleep

Jules Gibbs

The Perfect Shirt of America

I was content, enjoying my ideology like a thruway
to a relaxed truthing of whatever it was I thought I knew.
I walked under the dream moon with the dog in the perfect shirt

of America and told no one, asked no one. (*A relaxed truthing* — you know
what I mean? — it's what all truths do.) The shirt was flannel or
maybe I wore broadcloth that day, but I was really *in it*

wrapped and bolled like an infant swaddled, not the way you'd feel
on a lava beach in Cersuta which is how I knew this was America's
imprint on my skin. I took a wrong turn and checked my phone

which glowed like Achilles' shield that morning. You'd texted me a sexy pic,
maybe something from late at night where you live
across the curved sea. This shattered the enjoyment of my ideology and I heard

verboten on the wind. The perfect shirt of America softens and abrades like
a newborn in a patch of blackberries. So young it hasn't met any of the old
gods. I tucked the phone in my pocket, wanted to be left alone before the epic

of morning went flat and the day's longing resurged. Before I felt the itch
to buy something molded in hard plastic with little spikes
I could make love to or smack someone with or win a battle. Violence clothes belief,

makes a berry sweeter or a text more sexable. What can we do in this illegible country
to make the gods notice us? I walk out under the dream moon with the dog
in the imperfect school of America, and the playground radiates an alien glow.

The dog's elbows are manlike, ashen, and that's enough satisfaction
for one day. He sniffs the slide, takes a piss, the spray bounces and
trickles. In some un-American place, microbeads and flecks of polyethylene

terephthalate made in the same factory as this toxic yellow mold pump through
the baleen plates of a whale. As if we could become sisters or lovers this way,
as if we could escape our manufacturer. As if any place could be untouched by us.

Still, it's hard not to fall in love every minute in this gorgeous flannel shirt.
The dog and I go down the slide, whizz through the piss, fall through the space
of a flattened earth. I appreciate the sext you sent, but not the way it begs

under the table, bends time. I don't think you'll be impressed with my body or
my brain as a form of pixelated action; I mean, there's better stuff online
and my powers of attraction are steeped in older patterns. Still, it might be possible

to transfer my fantasy to a rusting swing set where the myth
of childhood persists, where the squeak of chains was a song
and our toes clipped fat lilacs on the upbeat,

when we spoke to god in ballads with no refrain. This is the wrong
sort of thinking for a morning under a sumptuous dream moon,
the breath of deer huff in the air, all of us feigning guilt for no one

but the wan sky, falling in and out of love seven times per breath, trapped
in a filth regime of our own design. The sky like a baby blanket
bluing over a scheme drawn in chalk on the soccer field, another marked exile

and set of rules where we hope to score, the only way we know to make it
mean something. I wanted to return to the fundamental chorus
where I asked no one, told no one, but the brain is a search engine on fire.

It hunts for a kiddie pool or a tiny car you drive with your feet
like a prehistoric cartoon as if the right buy could deliver me
to the tree spirits I knew before I acquired this ideology or swam

in the Ionian sea. I was content then, could out-sing the Sirens, take pleasure
in what I did not have and could not know. I walked with the dog
under the dream moon, as the skeptical four a.m. perfected itself.

I unbuttoned my shirt, snapped a pic and hit send and still I could not return
to my own form nor prove what was true — that I was a boy once
in an unchartered land, unworn in the fabric of a man or a president.

Sam Marshall

What Stays and What Goes

We'd driven east out of Nashville until we hit the Smokies, where Ricky pulled the truck over without warning or explanation, as was his way. Bluish fog clung to mountains patchy with swathes of dead hemlock trees that jabbed into the sky like fingerbones. It was late July, somewhere along Route 441, and I'd had enough.

"Killer view, right?" Ricky said. He took a deep, obnoxious breath. "Clean mountain air."

"What's in that fog?"

"Cancer," he said, and clapped me hard on the shoulder. "Shut up about the fog, Noah, all right? I'll let you know when there's something to worry about."

We'd been driving around in Ricky's truck for some five weeks. The bed had a camper shell over it and that's where we slept most nights, off the side of the road, wherever.

Ricky had built up a plywood platform for sleeping on, so you could store things underneath, like blankets and dirty clothes and bottles of antacids. We would fall asleep on opposite sides. Then in the night he'd roll closer in his sleep until I'd wake up with his hot breath funneling into my ear.

He had to have known this was coming—the end of this part of our lives. I had begun to break up our rituals, including Ricky's weekly ministry of my injections. Sixty milligrams of testosterone into the thigh. After giving me my shot, he would rub circles with his fingers around the injection site, massaging the muscle with a rare look of quiet concentration. There was more ceremony in his hands than I was comfortable with, so a few days before the Smokies when he asked if I wanted him to "shoot me up," I said no. I'd already done it myself. He'd stared at me, baffled, and said, "Why the hell would you do that?"

He studied me as he had not done in all our time together, as if considering for the very first time that I might not be who he'd decided I was.

There on the roadside Ricky said, "You wanted mountains, there's your mountains. Now what?"

"I think I'm done," I said. Speaking those words brought instant relief, the heady lightness of slipping free of an attachment. That very lightness would soon be its own burden, but not yet. "No, yeah, I'm done. I don't want to be here anymore."

"Don't be an idiot," he said. An edge to his voice, a warning. "We just got here. We're not done."

"You can stay. Just find me a bus stop and I'll figure it out from there."

He looked at me and I pretended not to notice, kept my eyes on the dead trees. He said, "Well, shit."

We spoke little on the way back to Florida. He drove. Waiting, I think, for me to change my mind, to tell him the never-ending road trip could go on. Likewise, I was waiting for him to act out, to stall our arrival somehow with one more stop, one more. He didn't. The inside of his truck smelled of some chimerical animal made of the two of us—stale sweat, skin, scalp. Every now and then a whiff of his cologne, leather and musk. That smell got into me where it pulsed like a wet little heartbeat and I wondered if I had made a hideous mistake, but I wasn't sure what the mistake would be—calling it off, or having agreed to go with him in the first place, or something else more fundamental and far too long ago to change.

Warm wind stirred trailing tangles of Spanish moss when we arrived in Lakeland. Ricky parked in front of the house where my parents had raised me and lived still, a khaki stucco box. Worn sheets flapped on a clothesline in the neighbor's yard. The street was quiet and blurry with dusk. Ricky got out of the truck and twisted his torso left and right until his spine popped.

He said, "This whole goddamn state is a lie, it's nothing but cow fields. Next cow I see gets it." It was the first thing he'd said in almost an hour.

Ricky's father had been CFO of a chain of retirement communities across the states. The tar pits, Ricky called them, or old people death farms, a name I found less morbid than "retirement chain" or "franchise." His mother was a professor of French literature. We'd met a couple of years ago, in college, but hadn't seen each other since graduation until Ricky sought me out and came to crash on my couch. I was still living in Gainesville, our college town, and working as a teller

at a bank. Nights I was drinking with the dwindling group of friends who had stuck around. Ricky's father had died and Ricky was living out of his truck. By choice, not lack of means. I figured he was slumming it like some other well-off guys I'd met who loved to talk at length about what great food could be scavenged from dumpsters and all the people they'd met while train hopping or working at canneries in Alaska. He asked me if I wanted to join him, see places I had never been—beaches drowning in sunlight, deserts where stars still existed, real cities where real people lived. He said he had his sights set eventually on Peru, where his father had spent a college summer. I'd read that Randy Wayne White had gone to Peru and been stabbed, and I thought maybe something like that might happen to me if I followed Ricky, so I said yes.

Inside my childhood home, my father sat sunken into the couch, watching the news with the volume turned down to a murmur and the captions on. My mother clattered around the kitchen and asked Ricky polite questions while he did his impression of a humble bumpkin, all "Yes ma'am, no ma'am, you have a lovely home, thank you, ma'am." He made her laugh, flirting and getting in her way trying to help her fix dinner until she gave him a playful swat with a wooden spoon, at which point he put his hands up and backed out of the kitchen while my mother grinned down at the sink and shook her head. He caught my eye and winked.

Ricky was attractive in the way only people who don't know any boundaries can be. His whole life he had said and done whatever he wanted without consequence and had never been told no, as far as I could tell. He had the blithe, gorgeous smile of a holy fool, a smile that knew no evil nor much good. Adam and Eve smiled like that in Eden. They smiled like that while screwing all the animals in paradise before naming them. Nobody had told them not to yet.

That night, we ate leftover lasagna and wet shreds of iceberg lettuce. We ate with the television on in the other room, the volume turned up now, just as we had done when I was a kid. We had never had much to say for ourselves, or to each other.

Ricky took the couch and I my childhood bedroom. The house was so small and still at night. I could not believe I had ever lain there and touched myself, but of course I had, every night for years—possessed, sweating, panting like a dog,

unhappy, inflamed, a frantic little maniac. I knew I wouldn't be able to fall asleep, but then I did anyway, and woke to the sound of shuffling in the living room.

It was still dark outside. Ricky crept around like a cartoon burglar, slipping things into his duffel bag, including a box of bran cereal he'd taken from the pantry. He was also holding a gun. It was my grandfather's hunting rifle, the one with flying ducks engraved on the stock. My father kept it zipped inside a case in the hall closet, behind the empty luggage and the formal wear hanging in dusty plastic sleeves.

Ricky smiled and raised the rifle. "Is this thing for real?"

He let me grab it from him easily. I'd only touched it once before, when I was a kid, maybe thirteen, alone in the house and curious. My father didn't go hunting, so the gun was only a relic, not a tool. The first time I held it, not knowing any better, I had considered it loaded, had considered what could be done. Only on that night with Ricky did it belatedly occur to me that it had not been, that of course my conscientious father would have ensured it was not, that it had not meant what I had thought it meant that day years ago when I returned the gun to its case and hid it again so no one would know I had touched it, hid it where I knew it would be if I ever went looking for it again.

"What are you doing? You're just going to leave in the middle of the night?"

"I shouldn't have even come inside," he said. "I just didn't want to be rude, you know. To your mom."

Ricky's socks sagged on his hairy ankles. His white undershirt was stained at the pits the color of old paper. He was so real and present that it was impossible, ridiculous, to imagine him gone. I hated that I couldn't imagine him gone.

I prodded him in the gut with the butt of the rifle. To make him leave or stay, I don't know—just to see what he would do, I suppose, to provoke some response. He went out the door and got in his truck, then rolled down the window so he could go on smiling down at me. I had stopped noticing the slight gap between his front teeth somehow along the way, but there it was again.

"I never like seeing people at home," he said. "Don't stay here too long, okay? When you get it together and get bored, call me. Or if you don't, but you're missing me real bad, call anyway. I'll come and get you out of here."

"Where are you going?"

"You're the one who's quitting, what do you care? Hey, no hard feelings. You were such a mess when I found you. Remember? Could hardly drag your sorry ass out of bed. Now look at you. I think I did a good job. Take care of yourself for me, don't waste all my hard work."

His truck rolled down the street and out of sight. The rifle's stock was cool and smooth and I thought, now it's time, the time to put away childish things, or however it goes, and get serious. No more whining and sulking, no more Ricky and his on-the-road fantasy. That had all been well and good as a lark, but it was over now.

In the morning my mother fried eggs while my father read the paper. I'd slept through church, where they'd stopped demanding my presence when I was still a child. They had already changed out of their Sunday clothes and back into what they'd slept in. My mother wore her pink robe. "Your father's found you a job," she said. "How many eggs do you want?"

My father had a stern, competent face, deeply lined and sun worn, like the face of a man in a black-and-white movie, maybe one of those guys in *The Grapes of Wrath*, all weather-beaten and timeless. I waited for him to say or do something that might canonize me as his only son. An esteemed title in its own right. If you were an only son, you didn't have to be much else, I figured. I have an older sister. She was in law school at the time. No one in our family had ever been to law school, that I knew of. "Only son" held its own beside "eldest daughter in law school" despite a lack of any equivalent qualifications. If I could just be that.

When I informed my family of my transition a few years ago, I had dared to imagine only the extremes of rejection or embrace. My father in particular, I had thought, would react strongly, one way or another—would have something to say to me at last, where before there had been mainly silence. Don't all fathers want sons? Even his disavowal would have felt like a kind of vindication. Don't all sons fail their fathers, in some way, large or small? But he had done neither of these things. Our relationship remained suspended in a state of cordial incomprehension. I have always felt that he did not really know what to make of his children; that he held us at a gently befuddled distance, as if he somehow had no idea where we had come from or what we had to do with him at all.

Dad coughed wetly into his napkin, which he folded up without inspection. "Job's yours if you want it," he said.

I went to work for the state. My job was to inspect produce and perform quality assurance. It was a job my father had held when he was a twenty-something, before marriage and children and subsequent decades of manual labor on construction sites. I tried to be grateful for the work and often succeeded for whole minutes at a time.

I drove up and down the peninsula to fields and packing plants. I held a lot of fruit. Dimpled, rubbery oranges as firm and round as baseballs. Grapefruit with obscene, gushy pink insides and velvet-skinned tomatoes. Bell peppers that were crisp and firm on one side but soft and brown on the other. Strawberries gone soft and dark, almost liquid, like turkey giblets.

In the fields, rusted school buses ticked in the heat. Migrant workers, paid cents to a pound, harvested the fruit, and then I inspected it. Soft spots, brown spots, deformities. I had not designed the standards I was the arbiter of, but I was there to do their brainless bidding. I said what stays and what goes. Edible but imperfect fruit putrefied in landfills by the ton because no supermarkets would buy it. The field workers, their bodies permeated by the chemicals used to produce all this wasted surplus, learned it wasn't worth their labor to even pick oddly shaped or blemished produce, so it was left to rot on the vine. It was all very rational. Everyone behaved more or less as anyone else would in any given situation, according to the logic of our individual circumstances. We all played our parts.

I ate whatever I could get away with. I wasn't supposed to, but I wasn't asking for permission. I did not consider this an act of protest or rebellion. I don't know what it was. Some kind of delirium. I filled myself to the eyeballs with undesirable fruit, made myself sick on it. I learned that nausea could be pleasurable. I liked feeling queasy. Nothing more interesting was happening. I wasn't talking much to anyone during this time of my life, and I wasn't home or ever in one place for very long.

When I was traveling with Ricky, the world outside had served as a backdrop for the cramped confines of his truck. Now, out on my own, there was no such center. The world seemed at once larger and less permanent. There was always something

new to see out the window wherever I went, flashes of places that vanished as soon as they were out of sight. Everything I saw by myself seemed only half real, since it existed in my memories and no one else's, solitary and irreproducible as dreams.

Along the underbelly of Lake Okeechobee, I drove by acres of sugarcane fields set on fire. Clouds of smoke and soot blew for miles and black snow fell on all the little towns in the Glades. It encrusted the windshields of cars and the windows of schools and made everybody asthmatic.

When I was a kid, my family took trips to visit relatives in the southern part of the state. Once, we drove by a burning field and my father said, "That's to get the snakes and rats out, so you can nice and easy harvest the cane." Only later did I learn he was wrong. The fires had nothing to do with human labor; they were for the machines. To burn away the waste parts of the plant, so only the stalks remained to be processed into white sugar. Still, my father's words came to mind whenever I saw a burning field, and I would imagine men holding torches, an exodus of small animals scurrying and slithering between their ankles. He shared so little that I couldn't bear to let go of one scrap. I turned his stories over and over, trying to break them open, but they didn't have any seams. Once, he told me about inspecting boxes of tomatoes at a plant in Immokalee, where "there was a blind man who sat on a stool and tapped the lids of the boxes down with his cane—he might not have been blind, but asleep." There was the motel with turf grass instead of carpet where he stayed for cheap and was given bags of boiled peanuts by the cleaning lady and got chased by an alligator that lived in a retention pond. These were the fragments from which I tried to piece together a picture of my father. I looked everywhere for the people and places he told me of, but I didn't find them.

That October while the fields were burning I took a weekend trip to St. Augustine with a borrowed surfboard. My arms and calves burned as I dragged it across the hot sand. Its heaviness surprised me. Heat made the air ripple like melting plastic and for a second I saw black dots swarm the sky and had to drop the board. I shut my eyes, dizzy, thinking I might hurl. Then my head cleared. The waves were sloppy shrugs of water, no good for surfing, but they buoyed me and

let me forget I was weak. I wasn't any good at surfing anyway. Ricky had tried to teach me, but I'd been a poor student. Salt water licked my chest beneath my rash guard, shivery and cold.

Back in my motel room, I devoured a ham and cheese sub and a pint of salty chocolate ice cream, then fell asleep and dreamed about a rainforest I had never seen. Fleshy leaves of impossible colors, rivers that ran silty brown in the sun and purple in the shade and then frothed white over rocks like the foam that bursts out of shook-up soda cans. I saw creatures with both human and animal parts. When I woke up, I was feverish and threw up in the toilet. This was not the benign nausea I had grown used to. I was so sick I was giddy with it, like a crush. I wondered who would find my body when I died and considered dragging myself to my truck so as not to leave a mess for a motel worker to find, but in the end I couldn't leave the toilet for long enough to pull off such a maneuver. I almost called Ricky. He would come if I called him, though just his voice would be enough. If he was there, I wouldn't die. He wouldn't let me. I knew that was impossible and beyond his power, but I also knew it was true.

I didn't call him. It was food poisoning and I was fine in a couple of days, but in the grips of it, memories of the end of my time with Ricky besieged me. One night in Nashville he found us dates, a woman he knew in town and her friend, and took us all out to dinner so he could amuse himself with finding out how rare the restaurant was willing to serve his steak. After dinner came drinks in bar after bar, then back to the hotel for more drinks. He had splurged on two rooms, nicer than the motels he sprang for on occasion. The women were good company and generous with their laughter, though more interested in each other than in either of us. They held hands and breathed each other's air and communicated telepathically with their eyes and it was not for our benefit that they kissed each other in the elevator. It began to dawn on me only then that they were each other's dates, not ours. One of them became sick when we got up to the rooms. I helped her friend hold her hair back while she hurled and thought Ricky had wandered off to pass out in one of the beds, but then there was his breath in my ear and he said something like, "Let's ditch these lesbos. Let's go sleep in the truck."

I said like hell was I sleeping in the truck when there were real beds right here, but I followed him outside anyway. The air was humid. Close and damp, palpable air, like walking around inside a giant's mouth. I was drunk enough to need to keep my eyes on the ground so I wouldn't fall over. I remember uneven pavement and the black, tarry stains of old gum cooked into the concrete. Diesel fumes and grease, twangy pop thumping in the bars, then quieter as we moved away, something bluegrass plucked out on aching strings, then nothing, just tires sucking pavement and the muddled din of the night. Then the bricks of some side alley rough through my thin t-shirt as Ricky pressed me into them, kissing me, pinning me there with his hands and his mouth. His grin was right in my face as he said, "Why haven't we fucked yet?"

Most things I felt about Ricky, including resentment and adoration, I kept scrolled up real tight in a bundle that was very small and very crowded, like that type of star that's already exploded and contracted into this tiny but super-dense core of nothing but aftermath forever. Like that. I worked very hard at this. It was true, we hadn't fucked. Had been wasted and handsy a few times, sure, but nothing we couldn't shrug off by morning. None of it had meant anything. If he wanted to experiment, lean into his latent bisexuality, that was fine, sure. Fooling around we could get away with, but this felt different. For one thing, he was talking. That by itself was dangerous.

I tried not to think about what it meant that I was the first guy he'd ever made a move on, tried not to wonder if he still considered himself as straight as he had professed to be when we met. Tried especially not to remember the way he'd cut his eyes at me when he said something he thought was funny, to see if it had made me laugh.

"Everything is so easy for you," I said. "You think you can get whatever you want just by asking for it."

He grinned. "Is it working?"

I wasn't against the idea of us fucking in principle, but I didn't want him to enjoy it too much. I didn't want it if he thought there was only one way this could go. And I was sure that he did, and I hated him for it—for his entitlement to things going just as he expected they would, and for the power his expectations held over

me. I was sure fucking meant just one thing to Ricky, not the tangle of potentials it was to me, for what reason would he have ever had to imagine differently?

"If we fuck, it's not going to go how you want it to go."

"Yeah? How do I want it to go?" he said.

His tone unsteadied me. He was amused, teasing. He had that fond, dismissive tone he took when he thought I was being neurotic. Maybe I'd missed something. Maybe I had misread him somehow along the way, had misunderstood something vital. But I was so sure he was going to let me down, just as I had waited for him to do all along, just as I had maybe hoped that he would, so that I could finally have all the excuse I needed to cut myself loose from him.

It had never occurred to me that I might be the one to do the letting down.

He crowded me against the brick, ground his crotch against mine, his breath ragged against my neck. He fumbled for my belt. I grabbed his wrist and said no.

He made a small sound in his throat. I told him to shut up. He let me unzip his pants. He looked at my hands on him and shuddered. Attraction can look so much like revulsion. Things are so often only their inverse waiting to be turned inside out.

Then he said, "Do you hate me?"

It was a mistake to look at his eyes, which were far more knowing than I'd ever given him credit for being. And sad. He must have seen something in mine, too, though I don't know what, because then he said, "Have you always, or did it just happen? When did it happen?"

"Stop talking," I said, and gave him a ruthless handjob. He came in my hand, which I wiped on his jeans. I left him slumped there against the wall with his head tilted back and his eyes closed.

I don't remember getting back to the hotel, but when I woke I was lying on a fully made bed in one of the rooms. I was alone and someone was banging on the door.

It was the two women from the night before, looking rumpled and hungover but otherwise no worse for wear. "We're leaving," the redhead said. "So it's your turn to go keep an eye on Ricky."

"What?"

"He woke us up at three in the fucking morning, calling me because he couldn't

get the door open. Like, no shit, dumbass, wrong fucking room. He was a mess. I guess you made it back all right though. Good for you."

That pretty much let me know what she thought of me, so I didn't ask any more questions and just laid there rubbing grit out of my eyes until they left. The room next door was unlocked. Inside, Ricky lay shirtless on the bed with the sheet pulled carelessly over his crotch, smoking a joint with one hand and playing with himself under the sheet with the other. He grinned at me, squinting against the sunlight blaring through the window.

"You can't smoke in here," I said.

"Good morning to you too," he said, and held out the joint. "Sounds like you need this."

I didn't move. I said, "I heard you got lost."

His grin was stuck on him as though stapled in place. "Honestly, I hardly remember."

I didn't believe him. It was such a convenient line. We'd used it before. "You could've called me. I would've gone and found you."

"It's all whatever, man. Hey, if you're going to stand there and talk at me this early in the morning, at least do me a favor and shut those curtains. Bright as fuck out there."

It was a relief to be given another command, something to do with my hands. I crossed the room and closed the curtains. The metal rings sang against the curtain rod. Ricky smiled and exhaled smoke through his nose. "Atta boy."

Then we went to see the mountains.

By winter I had moved out of my parents' house and back to gloomy, swamp-sunken Gainesville. I rented a studio apartment across the street from a field owned by the university where cattle grazed. They gathered at the fences at dusk to be fed wild grasses by people who visited them night after night, walking dogs and holding hands and pushing strollers. The air smelled like manure and that earthy mammal scent of the cows, like warm hay and dirt and sunlight.

Among the people I still knew in town from bygone undergraduate days, there

was always a reason to drink. That night in December it was the birthday of a friend-of-a-friend who happened to have been our magic mushroom hookup when we were all students and he was the chill big brother who'd graduated years before. He was turning thirty-two and lived with his girlfriend and his girlfriend's girlfriend in a house across town near the prairie. By the time I arrived he was already drunk and monologued at me about cryptocurrency for half an hour until I escaped and slipped outside.

The backyard was a scraggly patch of crabgrass with one moldering oak tree and a crumbling firepit. A folding table was piled high with plastic cups, sticky liquor bottles missing their caps, and the corpse of a birthday cake, half-mauled and dripping green icing. String lights blinked red and gold. I availed myself of the open bar. Muffled voices and the smell of weed drifted over the fence from a neighboring yard. My breath wisped in the air but I wasn't cold. My face was warm and flushed. The world slid into winter so suddenly that year, the way things change in a dream, here and then gone.

I got busy inhaling a slab of cake and didn't notice the woman until she was right in front of me. She was tall and peered down at me over the lip of her plastic margarita glass. I'd seen her somewhere before. Sooner rather than later, it seemed like everyone I had ever met came back, appeared again. No one ever really left. The trick was to recognize them when they returned.

"Are you sure you want to be eating that?" she said. "It looks like it might come to life."

"I don't like to drink on an empty stomach."

"How responsible of you."

"I just don't want to puke."

She nodded, grave faced. "That makes sense. Maybe I should have some too." Then she smiled at me. It wasn't a particularly friendly smile. It had hooks in it. "Don't you remember me?"

"I know I've seen you before."

"It's okay. I wasn't sure it was you at first either. I had to ask around. We went to high school together. I had such a crush on you back then. Did you know?" She put her hand on my arm. There was a little lipstick on her front teeth. An endearing

pink smudge. I still wasn't sure I recognized her, but what the hell. I leaned back against the fence as she ran her hand up my arm to the back of my neck, a place I have never liked to be touched. It took effort to stay still and not cringe away. A flowering vine growing along the fence smelled of rotting orchids. She kissed me lightly, just for a second, then stepped back and said, "But we'd better not. Actually, I came over here to tell you there's a guy looking for you. He just came by, but he didn't stay long. I think he was a little freaked out by all the people."

I left through the sideyard. Inside the house the warm bright crush of the party went on, but out on the street it was cold and quiet, dark but for the solitary streetlamp and the holiday lights shining along the gutters of every other house. My breath fogged. Across the street, a Christmas tree glittered behind a dark window.

I saw Ricky before he saw me. He sat on the curb a few houses down, shoulders hunched, sawing a harmonica back and forth across his mouth. His clothes looked salvaged from a lost and found bin—jeans a size too big, a faded Batman t-shirt and a ratty corduroy jacket with a faux- fur collar that was too snug across the shoulders. He didn't look up right away when I approached, just went on staring at his boots and making a godawful racket with the harmonica. His truck was parked along the curb a little ways down.

Finally he looked up at me and said, "I can't believe you're still kicking around this shit hole. Everyone worth a damn left a long time ago. Now it's just the losers and rejects."

"What are you doing here then, if you hate it so much?"

"What are *you* doing? Still working that damn fruit fondling job?"

"What do you know about that?"

"I have my sources. Got to keep tabs on you somehow. You never called."

He pressed the harmonica back to his lips before I could reply. Not that I had anything to say. He had lost a little weight, though there was a slight puffiness to his face that kept him from looking gaunt. The manic glint I remembered in his eyes had melted to a stillness I did not trust. Equanimity was unsettling on him. Like the supernatural quiet you hear in the woods sometimes when the birds stop singing. He stood and jerked his head toward the truck and started walking. I followed.

He got behind the wheel and sat there, blowing his harmonica. I could hear it wheezing through the glass. I knocked on the window of the passenger side door. Without looking at me, he made a deliberate show of unlocking the door, twirling his finger in the air and then pressing the button. The lock clicked. I hesitated, then clambered inside.

Ricky turned the key with one hand, still torturing the harmonica. I think he was going for "Waltzing Matilda." Warm air gushed from the vents. The cab windows fogged, then cleared. "Okay, I'm in the truck," I said. "You got me in the truck. What do you want? You want to talk? Let's talk."

He twisted the wheel with one hand. The truck eased from the curb while the harmonica death rattled. "Would you quit it with that thing?"

He would not. The truck rolled down the street and stopped gently at the blinking yellow caution light at the intersection, where he flipped the blinker on with a flourish. "Can you at least tell me where we're going?"

"Your place," he said. He dropped the slobbered harmonica into the cupholder along with the wads of chewed gum wrapped in crumpled receipts. "I need a place to park for a few days."

I closed my eyes and leaned back against the headrest. It had been a long time since anyone had driven me anywhere. Lately I'd done all my own driving. I had forgotten how it felt to be nothing but cargo, just ferried along. I dozed. When I woke, the truck was still and the world outside was dark in all directions. No streetlamps. To the west, way off in the distance, pinpricks of light slid along a horizontal plane like beads on a string and for a second I didn't know what I was seeing and was afraid. Then the vision resolved itself into the lights of faraway trucks riding a parallel highway way out across Paynes Prairie.

"This isn't my place," I said.

"No shit."

"I'm tired. Get us out of here. I just want to go to sleep."

"God damn you. Just get out of the truck, come on."

Outside, insects and frogs buzzed and croaked, comprised the churning white noise of the prairie at night. I made sure Ricky saw me shiver.

"Don't whine," he said. "Just look at the pretty stars, you sonofabitch."

The sky was broken out in a rash of cold needlework, stars like shattered ice. Orange light pollution smeared itself over town to the north, behind us. The prairie unfolded itself in all directions, low and flat and waterlogged.

"I was going to call, but then I didn't," I said.

"Shut up. Call if you want, or don't call. You think I give a shit?"

"Yeah, I do. But I had to stop. I didn't feel good about myself. About who I was around you. I wasn't myself."

"Yes you were," he said. "And nothing's ever any good anyway. I mean, be honest with me. The best lay you've ever had, how much better is it really from the best shit you've ever taken? How good does anything ever really get? You can do plenty terrible, but you can't do anything very good. So don't give me that bullshit."

"You did good things for me. You said it yourself. I was in a bad place, and you helped."

"Shut up."

"Are you okay? Has something happened?"

"No. Nothing happened. Just be quiet, please, all right? Just don't say anything."

We stood by the side of the road. Ricky studied the darkness while I wrapped my arms around myself and thought about my bed and counted the seconds. After a couple of minutes, Ricky pointed out at the prairie. His voice was hushed. "There's something moving out there."

I looked. The darkness was grainy, buzzing like television static. I wondered if I should see an optometrist about that, or if it was normal. Then, maybe—something blacker than the uniform darkness moving in the foreground, a form cut out of the gloom.

"Wild horses," Ricky whispered. "We've got to get closer. Come on."

"Don't. You can't see where you're going. If you startle them, they'll kick."

Years ago, near this very spot, I saw an alligator snap at a horse that had wandered too close. The horse kicked it and kicked it until the people around me got upset and began to mumble, then raise their voices. No, stop, they said. That's enough, leave him alone. They made wounded noises in their throats, the sounds of a crowd's disapproval of a fight gone sour, an unfair match, the face kicking the teeth out of the heel with too much gusto, punishment in excess of all reason.

There rose from them the uneasy grumblings of mutiny. I joined them without meaning to, inhaling through my teeth, cringing. For a moment the human apparatus seemed in fine working order—we were antennae able to recognize and react to cruelty. We did not turn away. But the horse kept kicking. It kicked so hard the poor monster caught air and twirled.

Ricky crept onto the prairie. He glanced back to see if I was behind him, but I had not moved. For a second I thought my refusal to follow would bring him back, but he turned and continued on his faltering path without me.

He'd left the truck unlocked and the keys on the front seat. After a night in a motel, he'd once crawled into the chamber of the covered truck bed and said, "It's nice to have a bed now and then I guess, but I can't get used to it anymore. There's too much space. I'll have to sleep in here for the rest of my life."

Damp, ankle-breaking earth squelched beneath my sneakers. His pace was clumsy but determined, his body lurching and stumbling ahead of mine. I strained to catch up. Blood throbbed in my ears like hoofbeats. He was unbalanced and easy to push. My hands flat against his back, his sharp intake of breath. He twisted as he fell and took me with him, grabbing onto whatever he could reach. His teeth and the whites of his eyes flashed. He was smiling, and I wondered if he had gotten what he wanted after all, to play in the mud like a child or an animal. We rolled each other over, my back in the mud and then his, and then mine again. His dirty hand clamped over my mouth, his breath going *sh-sh-sh*, his eyes fixed on something behind me, above me, something larger than us breathing wetly in the dark.

