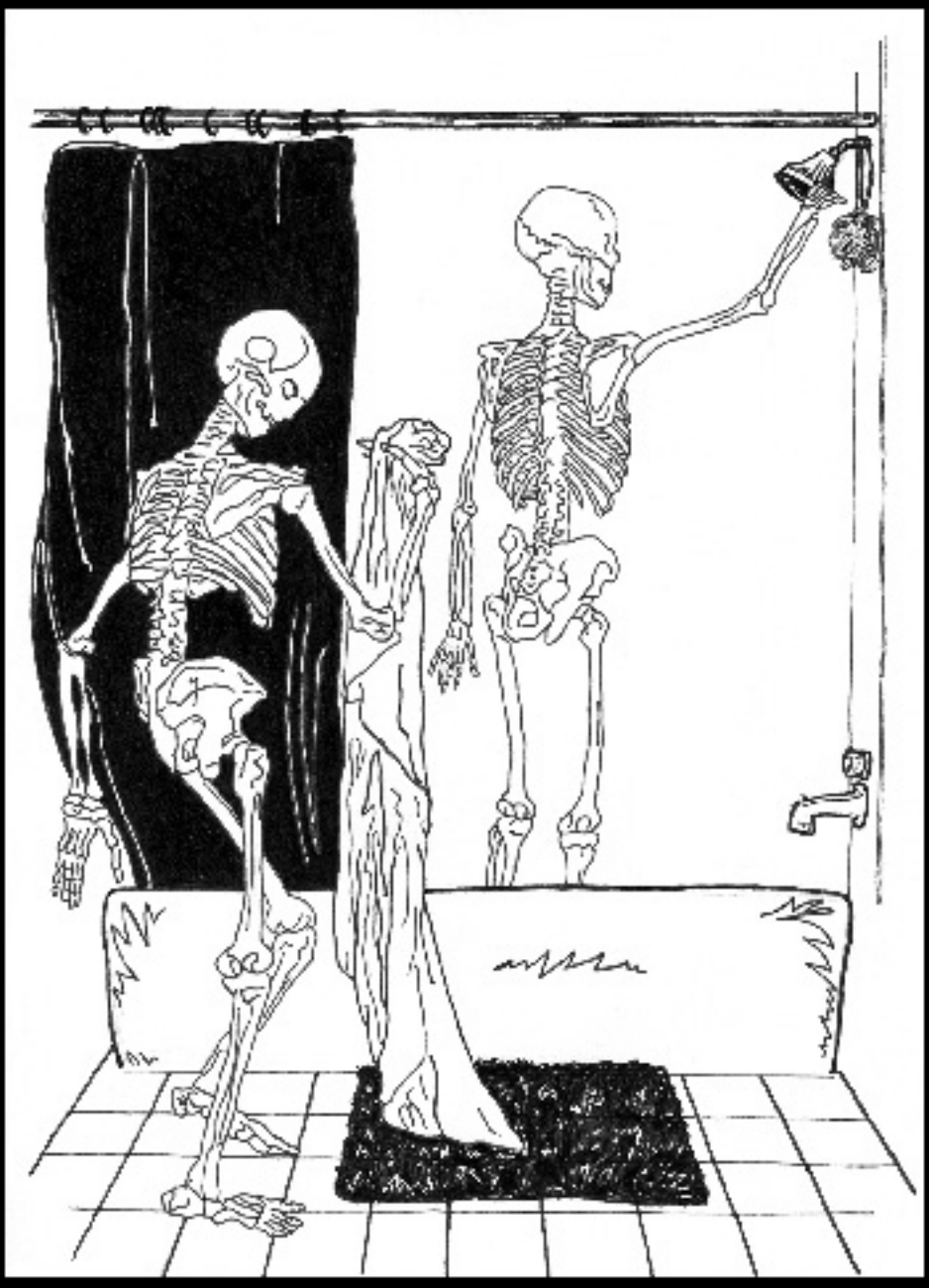
LEVEE
MAGAZINE



FALL 2020 — ISSUE 05

LEVEE MAGAZINE

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Founded in 2018 by Samantha Daniels and Eric Orosco

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 Levee Magazine is published twice annually using Kindle Direct Publishing. More information can be found at leveemag.com.

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Sarah Pascarella

Sarah Pascarella is a writer and editor based in Boston. Her fiction has appeared in *The Maine Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, and *Aquifer: The Florida Review Online*, among other publications. She has a Masters in Writing, Literature, and Publishing from Emerson College.

Embolus

Even in dreams, Elaina stayed in the shallow end of a pool. A narwhal swam with her, friendly at first, but when she turned away to surface it charged and attacked. Its tusk sliced her right leg from hip to ankle. The flesh folded outward, like velvet theater curtains, to reveal the screen of sheer white bone underneath. In the dream, her leg didn't bleed and the cut was painless; she regarded the mangled limb with detached fascination and annoyance. For a waitress, this would be inconvenient.

Her alarm clock interrupted her inspection. She untangled herself from the knotted blankets, then swung her intact legs to the floor. She leaned down to check the leg in question, felt tight muscles, stubbly skin. All as it should be.

A bowl of Wheatena with freshly perked coffee usually banished any remnants of her dreams, but this morning the images lingered. They trailed her into the bathtub, gave her pause as she brought the razor to her skin. They hovered as she ran her fingertips over the tiny pebble that rested in the hollow between her underarm and breast. Back in her bedroom, she did a double-take when she took down her nylons, dry from the line, and ran her thumb along the seam, so perfectly placed to split each leg in two.

At the restaurant, she was aware of her leg, surprised at its capability. It did not ache as she took a flight of stairs; it held her up during a ten-hour shift; it submitted to the shoves and jostles of the crowded trolley without complaint. With the dream's residuals, she also noticed the tiny everyday bonds and splits, normally overlooked: toothpicks that kept a club sandwich upright. Monochrome thread that bound a menu's pages taut to its spine. A discarded armchair in an alley, exposed stuffing like cumulus clouds across the upholstery.

At home, she completed her nightly rituals: hair curlers snapped into place. A light layer of cold cream across her face. A quick swipe to unclog the sink's drain.

And the less frequent: a press of her fingertips under her arm, to measure the pebble's width. She brought her hand to the wall, made a mark with her pencil, and added the date. Wider than the last, a month prior, and all the others before it. She bit her lip until it hurt. She undressed, then got in bed and turned off the lamp. Beams from passing cars danced across her ceiling, as though the plaster were water, and she watched them gambol until she fell asleep.

Deborah Bayer

Deborah Bayer is a (mostly) retired Infectious Diseases physician. She left hospital practice over six years ago to concentrate her attention on the HIV clinic in Atlantic City, NJ. Her poems have appeared in *Cider Press Review*, *The Stillwater Review*, *Hospital Drive*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Serving House Journal*, in the anthology *Still You: Poems of Illness and Healing*, and elsewhere. She is using her retirement to work on her memoir and to blog.

In Situ

Soon, even before I open them, the light in my eyes
will be orange, as red buds give way to masses of pollen
and then pale new leaves. The changing foliage makes

a cellophane filter for the sunlight through the glass: amber,
pale green, then emerald. This tree and I have traveled
a score of journeys together; four years since my diagnosis.

Each year, the colors are farther from my window.
Another limb has died. This summer, I will turn
my attention to the earth. A single yellow blossom

will sing, a siren to the bumblebee who will attack;
bee and blossom will merge. The flower's stem will bend
under the weight of the bee but spring

up again and sway as the bee straight-lines away,
as suddenly as it landed. The crimson leaves of autumn
will desert the chokeberry bush, leaving red fruit behind.

The cardinals will have their fill, even the female
with her bright orange beak and gray plumage that
only hints at redness. In winter, I look to the sky.

Comforters of snow and prisons of frozen rain
encase the woods in brilliant fire. Orion's Belt
stands out sharply among the midnight swarms of stars.

Moonlight intensifies the white discoloration of lichen
patches on the bark. The bare branches of my tree
look as unfamiliar as my own chalk-white skeleton.

Logan Wei

Logan's worked with patients, students, and ppl enduring homelessness. Logo's poetry has appeared in *grist*, *The Notre Dame Review*, *Pedestal Magazine*, *Parhelion*, *AZURE*, and others. Once, he got a "Best of the Net" nom. Lo's been spoiled by some good years & spoiled by some bad. Spouse and L. live in a lump of Minnesota, under the grueling hegemony of their one rescued quadruped.

Elm

I lean on my elbow. I'm getting pretty forgetful. Dying
is hideous business, even at five hundred and ten. O, sunshine, I'm liquefying from the inside
out. This will be my final entry. The sap slows, I can feel it, I don't fear it, but I feel it,
the nuclear mold. But everything falls. Right? Soon, mushrooms as large as men
will overcome what's left of the trees, as they did with the men (they have teeth now).

It's just as well. When I was six and blustering upwards, half my family vanished—
a crying saw slid into their hips. Autumn came and I fell
asleep. When I awoke, Earth, the air, was in the havocs of spring, all nectar and worminess,
and in their place there fanned out a camp—
for the immigrants. Immense. Steel filaments wrought a great wickerwork ring
rounded by towers, and a road, slack, and black as electrical tape.
Sometimes you could see: buses with black toes growling, gorging: their bulimia of bodies.

Then, the warming, then,
the famine, then, the warring. Once, everything vibrated; the sky branched
with extravagant light, and—touchingly—detainees and blueshirts held one another,

(how little, little the bodies with their blankets shining under the night) weeping at all
that was done. Then—touchingly—they hunched
into rich dusts, rich soils. In time, the flag of the home for brave things
thinned into thirteen belts. Into hair.
But that? that was centuries ago, and forgive me, I forget the particulars. Still,

the fence twinkles. Still, it stands, hacking up the wind. O Sun,
my burning, beautiful button. Will you remember any of this. Should this be recollected?
You always return. Perfect and empty. I only have one story to tell.

Ishani Synghal

Ishani Synghal is a poet, essayist, and educator. Her work has appeared in various magazines including *High Shelf Press*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, and the award winning *F Newsmagazine*. She is currently in the second year of her MFA at School of the Art Institute of Chicago and lives in Chicago, Illinois.

firing synapses

you selfishly pick the fruit from my body i grow for myself and eat them as you watch me starve, and i let you. half-poets and half-lovers in chaos are odd in their evenness. in our

voices you wake and i hear silent sounds. screaming. devolving. into city talk trying to catch it all back, the love. grounding myself motionlessly. i am realizing in terror that love always

comes with a price and i paid with my body. five p.m. there is not enough serotonin there is not enough dopamine there is not enough sleep there is not enough faith there are not enough

apologies there are rivers in the pit of the stomach there are rivers in the pit of the stomach there Is God there is god there is you there Is You there is me somewhere i am

how many nights

did i spend
compressed
between the knees
of gods and Men
pray-begging to be
unborn from the rib

Spencer Riggi

Spencer Riggi resides in Orlando, Florida. A graduate of Rollins College in 2017, he writes short fiction, poetry, screenplays, and music.

Saint Anthony

By noon, Tony had already downed a few Old Fashioned's. He used to be a mechanic, but always wanted to be an actor. He liked playing characters; he had a character for everyone he was ever with, made up with pieces of himself he'd rearrange as necessary. He didn't quit the shop for acting.

"How ya doin' there, pal?"

Nice guy, this bartender. Heavy pour, kept to himself. Tony rested his chin on his thumb, index, and middle fingers outstretched to his temple. He gazed into the dark shine of the bar, his reflection blurring into the fine wood. He didn't respond. The bartender inched closer and breathed deep.

"Hey, you need me to call you a cab or something?"

Tony's head felt hot. He'd heard something over the radio. Just a faint fragment of noise. Something about a car crash.

"Could you turn that up?" Tony finally said, not breaking his trancelike gaze.

"What's that?"

"The… radio. Turn it up."

The bartender, confused, sauntered to the radio and obliged. He turned the knob and the heat filling Tony's head rose with every word. Car crash in Ozone Park. Four people involved. Fatal. Tony waved his hand and closed his eyes.

"What?"

"Shut it off," he said with his eyes still closed.

The bartender turned the knob again and with a final click the voice vanished. The space fell almost silent. Tony's head still felt hot.

"'Nother," he said, raising his empty glass with a tilt that skidded out its last drops. He didn't recognize his voice.

"I don't think that's a good idea," the bartender said.

"You what?" Tony looked up. The bartender sighed at the all-too-familiar bourbon glaze.

"I think you're done."

"You kiddin'?" Tony lowered his chin into his chest, gas rising in his throat.

"You need to go."

Tony shot up, damn near falling as he did. With him bowled over the stool, Christ dangled from his chain, swaying in the bar's musty air.

"Listen here you motherfucker… gimme another or I'll—"

Tony awoke slumped against his car. The right side of his face throbbed. He remembered the first punch he threw or tried to throw and that was it.

* * *

Tony had just quit being a mechanic. It was the first morning after and he was parked nearby St. John's University in Queens. He smiled and waved at a girl named Sue, bouncing toward the car. She was a sophomore, a decade younger than him. They met at a bookstore nearby. Tony didn't go to bookstores or read much but he liked girls like Sue. Educated, smart. It made her funny in surprising ways. She opened the back door. She always hiked her skirt and flashed a little too much thigh stepping into his '54 Nash Rambler. She always did it with a smile.

"Take me to the mall, Jeeves!"

This day, she hopped in the backseat and turned up her chin, speaking in a most sophisticated British accent. Tony chuckled. He flung his bushy arm over the passenger seat. The sun bounced off his golden crucifix chain, a gift from his mother when he was six.

"At once, Madam… Jeeves, though?"

She leaned forward, planting a kiss on his stubbly cheek. He held his face close to her lips. The feeling rushed all over his body.

"You don't like it? I think it's cute."

Tony pulled back and stared at her face.

"Don't think girls are 'sposed to kiss their chauffers, m'lady."

"Girl, huh?"

"You don't like it? I think it's cute."

She furrowed her brow and squinted. He thought that was cute too.

"I hate it when you call me that."

"Well… only *girls* sit in the backseat."

"What if I had a big, strong man back here with me?" she said, wrapping herself around his bicep. He slipped loose and turned back toward the windshield, laughing. He patted the passenger seat.

"How 'bout you hop up here instead."

She left the car in a huff, defiant with her well-practiced eye-rolling. In the rear-view he observed her brown pin-curls, the curves of her dress; that playful, confident smirk on her face. She got in the front seat and rested her hand atop his.

"Happy?"

"Gettin' there."

"What can I do to help?"

"Lots."

Her hand slid away from his hand, up his forearm, across his chest and stomach, onto his thigh.

"Am I getting warmer?"

Tony laughed.

"There's somethin' I want to talk to you about, actually." He paused. "I quit the shop yesterday."

"Oh?" She tilted her head.

"I got some savings. Thinkin' of goin' somewhere."

"Like a vacation?"

"Somethin' like that," he nodded. "I want you to come with me."

She thought about it, puzzled. She failed to ward off a smirk.

"Well… but… what about school, Tony? And my parents, how would I—"

"Just say you're goin' with friends. You get spring breaks or somethin', don't you?"

"Sure, one, but… I don't know…"

"California."

The word felt like calm. Sue remained non-committal and they drove for a while, not talking about it anymore. She asked if he wanted to spend the night with her. They hadn't had sex yet. She wanted it. Tony didn't.

* * *

Later that night, Tony relaxed on Molly's couch, a single mother his age, at her apartment in Ozone Park. Down the hall, her eight-year-old son Charlie slept after an exhausting evening of stoop ball.

"How was the shop, hon?" she asked, plopping down on the sofa with a glass of red wine. Tony reached over to take it.

"Gimme that before you spill it all over."

"You must think I'm some dummy," Molly recoiled, sloshing the liquid.

"Huh?"

"You just wanna drink some."

"What, you don't trust me?"

"I trust ya as far as I can throw ya."

She shook her head and took a long sip, staring at him. Tony slinked further into the sofa and rested clasped hands behind his head. Molly ran her fingers along the gold chain, following as it dipped beneath his collar; she found Christ lost in a jungle of oily chest hair. Looking up from Tony's chest, she observed his profile—the blemished skin, long nose, stout chin. She drew close, breathing a whisper into his ear. He closed his eyes and saw Sue, in the backseat of some sophomore's car, giving the suspension a real workout. It made him angry.

"So…?" Molly asked. Her hand had drifted downward.

"So what?"

"Whaddya say?"

Tony halted her hand and placed it back on his chest. He zipped up his pants.

"It's… been a long day, hon. Another time, yeah?"

She sighed.

"You gotta talk to that boss of yours. He can't keep sending you home to me like this. You want me to fix you a drink?"

"No, not tonight. I think I just want to sleep."

She nodded and planted a kiss on the side of his head.

"I'll be in the room."

Tony watched her round figure turn the corner down the hall. He wondered if she'd go to her room, slip out of her clothes and wait. Wine could do that to her. But maybe she'd crack open her son's door and peer through the dark, watching the gentle rising and falling of his chest. Tony fell asleep on the couch and dreamt of Sue.

* * *

The next morning, Tony woke up in someone's bed. Not Molly's. He rolled over and rubbed his face on the pillow beside him, taking in its smell. A man walked in the room, buttoning the top of his shirt. His name was Allen. They met at the bookstore.

"Morning, sunshine."

Tony yawned and stretched, letting the covers slip off him. He admired Allen, the cleanliness of his pale, shaved face, the way the slant of the sun reddened his thin brown hair.

"Thanks for lettin' me sleep."

Allen chuckled. He sat on the edge of the bed, next to Tony.

"Aren't you late?"

Tony kept staring at him.

"You're too perfect for me," he said, the edges of his words rounded.

Allen scoffed. "You hear yourself right now?"

"All's I hear is my heart beating… beating for you…"

They eyed each other for a second. Tony's lips angled up. He broke out in laughter.

"You're an ass, you know that?" Allen said, fighting a laugh of his own.

"Can't help it." Tony relaxed back into the pillows and yawned. "Say, you got any smokes in here?"

"You think you can smoke in my bed?"

"I don't see why not."

"Because I said so?"

Tony exhaled. "Sheesh. You sound like my mother."

Allen pinched Christ between his thumb and forefinger, pulling Tony close to his lips. Hot oxygen danced in and out of their mouths. Allen grinned.

"You can smoke in the foyer, Anthony James Passerini. How was that?"

Tony closed his eyes and moved in, but Allen pushed him back into bed and stood.

"I have class. You should get dressed."

"But I'm comfortable."

Allen bent down and threw Tony's clothes on top of him.

"You know Marsha comes home for lunch."

* * *

Tony drove to St. John's and waited for Sue in their usual spot. He had a tight schedule; Molly needed him to pick up Charlie early from school, but Tony wanted to see Sue for just a little, to have lunch, at least. He had been thinking about her. She never came. Halfway through his third Lucky Strike, Tony decided he couldn't wait any longer and drove off. He caught himself wondering where she was, who she was with. The dream replayed in his head. He hadn't had a dream that vivid in months.

Charlie wasn't in a good mood when he got in the car. Bad moods weren't part of the routine. It upset Tony, seeing him staring out the window with his lips pouted, arms crossed. Tony reached a free hand to rub his shoulder.

"Somethin' wrong, buddy?"

"No."

"Sure seems like it. Wanna talk about it?"

"No."

"How come?"

"It's about my mom."

"Oh yeah? What'd your mom do?"

Charlie didn't respond.

"C'mon… you can talk to me."

"She yelled at me."

"Well, did you do somethin' bad?"

Charlie turned his head in a way Tony had never seen before. He had a spiteful kind of look he'd never seen before either.