Translated from the Chinese by James Shea and Dorothy Tse

Yam Gong

Quiet Night Thoughts

Those sounds of late autumn insects
have vanished along with pudding cakes
When did all this begin to happen?
Occasionally I turn from my book
Mother's palm-leaf fan
and the shadow of a ghostly fox appear
I'm like the boy who made a secret hole in his wall to get more light,
peeping beyond the starry sky
at a cat's eyes
A voice selling *Airplane olives!*
still hoarse and forlorn
arcing in long curves
a trail through time and space
like a comet
carrying a hint of bitterness
circling back for a fresh start
circling back for another cycle
Shadows from the past on a low wall,
those dealers buying damaged umbrellas and watches
muddled by a shaking tambourine
meandering in a clamor
all arriving in front of me
followed by
Knife and scissor sharpening!
and strings and strings of voices
selling bamboo poles for clothing
All sorts of melodious peddling
like sketches on thin yellow paper
with traces of ink bleeding through, bleeding through
this side

Yam Gong

Translated by James Shea and Dorothy Tse

靜夜思

那些深秋的蟲聲
和砵仔糕一同消失
是打哪時開始呢
偶爾從書頁裏轉過頭來
母親的蒲扇
鬼狐的影子
像鑿壁偷光的童子
窺見星天之外
貓的眼睛
賣飛機欖那把嗓音
仍然沙啞蒼涼
劃過長長一彎
時空軌跡
像一枚彗星
曳著生澀的一綫味兒
周而復始
周而復轉
那些收買爛洋遮手錶的
彷若當年矮牆日影
給轉響手上的搖鼓迷亂了
叮咚逶迤
便都到了眼前
尾隨着
趕上鏟刀磨鉸剪
和一長串一長串
買衣裳竹的叫聲
種種聲調悠揚的生意
像描在黃草紙上的
墨跡，沁透紙背 ；也沁透
歲月的

of time
If fortune smiled
whether the moon dimmed or shone, waxed or waned
I'd turn a corner onto a street
and hear bleats from a funeral horn
with a coffin coming into view
leading mourners processing on and on
Chance encounters between those who've never met—
On a street steeply inclined
and paved with slabs of stone
I heard the fortune teller's gong
and the sound of a wandering lute
Stopping for a short rest
I looked back with a start:
so many summer nights of almond tea
so many winter days of sesame soup
Now I want to act like a grown-up from those years
warm a jug of wine
to go with a pot of worms
But even if the old showman comes by with his monkey
or white mice appear pulling a wedding carriage
out of a lantern's shadow
where can one still find the figurine man
forming bizarre characters and stories
out of rice flour, kneading them
into all kinds of shapes
When did I become like my long-wandering father
looking up at the streaming moonlight
and gazing in bewilderment
at children underfoot
Before my hometown bed
there's a well…

這一邊
如果運氣好
無關乎陰晴圓缺
街的轉角
「啲打」聲響
一挺棺木在前
行行重行行
相逢未必曾相識
石板的街衢
陡峭的斜坡
聽過算命銅鑼
和流浪的三弦琴響
隨便一歇
回頭便驚覺
多少個杏仁茶的夏夜
多少個芝麻糊的冬天
如今，我想學當年的大人
燙一壺酒
送一盅禾蟲
但縱使有弄猴的老叟經過
或燈影裏走來
推車送嫁的白洋鼠
卻那裏找得着捏麵人
將那等光怪的人和事
諸般
搓捏
何時呢我像我飄泊多年的父親
也望著悠悠月色
惘惘然對膝下的人兒
發怔
「故家的床前
有口水井……

Translated from the French by Kareem James Abu-Zeid

Olivia Elias

Migration of Stars

In this country the stars were not fixed

they could easily all fly off in a single go migrate to regions where happiness is less precarious

and that's precisely what happened

in fact it was that way with everything life itself could fly away the water stop flowing the house and the field vanish just like that in their place a Wall blocking the horizon

a concrete house sprang up followed soon by thousands of others all the same

living nearby was like camping on the edge of a volcano ready to blow at night the lava gushed out the wolves prowled with their teeth bared

the women threw stones tied knots with their handkerchiefs hung blue beads and small crosses around the children's necks there were more of them every day

do you know the sound of an olive tree being uprooted?
or of a bullet striking a man right between the eyes?

Olivia Elias
Translated by Kareem James Abu-Zeid

Migration des Étoiles

Dans ce pays les étoiles n'étaient pas stabilisées

elles pouvaient tout aussi bien s'envoler d'un seul coup migrer vers des contrées où le bonheur est moins précaire

et c'est ce qui arriva

en fait il en était ainsi de tout la vie même pouvait s'envoler l'eau s'arrêter de couler la maison et le champ s'évanouir comme ça pschitt à leur place un Mur bouche l'horizon

une maison de béton surgissait bientôt suivie de milliers d'autres toutes semblables

habiter auprès était comme camper au bord d'un volcan prêt à exploser la nuit les laves jaillissaient les loups rôdaient babines retroussées

les femmes avaient beau lancer des cailloux faire des nœuds à leur mouchoir accrocher des perles bleues ou de petites croix au cou des enfants il y en avait tous les jours davantage

savez-vous le bruit que fait un olivier qui s'écroule racines à l'air ?
et celui d'une balle frappant un homme en plein front ?

Bo Schwabacher

Adoption File 1987

Beginning in desire
with half-moons,

and *gyungdan* (경단)
a black sesame rice

cake, this night
is for splashing

in water. My first year
was extreme

terror. My papers say
conjunctivitis in Korea,

an upper respiratory
infection in America,

a boy with "extreme
jealousy"—being alive

and unmolested
with the hope

of saying
Korean words

right, my heart
responds—a snow crystal

nun *gyeoljeong* (눈 결정),
light *bich* (빛)

a wish *bujeok* (부적)
written in red ink.

My papers say
I said, "bye bye

with meaning."
The red spider

lily, the equinox
flower of final

endings and rebirth,
flourishes in my birthplace.

Josh T Franco Interviews Raquel Gutiérrez

I was delighted when the email arrived. Subject line: "Gulf Coast Invitation to Interview Raquel Gutiérrez." I had been hearing about Raquel for a while, mostly from mutual friends in Texas. I had scoped their website. Mira el ".net" and that technicolor drama three-quarter profile shot. That fade: so damn brown and cool. The knowing and inviting glance. It's just a website homepage, but already you're in Raquel's world thanks to the power of portraiture. That's one of the skills at which Gutiérrez is so adept: portraying.

The invitation to interview them also meant being blessed with an advance copy of *BROWN NEON*, which is a portrait of the overlapping brown, queer, art-driven worlds traveled by the author. I travel in the same cosmos; So many of the fabulous figures you will read about in the book are acquaintances or friends of mine as well. It felt inevitable that we would meet to trade stories and create knowledge and meaning together. We both hope you find our traversal of themes of territory, ancestry, and artmaking useful. The territory where we perhaps overlap most is Marfa, Texas, and it is primarily our Marfan friends who had been speaking our names to one another in the past few years, laying the ground for our eventual meeting. Place is a central topic in our conversation, which is fitting; What the novelist Rudolfo Anaya did for New Mexico, or what cultural critic Fran Lebowitz does for New York City, Raquel does in *BROWN NEON* for Los Angeles, San Antonio, and Tucson. Every generation and community should have their master portraitists. Gutiérrez is one of ours.

It is a strange experience to have your first actual conversation with someone recorded and intended for publication. Below, y'all will read that conversation. Most of the chismes remain and, I feel affirmed in my initial creeping instinct: When I grow up, I want to be Raquel Gutiérrez.

Recorded January 17, 2022 via Zoom:

Josh T Franco: Hi Raquel.

Raquel Gutiérrez: Hey Josh, big fan.

JTF: This is our first conversation IRL! I mean, in real time I guess. "IRT."

RG: Across space, across time zones. I'm coming to you live and direct from Tucson.

JTF: I'm in College Park, Maryland. I made the futon into a bed so I'm really comfy, and it's dark and cold here.

RG: I feel the occasion warrants that. It's the Cancer full moon. I know you're an Aries…

JTF: Wait, so you call out other people's signs in the book, but did you ever say yours?

RG: No…I don't. It would be on par with uploading photographs of my underwear drawer. I do, however, enjoy this question as a prompt for my students who perk up and happily share their top three astrological signs—sun, moon, and rising. And for the remainder of the quarter or semester I make them guess mine. And because I have been an adjunct lecturer these last two years I've had Zoom classrooms of over 60 students at a time so there's constant guessing happening in the chat space.

JTF: I am looking at notes I made while reading your book. I made this little chart tracking these binaries that emerged in thinking about your experiences compared to mine: First, migration. Your experience and those of most of the figures in the book is that of being an immigrant or the child of immigrants. My family's history is much more a the border-crossed-us story. Second, syncretic Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism. My brown experience is shaped by the latter. And third, the most glaring binary: Tejas and California. I also just want to thank you for

resisting the sacredness of Guadalupe in some key moments in the book. It made me productively self-conscious about my unquestioning veneration of her. But yeah, there are these gulfs between our Chicanidades.

RG: There is a certain staticness, you know, around those "gulfs," or perhaps I can refer to them as lapses. We start at a certain origin story and then we don't stay on the narrative, right? We don't actually know what happens, unless you're a deeply committed student of Chicano history. There's a certain glossing over, and that's sort of the premise around language. We gloss until the occasion for precision reveals itself.

JTF: But it's not just language, right? Place matters. Is there translation that occurs, or is needed, between Tejanos and Californians?

RG: The translations occur at improvisational levels to bring context to these cultural tactics, and our executions of them. Whether it's the way that we style ourselves, or the sort of the rhythms we're more adjacent to.

JTF: I'm thinking about the moment in the book in that takes place in a San Antonio backyard, the gathering after the ArtPace event. Something about that man asking y'all to be quiet. I thought, "this is the Texas-California friction right here." I think it has to do with being a guest and how people go about being guests, or recognizing themselves that way. And for a Texan like me, my brownness is not tied to a precarity of place, like it clearly is for so many people who are recent immigrants or their parents were. I've never felt a precarity of place like that, so I don't think I am as sensitive to it when my right to be in a place is questioned. My ancestors are buried under the ground where I walked around growing up, and I can go to them any time and know where they rest. We, my family, visit their graves as a weekend activity. Your book reminded me that not everybody has that, including so many other brown people I know.

RG: I'm really taken with this idea of knowing where your ancestors permanently

reside, and that you could walk over their resting places and know exactly where you're from. I feel like that's a very Texas experience. My partner's family burial plot is in Sonora, Texas and we've had several occasions to visit and feel that familial history at such a visceral level.

JTF: Speaking of ancestors, I love that you have black kyanite as your ancestral amulet. You mention that in the book. I like black kyanite. I have some right here. My amulet stone, though, is a Tibetan black quartz. It's clear but has like this black heart you can see inside it.

RG: On what occasions do you activate it?

JTF: Well, my dude has one in his car. They're twin stones. That one's his, but he doesn't do anything with it. It just sits in the car. When I travel, that's the one I take with me… Raquel, there are so many things I want to talk about from the book. I don't want to be all list-y, but I want to get to all these things. Like the discussions of the Sun Tunnels and danzantes, and that thread of orientation-of-the-self from Nancy Holt to Sebastian Hernández you made it possible to draw.

RG: Thanks, man.

JTF: I like when I feel like a book is giving my body instructions. In yours, there is a strong suggestion to pay attention to the cardinal directions.

RG: I appreciate that note because I had to do several sort of agonizing rewrites on the adobe-making section. Like, how do you convey the specialness of adobe-making to the reader?

JTF: Did you find your way to the adobe files at the Marfa Public Library? They're part of the Junior Historian Files. "Adobe" is a subfile. They're amazing. One of the reports on adobe is by my cousin, Sammy Cobos. When he was 11, he did a report on adobe-making and uses, and took all these beautiful black and white

photographs of the process. You have to check them out.

RG: I would love to and I think that's also the gift that rafa [esparza] facilitates in his practice. I actually got to make adobe in Marfa with rafa.

JTF: That's a good way to put it. Changing subjects, how did you find your way to María Lugones? You cite her in the book. Lugones was my advisor in graduate school. I worked closely with her for about six years.

RG: Lugones is an important reader of Anzaldúa; she provides the grounding and history of a way of writing. At the end of the day, it's not what Anzaldúa says, but more about the conditions that were present that made that writing possible or impossible. At face value, that writing "fails" but there's so much more to the circumstances; Anzaldúa didn't have the typical conventionally writerly life. She was crisscrossing the country trying to eke out a living.

JTF: Isn't it sad that that has become the conventional writer's life?

RG: A particular type of writer right? In the sense that like, even myself, the Latino writers that I know, who have produced work by way of books. We all have a somewhat middle-class existence that lets us produce at longer spells. Anzaldúa didn't have that. She was saying yes to everything and trying to put something together during those travels that could pass for a manuscript. My partner Sandy Soto is a *This Bridge Called My Back* expert, and it's really about the history of these writings. We should pay more attention to the history than the living texts, which are mired in their own shortcomings.

JTF: Oh, wait, also Laura Aguilar… There's so much to say.

RG: Absolutely. And there has already been so much said and written about Laura Aguilar. There will continue to be more to say about so many artists. I think as writers we tend to think that certain artworks belong to the critical space of certain

figures. It's a grad school-y academic impulse to lay claim to certain archives. Like, one might not write about a certain artist because a critic has already written about said artist.

JTF: Is that the vibe around her? Are there writers who are territorial about Aguilar?

RG: I feel like that was something palpable 20 years ago—in grad school, thinking that one couldn't write about a particular set of cultural productions because it had already been part of someone else's critical treatment.

JTF: I mean, fuck that. You've got to do what you want at the end of the day, right? When grad students ask me a question that starts "How do I navigate…" I'm like navigate what? You don't fucking navigate. You do what the fuck you want, and don't be an asshole. Those are the only two rules in life. Often, those are in contradiction to one another; figuring out how to move from that contradiction is everything. Do what you want. Don't be an asshole.

RG: For sure. And practice good politics of citationality. Every cultural production has 360 degrees, 360 doors, from which to enter said text. For me, writing about Laura Aguilar was also a way in which to think through my own sort of lesbian experiences. My own lesbian abjection.

JTF: Oh, that's interesting. You're saying something that's obvious, but thank you for saying it out loud. You identify with her in that much more direct way than I do.

RG: Yes, and especially in terms of the regionality.

JTF: The first time I encountered her work, I was like, Whoa, who is this person? But then I read that she is from California. Like, oh I get it now, a California Chicana.

RG: Yeah, California Chicana, SGV (San Gabriel Valley) Chicana… but early, early. I don't know if you remember what you had to learn in fourth grade, but in California, we had to learn about the California Missions. I went to Catholic school. In fourth grade, we had to do our mission projects and I did my 3d model on San Juan Capistrano, right? In like Orange County. But we went on our field trip to San Gabriel Mission, which is the mission in the area where Aguilar and Cherrie Moraga grew up. But we all learned about these missions with the very specific omission that California was Mexico during the time the missions were built. They were built on Camino Real, what's now highway 101.

JTF: Kill 'em or convert 'em… Who are your artistic ancestors?

RG: That's a beautiful question. It's interesting too, as someone who has a genre promiscuous approach to artmaking. I think the book is my first artistic output as an individual. I've always been part of a collaborative project. I was part of an ensemble at the Cornerstone Theater Company. I have been on curatorial teams at places like the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. I was part of Butchlalis Panochtitlan, with three other brown butch dykes, making performances. Or collaborating with Rubén Martínez on our variety show. In terms of artistic ancestors, I guess it would have to be in language. I think of Wanda Coleman, my gateway to poetry. I think of people I've written about in *BROWN NEON*: Shizu Salamando, Laura Aguilar, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and rafa esparza. And, of course, I am indebted to Amalia Mesa-Bains, Roberto Tejada, John Rechy, Fred Moten, and Jeanne Córdova for their language.

JTF: Nice. Thanks so much for speaking with me, Raquel. Wouldn't it be nice to be hanging out in Marfa tonight, under the stars? I always want a cigarette there.

RG: Well, I always want a cigarette. But yeah, Marfa, with a Shiner Bock and an American Spirit.

Paula Harris

self-portrait not as marble ready to be shaped or bronze to be poured or even as good clay for sculpting, but as the dry gritty dirt—devoid of all nutrients—that my grandmother somehow grew crops of potatoes in and which rubs against your gums and grips the back of your throat if the wind picks up and blows some into your mouth

and then Camille Claudel walked into this poem
and said *I can make something of you, y'know,*
I can make you into something beautiful

and I said *but you're dead and you were mad and terrible at relationships*
and she said *pot, kettle, black*

and I said *most people have never heard of you*
and Camille Claudel said *well, no one's heard of you either*

and I said *but I'm dead*
and Camille Claudel said *it makes you even better to work with*

and I said *something beautiful?*
and Camille Claudel said *something beautiful*

Drew Calvert

Anecdote of the Jar

Have you ever dated a poet? I have. Her name was Faye Linderloff, and she was the genuine article: a formalist from Tennessee with an acid pen and a teeming brain. This was at Stanford, back during Obama's second term. Faye was a Stegner Fellow there while I was enrolled in the business school's entrepreneurship program. The fact that I have dated a poet distinguishes me, is how I feel. I bring it up at social events to offset, or at least modulate, the impression that I am a typical douche among management consultants. We all have our version of this: the indie band from freshman dorm; the abstract painter we knew in Berlin; the son or daughter writing a Proustian novel on their gap year, proof of a wild and fecund gene. Some of us are bold enough to use the term *creative* as an all-encompassing and—let's face it—thoroughly vampiric noun, but everyone, even the doughiest, milkiest Dale Carnegie acolyte has a touch of the Dionysian spirit thrumming in their blood. If not the artist, we all want to be, at least, however obliquely, the muse. We exaggerate these stories, of course, but this should be forgiven. When a colleague tells me that she was engaged to the bassist from The Strokes, I believe her on principle. It's the only immortality available to us.

I met Faye at a lunch event. She and her friends, through typical Stanford graduate student sleuthing, had gotten themselves included on the business school's listserv, granting them free access to the full cornucopia of catered talks and conferences.

"I haven't paid for lunch all year," she said, explaining the scheme, her plate heaping with couscous and okra, her appearance—glasses with hazel frames, cropped hair in a bourbon shade, studs piercing the top of each ear—flamboyantly blowing her cover.

I told her there was a way to snag a free dinner, too.

Ladling chickpeas into a bowl, she raised her eyebrows. "Do tell."

I said, "Join me at a restaurant of your choice, and I'll explain."

Incredibly, she showed up. My particular brand of bluster isn't for everyone. She arrived half an hour late, having chosen a dim trattoria on University Avenue,

and we spent the evening sparring over whose chosen lexicon was more divorced from reality.

"I come for the lunches but stay for the whole patois," she said, of the business school. "So much to leverage. So much synergy."

"Who's worse, though? Economists or literary theorists?"

She looked at me as if to say the answer was obvious.

"Always already reified," I said. "Problematize." I had been an English major before switching to Econ.

She laughed. "I guess it's a close call." But *theorists* were a different breed, she told me. They weren't *writers*, not really. She paused to think of what it meant, to be an actual writer. I paused to admire the comet's tail of freckles on her nose.

"I guess you could say a writer is a spiritual entrepreneur," she said. "You have to make something new."

"And how's it going so far?"

She said she had published a seven-word poem in *Whistling Kettle: A Journal of Verse*, for which she received a thirty-five dollar "honorarium."

"That's five dollars a word. Not bad."

"They call me an *emerging* writer."

"What are we talking? Larva? Papoose? No, wait—that's something else."

"I think of it as a state of being. Real artists never *become*. Becoming would be a kind of death."

She was only half joking.

I opened the menu. "Do real artists drink red or white?"

"I believe we drink absinthe."

"*La fée verte*. It's not listed. Bunch of Philistines." I told her about my trip to Paris the summer after college, how I'd spent an entire afternoon on a walking tour of Montmartre's old studios and cabarets, led by a French-Canadian woman with two PhDs and the oily hair of a hostel rat. That morning, I'd received an offer from Morgan Stanley—a generous one—to join them as an analyst, and I was deciding how to respond. The tour guide told me, *Take the money.*

"You're a traitor," Faye said, smiling now. "You could have been one of us."

"You mean the chronically underemployed?" The waiter appeared and I ordered

a mid-price blend of Napa Valley shiraz. "Just think of me as a patron of the arts," I said, closing the menu.

After dinner, she joined me at the graduate student bar, a short walk from my one-bedroom in Escondido Village. We sipped our golden Anchor Steams and held a comfortable silence as the sounds of our peers chatting about their research, blueprints and case studies gathered to a fine buzz. I remember the moment well. I was desperate to know what she thought of me—what she *really* thought of me—for I had sensed a dangerous warm vine sprouting through my ribcage. Whatever it was, she didn't say. Poets are kind of cagey like that.

After a pause, she said, "Here's one: *negative externality*. Which is basically, what? Poor people's problems. The seagull tarred with oil."

I sipped my beer and thought for a moment. "*Negative capability*." I remembered the term from English class at my gothic New York prep school, the kind of place where Keats was considered a prerequisite for Goldman Sachs. "You have to admit, it sounds like a term from an economics textbook."

She laughed. "You're not wrong."

"Negative capability: the rational actor's capacity to fuck it all up."

"A firm's unique talent for evil."

"Or, at least, incompetence."

"No," she said. "It sounds more like a *psychology* term to me. Like 'failure to leave a strong impression.'"

"A cruel euphemism," I said.

She smiled at me and tilted her head as if to say, *I'm on the fence.* She lived in Oakland, and we both knew the last Caltrain from Palo Alto would leave in fifteen minutes.

She looked at her watch. "I guess I'll miss it."

The sex was extraordinary. I should mention that, by the standards of my demographic, I am a selfless lover—Faye shuddered powerfully when I buried my face between her legs, and kept it there, and kept it there—but *selfless* might be the wrong word, since part of the thrill for me was knowing that I could reduce this wry, cerebral woman to an animal state. In so many ways, I will admit, I am fairly ridiculous. A stuffed shirt, a "bro," a tool, a fleck of mold on the national

sandwich. And yet, granting a symbiotic link between eros and poetry, or the white heat that produces it, I was, at least for a short time, a source of creative sustenance. Afterwards, in the postcoital vortex of intimacy, we shared our deepest fears. Mine was being undistinguished, a mediocrity. Hers was dying before she wrote the words to a poem whose rhythms she was carrying in her head.

"Well," I said. "You win."

She turned over to face the wall. "I'm also afraid of the poem."

That summer, a fellow Stanford alum hired me at Chariot—a new platform for impact investors—and Faye was hired by an NGO to write fundraising emails, so we moved together to Noe Valley, where we lived for two years. I still have dreams about this era. There is no city as nonchalantly gorgeous as San Francisco. Even after we ruined the Mission and gentrified most of downtown, the new millennial technocrats were not without respectful awe for the city's eternal charm. Leaving Market Square at dusk, the air tangy with ocean brine, I'd ride the BART, with its Bruegelesque tableau of upstarts and down-and-outs, then bike home along 24th past murals, pugs, taco trucks, canopied strollers, bronzed youths, grandmothers in Green Peace vests, tidy parklets, neon joggers and townhomes with a lilac flush. I'd feel a tide of gratitude. Our building was near Dolores Park, and allow me to say for the record that if there's any choice in the afterlife, I'd like to spend it there, with a bottle of wine, a fist of brie, sea-salt crackers, dates, and that special brand of artichoke hearts we bought at the Farmer's Market. Once, stoned out of my wits—for we had discovered edibles—I was prepping a tray of hors d'oeuvres atop Faye's reclined stomach when a heart slipped from its cracker-raft and into her golden navel, and I slurped it up, which made her laugh and topple the whole smorgasbord.

Faye was busy writing, of course, and this was less resplendent. To me, it looked like boredom, or a version of despair. She was silent a lot. She sulked. When I asked her what she was working on, she told me she was biding her time. She didn't like when I made suggestions. "Write me a sonnet," I'd say each morning, clasping my helmet's chinstrap. "Write me a nasty villanelle." I offered to be her dark lady, her

golden boy, her manstress, but she didn't want or need my help. Instead she called her former advisor, a poet in his forties who had won national prizes and was still teaching at Stanford, and they would chat on the phone for hours—about what, I have no idea. Secrets of the trade, perhaps.

"Have a good day at work," she'd say. "Don't eat all the trail mix."

In so many other ways, though, we kept having a blast. It was fun hanging out with poets all the time. When Faye published her first collection—a satire of the fundraising game told in heroic couplets—we held a launch party at a dive bar in the Mission. We celebrated her birthday at a place that served wasabi-flavored popcorn as an appetizer. (The entrée: burgers with donuts for buns.) We finished that night in the dim sapphire glow of a new martini bar, where the last performer, a bearded queen, clambered across three tables and kissed us both on the lips. And yet I could sense an undertow emerging beneath the unrelenting whimsy of that era. You'd meet people who once subscribed to socialist ideologies who were now writing ad campaigns for Spotify or Hulu. You'd see a guy wearing his Google Glass get egged in the side of the head. Faye's friends were entertaining, but they could be ridiculous, too. The kind of people who liked to drink thirteen-dollar martinis at the top of Hearst Tower while enumerating the dark forces that made the experience possible. To be fair, I'd invited them.

Faye had mixed feelings about her literary debut. She enjoyed the recognition of her peers, who praised her deployment of an underexplored poetic form, but at home she expressed regret for being "flippant" and "taking the easy way out." There were fewer picnics. There were days of silence.

We'd often join her friends from the program for drinks after readings. I remember one in particular, at City Lights Books, because the poet cited Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar" as a major aesthetic influence, and this was a poem that baffled me. I confessed this to Faye and her friends over cocktails at Vesuvio. *I placed a jar in Tennessee*, is how the poem begins, and it doesn't get much clearer from there:

And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness

Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.

The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

Back then, I was the only one in the group who owned a smartphone, so I searched for the poem and read it aloud, pausing after each line to ask them what it meant.

"A poem should not mean, but *be*," said one of her friends, unhelpfully.

"Why does it need to make *sense*?" said another. "Does your *life* make sense?"

Faye stayed out of the whole discussion. She didn't care what poetry meant to others; she cared what it meant to *her*. All she said was that she liked the phrase "port in air." For some reason—don't ask me why—I couldn't let it go. Part of me was annoyed to have such fleeting, limited access to this wing of Faye's emotional life. I wanted her to *explain* it all, to open up, to share this secret realm she disappeared to. But I guess that wasn't possible.

Anyway, it became a joke I tossed out periodically. "I placed a sock in Kalamazoo," I'd say, after a long silent moment on the Caltrain, the pastel landscape of Northern California streaming by. "I placed a fork in New South Wales," I'd say, while we brushed our teeth. I imitated the voices of the poets we heard at readings—the breathiness, the pauses, the insufferable pretention—and this would always make her laugh. But she was still maddeningly coy about her work. All she said was, "It's coming along," but there was no hard evidence, only phone calls with the Beloved Prof about an apocryphal manuscript. She made two

trips to Stanford, both overnight, both to visit the Bard and his dreamy, booklined guest room, returning with even less desire to frolic in the park. So, naturally, I spent more time availing myself of Chariot's perks. The onsite bar. The youthful colleagues. The purchasing power to spend my evenings drinking rare scotch in rooms with Berkeley undergraduates in snug cocktail dresses.

Here is the part of the story where I really *am* a douchebag.

For one of those Berkeley undergrads once ventured over to say hello. We talked about the origin story of Pixar for half an hour, and then we took a taxi to her loft apartment on Shattuck where there were no ghosts of unwritten poems, just posters of actors and skylines, and the sex was fairly straightforward. Uninspired, uninspiring.

Here's a tip for the douches out there: if you cheat on your girlfriend, never leave your phone charging shamelessly on a table in the living room, where a scandalous photo inviting you to participate in a second debauch can magically appear on the screen. Faye was reading Robert Hass on the couch while I was boiling pasta. All she did was glance at the phone, and *poof!* It was over. By three o'clock the next afternoon, she'd packed her things and moved back in with her program friends in Oakland.

What followed were some dark months. I, too, packed and moved, to a high-end building in SoMa, where I moped around in my briefs and left tearful messages. *You have reached the voicemail of Faye Linderloff. To leave a message, wait for the beep. To apologize, put your head in the oven.* When the Giants won the World Series, I was asleep in bed.

Eventually, I moved on. Chariot was pushing me out—my productivity nosedived—and the city was haunted anyway, so I interviewed with The Providence Group, who flew me out to Kuala Lumpur for a week of interviews. They offered the newest iPhone and Mac, a signing bonus, a housing allowance, and a lead role consulting Maxis, the communications company, on a digital education campaign. They put me up at the Mandarin Oriental, where, on my last night, I drank too much at the hotel bar and took photos of everything—the Petronas Towers, my curry laksa, the pink orchid spread across the padded leather amenities booklet—and texted all the photos to Faye. There was no reply. I was still awake at six a.m.

when the city shed its nighttime dazzle, the skyline's towers fading back to their copper, silver, and platinum selves. I sat on the edge of the bed and watched a weatherman usher whorls of radar across the South China Sea. I went to the breakfast meeting and signed a two-year contract.

In more recent news, I got engaged. My fiancée works for Standard Chartered; she transferred here from Boston after a brief stint in Toronto, and we met at the bar on top of Traders Hotel at someone's birthday event. We make a decent partnership. We both like pricey dim sum and competitive Sudoku. We take brief, efficient vacations to Bali or Phuket. Our apartment building, The Endicott, has a tennis court and motion-sensor elevator buttons.

Anyway, a few weeks ago, on a Friday after work, I was nursing a Guinness at Murphy's Head and waiting for my friends to arrive—to toast the good news—when I opened the mail on my company phone and saw Faye's name. It's been more than two years since I left San Francisco, but it seemed for a moment that time had collapsed, and I felt, if not the sprouting vine, then at least a trembling bud.

The email, however, was not for me. Or, not just for me. It was a message to all her contacts that her debut collection, *Port of Air*, was available from Penguin Press for the price of seventeen dollars. I am glad I was sitting down for this. Whatever my sins and weaknesses, I am belletristic enough to know that Penguin Press, whose logo graced the spines of the classics I read as a boy, tends to publish the kind of work that lasts generations. This was a major accomplishment, and Faye was now a famous poet, or as famous as a poet can get.

I also knew I would be flayed alive in the pages of her literature. I'd told her my secrets, *betrayed* her, then recorded a hundred drunken, sniffly messages on her phone. It wasn't a question of being portrayed in mildly unflattering light. It was a question of being tarred and feathered, paraded through the streets. The understanding of how I'd come across poured into me like poison through the ear. The blurbs were unambiguous: "intensely autobiographical;" "unsparing;" "fiercely confessional in the mode of Sexton or Plath." It was all very worrisome. I felt my whole body wince.

I clicked a link to the title poem, which took me to the website of *Poetry* magazine, where the work had first appeared. I was halfway through when my friends Kian San and Anurag arrived.

"What do you make of this?" I said. I explained the situation and read the poem aloud.

"No idea," said Anurag, who trades commodity futures. "I have absolutely no response."

"There's no *explicit* mention of you," said Kian San, who's a lawyer. "That's promising from the standpoint of deniability."

Anurag took a nibbling, foamy sip from his pint of Kilkenny. "Is she working in a particular *form*?"

Kian San laughed. "Name a form. And don't say sonnet."

Anurag paused to think.

"Okay, fine," Kian San said. "Recite one poem you know by heart."

"What is this, the GCSE?"

I was concerned they might be missing the point. Kian San went to a British school in Malaysia, then to college in Sydney; Anurag has a master's degree from the University of London; I attended fancy American institutions my whole life. We sat there thinking of poems we knew. We should have been a font of verse. As it was, we couldn't muster a single iamb between us.

Instead, we talked about wedding plans. This was another cause of stress. My fiancée was treating our wedding like an initial public offering, endeavoring to please all stakeholders while preserving our competitive advantage. Her best friend and the friend's husband had written their own vows, so we had to write better ones. She'd sent me the shared Google doc.

"When's the bachelor's party?" This was Anurag, checking his calendar.

I said I wasn't sure. I was scanning through the poem again.

"We'll talk about it later," he said. "Once you've cleaned the sand from your vag.

The following week, I walked over to Kinokuniya, in Suria Mall, and found the poetry section. It was larger than I'd expected. I found Faye's book—a thin,

blue volume—and on it, Faye's intelligent face. She looked the same, more or less, which is to say, gorgeous. Even more so, arguably, though perhaps one should factor in the light in professional photographs, which can give even ordinary people that ethereal glow. I bought the book, went home, poured myself a glass of wine and read the thing in one sitting.

After I finished, I sat there on the balcony for a long time. My fiancée had already gone to bed, so the place was quiet except for the strangely mournful hum of traffic below. I thought about my life, how I'd bluffed my way through every stage, how the bluff had somehow *become* my life. I'd let my fiancée assume I was working on my vows when, in fact, I was scrutinizing my ex-girlfriend's line breaks, straining all my faculties to recall exactly when I'd become the person I had become. I thought if I waited long enough the answer might occur to me, like the lyrics to a once-favorite, now-elusive song.

A few days later, tired and dazed by client meetings and wedding plans and a new, disturbing genre of dream, I met Anurag and Kian San again.

"Did you get the book?"

I nodded. I was in no mood to joke.

"Whoa. That bad, huh."

The waitress came with our regular drinks. (Murphy's Head is the kind of bar where the staff endure lewd jokes and costume themselves in accordance with the vision of some libidinous Celt). We watched the cream cascade up our pints, mourning the loss of my pride. Then Anurag coughed and lifted his glass. "Let bygones be bygones, my friend," he said.

"With poetry," Kian San said. "What kind of circulation are we talking?"

I told them, and they both laughed.

"More people read my Yelp reviews."

I tried to laugh, too, but there was a wintry moth, a malignant one, flitting around my chest and stomach. "Yeah, I don't know," I said. "I guess I was just paranoid."

With that, for them, the issue was settled. We moved on to other affairs, chief among them the bachelor weekend. Kian San suggested a golf retreat in

Bintan: there were promo deals at Sedona Beach Resort. Anurag voted for Batam, where we could paintball and race go-karts. I was fine with either, I said, not fully engaged, watching myself from an elevated distance, ten feet or so, the standard hovering position of a disembodied soul, as my friends recounted tales from other bachelor weekends and stag nights, none easily distinguishable. They were mixing up the names.

It was impossible to explain what I'd discovered in Faye's book, so I didn't bother trying. The poems were extraordinary. They were touching and sharp and funny and raw. There were poems about her mother's struggle with epilepsy, her father's scars, her neighbors' tragic loss of their son. A lot of it I was hearing about for the first time, but there were things I recognized from anecdotes. Some of it was political: angry odes to oil derricks, parodies of coastal elites exoticizing the south. She shaped it all beautifully. The book keened and raged. It had a real soulfulness. There were poems about the oblong coins of light across the back of a chair—her first childhood memory—poems about the Stanford quad and the pastel hills of California, poems about the first sip of a beer after a reading. There were poems about couscous and okra. There was one about Dolores Park. Naturally, I read all of this with a deepening sense of unease. Every time I turned the page, I braced myself for the lash of her pen. There was no coyness about this work, no use of first letters to disguise civilian names. It was real and unforgiving. She had done what she'd set out to do. She had climbed into the well of herself and scooped the purest water. She had hit the fleshiest part of the peach. I was nowhere to be found.

Janice N. Harrington

Waste Streams

Inside a bottle's gut (*Horlicks' Malted Milk Lunch Tablets*) I find a seed sprouting in a knuckle of dirt. Maybe loneliness will fit (mos') any container.

Near Humiston, a landfill rises like a temple of the Cahokians. Yellow bulldozers at the top and a line of waiting dump trucks. We drive a mile or two further to the nature preserve: bluebells, and bloodroot.

Riis wrote of a photograph, "debris appears as itself."

Turning and turning in a widening gyre. But there are so many wastelands, now. Coal ash, nitrates, particulates of lead leaching into the groundwater. Another aging street shrine. *Things fall apart.*

You are, she said, what you cannot throw away.

The vintage *Seven-Up* bottle I keep on my shelf is worth $5.00 on eBay. It's not the bottle that I want so much as: virescence, leaf-light, the excuse to say smaragdine.

The paper says the girl's body lies in our local landfill. In every abandoned gum wrapper or Styrofoam shell beside the sidewalk, in every overfilled dumpster, a ghost: *my daughter, my daughter.*

Hope/heart-debris/a bit of dirt, a seed, a damp of condensation.

My life condensed to...

If even debris appears as *itself*, how do I explain my cowardice?

Ode to Cassava Root

Aída Esmeralda

Oh you, so delicious with sugar cane, butter, beans, tomato sauce. | You thicken. You Jellify.
Fry, bake, steam, mash, crisp, stew, boil, you, mother. | To be Kasiri, Tapioca, Casabe,

We can toss you. We can grate you, beige flesh root, into pulp. |
Suman, Beijú, Fufu, Bammy, Yuca Frita— Nuegados! | We can milk you.

where your tubers poked. | You know here we call white people left holes in the ash
You were found in 1,400-year-old Joya de Cerén all lava'd over, yuca pelada. Call

your ashy rind my grandmother's kneecaps. | Your fungi tingles and hugs you back. |
Call the Amazon basin your first time, flying on the tail of a sea breeze. |

you won't let nobody bite you raw. | You grow even where there's already dead, where
the dying is happening. | Dance your leaves in the sun. At the hottest hour, collapse in rest.

You could not be more giving, sacred cistern. |
In these drought days, keep your leaves

for the rainfall. Subterranean swetheart, keep feeding.
Stay safe in this apocalypse. | Cyanide angel,

Translated from the Slovenian by Matthew Rohrer and Ana Pepelnik

Tone Škrjanec

Basic Wisdoms

they said there's no time
that the place is too small
that the water burns
that the hair hears differently than ears and skin
that things aren't flat enough
that bodies aren't always correctly rounded
that that's why we need all these invisible silver threads
that money isn't the question or the answer, they added
that women are everywhere
that it has been like that since the time of the first grasses
and that there are only a few red leaves
which the light can shine through.

Tone Škrjanec
Translated by Matthew Rohrer and Ana Pepelnik

Osnovne Modrosti

so rekli da ni časa
da je prostor premajhen
da voda žge
da lasje slišijo drugače kot ušesa in koža
da stvari niso dovolj ploske
da telesa niso vedno pravilno zaobljena
da zato potrebujemo vse te nevidne srebrne niti
da denar ni ne vprašanje ne odgovor so dodali
da so ženske vseepovsod
da je tako že od časa prvih trav
in da so le redki tisti rdeči listi
ki prosevajo svetlobo.

Tone Škrjanec
Translated by Matthew Rohrer and Ana Pepelnik

Noises Are in the Air

everything's temporary
standing by the shade of a flowering oleander
with pale pink blossoms.
some flowers, yellow and red,
open only in the evening
when shadows appear,
when the sun isn't so strong anymore,
when people and stories gradually
begin to disappear in the dusk. and yet,
some faces
appear just once
and never disappear again.

Tone Škrjanec
Translated by Matthew Rohrer and Ana Pepelnik

V Zraku So Šumi

v senci krošnje neznanega drevesa,
ki stoji ob senci razcvetelega oleandra
z bledo roza cvetovi,
je vse začasno.
neke rože, rumene in rdeče so,
se odprejo šele na večer,
ko se pojavijo konkretnejše sence,
ko sonce ni več tako močno,
ko osebe in zgodbe postopno
izginjajo v mraku. pa vseeno,
kako se neki obrazi
enkrat pojavijo
in nikoli več ne izginejo.

Translated from the Slovenian by Brian Henry

Aleš Šteger

from *Human*

1.

Behind the still fresh ruins of the capitals
And under the ancient script of the first lichens
Is a drop of human blood.

2.

Conceived from the collision of two thoughts:
A human doesn't want to be a human.
A human loves kills
Water ferns nonhumans.

3.

A human is a tear.
A human is a stone.
The ocean wakes them up,
Tosses them,
A human is less
Than the sand of humans.

Aleš Šteger
Translated by Brian Henry

od *Človek*

1.

Za še svežimi ruševinami prestolnic
In pod pradavno pisavo prvih lišajev
Je kaplja človeške krvi.

2.

Spočet iz trka dveh misli:
Človek ne želi biti človek.
Človek ljubi ubije
Vodo praprot nečloveka.

3.

Človek je solza.
Človek je kamen.
Ocean ga budi,
Premetava,
Človek je manj
Kot pesek človekov.

Jennifer S. Cheng

We Bury What We Cannot Bear to Lose

1

The grief of a stillborn child is an ancient grief reaching back thousands of years in recorded history. Ancestral grief, primordial grief. A woman who lives is capable of various asymmetries in her lifetime, but none so mythic yet concrete as this—she gives birth to what is already dead, what has already died inside of her. Only those with a womb can carry death so literally. *She bore it.* Bears it. Her womb becomes an underland to hold the body inside walls of yellow fluid and stone-purplish, pale red. It is a ceremonial site for crossing rivers.

2

I have never gone through a stillbirth—on this I want to be clear. Over two years ago I gave birth to a child who came into the world silent but breathing, eyes wide with fear. When I gave birth to my child, I had already been trying and losing embryos inside my uterus for years. I gave birth to a child, and then I bled and bled and did not feel anything while the doctors panicked, peering into the intimate layers of my body in ways I never could.

3

The earliest recorded mention of stillbirth might be the earliest surviving piece of literature, the epic tale of Gilgamesh, who asks after his stillborn children when his friend travels to the underworld. The earliest known burial in human history is of a toddler child at least 78,000 years ago in East Africa. In 2005, researchers unearthed a Stone Age burial site of an infant, dead at birth, carefully covered in red ochre with beads of ivory, protected under the shroud of a mammoth scapula.

When I came across this reference in a book about rocks and deep time, I wept for strangers who existed 31,000 years ago, themselves small children in the timeline of human history.[1]

4

Our tiny griefs, our pocket-sized griefs, our ephemeral griefs, our immigrant griefs, our transient griefs, our itinerant griefs, our rustling griefs, our imperceptible griefs, our shadow griefs, our ghost griefs, our winter griefs, our threshold griefs, our empty griefs, our entangled griefs…

5

To cross over from life to death before even entering the world, to enter the world already departed, is a strange and unwieldy contradiction. We are all here, half-here. We depend on pre-defined boundaries while also defying them. In the red rocks of Arizona and Utah, where the compaction of stone across millions of years causes colorful striations of rust, burnt sienna, bone-white tinged with dove-gray, I learn that the color I am most captivated by, the bone-white, is actually made of the skeletal materials of tiny ancient creatures who populated a massive ancient sea that is now evaporated. When our small unknowns fall away into the abyss of deep time, are their memories also kept by *rock, ice, stalactites, seabed sediments, and the drift of tectonic plates*?[2]

6

What can the body endure and never return from? The body returns, again and again. After I gave birth and lay bleeding, soaking the sheets and dripping onto the floor, the nurse placed the naked child under my chin, but truthfully, I was terrified by the smallness of her body and the tangle of her bones. My body was spread at a strange downward angle; I struggled against gravity and did not want to hold her body until I could hold my own.

[1] The book referenced here is *Underland* by Robert Macfarlane.
[2] "*rock, ice, stalactites, seabed sediments, and the drift of tectonic plates*" is from *Underland*.

7

When my friend dies, I learn that grief is something that scatters like summer spores across a field. I learn that grief is like time, made up of ill-defined textures one must continuously let go of as other ill-defined textures take their place. The illogic and unclarity of its edges kindle in me a kind of disbelief in the fact of its materiality, as if porousness were not already an attribute of fundamental realities: wind, light, the sea. On the radio I hear a psychologist say that we bury and mark the sites of our dead because, *In order to grieve one must know where the body is*.[3] When S called to tell me our friend had died, I heard her clearly, but I kept repeating the question, "But where is A—?". Across the sea, on the fifteenth day after the Spring Equinox, the people of my ancestral home remember their dead by visiting and cleaning the graves; the name for the holiday in Chinese means something like *pure brightness* or *clear and bright*, and its characters recall water, light, and the moon.

8

In the 1970s in Western societies, stillborn children were incinerated in hospital crematoriums or sometimes buried with deceased strangers. Nurses were instructed to take away stillborn infants immediately after birth to prevent mothers from seeing or holding what had grown inside them and passed onerously between their legs. Doctors advised fathers and family members to rid the house of any objects or mementos they had accumulated in anticipation: bassinets, baby clothes, rattles. The idea was to disappear what they could not bear to lose. My mother—a child of famine, social turmoil, and missing family members—is well practiced at this: at any slight sign of distress, she immediately excavates the source and denies its existence. *Everything is fine, you are not bleeding,* she would frantically say to my little sister as I wiped the wounded knee. My mother counters loss with loss, believing that some absences are more bearable than others.

[3] The psychologist referenced is Pauline Boss.

9

Ambiguous loss, which I take to mean the seed and condition of our existence here on earth. Even in theorizing concrete loss, we speak in the language of palimpsest and ghost: *In grief, the subject experiences a fundamental ambiguity between presence and absence…between the present and the past…between two worlds…*[4] Grief haunts us with its unwieldy vastness, its untidy borders, the way there is always more than we can see, hidden underneath surfaces. *Ignore what grows above ground, for the time being,* my friend M instructed in her writing assignment. *Our concern being, instead, root systems.*[5] Perhaps I am not trying to *say anything* about grief; perhaps I am simply trying to lay down with it, to loosen the earth just a little.

10

I have been obsessed with the *tilted plane* of X, that feeling I had in the glass room while holding my suffering baby, hearing a refrain in my body, *unbearable, unbearable, unbearable*. In those months when rage, which is grief, was at its worst and there was nowhere to direct it except at myself—I hit, I slapped, I drew blood. After the baby was born, there was an earth-shattering moment, spanning almost six months, during which I embodied a perversion of my mother's coping strategy: I felt a clear and distinct urgency to excavate the entire shape of my existence, not even to die because that would imply a forward-moving process in concrete terms, but rather I prayed utterly and immediately *not to be.* The desperation I felt was for something other than the binary of life and death, an altogether third space of cessation. The truth is that birthing a child shook the world apart and in its violent fissure exposed an unfathomable, paradoxical plane of existence: where deepest grief and terror coexists with love and delight; they became inextricable, bound up together, *by* and *with* and *alongside* and *through*.

11

When I read the collection of memories and advice from parents who have

[4] *In grief, the subject experiences a fundamental ambiguity between presence and absence…between the present and the past…between two worlds…* is from "Presence in absence. The ambiguous phenomenology of grief" by Thomas Fuchs in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences.*

[5] With thanks to Mia Ayuymi Malhotra

experienced stillbirths, what overwhelms me is how nearly every single one mentions *honoring the child* and *honoring the loss* by spending as much time as necessary holding, bathing, and caring for the deceased infant. One mother, Valence Meijer, writes, *It felt like the only thing I could still do was to give [my baby] a sacred and loving welcome into this world. The fact that he never took his first breath is irrelevant to me, my son was born and he has touched this earth.*[6] Most pamphlets on grief will say that rituals and rites offer us external containers for bereavement and mourning. They define for us directions, routines, roles, providing clear boundaries for a disorienting experience. However, one pamphlet I come across says that rituals bring together the past, present, and future, allowing us to feel comforted in the fluid intimacy of what might otherwise be estranged: *rituals make boundaries between life and death, the sacred and the profane, memory and experience, *permeable** (emphasis mine).[7]

12

Sky burials, sea burials, earth burials. In some death practices, the body is left on a hilltop to allow the birds to take it away, little by little. In others, the bones are paraded through the streets to music and celebration. Cremated remains are made into colorful beads. Coffins are set to hang from a cliff or at the entrance of the home. When my grandfather died, I was not prepared for how his body, mere hours after death, would look hollowed, a desiccated shell. His skin was the ashen gray of dry desert stones, and his mouth sunk inward, wrinkly around the edges into an open O. It felt somehow sinful to look upon his body, bereft of its spirit; it felt sinful, too, to look away. The dark eclipse of his mouth grew to the size of a planet.

13

Recently news reports were captivated by an orca whale in the Pacific Northwest who carried her dead calf for seventeen days, refusing to forage for food with her pod. Primates, too, have been known to carry a dead child, to grow lethargic and

[6] The quotation from Meijer appears in "Stillbirth: Your Stories" in *The New York Times*, June 26, 2015.

[7] *rituals make boundaries between life and death, the sacred and the profane, memory and experience, permeable* is from "What ancient cultures teach us about grief, mourning and continuity of life" by Daniel Wojcik and Robert Dobler in *The Conversation*.

emaciated after a companion dies, sometimes themselves succumbing to death shortly after. Elephants, giraffes, and zebras stand guard over the body of the deceased, sometimes returning to the remains to touch the bones, during which the closest family members linger the longest. Darwin wrote in *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, that in moments of deep grief and distress, *our brains tend through long habit to send an order to certain muscles to contract, as if we were still infants at the point of screaming out.*

14

If I were to write an essay entitled "Hystery and Hystericism," it would describe how a woman's grief is considered to exceed acceptable boundaries of expression, or experience, or both. The history of hystericism is such that women, some more than others, must prove themselves to be dispassionate creatures in order to be considered rational, sensible, intelligent. But what underlies our assumptions about *what* and *how* we know? Is the world not a hysterical place?

15

Later, it was our child's body that turned blue, and my husband who wrested his own breath into her. What I recalled after the moment passed was not terror but the vagrant hue of what lay inside the morning's clouds just beyond his shoulder. In the essay "Loss: Loving into Life and Death," bell hooks writes, *Our first home in the womb is also a grave where we await the coming of life. Our first experience of living is a moment of resurrection, a movement out of the shadows and into the light.* How strange, to think of our first cries upon entering the world as sounds of mourning for the loss of a gravebed, where we grew into being inside an unknowing sleep, a garden-tomb of sorts. How strange to think of the body in these terms at all, a nexus of contradictions.

16

We cannot live in the space of tragedy or apocalypse all the time. A body cannot sustain indefinitely in a state of fight-or-flight. And yet the young woman who had been living with stage-four cancer for six years now said that it was like living with *chronic crisis*, perpetually at the brink of unraveling into oblivion. Everyone reaches impasses of *tragic time* at some point or another, but these moments don't last forever; it gets better, you figure it out, you return transformed—or not—to *ordinary time.* How, she asks, does one begin to live, *to live a real life,* if you are always, unremittingly, continuously at the edge? How does one build a tiny home on the precipice of a crumbling cliff, next to the wide, wide sea?[8]

17

For in the very first moment when I looked upon my child's face, I began to grieve for all the shadows to come. I grew desperate with how they amassed in my heart, climbing up toward my throat. It is a wonder how continuously we choose *not* to crush the fragile seashell in our hand, salty from the sea; *not* to keep the steering wheel straight at the curve of a highway bridge; *not* to continue wading, wandering far beyond, beyond the shoreline. At some point or another, we discover life is not a series of choices; the only choice we ever really make is one of *here,* over and over, like a forgotten metronome, until even this choice eludes us.

18

What I hear, over and over, from the parents of stillborn children is that grief never disappears; it is like the movement of the sea, and one simply learns over time to live with its rhythms. When one mother writes that her grief *flew away into the sky* and that she learned to love again, *perhaps more so because of the hole in [her] heart,* I imagine grief like a wild bird puncturing an opening in the firmament, and water spilling through, pouring over.[9] There is a difference between a heart that is whole that loves, and a heart that is holed that loves.

[8] See "The Future of Hope," a conversation between Kate Bowler and Wajahat Ali at the podcast *On Being with Krista Tippett* (Sep 16, 2021).

[9] Quotations are from "Stillbirth: Your Stories" in *The New York Times*, June 26, 2015.

19

We dress our dead in the best of our garments. Things we never wore in our living days. Little gold cufflinks, silk dress, clean fingernails like the moon on a watery clear night. I have never held anything against the dead; they held on for as long as they could. Thirty-seven years later, my mother says she still dreams of her own mother at night, it is as if she is right there, moving around in the world. I do not ask my mother if it is a comfort to have her near in the dark mystery of sleep, or if it means she must relive loss every time the sun rises.

20

Something returns to me: *Rituals make boundaries between life and death, the sacred and the profane, memory and experience, permeable.* In the Celtic Christian tradition, there are certain places in the geography referred to as *thin places*, where the skins and layers of our world feel fragile, porous, where the *distances between heaven and earth collapse*.[10] Here, we are disoriented. Here, language fails us; here, we fall silent.

21

When the scientists stumbled across the deeply hidden and rarely accessible cave, they found that the ancients had taken care to bury their dead in places where shadow meets light.

[10] *distances between heaven and earth collapse* is from "Where Heaven and Earth Come Closer" by Eric Weiner in *The New York Times*, March 9, 2012.

Jessica Tanck

Sheboygan Area Theatre Company

My father was Oberon,
Dr. Spivey, Giles Corey,
Bill Sikes, James Leeds.
Faerie king and teacher,
doctor, killer and accuser,
suspect, sorcerer. I watched
his hair gray and grow,
darken, disappear.
Every season a new face.
Watched him thunder,
charm and wrist-grab,
sign and sing and praise.
Meanwhile, music
rained through
our house: nine pm
piano, the pound of keys
under my stepmom's
alto, Whitney Houston
and *Les Mis*, mostly
the same two songs—
whiplash, back-and-forth
searing, a tease.
So often, performance
seems an exaggeration:
his makeup
at the stage door,
those deeply etched

wrinkles, the painted
lines of mouth and eye.
Lines belted, solemn,
in *Children of Eden*,
The King & I. Other
moments lapped
uncanny. I watched
Sikes snarl, grab
his wife, and cold
sweat beaded
up my back.

Patrick Dundon

Dream Without a Proper License

Dad and I are out on the Pacific
in a little yellow boat he named after himself.
He pulls up a crab pot we planted that morning.
Inside the metal cage: dark unmoving shapes.
Are they dead? No. They aren't animals at all,
but clothes I used to wear as a kid: a pair
of navy blue Keds, white Nike socks, that striped
shirt mom got me at Ross. We can't keep these,
he tells me, we don't have the proper license.
He throws each item back one at a time,
flinging them happily like frisbees. Each one
floats for just a moment before it fills
again with water, becomes its own anchor.

Susan Sanford Blades

Sophie Martineau on Bass

Too soon after her name had been slipped to me under a glass partition, my birth mother stood before me, looking elfin on stage. Tiny black hedgehog eyes and a pushpin nose. Her lips thin and white, as though dusted by icing-sugared sweets. Her hair, a helmet the same shade of caramel brown as mine and so fine the alpine peaks of her ears poked through when she bobbed her head to her bass lines. Pale, shapeless stork legs poked out from a little white slip dress that probably was indeed a slip. I was undeniably her kin. Her pointed lollipop chin, the sag of cheek from her jaw bone, her unruly Kahloesque brow—the shock of them, of their imprints on myself, made me pee my pants a little.

When Chixdontdiggit had taken the stage, Lil spat a balloon-cheeked mouthful of electric popsicle onto her Mary Janes. It's the elder you, she said. She bopped her palm against the nest of mini-buns clinging to my scalp. Same dog-shit-coloured hair too, she mused. Like, exactly the same.

My birth mother curved herself into a C on every fourth note she fingered, the movement so devoid of muscle tone I expected to see strings rising from her joints and a grand riot grrrl puppeteer crouched atop the rafters—Tobi Vail controlling her with a flick of her drumstick.

When we'd inseminated this idea a month earlier—when Lil had grabbed the Chixdontdiggit cassette from the new releases bin at Blackbyrd Myoozik because the lead singer looked like a cross between Snow White and Courtney Love in all the best ways, flipped it over and said, Holyjeezusmotherfucker, Sophie Martineau on bass—there was still a chance it wasn't true, that this Sophie Martineau wasn't *my* Sophie Martineau. I indulged in that chance when it suited me. Perhaps I'd only wanted to find her, not to meet her.

I made Lil buy the tape because Stage Hand Luke was the only one working the record store that day. Named such because he dressed in all black and thought he was cooler than Paul Newman's ice-blue stare, Stage Hand Luke was covered arbitrarily and indiscriminately in ink, ever-topped with a dollop of toque which most likely sheltered a vast wasteland of prematurely nude scalp. His face was

greasy and perforated, his eyes empty spools underscored by lines of unwound tape. He was one of those eighteen year olds who'd looked twenty-seven for the last five years. He'd normally be engaged with a co-worker in conversation about some obscure band with a fan base of three who played what could be classified as "art-noise." He thought CDs were the devil's work, cassette tapes were cute, and vinyl was god. I'd avoided him since the day he called my Heavens to Betsy CD a "dear-diary scream fest."

You know anything about this band, Lil asked.

Stage Hand Luke cast his blank eyes toward the tape. They're from Calgary, he said. Their bassist used to date Chixdiggit's bassist. It ended badly, hence the name.

Good way to get back at an ex, Lil said.

God forbid they'd start a band for the music.

Lil blew a column of hot air up from her bottom lip and rolled her eyes to the top of Luke's wool-condomed head. Isn't all art revenge, she asked.

If you're a psychopath.

Lil picked up the tape and shook it. How much?

Stage Hand Luke rung us up and, in what we later deemed an effort to seem in-the-know, he told us Chixdontdiggit was opening for Delores—a Much Music darling, Canada's more polite answer to Courtney Love, all veins intact—at the Rev on October 8th and, in what we later deemed an effort to be controlling, told us we should go.

And there I was at the Rev in my adoptive father's baggy GWGs and a toddler's undershirt. I felt the storkish lines of my own knee caps, the C-shaped groove my body mimicked. I didn't have to speak to her after the show. There would be other shows. This could just be step one.

Beside me, Lil thrashed her head into a black scribble, wafting that god-awful peach Body Shop eau de parfum she insisted on dabbing behind each ear like a spray-tanned bar star.

What do I do? I yelled into her ear.

Lil shook her head and shrugged. She couldn't hear me. Dance, she screamed.

I left Lil and walked toward the bar, my eyes on the stage. A snake pit of punk boys writhed there, grasping after the rum and Coke that would propel them toward a raunchy story to tell that Monday. Among them, Stage Hand Luke, who rose his chin in acknowledgement of my obedience. Beside him was the second-scariest purveyor of music, Sub Pop Bob. His uniform consisted of shredded Levis orange tabs held up by rainbow suspenders over a red one-piece long john suit. In the winter months, he'd cover his torso with an extra layer of fluffy cardigan in a grandmotherly shade. Sub Pop Bob was the guy who had shed a single, Seattle-saltwater tear upon Kurt's suicide and was immediately over it before all the poseurs swarmed the store for their remaining copies of *Bleach* so they could claim to have been into Nirvana *when*.

Past the bar in a booth against the wall—where the pool tables squatted, where the dudes gathered—I noticed Jordan Hagen and his friends, hunched around a pitcher of beer like rednecks beside a freshly shot buck. Jordan drove me home from school sometimes, in the truck his parents bought for him after his twin brother died. On the first day of grade twelve—on my eighteenth birthday, the day I first entered his truck—Jordan was the envy of every kid in school. His truck sparkled cerulean blue like his twin's eyes used to. Like Jordan's eyes used to. And then we all remembered the reason for the truck—Bobby Hagen spinning like a disco ball from the roof beam of their family cabin.

I couldn't approach Jordan at the Rev, in public. He and his friends were popular. They lived in Riverbend, in two-storey cookie-cutter homes iced with pastel shades of California stucco. Riverbend was absent the numbered streets and avenues that organized the rest of Edmonton. It hosted arbitrarily named drives, crescents, closes, wynds, all meant to disorient and discourage outsiders. I was not a Riverbender. I was a drifter in the halls of Strathcona Composite High, an undeclared, somewhat familiar, glasses-covered face. A not-normal normal girl. Suspicions had surfaced around school—rumours, but little evidence—that I was attached to Jordan. Ours was an entirely truck-based relationship.

His friends were an impenetrable defense, surrounding him in the booth wearing their hockey jackets, felted green with white leather sleeves, their surnames appliquéd on the backs—their ticket to popularity and to any midriff-

baring girl in school. Come the end of June, those jackets would hold no currency. Jordan would begin working nights at the Thunderdome. He'd live off cocaine and Labatt's, head-bang to the "Thunderstruck" laser light show every night at midnight, climax in hot tubs at 3 a.m. with living blow-up dolls pumped full of silicone and collagen, the kind of girl who would melt if burned at the stake.

Jordan and his friends rose then, all at once. And not only them—it was as if the contents of the Rev all lifted, a gasping tsunami, and crested toward the stage. Delores had strutted on. I'd been focused solely on the back of Jordan's head, soft and blond and haphazardly greasy as though he applied olive oil to select strands with a paintbrush post-shampooing. As he ran past, jostling with his friends, Jordan acknowledged me only with his eyes, reprimanding and dark. I had become a vessel for his half-heartedly ejaculated guilt—for being the twin who lived, for not recognizing the ache he knew existed beneath his brother's jovial exterior, for being too drunk to act on the tightening around his throat that weekend while Bobby swung. In my few forays into his truck, it had been established I was to absorb that guilt, to be a sponge for Jordan's yearning and to appear only when he needed release. The rest of his time was spent forgetting. And how dare I mix the two.

I hadn't noticed the end of Chixdontdiggit's set or the departure of my birth mother from the stage. A panic set in, first to locate Lil in the mass of bodies. It was the sort of crowd that stripped you of your balance, your humanity, attuned your survival instincts toward maintaining your position before the stage by any means necessary—elbows, shit-kickers, the burning tips of cigarettes. I couldn't see Lil's black pom-pom head but I knew she was fine. Lil would rather be trampled by a thousand Doc Martens than find herself in front of that stage on her own.

I couldn't see my birth mother in the crowd. How was it that I could spot Jordan and his entourage—a splatter of green spray paint on that frantic brick wall—and not my own blood?

And then, from my vantage by the bar, I saw the ruffle of white tulle from under Chixdontdiggit's lead singer's skirt as she stepped like a fishnet-stockinged ostrich out the front door of the club. In the slant of dusk through the open door, my birth mother floated like a spectre in her slip dress. There, and then gone when the door swung shut. I walked into the crowd and pushed my way through to

the other side. Dank armpits streaked my cheeks, banging heads of hair whipped across my mouth like soaked, salty gags. The mob dilated and contracted around me, then hawked me out the front door.

My birth mother sat on the edge of the sidewalk, knees fused, pigeon toes splayed, her back to me, ashing her cigarette into the storm drain. The scent of second-hand smoke and dry leaves rode a cool breeze. She was alone. I made out her lead singer's form in the window of a beat-up Econoline van parked a few metres away. The kind of van Lil and I used to call a child-molester van when we still believed child molesters lurked under playground slides and rapists crouched in bushes.

My birth mother was a Narcissus, displaying her elegant nape as her head drooped toward the drain. I wondered if the back of my neck was as pretty. I stepped closer to her and almost turned to run home. Why hadn't I done this the normal way? Looked her up in the Calgary white pages, sent her a letter with a photo, asked, after a few exchanges, if she'd like to meet? This was Lil's idea—catch her off guard. Still buzzing from the stage, she'd accept me with open arms. Not only a fan but her long-lost daughter. *It's great song-writing material*, Lil had said. *How could she turn that away?*

Can I bum a smoke?

My birth mother squinted up at me. Not a Delores fan, she asked. Her voice was high-pitched, airy and precise, like that of a jeweller or a fair-trade tea importer. Not the honeyed tenor of a mother.

Yeah, I am. I stuffed my hands deep into the back pockets of my jeans. But not a mosh pit fan, I said.

She straightened and stepped up onto the sidewalk beside me. She was taller, a stretched-out version of me. She looked like a board-game peg with her helmet of hair and long cylindrical body.

Have mine, she said. She held her cigarette to my lips and I accepted it. I chastised myself for recoiling a bit at its dampness, at the taste of her tangy sweet saliva on its outer edge. I once shared her body, after all. But she was also a stranger.

I took a short drag, careful not to inhale. I listen to your album all the time, I said. I love "Give Me Back My Smalls T-Shirt, Motherfucker."