"*Did you*?" Charlie asked.

* * *

"Charlie says you yelled at him today?"

Molly chopped vegetables in the kitchen, preparing for supper. She shrugged.

"Did he do somethin' bad?" Tony asked in a hushed voice. He stood close behind her, wrapping his arms around her thick frame.

"No… I don't know… it was just a rough morning. He caught me in a mood."

"A mood? How come?"

She stopped chopping and sighed.

"Really?"

"Really what?"

"You fell asleep on the couch last night. And then I woke up and you weren't even here."

"I was tired, hon, I told you. And I had to get to the shop early, you know it's been bu—"

Molly resumed chopping, more aggressive than before. Tony winced with each slice of the knife.

"No, I don't know. You never tell me how it is. You never talk to me about your day."

"Hey, my days just aren't that interestin'. I fix cars. You want me to talk to you about engine repair? Or… what, changin' oil?"

She spun around, accentuating restive words with her careless handling of the knife. His eyes were locked onto it.

"Don't get smart with me. You know exactly what I'm talkin' about."

"No… I really don't. Easy with the knife there, Jack."

"Lately I feel like you come here for Charlie and maybe some light company and that's it. It's like I barely exist." She paused and lowered her head. "I even drank wine last night. I was all… I don't know… loose."

"Loose?" Tony raised his eyebrows.

"And you didn't even take advantage."

He didn't like the way she said that. Mothers shouldn't talk this way, he thought to himself. His hands drifted off her and he wandered away, leaning against the kitchen doorframe.

"Tony?"

He watched Charlie, sat in the middle of the living room, doing math homework. Tony wanted to help him.

* * *

After sunset, Tony drove past Allen's apartment. The lights were on and he could make out silhouettes inside, moving about, like a party. He opened a fresh pack and parked on the curb down the block. More people arrived, middle-aged people dressed fancy, but some younger, wearing shorter dresses and letterman jackets. One young man had his arm wrapped around a girl that looked like Sue from the back, but a lot of girls did.

A loud tap broke Tony's gawp. He shot his head, jolted, and saw a man standing outside the car, motioning to roll the window down. He looked dirty, face dark beneath a dirtied flat cap and unkempt beard. Tony paused but rolled down the window.

"Sorry to bother you, mister."

"That's alright."

"Don't usually do this… botherin' people in cars, I mean. Saw you sittin' there for a bit, though."

"Has it been long?" Tony checked his watch.

"I don't know. Maybe it just felt like it."

Tony looked back up at the stranger.

"Well. What can I do for you?"

"I gotta ask if… if you can help me out at all, mister. Just a little of whatever you got."

Tony shook his head. "I got just enough for gas, pal. Can't help ya there."

"Maybe a smoke then?"

With a nod and smirk, Tony pulled a cigarette out and handed it out the window. The man took it between his trembling fingers and into his lips.

"If ya wouldn't, mind… I…"

Tony flicked his lighter open and held out the flame. In the illuminated glow he could see deep wrinkles and cracks in the man's face. The man took a long inhale before leaning his head back and letting the smoke expel toward the sky. He stayed like that for a few seconds, relaxed, and then looked down at the cigarette.

"That's quality, there."

"Good taste," Tony said with a laugh.

"Just a smoke does a man wonders. Used to be only thing that could calm these shakes. Not so much now, but…"

He paused.

"You a soldier, young man?"

"Army. 32nd Infantry."

The stranger laughed.

"If I had a cap, I'd tip it to ya."

"How about you?"

"Air Force."

"Fuck."

He laughed again and paused again.

"Lost some friends. Lost a lot. Knew this boy by the name of Austin, another bomber. We was close. We—"

The man chuckled and shook his head.

"Not many people know what it's like, s'all. We were close. And then one day I just didn't see him no more. Didn't see him again."

He rested his arms on the car door and leaned closer. A shadow casted over half his face.

"Ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"When you think about your boys… bein' out there… you boys all huddled in the jungle. Doin' what you had to and all. Would you do it again?"

Tony breathed deep for a moment. He lit another cigarette.

"I think I would."

The man angled the one visible half of his mouth into a smile. He nodded and straightened back up and stared at the burning nub of his cigarette.

"Ain't the same on the ground. People ain't the same neither."

Tony took a drag. The two of them remained still in the silent breeze.

"Well… son… I appreciate ya. Seems like you got somebody you wanna go see."

Tony scratched his eyebrow and sighed, glancing at the shadows swaying in Allen's apartment window.

"I'm not so sure about that."

"Oh, c'mon now… you're a soldier, ain't ya?"

"So I've been told."

"Duck soup, then."

The man dropped the cigarette onto the sidewalk and put it out with his boot. He gave Tony a casual salute and turned away, heading toward the dark.

"Hey, wait—"

Tony reached into his pocket and pulled out some cash. He held it against the Lucky Strike box and extended his arm out the window. The man turned around and held his hands up.

"Oh, son, you don't gotta—"

"No, please. Take it. Get yourself some grub."

The man reached out a shaky hand and accepted.

"Bless ya. Be safe now."

"You too."

* * *

The smoke permeated the hallways of Allen's apartment building and got thicker the closer Tony inched to Allen's doorstep. There were bodies leaning against the walls, chatting, holding glasses with lit cigarettes between their fingers. Some of them didn't smell like cigarettes. It was a strange mix of people, some young, some old, black and white faces, some dressed well, others like they got their clothes from the dumpster out back. Tony felt eyes on him, but nobody was watching him at all.

He stopped outside Allen's door, the same door he'd rapped his knuckles against countless times. This time the knock suffocated beneath the music and chatter. He waited and knocked again. A girl in the hall titled her head and laughed.

"Hey, it's open, man."

"This your first time at a party?" the guy wearing a scarf standing next to her said. She elbowed him in the ribs. Tony managed a smile as he turned the knob and leaned forward.

"It is here, anyway."

The girl called out to Tony before he disappeared.

"Say, man, you got any kush? We're dryin' up."

Tony shut the door behind him. There were even more bodies inside Allen's two-bedroom apartment, so many faces and so much smoke that they blurred, a muddy haze of skin, hair, and clothes. The air in the living room was dense with heat, carbon carcinogen, and deafening noise, vacillating jazz notes glazing the layers of voices that spliced words and pieces of sentences. Tony waded through the cacophony to the kitchen where he hoped booze would be. He didn't recognize the place in its current state, stumbling around feet and misplaced furniture that obscured pathways he knew even in the pitch dark.

The kitchen had fewer people and felt less warm. Tony gravitated toward the half-full bottle of Booth on the counter, grazing the handle of the pan he'd often cook eggs and bacon in. The shreds of conversation still spilled around the doorframe. A couple of times Tony swore he'd heard someone say his name. He began opening the cabinets where Allen kept glasses.

"Think all the glassware's spoken for, hon. I got some cups down here."

Tony looked to his right and the words came from a woman bent down, rifling through a cabinet near the sink. She handed Tony a Solo cup. He took it and opened the freezer for ice.

"Think we got some OJ in the fridge. It's slim pickings, all the folks showing up empty-handed."

Tony dropped the ice into the cup. "Oh, sorry… I found out last minute—"

"No, no, you're fine. I'm talking about some of the… other crowd."

`Tony started pouring Booth, a lot of it, pretending he knew which part of the crowd she meant.

"Usually how these things go. It's not a party without people you don't want here."

She laughed. She had a nice laugh. There were a lot of nice things about her. Tony opened the fridge and grimaced while grabbing what was left of the orange juice.

"Gin not your poison?"

Tony splashed the orange juice and stared into the cup. He raised it to her.

"Desperate times."

She raised her glass of red wine.

"To those."

They both maintained eye contact as they sipped. Suddenly the air felt different, all the noise washing under her words.

"Say, where'd you get the wine, anyways?"

She giggled and swirled the glass. "Perks of being the host. I know where the good stuff's hidden."

In an instant, Tony felt the temperature rise. He took a big sip, nearly emptying the cup, and forced a nod.

"I'm Marsha. I'm guessing you know my husband?"

Tony couldn't look her in the eye now. His gaze darted from the sliver of liquid in his cup to the tile floor and wood cabinets. He laughed. "I do, actually—"

"Anthony?"

Allen's voice smacked against Tony's ear and reverberated in his skull. He looked over. Allen's forehead had more wrinkles than Tony was used to, the confusion ripe in his face.

"I wasn't sure if it was actually you!"

Allen let out a hearty laugh as he stepped into the kitchen, extending his arm out. Tony reached, and they clasped hands, shaking firmly. Something about Allen's eyes looked different.

"What the hell ya' doing here, bud?"

The heat kept rising and Tony felt a stinging pain in his side. He was sure he was sweating. They let go of each other.

"I, uh… you know, heard about a party." His voice shook. He cleared his throat and started pouring more gin, finishing off the bottle. "Didn't realize it was yours. You never struck me as a party type."

Allen laughed and leaned against the counter, folding his arms across his chest. "Once in a blue moon is all. Honey, this is Anthony—"

"Please, Tony—"

"He's the fella at the shop, helped me out with that broken taillight I had."

Tony poured the orange juice and let the words loop. They sounded rehearsed.

"Ah, so a mechanic? And a good-looking one at that. You must be popular among the ladies."

She eyed him over the rim of her glass. Tony smirked, and he realized he forgot more ice.

"Popular is one word for it."

"Say, you gotten a chance to survey the goods yet?" Allen said, arching his neck back toward the living room.

Marsha sighed.

"No. I only just got here."

"Well, if you like them young…"

"Al!" Marsha said, slapping him on the arm.

"I noticed that. Good mix of folks here. What's the occasion, anyways?"

"Oh, we try to do it once a year," Marsha said. "Faculty, some of the more palatable students. And then of course whoever else catches wind. Maybe we should look into a doorman next year, darling?"

"Oh, what's the big deal? New faces are exciting. And unexpected friends! Like *Anthony here*."

"Yes, well, you're not the one cleaning up after them."

The three of them chuckled and took sips from their drinks, Allen and Marsha beside each other, Tony across from them. With their silence came the energy bursting out of the living room.

"So, *Anthony*. How'd you hear about our little get together?" Allen asked.

Tony looked up and went to answer but his eyes drifted over Allen's shoulder into the living room. He spotted brown pin curls atop a flowery patterned dress that stopped just a little too soon. She had a bounce to her while she talked to a young man in a black turtleneck, leaning forward and back on her toes and heels. Tony watched her place a hand on the young man's bicep. His blood boiled. Allen and Marsha turned back, poking their heads around the corner.

"You know Susan?" Allen asked.

Tony realized they'd turned around because the name "Sue" spilled out from behind his lips. Allen turned back.

"She's one of my best students. Though I think she could do better than that Harold nitwit—"

"Oh, not this again…"

Tony's eyes hadn't broken away from Sue.

"If the boy brings up Max Eastman in my class one more time, I'm going to beat him over the head with my syllabi."

"I find him quite charming."

"Oh, he can charm half the money out of your purse, that's certainly true."

Marsha shook her head as she downed the last of her wine. She exhaled and looked at the glass.

"Well, time for a new bottle! I'm going to mingle, dear."

She kissed Allen on the lips and turned back to Tony.

"Cheers, friend!"

Tony forced a smile and raised his cup. Him and Allen both watched her saunter out of the kitchen. Tony's eyes returned to Sue for just a moment, until Allen shot forward, closing the space between them. With Allen that close, Tony realized the rest of the kitchen had emptied as well. Allen gripped Tony's forearm and dragged him away from the doorframe, out of eyesight. He had him up against the stove.

"What the *fuck* do you think you're doing here? Are you stupid?"

Tony ripped his arm away.

"Say, this feels different than last time we were in here."

"Oh, cut it. What are you thinking? Dropping in here like this?"

"It's a party, Al. We played it fine."

"We shouldn't have to play it at all, you idiot."

"Watch it."

"Don't you have an ounce of common sense? Not to mention you know one of my students, how is that even possible?"

"It's a small world, pal. Or you ain't heard?"

Allen breathed deep and gritted his teeth. He stuck a finger in Tony's face.

"You… you have crossed a line, tonight. You need to leave. Now."

Tony lowered Allen's hand slowly.

"So, this is the line, huh? That's where you decided to draw it?"

"Oh, screw yourself. To think I trusted an imbecile like you, some brainless punk off the street who can't ev—"

Tony felt his hand gliding along the counter toward the empty Booth bottle. Allen's words faded into the background with the rest of the sound. Tony felt the glass on his fingertips. And then he remembered Sue. He smiled.

"The bookstore."

"What? What about the—"

"Sue. I met Sue at the bookstore."

He shoved Allen away from him, harder than he wanted to. The sound of Allen crashing into the refrigerator made more noise than he thought it would. The tone of the commotion in the living room changed. When Tony emerged from the kitchen, he felt eyes on him again. He started across the living room toward Sue, conscious of the pattern of his breath, the tingling on his skin, the slight tremble in his hands. She was still turned around, talking to the turtleneck. Tony lifted a hand and rested it on her shoulder. Her hair bounced as she turned around in the middle of sipping her drink.

"Hey, doll."

She saw Tony and sprayed vodka soda all over his white t-shirt. She coughed and wiped the corners of her mouth.

"T—Tony? Wh… what are you—"

"Was in the neighborhood and heard about a party. Fancy seein' you here."

"Oh my *gosh*, what a surprise!"

She pulled Tony in for a tight hug. "Since when do *you* come to parties?"

"I'm tryin' to get out more."

They pulled away.

"You can meet all my friends!"

The rest of the party had already forgotten about the noise in the kitchen. Tony couldn't see Allen anywhere. Turtleneck cut in with an outstretched hand and laughed nervously.

"Care to, uh… introduce us?"

"Oh!" Sue giggled. "This is Tony! Tony, this is my friend Harold."

Tony quickly shook his hand. Harold eyed Tony.

"How do you two know each other?"

Looking at up Tony, Sue smiled with a devilish look in her eyes. She shrugged.

"Oh, you know, just around."

Harold stared blankly at them.

"I think I need a refill."

Harold went to step past them and Tony realized Allen had emerged from the kitchen, staring from across the living room. They locked eyes. Tony smiled and leaned close to Sue, still looking at Allen.

"Hey… whaddya say we get outta here?"

Sue bit her lip. "Oh, Tony, but I'm here with my friends"

He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close. He whispered in her ear.

"I want you. *Right now*."

Air left her body with a tremble. "Do… do you mean…"

Tony smiled. "We can go back to my place."

Sue briefly glanced back at her friends, and even more briefly at Turtleneck, who was returning with a full glass. Allen followed close behind him.

"Okay." She said, placing a hand on Tony's chest. "Let's go."

Tony locked hands with her and started leading her toward the door.

"Whoa, hold on!" Turtleneck shouted. The party noticed. Tony and Sue kept walking. Tony opened the door. Turtleneck set his glass down and charged ahead. "Hey, I'm talking to you!" he said louder. He grabbed Sue's arm and pulled. "You think you're just gonna leave?"

Before he even fully knew what was happening, Tony let go of Sue and threw a hard right into where he thought Turtleneck's Adam's apple might be. Turtleneck coughed and choked as he stumbled back. The whole room gasped.

"Tony!" Sue cried out.

Tony went to swing at Turtleneck's jaw this time, but Allen grabbed onto his arm. With his free hand, Tony grabbed the glass off the coffee table and swung blindly. It shattered in Allen's eye. Allen yelped and fell, clutching at his eye, glass and blood shooting through the gaps in his fingers. Gasps turned to screams and calls for the police. Sue stood motionless with her hand over her mouth. With the front door ajar, the young man with the scarf poked his head in. The young girl with him followed suit. Tony stood over a squirming Allen and stomped on his groin twice.

"*Whoa*."

"Is this… *actually* happening?"

Allen screamed and retreated, crawling along the floor, dripping blood onto the carpet. Marsha ran to him, stepping in between him and Tony.

"What the hell is *wrong with you*? Someone help! Phone the police!"

Tony backed away but bumped right into Turtleneck, who shoved him into the wall. Tony turned and took one wild punch to the chin and then ducked the second one. Turtleneck's hand broke against the wall. He yelled and grasped at his wrist, bending over. Tony kneed him in the side of the head and then punched him twice in the face. Breathing heavy, he looked back at the door and grabbed the scarf from around the young man's neck.

"*Hey, that's my favori—*"

He marched back over Turtleneck, who had his face buried in the carpet. Tony held both ends of the scarf tight and wrapped it around Turtleneck's throat. His head felt like it was on fire, flames erupting out of his eyes.

"Please, stop! Sue finally unfroze and grabbed onto Tony, pulling him.

"Tony, we have to *go*!"

Tony strained as hard as he could, veins bulging everywhere. He released, and Turtleneck's limp head landed with a thud. He and Sue left the apartment and walked fast down the hall, past the hushed whispers of partygoers, neighbors, and general onlookers. When they got downstairs and outside, the fresh, cool air almost knocked Tony on his back. He leaned against the streetlight, panting. Sue stood at a distance from him, tears in her eyes.

"I can't… I can't believe you did that." Tony took a deep inhale and stood back up straight, staring at his raw knuckles under the streetlight. He looked at her.

"I… I don't know…"

Before he could exhale, she was on top of him. She wrapped her arms around his neck

and pulled his face into hers. It was the most passion he'd felt between them. He lifted her off the ground and up against the light pole. Tony sucked on her neck. People watched from the windows.

"Oh my god, I need you. I need it now."

Tony placed her back down, cupping her face with his hands. He stared into her eyes and laughed.

"I don't think my place is a good idea anymore."

* * *

The next morning in the motel room, Tony sat naked on the edge of the bed, face buried in his hands. It was early enough to still be dark out. Sue rolled over, eyes half open. She yawned and blinked. She rested a hand on Tony's back.

"Hey… what are you doing?"

Tony lifted his head and stared into the dark of the bathroom. He clenched his jaw.

"I… that hasn't happened before."

She propped herself on her elbow, staring at the back of his head.

"I had fun. It's okay. I hear booze can do that. It's not the first time I—"

Tony shot up from the bed.

"Wait, you can still finger me more if you want—"

He slammed the bathroom door shut behind him. He turned on the light and started the shower. Sue didn't get out of bed.

In the shower, Tony lowered his head as water dripped down over his hair, shoulders, and Christ. He arched back and opened his mouth, letting the water fill it. He thought about swallowing and letting the water fill all of him. He wondered if he could drown himself. After the shower he gripped the sink and stared at the fog in the mirror.

He left the bathroom and walked to the chair his clothes were flung over. He started dressing. Sue sat up in bed.

"Tony… please. Don't do this. We can just lay together."

He stuck his legs through his jeans and paused before zipping. He couldn't make out her face in the blue of the early morning, just the shape of her body beneath the sheets.

"It has to be me, it was my fault. I'm sorry."

"Just *stop*." He stared at the shadow of her. He put his shirt on. "I have to go."

The words dropped his heart to the bottom of his stomach. He finished getting ready in silence.

"That's it, then? After everything?"

"I'll give you some money for a cab," he said, sitting down to tie his boots. She threw

the sheets off and stood up, bringing her bare body toward him. She got closer and he could make out more and more of her features; her perfect skin, the curves of her body, her breasts, her lips and eyes. He felt everything and nothing for her at once. She wrapped her hands around Tony's head. He leaned forward and rested against her stomach, closing his eyes.

"I don't understand you, Tony."

* * *

He slammed the car door shut and sat still in the dark, leaving Sue in the motel room. He stared at the bruises on his knuckles. He thought about everything he'd lost the night before. He tried to think about all the reasons why but couldn't find them. He considered going to Molly but didn't have the strength to put on that face. In this moment, he had no piece to rearrange; all the pieces had been scattered. He had nowhere to go. He was himself. And he was alone.