My birth mother didn't smile so much as shift her jaw back toward her throat and look to her left, to the river, as though searching for an escape. The song I'd mentioned was not in fact one I loved but it was the only one she'd written and sung lead vocals for. Sung was a bit of a stretch. The song consisted of Sophie Martineau scratching at a bass string and chanting in a possessed, baritone drone, "You took my shirt / You took my life" for two minutes. I worried I'd insulted her with presumed sarcasm, given her song was obviously unlovable. And then I resented her. A mother is not someone you should feel uncool before, someone whose feelings you worry over. A mother should be someone you don't have to think about. A mother should be felt, not seen or heard. Eternally there but not present.

We stood silent for a while. She lit herself another cigarette, inhaled, and blew the smoke directly in front of her, so it wafted back into her face with the breeze. Then, she startled her head my way in an avian manner and straightened her spine.

I'm glad you liked my song, she said with the strain of sweetness in her voice girls reserve for reassuring one another of beauty, thinness, captivation of boys' hearts. And then my birth mother walked away from me. A wisp of white ash fluttering against the charcoal sky.

Wait, I called out.

She turned, and I said, Does September sixth, nineteen seventy-six mean anything to you?

The lady at the post-adoption registry who'd wished me a happy eighteenth through her coffee-stained smile had given me only the name Sophie Martineau and the advice to mention my date of birth as an ice breaker so as not to scare my birth mother away. As though giving up a baby for adoption relegated a woman to a different, skittish species—sparrow, squirrel, tarantula.

My birth mother bit her mouth into a lipless, impenetrable seam, and her pupils conquered the whites of her eyes. I was certain this was the last I'd see of her and took inventory of my senses—the heat of her cigarette against my lips, a woman yelling *Fuck you, Clayton* a few blocks away—to imprint her on my memory.

She shook her head and said, Sorry, no. And she turned and stepped into her band's dark-windowed van.

I was downtown the first time I entered Jordan's truck. I'd just walked out of the post-adoption registry and stuffed that piece of paper that read *Sophie Martineau* into the back pocket of my GWGs. Jordan slouched in his truck, idling outside a convenience store nearby. I don't know what Jordan was doing on the wrong side of the river that cut our city north from south. It was the first day of our Grade twelve year. He should've been behind the school, giving wedgies to the puniest Grade ten boys. Or maybe I'm mistaking my life for *Dazed and Confused*. I approached his truck because he was there and he was alone and my bravery grew with geographic distance from school. In my pocket, my birth mother had a name and was suddenly real, my loss suddenly tangible. I walked up to Jordan's open window and said, Tell me about your brother.

We sat in that parking lot for hours, my legs clenched on his still-crisp passenger seat, which didn't embrace my rear so much as abstain it. The truck smelled, like Jordan—new and delightfully toxic. When we ran out of words for loneliness, he slid his hand between my thighs. It felt surprising, wrong, natural. When I tightened at his touch, he didn't retract. He was grief-struck and popular. He could rationalize any action with a tuck of his hair behind an ear or an elongated blink. He kissed my neck, he pulled my hair, he nudged at my crotch with his knuckles. We both disappeared, sucked into the undertow of Jordan's desire, dragged by our misfortune. Things just happened to us. It didn't occur to me that Jordan was not a victim of his teenaged body, acting out the script written by his boy hormones. That he saw me as the one thing he could control.

After that day, he drove me home from school sporadically, on a timetable I never decoded. In that truck, we were two vacuums consuming one another, fumbling with each other's button-flies until Jordan came, head tilted toward the roof of his truck and beyond, eyes blurred and wet. The only pleasure I felt was in the warmth of his naked stomach against mine, that small taste of intimacy. I returned to that truck for his eyes, blue like a vein under thin skin. For the way he smelled like cigarette smoke and rain on pavement—noxious and fresh at once. For his brief scratches of laughter that reminded me of a needle dropping onto a record. I was a parasite, drawing the emotion he leaked—from his misty eyes, his fingers that only showed tenderness to cigarettes, his voice that trailed and skipped over

mentions of Bobby's name—nurturing my loss with his. I returned to his truck because he had lost something I had a hope of recovering.

The members of Chixdontdiggit huddled inside their van as though I was Cujo, waiting to fang the first limb to peek out from the vehicle. I imagined they were cackling over the idea of Sophie Martineau as mother to that bespectacled girl who feared mosh pits and didn't inhale.

October had sucked all of September's dwindling warmth from the air. The cold became unbearable in my tiny undershirt, even after two electric popsicles on an empty stomach. I tossed my birth mother's cigarette into the storm drain and stared a while at her van. This dance wasn't over.

I turned to walk back into the Rev and there was Jordan, propped by one shoulder against a brick wall. I liked him best from a distance, where the angry sorrow he diffused was most enticing. His form against that wall was a riptide I wanted to dip my toe into. I kicked my Adidas through the gravel of the parking lot, crunched every crispy leaf on my path toward him in hopes he'd look up, give me a clue as to how warmly I'd be received, but he didn't. I said hey when I was two steps from him.

It's a lot in there, he said.

I just met my birth mother.

Jordan looked up at me and smiled. He had dimples I'd never seen.

Frances, he said. He grabbed both my hands in his, pressing a thumb into each of my palms. How?

She's in the band. Chixdontdiggit.

That's so cool.

I nodded.

Your mom's in a band.

I pulled my hands from his and crossed my arms. For an entire month, I'd only wanted to be near this boy. Even to smell his Speed Stick as he passed in the halls was ecstasy. But right then, his excitement repulsed me. He'd stepped behind the viscous layer I felt between myself and the world, the same wall of honey my birth

mother had erected between us. Both of them within reach but untouchable.

What, he asked. His dimples smoothed, his eyes flattened.

I don't want her to be cool, I said. I kicked a pile of gravel against the wall of the club. Why do you care if she's cool?

He flicked those flat eyes up at me. You're too much, he muttered.

I stared at him, mute. Jordan was grieving. When Jordan smiled, all around him smiled, coddled that drop of joy with all the affection they'd afford a newborn puppy. When Jordan felt anything, all around him felt that same thing. Jordan was grieving. He had no leash on his entirely forgivable anger.

I walked past him and into the Rev.

Are you for real? He yelled to my back, the bouncer, the slamming door.

I found Lil, sweaty and frenzied, in a staggering clump with the Blackbyrd Myoosik boys, smelling like a peach juiced by a frat boy's armpit. When I pulled her toward the door of the club, she yanked on Stage Hand Luke's T-shirt and he turned to nod and wink at her. I held her by the elbows, my mouth dramatically agape and all she did was pass that wink on to me.

We walked across the bridge hand in hand, the murky river a fat, slinking crocodile beneath us.

What was she like, Lil asked.

Like sex in Jordan's truck.

Lil laughed. She looked at my straight face and laughed harder the harder she tried not to. I waited for her to stop, to match my mood, but then I laughed too. I laughed and laughed because Lil was laughing. We hung our chests over the bridge railing and shrieked and drooled into the North Saskatchewan. Eventually, we wiped our chins with the hem of Lil's dress and we went home—all of us—to our mothers, asleep under a hovering and inherent sense of failure, in bed with men who were fathers simply for lying next to them.

All My Holes Except The One in My Heart

Their hunger for me invented me. Married couples message me after I become single, and start by saying they've always found me attractive. Like they discovered me, like I had never been.

All their FANTAZIES:
school gurl < < pony gurl < < Princess Leia Repunzel braid bikini < <
alligator queen of the Nile < < doming while eating a sub-human
sandwich < < Eiffel-l'Arc-de- Triomphe-Humpback-of-Notre -do-me < <
star-spangled naughty banner < < X-Files with ears and a tail < <
coughing victorian lace while cuffed < < Kitty Jackie-O < <

FANTASAYY:
bisexual woman as conduit between two people < < glass skyway
connecting riverbanks < < dirt passage between two castle chambers < <
vital stem connects flower and bulb < < pillar that holds up
the house where life takes place < < silent egg in the batter that sponges
the cake < <

Curiouser & Curiouser! These couples ask for holes where there are none! Me, a brunette gravitational pit. Spelunk my bitchy chasms. Prospect for pockets. Hunt for keyholes. Open. Open. Wider. Wider. Big enough so their relationship can fit inside me. Galaxy gaze. Wonderlanding. Drink me. Eat me. Paint my roses red. What they really ask for is my early death through opening new holes. Off with my head.

I have a FANTA-Z:
someone asks how I feel at the end of a long day < <
A beloved reaches underneath a mess sheets to seek my hands, my face, in the dark < <

Just now, a voice said, *oversharing is giving away energy and keeping secrets is protecting it.*

But I am not using protection in this poem.

If I open any wider, make any more holes, I will fall into myself and never climb out.

Zoë Bodzas

Goodbye! Goodbye!

a man in a smartcar tried
to kidnap me but like
sir
i'm a big girl
my knees will be out the window
calling for help
calling for ??????

i order delivery to the dmv
and play a record on the wrong
speed, willing the fabric
of reality to melt, but
sweetheart?
world is already soft. the future
is a 401(k) and the light of a dead star. i'm not cut
out for apocalypse. i live
for a hot shower and protein. the fabric
of reality is polyester, and i too
am more of a crude oil. lord,
give me a new nose, a window seat, & a rich
interior life. i undress immediately but drag my feet walking to that higher plane. give me
a ride and i'll be

Kate Garcia

Heatsick

She wanted to come in the open mouth of Yucca—
she wanted Orion to watch her buckle then
yelp on that dirty old saddle blanket her
date had laid out in the silt

She wanted to be a naked glowing pale
purple alien she wanted to be thin and frightening
and fuckable

So she put on a real show—
with that oily bratwurst
he grilled on his little red camper stove—

she ignored the hotel-casino wrenching
up and out of the desert floor
huge and pink and steaming

And when he asked her
about her biggest flaw
she answered him:

I was a violent child who lied.

And she laughed with him when he thought that was funny—

Picture this:

You're on I15 heading away from Vegas and you stop at
The World's Largest Chevron (96 pumps)

You pick up a tacky neon bag labeled Alien Jerky
and it is full of nothing but a putrid puff of air

You keep driving toward a violent beam of light
You keep driving toward a vast ocean of mirrors

Sara Fetherolf

Land of Can't-Get-Far

All runaways come home, eventually.
Each pauses on the stoop to look at stars
like spilled milk, ejaculate, unraveling bridal

veils, mushroom spores, exponential keyhole lights—
that unfinished business. While somewhere, a caterpillar
weaves itself a pure silk transformation room;

somewhere, a hungry dog sneaks into church
to steal the god-bread from the altar plate;
somewhere, a mother is teaching her son

to balance on a rail by using feet as eyes
& keeping his eyes fixed on the middle distance.
See how the stars don't care the ways we yearn

or don't yearn toward them? Is that love—? To know
nothing is waiting, and still step forward?

Wayne Koestenbaum

Stomach Aches I Have Known and Loved

stitch in my side while temping across the Charles River

limping to the bus

codeine on Linden Street

near the Bauhaus

he called it a tropical disease

because he specialized in tropical disease

and yearned for a reason to practice his calling

horse tranquilizer shot in my stomach

muscle relaxant near scorpion bowl

footsie and then retraction

a rage for pilsner

without a comprehension of pilsner

Tennyson the best moment in the horse show

or the dog showing its beef

repeating spumoni to uncomprehend it

nullify a former comprehension that proved false

his love mask falling down

can I tuck your shirt into your trousers

those are braces, not suspenders

did you add the silkscreened tree yourself

I want the yellow purse

chunky pearls made of wood

hanger steak his voyeurism ogled

drive-in movie mirroring the dance of the solar system

after serving a prison sentence for graft

shuffling down the sunny street with plastic-surgery wife and neurodivergent son

or is the wife neurodivergent

the father is the ambulance driver I wrote about

the yeshiva's Auden

repeatedly asking for biscuits after 4 p.m.

when the cafeteria is closed

sharing a bed despite pyromania

after the pandemic ends I'll go into the store where they fondle

they fondle bargains

ripped off are the bargain hunters on their faery steeds

a Coupe de Ville in 1966

parked on Englewood Drive

near the good homework house and the encyclopedia

one volume per month from the supermarket

the C volume like a testicle overlapping with its ghost

testicles are implied but not seen

in the glossary you will find

a cup of the forbidden like flour or sugar

the bassoonist on her porch

what do you call those porches in Charleston

the porches on the side of the house

like Eddie Haskell in *Leave It To Beaver*

epitome of smarmy menace

grazing his victims

the nipple was flat but made itself known to the search party

veranda is the word

I knew about verandas before I forgot about verandas

on an anthill you can be happy if you are an ant

but if you are not an ant you will seek a different habitat

Laura August

Inés Verdugo: The House Disappears

Memory is not only a remembrance, but the presence of a past that has been lost irredeemably. The house disappears and when we try to capture a remembrance of it, it also fades, lost forever.[1]

—Inés Verdugo, Desarraigo, 2018

House like an engine that churns and stalls.
House with skin and hair for walls.
House the seasons singe and douse.
House that believes it is not a house.[2]

—Tracy K. Smith, from "Ash," 2015

In her video *Arraigo* (2017), Inés Verdugo models a series of physical movements within three-dimensional digital models of dollhouse-like frames. Her body is exactly the scale to fill the entire interior of each house; each house barely contains her (Fig. 1). She curls into a ball, rolls into herself, makes angles with her elbows and knees: her body crowds to the edge of each frame. In a series of prints from the same year, *Estar ahí* (Fig. 2), Verdugo contorts her body within blueprints of houses, reiterating the gesture from *Arraigo*. She pushes against walls, hunches down with the ceiling pressing upon her neck. The feeling of claustrophobia is met by the contained energy in her body, the forceful push back against the space that constricts her.

A year later, Verdugo produced a site-specific installation titled *Desarraigo* at Galería Sol del Río in Guatemala City (Fig. 3). From rooted (arraigo) to unrooted (desarraigo) in a year, this piece continues her investigation of what home means, in her hometown. Dismantling her childhood dollhouse with precision, Verdugo again describes home as a frame within which the body struggles. She hangs the broken-apart pieces of the house on cords dangling from the ceiling, spreading it

This text is written in celebration of Susan, who first taught me about the way to read and build one's own home. It is dedicated to the memory of Yvonne & the artists who made a home with her from 2016–2020.

[1] "La memoria no es solamente un recuerdo, sino la presencia de un pasado que se ha perdido sin remedio. La casa desaparece y cuando lo hace el recuerdo de ella también se desvanece, perdiéndola para siempre." Artist statement, inesverdugo.com. Trans. by the author.

[2] Tracy K. Smith, "Ash," *The New Yorker* (Nov. 23, 2015).

across the gallery. The dollhouse seems to be paused mid-explosion, its walls placed to parallel the structural principles of the gallery (itself a former house). Each piece of the dollhouse has been covered in a viscous layer of resin, which seems to both hold it together and give it a skin. "I have measured my body in comparison with this house," Verdugo writes. "I have hidden myself inside it. I have recorded all of the postures that my body takes on within this space. I have left it flying in the air, hooked to a crane with the desire to let it fall, without allowing it to."[3]

Writing in the catalog for the 2017 exhibition *Home—So Different, So Appealing*, Chon Noriega describes home as a central site for understanding the self and the world around it:

> It is an unquestioned premise: 'I am home.' To say 'I am home' is to be at home and to be the home itself; it is to speak 'on the threshold of being' within the world. Habito ergo sum. Within that premise is the deeply held secret that our being-in-place, the concreteness of our being in the world, is on shaky ground.

The home, he continues, "constitutes the archive from which one may tell a counterhistory that is concerned with the wreckage, informal places, and feelings produced by history."[4]

Included in *Home*, Daniel Joseph Martinez's *The House America Built* (2004/2017) layers a series of U.S.-American home archetypes with heavy-handed citational irony: Martinez builds a scale model of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski's Montana cabin (based on Henry David Thoreau's Walden Pond home), paints it the colors of Martha Stewart's 2017 palette of "living paint colors," and then cuts it into four parts, in a wily nod to Gordon Matta-Clark's *Splitting* (1974). At the time of its making, both Kaczynski and Stewart were in prison—along with 2.3 million other U.S.-Americans—making prison, actually, the most widespread and uniform style of American "home."[5] The conflation of the iconic "American" homes signals a broader political philosophy with which the U.S. imagines—and enforces—a national domestic space.

[3] *Desarraigo*, 2018. "Se podría decir que esta casa ha traspasado los elementos simbólicos de su arquitectura y se ha convertido en el objeto que me ayuda a crear un puente entre lo real y lo imaginario. … He medido mi cuerpo en comparación con esta casa. Me he escondido dentro de ella. He registrado todas las posturas que mi cuerpo adquiere dentro de este espacio. La he dejado volar por el aire enganchada de una grúa con el deseo de dejarla caer sin lograrlo." Artist statement, inesverdugo.com. Trans. by the author

[4] Noriega, Chon. "To Dwell on This Matrix of Places," in *Home—So Different, So Appealing* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017): 25.

[5] Noriega, Chon, with Mari Carmen Ramírez and Pilar Tompkins Rivas, *Home—So Different, So Appealing* (exh. cat.). Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017.

If dwelling, a la Heidegger via Noriega, is the way in which we exist on the earth, our existence (or state of becoming) is also accompanied by objects: "Dwelling," Heidegger writes, "is always a staying with things," and here he signals the participation, perhaps even animism, of objects in our constructions of the self.[6] For the 2014 Paiz Biennial, Verdugo installed *Acumulación en secreto*, an inventory of 80 personal objects she collected since 1990. Alongside the objects, she wrote a numbered list in pencil on the gallery wall. In the center of the room, she placed domestic furniture: a clothes rack, a shelf, a low bench. As she delivered each individual object to the shelves, she erased its name from the list. "The action consisted of showing and abandoning each object," she writes. The piece obliquely recognizes collection logics that remove cultural objects from their homes: in this case, the artist herself pulls the objects from their domestic context, effectively enacting their erasure. And now we see one way in which *Arraigo* disorients: there are no objects inside Verdugo's model houses.

Verdugo studied art education in Madrid, but perhaps her most formative training in visual art came during weekly gatherings hosted by Raúl Torres in his apartment in Zone 1, every Friday night for just over two years, beginning in 2010. With friends Rolando Madrid and Diego Sagastume, he named the gathering Espacio 556 and here, a group of eight artists and designers brought new work and installed it around 5 pm, on the walls (or other spaces) of the house. From 7 pm until the early hours of the morning, the group would offer critiques of each work, often inviting academic visitors to join the group and offer their observations, too.[7] For Verdugo, this was the space in which she began to understand the work she did as an arts educator as something more than therapy. She describes Torres as a fundamental figure in the city's artistic development, "First for opening the doors to his home for such a long time," she says. "And then, for doing this in a way that was so loving and kind. He allowed us to grow past the border of our artistic doubts and struggles by letting us make a whole class of proposals in his house."[8]

If Raúl's home was a formative site, its brutal ending is one that also marks Verdugo's work: in April 2016, Raúl was murdered in his home and his body was

[6] Heidegger, M., (1971). "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" (Hofstadter, A., Trans.), *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York: Harper & Row.

[7] For more about Space 556, see: https://www.prensalibre.com/revista-d/espacio-556-un-ejercicio-plural-de-arte-contemporaneo-en-guatemala/

[8] Ibid. "Verdugo recuerda a Torres como una parte fundamental de Espacio 556. "Primero, por abrir por tanto tiempo las puertas de su hogar. Y luego, por hacerlo de una manera muy cariñosa y sincera. Permitió crecer la frontera de nuestras inquietudes artísticas al dejarnos hacer toda clase de propuestas en su casa. No olvido la ocasión en que se abrieron zanjas en el piso para una pieza que involucraba el uso de llamas. Él, siendo tan creativo, construyó el mecanismo para utilizar correctamente el fuego." Trans. by the author.

disappeared. We see the lingering traumatic loss as Verdugo explores the dissolution, dissection, and explosion of the house and its resulting dissolving of the self. The self is not safe in the house, her work observes, over and again. In 2016, she cuts a doll house into small squares in a work she titles *Desplazamiento*. She then stacks the tiles of the destroyed house in small piles, binds them together with ribbon, and installs them on the floor. The piece, she writes, "shows the absence, the destruction, the collapse of the house. It makes visible the power of the object and the deterioration of the spaces that we inhabit. Fifty-six pieces in resin speak about accumulated memories from the past, found within a disorganized memory. Pieces that are direct copies of this house, where the important thing is the permanence of the past brought into the broken present."[9]

In the fall of 2016, Verdugo worked with curator Belia de Vico to develop a site-specific project titled *Asilo*.[10] Together, they coordinated the use of an empty house in Zone 2, which was being converted into a women's shelter for victims of abuse. Throughout the building, Verdugo made sculptural interventions in its small dormitory-style rooms, central kitchen, and laundry (Figs. 4-5). Using packing foam and discarded construction materials, she created piles and rolls of things, some of them packed into wall-mounted vase holders or stacked on cupboards. One pile of materials—a trophy, a gun, a lampshade, a wig, a wicker basket, a telephone cord, bits of rebar and fabric—is wrapped in thick foam, held together with twine. On the twin-size mattresses, she layered sheets covered in drawings of house structures and domestic schematics. In one room, the fabric drawings include only statements from her interviews with neighborhood women, about their aspirations and dreams, the reasons they stay in family situations. Verdugo shows me her sketch books, which include extensive observations and drawings. She cuts into the pages, turning the books into sculptures themselves. On one page, she has written, "The collection has the emptiness of the future, in order to capture an identity that hasn't yet arrived. The objects are only a constant searching."[11]

[9] From the artist's website. "Desarraigo muestra la ausencia, la destrucción, el derrumbe de la casa. Haciendo visible el poder del objeto y el deterioro de los espacios que habitamos. Cincuenta y seis piezas en resina hablan sobre recuerdos acumulados del pasado encontrados dentro de una memoria desorganizada. Piezas que son copias directas de esa casa donde lo que importa es la permanencia del pasado traído a un presente roto." Trans. by the author.

[10] Belia de Vico is a Spanish curator and cultural organizer who founded the influential project Contexto in the early 1990s in Guatemala City; Contexto commissioned major, historically significant projects by artists such as Regina José Galindo and Jorge De León. It also served as a cultural center for an underserved community of children, connecting them with Guatemala's contemporary artists. De Vico was also responsible for bringing numerous artists, particularly from Mexico City, to offer workshops and lectures in the mid-1990s, facilitating an important (and understudied) connection between these two places. After a long hiatus, Contexto re-started with *Asilo*, in a series of site-specific projects de Vico intended to commission throughout the city; the subsequent projects were never realized.

[11] "La colección tiene el vacío del future capturar una identidad q no ha llegado. Los objetos solo son una constante busqueda." Artist sketch book. Trans. by the author.

In her essay for *Asilo*, Guatemala City-based curator and critic Rosina Cazali writes:

> As in the somatic disciplines—the field of study of the perception of the body in first person, from the depths of each individual—the work of Inés Verdugo reveals itself to us as an invitation to measure, calculate, sum up, subtract, multiply and divide with our own bodies, this extremely symbolic space, this refuge filled with contradictions, that both calls us and repels us.[12]

This emphasis upon Verdugo's work as measurement, however, disregards a salient aspect of her observations: there is nothing in *stasis* about the making or inhabitance of a home. Following Heidegger's association of building with being, the process of "home" is one in constant metamorphosis, as fragile as it is changing. "The association of home with familiarity which allows strangeness to be associated with migration (that is, to be located beyond the walls of the home) is problematic," cultural theorist Sara Ahmed writes, adding:

> There is already strangeness and movement within the home itself. It is not simply a question then of those who stay at home, and those who leave, *as if these two different trajectories simply lead people to different places*. Rather, 'homes' always involve encounters between those who stay, those who arrive and those who leave. There is movement and dislocation within the very forming of homes as complex and contingent spaces of inhabitance.[13]

When I meet with Verdugo to plan her participation in the 21 Paiz Biennial, she has sketched out a project she is calling *Dulce hogar*, a structure made entirely of blocks of brown sugar, *panela* (Fig. 6). The piece is beautiful in its straightforward bitterness: a house built of sugar will melt away under the rainy season skies, leaving its structural support and its sticky remains, its title pointing to the cultural fetish of home. While this fetish is not unique to Guatemala, it is widely evident in political discourse around the Cicig (the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala) during this time. The organization is investigating charges of corruption against then-president Jimmy Morales and, in a swift

[12] "Como sucede en la disciplina llamada somática—el campo que estudia la percepción del cuerpo en primera persona, desde el interior de cada individuo—la obra de Inés Verdugo se nos revela como una invitación a medir, calcular, sumar, restar, multiplicar y dividir con nuestros propios cuerpos, ese espacio extremadamente simbólico, ese refugio lleno de contradicciones, que nos llama y nos repele." Rosina Cazali, exhibition text for *Asilo*.

[13] Ahmed, S., (1999), "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement," *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2 (3): 340.

counterattack, Morales declares the U.N.-backed organization unwelcome in the country. While defending his illegal decision, Morales situates the removal of Cicig within a broader discourse about heterosexual marriage—one nationally expedient way of defining home.[14] "Guatemala and our government believe in life, the family based in marriage between a man and a woman. We believe in and want free elections, without interference," Morales proclaims, while tanks and anti-riot police line the streets around the national congress.[15] With a wink to his conservative Catholic supporters, Morales aligned the vote against Cicig with a review of Initiative 5272, strengthening penalties for women who have abortions, prohibiting the teaching of sexual diversity in public schools, and vetoing marriage equality. Journalist Alberto Pradilla writes, "The sectors affiliated with the president are trying to locate the debate in ideological terms that transcend the anticorruption fight…" Foremost among these ideological terms is a shared sense of what constitutes an acceptable home, defined through heteronormativity and the destruction of reproductive healthcare.[16] Home, as politicians in the U.S. also know, is the quickest metaphor to use when stripping citizens of their rights.

In a 1992 lecture titled "The World and the Home," Homi Bhabha describes something he calls "unhomely," from the German *unheimlich*. A moment in which the world invades the home, the unhomely makes visible the porous boundary between intimacy and political life. "The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence," Bhabha writes.[17] Thinking about Nadine Gordimer's novel *My Son's Story* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Bhabha uses examples of the home space in each to show an overlap between outside and inside, a disorienting violation of the sacredness of home that illuminates a larger lived reality under violent social and political regimes (apartheid and slavery, respectively): "In a feverish stillness, the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement the border between home and world becomes

[14] The Associated Press, "Guatemala's President Shuts Down Anti-Corruption Commission Backed by U.N.," *The New York Times*, August 31, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/31/world/americas/guatemala-corruption-commission-morales.html

[15] For excerpts from Morales's speech, see Alberto Pradilla, "Morales cierra la puerta a la Cicig y amaga con autogolpe de Estado, con música de mariachis al fondo," *Plaza Pública*, September 1, 2018. https://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/morales-cierra-la-puerta-la-cicig-y-amaga-con-autogolpe-de-estado-con-musica-de-mariachis-de/

[16] Similar associations of the purity and stasis of the heteronormative white Christian home are also bound up in the xenophobic nationalism that informs debates about migration and bodily autonomy in the United States, too. It is worth noting that President Morales was a staunch ally of U.S. President Donald Trump; in turn, Trump supported and assisted in Morales's removal of Cicig from Guatemala.

[17] Homi K. Bhabha, "The World and the Home," *Social Text* 31/32: "Third World and Post-Colonial Issues" (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992): 141-153.

confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other…"[18]

In 2018, we install *Dulce hogar* on the grounds of Convent Concepción 41, on the outskirts of Antigua. Within hours of its completion, it attracts swarms of bees, who begin picking away at the surfaces of its bricks. The structure is big enough for a single person to enter, its frame tight around their body. The visitor is immediately surrounded by the thrumming work of the insects, which makes entry feel terrifyingly unsafe: the house is unhomed. "To some extent we can think of the lived experience of being at home in terms of inhabiting a second skin, a skin which does not simply contain the homely subject, but which allows the subject to be touched and touch the world that is neither simply in the home or away from the home," Ahmed writes.[19] Not simply the subject, content, or objects contained within it, nor only a metaphor in the national or personal imaginary, the home is felt on the body, just as acts of remembering past homes and constituting new ones are intimately physical actions, eternally in the process of becoming and unbecoming.

In 2018, Verdugo's solo exhibition *Bajo sospecho*, shown at Galería Trama, charts the experience of a woman attacked and robbed in her own home. After surviving the attack, the woman begins to collect the license plate numbers of cars similar to the one her assailants drove: she follows them across the city, searching for her attackers. In the story Verdugo tells, the woman sews her skirts closed, a gesture of self-protection. In the exhibition, Verdugo stands near a skirt hanging in the middle of the room. She wears a matching piece of clothing as she narrates the tale. Impressions of automobile plates fill the room.

Ahmed describes leaving home—and the associated loss of memories and experiences there—as not uniquely a migrant ontology, but rather, a common pattern within the experience of estrangement. "It is through the very loss of a past (the sharing of the loss, rather than the past as sharing) that the 'we' comes to be written as Home," she writes. "It is hence the act of forgetting that allows the subject to identify with a history, to find out, to discover, what one has already lost: here, what is already lost is the phantastic 'we' of a nation, city and house."[20]

Shortly after *Bajo sospecho*, Verdugo moved to Montevideo. There, boats and nautical mythologies begin to seep into her work, displacing the home structure.

[18] Bhabha, 141.
[19] Ahmed, 341
[20] Ahmed, 330.

She installs a small boat in her 2021 exhibition *Bajamar*, then traces its form in pieces of cut leather (Fig. 7). Hooks, chains, and small weights form elegant compositions in this new, watery world. On a piece of blue fabric, she draws out the elements of a small vessel: an oar, the helm, a sail all appear in diagrammatic outlines (Fig. 8). The light, gauzy fabric hangs loosely from the wall, its undulating folds creating intricate shadows behind it. A series of notebooks accompanying the exhibition tell a nautical dream, which Verdugo illustrates in pencil. The floating movements of boats, their endless wandering, their susceptibility to weather and sinking, all form a striking contrast to the house metaphors of her earlier works. "The artist looks for a place to which she can be tied, takes apart the image of a boat, establishes ephemeral connections in an endlessly imprecise journey," writes artist Lucía Pittaluga. "Inés Verdugo sets out a poetics in transit, a dreamlike landscape in constant deconstruction..."[21]

Which is, perhaps, a beautiful way to say: she's gotten out of the house.

—Rincón, New Mexico, 2022

[21] "La artista busca un lugar donde amarrarse, deconstruye la imagen de un barco, establece conexiones efímeras en un tránsito siempre impreciso… Inés Verdugo enuncia una poética en tránsito, un paisaje onírico en constante deconstrucción…" Lucía Pittaluga, *Bajamar* exhibition text taken from the website inesverdugo.com. Trans. by the author.

p. 201, Fig. 1. Inés Verdugo, *Arraigo*, 2017.
Single-channel video (no audio), 3:10 min.
Image courtesy of the artist.

p. 202, Fig. 2. Inés Verdugo, *Estar ahí,* 2017.
Six heliograph prints on cotton paper, dimensions variable.
Image courtesy of the artist.

p. 203, Fig. 3. Inés Verdugo, *Desarraigo*, 2018
Resin, fiberglass, latex, wallpaper. 56 pieces, dimensions variable.
Image by Galería Sol del Río, provided courtesy of the artist.

p. 204, Fig. 4. Inés Verdugo, *Asilo (untitled)*, 2016.
Sponge and objects, dimensions variable.
Photography by Andrés Vargas, provided courtesy of the artist.

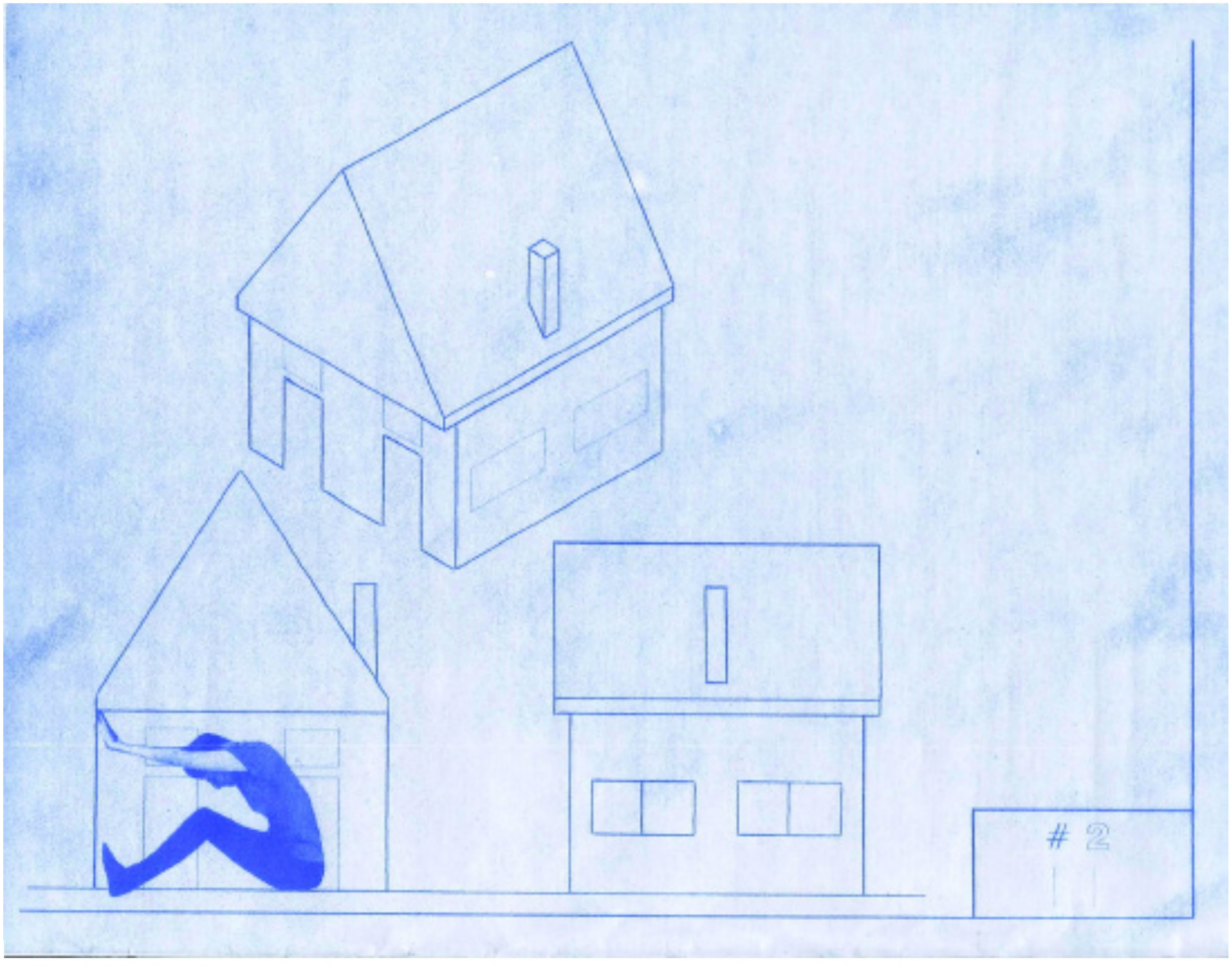
p. 205, Fig. 5. Inés Verdugo, *Asilo (Vahído)*, 2016.
Painted metal and filter, 98 x 35 x 33 cm.
Photography by Andrés Vargas, provided courtesy of the artist.

p. 206, Fig. 6. Inés Verdugo, *Dulce hogar*, 2018.
Sugar, 1 x 1 x 1.5 m.
Photography by Byron Marmól for the Bienal de Arte Paiz,
provided courtesy of the artist.

p. 207, Fig. 7. Inés Verdugo, *Variaciones de un barco*, 2020.
Leather, dimensions variable.
Fundación Kavlin, Punta del Este, Uruguay.
Photography by Ignacio Rodríguez Srabonian,
provided courtesy of the artist.

p. 208, Fig. 8. Inés Verdugo, B*arcos desde mi Ventana*, 2020.
Fabric, 2 x 2 m.
Fundación Kavlin, Punta del Este, Uruguay.
Photography by Ignacio Rodríguez Srabonian,
provided courtesy of the artist.

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Altered Space

A poetry curation

by francine j. harris

francine j. harris

An Introduction

This guest segment marks my first project as a Consulting Faculty Editor for *Gulf Coast* magazine, though I have been working with editors behind the scenes for about a year now. Mostly I just affirm their brilliance and acumen. Some of the reflection of an artist—beyond whatever they make—is how they appreciate what *others* make; who they read; who they talk about and celebrate. The editors of this journal continue to celebrate a rich and brilliant world of contemporary art and literature and I am honored to be able to participate in the process.

For this curation, I offered contributors a possible thematic focus: enclosed, or dedicated, interior space. I didn't give much direction beyond that. But upon reading these incredible submissions, I can offer that I was thinking about this partly because of the pandemic. I was thinking how we—and here, I mean Black women—have had to regard interior space and physical boundary since its onslaught. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and the deaths of Breonna Taylor and Sandra Bland, in the steady digest of news around mass shootings and losses in the fight for reproductive rights, the notion of interior space as a source of refuge is increasingly volatile. It so happens, that I am writing this introduction in the days following yet another mass shooting in Buffalo, NY where six of the ten people murdered were Black women and where that shooting took place inside a neighborhood grocery store.

Interior space is a negotiation of limitation, intimacy, privacy, shelter. It can be a source of solace or a site of trauma. I wondered what connections might emerge from poems centered around the possibility afforded us whenever we create, choose, seek out, navigate, endure, savor, behold, explore, and figurate—enclosing space.

There is a generosity of setting here, of ground and landscape in these poems. I dare say they feel inviting. But they invite on their own terms. What strikes me most about the poems in this segment is how they wind up asserting relationship to space by changing the surroundings. I love the agency in that. In *Demonic Grounds*, a book that considers Black women's relationship to, and intellectual engagement with their geographies, Katherine McKittrick says that "terrains *outside* black

women's bodies and produced by and through black femininity are also analytical, historical and socially produced—and therefore alterable."

Alterability, after all, is the poet's palette. The ability to change, transform, and disrupt is her power.

As it happens, the poems feel in conversation with one another. The departure from one seems to open at the threshold of another. The movement feels continuous. Things shapeshift in these poems, and that often gives way to lucidity and vision. Here we see alterability as playful, urgent, telegraphic, elegiac, ekphrastic. It is grounded in (or expounded through) space and time.

I haven't even mentioned yet, their beauty. I am excited about, encouraged by, and grateful for these poems.

Michelle Whittaker

Opening

—after Philip Glass

on repeat, is good for wondering why the helicopters
are hovering over your house low enough to lure you

from bed, low enough to escort you to the door, opening,
as you look out then up to a heaven that isn't clear

but broken and for some unknown reason, is rotting
at the oak edges to strip safety from its lock. Glass

is good for understanding why this doubles your pulse
& why you start pacing across the splintered floor
like a pregnant black fowl hidden within the hemlock.

Glass is ambitious as double consciousness,
like how paranoia is sound business
for penance & even the dogwoods
devote their leaves to the swinging armatures.

Glass is good for ruminating every ten minutes
when the landlords bicker, then hellishly yell
racists rants, as you place a brown ear to their pipes,
listening, while decoding smash & cuts, questioning
if you should call authorities for help or respond
to the faint cries from the left wall behind
the fridge near a hole where the wasps hold up.

Glass is good for the quick jump
of what sounded like a gunshot — or shotgun?

It's good for keeping the lights off, for pushing on laced up kicks
while checking from behind the blinds furthest from the entryway.

Glass is not good for not quite seeing there's a body
larger-than a-racoon but smaller-than-a-deer
dead in the side of the yard
and at this moment,

Let us pray:

Imagine "Opening" by Philip Glass
as a coroner at the edge of our mascara,

conducting a falsehood about the tumbling sky:
We know you are not a bird or a plane or drone.

We know you are not Superman or Superwoman,
you're not caped or cotton-wearing or spandexing.

We know you are not uniformed or unifying
as a dad, or a mom, or a sibling — but streaming

scripted toward the polyphonic Earth
and there's no one but you in this corner of the room

who exists to save me.

Unsound Health

When walking on a boardwalk that enters a park named *Anxiety*,
or the woodsiest wood of the woods, you then ask, *can we talk?*
But maybe he's thinking about naturalness versus human-made
or about the passing jive that moves through this part of the Paumanok,
or this Long Island, on this long walk, into these woodsy woods of wood.
Maybe he's concerned about the wild turkey pluralizing around the geese,
wondering whether we should also cross over into the dangerous blue-green algae.
Now we are semi-running, but not really talking about the risk
into these woodsy woods of darkening coo, with remnants of heavenly,
as them turkeys continue following, shaking their bulky tail feathers,
necks and heads as if they swallowed the scold of their indexes.
Their presence is perfect for spoiling the mood,
    for saying Keep Out but Love Me anyhow, especially
    when watching your love stride ahead almost half a mile,
    as you fall further back, wanting disrespect to turn into a hex.

Evie Shockley

destin(ed)ation

i became a fugitive the first
time i sent the *w* of my wish
flying into the dandelion's fro

:: that white cloud scattered
in patterns of maybe and my
thoughts followed :: maybe

north, maybe france, maybe
my lips the color i was born
with :: i became a fugitive

long before i donned the gear,
by time i slipped myself out
the box of stockings and heels,

my fugitivity was old hat :: i
became a fugitive the first time
i looked around the house

of *could-be-worse* and knew
a garret could be better, knew
alone could be better :: long

before i stuffed seeds into
a pillowcase, packed a bag,
or earned enough *mad money*

for me to get downright
fucking furious, i could tell
i was en route to absent ::

the first time i cast my dreams
into a future the shape of
my body, my intellect, my

heart, i was gone :: there was
no other space that could
contain me, there was only

the squeeze into obedience's
shadow and the spill of my
elsewhere into watchful

silence :: i could act my age,
behave myself, mind my *p*'s
and *q*'s, but the leaving was

already going/on :: i became
a fugitive the first time i
looked at a wall and saw a

a window, when i first felt
the bloody nubs where my
wings *already spread* would

grow—

from *the beauties: third dimension*

—after Willie Cole

LULA BELL

i'm not the first to feel that tingling
in my fingers, that pull to read the braille
of your body, but i may be the first
to ask permission. merely to eyeball

your brocade is to begin weaving a tale,
a tapestry of travels and chains, joints
and partings. you are stitched with
the trajectories of insects: busy, purposeful,
multiplicitous. ink-kissed, you cast quite

an impression. i swallow and desire
tastes of blueberries. i walk away
empty-handed, but heady, carrying
an eyeful of your texture of caress.

FANNIE MAE

another day passed in a haze
of regret. i reap what i have
sown: poppies and showers.

my face is a study in water-
colors. i tried again to be open,

but even shot through with
longing, only my scratches
appear visible. my verdant

valley is counted as vacuum.
i'd give my right eye to be

caught in somebody's cross-
hatches, to come alive to them,
briefly, if only as a target.

SARAH

girl, you leave me with a faint
flavor of sunflower, of corn
flour, of rainwater, of clouds.
a faded bouquet, treasure
pressed, dressed in a bible's

parchment leaves. girl, you
are a dim remnant of joy
remembered through a haze
of time, the color of youth
washed and worn and washed

and worn until your rainbows
grayed. maybe the violets
can be reactivated—a scratch-
and-sniff that floats parades
of petals to surface. maybe

the hint of beauty in you is
not an afterimage, but a matter
of taste. girl, tell me: have
you lost your spice? stick
out your tongue and say *nah!*

Lauren Russell

No One Knows It

for Hannah Emerson, after "Becoming Mud" [1]

Love this secret: The beginning

of window is mud. The beginning of awe
is tangent. Mud awes the counter-

top. Lined with sprigs of dailiness.

As fork kisses tongue. As gulp
nurses secret: The ark muddy

as the ocean licking it still. We

were mud before dust. We were sun-
light before sentence sensed

along the ridge. We are fracture

to egg. We are tin to periwinkle.
All our secrets gather in maps

of birdsongs loved, muddying trill.

[1] "....Please love poets we are the first/ autistics. Love this secret no one knows it."—Hannah Emerson, "Becoming Mud," from *The Kissing of Kissing*

And the Evening. And the Mourning.

In the end the earth
is void as a cancelled
check whipped
from the garbage can

of alternative facts, begging
for restoration to some barge
of a bank, all the dollars treading
water while an oarsman deep-

throats Cheetos and hoarsely
calls out the hours, as he paddles,
as he paddles, shrieking:
It is good, it is so so good, down

below the firmament, guzzling
Diet Coke while dividing light
from deep, Word from sentence,
Wagner from Rhianna, a Twitter

handle from a stimulus check-
mate. *Let there be let there be*, he wails,
barging through vaults of shadow
puppets to cast his bricks at the River Styx.

Dawn Lundy Martin

Self Care

We, annihilated by rigor
wet close to edges
of ornate buildings meant
to keep us safe
they said safety was a priority
no reason for coercion
grammar's meaning
undisputed or so they
said in black and white
It says right here
Tigers for populous! Take it
or leave it
and holy water dripped from tongues
unable to absorb
anything
anymore
Meanwhile, outside the gates
obsessive chatter about Freedom
which they said was
doing whatever you want
whenever you want
with whom or what
unintended or purposeful
on land or sea or flying
The tower's upper window
empty
irresistible lure
ticked a lever in the chest for flying

What are the parts you don't remember?
Which evidence points toward exosphere?

So we lifted our one half-broken wing, and we flew
we unsquatted, recalled
the medicinal qualities of the Boswellia tree.

Winter

No matter
what
happens, however
tragic or who
says what with
whatever kindness
or malice or whatever
is done in
the name of some
imagined ideal
or whoever is
on their knees
groveling for mercy
No matter which
open palm is raised
a common gesture
and the fury
of it all to
create a beautiful place he said
amidst the easy
brutality of that like Fred said
and like I said
it's a reminder
not to put lead in
my feet as if
the nation did
not simply yawn
into its own
mouth trying to be
itself
a tango
a sweaty machine
impossible tether
A whale decomposes
on the ocean floor

didn't you know
the sea is a giant grave
where else would they
go? My mother cannot tie
her shoes' flat argument.
Does tyranny have its own
music trying to find shape?

At the university, we
exhausted a brand
of racism and wanted another
wanted whatever was
wound by invisible wire
our eyes blotted by stones
We could be fresh again
eager bird minds lift
up our nasty bird throats
a gully to soak sound
trampling each other
with envy.

"African Americans," they called us
to shave the spikes off
our rage. I escaped to the long light
of island time, a swollen
expanse like the breathing sea, amongst
the grizzled Whites, who
could tell how old, skin
a joyless confetti. Wherever
we were, the smother of their
large bodies, monstrous
shadow would not shift
its weird attachment.

You've heard about it
Hands, clamorous forceps

quaffing rum and ale. We're all
dying for a sea spray
into our nostrils, powder
away the bureaucrat
endlessly twining toward
nothing, the war,
the "standing with," all of it
the other world, almost
fetish catastrophe. I swallowed
the seeds too. I left them inside me
to rot without a thought.

Because a way of getting
got is split—wedge—
reduction to rudimentary tooluse
or a slow killing
imperceptible, eye restrained
floating in burial
dirt, my father adrift, weeds:

Toward scythe, a swinging
Toward recompense
What's held in that bubble between loss and—

Black body as severed wing

It is winter
grey cement has become
my face gazes into
cracked accolades
bottomed out race labor
a merciless hunt
behind me, a diving that looks
like falling.

Into my breath I breathe
        my dog's last breath
tell him It's okay
        like Alice said
absent weight of him is
        what I feel
that other world
        as dim and unjustified
as any closet filled with worms
        and to howl is the whole poem's
most corporeal flank
        when hit, a crippling.

lightkeeper's palindrome

on the way down
coiling
stairs after rainstorms
the tower grows
chilly, swaths of cloud converge,
locking the watch room in gray

midstorm,
the sky bowl appears
washed with guilt
punished
& wind-whipped
sullen

in such constant shadow
the lightkeeper idled:
elected to keep
after the lighthouse,
(& yet unnoticing
too often beholding scenes
sunk in books
& a shame; those paid, rich eyes)
lost sea vessels in distress
so many unguided

sweeping land & sea in signal
— keeping rounds
mated yellow birds
revolve up there, now auto-
hypnotic the light left on
always

her own life
above the shoreline
moved as if ascending
forever, truths
dismissed
the last light keeper left,
useless as stolen whale-oil
forever burned-out
on the way down

on the way down,
forever burned out,
useless as stolen whale-oil
the last lightkeeper left
dismissed—
forever truths

moved, as if ascending
above the shoreline
her own life
always
hypnotic, the light left on
revolve up there (now auto-

mated) yellow birds
keeping rounds
sweeping land & sea in signal
so many unguided
lost sea vessels in distress
& a shame; those paid, rich eyes)
sunk in books
too often beholding scenes
(& yet unnoticing)
after, the lighthouse

elected to keep
the lightkeeper— idled,
in constant shadow,
sullen
& wind-whipped
punished

washed with guilt…
the sky bowl appears
midstorm
locking the watch room in gray
chilly swaths of cloud converge
the tower grows
stairs after rainstorms
coiling
on the way down

Sleep Deprived in the Waiting Room

I yawn when the babies yawn, my eyes so burnt they can't sleep. We settle into hospital cushions, and I glance at my newborns,

move aside the blankets, so I can really take them in. Twins. Faces the color of acorns. A singular set drinking sleep, unblemished as climbing roses I tended so carefully before they arrived

premature, kept cased in the NICU for thirteen days, unable to nurse. So this morning I dressed them against November and influenza, draped bright patterns over their seats. Quite suddenly, an Owl alights in my periphery,

clicks from across the waiting room. Prey. I realize too late I've left them unsealed after my greedy check of their blossom faces. The owl is already cooing, curling gray feathers behind her ears. You know how new

babies smell. So the Owl comes reaching, talons outstretched, poised to bestow upon my baked infants her White Egg of Blessing. Me, frantic Field Mouse. Teetering on one-foot panic. Squeaking, "close the door, close the door!"

to their father, who is nearest to the exposed rose of our daughters' skin. Reluctant Jaguar, he stands and smacks the Owl's touch away, swatting the rings of her white reach

with his black paw. In retreat, the Owl is a wide-eyed frenzy. A double take cast over the shoulder. Baffled in her flight—to protection in any direction.

Nabila Lovelace

Shame, My Wife & My Murderer

Unwanted you are the table
in the room of my mind. You are the wires in the wall booming
through the speaker system. When I offered you VVS's you
requested emerald cut canaries. From your cave came speech. From
where you killed me is wet with desire. You mighty root system.
The oak that connects my other oaks. Headbitch. Queen Bee you
make & are the honey. When I bowed to you it made stallion knees
rust. When I licked you brackish water appeared in my tongue's
moat. We made love like underwater, like time was a night-moth
sneaking a porchmoon. I fed you to my veins & what should run,
calcified. My friends said you are not my friend, but I kept you
my bedraggled tooth, my steamboat coal oven. You be
the soot & the well
drying out

When We See Us

she who we said we would never be never be

the bitch on the other side of a screen door in the rain for two hours over a nigga. us. two sisters huddled over our AIM accounts to our other little girl friends about the girl who would not dub the low drum of my sisters brothers name. we laughed & were thunder laughing at her. if we were preteen smokers & not lateteen smokers we would have tossed bluntguts over her underachievement. the kind of shorty out in a shower for a nigga was never my plan & still I found myself dicksilly in a city w/ exclusively closed bars. found myself in a pool w/ no water tracing fish into a sidewall for the prospect of a window. I mean when I left my nigga there were no trumpets. No vuvuzelas for enacting midnight. Fact: he was a nigga in need of leaving. My neighbors remained on their side of the wall w/ their dog & their own raised verbs. I put down the dog tequila raised in my chest, my voice a low crumble. *get out. get out.* fists to nouns again. I mean once I was tied by the hip to a man who did the dishes & a mattress with a sunk-in crate for a dip, but today it's 58 degrees & in my crew neck I walk a rivers length.

& who else were we to have?

our mothers had their own laughs.

all the girls were not our sisters.

some would be our misters.

Donika Kelly

This is a room where nothing can happen.

A room to walk through.
To sit in. The women in these chairs
got here somehow.
Close the door.
A room through which nothing walks.
Their faces run, slide away from their scalps,
freshly greased, hair pressed or braided.
Blue magic.
Invite them to sit.
They sit, smudgefaced under their nests
of hair. A room through or in. A room
where sitting can happen. They live here.
A room is not a home.
They live here.
Whatever happened, happened outside.
Close the door.
Whatever happened
never happened in this room.

What I Would Hold

Tuileries Garden

My eye makes brief the distance
between my body held aloft
in the swinging gondola above the gardens

and the tower—an illusion, of course,
though I wonder what weak gravity
my eyes exert, wonder at the possibility

of a satellite newly made.
What other monument might I bring
nearly within reach? Could I raise

from memory's bedrock, with the pressure
of grief and the persistent low heat
of loss, my mama—not as she is now,

a shadow a shade, but a moon, twinned,
simultaneously full and new?
The gondola descends, the tower retreats.

I know I cannot trust my gaze. I am afraid
of the dark shapes that have made a home
in the far fields of my vision.

I learn to turn my head
slowly, to tend to my ghosts alone.
Would I even know her, should she return?

Henry Box Brown and Things to Fit in Small Boxes

You can't be multiple things when you're Black.
You've got to be in a small box.
—Damon Davis

Firebox. Specimen box. Toolbox. **Henry Box Brown #1: Fit freedom inside the body-box. Everything else will follow.** No safe-deposit box, but maybe a tin box like the one that holds the braided hair of my dead grandmothers and great aunts. Brain box, womb box, voice box. The boxes you check. The boxes you fit into. The small spaces where you can be Black and free: say—a page, a scale of notes, a pew, a garden row. **Henry Box Brown #2: What space can't blackness fill?** Somewhere a Black hand slips a ballot into a box. Black arms hold the box of a child's body. Though the boxes we put ourselves in are often dangerous. Gun box. Cartridge box. **Henry Box Brown #3: What can't you endure?** Box counting is a means of analyzing complex patterns. Sociologists use box counting to measure the boxes the average Black woman will escape in a lifetime. Sewing box. Button box. **Henry Box Brown #4: Once a body is taken out of a box, it can't be the same body.** There is boxed out and boxed in. *You can't be multiple things when you're Black. You've got to be in a small box*, according to a Black artist from St. Louis. But maybe he means a puzzle box: hidden components, hidden parts. Memory's boxes come with overlapping flaps, smashed corners, and usually mislabeled. This box that I am supposed to have—a woman's genitalia. Tomorrow, I'll turn my heart into a shadowbox or use it for tackle: hooks and string and bright-colored bait. **Henry Box Brown #5: Pick the box moving in the right direction.** A shoebox of old letters became my first Black history museum. Please record your identity in the box provided. **Henry Box Brown #6: Postage gets you there. It doesn't open the box**

If You Should Wake

No, everything in life dreams. . . . A chair dreams of becoming a gazelle and running back into the forest.
—Nilo Cruz

The child
in the cellar, sitting in the chair (that was once a gazelle), dreamed she was the snake that lay across the path that frightened her mother, the snake her mother chop-chopped into meat. But then she dreamed herself into a fly, and ate everything she wanted and laid maggots, and dreamed herself into a maggot, pearl-colored and plump. Everything belonged to her. And then she was a fly again, perhaps. That fly was always what she'd dreamed of being, shiny, black-blue, and winged.

And the echo
in the cellar with the wooden chair dreamed of being the white roses that covered the cellar roof, their ruffled crinolines and teeth, the way their nails tore any flesh just to snare the eye's attention. But mostly the echo dreamed of being the scent of roses, held and allowed to linger against a fragile warmth.

And the cellar
that held the chair dreamed that it was once a child who aged into a crone who, asleep, dreamed she was a child again, a child dreaming that she was death. And death could eat everything—blackberries, roses, echoes, chairs—death could eat anything and as much as it wanted. It could touch or play with anything, too. Death was never lonely. The cellar woke up from its dream, but remembered only the echo of the child's laughter, which it held and echoed back, without knowing why.

upitsi [1]

they will build it
from my rib cage

a structure
black enough
to let sky through
and hold the stars

they will say
it was always meant
to feel this way

my broke and useful heart

*

but i will break
and reshape
my cartilage
and bone

i will breathe

and free all fish
and falling stars
and weary planets

[1] The fish-trap constellation of the Suisi of Rio Negro. Corresponds with the western constellation Orion. For the Suisi and the neighboring Turkano the upitsi announces the fishing season

kapoi [2]

the strength of the new moon
brings you out
to the doorway

where you open your arms
and commence
to fly in place

remember your heart
is as changing
as sharp
as the moon

*

those of us
who love in doorways

must remember
to stretch our wings

must put water
in our eyes

learn to see
in the dark

those of us
who love the moon

must remember
to be faithful

to what
we cannot

[2] Wacusi word for "moon."

always
see

*

rolled leaf
telescope of water
bless my eyes

so anywhere
i look

i see
the cycles and movements
of love

*

this very night
saltwater eyes

i put my hand
into the mud

i gather clay
unto myself

before i greet
the kiln of sun

i build
a world

Samiya Bashir

nail hard

— as i was saying
  your
    (idea of) death ain't mine(s)

i('ll) sprout any how

  (flourish!)

your rot flesh don't make me no
    (ting) never mind

— s t r e t c h —

not too long

(just) long enough (just)
  dark(ish) grow(th)

hard as illusion(s)
    and furthermore —

Niki Herd

Lyric Sung in Third Person

Up the driveway
into the house in one hand she carries

the fish in its body bag of ice, the thickness

of it curled into itself, in the other
she clutches

a handful of a woman's name say Daisy

say Scarlett petals and yellow sassafras, she

cuts the bottom of each green stem
at an angle. Outside

the frame of the kitchen window

cicadas discuss the world while the sun
creeps away—

How does she find

the music to say today
there has been no tragedy—

The flowers are safe in their glass house
necks upright

then look

solitary hiker black dot on a canvas

an insect treks the expanse of the

wooden floor
hush hush thing

so confident it moves

away from harm—

Shayla Lawson

La Galleria Internazionale D'Arte Moderna—The International Gallery Of Modern Art

Love {(lûv) : presto} ::

This was the first time I saw Gustav
Klimt\-'s THE KISS. This is [not] true I have checked
several times to see/ if The Klimt
even came to Ca' i Pesaro & always return
::\\ :: empty I recognize there are times when I mis-
lead myself :: a collection [of them] / I am always
confusing [as] Cause & Effect ::
I am standing in Sala 4 between // Symbol-
ism \\ & // Secession \\ : THE KISS beginning
a torso\-'s height above me I am [also] in
the gold leaf & oil : the first time a man ever held
my hair back ::\\ :: while he kissed me
& the shroud of two figures broken
in elation :: Arms : mostly arms ::
& the safety that only unfurls from a paint
tube :: asphodel: ultramarine : ochre. I am

breathless beside Nick :: his beautiful
autumnal arm- /hair coiling against my copper hand
:: the last boy I kissed : maybe his first
XX : a game we played in mimicry of the mustachioed gentlemen
we'd pass matching cheeks in the streets of Rome ::
// KISS : kiss\\// KISS : kiss\\.

We graze cheeks & land full-lipped upon each other.
Accidentally (?). We are friends.
Why didn't we ever think to be lovers? We are
eye-height to each other, the black of our lids opening
& revealing us to each other anew. Like modern art ::
the tongue : intrepid traveler :: just a taste of it transforms
us completely. A / kiss \ too fast for my lipstick to stain
his soft : creased : freckles :: Love happened.
Gone : // presto \\ : just as quick.

An art professor tells us / the problem
with America is the people
still trying to be modern while the world
moves past swiftly to the contemporary \\ :: a game
We must decide to venture towards or not. There will be

an evening in the future I spend
on the Ikea sofa of a Brit discussing Hamlet :
my divorce : my naked feet :: he calls me
a // poetess \\ & still no desire
to shag him arouses me. I am scared. Green
:: asphodel : ultramarine & ochre :: even a euphemism
for sex is new to my vocabulary. He mates
pasta with Sprite & sweet
onions : scents up the house well
after midnight. I leave after we consummate
the plates. At his front door : he asks for // a kiss \\ & I am
close enough to his body to feel
our conversation coil & dove inside him ::
a fist : a paint brush : a roll of pennies. It keeps me transfixed.
A kiss is a frozen memory : I kiss him again.

The problem with being // American \\ is trying to hide
all my compassion in a shroud \ cloth. I leave the Brit
& find the man / who first held (my hair) back
when he kissed me. **Knock : knock** *XX*
He opens his door at 2am & I use him
as a place to hide my paint in
:: as if to say : when I return (\ ) I want
only the present to come back for me. Confusing. Silly. Perhaps
the art professor did not understand that pain
is participatory : both in past \ & / future tense.
//THE KISS\\ : //The Kiss\\ :
the dawn it takes during Rome's White Night to find it
[but I have never been to La Bianca Notte : I say]. In the museum
I am looking at THE KISS : kissing the back of my hand
to the hairs of Nick's auburn
arm. I hold his hair(s) back : I think
of modern art.

Mimi Wong

Living It Out: Ingrid Rojas Contreras on writing her new memoir *The Man Who Could Move Clouds*

In the spirit of encouraging other writers to bravely share their work during Tin House's 2019 Summer Workshop, author Ingrid Rojas Contreras read aloud from what was then a memoir-in-progress. I sat among the audience of the outdoor amphitheater, mesmerized by Contreras' vivid recounting of a bike accident that left her with temporary memory loss, a deeply surreal period for the author. I reencountered this story while reading *The Man Who Could Move Clouds* (Doubleday, out July 12), a work of nonfiction centered on Contreras' family—specifically, her grandfather, a spiritual healer, and her mother, whose childhood amnesia bestowed her with special powers.

For Contreras, her amnesia came with its own gift, and allowed her to, as she puts it, receive her life a second time. After moving from Colombia to the United States when she was 17, Contreras initially wanted to study journalism. Though she eventually switched to creative writing, her desire to honor the truth of people's lived experiences remains. Her debut novel *Fruit of the Drunken Tree* explores the entangled lives of two girls of very different backgrounds, who are coming of age in 1990s Bogotá. Even as she draws on autobiography and research, Contreras maintains her sense of wonder, likening herself to a shapeshifter who appreciates being changed by stories.

This spring, Contreras took the time to speak with me about the creative and personal journey of writing a "ghostly" memoir, as well as the malleability and potency of memory.

Mimi Wong: How did you decide that this project needed to be a memoir as opposed to a novel?

Ingrid Rojas Contreras: The moment that I decided that I wanted to be a writer, I immediately felt like there were two stories that I had in me for sure. One of them was what ended up becoming my novel. The other story that I knew I had in me was this memoir. Initially, the story I wanted to tell first was the memoir, but I couldn't figure out how to tell it. Then later, it became clear to me that I was still living the memoir out. It took me a while to figure out how I would frame it, what the structure would be like. The tone of it was something that I consistently was trying to write and then failing, so I couldn't write it to my own satisfaction.

For me, it was always important for the memoir to be a memoir, because in telling people in the United States about my family and what our lives were like, I would be met with this constant policing around what I was saying. I think my trying to figure out the tone of the memoir was trying to get rid of that internalized voice that I had with me when I was trying to tell the story. The way that my family told the story about ourselves, about who we were, was such a wonderful treasure to me. Eventually, I realized I had to tell it in the way that we talk to each other. Once I started to do that in the actual writing, things started to happen, and I started to figure it out. But if I had written the memoir as fiction, or as a novel, I would have given up something important that I was trying to honor with that story.