* * *

Just before sunrise, Tony arrived at his old home in Staten Island; his wife Sarah still lived there. When he knocked, he half-expected some half-dressed guy to open the door. But Sarah answered, which might've been worse. Even through the veil of the screen door, he could see she was tired; her face looked lived in, by her, or by whoever she had been since he left.

"Well. I didn't think it'd take you this long."

Tony leaned against the porch railing and sighed.

"Do I even wanna ask where you been?"

"We both know you do."

They stood in awkward silence, two once-young lovers almost unrecognizable to each other. Sarah raised an eyebrow, radiating something Tony was still familiar with: her ancestral grasp of sarcasm.

"Well. Let me guess. You been shacked up with somebody. Maybe a few people."

Tony folded his arms and stared out into the street.

"Maybe a girl. Or how about a boy again? Maybe a horse, this time?"

He stood up, clenching his fists.

"I just… I just need a place to stay for a bit, Sarah. I need some decent sleep."

"You don't got a place wherever it is you been?"

"It's… complicated."

She let out something resembling a laugh, smirking and blowing air out her nostrils. She opened the screen door.

"When isn't it?"

She let him inside and retrieved a blanket and pillows before going back to the bedroom upstairs. With every creak of the steps he replayed everything that led him here, back to her. He laid down on the couch and closed his eyes for some time but never slept. Part of him wanted to crawl into their bed, and soon, all of him wanted it. He had loved her, more than he ever loved anyone else, and for longer. He had felt happy. Time revealed the corrosive things about them that could not change and would only get worse.

He got up to make himself coffee. He drank from the same mug he always used to. The space remained the same as before and yet felt so different. He looked around the kitchen and thought about the last time he was there, before he left and ended up in Queens, when he rushed out and got in his car, wanting to drive anywhere. He was drunk. And bleeding.

"Don't you think I know what you been up to, you no-good son of a bitch?"

That day six months ago, Sarah had a knife pointed at him, hand wrapped so tight around the handle that her thin veins bulged. He inched closer, pleading with her. His eyes were apologetic. Her eyes were wild and wet with tears.

"Sarah, honey… put the knife down. You're not thinkin' clear."

"Don't you 'honey' me. I can smell the booze on you from here."

"We can… we can fix this, alright? I promise, I'll be better from now. I can be better." He reached out a hand. She stared at it seething.

"You're *sick*. You're a damned *sick pervert*."

"Sarah, please…"

"You think you can ever sleep in my bed again? You think I want you touching me ever again?"

"It's okay, it'll be okay… just give me the knife…"

"*Fuck* you. How about you go sweet talk your little boyfriend, you freak—"

"I said give me the goddamn knife!"

He advanced at her, maybe too quick, and so she stabbed him. Maybe she didn't mean or want to, and it just happened; neither knew for sure. The wound itself wasn't too serious, more of a graze than a stab, slicing the side of his stomach. It could've been worse, but it was enough. He got his wallet, keys, a towel to stop the bleeding, and stormed out. He had no real plan. He didn't think he'd ever see her again.

Tony made the mistake of sleeping around in his same neighborhood. One night after a few too many beers, or maybe just the right amount, he had sex with his neighbor from four houses down; a man named Juan. This one unexpected night turned into a series of nights, and mornings, and afternoons. One day Juan's sister dropped in unexpectedly and found them on the living room couch—as a devout Catholic, she did not have the tolerance or capacity for keeping that kind of secret. She told Sarah. Sarah stabbed Tony. Tony left without saying goodbye to Juan.

After his coffee, he sat on what used to be his couch and stared into the stained white mug. He wanted a smoke badly but hadn't gotten a new pack. He looked back at the steps he'd carried Sarah up when they first bought the house; the steps he would lead Juan up by the hand. He felt sick.

This time, he was sober when he left. And not bleeding. Still, the drive back to Queens felt the same; he was just as disoriented, just as confused. A song played on the radio, *Teenager in Love*. At first, he didn't understand why he was going back. He knew the cops would be looking for him, would recognize his car. They must've already talked to Allen and Sue. Going back was a risk, but Tony realized he had left enough goodbyes unsaid.

* * *

By noon, Tony had already downed a few Old Fashioned's. He used to be a mechanic, but always wanted to be an actor. He liked playing characters; he had a character for everyone he was ever with, made up with pieces of himself he'd rearrange as necessary. He didn't quit the shop for acting.

What did he quit the shop for? That was one of the questions Tony asked himself, sitting at the bar. The word "California" rang out in his mind like a bell. It sounded like a fresh start, a real fresh start amidst a sea of them.

"How ya doin' there, pal?"

Tony rested his chin on his thumb, index, and middle fingers outstretched to his temple. He gazed into the dark shine of the bar, his reflection blurring into the fine wood. He wondered what he was even doing there, why he was drinking. He knew he had something important to do. He thought about staring into the fog in the motel bathroom, with Sue behind him, and Allen's face in the glass, shattering.

"Hey, you need me to call you a cab or something?"

Tony's head felt hot. He'd heard something over the radio. Just a faint fragment of noise. Something about a car crash. He thought about losing people, about things and lives breaking and not being able to fix them.

"Could you turn that up?" Tony finally said, not breaking his trancelike gaze.

"What's that?"

"The… radio. Turn it up."

The bartender, confused, sauntered to the radio and obliged. He turned the knob and the heat filling Tony's head rose with every word. Car crash in Ozone Park. Four people involved. Fatal. Tony waved his hand and closed his eyes.

* * *

Tony awoke slumped against his car. The right side of his face throbbed. He remembered the first punch he threw or tried to throw and that was it. After regaining enough of his senses, he took a quiet drive around the city. He kept a lookout for police with his one good eye. He caught a glimpse of himself in the rear-view mirror.

—You're gonna be somebody.

A man, Tony's father, told him that once. Before he pretended to go to sleep. Before his father touched him. Christ watched from the bedside table. Tony never talked about it—

Tony drove past the crash site. He saw three cars, totaled. Two ambulances. He imagined telling the families what happened; the tears and the hugs.

—You're gonna be somebody. A friend told him after their first high school play together. Tony's first kiss. The boy suffered a beating a few weeks after, not because of the kiss, just because they knew about him. Tony never talked about it—

He kept driving. He could barely keep his eyes open. He imagined crashing.

—You're gonna be somebody.

A girl, Tony's first serious girlfriend, told him right before she wrapped her car around a telephone pole. Tony lived. She didn't. Tony never talked about it—

He parked down the street from Molly's apartment. Charlie was out front by himself bouncing a ball off the stoop.

—You're nobody.

A soldier screamed at him, inches away from his face. He punched Tony in the stomach. Months later, Tony would watch that same soldier's head leave his body, carried on a thunderous eruption of dirt and bullets and flames. Tony never talked about it—

He got out of his car.

—You're somebody.

He whispered to himself while he stared at the mirror in his bathroom, and Molly's, and Allen's. The cracked mirror in the mechanic's shop. The rear-view mirror in his car. He'd heard it all his life. But who? Tony never talked about that either—

* * *

When Tony approached Charlie, they just stared at each other. Charlie cocked his head to the side and squinted his eyes.

"What happened to your face?"

Tony kneeled beside him.

"Got punched."

Charlie thought about it. "Did you deserve it?"

Tony laughed and winced after. "Between you and me… I think I got off easy."

Charlie bounced the ball twice. He stopped.

"My mom cries a lot now."

"She tell you why?"

"No."

"Did you ask?"

Charlie shrugged. He bounced the ball again.

"Maybe you should talk to her. It might help."

The stayed there silently, listening to the ball bounce off the concrete.

"I think she misses my dad."

Tony shifted his feet and stared down at the asphalt. "Do you remember your dad?"

"Sometimes, a little. He was nice."

"Nice… nice is good."

Silence returned. Tony turned around, hearing faint sirens. He didn't think they were for him, but knew his time was running out. He looked back at Charlie.

"Charlie… I'm gonna be goin' away. I don't… I don't think we're gonna see each other again."

Charlie turned to Tony, looking him in the eye.

"You're leaving me?"

"No, it's not…it's not like that. I have to go. I can't stay here."

Tears formed in Charlie's eyes. Tony pulled him in for a hug.

"Hey, hey…it's okay. You're a big man, right? You gotta be strong for your mom. She needs you, you know. My mom needed me too."

Charlie nodded into Tony's shoulder.

"Atta boy. You're gonna be okay."

Charlie pulled back and wiped his eyes.

"Are you gonna be okay?"

Tony's own eyes started to sting. He smiled. "Sure, bud."

"Do you mean it?"

"I… I can try. It's a start, ain't it?"

Charlie nodded back and sniffled. "Can you tell me why you have to go?"

"I just…have to."

"But why?"

Tony took a shaky breath. "I just… there's somethin' that's not right. With me. Up here." He tapped his temple. "Somethin' that keeps me from… I don't know. I just do things

that… nothing makes sense. I can't make sense of myself. I don't know if goin' away can fix it. I guess that's just me hopin' it will. I don't know what else to do."

Charlie stared at Tony's puffy face, reconciling it with the image he once had. This is the image he would remember.

"Okay. I understand."

They hugged again, and this last hug lasted a while. Tony went to stand up but paused first.

"Hey, I wanna give you somethin' special. My mom gave it to me when I was around your age…"

Tony went to unclasp his chain, but only felt his bare neck. He reached into his shirt. His chain wasn't around his neck; it was on the barroom floor, next to the drops of his blood.

* * *

Tony was a mechanic but he always wanted to be an actor. Or at least that's what he told himself, what he held onto. The truth is Tony just wanted to be somebody; anybody else. After saying goodbye to Charlie, he sat in his car and the tears rushed over his swollen eye and cheek, a collage of purple and reddish hues painted over olive skin. He bowed his head and wept. Afterward, he drove away. He kept driving. That day, with nothing but his Nash and whatever pieces of himself he had left, he entered the open mouth of the Victory Highway. Queens and Christ and all his former lives evaporated behind him.

Tyler Cernohlavek

Tyler is a poetry student who likes to explore the messier parts of identity in his works. He enjoys the experimental use of line breaks and white space.

Margins

Is there a
line
running down
my body that
tells you when
I have to
stop talking?

When you're
allowed to
erase my stories
out and
discredit me
using my
content in all
its multitudes
(queertransmixedrace
neurodivergentlefthan
dedhuman)
against me?

When I become
nothing
but a
blank page
for you to
write your
privilege over?

Why am I
forced to fit
myself into
such a
narrow channel
of words
between these
straight
White
spaces?

Michal ‘MJ’ Jones

Michal ‘MJ’ Jones is a poet & parent in Oakland, CA. Their work is featured or forthcoming at *Anomaly*, *Kissing Dynamite*, and *Borderlands Texas Poetry Review*. They are an Assistant Poetry Editor at *Foglifter Press*, and have fellowships from the Hurston/Wright Foundation, VONA/Voices, & Kearny Street Workshop. They are an MFA graduate fellow at Mills College.

The cashier has a thing for Black girls

What is the thing that
this white dyke has for me
I would like to ask
but don't just no-teeth grin
into my shoulder
She's eager at my stretch
of neck is kissing
me with lifeless empty
lips is kissing me
like she just knows she'll get
this brown shuga is
pressing into me is
having a thing for
me or the trope of mes
that she imagines
& I don't share her same
arousal—so she
suggests a film & picks
Madea to prove
she's hip to this thing
she got for Black girls
ones that "look aggressive"
like me—buttercream
enough to whip bitter
sweet I mean can I
blame her for knowing what
she likes she's leaving
me an awful hickey
my eyes are open
to study crown molding.
I'm not in the mood
want to go home she begs
for me to stay my
jeans ain't moist or tightening

there's a bruise on my
trachea I'd rather
stagger home in cool
Capitol Hill mists in
yawning dawn than be
this bitch's plaything.

Abby Wolpert

Abby Wolpert is an emerging writer and student from Roanoke, Virginia. She is also a former editorial intern for *Blackbird Literary Journal*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *86 Logic*, *The Cardiff Review*, T*he Dewdrop*, *Lux Lucet Zine*, *Pwatem Literary Journal*, and *Soft Punk Magazine*.

Ode to Men Who Catcall

How sweet the sound of a greeting
from your '93 Cadillac window. Saliva
glistening on the pavement, lofted
from your warm throat just moments before.
How melodious your jeer, acapella anthem
of my morning commute; you, the belting
baritone of the churning city chorale.
How resonant your whistle, from Brooklyn
to South Bronx, contesting swallows
and pigeons piping hymns until dawn.

And how flattered am I—handpicked Honeycrisp,
plucked in a plentiful orchard, yet so quickly
replaced by a Goldspur or Granny Smith
once I am dropped home to earth.

Saramanda Swigart

Saramanda Swigart is thrilled to be writing fiction (almost) full time after years of writing ad copy and corporate literature. She has lived and worked in Italy, New York, San Francisco, and Dubai. She has an MFA from Columbia University, with a supplementary degree in literary translation. Her short work and poetry have appeared in *Oxford Magazine*, *Superstition Review*, *Ghost Town*, *Expanded Field*, *The Saranac Review*, *Glint Magazine*, *Reed*, *The Alembic*, *Border Crossing*, *Hypertrophic Press*, *Euphony*, *The MacGuffin*, *Voices de la Luna*, *Streetlight*, *Thin Air*, *The Furious Gazell*e, the British anthology *Temporal Discombobulations*, among others, and she's received an honorable mention in *Glimmer Train*. Her short story *The Earth Falls to the Apple* was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her first novel, *Meaning Machine*, about a family's incompatible coping strategies in the face of loss, is currently out for consideration. She is working on a collection of interlocking stories, a second novel, *Flight*, and a modern translation of the more salacious stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. She lives in San Francisco and teaches at City College of San Francisco.

Ekphrasis: Metropolitan Love Poem

Here's what I love about you:
You know when to be immodest.
You're like that handsome column there
Taking up the room, edging out
The people and forcing them
To slip around you. Your laugh is
So big we get asked to leave restaurants.
That's why I love you: you force my
Respect. Here it is: I offer it to you.

Lara Levitan

Lara Levitan was born in Chicago and studied creative writing at the University of Illinois. Her wacky website, laralevitan.com, is home to some weird blog posts about *Beverly Hills, 90210*, and links to her debut novel *The Secret Sugar Daddies*. Lara lives in Chicago with her husband, daughter, and aging cat.

Cast

My child, your chariot awaits!

Gabby springs down the steps toward the idling car, purple backpack bouncing.

Momsy-Womsy waits semi-patiently in the Subaru, proper red scarf-thingy tied around her neck, even in this heat. "Move your tush!" Mom actually says, which means hurry, shake a leg, for she can't be late, The Devil Incarnate waits. Scooting in passenger, hot vinyl burning thigh skin, Gabby hands over the deodorant stick. Lately Mom's been forgetting things such as deodorant, and on a scorcherooni such as this! She doesn't even know she's forgetting, which is, Gabby supposes, what makes it forgetting. Mom drops her lipstick between her seat and the gear shift—Farewell, naughty lipstick, for you shall melt into the vehicular abyss—and stares at the Secret. "Oh my God, how did you know?" How did Gabby know, and could she ever explain?

"I'm magic," Gabby says.

Mom clicks her tongue, untucks her restaurant shirt from her restaurant skirt, rubs the stick on her pits. She shoves in Bikini Kill and drives Gabby to her first day of seventh grade, a day she has been anticipating for weeks now—endless empty calendar squares!

"Are you seeing *Jee-off-ree* today?"

"Is it the lipstick?" Mom re-tucks her shirt as she drives, broken air conditioner, hair bunned, sweaty blue bangs clipped with a pink-bow barrette. "Too obvious?"

"It's alright."

"Anyway, I told you not to say his name like that."

"Like *Jee-off-ree*?"

"You are a brat and a half."

"I am but a lowly child."

"Almost a teenager."

"Not for a year."

"Geoffrey's… nice. He's nice!"

"His teeth look like his breath smells."

Mom drives into a sea of tiny heathens, their backpacks cling to their backs like fat spiders.

"You have to take me to the junior high entrance, Mom."

"Oh, right. Where is that? In the back where you can smoke?"

Gabby doesn't answer, she is scanning the kids, heart humming, eyes jumping over faces—is she here yet? Krista, Krista, Krista, *mon petit chou*?

"Okay, get out of my car." Mom leans over for a kiss.

Gabby ducks. "Don't want to ruin your lipstick!"

"Brat and a half," Mom says through the open window, and Gabby watches her drive

off. Suddenly she wants the kiss—could it have promised a perfect first day, like a poisonous apple in reverse? But too late, Mom's gone. Gabby turns. The massive brick dungeon that is Sylvester Elementary is the same but different from this junior high view: ancient trees the same, cracked windows the same, chipped concrete around the doors the same, except there, lying at the base of a bush—a man's black glove. It lays with stitches tattered, fingers tied up in weeds, a handcorpse left to decompose.

In the new classroom—flying spitballs, chalky scent, noise so clattery Gabby feels it like a headache—she searches for the face of Krista, back after three weeks at *theeh-ate-er* camp in Whatever, Wisconsin, and though it was nice to be with Mom so much during the summer, three weeks is forever when one is sans best friend. Gabby thumbs the half-broken heart of her BEST FRIEND necklace. No teacher yet, so the heathens are ballistic, lounging un-alphabetically, bouncing about like their cages have been left open. The seventh grade classroom is just as babyish as the sixth, even smaller because everyone is bigger, and sweatier too, classroom = Bog of Eternal Stench—but who cares?—because Muglia comes right after McAllister—fate!—and so Gabby's seat is secured next to Krista's.

At last! Krista's caterpillar eyebrows, sunburnt cheeks, braces twinkling—these Gabby recognizes. The shorter hair she does not—still curly but grazing her shoulders, springier, the curls more like rotini, less like lasagna—a special meal, lasagna, that Krista's dad made the first time Gabby dined chez Muglia three years ago—fourth grade! Such babies then but knowing, even as babies, that they were BFF, LYLAS kind of girls, bonding over divorce, poor little children of divorce, lonely only children, and latchkey kids too. It was Krista's dad, ("Call me Pops, honey,") body like a ripe tomato, always on the verge of tears, even when he was laughing—it was Pops who bought the best friend necklaces. Krista requested them and suddenly—poof!—they appeared the next day after school on the vast expanse of the dining room table, waiting in patient pink boxes.

Gabby bounces toward Krista Maria Muglia, future Broadway Superstar! She stops. In the seat next to Krista—Gabby's seat—a foreign creature lurks, a girl, a new girl in school? There had been no announcement. Gabby knows nothing of this princess type, Cream-of-Wheat hair, skin like a peach tulip. She belongs on the cover of a young adult novel, frozen and patting a sad pony's flank. Gabby's ears tingle like antennae, sweat juices her pits. The new girl presses Lisa Frank stickers onto Krista's skin, Krista giggles and—what is all this? Some weird sticker ritual?

"What're you doing?" Not what she wishes she'd said—such a whiner!—but doesn't she have a right to know? Krista looks up and Gabby sees it: the BFF necklace—vanished. *Where's your necklace?* The question pops and disintegrates in her throat.

"Gabrielle. How are you?"

Krista's voice is calm and oh-so mature, and hence it is evil, the voice she used for "Mean Mom" when they played Barbies, in secret of course.

"I think you're in my seat," Gabby says to Awake Sleeping Beauty, who glances at her sideways, too pretty to move her head.

"Actually? Tiff sits next to me now," Krista says.