MW: That's so interesting to hear you talk about trying to figure out the tone. How did you find your voice for the memoir?

IRC: It all came down to this crucial moment that I tell in the memoir, where I was at a party on a cliff overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. I got asked this question, "What do you do?" I said, "I'm a writer." Then I started to talk about what I was working on, and I said, "I want to write a book that's about my grandfather who people said could move clouds." This woman—she was white—looked at me with pity. She was standing by the cliff, and she wanted me to come where she was standing. There was something about the way she was beckoning that me made me very suspicious about what was happening. She kept being like, "I'm a park ranger. Come, let explain to you how wind works."

In that moment, I realized I've been telling this story to an imagined audience who would not be receptive to this story. I went home, and then the next time I tried to write the beginning, it became, "Okay, so when we are within our family, and we are telling the story, what does that sound like?" I found that all those moments in the narrative where I might stop and say something like "This might not be familiar to you," all of those things started to go away. Basically, I just got out of my own way. In the drafting, I was listening to what it sounds like when my aunts are talking, or what it sounds like when my mom is talking to me, or what it sounds like when we're all together in a room and we're not worried about being overheard. Once I did that, then that's how I found my way to the to the right tone.

MW: I also noticed this moment at the end of the third chapter of the book, where your mother has just told a ghost story involving your grandfather. You have a moment of disagreement with her. She says he saw a ghost, and you argue it was just a woman. It's interesting that you observed your own judgment, but the voice that's narrating the story to the reader is leaving space open for interpretation. How did you approach writing these family histories that also have the supernatural in them?

IRC: One of the things that I started to realize when I was thinking back to the way that we tell stories among ourselves is that we don't make a differentiation between, "Now I'm going to tell you a story" and, "Now I'm going to tell you a part that I'm not sure about or this part is a dream." We don't make those kinds of labels, so I think I was trying to stay faithful to that. I also really like to put the reader in the position that I was in as a listener, so that they also have that experience of a blurred reality.

There's a rich lineage of memoirs that are tackling something similar, of writing into an expanded sense of reality which includes things like ghosts and dreams and visions. Famously, Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* does this, and Wendy Ortiz's excellent book *Bruja*, which she calls a "dreamoir" does this, and recently, Kat Chow's *Seeing Ghosts*. Even Barbara Ehrenreich's *Living With a Wild God*, in which Ehrenreich as a non-believer is writing into having visions and trying to

investigate and answer for herself what a mystical experience is, does this. I am sure there's more, but off the top of my head, these come to mind.

MW: Even when our families pass down stories, there's often so much that remains unsaid and which we have to fill in for ourselves. How did you negotiate filling in those gaps while writing your family's story?

IRC: I did a lot of interviews. I interviewed people who had seen my mother appear in their house. I interviewed people who had seen my grandfather move clouds. I interviewed patients of my grandfather's and then patients that my mom had healed, so there was quite a bit of background research into everything. I was collecting true stories, the true lived experience of what happened.

I think when it's a memoir, and you're entering into a contract with the reader where you are telling a true story, I do honor that contract. Everything in the memoir is researched, has a source, and all information I was given I checked with other sources. So I followed the rigor of memoir and of telling a true story. It just happens to be that the subject matter of the memoir extends to ghosts and apparitions and curanderos.

MW: How did you apply that research process to your own first-person story? A big part of the catalyst, or what sets off the story, is an accident and subsequent amnesia that you experienced. I'm curious about this because I also had a concussion 11 years ago from a snowboarding accident, but my memory loss was very short-term. How did you go about writing about an event that you couldn't necessarily remember yourself?

IRC: Mine was also temporary, so my memories did come back. Everything up until that moment is erased, but you still remember everything going forward, so you still have an ability to make memories from that moment on. The thing with the brain is that your memories are not stored in one place, but they're stored in multiple places. Depending on what part of the brain is impacted, that will decide

what is going to be affected. Some people lose other types of memory, some people lose speech, for example. But because the brain stores different information in different parts of the brain, it's possible with time that those memories find a connection back.

I had a period of eight weeks where I didn't remember anything. I would fall asleep, and then when I woke up, there would be a new memory. The interesting thing is that some memories came back with glitches. For example, I recalled being in my neighborhood where I grew up in Bogotá, and I was wearing this one dress in the memory. But then I realized this was a dress that I only had in Chicago, so I didn't have it then.

We tend to think that our memories are solid, and that they're the truth of what happened and what we lived. There's something very fictional about how memories are made, and each time we remember them they change. But as writers that's what we swim in.

MW: Do you almost feel like you're overriding a memory when you're writing it down?

IRC: I think it makes it static. Usually, when we don't write a memory, and we are constantly bringing something to mind, each time that's going to change a little bit. Something that I really love doing in memoir is inviting or writing in when other people have a different recollection. I really enjoy telling one version of the story, and then telling the other version of the story. Because I think that's actually more truthful. Each version of what happens says something about who was witnessing, and that's the part I'm interested in. It might be a more Western preoccupation to ask, "But who was right? Where was the camera? Where's the proof?" I just don't want to live my life that way. I'm more interested in the stories that we tell, how we metabolize narrative, and what that says about who we are.

MW: You said you needed to live the story out a bit more before you could really figure out how to get into it. What was the turning point?

IRC: I always knew that it was a very interesting story. I immediately knew they were the main characters: my mother and my grandfather were such good characters and had such good stories attached to them. I didn't know the reason for telling the story. I didn't have that urgency to tell it, that connective tissues that make longer-form storytelling.

It was when I lost my memory and then regained it, all the memories came back. I had this experience of receiving my life a second time. I had this experience of getting to remember my mother again, and getting to remember who my grandfather was, and getting to remember all of these stories about them healing different people, and getting to remember how we lived and danced and how we work together. Then I remembered that my mother had also lost her memory. It was just like, this is too bizarre. That was the moment that I knew how I fit into the story. That's how I knew I am related to this lineage of stories. Once I knew that, then that's when I knew that I could write it. That was the part that I needed to live out.

MW: I relate to that a lot. I sometimes think it's easier to write about our parents or families but much harder write about ourselves.

IRC: As you're saying, it's very easy to bear witness to somebody else's life. It's much harder to bear witness to yourself. And to bear witness to the parts of yourself that you would want to discard or abandon or suppress. I think memoir is such a hard genre because you need to be able to do those things. You need to be able to unearth a lot of that. So it's definitely not a super comfortable genre. But I do love it somehow.

Jieyan Wang

Unsettled Parts of My Body

One day, I will replace every part of my body
with small pieces of language. In my eye:
我: meaning *I*. The *i* in my name can now see.

*

How old were you when you came to America? I asked
my mother once. *Sh*, she repeated. *Sh*: the sound
beginning the Chinese word for *time*: 时时时.

*

An ear, numb from listening. An eye, forever
turned towards the periphery, trying to see
what's behind. *Here* the mouth echoes *here.*

*

The English and Chinese words for *home* do not
share any sounds. *Home*, with its rounded *o*—
家, its body curved like a story or cold goodbye.

*

Another question I ask often: *do you find home
by listening back or listening forward?* Answer:
it's under the tongue, waiting for vowels.

*

找: meaning to *search*. It resembles 我, split apart.
Every part of me is searching. To be found:
legs, straightened arms, fingertips soft to touch—

*

It's been a long 时 since I've written 我, since
I've had words for anything. 我: its sound is *wo*.
Wo: it begins *word*, what slips down the throat.

*

What else can the body dwell in? Where else
except in the space in the middle of the 找?
Yes, the 我: I'm placing its name together.

Ruth Dickey

Psalm of Want

Here I am, I am, I am, we say over and over,
fireflies blinking with need. All I want

is to be a ferris wheel, strung with neon and slow
orbit, to be the lone car pinned at the top,

breeze trembled, searching horizons for moon.
All I want is to be a string of lights glowing. All I want

is to glow. The park where I walk is festooned
with snowflakes. The bushes are tangles of lights and

I love it too much, am oversaturated, paint soaking paper,
cayenne or rosemary that spoils the soup. In Mexico City,

I once ate street tacos with my brother, his so hot
tears streamed his face, stamping his feet yelling.

All I want is to want: a wheelbarrow of yes,
garlands of heat, tangles of lights. All I want is

polaroids we flash back and forth, our smiles swimming
slowly to the surface, eyes caught in lights, streaming.

Kathy Chao

What to Save in a Fire

1. Everything, of course. Everything.

Of course, when at last the smoke reaches up from the purple-gray hills, when the fine ash that's sprinkled all day begins to blot out the sun and clog up your throat, of course then you must grind into action. You must hoist your stiff body from the La-Z-Boy, where you've been hunched all day, waiting and sulking and denying the reality of the fire moving like a wall from the canyons and through the forest, over the dry kindling of the San Bernardino hills and down the desiccated bank of the Santa Ana. In the moment you admit, inwardly, with a terrible certainty, that a county line has never stopped a fire, that you will not be spared, you must lift your head and haul your sorry self to your feet.

You hurry. You who have never been prepared. You who (you acknowledge) have gone your entire life doing too little, acting too late.

You who've lived in California all your life, who traipsed back to school each fall as a girl under the dry winds that portended the start of wildfire season. Still, not once have you expected it at your own doorstep. Not in your California of white-collar jobs, morning traffic on the 5. Trips to the 99 Ranch in Corona to stock up on Chinese groceries, home to Riverside for the all-you-can-eat barbeque buffets. Electric cars and drought tolerant landscaping and the hollowed pit of a pool once filled and jewel-like beneath the late summer sun. This California of small desires and modest upward mobility. Despite watching this state of yours annihilated a thousand times over in the disaster blockbusters, the ones your husband cannot stop renting, never once have you faced true destruction rolling toward you over the hills. Never once have you imagined it happening. Never once, you think to yourself angrily, as if that means anything. How dare it appear all at once on your doorstep? How dare it come slinking by now, hat in hand?

You wander room to room, a lump in your throat. You roll suitcases behind you, sling duffle bags across your screaming shoulders. Bedroom, guest room, living room, bathrooms. Quickly, now—threat level orange. Thumbing through lumpy old sweaters, knick-knacks from long ago vacations to forgotten shores. A mother faced with infinite wailing children. You must look each in the eye and decide: in or out. To save or to leave.

To save: your drawer of jewelry, tangled jades and golds; the framed photo from a trip to Hearst's Castle (the bright joy in your kids' school-aged faces!); the blouses you purchased half-price at Macy's (and never wore because the shoulders pinched, but still, what a deal); the uncracked encyclopedia set an earnest, perspiring salesman sweet-talked you into buying a decade ago (and from which you're still determined to get your money's worth); the bundle of household electronics that has sat multiplying behind the TV for years; the mildewing old books you'll perhaps one day reread; the blue-and-white lacquered tea set; the good Egyptian cotton sheets; the dozen pairs of underwear; the compression socks; your daughter's discolored baby blanket, which comes springing out from the overstuffed closet like a startled bat.

Enough, you tell yourself. You have enough.

To leave: the pair of dolphin-shaped ceramic lamps some faceless third cousin presented to you and your bewildered husband at your engagement party; the greasy armfuls of melted cosmetics and expired sunscreens crammed in the damp-warped corners of the bathroom cabinets; the aluminum pots and non-stick pans and rice cookers of your well-worn kitchen; the apple-scented candles you light in the crisp autumn evenings; the down duvet too thick for most nights of the year; the bolts of unused fabric in the craft closet; the Singer sewing machine; the wicker chair; the yoga mat; the throw pillows.

You must leave them. You must leave them all. How you've loved each and every one. You grip the bags to your chest, tear your gaze from the rest. You do not know what deep-brained logic drives these split-second save-or-leave decisions. You wish it would reveal itself.

Threat level: Red.

Soon this will all go up in flames. In flames!

You stumble down the hall, toward the door that will lead you to the Prius idling in the drive. To your waiting husband, his righteous judgment beaming through the car window like the rays of the sun.

After twenty-seven years of marriage, how clearly you see his cogs at work sometimes. Like crabs scuttling across the bottom of a crisp, clear sea. Even from here, you know what he's thinking—he would never find himself gathering desperate grab-bags in a terrible rush. He would never debase himself like this.

What would he save in a fire? You can already hear his strident voice:

2. The bare essentials, nothing more.

From the beginning, you've known this. And by beginning, you mean *beginning*. You mean boyhood, precognition. A babbling, wordless mass of anxiety, your mother always said you were. How you quivered with a fear you should not have known. How you clamped down on her chapped nipple with a single-minded urgency. You see, even then—the bare essentials.

Then, older, the darkness took form. You understood that you lived in a land savaged by earthquakes, lacerated by the Santa Anas. Hemmed in by the parched desert on one side, the roiling sea on the other. And down the middle, the spiked ridges of an impassable mountain range. Land of drought, land of blackflies. Land where fathers came and went.

At night, as your mother slept—her corrosive, lemony scent, her days spent scrubbing office buildings—you packed. In your child's novelty suitcase, sixteen by sixteen inches: Yosemite keychain flashlight, double-A batteries, a Boy Scout Handbook you'd rescued from the library lost and found. Two candy bars, three bottles of water. The ceramic turtle flute purchased on a rare outing to the beach, as almost an afterthought.

You tore through your *Illustrated Guide to the Titanic*, read it cover to cover and back again under the sheets, a light in your mouth, your heart in your throat. You eventually knew by memory the exact amount of time that had passed between the first SOS signal and the final "every man for himself." One hour and forty-five minutes. You knew how long a human body could remain functional in the icy

Atlantic. Fifteen minutes, give or take. The exact shortfall of lifeboats (forty-four) that doomed the poor souls (1,517) whom you imagined mostly as versions of yourself and Ma, doe-eyed and lost, trailing pathos like a shroud.

The importance of the orange whistle attached to the modern life vest. (The authors of the Illustrated Guide mentioned it in parenthetical.) You knew that the hapless Titanic passengers lacked even this small luxury. That out there in the frigid black sea, those without lifeboats found that the wind ate their cries. Some were rescued by sheer luck. The rest wore out their voices, alone, unheard.

You decided that of all your supplies, the ceramic turtle was most precious. No matter the disaster, you could not survive forever on rations. You could not claw your way out of debris. If you could not run, your next best hope was to wait. To wait and whistle and hope to be found.

You understood that, at any moment, the world could collapse, the ground could split in two. The door could fly open. A man with red eyes and sour breath and Father's turgid face could storm into the grease-flecked kitchen where you sat quietly drawing, pull you into a gruff embrace and lead you out the door.

"I deserve to see my son," shouted at your bleating mother. The wind ruffling your hair through the open convertible top, his roaring laughter. "Wouldn't it be nice to go to the beach? Isn't it a nice day for a swim?"

"Yes, Father."

An afternoon of toes in water, buried in sand. Sunburns and Father snoring on a towel. Trudging back to the car in the blurry smog. And, on the way home, a sudden stop before a closing stall, a table heaped with wares. Father scattering a fistful of coins across the table.

"Here." In your hand a ceramic flute, turtle shaped. "A souvenir. You like it?"

"Yes, Father."

"Good. You can play it for me sometime."

A subdued ride home to a pacing Ma; a rough pat on the head. The swerve of taillights around the bend. The flute small and hot in your hand. You practiced at it for months, with ant-like determination, your mouth shaped experimentally around the spout. But it was long forgotten to everyone but you by the time Father came around again. By then, long since packed away in your waiting suitcase of doom.

By then you knew that change was the order of the world. You knew to be prepared. You could be out of bed, gear in hand, in two seconds flat. You were ready to flee anytime, anywhere.

Now, in your fifty-seventh year, fire. Your whole life has been leading up to this moment. Your gear has hardly changed, only grown. In the trunk: two three-gallon water jugs, a first aid kit, a hand crank radio, an industrial grade flashlight with extra batteries. In the backseat: solar blankets, two pounds of granola, four bottles of an evil-tasting energy drink. Beside you, a half-melted chocolate bar, as a treat. And a whistle, titanium-plated and shiny. God forbid you'd ever need it, but a pleasure nevertheless to cradle against your pounding chest. Nothing to save now but your own skin.

Yours and your wife's, you remember a beat too late, shamefully. Driven out by an inevitable argument to the Prius in the street, sweating in your neon vest, wheezing with each breath. How has it come to this? A screaming match against a red fire sky. As soon as the Level 1 warning was issued, you were ready to go. How she dallied instead, all afternoon, sipping iced barley tea in the sweltering kitchen, peering out the window shut tight against the ash drifting down like snow.

"I'm leaving," you shouted.

An hour later: "With or without you, I'm leaving."

But you did not. You found yourself unable to do anything but pack and unpack, count, double-check, reorganize. Refresh the news and track the movements of your more prudent friends on social media.

She did not heave out the dusty old bags until the evacuation order was issued. The flames thirty miles away and speeding along. Against the backdrop of your panic, she shuffled from room to room, gathering, inspecting, methodical only in her sentiment. She could not be hurried. You were a nuisance.

"Why don't you go wait in the car," she said, a command in suggestion. "I'll be out in half an hour."

You took the heaviest of the bags, cursed as it hung on your bad shoulder.

Now you sit obediently in the drive, waiting. Half an hour has ticked by. An hour, at least. You lean on the horn.

Time to go. At last, at last, time to go.

3. One thing you could never save: time.

You who save the loose thread left from darning socks, who compose your grocery lists on the backs of used envelopes. You—scrap-clinger extraordinaire. But time has always slipped like water through your hands.

You have only been gathering for twenty minutes, give or take, when you hear the horn blow. Five-minute warning. Another five, or ten, before your jowly-faced husband, already strapped into his seat, places his hands ten-and-two and takes off without you down one of the winding escape routes he's been plotting since you first moved to this hill town of sinuous roads thirteen years ago.

Would he leave? Why not? It had not gone unthreatened in the past.

At the supermarket, when you agonized between two jars of tomato sauce, struggling through the cost-per-ounce calculation between an unpronounceable, imported luxury at 30 percent off, and the store brand, at full price. Or at the flea market, lost in a spirited haggling match over the chipped and mismatched remnants of a once-grand heirloom tea set. Or at the endless yard sales you frequent on Saturday mornings, sifting through boxes of airport paperbacks and dollar store frames. Your breath held in anticipation of a treasure to be salvaged from this box, or that, or that. Always in the next box over, just out of reach. And your husband trailing you, his hands clenched in his pockets, his eyes on the cars in the street.

Or off and on the entire third year of your marriage, when the awkward intimacy of the first and the giggly contentment of the second wore off as suddenly as they'd set in. One day you were a twenty-three-year-old virgin trussed in lace, led through the banquet hall by the steady man you were told to call husband. His face wide open with adoration, his hand a coal on the small of your back. And the next, you were a good-for-nothing hoarder, sitting at the unhappy junction of greedy and cheap. You terribly silly thing.

You stood in the dank entryway of the ground floor apartment in Fullerton, hauled before the six skeins of shepherd worsted yarn he'd pulled from the closet. You were scolded like a child. You talked back: no hiding, no secrets—you simply put them away. How was that sneaking around? Why did you need to justify every little purchase? It was on sale! Buy one get one! You'd have been a fool to pass it up.

"Do you knit?" he asked, a mean twist to his mouth.

"No."

"So?"

"I can learn."

"You won't." He threw a soft skein to the ground in disgust.

You looked at him then, red of face, bulging of vein, and realized, with a start, that your husband was the ugliest man you'd ever seen.

All through that third year, this fight, other fights, all the same. Wax and wane, the cycle of the moon. Incorrigible. Unbelievable. Huge mistake, you both say. You should have never, should have known, should have listened, et cetera. A threat to leave, repeated like a mantra. A voice unlike yours, shrill in the night: "Like father, like son. Go on, then—leave!"

Silence like a curtain, the hurt etched on his face. The bottom dropping out of your stomach as you reached for the hand he pulled to himself.

Then, abruptly, one long shadowed afternoon in that third winter, everything falling into place. A missed period, a bout of nausea. A test. Another. A secret visit to the clinic just to be sure. A dizzying moment when the serendipity occurs to you—in a year of petty antagonisms, the two of you had somehow found the wherewithal and lucky time to make love.

You wrapped the stick in a box for him, topped it with a ribbon you'd saved from an old birthday gift. You watched his face as he opened it, the suspicion sliding off, the slow dawn of amazement. Then he was on his knees, his face to your abdomen. You stood, stroking his hair, and knew already then that you wanted a girl. You would knit her a blanket. You would knit her ten. A familiar twinge of triumph.

So, you conclude, no. He would not leave. You are almost certain. After all, he's stayed all this time.

4. One thing you always thought you'd save: your children.

But where are they now? Grown and gone. One in San Diego, texting links to the panicked news reports you read hours ago; the other telling you, make sure you get mom to evacuate, from the chilly distance of Chicago.

TY for reminder, you think of responding, while you wait in the car. *I was just going to leave her to die.* But no use in antagonizing them on this, the eve of (or is it the day of?) disaster.

These soft-voiced young adults hundreds and thousands of miles away, who were always more their mother's children than yours. Raised under her hand in the split-level duplex while you worked through overtime under blinking fluorescents, fretting over the power grids that sustained the city. How abruptly they could flick off in a moment of strain. How close you all were to a world plunged in darkness. At home, shining and oblivious, the three of them lived their tandem lives, and you followed the stories of their long days with uncertainty—the jostling, the bickering, the drop-offs, the pick-ups, the small hands in cold bowls washing vegetables after school. The laughter, the inside jokes which, to their credit, they tried explaining, but in doing so they only confirmed your place in the periphery.

You've long imagined them a strange breed of herd animal, yourself a khaki-clad zoologist. You imagined them, in those days, huddled together like ducklings in the pale winter mornings, or sprawled across the living room beneath the heavy summer heat, ice on their tongues, sweat beneath their knees. Watermelon and gazpacho and primary-colored popsicles. Whiling away the dog days with crayons and rolls of butcher paper. The psychedelic portraits of zebras and peacocks and improbable Martian adventures that she always kept, the folders in the hall closet. You always thought they'd reappear decades later, in the grown kids' faraway mail-

boxes, bearing your wife's precise, museum curator's hand: *Remember this? Summer of '02. You wanted to run a zoo on Olympus Mons.*

One miserable day in September, in those years when the kids were little, you brought home a pack of frozen scallion pancakes purchased on a whim. Forget the meal plan, you pictured saying to their delighted faces. Don't we deserve a treat?

What peals of laughter the package produced instead. You were befuddled, half-annoyed, and she said, "Nothing, nothing." A long, fragmentary tale of some coincidental cooking mishap earlier that day: slimy onions, rock-hard dough, trying and failing to save it all afternoon. The despair, the near-tears, the final, spiteful act of throwing the whole damn concoction across the yard.

"But lucky that you got these," she said, coming to peck your cheek. "You must have sensed my distress."

And underneath the mirth you saw some disappointment still resting on her face, saw all at once that the children were laughing on purpose, to bring comfort to their miserly, beaten-down mother. You considered for a moment what levity they might spin to help you save face one day, could think of nothing, felt yourself a trespasser, skulking at their door.

5. Food, you decide suddenly.

Lots of it. Not the gravelly granola your husband is sure to have slugged into the trunk by the pound. Real, substantive food that will make you feel alive, that will blunt the pain of abandoning your dragon hoard to an uncertain fate, that won't take that long to make. You steel yourself. Focus. Last stop before you force your steps down the hall, away and out the door and down the pebbly drive and into the idling car that your husband will surely rev up the moment your body slides in next to his, drive off in without a backward glance.

You could never resist a good backward glance yourself. Even now, gathering the puffed rice crackers, the salted almonds, the ancient package of dried apricots

like shriveled ears. Even now, you can't help running your hands over the tins of coffee and high mountain tea, the twin sentinels of your countertop; the flours, cake and bread and all-purpose and whole wheat; the extracts and infusions and essences that you may never again coax into a meal.

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No wonder they felled the rainforests. No wonder they drained the wetlands of the south. Where else would all the stuff go, this world of stuff, drifting toward you, piling chest-high, then chin-high, then right to the edge of your lips? There are only two routes: to you, or to waste. So, you tread water, snatch at what you can. What else could you do?

Your mother-in-law had approved. You remember her, what, twenty-seven, twenty-eight years ago, still plump and rouged, unravaged by the cancer that would take her not two years later. You remember her mincing steps around your kitchen, not this one, but another one like it, with the same stacked boxes of leftovers, the cabinets bursting with bulk grains and dented cans of soup. How she'd sighed once. In sadness or in satisfaction, you could never decide.

"Yes, good," she said, and you understood you'd passed some sort of test. "Yes, my dear." She patted your husband's arm on the way out. "You'll be taken care of here."

She looked back, cast a final glance around the kitchen and you felt, not for the first time, a disquieting nostalgia for all you had yet to lose.

Two short beeps. Another five-minute warning. How many are left? Fat load of good it did to buy an electric car. Throwing a cup of water on a wasting world that burns anyway.

One last sweep of the shelves. Rosemary and thyme? The good olive oil you were saving for a special occasion? The Tupperware of last night's fried rice? The half dozen eggs you boiled for the salads you might not return to make?

No, enough. You have enough. You have yet to begin the journey and already

your shoulders ache. All that's left to do is leave. You lift your gaze, walk through the kitchen and down the hall, unplug the vacuum on your way to the door. You will not look back, you will not look back.

You look back.

6. Your wife, good god.

Look at her waddling to the door, loaded down like a beast of burden. Look at her even now, her head unbowed beneath the ashing sky, hesitating at the front door like either of you have a choice. Who could save her, if not you?

A brief jab at the horn and she starts to attention. Out of obligation, or the slightest flicker of guilt—it was not a very loud honk, after all—you pry your hands off the wheel and meet her halfway up the drive. You free her from the bags, except for the insulated lunch pail she keeps clutched in white knuckles. Pack them as carefully as you can into the too-small trunk. Make your way back to the front, turn to find her rooted in her spot. You double back, lead her by the hand to the passenger's side, slide her in with a kiss. It occurs to you for the first time that she is frightened.

A memory: Your mother at your wedding banquet, flocked by a gaggle of girlfriends at the table she should be sharing with your father. (Your father at the far edge of the hall, tucked between two distant cousins, quiet and brooding and nibbling at the geoduck you thought he used to like. Bored or self-conscious, you cannot tell. He'll slink off into the night before the third course is served). But, your mother holding court. From a table raucous with laughter, hers rings the loudest. Is it joy at her son's marriage to a suitable girl? "A princess," she'd warned ominously, when you first announced the engagement, but now it seems she's come around. Or, a show of strength against the glowering man who abandoned her thirty years ago? Both, you decide, in your tux, and find yourself smiling. Does she not, after all, deserve the last laugh?

A moment of distraction, and you've lost the thread of the conversation your first cousins are stringing around you. You nod at their congratulations, their tired jokes of marital obligations. You find yourself unable to muster a response. Across the way, your bride is resplendent in white, stooping to dance with a wobbling child you do not recognize. You feel, in this moment, suddenly, inexplicably, all alone.

You mutter your excuses, your pardons, slide through the crowd like a shark. You are moving toward your mother, toward the beacon of her flushed and laughing face.

You approach just in time to hear her say: "Easy child, I hardly had to raise him. He spent all his time reading and packing —"

"Packing?"

"His emergency kit. For earthquakes. Tidal waves. You name it."

Peals of laughter. A chorus.

Your mother continues: "It's adorable what kids think to save. I remember looking into his suitcase once. My little soldier. And guess what I find? A chocolate bar, some water. And this tiny ceramic flute. He'd even kept the sheet music that came with the box. I forget sometimes that he's really just a big sentimentalist, that these little keepsakes meant so much to him."

Your steps drift to a halt. Do you ever make it to your mother's table after that? It's been so many years, how can you be sure? You remember only standing still, stunned. You remember only thinking: How could she have misunderstood? You thought of the sound of a whistle wailing in the dark. She'd thought it was whimsy, all that time.

You look over at your wife now, in the car seat beside you, pale-faced, wide-eyed, the fear you now recognize rolling off her in a sour wave. This collector, optimizer, who has been your partner and nemesis and rip-your-hair-out exasperator half your life. You feel a rush of tenderness you haven't felt for her in years. You reach for her hand, but she swats you away.

"Eyes on the road."

She sits beside you in silence, clutching her sack of food. Why, when you've packed enough rations for the both of you? She has wrapped herself, despite the heat, in a mottled baby blanket you vaguely recognize. Haven't you seen them before, these large, twisted stitches of an amateur with more enthusiasm than skill?

You tilt your chin at her, eyes forward. You hear yourself asking, in a gentle voice, as if to a child, as if to yourself: "What do you have in the bag?"

"Snacks."

"Good idea, for the road." You take the first of the sharp turns that will lurch the two of you, side to side, all the way down the mountain.

You glance up at the mirror to catch her eye, find nothing but the apocalyptic orange of the sky, burning from horizon to horizon. You take a deep breath, compose your face into a mask of calm.

"Should we crack into it then? It might be a long drive."

She nods, produces a steaming foil packet. She had time to cook, while you waited?

She leans in, though, to feed you a bite.

7. "Scallion pancakes. Try some."

You watch the grin spread over your husband's face, light it up into something once familiar, and warm.

"They're still good?" he asks, his voice hoarse.

You shrug. We'll see, you think. Instead, you say: "These things last forever. All they need is a minute in the pan. While you're doing something else. And—" you can't stop yourself "—I couldn't just let it go to waste, could I? After all this time?"

"Of course not."

He's teasing, but you don't mind. You take his hand in yours, pry it off the wheel, let go only when he needs both to negotiate a turn.

Yes, you decide. A small, shared victory. To salvage in the hour of the fire this little bit, the very least. To put out of your mind for a moment the things you've left behind. To wind down the drought-cracked mountain with your stolid lump of a husband; to close your eyes at the small pleasure of freezer-burned dough on your

lips; to open them again. To fix your gaze straight ahead, look it all head-on. The road unspooling before both of you, the smoke rolling in like a tide.

Jessica Lee

When I Think About the First Time I Was Almost Reared on a Horse

I don't think about the horse, gray as the clouds forming above the naked oaks, or my bell-bottom jeans with lavender ribbon and teal beads stitched along the hems in little floral clusters. I don't think about the rain hitting the pale part between my two braids, but the soft folds of the horse's ears—perked up, swiveling forward. I don't think about the sky, suddenly purple as an iris, or the lightening ripping through, or the way I grabbed her neck out of instinct as she reared up, like reaching for a life float in open water. It all lasted longer than it really could have—the two of us together, suspended mid-air, my nine-year-old thighs squeezing the big saddle. I don't think about the hard jolt down or how we galloped off into the manzanita grove as thunder rolled. Instead, I think about the inside of my instructor's house, where everything seemed dark except for the TV's blue illuminating her husband's face, the red hairs coating his thick arms, his blue eyes that seemed to look a little too closely, the newscasters reflected in his pupils, and how I knew to sit on the arm of the sofa, as far from him as I could be while Linda fixed me a grilled cheese sandwich on the hot plate. As I listened to the margarine sputtering, ice cubes clattering down into a plastic glass, the snap of a Pepsi can's aluminum mouth, all I could think about were the horse's ears, how she sensed what she couldn't see, knew the storm was coming before it hit.