Tiff? A name like cotton candy, like puff pastry, like disgusting Pop Rocks that ruin your teeth, a name that should be banished, you Cream Puff Princess! Gabby rubs the BFF charm between her thumb and forefinger, hoping that Krista will see it and say something like *Oh, silly me, I forgot we were BEST FRIENDS FOREVER and that means all of eternity!*

"Her last name is, *Mee*—wait, what is it again?" Krista turns toward Tiff, who drops her stickered fingers in her lap and tosses her beautiful hair.

"Mihok." She pronounces it like she's proud. "It's Hungarian."

Gabby steps back to see it, the paper name plate on the desk that should have been hers and there it is, MIHOK, five tall letters wedged between MCCALLISTER and MUGLIA. Gabby pulls at the BFF necklace. The chain burns a line in the back of her neck, then breaks—a terribly symbolic occurrence? Tiff and Krista laugh, and the sound Gabby usually adores, the hyper-giggle that once flowed over Disney movies, *90210*, and *Seventeen-Magazine*-reading marathons—now spits in Gabby's face.

"Well where am I supposed to sit?"

Gabby catches it, the meanness in Krista's eyes. "Maybe you should ask your Mommy?" Tiff giggles and poof! The meanness disappears.

"Class! Attention!" Miss Swick: a stalk of frazzled wheat in a pink belted dress, too many folders in her arms.

Gabby folds into her new desk, drops the broken best friend necklace inside. Her chair rocks, one leg missing the silver disk of a foot—great!—and now instead of Krista sits Tiffany Mihok, her enviable notebook opened, her attention fastened to Miss Swick, who goes on about tardiness as if she weren't tardy herself. The sun beats through the curtains, baking Gabby's shoulder blades like the wings of a rotisserie chicken—ugh! Rotisserie chicken: Mom's meal kidnapped from Shoney's along with sad mashed potatoes and pukey vegetables in styrofoam cups. Couldn't they do fast food, which doesn't pretend to be homemade?

Standing at the front of the class, Miss Swick tries on a smile that doesn't fit.

"Welcome to seventh grade!" she shouts, staring at Tiffany Mihok like she's the only kid in the room.

After dinner that night, Gabby escapes to her bedroom, pink walls, closed door. She holds the bottle of lemon juice, which is needed, writes the great Noreen Miller, to renew spoiled friendships. On her boombox, *The Lion King* soundtrack, and from her closet, the much-thumbed copy of *Spells and Enchantments*. Dear Noreen Miller, her black and white author photo so adorably bewitching, long black ponytail streaming over her shoulder, bold '80s cheekbones, fiercely shadowed eyes—no smile—and yet Gabby knows she is kind, a White Witch who only wishes to IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH & HAPPINESS THROUGH THE POWER OF WITCHERY. Gabby had bought the hardback at the Skalnik's garage sale last year. Mrs. Skalnik had raised a pointy eyebrow, but winked as Gabby walked away.

Pulling the spell box from its hidden place in her closet is like snuggling an old teddy, though it is hard, sturdy cardboard, and bejeweled, too. The foreign chanting of *The Lion King* music makes opening the box feel precious and secret, a sacred ritual. Inside are half-burnt candles, rubberbands, twine, empty pill bottles, dried herbs, coins, and stones from the rock tumbler Krista's dad got her for Christmas last year. Oh, Pops. Did he know that Gabby had been replaced by a Cream Puff Princess? Was Tiff chez Muglia that very moment, enjoying the Toys 'R' Us wrapped in a mini-mansion that was Krista's abode? So strange, Tiff's interest in Krista, who is rich but not popular. Everyone at school thinks she's too spoiled and kind of a brat—which is fair—but they don't know the whole truth. That Krista gets Super Nintendo and Guess jeans because Pops made Krista's mom fall out of love with him, so now he owes her.

Gabby sits on her knees, gazes upon the contents of the spell box, and sighs. She has yet to conjure magic from this particular lot of hodge-podge. It has been seven months, three weeks, and two days since she wrote Dad's full name on scented paper in careful script, wrapped the paper around hair from his comb and his used tissue, and buried it (as instructed) beneath the serviceberry in the backyard. And yet, Gabby believes. Because what else can she do? Momsy never mentions Dad's name, acts like she's forgotten. But Gabby has not, and how could she ever?

She feeds an orange candle to the fish-shaped candleholder, props a turquoise stone against it, and with an eyedropper plops three drops of lemon juice on the wick. When she lights the candle, will Momsy arrive from the kitchen like a fire truck? Doubtful. Burnt lemon scent floats around *The Lion King* flute like it is also music. Will Mom smell it above Geoffrey Zeigler's *eau de puke* currently stinking up the kitchen? Impossible. She closes her eyes and settles on an image of Krista's face, braces soaked in marinara. She reads what she herself has written, for Noreen Miller's incantations are never exactly right.

"Goddess abound, hear my plea. Swiftly return my friend to me." Her words purr along her tongue. "Deliver her heart from blonde spirits mean, and renew our friendship, bright and clean."

How miraculous if the doorbell rang and—poof!—Krista stood there, begging for forgiveness, and for the secret to Gabby's powers. Although the spell-casting-thing seemed to

freak Krista out. She thought it capital W-E-I-R-D when Gabby showed her the spot under the tree where she had buried Dad's spell—major squirmage at dinner that night, cold shouldering her way through recess the next day at school. After that, Gabby almost trashed the book, but Noreen Miller whispered loudly from the garbage: *Offer your sprinkled Pop-Tarts to your friend tomorrow at lunch, my child—then retrieve me from this muck!—and all will be forgotten.*

The Pop-Tarts worked, but Gabby never mentioned magic to Krista again.

On her knees, Gabby remembers the broken BEST FRIENDS necklace, retrieves it from her pocket, and wraps it around the base of the candle. She watches the candle burn as the lyrics to *Circle of Life* soar through her. The song ends. In the silence, she feels Dad. She hears his voice. He would make up these songs when Gabby wouldn't eat her food. Silly melodies about sad sandwiches, disgruntled bowls of mac and cheese. *I am not old, I am just cold*, he would sing, strumming his guitar. *Won't someone please, eat this good mac and cheese?* Gabby can't look at those foods without hearing him sing. She smells him (cigarettes and Folgers) in certain corners. Once, she thought she saw his cowboy boots in the front hallway, but when she flung herself in, the apartment was silent. Ticking. When she went to check again, the boots were gone.

Dad was a ghost in search of conjuring.

Two weeks later, Gabby's at Walgreens picking up Mom's prescription, "Happy Pills, *tra la la*!" Mom's shuttered in the Subaru outside. Gabby heard her awake all night listening to jazz records that sound like black and white movies where all the ladies are crying in men's arms and kissing them hard on the lips.

"Gabby Girl!" Pops appears in Aisle 4. The hug is joyful and easy because Pops and Gabby are the same height, but enfolded in his thick arms (his smell = Irish Spring and spaghetti sauce) she remembers Krista is no longer her friend and *smack*! Heart on the floor. Oh, pharmacist! Blood spill, Aisle 4!

"Haven't seen you in a while, Gabby girl. Whatcha been up to?"

How to say it, exactly? Trying to cast a spell on your precious daughter so that she'll love me again, ol' Pops, how 'bout you?

Gabby holds up the prescription bag, shakes it gently. "My Mom."

"And how is she? Your mom?"

"She's okay. Dating a lawyer."

"Too bad for her." Pops grimaces. "I'm sure he's one of the nice ones."

"Not exactly."

He raises his arm, runs a hand over his head. A two-headed, eight-legged sweat monster lurks in his pit. Pops notices the creature, folds his arm quickly.

"You know, your mom served me once at Shoney's."

Oh, must he speak of Shoney's, which isn't even as cool as Denny's?

"She was busy, but um. Well, I hope she doesn't think—"

Pops starts blushing, which makes him look like a very old baby. "Are you okay, Pops?"

"Of course, sweetie. She did a nice job. Very nice woman."

It was factual and all, but woman Mom was not. Momsy, yes. Wife, no. Girlfriend, yes? Was she really Geoffrey's girlfriend? It was beginning to seem that way, with his constant appearances now shitting up the weeknights too.

"I gotta go, Pops. Mom's waiting."

"You know, Gabby. Why don't you come over for dinner sometime? Heck, you can even bring your mom." Pops laughs. "Tell her I won't be there." He grunts. "Just kidding."

Gabby's throat prickles. Dinner at Krista's? Oh, happy days! But Pops obviously doesn't know what's become of his Best Friends, their broken halves possibly broken forever.

"I don't know." Gabby holds back tears. "I'll ask my Mom."

"Okay, but tell her it was your idea."

Pops hugs her before she has time to think. The hug squeezes the fake right out of her—squirt!—joining her bloody heart on the floor. The tears will flow if she doesn't run swiftly, and she does. By the time she gets to Mom in the car, she is dry as dust.

After dinner, Mom stands at the kitchen counter scooping mint chocolate chip (Gabby's pick) into two bowls, one for herself and one, presumably, for Geoffrey Zeigler, whose hands are stuck to her waist—gross. Mom's bare foot hooks his ankle, his mouth is in her hair.

"You're giving me a toothache," he says, "you're so sweet."

Shall Gabby bolt back to her room and hide for all of eternity? Tempting, but first she must retrieve the ice cream that is rightfully hers, for Geoffrey's is the true third bowl, isn't it, Momsy Dearest? Mom inserts a spoon in his mouth, and Gabby can't tell if the gesture is meant to delight him or shut him up.

"Mom?"

Caught, the grown-ups jump. The hooked foot makes Mom waver, but she catches herself.

"Jesus, Gabby. You scared the crap out of me."

"Hi my name is Gabrielle Rose McAllister I'm your daughter and I live here?"

"Oh really? I thought you were some renter."

"Can I have ice cream?"

"Hey, Gabby!" Zeigler's all Mr. Excitement, Mr. I-Like-You-Let's-Be-Friends. He yanks the spoon from his mouth and says, "So Gabby, whatcha up to in your bedroom? Did I hear

African music in there?"

When he says "African music" he squints like he's trying so hard to understand, which he never will, because he wasn't actually paying attention to her music, he was trying to eat Mom's face. Hallelujah that Mom interrupts.

"It's *The Lion King* soundtrack." She's shoving the bowl at Gabby like it's the worst thing on Earth to be doing. Leaning against the counter, she tries to eat like she's the furthest thing from a slob, regarding Gabby like she's some curious young beast that has wandered into the kitchen. "She's still into Disney."

Geoffrey smiles like, *Awm, look at the baby*, and spoons ice cream into his piehole, which is Mother's favorite nickname for the mouths of assholes. Gabby's cheeks burn because of all the traitorous things to say. Mom had purchased that very CD from the thrift store, crayon-scribbled liner notes and all, and sometimes requested its rotation!

"Don't you smell me burning candles in there?" Gabby's hot hands melt the ice cream in her bowl. All she can think watching Mom and Geoffrey slurp ice cream is *Dumb, dumb, dumb* and—*sloop!*—from outer space comes this question: "Do you know where Dad's dumbbells are?"

Mom looks at her dead-eyed.

"The only dumbbell your father had was his brain." She blushes like she can't even believe her cleverness. She looks so pretty blushing like that, but only for a millionth of a second, because in real life she's Queen Ugly of the Disintegrating Universe. Geoffrey laughs way too hard. Gabby bolts. In her room she turns up the music to mute the thump of bowl on wall, the splat of ice cream staining her expired wallpaper like the vomit it actually is.

During recess Gabby sits on the ground watching the younger kids sail down the slide like little human toys dropped down a chute. Two girls with braids skip by, holding hands. If only Gabby could sprinkle friendship dust on their shiny-penny heads and protect them from demons in disguise. Speaking of, Tiff sits on a nearby bench with Yvette Anello because Krista stayed home sick today. When Tiff approaches her, Gabby is certain she's headed somewhere else. But Princess Poison sits on the ground before her. Gabby doesn't know where to look because Tiff's eyes are everywhere, bright and jeweled like something expensive you should never touch.

"Hey, Tiff." Saying her name out loud feels like waking up, suddenly, from a nightmare.

"Krista's mad at you, you know."

"Why?"

"Your mom was really mean to her dad, and now Krista's really mad."

The words like a stone between the eyes, Gabby nearly sees stars. How could Tiff know a thing about Momsy?

"My mom was never mean to Pops."

Tiff makes a stinky face. Could she even fit a pinky into one of those darling nostrils? Was she physically incapable of picking her beautiful nose?

"*Pops*? Is that what you call him?"

"What are you even talking about?"

"Pops went where your mom works over the summer. And guess what? Your mom called him fat."

"Pardon me?"

"'*Pardon me?*'" The nostrils flare. "Who are you, Miss Swick or something?"

Gabby flusters as the conversation seems to be mutating. Hello, Confrontation, how does one handle you, exactly? Would dialing 911 be an overreaction?

"I don't know what you're talking about. My Mom didn't call Pops fat. She never even sees him."

But—is that true? Had Pops not just confessed to being at Shoney's with Mother Loins herself? Had meetings been occurring without Gabby knowing? She watches Tiff notice her fake Payless Keds.

"Anyway, your mom is really mean." Tiff stands, dusts off her frosted jean skirt. "And BTW? Your shoes are ugly."

The comment is so rude, so simple an insult that it has to be a joke. Tiff whispers at Yvette, who sneers in collusion at Gabby—no joking here! And the icing on the cake, to use a motherly phrase: there is no Kleenex to absorb Gabby's crying, there is only the greyed sleeve of her thrift store jacket.

Friday night and Mom's working a double. On the crusty kitchen counter, a twenty and a note: *PIZZA $ (bed no later than 10)*. Better, at least, than another dinner with Zeigler the Zit.

Eyes still red from tears—and over a shoe insult!—Gabby storms into Mom's bedroom, unmade bed, rattling air conditioner that should've been off, hippie-ish purple curtains that hate the sun. It's as if someone is in the room, but no one is. The closet door exhales darkness and a few ugly shoes. Must run in the family.

"Did you call Pops fat?" she shouts at the violet flowers of Mom's bedspread, the unmatching blue sheets. "Did you?"

She stomps toward the bed, grabs the corner of the bedspread, and tugs it into place. She punches the pillows upright, smooths the corners, and folds a ratty afghan. The bed is made, fit for a queen who may or may not be evil, if it weren't for that gentle lump? Gabby pulls back the bedspread to uncover a knot of patterned fabric and, Eeep! Boxer shorts dangle from her

finger. She drops them, jumps back, circles the shorts like a detective pondering the evidence. Their billiard-ball-in-motion pattern only confirms their owner: Zeigler. The air conditioner turns off. Silence falls like snow. Gabby jumps, turns around, but there is no one, only the air conditioner and the window that holds it like a too-full mouth. From this second-story window Gabby sees the empty alley, the backs of old houses, and lonely backyards like their own. Everything looks small, including the serviceberry tree beneath which, inside the earth, Dad's spell decomposes.

Gabby snatches up the boxers. She re-messes the bed.

On her bedroom floor Gabby drops Geoffrey's drawers. She writes down the words of the spell before their baby bat wings grow tiny in her view. She folds the paper, shoves it in her pocket, pulls from the Spell Box scissors, red yarn, a candle and a holder, matches, and… Vaseline? Yes, that shall do! This spell needs grease, speed, something to make it work.

Oh, gross petroleum jelly, please make it work!

Suddenly she's in the yard, kneeling in the grass beside the serviceberry. Gabby cuts Geoffrey's shorts with dull kid scissors. She makes a cut and rips the rest, tearing pool balls in halves, quarters, thirds. She replays Tiff's words: *your Mom is mean, your shoes are ugly*, and she rips, snips, and clips them too, until a heap of shorn fabric lies in the grass. She ties up every bit with red yarn, webbing and webbing, the sun setting, darkness seeping, fingers spreading Vaseline, which isn't exactly warm butter, but she works and spreads. She buries the bundle. On top, she lights a candle and reads aloud.

"Greedy heart and ugly ties, his presence here one does despise. He is not real, he is a thief, his face is ugly and so's his teeth. And he shall drive his fancy car, somewhere that takes him very far. Away from us, we'll be so glad, to behold the great return of Dad!"

Gabby opens her eyes on the candle. The flame waves hello, then blows out on its own, as if to say, *Thank you and good night, your work here is done.*

Later, daydreaming while waiting for pizza, Gabby imagines the man's black glove she saw on the first day of school. It skitters on the sidewalk with busted finger-legs, reaching for her heels. Like a girl in a silly horror movie, she runs from the glove. But when, in her mind, the boys from school grab and tease it, she is filled with regretful tenderness. What if the homeless glove just needs love, a hand to make it full?

Fourth Monday of seventh grade, and—what's this? No Cream Puff Princess already at her desk? Gabby strolls to her seat, suspicious. Is Tiff late for once in her precious life, or has she

gone to the bathroom? Perhaps she's been summoned by the dentist, because she is so sweet? At the mouth of Tiff's desk, Krista's unicorn pencil lays in the pencil divot—long, sharpened, unblemished. Gabby picks it up, admires its slender beauty.

"You can keep it."

Krista's hair is piled up on her head like a noodle bouquet and tied with a red bow. Her shoulders slump. And who are these three darling zits dancing on her forehead? Gabby would kiss the zits if it would make them feel better about being disgusting, but she should really put the pencil back, for how utterly dorky to long for a writing utensil.

"She's not coming back anyway."

Krista drops in her seat, opens her notebook. "Who's not coming back?"

Krista scowls. In the row before them, Tom Hambrosek flips a horny bird at Nick Jakubowski, who laughs so hard his seat rocks.

"Who do you think? Tiff. She's not coming back. To this school."

Can this be true—darling Sleeping Beauty vanished? Gabby reaches for the BFF charm around her neck and remembers it isn't there, it is wrapped around the candle under her bed—the spell! Has the spell finally worked? A smile crawls up her throat and pulls, with determined little mitts, at the corner of her mouth. Gabby holds it still.

"Why?" Gabby says quietly. "Why isn't she coming back?"

Krista stares at her notebook, where she is transcribing the lyrics to "Tomorrow" from *Annie*.

"She lived with her Mom, and now she has to go live with her Dad. Or I don't know. Something stupid like that."

Krista is drawing deflated hearts around that hopeful word, Tomorrow, written in her signature bubble script. Gabby's heart plunges and deflates like one of those sad hearts, empty, drifting off the page, blue ink gobbing up on white paper. But she's not supposed to feel like shaky pen lines—that's not what the spell promised!

Gabby pulls out her marker case. "Wanna fill in those hearts?"

She dumps the markers on Krista's desk.

"I don't want your stupid markers." She swipes them with her arm, they fall to the floor.

Tom and Nick watch with long-toothed smiles, waiting for a scrap of meat.

"Sorry, I just thought you would—"

"You did this, didn't you?"

Krista's voice is new, wolfish and low. Greetings, demonic werewolf Krista, born at Theater Camp, were you?

"You cast a spell, didn't you? Because you were jealous. Because we were friends."

Nick and Tom laugh—"SHE CAST A SPELL?"—eyes bugging. No, Gabby wants to say, the spell was only to make us friends again, not to make Tiff disappear—but is that really

true? Because hadn't she longed for Tiff's removal all along? Perhaps the spell had sensed her desire for a Tiff-less world and, like a wicked little friend, obliged her secret fantasy? Or, what if the spells crossed, and instead of Geoffrey disappearing it was Tiff? Miss Swick enters, sweating and out of breath, ordering Silent Sustained Reading like if they don't do it, children will starve.

With Krista's unicorn pencil, Gabby writes a note.

I didn't cast a spell on Tiff, I promise! Gabby writes. *Please believe me! Are we still friends? LYLAS, Gabby.*

She passes the note to Krista, who shoves it under her butt—Dear Profession of Love, Sweet Plea for Friendship, please meet Krista's rear-end—and when Krista stands up, excused for the bathroom, the note falls to the floor. It lays on the sticky linoleum for half a second before Gabby's hand outruns Tom's. He flashes his hyena teeth then retreats when he sees Gabby's own bloodthirsty canines.

"She's a psycho," he says loud enough for the whole class to hear, as if they didn't already think that.

After school Gabby finds Mom's bedroom door cracked. Is Krista's anger contagious, a plague seizing the village, Mom its latest victim? Has she come home early to rub her pus in Gabby's face? Or worse—does Zeigler lurk, angrily seeking his boxers? Gabby opens the door to the stink of grilled cheese, cigarettes, and overworn shoes. The air conditioner is off. The curtains filter weak sunlight onto a lifeless body-lump clothed in Shoney's-wear on the bed.

Mom rolls toward Gabby, who finds not pus but tears... Mom's nose the color of raw hamburger.

"Mom what's wrong?"

She laughs one of those *Isn't everything just so stupid*? adult laughs that Gabby hates, having encountered them far too often in those spongey, post-Dad days.

"Nothing. Go do your homework."

Mom shifts her feet—black clogs still on—and the nylons she hates to wear swish together, a sickening sound. Sweat tickles Gabby's temples.

"Did The Devil Incarnate fire you?"

"Ha. I wish."

"Did Geoffrey Zeigler do something?"

Mom presses a finger against her wet lashes, inhales the clear snot webbing her nostril.

"He did, didn't he?" Gabby stifles the happiness creeping into her voice. Mom sits up, her swollen face red, hair messy and blue, teeth bared and white. Mom is a sad American flag personified, personification being a Language Arts favorite, and rightfully so.

"Mommy got dumped, Sweetie." She blows her nose in a crumpled tissue. "Don't ever

date men, Gabrielle. They fucking suck."

This day = stranger than all other days. Both Tiff and Zeigler, vanished at once? Gabby knows she should sit, comfort Mom, but how can she resist hurrying to the window to behold Dad, who could arrive at any minute? From the window: the backyard, the serviceberry—oh, Magical Tree, you have done well by a young White Witch! In the alley two boys walk by, kicking a soccer ball. Nothing just yet, but soon. Soon!

Mom's words rush by on a tearslide: "What are you looking at?"

"Dad," Gabby says, the tip of her nose touching the window.

Mom leaps to her side.

"Is he fucking here?" Her eyes prowl the window. "Did you invite him here?"

Gabby looks at Mom's face, suddenly far from crying.

"No." Gabby takes a step back. "I cast a spell to bring him back."

"Excuse me?"

"See, I wanted Krista back, and now Tiff is gone. And Krista's mad at me, but she'll get over it. And sorry? But I wanted Geoffrey gone too, and so I cast a spell on him that would also bring Dad back. And so he must be coming—"

"You cast a spell?"

"I wanted Dad back even though he's an asshole. And then Krista stopped being my friend, so I cast a spell to bring her back, even though she can be an asshole too. And now the spells are actually working."

Mom stares at Gabby, her mouth turned the way it did when she watched a bad story on the news.

"Your father isn't coming back, Gabby. You can't just cast a spell and make people come and go."

"But I did."

"It doesn't work that way." "But it already has."

"You can't just say *abracadabra* and get what you want." She looks at Gabby, who looks back.

"Well, Geoffrey's gone. And it's because of me."

Gabby's palms are hot on her closed eyes, they smell like a sweaty pencil. She takes them down to find Mom still staring at her. The grey light on her face paints her skin in shadowy splotches, makes her look old.

"I liked him, Gabby. It doesn't matter if you didn't."

"You didn't like him! And he didn't like you either."

"What are you talking about?"

"He just wanted you because he thinks you're, like, some cool punk rock chick."

"I *am* some cool punk rock chick!"

"And *you* just wanted his money."

The slap pops her cheek, a hot flash of light. The force wets her eyes. She's too stunned to cry.

"You hit me." Her mouth feels hot. Full of blood.

"I'm sorry, baby—" Mom reaches for Gabby but she pulls away. "Oh, my god." She turns to the bed and collapses, face first, into her pillow.

Gabby runs to the bed. "You can't just disappear into your blankets!" With the hand not holding her cheek, she grabs a fist of Mom's hair—bobby pin-stabbed, stiff with gel, scratchy on her palm. Mom swats her hand away.

"I need time." The comforter eats her, its folds muffle her voice. "I just need a minute. Go get yourself some ice."

Gabby runs to the bathroom—avoids the mirror—and retrieves Mom's bottle of pills. Back in the bedroom, she throws them at the wall above Mom's head. They land on the bed next to her.

"Thanks," she says.

And so it is surprising when, hours later, in the middle of the night, Mom wakes Gabby, who is sleeping in a bag in the yard beside the serviceberry, for the short distance between her heart and Dad's spell will surely hasten his return.

"What are you doing out here?" Mom's shirt is untucked, her hair an ugly hat.

"Waiting."

Mom crouches down and sits. She hands her a an ice pack. "Are you mad at me?"

Gabby shrugs. The ice pack is too cold. "Sort of."

"I'm really sorry I smacked you."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not. I'll only regret that for eternity." They look up at a starless sky. Gabby wishes Mom would hug her. "It's just that—you were kind of right. About me and Geoffrey."

"Really?"

"But people get together for a lot worse reasons, Gabby. You're too young to understand. You still think everything's about love. And magic."

Mom's fingers stroke the grass.

"Was it magic with Dad?"

She doesn't answer right away. "Yes." The fingers stroke faster. "And look where that got me."

"But why would Geoffrey dump *you*? He was the loser."

Mom shrinks. "Because even the losers leave me?" She looks like she wants to say something properly motherlike but doesn't know what it is. She picks up a small piece of broken plastic—"Sorry babe, but people, especially men—even the geeks, apparently—are assholes,"—and tosses it over the back fence.

"But I miss Dad's hair." Gabby drops the ice pack into the grass. "And I liked the way he smelled."

Mom bends her knees, she makes a table for her forehead.

"I miss the bandana snot rag he carried in his jeans even though I know you thought it was gross."

Mom picks up her head. "Smells."

"What?"

"You like the way he *smells*," Mom says. "It's not like he's dead."

"Well, if he's still alive then why doesn't he, like, call me or something?"

Mom looks at her. "You sound like me after the first time we slept together."

"Gross."

"Please."

"What about Pops?"

"Who?"

"Krista's dad. Pops?"

"Are you asking me if he's an asshole? Because he probably is."

"Were you rude to him? At Shoney's?"

Mom squints, thumbing the files in her brain.

"You mean when he asked me out?"

"He asked you *out*?"

From nowhere she pulls out a Lucky Strike, lights it.

"He did. And I said no." She sucks the cigarette deliciously. "Because yeah right."

Gabby considers the astonishing prospect of a Mom/Pops couplehood, and though the thought of legitimate sisterhood with Krista chez Muglia is tempting, a massive *Enww!* sounds in her brain.

"But did you call him fat?"

"Oh, god." She sits up, bewildered. "Of course not. Not to his face, at least."

"Mom!"

"I don't want to talk about Mr. Muglia, okay freekazoid?" She picks something off her tongue. "I want you to show me how you do it."

"Do what?"

She rolls her eyes. "Cast your spells?"

Gabby gets on her knees. The ground yields beneath her. "Really?"

"Please don't get all weird about it."

She removes the cigarette from Mom's mouth, squashes it, drops it on the grass. Mom makes a face but Gabby proceeds, taking her hands, speaking slowly.

"What do you want to make happen?"

Mom closes her eyes like she's taking it seriously, like she's the furthest from, *I'd like a sane daughter-child who's outgrown Disney movies and refrains from cursing my boyfriends, please and thank you.* She breathes and says it fast, almost whispers it, like if she doesn't she won't say it all: "I want to believe in magic too."

Gabby wishes she could capture Momsy like this forever—holding hands, sun far from rising, moon spying from above. But she has work to do. "Come on." She leads her toward the house, her bedroom, Mom's hand like a warm, injured bird in her own.

"Shit. I can't believe it's come to this," she grumbles as they enter Gabby's room. "How long does it take?"

"Be patient," Gabby says, feeling 100 years old. She finds Noreen Miller, holds the book like it's a hand. "And stay open. Sometimes the spells bring unexpected gifts."

"Says who?"

The words are Noreen's, not Gabby's, but this time they're enough. She holds up the author photo.

"Mom, meet Noreen Miller."

"Witchery?" Mom says the word like it's the name of someone she used to date. "Are you a witch?"

Gabby doesn't answer right away. It's something she's never thought about, and she's not sure if saying yes will get her in trouble. When she looks up to find Momsy still standing in her bedroom, still waiting for an answer—gazing at her and no one else—she knows the answer.

"But mostly I'm your daughter," Gabby says. Momsy smiles.

They sit on the floor. It's the middle of the night. They open to the beginning.

Yvonne Higgins Leach

Yvonne Higgins Leach is the author of *Another Autumn* (2014). Her poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies including *The South Carolina Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Spoon River Review* and *POEM*. She spent decades balancing a career in communications and public relations, raising a family, and pursuing her love of writing poetry. Her latest passion is working with shelter dogs. She splits her time living on Vashon Island and in Spokane, Washington. For more information, visit www.yvonnehigginsleach.com

On My Father's Birthday

How it is that certain
memories are echoes,
loud and repetitive like hearing
a good verb for the first time.

Our birthdays two days apart.
Our breaths meld over
the liquidy light of candles
in a dream-haze of wishes.

Years now I blow out
candles alone
and the moment the smoke
shapeshifts into invisibility,

you come again in another form
rare as the shrill of air passing
through a condor's wings,
and I too know the sound of sky.

Distances

How the light is only half-light
out my front window

where the hill slices my view in half,
where it arches like a hunched animal.

Often, the light is sad and flat
in its dissection. But today,

as if in a painting, a young boy
bursts into the frame.

His small legs tackle a yard or two;
he spins and stops,

waiting for his grandmother
for a few breaths. He hardly bends

to pick up a stone, veers off
into the neighbor's yard.

Just as I begin to want more,
he disappears.

Why do I think this scene
means something?

Why do I suddenly worry
about this grandmother

as her feet slap the hill's spine,
as she follows cracks in the cement,

as her dress hugs her shins?
Climbing on, stiletto light settles

between her and the hill.
When she too disappears,

I go to the porch,
strain to see farther.

Will she reach the boy?
Am I quaint and nostalgic

to think I could help her?
I try to imagine what true

neighborliness looks like,
but I can't.

I feel annoyed
at how the breeze blows through me.

John Leonard

John Leonard is an English teacher and poetry editor for *Twyckenham Notes*. He holds an MA in English from Indiana University. His previous works have appeared in *PoetryQuarterly*, *december*, *North Dakota Review*, *Roanoke Review*, *Mud Season Review*, *The Blue Mountain Review*, *Rock & Sling*, *Chiron Review*, *Genre: Urban Arts*, and *Burningword Literary Journal*. You can follow him on Twitter at @jotyleon and @TwyckenhamNotes.

Dream Shapes

Cough syrup, three beers, and some Ambien;
in my dreams, you are standing in the lightning.
Each flash is a calla lily. Each roll of thunder is dirt
striking the lid of my father's coffin. Nothing could be less
morbid; you in danger, smiling beautifully as your garden bursts
into flames. Nothing feels righter than rain falling through your hair,
dripping onto your lips, blossoming into night smoke. I am watching
from your bedroom window, breathing on the glass, writing you
a message that disappears each time, collapsing in on itself.
Three words that, when I open my eyes, I forget each time.

Sharon Gutowski

Sharon Gutowski is a fiction writer (and reader) based out of St. Louis, Missouri. She has a background in studio art, marketing, and international relations. Her favorite stories blend dysfunctional families and suspense. Learn more at authorsharongutowski.com.

The Weight of a Happy Marriage

Find your wife in the tangle of wires and resist the urge to dig her out. A coma doesn't make her Sleeping Beauty. She doesn't want the taste of you on her lips, anyway. Listen carefully to the machinery speaking over her, because it might be a clue about the future. The chorus of beeping makes it impossible to do anything but wonder what will happen in the end.

But you've been thinking about the end for some time.

Life isn't a fairytale.

"Are you the husband?" The doctor's appearance in her room seems aggressive.

"Yes," You know how to answer this doctor, but nothing else. Time has stopped at just the wrong moment, leaving you stuck between two realities. Which one feels like home today?

"I'm sure this is a great shock to you," the doctor says. When did you let him take your hand? The doctor is still talking. He says, "In addition to her head injuries, your wife has sustained spinal fractures and herniated discs. We're taking her into surgery and then we will run some imaging tests. You'll be the first to know the results. There's a lot of unknowns we're dealing with. "

Tell me about it, Doc. Somehow, keep that to yourself.

The day you met Alice you were on a date with the wrong girl. Alice even told you that, when it was over. You fumbled through the salad, the iceberg lettuce trying to climb back out of your mouth. Your date, you don't even remember her name any more, made it clear that everything about you was wrong. She left before the waiter could offer dessert. You nursed your ego and a glass of Merlot when Alice sat down in front of you.

"You're too nice," Alice said, swishing your wine in her hand. "I lost a bet. I thought you were going to be the one to end that horrible date. My mom said you looked like a pushover." Her clipped red hair spun with the flick of her wrist, but her icy blue eyes held your gaze, like a challenge.

"A gentleman," you'd corrected her.

"Not too much of a gentleman," she'd said. "Or I'm going to think you're not interested."

So like Alice to turn eavesdropping into wanting her in the worst way.

Footsteps. Someone from the medical staff is coming back. Duck into the bathroom, before they can corner you again. You feel like you're trespassing.

Later that week, the tarot card reader at your company party throws death on the table and smiles. "Death means transition," she says, her green eyes sparkling with secrets. Lean in, to enjoy the whisper of her voice to its fullest potential. She says, "It could mean a change in your career, a key relationship, or moving on in some way." She places her hand over yours and gently traces the tan line, the ghost of your wedding ring, before inviting you home.

You bury yourself in her.

The next day, you have no regrets. Regrets are the burden of a happily married man, and you long for the weight of them. You've adjusted to your wife not being here. If Alice woke up from her coma tomorrow, she'd remember leaving, even if she had to ask the nurses where she was first.

You miss the idea of cheating. Not that you wanted to, but that who you slept with mattered. Now, you belong to no one, so you're free to sleep with whatever fortune teller you meet. It makes the future feel cold and dark. It unfurls out to infinity.

How long has Alice been in her coma? Three weeks. That means she moved out around three months ago. She never even specified whether this was permanent or temporary. She'd started by saying things like, "I need space," and ended saying nothing at all. What were you supposed to do with that? Wait for the divorce papers in the mail?

That seemed like as fine a way as any to handle it, and your confusion grew the longer you waited for legal documents that never came. At first you thought she was reconsidering. There's a first time for everything, right? Then you got a call about a car accident involving your wife, whom it seemed had not updated her emergency contact. Another sign open to interpretation, but you try to smother the hope blooming inside you. No one ever writes down an emergency contact expecting to need it. Some things don't hold the meaning they should.

When you're alone with the medical equipment, ask Alice if she's hired lawyers. Ask if she wishes she could tell you.

Consider the possibility that the hospital staff knows your marriage to their patient is a mere technicality. What if they can smell fraud on your coat like second-hand smoke? Slip your wedding ring back on, just in case.

The person who notices your wedding ring isn't anyone who works at the hospital, but her mother. "I didn't know you were here." For one delightful moment, you realize this will answer all your questions. If she leans in for a hug, you and Alice are still married in her mind, no matter how loosely. If she keeps her distance, Alice has told her about your estrangement and probably even called it a divorce. After your mother-in-law hovers in the doorframe thirty seconds too long, it occurs to you how strange it is that she never called. That tells you that your marriage to the comatose woman has ended, in every way that matters.

"Why are you here?" Her voice is gentle, but she makes no move to sit next to you, to place you both on the same team, on Team Alice. She pities you. She's staring at your left hand.

"We're married." An interesting take on things. Still, lean into it. Stick your chin out. Own it. It's the truth you deserve.

The compassion in her face grows into something harder. She pulls out a folder. "This is power of attorney paperwork," she says. "It's not completely filled out, but my lawyers tell me

that we can demonstrate that it's her handwriting. I also have emails outlining her reasons for wanting to end the marriage that will show intent."

Your heart lunges at that folder. Part of you wants those emails, so you can understand yourself, so you can see this "intent" spelled out. Broken down so even you can understand. Another part of you is insisting that people can change their mind, even people like Alice who never have before. It takes you a minute to catch up to the matter at hand.

"Why do you have a lawyer?"

"If you'd been talking to the medical team, you'd know." As if on cue, as if he's been waiting for his chance to get back at you for hiding from him and making the worst part of his job even harder, the doctor appears and addresses you together.

"As we discussed," he glances at you, "the damage to her brain stem meets the medical requirements to diagnose her as clinically vegetative. She can breathe, but only because of the ventilator. I'm terribly sorry to give you this news. If you want to discuss the medical details with me, I'm willing to take as much time as you need to feel satisfied with this diagnosis."

He keeps going, now, making eye contact with everything in the room but you. He says, "I've spoken with the legal team extensively. Without a notarized signature on her power of attorney documents, we cannot recognize it, regardless of any other documentation about the alleged state of her marriage. Unless there's a living will, what we do next is up to her husband."

The word "alleged" makes you feel like a criminal.

"She would have wanted to move on," her mother insists, and a funeral home brochure flutters down. The kind where the director sits by your side as you pick out flowers, lighting, and watered down music. The kind of place that will design a service Alice surely would have hated.

"But people wake up from comas, don't they? I mean we can't really know she won't wake up, right?" You feel like a child in Sunday school asking the dumb question.

"You see?" your mother-in-law accuses you of something to the doctor. "He didn't even care enough to learn the facts. He just sat here, sulking and hiding, and now he's going to keep her here indefinitely."

Admit it. You can't help but like the sound of that. You suppose you should be ashamed, but the idea of Alice has surrounded you like a warm breeze. Enjoy it, while you can.

Excuse yourself. Go find air. Climb into bed. Cry all night. Start to grieve.

It's time to go back to the hospital. You find Alice's mom by her bed. She looks ready for battle. You don't know how, but you're ready too. Say, "You can listen or you can leave." Give her a moment. She sits down.

Go for it. "I don't know why Alice was unhappy. She never gave me the courtesy of an explanation. But I also don't know why she didn't divorce me, and neither do you. The only one who knows is Alice, and she's not telling. You need to think about someone besides yourself. I'm

losing her for the second time and I will need time to process. I will speak with the doctors and gather all the information. I will consult my own attorney and then if it comes to that, I will plan the funeral befitting the woman I loved. I hope you can be polite when you attend."

Don't break eye contact first. Don't break eye contact first. Don't… Okay you won. Now go to the bathroom so she doesn't see you throw up. Go back in and hug the woman who lost her daughter.

Leave the word "widower" in your mouth. It's there to stay. But it won't always be sour. To countless women, it will be a relief. Not long after you first meet them, they ask, "Still single or divorced?" Both answers are wrong. But when you say, "widower," apologetically, like it's somehow your fault, you earn some unwinnable prize. They look at you like they've tasted blood in the water.

Every night for a year, you'll say "Goodbye, Alice," before falling asleep. Sometimes you mean the coma, sometimes you mean your marriage. Other times you don't really know, but the words just feel right against your cheek.