Kelly Hoffer

Pygmalion Iteration

if I am a bird, I am a pigeon
if you are a bird, you are a dove

if I am a fountain, I am dyed green for a holiday
if you are a fountain, you are filled with coins

if I am a pigeon, I am molting
if you are a dove, you are pearl white,
molten, and phoenix-boned

I sit on your ledge and pull
change from your belly

if I am a woman, I am an animal, if I am not
an animal what am I
if you are an animal, you are the magpie who catches
himself in a mirror, a round yellow sticker
on your feathered throat

I am a whatnot with a beak
I am hungry with glinting teeth

if I am a voice, I am a body
if you are a voice, you are an echo of

an animal, you are an animal
if you are an animal crying

if you are a celestial object, you are a sun
burning the film of dew off a summer's lawn

if I am a face, I cry into my hands until my eyes disappear
if you are a face, you are a mouthless cliff

if I am a mollusk, I am the poison mussel, cooked and firmly shut
if you are a mollusk, you are pearl-less

if I am a celestial object, I have forgotten
if I am a pearl, I was born of sand
you are not a pearl, and I open my mouth to
forget the man of you

I try to climb you without footholds, you shift away from my hands
my face becomes an animal, crying

if I am a dune, I am shaped like a slick of ice cream
I taste sweet, I breathe salt

if you are a dune, you are shaped like a cloud

Trey Moody

The Committee on Silence

One morning when the sun erased all the night's undoings, the villagers finally forgot how to close their eyes. They had grown tired of not seeing what all happened while they slept. They had grown tired of losing those fragile moments blinked away during each day's dazzlement. That morning, no matter how hard the villagers tried, their eyelids would not budge. Even the softest fingers could not pinch closed any neighbor's sight. They rejoiced. They would never miss the wolf approaching from the forest. They would never ignore the thief leaving the church with a sackful of eggs. They would never look past the child sticking chewed gum on a statue's eye. They rejoiced and named the day Apollo Day. The Festival Committee was appointed. The Committee employed workers to saw down trees to be fashioned into spiral staircases leading far into the sky. The Committee hired labor to weave the surplus of exotic textiles into a quilt great enough to be cloaked around the entire village's circumference. The Committee asked all the children to make with their hands a number of drawings to be nailed into each stair and stitched into every square of the fabric wall. When the moon next brightened its whole being, the festival was held. Music fled from mouths and instruments. Fire turned animals into food. Some people climbed into the night sky so far even eyes that could not close could not see them. Some people watched the wind move the wall like a single, continuous sheet of hymns. Some children hid and some children sought, but the children who were seeking always won. It was all anyone could speak of for the entire next year. The Committee decided on many agains. Festival after festival came and then went. After some time, the particulars gradually changed. Staircases were repaired, or replicas were made. The worn fabric was switched with nylon weave. Yet the children's drawings remained largely the same. The elders saw in these sketches what they remembered seeing when they would blink. Instead of stories, each year's festival ended with a sigh. The villagers continued their lives of light, speaking only of what they saw. The wolf approaching from the forest. The thief leaving the church with a sackful of eggs. The child sticking chewed gum on a statue's eye. Sometimes what they saw they no longer wanted to see. A test was run, and village experts concluded everyone's hearing had weakened. All signs pointed to it worsening. When someone spoke of

a lake they once saw, the listener only heard a handful of silt. The experts decided there was nothing to be done. Year after year, the Committee continued to plan. One morning after the festival, when the sun lit the conquered dark, the villagers forgot how to open their ears. They had not planned for this. They named the day Harpocrates Day. No festival was to take place. They established the Committee on Silence. This brings us to the present day.

Travis Eisenbise

Honey: A Preface

I have learned how long a life can be, how many iterations it can take. Before this book, *Third Life*, I built my career writing essays for journals and nonprofit newspapers—droll pieces, mostly ethnobotanical in nature. Before that, I taught bored college students on the West Coast. Before that, I was the daughter of a broken marriage in a town northwest of Santa Barbara. When my father was wild, when he returned from the mines with glassy eyes and erratic fists, my mother carried me to the sea. She would curl me up in the crook of her arm, look out over a black sky stippled with stars, and let the coastal wind drown out her cries. Before that, I was nothing, just like you.

My editor and I have gotten into a bit of a row over all this. *A preface*, he says, *is a short* (he stresses) *introduction to why a person wrote a book, not,* he says, a *desperate attempt to get someone's attention.* At seventy-three, I told him, I do not want attention. Nor, I told him, does anyone care why I collected these particular essays into *Third Life*. They will read it, as I assume you're doing now, to learn more about Helen Sholes, the woman you have seen on television or have listened to on the radio or whose memoir you have read recounting the abuse she suffered as a child. You want to verify her creation myth. (*Aha!* he says, as though he has come up with the idea himself. *A creation myth would definitely make a preface more accessible.*) You want to learn more about those who should have protected her. You want an answer to the question, *Am I protecting my own child enough?*

Let me say, first: None of us understood the danger around her.

Let me also say: I miss her terribly.

I live alone, still, on the island where Helen was raised. From afar, the low land shimmers up from the water like so many other islands in Casco Bay. Closer, the island is trees and small hills, a convenience store by the ferry dock, a schoolhouse, and a few dozen clapboard houses gnawed on by saltwater air. In the summer it becomes a destination for vacationing families, but for most of the year, this area settles into a welcome isolation. When the long dark months arrive, the island sits through winter like a snow globe on a forgotten shelf, awaiting the syncopated *chip*

chip chip of warblers in April, the controlled frenzy of hummingbird wings in May, the arrival of new families in June.

Helen's story begins (*Fortuitously*, says my editor, though that is up to you to decide) during my first relentless Maine winter here more than thirty years ago, when a woman's body washed up on the island's east side. Alba Barrett, who co-owned the convenience store by the ferry dock, discovered the body on a morning run after a pinch of pain in her left ankle slowed her by the water's edge. Without anyone nearby to help her, Alba limped the half mile back to her home; there were no cell phones then.

Her husband, Fletcher, contacted Wavie Litchfield, the boy in his early twenties who lived a mile down our three-mile, unlined main road. With no police or fire station, we took care of ourselves, and though Wavie was a lobsterman by trade, he volunteered for our island's civilian response team. He owned a flatbed truck that was used for transporting building materials from the ferry dock to our homes and was outfitted with a snowplow during winter. Over the years, and mostly by default, he assumed the role of keeping the island humming, our roads cleared, our chimneys swept clean of nests and neglect. News of situations involving Wavie did not take long to spread among us, and by the time he made his way to the crest of the hill overlooking the body, half of our island stood huddled together by the side of the road. We watched him exit his truck, sip the final swigs of morning coffee, and pull a double-layered body bag from the bed of his rig.

Fletcher snapped Polaroids while Wavie pointed and walked around the dead woman. From the road, we saw the black bag unfurl like a flag in the breeze and fall gently on cold, wet leaves beside the body. Wavie cradled the woman's midsection and loose head while Fletcher took both legs, and we watched as they cleared the woman's hair from the zipper's teeth and closed her body off from the morning sun. They carried her up the hill and hoisted her with a jarring thud on the truck's bed, fastened two ropes over the bag to secure it, and made their way forward and down the road where the lifeless body would wait on the dock for the next ferry to arrive.

"It's not the first suicide drowning we've seen," said Alba to the group of us who had walked back to her home for coffee and tea and gossip. She set out cups

as we tried to make sense of the morning, of what it meant for us all. "But it's definitely the first body—in all my years here—of someone I didn't know."

"And how long has that been?" I asked. I was, after all, new to them. A single woman displaced from the opposite coastline, requesting access to their tightly knit lives.

"Since always, Hannah," Alba winked at me.

Mertie Sholes—who taught a handful of children through fifth grade in our island's three-room schoolhouse—sat at Alba's kitchen table, her hands wrapped around a cup of warm chamomile. "I saw that woman yesterday," she said. "Walking around on the west side of the island, over on Martin Gledhill's property by the cove." I shook my head along with the group. It was possible. Martin was a travel writer and journalist we knew to rent out his house while on weeks-long assignments overseas. "But," she continued, "I could have sworn I saw a small child in her arms."

We started walking toward the cove: Mertie, Alba, Gary and Sara, a young couple who had also gathered with us that morning, and Edson and Loriana Robertson with their Great Pyrenees, Bailey, who sauntered next to us without a leash. We made our final turn down Martin's gravel driveway. It was there we met back up with Fletcher and Wavie who had just returned from loading the body onto the ferry. When our repeated knocks went unanswered, Fletcher simply turned the knob—no one locked their doors on our island back then.

Like all our homes, Martin's was a mix of living by land and northern sea: photos of sunrises over the ocean and woolen blankets folded on teakwood furniture. An old fireplace stood amid an alcove of windows with a view of other islands in the sound. Bailey began to bark and lunged into a second sitting room by the kitchen. Far off in the corner, wedged behind a beaded Turkish ottoman and a wet bar, partly obscured by couch pillows, we discovered a medium-sized cardboard box and in it a baby with wisps of yellow hair.

Mertie took the girl to the mainland for the day, checking in with pediatricians and government services, and when she returned, we had covered her porch with boxes of cloth diapers, jars of pureed fruit, hand-me-down onesies, blankets, and a crib. While we waited for official instructions on what to do, Mertie's house

became our island's new meeting place. On days when Mertie had to teach, Alba and I took turns changing diapers and allowing the little towheaded foundling to spit up on our shoulders. Six weeks later Martin returned from covering a massacre in southern India, and he admitted he had met the young homeless woman on the mainland and offered his home while he was away. He knew nothing more about her other than the name she had given him: Helen.

Two months after we found the child, the state set a date to retrieve her. We gathered in Mertie's home, the lot of us, to measure our collective wealth in dollars, time, and love, and by the end of the week we had a plan. Edson and Loriana, who had practiced family law in Chicago before retiring early to Casco Bay, petitioned the state, reviewed and filed all the necessary paperwork, and followed up with vaccinations and child services. Though Mertie agreed to be the child's legal guardian, signing her name on papers we never saw again, we all agreed to have a hand in raising the child.

We named her Helen, after her mother; we called her Honey.

Before I came to Casco Bay—less than a year before Honey—I had taught ornithology, biology, and mycology to disinterested college students for nearly fifteen years before realizing I would rather write the content than teach it. My mother had passed, my passion was waning—what was keeping me in California anyway? Once I had saved enough money to live a comfortable life of meager means, and once I had published enough essays so that my name alone ensured future manuscripts would be considered, I eloped with my forty-year-old self to the isolated waters off coastal Maine, bringing with me a dowry of books and journals.

The collective agreement to raise Honey was a welcome affirmation of my decision, and I found great joy through that first long winter supplying Mertie with crocheted baby blankets and wet wipes. I never wanted children, not after I saw the anguish my own mother went through. Give me oxtongue and thrush, witch's butter and chanterelles, pen and paper and the bothered whine of a ruffed grouse. I came to reroot myself in the loamy soil of a new coast, and I found great

joy in observing the connected lives of this isolated ecosystem.

Most nights, after closing the convenience store, Fletcher and Alba stopped by Mertie's house to check in on Honey before finishing their walk home. Edson and Loriana spent hours stretched out on Mertie's living room floor, watching Honey giggle and helping her roll over. Gary, Sara, and Martin pushed her in a stroller up and down our island's pebbly road. That summer, I showed Mertie how to carry Honey across her chest using one of my long, woven scarves. She walked around the island with great pride, and outsiders stopped her on the road between their rental properties and the ferry dock, wishing her and her granddaughter well. How we laughed at that: Mertie's joy and the outsiders' assumptions.

They accepted me so easily into their lives. I learned that Fletcher and Alba had grown up on the island, married in their early twenties and inherited the convenience store from Alba's mother. Edson and Loriana had a college-aged daughter on the West Coast and a son working as a union rep for casino workers in Nevada. Martin was unmarried, focused on his work with laser precision and passion. Wavie had grown up here; his mother and father died long ago in a car accident on the mainland, and he had a sister with whom he rarely spoke who attended graduate school in Michigan. The saddest revelation that first winter was Gary, Sara's husband, who, at just twenty-six, was being treated for a stubborn lymphoma. Despite waffling signs of hope, we did not have the drugs back then that we do now, and we all understood when Gary grew tired and needed to sit down for a time.

That fall Mertie's mother, who lived in a home on the mainland, broke her right hip and Honey was passed to Gary and Sara while Mertie moved her mother to the island.

We celebrated Honey's first birthday a year to the day we found her mother washed up on the shore. We gathered at the schoolhouse and watched as Honey smashed sugar cakes and applesauce. With the assured, wide-eyed bobble of a toddler, she stumbled across the room to each of us, one by one, grabbing onto desk legs as she passed. Bailey paced the room licking up food that had fallen onto the floor. When Honey stumbled into him, holding onto his fur like a life raft, we doted over them both. *Careful, now. Gentle.* We all crept up and took Polaroids

of Bailey licking Honey's face, waited for the chemicals to develop the image: Honey's beaming giggle against the blurry white fluff of dog.

Honey stayed with Gary and Sara through the terrible twos, and they loved her with great patience. They let her paint her face with dyed arrowroot and build a small sand pit in the backyard from days and days of slowly collecting sand from the nearby shore—which wasn't totally legal, but it made Honey happy and that made us happy.

Years passed, as they do. Sea ducks arrived each January, and I stopped by Gary and Sara's many mornings to take Honey on walks to learn about our island's place in the natural world. Honey, bundled up in a hand-me-down coat she was rapidly outgrowing, walked along the edge of the water, pointing and laughing, cawing back to the ducks at random intervals. In April, warblers and sparrows perched in our trees while waiting for the northern ice to melt, feasting on our island's bugs that grew more numerous in the post-winter warmth. In early summer, with the arrival of outsiders, the birds grew noticeably quieter as they found mates, built nests, and birthed their young. This was Honey's favorite time. We walked together through the wooded area just off the island's main road, thanking the trees for blocking the afternoon heat. Honey found broken pieces of speckled eggshells and abandoned nests which we gathered and placed by her bedside.

I published my first collection of essays that year, bundled them up for an editor who fawned over my *luscious, delectable* sentences. To celebrate, we crammed shoulder-to-shoulder into my cottage's small living room, Honey asleep in a folded blanket at our feet. We were so silly that night. Martin raised a glass to toast the *sesquipedalian* editors of the world, and we laughed and giggled and raised our pinky fingers until our cheeks grew wine-flushed.

Gary grew sicker. When he was ferried over to the mainland for final treatment and hospice, Sara informed us she'd be leaving our island and heading back to her family home in Colorado. She packed Honey's things into a few small boxes: a handful of outfits, her dolls, her collapsing bird nests. On the day of Gary's funeral, Sara allowed Honey to wear her pink My Little Pony bookbag atop the dress I made her from cotton dyed black with oak galls. Though she was still technically in Mertie's care by law, Honey sat next to Sara on the front pew reserved for family,

her legs not yet touching the floor.

After Gary died and Sara moved off to Colorado, two short roads were built at the southern end of our town, bringing new homes and families with children and teens. Over those next few summers, Honey built pinewood birdhouses and tree forts with a family from Nebraska, scavenged in the woods with young teens from Ohio, sold cookies and attended sleepovers with Girl Scouts back on the mainland.

Honey moved about between those of us who'd found her—staying for weeks or even months at a time with me, Alba and Fletcher, Martin, Edson and Loriana, and Wavie. We all had a space for her in our homes, sometimes a full bedroom, sometimes a couch, sometimes an unfinished basement where she and her friends could sleep over. I purchased a small bed, fitted it with handmade quilts and blankets, and separated it from the rest of my study with a hinged wooden divider. By the time she was five, Honey went wherever she wanted on the island.

Once, while chopping ramps in my kitchen, I heard the slow *shhh* of the sliding door which led out back into the woods. A mound of cornstalk-yellow hair moved at the edge of my eyesight just barely above the countertop, through my living room, and into the study. Honey returned holding a doll. She brushed the hair out of her face with the back of her small hand.

"Hannah, is it OK if I take this to Maxine's?" she asked.

"Do I even know Maxine?" I asked.

"Alba and Martin know her mom. Maxine is new from Skidenitee."

"Schenectady?"

Honey's head dropped back; her mouth opened wide. An audible *gaw* escaped her lips, and she resolutely held up the doll once again to me. I was obviously missing the point.

"So dramatic," I said. "Go already. Enjoy yourself."

As quickly and quietly as she'd entered, Honey was out the door. I watched through my kitchen window as she hopped across the wooded lawn, paused to snatch a small bug in the grass, then ran to Maxine's house down the new road.

Honey grew up in front of us like one might see a niece or nephew, and I began keeping track of her growth, cataloguing the fits and starts of her life, though I've never written about her directly until now. Over weekly intervals she was taller, smarter, and surprised us with new words we swore no one had taught her: *astringent*, *jangle*, *debonair*. Poison ivy crept up her legs, into the web between her fingers, and we swabbed her with jewelweed and aloe. When her knees scabbed, we kissed them. In winter, Honey and her friends skied down white slopes peppered with boulders, made snow angels, built igloos too small for anyone to crawl into. I showed her how to tap syrup from maple and forage in the cold for teaberry leaves, pine needles and juniper berries, parsnips, and lichen to quilt the tops of planters. She entertained Mertie's now completely bed-ridden mother with song-and-dance routines she made up on her own. Martin took her to the mainland for crab legs and ice cream sandwiches, held her on the ferry's railing so she could watch the wake churl behind the boat. Bailey grew old by her side, and Honey helped throw dirt on the box Edson made for the dog's grave.

When she asked for her mother, we said *We are your mothers.* When she asked for her father, we said *We are your fathers.*

At six, Honey's left incisor loosened on a slice of butter pecan pie. She was staying with me at the time and for three days I watched her wiggle the tooth aggressively with her tongue, pushing it so far back it touched the roof of her mouth, exposing the hard white nub underneath. When it could be ignored no longer, I crouched down on a knee while Honey braced herself against a cedar chest I had brought with me from California.

"I confess," I said, "this is my first time pulling someone else's tooth."

Honey stepped closer and pitched her head to one side. "Quick," she said. "I don't want to miss the Tooth Fairy."

I had not told her about the Tooth Fairy, but that was Honey's magic. She left each of us for a time and returned another child. More learned, more savvy, more aware of herself. I wrapped my fingers in a lacy gauze, inserted them into Honey's mouth, located the spindly tooth, and twisted until I felt the ripping sinews pop. That night while she slept, I lifted her head and placed a silver dollar under her pillow.

There was the year she wouldn't stop talking about dinosaurs and asteroids, a year she only wanted to eat beige foods. She loved gymnastics, and I practically wore myself thin figuring out a schedule to get her to practice on the mainland while also meeting deadlines for editors newly interested in my work.

One summer Wavie took Honey and some of the island girls on his lobster boat. Alba and I tagged along, bleary-eyed and toting coffee mugs to get us through the early-morning fog. We wrapped each child in sun-faded life jackets far too large for them and held safety cords as they leaned over the boat's side to pull in cages. A small wave jolted the boat just enough for Honey to lose her balance and fall face first into the rusted metal railing. She cried and touched her mouth where another tooth had loosened, but she was more scared than hurt. Wavie took Honey's mind off her fall by showing the girls how to check the soft underside of each lobster tail for pearl-black eggs. With seagulls circling, they threw the females back into the open water to reshape future generations of ocean floor. That afternoon, we gathered in Wavie's home and let the girls race the male lobsters on his kitchen tile, a ritual that was new to me. We watched him grab each girl by the waist and hoist her up high enough to drop the writhing creatures into the boiling water.

Honey walked by Alba and me with a lobster in one hand and a white peg of a tooth proudly displayed in the other. Alba reached into her pocket and pulled out a folded five-dollar bill. "Here," she said. "Spoil her some. She deserves it."

"Thank you, Tooth Fairy," I said.

Over the next two years, Honey's teeth came out more easily: A molar popped right out during one of Mertie's music classes, her second incisor jarred loose after tumbling out of a swing, a few more were pulled out by Fletcher and Alba's fingers, Wavie's fingers, Martin's fingers, Edson and Loriana's fingers. We all, eventually, had our fingers inside Honey's mouth, but with each tooth taken from her body the thrill and promise of the Tooth Fairy waned. Honey extracted the last one by herself during an overnight wilderness camping trip with Wavie and some of the island's girls. She pulled it right out, held it in her hand, and, according to her memoir, tossed it into the fire.

He wasn't touching her then, but he must have had his eye on her. To date, Honey is the only girl we know of that Wavie abused; he had the advantage—she trusted him. Prosecutors contacted other girls who lived on our island and on the mainland, girls who were on the overnight trips I just mentioned. He is in Michigan now, and Honey is Helen, living as an author in New York, and those young girls are young women with their own lives.

I'm not sure why all that comes to mind at this moment, other than to say: We were not prepared for Honey's teenage years.

She moved in permanently with Edson and Loriana, who had remodeled their basement for her to use full time, allowing Honey a greater degree of autonomy to come and go as she pleased. With money she had saved from holidays, birthdays, and small jobs around the island, Honey bought a portable CD player and began spending swaths of afternoons with Wavie who, among the lot of us, had the largest CD collection. On the mainland, Honey bought the latest Madonna, Des'ree, and Boyz II Men, then stopped by Wavie's home to listen to her finds on surround sound. Wavie, by then in his mid-thirties, introduced Honey to The Commodores, Pink Floyd, Queen; she was ravenous for it. We know now, also from her memoir, that he played Blondie's *Call Me* each time she packed up her belongings to leave, forcing a smile from her and the promise to return the next evening.

It remains difficult for me to imagine this.

Though she grew more and more removed from us, her connection to the natural world never faltered. During Honey's long teenage years, I would sit and write in the woods or on the cusp of lapping ocean waves. More and more national journals had commissioned me for essays, and I was cobbling together a new collection of my years here on the island—the community of people, the land, the way the ocean mist sometimes turned orange at dusk. I called it *Second Life*.

Honey once found me asleep in the lee of the bay, my notebook covering my eyes from the sun's midday light. "Hannah, Hannah," she sang and sidled up next to me on the sand.

During those chance encounters, we sat and talked or remained silent in each other's company. Once, she asked me, "Who will keep me when I'm eighteen?"

"I guess you'll keep yourself," I said, because I honestly didn't know.

"I'm not saying I'm ready to leave yet. Just thinking is all."

She turned to me. A few strands of flaxen hair crossed her right eye. I put down my pen and slid my finger across her face, tucking hair behind her ear.

"How've we done so far?"

"As parents?" Honey said. "You're more like gods than parents."

She had a point. She was free to roam among us, but we were ultimately responsible for raising her on a piece of land surrounded by water.

"There are plenty of wonderful creation myths that begin on an island," I said, and told her of a story I had learned as a child on the West Coast, about how Hutash, the Earth Mother, created the Chumash people from magic seeds planted in island soil. About how, when her creation grew too abundant and the island too crowded, Hutash made for them a rainbow bridge taller than the island's tallest mountain which stretched to what is now mainland California. "And that," I said, "is how the Chumash people crossed the unsteady waves of the Pacific to begin their new lives."

"You've told me that one before," she said, rolling a rock across the sand.

"Myths are not linear," I said, "they surround. Each time they come back to us, they land on changed ears."

Honey stayed silent for a few minutes, and we listened to the slow groaning of wooden buoys jostled by the waves

"You'd let me tell you anything, wouldn't you, Hannah? You wouldn't hate me for it?"

"Within some reason, yes," I replied. "And I could never hate you."

"Wavie told me there are Polaroids of my mother."

"That's right," I said, always amazed at what new thing was occupying her mind. "Or, rather, there were at one time. Fletcher and Alba might have them, but I'm not sure you'd want to see your mother that way."

Honey turned her head away and continued speaking to me while facing the sea. "I want to see them. I don't think it's fair that you all share a memory about me without me. Also, I think Wavie's cute."

"He's too old for you," I scoffed. "And, I'll ask Fletcher, but you know they likely tossed that stuff years ago."

"I know, I know," she said. She rose to her knees, kissed me on the forehead,

and walked away through the brush that led to the island's main road.

By fourteen, Honey would go weeks without checking in with us. There were more houses now on the island, more homes with more teenagers Honey's age. The Murphys, the Gagnons, the Lagharis, the Youngs, the Lius, the Morrisons. She walked from home to home with headphones on—a wild creature resolute on its trodden path. On rare occasions, she stopped by the convenience store to pick up a few things before heading to Wavie's to listen to music.

"What's gotten into you, Honey?" Alba asked her one afternoon as Fletcher stocked shelves in the store's back room. I had dropped in to pick up vanilla beans Fletcher had ordered for me from the mainland. I turned toward Honey, wondering the same thing myself.

"You're spending a heck of a lot of time with Wavie these days."

"Because he's cool and listens to good music," Honey said.

"Yah, well, make it a point to stop by more, OK? And I don't just mean at the store."

Honey kissed Alba on the cheek, waved to me, and left.

"She's just being a teenager," I said.

"But isn't it a little odd?" Alba replied.

I shook my head no. "He's got surround sound," I said, shrugging my shoulders. "How can we compete with that?"

How naive I was. How naive we all were.

I barely saw her that final year of high school, but she still managed to make time for her friends, other families, and Wavie, returning to Edson and Loriana's basement long after they had gone to sleep each night. That spring, Honey was unexpectedly given the lead as Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She defied the lingering April chill to stretch and practice side flips in various front yards and each day her body celebrated an inch more of newfound flexibility. It was the first time we all had a chance to see her, to really see the woman she had become: her golden hair tied back into a ponytail, a few strands held plastered in place with gel, her taut face, her flat stomach.

That May we watched her dart and dance between her classmates on stage. Dressed in a green leotard fitted loosely with fake moss, Honey spoke her lines in a deep bass, causing mischief and making us laugh. On all fours, her rear-end

gyrating downstage in front of the proscenium, she lifted her head back wildly and sang, *Neighing in likeness of a filly foal; and sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl.* She turned her head directly at us, stared us down with a vigor and intent that we had never seen in our Honey. She hissed and kicked, then balled herself up and rolled off stage.

On graduation day, we followed Honey to a small plot of grass near the auditorium's parking lot. Her friends, also in long blue robes, hugged her and posed for photos while other parents stood with us and watched. We said how nice the ceremony was, how proud we were, how we just could not even believe. When the crowds went their ways, Fletcher handed Honey a manila envelope. We had gathered $4,000 for her. We also included in the package short letters of encouragement, memories, and poems, and—despite much debate—Fletcher had tucked inside the four Polaroids we had of her mother's body.

She opened the letters one by one, read the memories aloud, hugged each of us in turn after finding the money. When Honey pulled out the square, white envelope marked *Helen*, she took a step back, her mouth open. She'd hugged us already; to do so again would seem unnecessarily maudlin. Instead, she just nodded, smiled with her lips, and closed the flap on the manila envelope. A woman in a sleeveless floral dress approached and offered to take a photo of us—the famed little island group—and just like that, the tension shattered. We shuffled behind Honey—Fletcher, Alba, Mertie, Wavie, Edson, Loriana, Martin, and I—one final photograph to show how much we had changed since we first found her in that cardboard box.

Less than a week after her graduation, Honey left us. On a rainy Thursday morning, Edson and Loriana woke to find her bed freshly made, a handful of her clothes and CDs removed, her shoes gone. We tried her cell phone and learned from the carrier that the number had been disconnected. There was no social media then, and we waited for a call that never came. Edson and Loriana took it the hardest, and though we tried to console them many nights during those first tough months after she left for good, they could not shake the guilt that on the

relay of Honey's life, they were the ones who dropped the baton.

Seasons passed without a word from her. Sandpipers and swallows that used our island for rest and sustenance on their migration came and went. The Coast Guard put new brass buoys on the water and throughout the night we heard a harsh *ting tong, ting tong* with each gentle wave that passed, and I listened to them say to me *she's gone, she's gone* in the mornings as I wrote my essays at the water's edge.

The island changed. More families came for the summer and never left. The new roads from years earlier somehow squeezed more houses and cottages alongside them. The island families grew denser and younger around us, and we each grew older on their periphery. Martin sold his home and moved permanently to London as a freelance correspondent. Wavie sold his house and lobster boat and moved to Michigan to spend more time with his distant sister and her daughters. I tried and tried to contact Honey, but after a time I accepted that her life had entered a new season without us.

Some twelve years later, on a cool Saturday evening, I was reading a book on the resiliency of weeds in winter when my front door exploded with hard fast knocks. It was Fletcher and Alba, their faces carrying looks of animal distress. They were in their late eighties but pushed past me into my living room where Fletcher pulled out his phone and hit play on an NPR interview from earlier that morning. Honey's voice filtered through the phone's speakers.

"What is this? Where is she?" I asked.

"She wrote a book," said Alba. "He touched her, Hannah. We let her spend all that time around him, and he was having sex with her." She paced in small steps, shifting her weight every few seconds. I turned to Fletcher, who realized I needed more information, needed it quickly.

"She goes by Helen now, not Honey," he said.

We listened, together. Honey's calm voice through the phone's speaker explained to the interviewer how distinctly ochre the sunrise was over the eastern shores of Casco Bay. She said, *I've finally came to a point in my life where I've accepted it wasn't my fault.*

"How old was she?" I yelled. "How old was she!"

Fletcher turned back around but did not look me in the eye. "She says it started at thirteen."

"Started?" I said. "What does that mean, *started*?"

Within an hour, Alba, Fletcher, and I were on the ferry to the mainland. Her book sat on the table immediately inside the bookshop, the paper jacket a golden yellow with purple lines of water lapping against an island and a far-off, hand-drawn sunset behind the title, *Call Me Honey*. We bought five copies, and I skimmed what I could on our way back to the island where Edson, Loriana, and Mertie waited for us at the dock. Alba and Fletcher opened the back room of the convenience store, and we sat around a wobbly green plastic table. The bare bulb cast a garish light in the windowless room, exposing the deep, shameful wrinkles of our hands and faces.

Loriana opened her book first, flipping immediately to the back cover where Honey, now Helen, stared back at us—a serious woman leaning against a brick wall, her hair dyed black and cut short.

"Did any of you know?" Alba asked.

"You think we'd have sat on something like that?" said Mertie.

"She once told me she thought he was cute, but that was all. I thought it was just teenage girl talk."

"And you didn't think to tell us?" Loriana looked at me, her face direct and scolding.

"I didn't know this," I said, pointing to the book.

That first month reporters swarmed the island seeking anyone who had known Honey as a child. Families living on the new roads directed them to us, but what could we say other than we loved Honey very much, gave her all we could, and had no control over the actions of others. That summer, whenever I walked down to the ferry dock, I felt the outsiders' eyes judging me. I wanted to scream, "That vile man is no longer here!" But they didn't care. Reporters continued to come until that fall, and when they left, I closed and locked my door behind them.

Mertie retired and moved back to her childhood home on the mainland, which she had rented out for years. Edson and Loriana sold their island home to

live closer to their grandchildren on the West Coast. Alba and Fletcher sold the store to a family from Texas with small children and moved—I don't know where exactly. They did not say goodbye.

Honey's memoir has sold more than seven million copies, has been translated into 13 different languages, and has stayed on a few bestsellers lists even in paperback. There is talk of a series and a movie option. I write letters to her publicist, try to use my connections to reach her, but no one wants to help.

If you are reading this now, it means *Third Life* is ready, the galleys have been proofed, the final book printed—maybe you are even holding it now. Maybe it will sit next to her memoir on your bookshelf and when guests come over you can point to them both and say, *Have you heard?* or *Can you even imagine?*

As of this writing, though, she has still not contacted any of us, and given all the ways we failed her, maybe that's how it should be. All that time we assumed the isolation protected us, gave us god-like powers to ward off pain and hurt; but the intervention of gods in human affairs is never a tidy endeavor. In fact, I discovered just a few years ago that I had heard incorrectly as a child—not all the Chumash people made it across that rainbow bridge to the mainland. Some grew dizzy when they looked down at the roiling waters of the Pacific, and when a lingering fog rolled in, some became disoriented, lost their balance, and fell into the sea. Hutash could not bear seeing her creation in pain, could not bear hearing their cries silenced as they sank deeper into the ocean. So, she turned them into dolphins.

I'm not sure why all that comes to mind at this moment, other than to say: Honey, if you read this, I'm still here.

Dedicated to all the victims of mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas; Buffalo, NY and elsewhere.

Contributors

Kareem James Abu-Zeid, PhD, is an award-winning translator of poets and novelists from across the Arab world who translates from Arabic, French, and German. His work has earned him an NEA translation grant, PEN Center USA's Translation Award, Poetry magazine's translation prize, residencies from the Lannan Foundation and the Banff Centre, a Fulbright Fellowship (Germany), and a CASA Fellowship (Egypt), among other honors. His most recent translation is Najwan Darwish's *Exhausted on the Cross* (NYRB Poets, 2021). He is also the author of *The Poetics of Adonis and Yves Bonnefoy: Poetry as Spiritual Practice* (Lockwood, 2021).