Diana Donovan

A graduate of Brown University, Diana Donovan lives with her husband and daughter in Mill Valley, California. She has participated three times in San Francisco 'literary mixtape' *Quiet Lightning*, and her work has most recently appeared in *Panoplyzine*, *Plainsongs*, *Pacific Review*, and *Birdland.* (Her husband, by the way, bears no resemblance to the guy in the poem).

Lost in Translation

You may wonder at the blue skies, the snow-capped mountains
and the waiter may wink as he hands you a glass of Pinot Grigio
but you will find that a person can feel alone anywhere, even Lake Como.

Flying from Chicago to Milan—business class
you greet the other wedding guests in a flurry
kissing cheeks, mindful of hands clutching drinks.

Your husband lingers after the rehearsal dinner
smoking cigars with the men with slicked-back hair
while you take pictures—silently observing through the lens
resting on the dark-eyed brother of the groom
imagining his mouth pressed against yours.

Rising early, you wander the grounds of the 16th century villa at sunrise
your camera the lone witness to its lush gardens and Roman fountains
the old man tending to his roses—almost otherworldly.

Later, back in your room, you change into the dress your husband chose
and recline on the canopy bed with your Italian-English dictionary
learning that in this language, there are many ways to say the word 'broken.'

In addition to the generic translation
there is a word for 'broken appointment' and one for 'broken health'
a word for 'broken spirit' and one for 'broken commitment'
a word for 'broken vow' and one for 'broken marriage.'

"Say something in Italian," your husband asks.
You clear your throat. "Rotto. Mancato. Rovinato. A pezzi. Non rispettato. Infranto. Fallito."
"Beautiful," he says, fastening his cufflinks in front of the mirror.

You look out the window
knowing no word—in any language—for this moment
the pale haze of dusk descending
guests gathering for a wedding.

Michael Hogan

Michael Hogan is the author of twenty-six books including *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico* which was the basis for an MGM film starring Tom Berenger and three documentaries. His work has appeared in numerous journals including *the Paris Review*, *Harvard Review*, *the Ohio Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *AGNI*, *New Letters*, and others. He currently lives in Guadalajara, Mexico with the textile artist Lucinda Mayo and their Dutch Shepherd, Lola.

The Poet's Hematoma

…appears one day on the inside of his lip and after weeks of troubling it with his tongue, he goes to a pathologist who, probing his mouth, taking photos, consulting with a colleague, terms it an "extravasation of blood."

At home, probing the inside of his lip where the less-than-benevolent blue-black bubble resides, running his tongue over it, he reaches for the only consolation this side of God a poet knows: "Extravasation, n. Extravasate, v. (1) (Path) To force out from the proper vessels, as blood. (2) (Geol) To pour forth as lava." His mind now forced out of the proper channels, he allows his eye to continue down the page. "Extravagate, n. (1) To wander beyond bounds; stray; roam at will. (2) To go beyond the bounds of propriety or reason." His imagination wandering, his mind strays to "Extravaganza. (4) A comic opera…marked by irregularity in form or feeling" which of course is exactly what his life feels like from the inside, although to the outsider it might merely seem to be "Extravagant. (1) Wasteful, exorbitant, wandering out of bounds," which is just what the blood did in its hematomatic episode, extravagating after its extravasation in an extravaganza (from It.) "queer behavior" which is indeed the reason the pathologist engaged in the study of (from Gr.) "Pathos (1) The quality of power which invokes strong feeling" in the first place. And now the poet pets the dog and thinks in a perfectly pathetic fallacy that the dog emphasizes with his distress.

At the same time the poet knows that his effort to exorcize the extravasation with words is itself quite pathetic and unworthy of a poem (which is why he's thinking in prose), and looks below to "Pathfinder, n. One who finds his way through the wilderness." Which is what he needs but there is no one and nothing available but this book of words which he trusts somehow, as poets in former times trusted the Bible with its patriarchal answers to each probing question which, like his tongue, continues but is no more reassured by its probing than the patrician poets who searched in the Greek or invoked a muse which (like the hematoma itself!) is of the poet and external to the poet but probably no more use than a musette bag, or a museum (seat of the Muses) which originally was a library or a place in which one could encounter the words which existed "In the beginning… before all things were made, and without which nothing was made that has been made," at least according to one pathfinder who roamed the desert in search of meaning but found instead his prophetic head upon a platter as indeed the poet's head will appear in the pathologist's office on film as they examine the pathetic photo which first shows all of the lip, then the hematoma, as if that were the whole story, as if the whole story could ever be told.

Vultures

…and every winged fowl after his kind
and God saw that it was good.
—Genesis 1:21

In the ash trees above the barranca sit dusty-winged zopilotes: red eyes watching the muddy swirl, the turgid flow, of brown water. A grandmother and three children have drowned in a wood-slat and cardboard shack in El Barrio Norte del Rio.

The officers of *la Seguridad* found the children together upriver. But the old woman twisted away to ride down the muddy stream: flowing in brown water rapids; eddying in pools of broken shingles, plastic bottles, shattered trees.

The *zopilotes* wait: their curved beaks utilitarian as grappling hooks, their feathers dun and dusty even in rain. When they find *la abuela*, her brown skirts hiked above her knees, her unbraided hair flowing like eelgrass, they descend in raucous swoops.

Two hundred feet above we watch, hoping for the rage of torrent, the snapping of the water-logged cypress. We bombard them with rocks, some grenades, some melons, but their businesslike backs barely ruffle. If one slackens, another jumps on, like gang rape in a New Bedford bar. They are orphans at a Christmas dinner. Pieces of thigh, a whole breast, strings of flesh hang briefly from scimitar mouths. Seven, eight of them cover her: a crawling, black-feathered shawl.

We do not look away. We witness what is given.

Satiated at last, they rise lazily, the thermal ascent of canyon walls: red vulgarity of their naked heads, fading. Effortless beauty of sculpted wings, remote. And no hope on earth of pity.

Mark Jacobs

Mark Jacobs has published more than 150 stories in magazines including *The Atlantic*, *Playboy*, *The Baffler*, *The Southern Review*, and *The Kenyon Review*. Stories of his have won the Iowa Review Prize, the Eyster Prize, and the Kafka Prize from the *Dr. T. J. Eckleburg Review*. His five books include *A Handful of Kings*, published by Simon and Shuster, and *Stone Cowboy*, by Soho Press.

His website can be found at www.markjacobsauthor.com.

Eulogy

The radiator boiled over in Georgia, not twenty miles above the Florida state line. They were traveling north on U.S. Route One because Dorcas hated the interstate. They were driving a 2002 Dodge Caravan with 235,000 miles on it. They were going to Maine. Jean, who died at eighty-two, was being laid to rest in a non-denominational cemetery outside Bangor. Jean was the matriarch, born with a capacious soul she put to noble use in her time, which was their time. Already she was missed. Thinking of her made Marcel's eyes tear up.

It was an honor for Marcel to be chosen by the League of Lovers to give the eulogy. But he would not be permitted to luxuriate in a warm bath of pride. After Dorcas' stroke he developed an uncanny ability to convert the sounds that issued from his wife's misshapen mouth into words. Since Patrick's phone call—*I want you to sit down, Marcel, I have bad news*—Dorcas's strangled sounds had been hammering the same hard nail into his soft ear: Eulogy shmeulogy, who do you think you are?

Steam was rising from the radiator through the seams of the minivan's hood, the idiot light was blinking, and Maine was as far away as Mars. Marcel pulled over onto the berm and parked. He sat there for just a moment in resistance, hands on the wheel, observing a field of black Angus cows grazing in serene oblivion. Was it heretical to imagine their animal ignorance as a state of grace? Dorcas was sputtering, but along with learning how to convert her sound to speech he had picked up another trick. When he absolutely had to, he could tune her out.

In the back seat, on the driver's side, Antonella remarked in a reasonable tone of voice to no one in particular, "I have needs too, you know."

Antonella was eleven. Marcel had no idea where she got ideas like that. His daughter's ideas scared him. Sometimes they appalled him. When they did, he felt shame and vowed to love better, be a stronger father. She had a genius for provoking her mother, and cream-white skin, and hair the same fulvous shade seen in the portrait of Marcel's grandmother that hung in the family home on Martinique.

Next to her, Sabastien sat with his hands folded in his lap. Like his sister, he had the Prudhomme skin. His face was a milky moon, with barely visible craters, under dark hair Marcel cut by putting a bowl on his head. It saved money. At eight, Sabastien had attained the age of reason, and Marcel wished he would register some sort of reaction to the things, the people, the events occurring around him. Anything: the boiling radiator, his angry mother, the single-minded cows. But he simply sat there, more placid than the placidest cow. Marcel wanted to take him to the free clinic for tests, but Dorcas had laid down the law. No child of hers, no poor man's clinic, no way.

If they had a problem, money complicated it. Marcel worked as a handyman at a

Catholic camp for disadvantaged kids near Sarasota. He was good with tools. Back in the day, before Dorcas made a lover of him, converting him out of his vocation by the sheer force of her personality, he was a Lazarist Brother. Working in orphanages in Francophone Africa, he was the one people called to fix things that broke. In the countries of Africa he remembered as a series of mechanical challenges, things were always breaking. Things at the Sarasota camp broke too. Fixing them did not quite pay the bills.

He got out of the car and lifted the hood. The radiator hose had exploded. He did not carry a spare, but he lugged his tool box from the back of the van and jury-rigged a temporary solution with duct tape and wire and a tube he could not recall having bought for any purpose. Putting away his tools, he felt a tug of responsibility that would turn into guilt if he gave it the slightest encouragement. He was seventy-five, too old to be the father of young children. There was a defect in his seed, which had gone watery. How else could he explain his peculiar children?

Back behind the wheel, he told Dorcas, "We'll have to stop for a radiator hose."

Her response was unintelligible. When he looked over, tears were running on her broad, unhappy face. Loss was no word to describe how Jean's death had left them. It was the adult version of this: children snug in their beds, a ruthless hand yanking the blanket, midnight wind howling in the dark, nobody to shield them.

Dorcas was sweating and her hair was frizzed, the gray roots longer than they were yesterday. As her weight ballooned, Dorcas had become progressively less flexible of body. The stroke made the situation worse. Her left side was useless. These days it fell to Marcel to dye her hair. Getting her head down to sink level where he could work on it, that was a project. Everything was a project now. A stroke at fifty: was God telling them they had made the wrong decision to love?

He had to be more patient with his wife.

* * *

As they crossed the border into South Carolina, the obvious thought occurred to Marcel that he had better write down what he was going to say at Jean's funeral. In the shock of her death, the confusion of packing and leaving Florida, he had failed to consider the moment that lay ahead, and what fell to him. Driving north, he had time to think through the details.

It was November. Maine was frozen or freezing up. By hook or by crook he had to get winter clothes for Antonella and Sabastien. He could not bear the humiliation of someone from the League taking the children on a surreptitious outing, buying them jackets and boots and gloves, bringing them back to the group while cheerfully saying nothing. He would stop somewhere before they crossed the border into Maine and clothe his children on credit.

With little difficulty he visualized the cemetery, the coffin hole dug, workmen standing around a muddy excavator smoking cigarettes and blowing on their hands, eager to finish the job and get out of the cold. Black trees bundled their sticks like peasant women holding their own against a sky that was the abnegation of color. Under the trees, thirty members of the League huddled in the snow in a cluster of communal grief. They had the right to a eulogy that did justice to the woman they were seeing out.

"I need a cell phone," Antonella reminded him from the back seat.

"Ermph," said Dorcas, meaning *Don't hold your breath.*

But something in the girl's voice—a sense of offended wonder that risked turning into dismay—prompted Marcel to stop at a Walmart.

"Wait," he told his family, although no one was offering to come with him. He came back out with a TracFone, handing it to Antonella as he handed Sabastien a present, too. It was a book about dinosaurs, and the father's heart in Marcel leapt to see the boy's eyes fix on the cover picture of a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

"Ermph," said Dorcas, meaning You fool, don't be spending money we don't have.

If Jean were there, she would say, Never mind all that, Marcel, and speak her love in the doing of something useful that no one else thought to do. She had been a Poor Clare for the longest time. At fifty, she fell in love with a cop who pulled her over for a broken tail light. Jean saw Nancy through the storm that erupted when they declared themselves a couple. Nancy was vilified by friends, family, and fellow police officers alike. It wore her down, lowering her body's resistance. By contrast, Jean always said, leaving the Poor Clares was a piece of cake.

Marcel could not dredge up the name of the blood disease Nancy contracted, probably because he had learned the word in English and now his English seemed to be disintegrating, whether because of age or stress he could not say. One day while brushing her dying lover's hair, Jean had an idea. Her idea turned into the League of Lovers, a haven for members of the Catholic clergy displaced from their place in the Church when they displaced Christ with their love for a human being. Marcel, thanks to his friend Patrick, was a charter member.

What Jean understood was the nature of their need. *We did not abandon the Church, the Church abandoned us;* so, in the League's early days, asserted a buck-toothed priest with a crew cut who married his yoga instructor. But Jean would have none of that. They were not there, in the cold basement of a Unitarian church in Boston, to weep and moan. They had come together in a self-made community to find their speaking voice. Whatever the Church considered them, they were Catholics, drawn to the language the Church had articulated over two thousand years. Baptism had washed them in vocabulary, and they still took, they would forever take, deep pleasure in speaking the words that proclaimed their identity. Who made me? God made me.

Fifty miles north of the Walmart, in South Carolina, the Caravan had a flat. They

were driving on old tires. Marcel had been monitoring the tread, not just to be able to pass inspection but to make sure the vehicle was safe for his family. And he had lucked out. A week earlier, driving home from work, he saw tires stacked in a front yard. Next to the stack stood a man wearing wide red suspenders over a wifebeater. The face under his Panama hat had an antique look. It was the face of an actor whose character had gone out of fashion. He studied the handyman's van, judged his need, and gave Marcel a tire he could get twenty thousand miles out of. That was the tire with which he replaced the flat. That left only the worry about what he would do if another tire went bad before Bangor.

He drove. Antonella was entranced by her telephone. He had put a hundred minutes on it, and she was taking pleasure and time in deciding which of her friends to call first. She understood in her childish way that expectation would be better than the call itself and ought to be prolonged. Meanwhile, Sabastien kept turning the pages of the dinosaur book, silently mouthing words that had nothing to do with the text.

When Marcel saw a roadside rest stop, he pulled in, and they ate sandwiches he had brought from home, along with tangerines and water from a thermos. It was still the South, still mild in November. The moment, or the occasion, made him remember home, and he told a story. Stories nourished children with ingredients essential to their health. That too was something he had learned from Jean, who told them masterfully.

"When your mother and I got married," he began.

He had their attention. How unusual, how pleasant. Dorcas sat at the picnic table facing sideways, holding a ham sandwich in her fist. A blue dress covered her massive bulk like a tent. From under the tent her legs extended like balustrades, the veins varicose, the flesh chafed red and raw. She looked at her husband wondering what he was up to.

"I was very happy," Marcel told the kids, "so happy that I wished to show your mother my home, and also to show my French people the magnificent American woman who had consented to marry me."

Sabastien dropped his head. You never knew what was going to trouble the boy.

"My family used to have a farm, you see. On the farm we grew sugar cane. We produced rum with the cane, that was our business. Island Gold was the name of our rum, although, of course, we said the name in French. People across Martinique bought and enjoyed Island Gold. Tourists who visited considered it quite wonderful."

He had thought, in the beginning, to teach the children French. They did not so much reject as ignore his attempts to interest them in his mother tongue.

"I worried that the family would be angry with me. Had I not turned away from my vocation as a man of God? I worried that people would blame your mother, they would call her Temptress and scorn her. And yet, the very first Sunday we went to Mass in the little white

church in our town, your mother sang, and her "Ave Maria" melted their hearts. They could not help but love a woman to whom God had given such a voice. I can hear the music now, swelling and filling the air."

It was not a narrative exaggeration. His ears were clogged with the sound of Dorcas singing from the choir loft of the Agnus Dei church, astounding and delighting the parishioners. But the memory of her triumph only embittered the distance they had come since those halcyon days. Their life together had done violence to their love. How that happened continued to baffle him.

As he was boosting Dorcas back into the minivan, words came to her. Sometimes they did. It was always a surprise.

"Jean," she said.

He waited. It was not a question of prompting. She needed a good running start to speak. Since the stroke her voice was husky, a smoker's rasp though she had never lit up. The voice could make a stranger of her husband.

"Jean said… told me there is something inside you, it was my job. To cherish. Protect."

Marcel disliked having Antonella overhear the conversation. It violated the bit of intimacy that remained between he and his wife. But he needed to know.

"Protect what?"

She shook her head in frustration. He pulled the seatbelt strap out to its maximum length and fastened it around her. Her body smelled of sweat. Bathing her was hard on both of them. Sometimes, they let it go.

"Protect what?"

"The light place. The place of light. Where God lies down to rest when He visits the earth."

Her response angered him. So Jean too had believed him to be soft, a babe in the secular American woods. Antonella was dialing her new telephone. Marcel snapped at her, telling her to put the thing away, and then they were driving north again.

* * *

In Virginia, they absolutely had to stop. Marcel was exhausted from driving, Dorcas from sitting, and the children needed a break. Marcel noticed a sign for a motel advertising cheap accommodations and pulled into the lot. They were in the country, and the brown grasses of the fields, the battered look of the trees, promised winter a little farther north. Already the air had a chill in it.

In the room, which contained two queen-sized beds, they recuperated. Marcel girded himself to bathe Dorcas, and she consented with something like a smile. Antonella was chatting on the phone with a girl friend by the name of Dilly whom Marcel did not recall having met.

Sabastien walked the perimeter of the parking lot with the dinosaur book tucked under his arm. The situation was stable, and Marcel consulted the front desk regarding pizza delivery. An extravagance, but they had to eat.

Picking at a piece of pepperoni pizza—he did not much care for the stuff – he called Patrick and told him they were making slower progress than he had anticipated, wishing as he picked up the phone that he had gone ahead and ordered a bottle of soda too. Pizza with tap water in a Dixie cup; one more way he was letting down the family.

"Is everything okay?" Patrick wanted to know.

Patrick was only sixty. He had made the transition from priest to dad-in-the-world with grace. He and Peg had two athletic sons on the way to being junior hockey stars on their Boston school team. Even Patrick's voice was rich, communicating confidence, humor; the manly virtues. Marcel understood the temptation of envy all too well and was able, mostly, to resist it.

He told his friend, "I think you should name a back-up speaker, just in case."

"In case what?"

"The trip is turning out to be more difficult than I realized."

"I know you, my friend. If I agree to this notion of a back-up eulogist, you will find a way not to make it to Bangor in time. Is it a question of money? I can wire you a little."

"We're fine," Marcel lied. "I don't need money."

He had stepped outside the motel room to make the call. That must mean he had something to say that was not for the ears of Dorcas, who was lying on her side watching C-Span on the television. They were talking about health care, and everyone who opened his mouth spat little pellets of outrage at the camera.

"I'm worried," he said, not entirely sure about what.

"Is this a confession? Remember, I don't do them any more. But as your friend I can listen with pleasure to whatever it is you would like to tell me."

"If I die tomorrow… my family, they are so vulnerable."

"Are you ill, Marcel?"

"No, it's just… I have done a poor job of making my way in the world. It was so easy, on the inside."

During the bleak times, Dorcas accused Marcel of wanting out of it all: marriage and fatherhood and the whole secular world, back to the Church's snug womb, which had a feeding tube. His deepest concern was that she was right.