Working across the Americas, **Laura August**, PhD makes texts and exhibitions informed by (mis) translation, political sanación, and attention to the natural world; her work is structured by the forms and disruptions of conversation with artists. A recipient of The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for her writing in Guatemala City, August completed the Core Fellowship at the MFAH and was a Mellon Fellow at the Yale Center for the Study of Race, Indigeneity, and Transnational Migration. She currently advises *American Art Journal*'s Toward Equity in Publishing program and is the inaugural Curator at the Stanlee & Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts at The University of Texas at El Paso.

Samiya Bashir a writer, performer, librettist, and multi-media poetry maker. Author of three poetry collections, most recently the Oregon Book Award-winning *Field Theories*, her honors include the Rome Prize, Pushcart Prize, Oregon's Arts & Culture Council Individual Artist Fellowship, and Hopwood Poetry Awards. Bashir Associate Professes at Reed College, Vermont College of Fine Arts and like, wherever, she might create, employ, and teach a restorative poetics to turn the isolation and despair of our moment toward a poetics of light. She lives in Harlem.

Emma Binder is a writer from Wisconsin. They received their MFA in Fiction from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and were the 2020–2021 Hoffman-Halls Emerging Artist Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing. In 2022, they received the Tupelo Press Snowbound Chapbook Award. Their work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in *Pleiades*, *Narrative*, *The Texas Review*, *DIAGRAM*, and elsewhere. They live in Western Massachusetts, where they're working on a collection of short stories about queerness, rural life, and survival.

Zoë Bodzas studied creative writing at Hamilton College and won the Glascock Poetry Prize in 2016. Her work has previously appeared in *Gigantic Sequins*, *Big Lucks*, *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, *Great Ocean Quarterly*, and elsewhere. She currently lives in Brooklyn.

Drew Calvert is a writer based in Claremont, California. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in the *Kenyon Review*, the *Threepenny Review*, the *Missouri Review*, and elsewhere. Awards include an Arts Fellowship from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and a Fulbright grant for creative writing. He is at work on a book of short stories and a novel.

Nancy Naomi Carlson, translator, poet, and essayist, has authored twelve titles (eight translated). *An Infusion of Violets* (Seagull, 2019) was named "New & Noteworthy" by *The New York Times*. Twice a grant recipient from the National Endowment for the Arts, she was a finalist for the Best Translated Book Award, the CLMP Firecracker Poetry Award, and is won the 2022 Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize in Translation. Her work has appeared in *The Georgia Review*, *Paris Review*, *Poetry*, *Poetry Daily*, *The Southern Review*, and featured on the website of the Academy of American Poets. She serves as the Translations Editor for *On the Seawall* and is a counseling professor at Walden University.

May-lee Chai is the author of 11 books of fiction, nonfiction, and translation, including her 2022 short story collection, *Tomorrow in Shanghai; Useful Phrases for Immigrants*, recipient of the American Book Award; and her family memoir, *The Girl from Purple Mountain*. She teaches in the MFA program in creative writing at San Francisco State University. Her writing has been awarded a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature, named a Kiriyama Prize Notable Book, and recipient of an honorable mention for the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights Book Awards.

Kathy Chao is a writer and data scientist originally from Southern California and now based in New York City. Her fiction has appeared in the *Gettysburg Review* and *Literary Hub*.

Jennifer S. Cheng writes in the space between essay and poetry. Her hybrid book *MOON: LETTERS, MAPS, POEMS* (Tarpaulin Sky) was named a *Publishers Weekly* "Best Book of 2018," and she is also the author of *HOUSE A* (Omnidawn), selected by Claudia Rankine for the Omnidawn Poetry Prize, and *Invocation: an Essay* (New Michigan Press, 2010), an image-text chapbook. She received her MFA in Nonfiction Writing from the University of Iowa, MFA in Poetry from San Francisco State University, and BA in English-Nonfiction Writing from Brown University. She has been supported by fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the U.S. Fulbright program, Kundiman, Bread Loaf, and MacDowell. Having grown up in Texas and Hong Kong, she lives in San Francisco. www.jenniferscheng.com.

Ingrid Rojas Contreras was born and raised in Bogotá, Colombia. Her debut novel F*ruit of the Drunken Tree* was the silver medal winner in First Fiction from the California Book Awards, and a *New York Times* editor's choice. Her essays and short stories have appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Cut*, and *Zyzzyva*, among others. *The Man Who Could Move Clouds*, a true family story about her mestizo curandero grandfather is her first memoir and is out from Doubleday on July 12, 2022. She lives in California.

Lena Crown is working on a book about belonging, the body, and the built history of St. Louis. Her work has been published in *Guernica*, *Narratively*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Sonora Review*, *North American Review*, and *The Offing*, among others. She holds an MFA from George Mason University and lives in Washington, D.C., where she writes for the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

Marissa Davis is a poet from Paducah, Kentucky. Her poetry has appeared in *Poetry*, *Poem-A-Day*, *Rattle*, *West Branch*, *Mississippi Review*, *Muzzle Magazine*, and *Best New Poets*, among others. Her chapbook, *My Name & Other Languages I Am Learning How to Speak* (Jai-Alai Books, 2020) was selected by Danez Smith for Cave Canem's 2019 Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady Prize, and she was the 2021 runner-up of Narrative Magazine's 30 Below contest. Davis holds an MFA from New York University. Her website is www.marrisa-davis.com.

Ruth Dickey's first book, *Mud Blooms* (Harbor Mountain Press), was selected for the MURA Award and awarded a 2019 Silver Nautilus. An ardent fan of dogs and coffee, Ruth lives in Brooklyn and her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Cave Wall*, *Kestrel*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *SWIMM*, and *Rhino*. More at www.ruthdickey.com.

Nathaniel Dolton-Thornton's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Tin House*, *Vallum*, *Griffith Review*, *Magma Poetry*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Salamander*, *Sycamore Review*, *Constellations*, *TAB*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *The Account*, *Raritan*, and other publications.

Patrick Dundon is the author of the chapbook *The Conspirators of Pleasure* (Sixth Finch Books, 2020). He's a graduate of the MFA program at Syracuse University where he served as Editor-in-Chief for *Salt Hill Journal*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Adroit Journal*, *Copper Nickel*, *DIAGRAM*, *Hobart*, *The Journal*, *Vinyl* and elsewhere. He lives in Portland, OR where he teaches preschool and teaches creative writing at the Independent Publishing Resource Center.

Olivia Elias, born in Haifa in 1944, is a poet of the Palestinian diaspora who writes in French. In 1948 her family was exiled to Lebanon, where she lived until she was 16 years old. She then lived in Montreal, before finally settling in France. She published her first collection of poetry in 2015. Her third and most recent collection, *Chaos, Traversée* ("Chaos, Crossing"), appeared in 2019. Olivia Elias' poetry is characterized by terse, laconic language, strong rhythms, and a deep sensitivity to the Palestinian cause, the plight of refugees, and human suffering in general. Her work has been published in numerous journals and in anthologies, and has been translated into English, Arabic, Spanish, and Italian. She holds Lebanese, Canadian, and French citizenship, and divides her time between Paris, Arles, and India. Her first book in English, *Chaos, Crossing*, will be published by World Poetry Books on Nov. 15, 2022, in Kareem James Abu-Zeid's translation.

Travis Eisenbise is a Brooklyn-based writer whose fiction has appeared in *Joyland*, *Masters Review Anthology X*, and *Denver Quarterly*. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Aída Esmeralda is a daughter of the Salvadoran diaspora, born & raised in Virginia. She is in the MFA program at Arizona State University, a graduate student worker, and the Poetry Editor for *Hayden's Ferry Review.* She is easily enthused, constantly curious, and is always looking to meet new beloveds.

Kwoya Fagin Maples is a writer from Charleston, S.C. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Alabama and has received fellowships from Cave Canem and the Alabama State Council on the Arts. She is the author of *Mend* (University Press of Kentucky, 2018) named a 2019 Finalist for the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Poetry and a 2019 Finalist for the Housatonic Book Award for Poetry. A collection of historical persona poetry, *Mend* tells the story of the birth of obstetrics and gynecology in America and the role enslaved black women played in that process. Prior to publication, *Mend* received a grant from the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation and was finalist for AWP's Donald Hall Prize for Poetry. In addition to a chapbook entitled *Something of Yours* (Finishing Line Press 2010) her work is published in several journals and anthologies including *Poetry*, *pluck!*, *Blackbird*, *Tin House Review Online*, *Obsidian*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Cave Canem Anthology XIII* and *The Long Devotion: Poets Writing Motherhood*.

Sara Fetherolf (she/they) is the author of *Via Combusta* (forthcoming) winner of the 2021 New American Press Poetry Prize. They won the 2021 Iron Horse Long Story award, and their writing has appeared in *Muzzle*, *Radar*, *Indiana Review*, *Plath Profiles*, and elsewhere. She has an MFA from Hunter College, and is a PhD candidate in Literature and Creative Writing at USC.
Josh T Franco is an artist and art historian from West Texas. He is currently based in Hyattsville, MD. www.joshtfranco.com/bio.

Kate Garcia is a recent graduate of University of Montana's MFA program where she served as poetry editor for *Cutbank Literary Magazine*. Originally from the mountains of Southern California, she now lives in Missoula with her dog. Her work has appeared in *Moss*.

Wendy Guerra is a critically acclaimed Cuban poet and novelist. She has published three collections of poetry, and her works have been translated into thirteen languages. *Todos se van (Everyone's Leaving)*, a novel, was adapted into a screenplay. In 2016 Guerra published *Domingo de Revolución (Revolution Sunday)* in Spain, the story of a Cuban author who publishes a book of poems in Europe and is the object of suspicion by both the Cuban government and Cuban dissidents. Of note is that Guerra's *Ropa Interior* was also published in Spain, perhaps due to its sensual and steamy content. Indeed, Guerra, who quotes Anais Nïn in an epigraph at the start of this poetry collection and has translated her work, has been described as "a sort of descendant of Nin."

Jules Gibbs is the author of the poetry collections *Snakes and Babies*, and *Bliss Crisis*, both published by The Sheep Meadow Press.

Born in 1949, **Yam Gong** is a celebrated Hong Kong poet whose honors include the Hong Kong Youth Literature Award, the Workers' Literature Award, and the Hong Kong Biennial Award for Chinese Literature for his first book *And So You Look at Festival Lights along the Street* (1997). He later published an extended edition of this collection, titled *And So Moving a Stone You Look at Festival Lights along the Street* (2010).

Raquel Gutiérrez is an arts critic/writer, poet and educator. Born and raised in Los Angeles Gutiérrez calls Tucson home. www.raquelgutierrez.net for more information.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs is a queer Black feminist love evangelist, a scholar, author and aspirational favorite cousin to all life. Alexis is the author of several books, most recently *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* and *Dub: Finding Ceremony*. Her next book is *The Eternal Life of Audre Lorde* forthcoming from Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. Alexis was dramaturg for the world premiere of Sharon Bridgforth's *Dat Black Mermaid Man Lady: The Show* at Pillsbury House Theater in Minneapolis. Alexis is a 2022 National Endowment of the Arts Creative Writing Fellow, a 2022 Whiting Award Winner in Non-fiction and was a 2020-2021 National Humanities Center Fellow. Alexis lives in Durham, NC where she co-creates an intergenerational living library of Black LGBTQ brilliance called the Mobile Homecoming Trust with her partner Sangodare.

Julie Gray hails from the Piney Woods of East Texas. A scholarship recipient of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, she went on to earn a BA from the University of Texas and a JD from the University of Houston Law Center. She is at work on a memoir (under representation), which was named the winner of the Writers' League of Texas Manuscript Contest. An excerpt appeared in *The Iowa Review*.

Janice N. Harrington's latest book of poetry is *Primitive: The Art and Life of Horace H. Pippin* (BOA Editions). She teaches creative writing at the University of Illinois.

francine j. harris' third collection, *Here is the Sweet Hand* from Farrar, Straus & Giroux, was a finalist for the Kingsley Tufts award and winner of the 2020 National Book Critics Circle Award. Her second collection, *play dead*, was the winner of the Lambda Literary and Audre Lorde Awards and finalist for the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. Her first collection, *allegiance*, was a finalist for the Kate Tufts Discovery and PEN Open Book Awards. Originally from Detroit, she has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the MacDowell Colony, and the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. She is Associate Professor of English at the University of Houston.

Paula Harris lives in Aotearoa/New Zealand, where she writes and sleeps in a lot, because that's what depression makes you do. She won the 2018 Janet B. McCabe Poetry Prize and the 2017 Lilian Ida Smith Award. Her writing has been published in various journals, including *The Sun*, *Hobart*, *Passages North*, *New Ohio Review* and *Aotearotica*. She is extremely fond of dark chocolate, shoes and hoarding fabric. website: www.paulaharris.co.nz | Twitter: @paulaoffkilter | Instagram: @paulaharris_poet | Facebook: @paulaharrispoet.

Brian Henry is the author of eleven books of poetry and, most recently, the prose book *Things Are Completely Simple: Poetry and Translation*. He has translated Tomaž Šalamun's *Woods and Chalices*, Aleš Debeljak's *Smugglers*, and five books by Aleš Šteger. He co-edited *Verse* from 1995 to 2018. His work has received numerous honors, including two NEA fellowships, the Alice Fay di Castagnola Award, a Howard Foundation fellowship, a Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences grant, and the Best Translated Book Award.

Niki Herd is the author of *The Language of Shedding Skin* and co-editor of *Laura Hershey: On the Life & Work of an American Master*. Her chapbook, a book-length poem, titled *don't you weep* is forthcoming from Sting & Honey Press. Herd's poetry, essays, and criticism have appeared in *New England Review*, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, *Copper Nickel*, *Salon*, Academy of American Poets' *Poem-a-Day*, *Lit Hub*, *The Rumpus*, *Obsidian*, and *Tupelo Quarterly*, among other journals and anthologies. Her work has been supported by Ucross, Bread Loaf, the Newberry Library, and Cave Canem. She lives in St. Louis where she is a Visiting Writer in Residence in Poetry at Washington University.

Kelly Hoffer earned an MFA in Poetry from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her first book of poems *Undershore* was selected by Diana Khoi Nguyen for the 2021 Lightscatter Press Prize, and is forthcoming Spring 2023. Her book manuscript, *Fire Series*, was a finalist for the 2021 National Poetry Series. Her poems have appeared in *Chicago Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Mississippi Review*, and *Prelude*, among others. She is currently a PhD candidate in Literatures in English at Cornell University. Learn more at: https://www.kellyrosehoffer.com.

Jenny Irish is the author of the hybrid collections *Common Ancestor* and *Tooth Box*, the short story collection *I Am Faithful*, and the forthcoming chapbooks *Hatch* and *Lupine*. She teaches creative writing at Arizona State University and facilitates free community workshops every summer.

Gary Jackson is the author of the poetry collections *origin story* and *Missing You, Metropolis*, which received the 2009 Cave Canem Poetry Prize. He's also the co-editor of *The Future of Black: Afrofuturism, Black Comics, and Superhero Poetry*. His poems have appeared in numerous journals including *The Laurel Review, The Sun*, and *Copper Nickel*. He's an associate professor at the College of Charleston where he currently teaches in the MFA program.

Donika Kelly is the author of *The Renunciations* (Graywolf), winner of the Anisfield-Wolf book award in poetry, and *Bestiary* (Graywolf), the winner of the 2015 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, a Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Poetry and the Kate Tufts Discovery Award. She is a Cave Canem graduate fellow and a founding member of the collective Poets at the End of the World. Her poems have been published in the *New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The Paris Review*, and elsewhere. She is an assistant professor in the English Department at the University of Iowa, where she teaches creative writing.

Wayne Koestenbaum—poet, critic, fiction-writer, artist, filmmaker, performer—has published 22 books, including *The Cheerful Scapegoat*, *Figure It Out*, *Camp Marmalade*, *My 1980s & Other Essays*, *The Anatomy of Harpo Marx*, *Humiliation, Hotel Theory*, *Circus*, *Andy Warhol*, *Jackie Under My Skin*, and *The Queen's Throat* (nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award). His most recent book, *Ultramarine*, the third volume of his trance trilogy, was published by Nightboat in February 2022. His first feature-length film, *The Collective*, premiered at UnionDocs (New York) in 2021. In 2020 he received an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature. Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library acquired his literary archive in 2019. He is a Distinguished Professor of English, French, and Comparative Literature at the City University of New York Graduate Center.

Shayla Lawson is the author of *A Speed Education in Human Being*, *PANTONE*, *I Think I'm Ready to See Frank Ocean*, *This Is Major* (a 2020 NBCC finalist), and a forthcoming decolonial travel memoir from Tiny Reparations (an imprint of Penguin).

Amy Leach is the author of *Things That Are* and *The Everybody Ensemble*. Her work has appeared in numerous literary journals and reviews, including *A Public Space*, *Ecotone*, *Tin House*, and *Orion*, in addition to Best American Essays and Best American Science and Nature Writing. A graduate of the University of Iowa's MFA program in creative nonfiction, she has been recognized with the Nautilus Book Award, a Whiting Writers' Award, and a Rona Jaffe Foundation Award. She plays bluegrass and the piano, teaches English, and lives in Bozeman, Montana.

Jessica Lee's poems have been published in the *New Yorker*, *American Poetry Review*, and *Missouri Review*, among other journals. In 2020 she was a finalist for Narrative Magazine's Poetry Contest and Rattle's Poetry Prize. She is currently an MFA candidate at Vanderbilt University. Find her online at readjessicalee.com.

Nabila Lovelace is a first-generation Queens born poet, her people hail from Trinidad & Nigeria. *Sons of Achilles*, her debut book of poems, is out now through YesYes Books. She is honored to be the Magic City Poetry Festival 2022 Eco-Poetry Fellow, as well as the Fall 2022 BMI Shearing Fellow. Most days you can find her kicking it in Tuscaloosa.

Dawn Lundy Martin, an American poet, essayist, and memoirist, is the author of four books of poetry: *A Gathering of Matter /A Matter of Gathering*; *DISCIPLINE*; *Life in a Box is a Pretty Life*; and *Good Stock Strange Blood*, which won the prestigious Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award in 2019. Her essays can be found in *The New Yorker*, *n+1*, *The Believer*, and *Best American Essays 2019* and *2021*. *Laceration: Poems* is forthcoming from Nightboat Books. *When a Person Goes Missing: A Family Memoir* is forthcoming from Pantheon Books. Martin, a 2022 United States Artist Fellow, is also the Toi Derricotte Endowed Chair in English at the University of Pittsburgh.

M.L. Martin is an interdisciplinary poet and translator, whose collection of ekphrastic prose poems, *Theater of No Mistakes* is available now from Anhinga Press. Her poems appear in *Denver Quarterly*, *DIAGRAM*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Interim*, *Massachusetts Review*, *PRISM international*, and elsewhere. Her work in translation aims to revise the critical interpretation and reception of the enigmatic Anglo-Saxon poem known as "Wulf and Eadwacer," and to recover this radical female text to the feminist and experimental canons to which it belongs. Her translations appear in *Arkansas International*, *Brooklyn Rail In Translation*, *Black Warrior Review*, *The Capilano Review*, *Columbia Journal*, *The Cortland Review*, the *Kenyon Review Online*, *The Literary Review*, and elsewhere. An editor for *Asymptote*, with grants from Bread Loaf, the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, and Tulsa Artist Fellowship, she's the founder of the *Translation Now!* symposium. Find more online at M-L-Martin.com.

Sam Marshall is a fiction writer from Florida and an MFA candidate at Vanderbilt University, where they serve as fiction and nonfiction co-editor of the Nashville Review and are working on a novel. This is their first publication.

Kayla Massey holds a Master of Art History from the University of Houston. Her writing focuses on the relationship of interconnected histories of cultural theory, art, architecture, and design. This work often emphasizes the role museums and cultural institutions have in creating experiences for the public and how viewers experience space. She currently resides in Victoria, Texas and works in community development.

Michael Mlekoday lives in the Putah Creek watershed of California, where they teach classes on hip-hop, Gothic literature, and wilderness poetics. They are a National Poetry Slam Champion and the author of two books: *All Earthly Bodies* (2022) and *The Dead Eat Everything* (2014).

Ata Moharreri is a first generation American, born in Rolla, MO. His mother emigrated from Minsk, Belarus and his father emigrated from Tehran, Iran. Ata has lived in TN, IL, MA, CA, and NY.

Trey Moody was born in San Antonio, Texas. His first book, *Thought That Nature* (Sarabande Books, 2014), won the Kathryn A. Morton Prize in Poetry. His more recent poems have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Believer*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Massachusetts Review*, and *New England Review*. He teaches at Creighton University and lives with his daughter in Omaha, Nebraska.

Ana Pepelnik is a poet and translator who was born in Slovenia in 1979. She has translated many American poets into Slovene, including Elizabeth Bishop, James Schuyler and Noelle Kocot.

Anthony B. Pinn received his PhD in the study of religion from Harvard University. He is currently the Agnes Cullen Arnold Distinguished Professor of Humanities and a professor of religion at Rice University. Pinn is also Professor Extraordinaries at the University of South Africa as well as a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Pinn is the founding director of the Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning at Rice University. He is the author of numerous books, including *Interplay of Things: Religion, Art, and Presence Together* (Duke, 2021).

Suzanne Richardson earned her M.F.A. at the University of New Mexico. She's currently a Ph.D. student in nonfiction at SUNY Binghamton. She is working on a memoir, *Throw it Up*, and a full poetry collection, *The Want Monster*. She writes Three Things column at *No Contact Magazine*. More about Suzanne here: https://www-suzannerichardsonwrites.tumblr.com/ and here: @oozannesay.

Matthew Rohrer is the author of ten books of poems, most recently *THE SKY CONTAINS THE PLANS*. He has co-translated poems by Tomaž Šalamun (with the author), Virgil Banescu (with the author) and Volker Braun (with his mother).

Lanecia Rouse Tinsley is a multidisciplinary artist who splits time between Houston, TX, and Richmond, VA. Her portfolio includes a range of mixed media painting, photography, teaching, writing, speaking, and curatorial projects for various non-profit organizations. Lanecia is the Artist-in-Residence at Holy Family HTX. She was recently the 2020-2021 Artist-in-Residence for the Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning (CERCL) at Rice University. She is a Co-founding Creative Director for the ImagiNoir Equity Group and the Director of Justice and the Arts with projectCURATE.

Lauren Russell is the author of *Descent* (Tarpaulin Sky Press, 2020), winner of the Poetry Society of America's 2021 Anna Rabinowitz Award, and *What's Hanging on the Hush* (Ahsahta Press, 2017). She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, Cave Canem, and the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, and her work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, the Academy of American Poets' *Poem-a-Day*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *DIAGRAM*, and the anthology *Furious Flower: Seeding the Future of African American Poetry*, among others. She was assistant director of the Center for African American Poetry and Poetics at the University of Pittsburgh from 2016 to 2020. In 2020 she joined the faculty of Michigan State University as an assistant professor in the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities and director of the RCAH Center for Poetry at MSU.

C.T. Salazar is a Latinx poet and librarian from Mississippi. He's the author of *Headless John the Baptist Hitchhiking*, out now from Acre Books and three previous chapbooks. His poems have most recently appeared in *West Branch*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Southeast Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Pleiades*, and elsewhere.

Susan Sanford Blades lives on the traditional territory of the lək^{w}əŋən speaking people, the Xwsepsum/Kosapsum and Songhees Nations (Victoria, Canada). Her debut novel, *Fake It So Real*, won the 2021 ReLit Award in the novel category and was a finalist for the 2021 BC and Yukon Book Prizes' Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize. Her short fiction has been anthologized in *The Journey Prize Reader: The Best of Canada's New Writers* and has been published in literary magazines across Canada as well as in the United States and Ireland.

Bo Schwabacher is a South Korean adoptee. Born in South Korea, she was adopted at three-months-old and grew up in Illinois. Her poems have appeared in *Cha*, *CutBank*, *Radar*, *Redivider*, *The Offing*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Zone 3*, and others. *Omma, Sea of Joy and Other Astrological Signs*, published by Tinderbox Editions, is her debut collection of poems.

James Shea is the author of two poetry collections, *The Lost Novel* and *Star in the Eye*, both from Fence Books. Recipient of grants from the Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program, Hong Kong Arts Development Council, and National Endowment for the Arts, he is the director of the Creative and Professional Writing Program at Hong Kong Baptist University.

Samyak Shertok's poems appear or are forthcoming in *Blackbird*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *New England Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Waxwing*, *Best New Poets*, and elsewhere. His work has been awarded the Robert and Adele Schiff Award, the Tucson Festival of Books Literary Award, and an AWP Intro Journals Award. Originally from Nepal, he is a PhD candidate in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Utah, where he is a Steffensen Cannon Fellow. A finalist for the National Poetry Series and the Jake Adam York Prize, he has received fellowships from Aspen Words, the Vermont Studio Center, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown.

Katie Jean Shinkle is the author of four books and seven chapbooks, most recently *None of This is an Invitation* (coauthored with Jessica Alexander, Astrophil Press at University of South Dakota, forthcoming) and *Thick City* (Bull City Press, forthcoming). *Our Prayers After the Fire*, originally published on Blue Square Press, will be reissued by Spuyten Duyvil in 2022. A 2021 Lambda Literary fellow, she serves as co-poetry editor of *DIAGRAM*, and is an Assistant Professor at Sam Houston State University where she teaches in the MFA in Creative Writing, Editing, and Publishing program.

Evie Shockley thinks, creates, and writes with her eye on a Black feminist horizon. Her books of poetry include *suddenly we* (forthcoming 2023), *semiautomatic*, and *the new black*. Her work has been named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, has twice garnered the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, and has appeared internationally. Her honors include the Lannan Literary Award for Poetry and the Stephen Henderson Award, and her joys include being a member of the collective Poets at the End of the World. Shockley is the Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English at Rutgers University.

Tone Škrjanec is a poet and translator who was born in Ljubljana, Slovenia in 1953. He has published eight books of poems, and in 2014 his book *SKIN* (translated by Matthew Rohrer and Ana Pepelnik) was published by Tavern Books. His poems can be found in many contemporary anthologies of Slovenian poetry and have been translated into numerous languages. Skrjanec has published many translations, mainly focusing on contemporary American literature, including William S. Burroughs, Charles Bukowski, Gary Snyder, Frank O'Hara, Timothy Liu, Paul Blackburn, Joseph Ceravolo, Jack Hirscman, Kenneth Koch, Jack Spicer, Anselm Hollo, and Kenneth Rexroth. He also translates from Croatian and Serbian. He lives and works in Ljubljana where he enjoys drinking green tea during the day and likes a pint of good beer in the evening.

Born and raised in Bogotá, Colombia, **Esperanza Hope Snyder** also lived in Tuscany. Her poems and translations have appeared in *Blackbird*, the *Gettysburg Review*, the *Kenyon Review*, *International Poetry Review*, *Free State Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and other journals. Honors include the Donald Everitt Axinn Award in Poetry for Bread Loaf and poetry fellowships for the *Gettysburg Review* and the *Kenyon Review*. Assistant Director of Bread Loaf in Sicily, co-coordinator of the Lorca Prize, she's the author of *Esperanza and Hope* (Sheep Meadow Press) and co-translator, with Nancy Naomi Carlson, of Wendy Guerra's *Delicates* (forthcoming from Seagull Books).

Slovenian writer, **Aleš Šteger** has published eight books of poetry, three novels, and two books of essays. A Chevalier des Artes et Lettres in France and a member of the Berlin Academy of Arts, he received the 1998 Veronika Prize for the best Slovenian poetry book, the 1999 Petrarch Prize for young European authors, the 2007 Rožanc Award for the best Slovenian book of essays, and the 2016 International Bienek Prize. His work has been translated into over 15 languages, including Chinese, German, Czech, Croatian, Hungarian, and Spanish. Five of his books have been published in English: *The Book of Things*, which won the 2011 Best Translated Book Award; *Berlin*; the novel *Absolution*; and the poetry books *Above the Sky Beneath the Earth* and *The Book of Bodies*.

Jessica Tanck lives and writes in Salt Lake City, where she is a Vice Presidential Fellow and Ph.D. student in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Utah. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Blackbird*, *Colorado Review*, *DIAGRAM*, and *New Ohio Review*, among others. She serves as the Managing Editor of *Quarterly West*.

Dorothy Tse is a Hong Kong fiction writer whose books include *Owlish* and *So Black*. Tse has received the Hong Kong Book Prize, Unitas New Fiction Writers' Award (Taiwan), and the Hong Kong Award for Creative Writing in Chinese. She has been a resident at Art Omi, the University of Iowa's International Writing Program, and the Vermont Studio Center.

Inés Verdugo is an artist and educator. Her work includes building situations, games, and personal rituals incorporating the body and exploring its relationship to an environment. Alongside an active exhibition history, she founded Puro Arte, an arts education center in Guatemala City for people with intellectual disabilities, which she directed for eight years. Her work has been shown at the Pollock Gallery at Southern Methodist University (Dallas, TX), XIV Bienal Femsa (Morelia, Pátzcuaro, Mexico), Fundación Kavlin (Punta del Este, Uruguay), Concepción 41 (Antigua, Guatemala), Sol del Río, 9.99 Gallery, Trama Galería, La ERRE, Centro Cultural de España, and the 19th Bienal de Arte Paiz (all Guatemala City). She lives in Guatemala City.

Matthew Vollmer is the author of two short-story collections—*Future Missionaries of America* and *Gateway to Paradise*—as well as three collections of essays—*inscriptions for headstones*, *Permanent Exhibit*, and *This World Is Not Your Home: Essays, Stories, & Reports*. He was the editor of *A Book of Uncommon Prayer*, which collects invocations from over 60 acclaimed and emerging authors, and served as co-editor of *Fakes: An Anthology of Pseudo-Interviews, Faux-Lectures, Quasi-Letters, "Found" Texts, and Other Fraudulent Artifacts*. His work has appeared in venues such as *Paris Review*, *Glimmer Train*, *Ploughshares*, *Tin House*, *Oxford American*, *The Sun*, *The Pushcart Prize anthology*, and *Best American Essays*. He teaches in the MFA program at Virginia Tech, where he is a Professor of English. His next book, *All of Us Together in the End*, will be published by Hub City Press in 2023.

Jieyan Wang is a first-year college student at Harvard University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Colorado Review*, *Pleiades*, *Witness*, *Passages North*, and elsewhere. She is also a reader for *The Adroit Journal*.

Michelle Whittaker is the author of *Surge* (great weather for MEDIA), which was awarded a Finalist Medal for the 2018 Next Generation Indie Book Award. She has been published in *The New York Times Magazine*, the *New Yorker*, *Shenandoah*, *Upstreet*, *The Southampton Review* and other publications. She has received Pushcart Special Mention, Cave Canem Fellowship and was a recipient of the 2017 New York Foundation of Arts Fellowship in Poetry. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor in the Program of Writing and Rhetoric at Stony Brook University.

Mimi Wong writes about art, culture, and literature. Her work has appeared in *The Believer*, *Catapult*, *Electric Literature*, *Hyperallergic*, *Literary Hub*, *Refinery29*, and was anthologized in *Best! Letters from Asian Americans in the Arts* (Paper Monument/n+1, 2021). Her fiction has been published or is forthcoming in *Cicada*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Day One*, *Joyland*, *The Margins*, and *Wildness*. For her writing on contemporary art, she was awarded an Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. She is Editor-in-Chief of the literary magazine *The Offing* and teaches at The New School. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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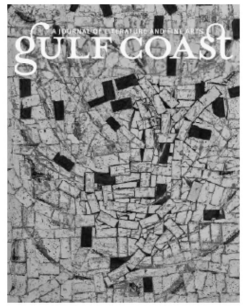

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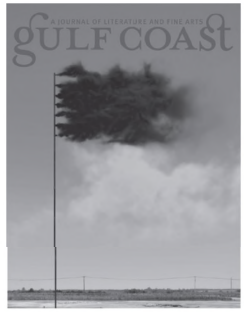

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