"I remember feeling that way," Patrick told him. "It was just after Peg and I decided to marry. Jean came to visit for the weekend, and she saw immediately what was what. 'Just because you are no longer a priest,' she told me, 'does not mean you are cut off from God. Pray, listen to the silence, take one step and then take another. Give it time, and you will find your way.'"

"You should give the eulogy," Marcel told him. It cost him, but he meant it.

Patrick's laugh rang in Marcel's ear like the rattle of a box of doubloons. Real treasure. "I'm not falling for that one."

That night Marcel slept hard but woke in the lonesome hours. He lay in bed listening to Dorcas snore, straining to hear at the same time the softer sounds of the children's regular breathing in the other bed. How fortunate a man I am, he thought, how blessed. In the dark, he imagined the shimmering wires of love that connected him to the three breathers in a strange motel room in a place none of them would ever set foot again.

He switched on the bedside lamp, got up, and sat in the room's only chair, taking notes for Jean's eulogy. At that moment he felt capable, even strong. The League had chosen him for a reason. Don't look too closely into their thinking. The main thing was to deliver.

The next day as they approached metropolitan Washington, the worst of the tires on the Caravan blew out. Marcel was a good driver, alert and cautious, and he was able to safely pilot the car to the side of the road. He helped Dorcas out, Antonella helped Sabastien, and Marcel led the three of them to a break in the fence of an empty lot where someone had been dumping trash. Away from the mounds of trash there was a tree, bare of leaves but with a hospitable appearance. Marcel went back to the car for a blanket, then established his family on the blanket under the tree. In his discouragement, the cool air felt like an omen.

He had to be practical. He went to work. No sooner had he removed the blown tire than a Virginia state trooper pulled up behind the Caravan, blue lights flashing. The conversation was tense. The trooper was African American and stern. Stetson strap on his chin, he looked like the policeman in a picture on the gas pump at the Virginia filling stations warning drivers they risked losing their license if they failed to pay for their purchase.

Trooper Sparks accused Marcel of making a poor decision, driving on bad tires with his family in the vehicle. Marcel acknowledged his mistake.

The man asked him, "Do you have towing insurance?"

Marcel shook his head. The trooper studied him.

"Do you want me to call a garage?"

Marcel shook his head again. This was a test, and he was failing it. His mind refused to work. He felt it shutting down.

"How do you plan to handle the situation?" Sparks asked him.

Marcel opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"Get in the cruiser," the trooper ordered him.

Marcel assumed he was being arrested for an offense having to do with vehicular negligence under Virginia state law. But Sparks threw the flat tire into the trunk of his car, drove him to a tire store, waited while Marcel bought a new one on his credit card, then drove him back

to the Caravan. In the empty lot, under the tree, Dorcas was telling a story with her hands, which both children appeared to be following. The trooper offered to change the tire, but Marcel told him he could manage.

"Thank you for everything," he said.

Sparks looked as though he wanted to admonish him, an old man having difficulty coping, one more time. He chose not to.

"You have yourself a nice day."

Marcel changed the tire, relieved at getting past the latest obstacle on the road to Bangor. Climbing back into the driver's seat, he realized what was bugging him. His life, the precarious life of his family: it all seemed to depend on the kindness of strangers.

* * *

In Massachusetts, Maine seemed possible. It seemed, halfway up the coast, probable. What derailed them, this time, was winter coats for the children. Marcel was fixated on them. It was pride, it was nothing but the pride of a poor man who had known better times, but he would not show up at Jean's funeral with his kids shivering in Florida cotton. Moving north on Route 1, he kept his eyes open for the right sort of store.

What he found was a big box outlet called Thurston's with a parking lot the size of the village in Martinique where the Prudhommes had their cane plantation. Dorcas looked at him, the question in her eyes that would not come to her lips.

"It's cold," he said.

She fumed, but he left the engine running and took Antonella and Sabastien with him into the store.

"She doesn't want you to do this," Antonella pointed out as they went inside.

Marcel wished the girl would call her Mom, or Momma, something safely American. It must be his fault. After all these years, he was insufficiently anchored in the country he had taken as his own. And yet Père Andre, his mentor at the Seminary College Sainte Marie, had predicted wonderful things for him as he said goodbye to a small island and hello to a nation so vast it had seemed mythical to the earnest young man contemplating the development of his vocation there.

"It's cold," he told her.

It was all the rationale he could muster.

The kids were easy to fit and easy to please. Antonella's choice of winter jacket struck Marcel as reasonable. It was long and puffy and white and somehow seemed appropriate for a child of the South. Sabastien fixed on a blue quilted coat that was on sale, though he could not know that. At the cash register, the mortification was not having his credit card rejected

as customers stacked up behind him in the line, it was the sense of haplessness in front of his children. He was carrying some cash, intended to cover food and gas costs. He paid the clothing bill with that, worrying what he would tell Dorcas about the card.

His wife had grown up in a family in which no one ever had enough. Living on the financial edge shaped her attitude toward money. On a bad day, spending it—spending anything—felt to Dorcas like taunting God. Like so much else, it had been worse since the stroke.

The minute they got back into the van, he told her. He had to. Weather the storm, he thought, and keep moving. Maine was a state away. But the storm that broke on his head was terrible. Dorcas raged at him in the Thurston's parking lot, she found words and lost them, she expressed her contempt. Knowing that her anger came from fear did not help, although he told himself it should. In the back seat, the children folded their hands in their laps and looked down. They did not dare touch the shopping bags containing their new winter clothes. Wasn't their mother's anger the clothes' fault? Why had their father done what she told him not to do?

Marcel did something he had never done before. Not once in fifteen years of married life. He got out of the car and walked away. It was not a decision, it just happened. He found himself transported to the bleak space behind the store with the Dumpsters and a red pick-up truck up on blocks as though someone had walked away with its wheels. The air was frigid, and there were tiny pellets of snow in the wind.

He did not need a winter coat. He had on the blazer he intended to wear to Jean's funeral. It was enough. Dorcas came from Minnesota and had come to the marriage with a wool coat they pretended still fit her.

He huddled behind a Dumpster, out of the wind. He closed his eyes. He would not cry. But with his eyes shut he saw a field of brilliant green cane, every standing stalk of it laminated in Caribbean sunlight. He took the track between two rows and disappeared. He was following something but did not know what. It turned out to be an egret, the kind you sometimes saw riding the back of a cow. The bird led him to a spot well into the cane field where he could stand and look at it.

There was no hurry. He looked his fill. The egret had the trick of collecting light so that its feathers glowed. Feet planted on the red earth, it preened a little, a rival to the regal green around it. Marcel was twelve, and he understood with what really was a sudden accession that God had made the splendid white bird in an act of love. He went home with a sense of having been selected.

Now, behind the Dumpster, he chastised himself for self-indulgence and went back to the Caravan. The children had their new coats on, and Dorcas was on the phone. She was talking in her nonverbal way to Patrick, who did not have a clue what the call meant except trouble. Marcel took the phone.

"Marcel? What's going on?"

"Nothing. A small predicament, but we are fine."

"Where are you?"

"Close to the Maine border," Marcel lied.

"Good. Just get yourselves here, and we'll take care of everything. We all look forward to seeing you."

Marcel temporized. It was an underappreciated skill. He pulled out of the lot and headed north on Route 1 again. Dorcas was making sounds. She went on and on. As good as Marcel knew himself to be at interpreting his wife, this time he could not make heads or tails of what she was saying. It was a dirge of feeling, a purge of all the things she was no longer capable of saying. It was everything she knew, and the emotions that went along with knowing. The sound rose from her like a geyser and coated all of them. The children were in awe of their mother. So was her husband.

It went on like that, mile after mile. The closer they got, the farther away Maine seemed to Marcel. After a certain point he could no longer take it, and when a sign pointed to public beach access he made an abrupt turn. He parked in a small lot above the beach, the crumbling macadam fringed with yellow grasses bowed by steady wind. The instant he turned off the engine, Dorcas shut up. As if by prior arrangement, the four of them left the car and made their way to the shore.

It was Dorcas who sat first. On the sand, above the water line. She had her wool coat on and went down heavily. The coat was black and gave her a fixed look that made Marcel wonder how she would ever get to her feet. The children in their new coats sat beside her. Marcel buttoned his blazer and looked out at the steel Atlantic, marveling that such a hard, cold ocean could be connected to the Caribbean he knew as a boy.

The beach was empty. The breakers came at them relentlessly but broke on the tan sand before doing any damage. Sandpipers raced, making a game of the waves. Overhead, white gulls rode the air currents in a demonstration of unconscious prowess.

Marcel and his family stayed as they were until Sabastien opened his dinosaur book, which he had brought from the car. He leafed methodically through the pages until he came to the picture of a pterodactyl, which caught his eye. He stared at the creature until Antonella noticed.

"Pterodactyl," she said.

With her index finger she covered the 'p' in the word beneath the illustration. "You don't pronounce the 'p.'" She said the name again.

After the briefest pause, Sabastien said it too. "Pterodactyl."

Clear as day, clear as light. Marcel was amazed. They all were amazed, Sabastien included.

The boy stood up. He closed the book and placed it in his mother's lap. He took off running down the beach following the water line, his feet challenging the breaking waves. Antonella watched him for a moment. Then she got up and ran after him. She caught up to him easily, and they loped together for a while.

When they turned around, they stopped for a moment. Sabastien raised his arms at the angle of the wings of the pterodactyl in the picture.

"They're catching their breath," said Marcel.

Dorcas shook her head. Marcel admired her tenacity as she worked to get out the words she needed to say. "They. Are dinosaurs."

They weren't catching their breath, they were gearing up to fly.

"You're right," Marcel told her.

"Ermph," said Dorcas.

Because he was used to converting his wife's sounds to words, Marcel knew it meant that they would get to Jean's funeral on time, and that his eulogy would be everything it needed to be. They watched their children fly up the beach.

Andy Jones

Andy Jones is the poet laureate emeritus of Davis, California. He has taught writing, creative writing and literature classes at the University of California, Davis since 1990, and has hosted the fortnightly Poetry Night Reading Series in Davis since 2007. His books of poetry include *Split Stock*, *Where's Jukie?*, and *In the Almond Orchard: Coming Home from War*.

On the last day, a child stands at the wall, wrapped in muslin

Stripped of turnips and parsnips, the dry garden stalks
Have been scythed by dragged and abandoned rigging chains.
Beetles stumble over each other, blind in the midday sun.
Rooted and thinning on low branches, migratory birds rest.
Dinner plates have been packed into slatted trucks.
We have forgotten why we registered as foreigners.
The mother has been emptied of time, of milk, of words.
While the beasts had long ago been carved into parts,
some artifacts have lasted for centuries without glass cases.
The distant fires were sparked by dry lightning strikes.
No one knows which of the giants is casting the shadows.
Often we check under the beds for previous residents.
On the last day, a child stands at the wall, wrapped in muslin.
A man with a white beard watches from a hoisted cage.

Katie Bowers

Katie Ellen Bowers was raised in Charleston, South Carolina, but is now sowing seeds with her husband and daughter in the small, rural town of Heath Springs, South Carolina.

Alone, the Streets of New Orleans

I put my feet on the rocks that rest
pleasantly against the Mississippi
but only for a second the man playing his new
harmonica reminds me that I have to keep
moving through the French Quarter and onto
Decatur and Royal and Dumaine
turning into the small doors of a Voodoo shop
where I long to believe in herbs and teas and oils and
gods I've never heard of buying a bag of tea to soak
in my bathtub to heal

A beer to-go in tow a girl
no more than a girl tells me things in a heavy
accent I do not recognize
about my past my present my future
all from a deck of cards all because I
put my left hand on part of the deck closest
to my heart and thought

she tells me of four children and
seventy more years of life left and
though I only drink half my beer
I don't know if I want to live
that many years
alone the streets of New Orleans tell me that
it's okay as I walk through
everything all of it
except this and that or that and this
but these crowded streets say otherwise.

Lisa Trudeau

Lisa Trudeau is a former publishing professional and independent bookseller. She lives in Massachusetts. Recent work has been published by or is forthcoming from *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, and *The Inflectionist Review*. She is co-founder and co-editor of *LEON Literary Review*.

Waiting for the Mall to Open

shopfronts apocalypse dark
gulls frilling the lot
    I want a drink I want a vacant day
    minutes erased as soon as they're written
birds agitate as two cars park close
lovers I think a morning tryst
    I drag on a fictional cigarette side-eye
    the liquor sign across the street
just two elderly women ordinary
in wool coats short sensible boots
faces pinked under identical hats
    I want open doors I want relief from
    my tiresome day's one tiresome task
gulls on flat orange feet encircle the pair
now embracing between their cars
    I watch
cold air around them shimmers like a front of summer warmth
each moves a hand to the other's cheek
    in tenderness in dismay
    reaching out to feel life break before it falls
past wonder and asphalt morning sober I watch
the lot filling shops unlock
air still rippling after they've driven away

Vincent James Perrone

Vincent James Perrone is a Detroit-based writer and musician. He is the author of *Starving Romantic* (11:11 Press, 2018) and cofounder of the 51 W. Warren Writers group. Recent work published in *Ghost City Press*, *Prometheus Dreaming*, and *Corvus Review*.

House Fire, New Years, 2020

Here is the state of disappearance—
we are waiting to remember.

The alleys are carnivals of spent
shells and countless sparks.

Life becomes a series of measurements.
We want to call it a story.

We want to call the interior
the individual. We want

our bodies and our bodies back.
Our homes and our tears

accounted for. Every dog in the
neighborhood is terrified.

A house burns and the firefighters
gather around for a photograph.

You say I wasn't even there.
That I never saw a thing.

I say I was the new moon light
on the back of your hand.

I was the lost breath of
every hidden child.

An entire life contained
in floating space. Not scientific—

just a moonset iris. Another
boring invention.

The state of redaction—I am
blacked out and I am now

and never again. You imagine dust.
Imply being. Crave a new light

on the cusp of a sunrise.
Aloha/memento mori.

The dogs are wailing at
the sirens. We are disappeared

clutching some ancient regret.
Curious smoke drifts above

and our lives spiral out
in neat grey curls.

We are now trying to remember
what we are waiting for.

Bill Schillaci

Bill Schillaci was born in the Bronx and attended New York University. For most of his twenties, he worked as a library assistant at Columbia University. After a brief attempt to make a living as a cabinetmaker, he worked as a technical writer for engineering firms in San Francisco and New York. He then switched to freelancing, specializing in environmental and worker safety topics. He lives in Ridgewood, New Jersey with his wife.

The Cost of Living

That day, for the first time, Eric left Brenda alone with Caroline, beginning her fourth week out of the womb. Three weeks, twenty-one days of breathtaking originality. That was the entirety of the time he had spent with them away from work after Brenda had concluded an exhausting pregnancy, nineteen hours of labor, a second-degree vaginal tear, little if any deep sleep since then, and an otherworldly six-block move to a semi-complete apartment in an empty building. Brenda developed preeclampsia in her third trimester, the swelling so bad she couldn't squeeze her feet into any of her shoes and had to wear Eric's Nikes through the grey Manhattan slush to the market and her OB-GYN. Her mother was in assisted living in Delray Beach; Eric's was eleven years gone. They were on their own, neither with a shred of useful experience with newborns or kids of any age. They were afraid to bring Caroline back to the biting air of their new home, but their pediatrician reassured them.

"This is a tough princess you've got here," the pediatrician said.

When he stepped outside the brownstone into the sub-freezing March morning, it was there at the bottom of the well, a ten-foot-deep declivity excavated out of the pavement in front of the brownstone and separated from pedestrians by a gate that didn't lock to a tall fence of flaking paint over rusted wrought iron pickets. At the bottom amid the cigarette butts and plastic straws was a capped drain in the ground, a metal door without a doorknob, and one caged window to the brownstone's basement. Apart from the walls, that was all. That was all until it was there.

Eric saw it at once, a heap of greenish contractor trash bags in the corner. But passing the well, he simply thought, "What's that?" before hustling north on Essex to the subway. He looked back, a last glance, hoping to see Brenda at the first-floor window cradling Caroline and waving. Even if they were there, the shroud of shadow over the window was too dense for him to tell. It was only later, gripping the passenger pole on the uptown F Train, that it occurred to him that the bags looked like a human-size cocoon. The mental picture did not last as he labored through the day to restore trust with his supervisors, who'd been left hanging by the paternity leave he didn't warn them about because Brenda told him he wouldn't need to take it. That changed fast when the reality of caring for a new life when your body feels like it'd been bounced off the back of a moving pickup truck smacked some sense into her.

They were the first tenants in the brownstone, which was still under renovation, including their apartment. There were no interior walls, just bare beams through which conduits and electrical lines needed to be run. The living room had a panel of knotty plywood nailed up where they were assured double windows would soon be installed. One of the bathrooms was

functional, not the other, a six-by-nine-foot cell with a creepy hole over the waste pipe. They had hot water and gas but no electricity while Eric completed the wiring. Until then, power was supplied by an eight-thousand-watt Honda generator on wheels he bought at The Home Depot on 23rd Street along with a couple of hundred-foot power cords and three five-gallon gas cans. He had to fill the cans every few days at the piratical rate charged by the BP station on the FDR. The Lyft drivers resisted placing the cans in their trunks, so he had to pay extra for that as well. The generator roared in the back yard so they could have light and power their refrigerator and several space heaters that kept them from freezing to death.

They were there out of desperation and good luck. They had been given an ultimatum with a drop-dead expiration date to vacate their rental on Crosby Street. Eric had punched the landlady's son, the culmination of a running feud over the son's refusal to accept deliveries. The breaking point was the disappearance of Brenda's six hundred dollar Epson Expression printer a lazy Amazon driver left on the front step in one of the highest population-density neighborhoods on the planet. A screaming match followed in which Eric reacted to the son spitting in his face with a straight right that opened a microfracture in the son's orbital bone. The last time Eric had punched someone he was twelve and had been punched back much harder. He swore never to repeat that mistake. But the son was that special kind of person who made you forget about promises you made to yourself.

The landlady hammered their door with the side of her fist and waved her phone with a photo of her son showing a black eye that covered half his face. She gave Eric a choice—vacate in two weeks or she would have him arrested for assault.

"My wife just gave birth," said Eric.

"Better start looking," said the landlady.

They were both earners. Eric was an electrical engineer at a startup firm near the UN. Brenda, a digital artist and poet, was also the top seller at an art gallery near the High Line. They'd met at a poetry reading and author signing at the Union Square Barnes & Noble. Brenda was disarmed that a techy New York engineer would attend such an event. Their income was good, but they were stupid with it. Their relationship was founded in the belief that life needed to be lived right now. This boiled down to travel, lots of travel. Up until the pregnancy they averaged two trans-Atlantic trips a year with the goal of hitting as many European World Heritage sites as they could before they retired, at which point they would shift to another continent. Charlotte, the gallery owner, assured Brenda she would be welcomed back when she was ready. That was the entirety of the maternity leave policy, no pay, no benefits. Post-birth, they had next to nothing in the bank. They needed two bedrooms and two baths and had a thirty-five-hundred-dollar monthly

ceiling. That was good enough to relocate somewhere in the city, which was good enough for Eric. But Brenda had never lived above 14th Street and wanted to stay between Houston and Canal.

"This is where I get my juice," she whispered, nursing Caroline, surrounded by scented candles in the otherwise darkened bedroom they would soon leave behind.

"You and all the hedge fund managers."

"Can't we just try, Eric. I will turn to cinders and blow away in Tottenville."

Eric loved Brenda, but he was also intimate with her genius at sales-speak. Still, one did not argue with a de la Tour vision of a Madonna and child. He contacted several rental agents who told him with uniform smugness that they didn't have anything in his price range, not in SoHo, not in Tribeca, not on the Lower East Side, not in Little Italy. He spoke to people at work. Everyone said the same thing, that the landlady couldn't evict him on such short notice. Of course he left out the business about breaking the son's face.

Predawn on a Sunday with their deadline looming, he was bent over his laptop scrolling through the latest listings. Brenda padded up behind him. She'd left Caroline in her basinet in the bathtub with the lights off, a place they'd tentatively come to believe was conducive to infant slumber.

"We're running out of time," she said.

"I'm looking."

"That's not the way to look."

"How else?"

"You go out and walk building to building and knock on doors. Find a place before they even advertise it."

"I don't do the sales in this family."

She exhaled sharply, a common occurrence lately, and if any words followed, they were not upbeat. But this time was different.

"You're right," she said softly. "You're very right."

A half hour later, all three of them were on the street. They immobilized Caroline in her stroller under six inches of blankets, only her nose and mouth and parts of her ghostly pale eyes visible, all semi-complete facial features topped by a wool cap. She was awake but unperturbed, as much as Eric could make out under the hood of the stroller, which he pushed along several yards behind Brenda, who strode ahead in her rubber snow boots, the only comfortable footwear of her own she could find. She said they shouldn't bother with the arrogant doormen guarding the high rises on the avenues. So she forged east on the side streets, beginning with Grand into the barely-risen sun. Eric suggested they wait until people were awake. This she dismissed, muttering something that sounded like, "This is my show now."

At every building Brenda went straight to the doorbell panel. If the scribbles near the buttons didn't identify the superintendent, she pressed those for basement or first floor units.

She was at this for an hour before she got her first response, a fire wall of static in front of the faintest indication of a human voice. Brenda asked if there were vacancies, once and again and was met each time by dead silence. She flopped down the steps, her face tight, avoiding Eric's gaze, and walked to the next building.

He waited on the sidewalk, rocking the stroller, occasionally making sure Caroline was breathing. He was content to see how Brenda was going to accomplish what he viewed as folly. She'd always told that him that she was not discouraged by promising sales that fell through, that she couldn't be, that she was in fact supercharged to score on the next one or the one after that. When a customer bailed, she said her approach was to jack up the list price. It worked once, a twenty-five-thousand-dollar sale of a twelve-by-twenty painting of the muscular back of the artist's lover with a ridge of savage spikes along the spine. The artist shed tears and embraced Brenda. The gallery's commission was half and Brenda took half of that. At home at night, she composed poems about the works of the gallery artists. She'd then inject lines she had written into her pitches. The patrons would either slip away as if from someone deranged or fumble for their wallets. A Christie's executive passing through the gallery said they could use her, at a higher base pay and with more prominent artists, but Brenda preferred to be the big deal in the smaller shop.

At Bowery they U-turned and headed west. Couples, their faces masked by scarves and clutching each other's forearms, descended from tenements for Sunday breakfast. Caroline had begun to fuss. It started now, as it did in the middle of every night, as a weak croaking, like that of a small, discouraged frog. It was so faint that when they first heard it from the other side of the bedroom, they thought it would soon cease as Caroline drifted back into slumber. They now understood that it was the proverbial leak under the sink, that did not go away if you ignored it, that did not even grow smaller. Eric thought being out in the fresh air would make a difference to Caroline, so he rocked and rocked as the croak grew angrier. Soon it would be a primordial howl for survival.

"Take her to the Starbucks on Lafayette," Brenda said between buildings. "I'll find you there."

"When?"

She looked at him flatly, as if he had asked what they were having for dinner.

"How about when I have to pee?"

On the changing table in the men's room, Eric wrapped Caroline in a fresh Pamper and then sat with her and a bottle of Brenda's breast milk at a corner table near the front window. The three baristas behind the counter were not busy, but they seemed unanimous about ignoring his limp waves for attention. After what seemed like a conference, the one with red and green tattoos encircling his neck physically sighed and came over to take his order for a latte. He accepted Eric's ten, stepped deftly around the stroller, studiously avoiding any glance at Caroline,

and fled to the counter.

"Maybe he was never a baby," Eric whispered above Caroline, feathering his lips across her alabaster forehead while her cheeks pumped at the bottle like a miniature bellows. Halfway through his drink, the store began to fill and finally Eric was gifted with a few sweet smiles from customers, all women, all young, who nonetheless sat as far from him and Caroline as they could. He smiled back and felt a sad twitch in his groin. It'd been twelve weeks since he and Brenda had sex, or maybe fifteen. He'd stopped counting, which was remarkable in itself, although apparently not as remarkable as what they were going through. Still the last time was vivid, Brenda on top, bloated beyond belief, her brow creased with her 24/7 headache. She kept whispering everything was fine right up to when she gasped "I can't" and slid away like a drunk off a park bench.

Caroline had a steely grip on his pinky and was watching him fiercely when he saw Brenda motoring toward them diagonally across Lafayette. They made eye contact through the window. Brenda flashed her scary grin and nodded.

"I found something," she said sitting, breathing hard.

Eric waited.

"It's different.

"Different how?"

"A little complicated."

"Different *and* complicated."

"It's front loaded."

"For us?"

"Yes and no. I mean we get a new place, a spectacular place."

"But?"

"It needs work."

"Is it a dump?"

"No, not at all."

"Then what?"

Brenda came around the table and removed Caroline from Eric's arms. Caroline protested a bit before calming when Brenda reunited her with the bottle.

"It's different," she said, a loving look at Caroline. "And complicated."

Eric eyed her as she, like the baristas, acted as if he was not there, and then turned to the window. Empty only minutes ago, the old New York street was thick with slow-moving traffic and fuming drivers. Was this what Brenda craved? He could never get what she meant, the juice thing, or how it worked, how she expanded as a woman, an artist, a seller of art, a wife and a mother, by flailing along with the rest of the city's oppressed middle class burning themselves down at both ends so they could scratch out a life under a cost of living three times higher than

almost anywhere else in the country. He got his own juice, his motivation at least, standing in the nave of the Cologne Cathedral, meditating on the six hundred years it took to build the place. That made generating CAD designs for rooftop HVAC equipment seem like child's play. Of course, Brenda also loved the European excursions, which, she said, made for stellar chit-chat with the gallery patrons; but however he looked at it, it was the gridiron of the Manhattan art world that stoked her fire.

Back from work on that first evening, he remembered the oddity and glanced over the gate into the well. In the inky blackness he saw nothing, but there was, he thought, a sound, a rustling, so he waited, standing still until he heard it again, accompanied this time by an unambiguous human cough that was also unambiguously female.

Inside, Brenda in her parka was stretched out on the couch, Caroline on the floor in her basinet, and between them the electric heater, a squat, square machine in which coils glowed fiery red behind a wire grill. Brenda was on her phone, trying to negotiate an early return to the gallery provided she could bring Caroline along and store her in the business office. There had been several discussions already with Charlotte, a mother herself, who yet felt that infant wailing, even faintly heard behind a closed door, would be destructive to the contemplative mood of a Parisian musée she believed was critical to her task of separating moderately wealthy patrons from tens of thousands of dollars for works of speculative contemporary art.

"I'm not asking for day care," Brenda purred, greeting Eric with a finger flutter.

He bent over Caroline, who was awake and pensive, as if she was closely following Brenda's half of the conversation. Eric stroked Caroline's cheek and moved the basinet closer to the heater. Brenda's eyes widened at something she heard and she shot a look of optimism at Eric. In the kitchen, he wolfed down half the stir fry Brenda had left for him on the counter, changed his pants in the bedroom and buckled on his tool belt. He was now on his second job, the one he'd been working until midnight since they moved in, the one Brenda acquired for him while he was tending to Caroline in Starbucks.

The way it had happened, the way she got around to telling it, was that on her do-or-die march through the side streets she encountered an older gentleman watching workers remortaring the front steps to the brownstone. She flashed her smile and asked if the gent was the owner.

Upon being told that he was, she flung open her wardrobe of charm and seduction. What resulted was an agreement that her husband, a licensed electrician, would replace the building's entire electrical system, everything from obtaining a permit from the city, to connecting the building to ConEd's main line, to installing the electrical meter, breaker panel, internal conduits and cables, junction boxes, and outlet receptacles for every one of the eleven

apartments. It was a job that in the city's electrician market could easily exceed a hundred thousand dollars if done by a reputable firm. But instead of paying cash, the owner agreed that Brenda and family would occupy the first-floor front unit rent free for one year. At that point, they would be allowed to remain, paying half the market rate provided Eric continued to maintain the electrical system, charging only for the cost of materials. If the work was not completed in one month, the terms would need to change, although there were no specifics as yet how.

Brenda unfolded this and related details without pause, possibly without taking a breath, in several monumental sentences while wiping her excess breast milk from Caroline's chin with a Starbucks napkin. Eric knew better than to try to interject with comments or questions, so he simply listened, at least to the point where Brenda outlined the core of his new responsibilities. There, his hearing appeared to fail, or his comprehension, and the remainder of the time they shared at the table became for him more of a near-death experience, a second him floating near the ceiling and observing the primary Eric transforming from a person of honor, a man with a clean record and a solid credit score, into some type of guerilla technician like an Internet hacker from Eastern Europe, or someone who disassembles stolen cars and ships out the parts to the Latin American black market within ten hours of the theft. He did register something Brenda said about the owner being optimistic about the furnace.

Brenda said they needed to get back to the owner before he headed home to Queens. She reinserted Caroline into the stroller, gripped the handles and plowed through the store's incoming foot traffic.

Pursuing, he called, "This doesn't sound legal."

"Why, you renew your license?"

Which was true. He'd obtained it in the year he took off between college and grad school to assist his father, who had a general contracting business and was chronically in need of an electrician. It wasn't the worst of jobs, and after work over Heinekens he and his dad would sketch out how they were going to set up a custom lighting business. That was before the old man slipped off a ladder and bled to death from what the doctors in Hackensack described as a spleen that had basically broken in two. Eric renewed his license annually because it wasn't expensive and seemed a fitting annual tribute to the father-and-son enterprise that never was. Occasionally on the weekends, he'd refresh his understanding of the trade by hard-wiring smoke alarms or installing recessed lighting as a courtesy to friends at the firm or patrons Brenda was sucking up to.

"I mean living in an abandoned building. It's squatting."

"It's not abandoned, it's just empty. And it's not squatting if the owner lets you live there."

"Not just that. The building has to be inhabitable. The city has inspectors."

"If anyone shows up, we say we're installing the electricity."

"Oh, you and a three-week old infant."

"Yep."

"Do we get a contact?"

"Maybe, probably."

"What's wrong with the furnace?"

"Nothing, it just needs a part."

"A part from where?"

She stopped and swung around hard. Her morning hair was backlit by the breaking day, and her arms, out wide in exasperation, strained the seams of her parka.

"From where? I don't know from where, Eric. From fucking Jupiter. What does it matter? What options do we have?"

"A truckload, Brenda. We have a truckload of options."

"Not for me we don't."

She waited. But all he could think is that violence, whether you're the victim or the victimizer, exacts a toll, and he wondered how long it would be before he paid his off.

"Go away! I have a knife!"

The threat, the voice, was both terrified and terrifying. Descending and then hearing it, Eric froze between steps and had to grab the gate so his momentum didn't send him sprawling down and meeting the business end of the weapon he'd just been warned about.

It was after midnight, the hour he vowed at the start of all this to stop work, on schedule or not. Unlike the night before, this night had been productive. He'd finished bending and squeezing conduits through old openings and a few new ones he drilled through one entire side of the brownstone's rock-hard, century-old white oak framing. Wanting to share the news with Brenda, he peaked into the bedroom where she slept beside Caroline, whom she'd barricaded on four sides with pillows. Commingled, their slumbering breaths occupied all the room, leaving no space for him to enter. More than a week after the relocation, he'd yet to share the bed with his wife under their new roof. Caroline needed to have a close maternal presence in the strange surroundings, Brenda explained. It seemed to him that all surroundings would be strange to Caroline, but he didn't bother saying this. The truth was that Brenda was extracting vengeance for him giving her a hard time, questioning and resisting every piece of her lunatic arrangement and then everything the owner told him. Turned out the man was not too long out of Turkey, where, he explained in occasionally decipherable English, he had been managing the construction of Russian natural gas pipeline that would bisect the Anatolian peninsula and cross under the Adriatic Sea before reaching Greece and southern Italy. It was a part of the world

where business arrangements such as the one he and Brenda had cooked up were as common as kebabs in Ankara. There was a speck of consolation in that, Eric conjectured, something that might weigh in his favor in his criminal trial, a futuristic proceeding that had taken up daily residence in his head.

"I brought food," he said, ridiculously extending the Tupperware container into the impenetrable dark. He'd filled it with cooked white rice and chicken chunks and heated it in the microwave. There was a crackling of plastic and then silence.

"I live in the building. I don't care if you stay there."

Of course he did care, but not enough or not in a way that would force her to flee to some other abysmal crack in the city's swarming underground of homelessness. Going and coming, he'd glance into the well. The bags were always there, crumpled and still, the wretched person inside them without a single purpose in her life except to stay hidden and keep breathing. He'd yet to see a face or a hand or any human part, although once he spotted the front of a grimy running shoe, presumably with a foot inside, extending beyond her hovel. The drain cover had been pried off for the obvious reason, although in the late winter cold snap it appeared any odor froze and died before it reached street level. For days he'd imagined her quietly succumbing to cold and starvation. He didn't know if it was wise to try to help. Was it like feeding an injured wild animal, creating a fatal dependence? But once the idea that he should do something entered his head, it became unstoppable.

Fear, hers mostly, which was as palpable as the frigid night air on his face, but his as well, filled the space between them. He sensed it, a tensing and trembling entity unto itself, and was reminded of the war of words with the landlady's son before all self-control was lost. This time would be different.

"I'm leaving it on the step," he said, retreating and closing the gate. "It's clean food. You can eat it. I don't want to hurt you."

Back inside, after filling the generator's tank and failing despite a vigorous scrubbing to wash the stink of spilled gasoline from his hands, he covered himself fully clothed on the couch under the scratchy Army blankets that had been passed down from his grandfather, who'd served in Korea. It seemed, while he was working, the space heater that was keeping him company had been replaced by a battery powered clock radio. The unset time repeatedly flashed 12:00, but the clock also displayed the correct interior temperature, forty-eight degrees Fahrenheit. In the upper apartments, the owner has stored packs of insulation, rolls bigger than beer barrels the color of pink cotton candy, more than enough for the entire building. But none of it could be installed before the wiring was complete and some plumbing as well. Until that happened, until the fucking furnace was fixed, or until the month of May, they were no better off than a family of pioneers on the Great Plains huddled in a sod shack around an oxygen-sucking fire pit in a

bumpy earthen floor. He didn't mind Brenda taking the heater; he would have brought it to the bedroom at once if she had asked. But making sure he knew how cold he would be without it—that was something else, that was different. Wide-awake he watched the clock as the temperature dropped to forty-seven. Before morning it would go down a few more degrees, not as bad as the cold his granddad endured at Chosin Reservoir or as bad as it was right now at the bottom of the well out front. When he walked through lower Manhattan or Midtown, he'd pass the homeless camping over sidewalk grates through which clouds of warmth were expelled from the city's underground steam pipes. But the well out front had no steam, and plastic bags were useless insulation.

He regretted what he'd said. Why should she care about where he lived or how sanitary the food was? He had told her "I don't want to hurt you," and of course all she could have heard, the only word, was "hurt." What more could there have been to her life than being hurt? What more could she expect from some bodiless male voice in the middle of the night? He watched the clock, waiting, he supposed, for the temperature to change. Like the night before, he knew he would lie awake, his mind on hyperdrive, before falling into useless slumber in the hour before he needed to rise and leave for work.

He fetched his phone and, back on the couch, Googled, "What should I do about a homeless person living in front of my building?" There were more than enough answers, and they all had one objective—how to get rid of the invader. Was that what he wanted? It had to be. Infectious disease, violent schizophrenia, that knife, the dangers were off the charts. For Christsake, he had a month-old baby girl who was already stuck in Gulag living conditions. He didn't even need to do it himself. It would be easy enough to pass off the problem to the owner, who he'd been contacting daily about needed materials. One 911 call, whoever made it, about a homeless person making a threat would be enough.

He retreated again under the blankets and, more awake than ever, resumed staring at the temperature. He decided he would take action if the number changed one more time. Later, a half hour, an hour, or some other interval impossible to gauge in this bleak, strange room, the one-degree drop occurred. He kicked off the blankets and carried the clock down the hall where he quietly placed it on the foot of the bed where his wife and daughter rested, blissfully unaware that a few yards away, a person clung to the rim of life for reasons he could not come close to fathoming.

Even two rooms away, drifting in and out of a shallow sleep, he heard Caroline, mewling to be fed or to be held and loved, whatever primal craving new human beings carry with them from the syrupy darkness where they were formed into the frigid light of existence. Only when the cry crescendoed did he hear Brenda's shuffling feet, a body-bump into something hard and a hissed, "Shit."

In the weeks he was home after Caroline was born, when he and Brenda clung to

each other as a tyrannical seven-pound force of nature took over their lives, they alternated the middle-of-the-night feedings. When he was at bat, he'd carry Caroline to a chair near the front window where he passed the time watching truck drivers and cops walking in and out of the twenty-four-hour Dunkin Donuts across West Broadway under a five-foot-tall replica of a Styrofoam coffee cup. Since the move, since he'd added six new hours of labor to his work day, Brenda took complete charge of the parenting, and he began to think of himself as an absentee father. All he wanted was to keep their three heads above water. There was no room or time for reflection about deeper meanings, about consequences. Now, in the sleepless hours, the accounting began. He was a family man, no doubt about it, but did he love Brenda this much? Did she love him as much as she loved being a Lower Manhattan dilettante? He was troubled by the questions when they came at him on his first night on the couch—would such thoughts even find form if she was lying beside him? He forced them out of his head by mentally singing songs from the Beach Boys *Pet Sounds* album, the ones he and his father tried to harmonize—and succeeded only by accident—on Christmas holidays in Englewood when he was in high school. Still, the questions about who loved whom or what and how much returned the next night and the next as the shock of what he was questioning lessened as did the need to sing songs.

At first light, to avoid running into Brenda in the kitchen, he hurried half-awake from the building for coffee at the bakery across Ludlow. Most of the joints below his waist ached, hips, knees, ankles, right down to the big toe of his right foot. The night before, when he did somehow drift off, he was invaded by divorce dreams. They were warnings, of course, emotional worst-case scenarios, what it felt like to be alone, to become a walking, talking human shell, something that should drop off the edge of the earth but stubbornly persists in misery. Apparently, he needed to know that damaged love, if that was what they had, was better than no love at all. He wanted to find comfort in Brenda, to hear from her that all would be well, but he feared it would go wrong, that she would misinterpret whatever he said as disloyalty, that it would trigger something feral and retaliatory in her.

Midway across Ludlow, he stopped. He'd seen something passing the well, something in the corner of his eye, and occupied by the specter of his marriage falling apart, it didn't register at once. He backtracked and saw through the gate what he thought he had seen—the Tupperware container sitting on the step where he left it and completely empty. What he had not seen but did now, was an opening in the nest at the bottom of the well revealing a single eye, wide and white, watching him.

Exiting the subway that evening, Eric found a glint of hope in a remnant of the day's crystal clear sky, a luminous pink streak over the Hudson, a precursor of spring. He detoured east to the deli

grill on Rivington. In line, he plotted the night's work. He was adjusting, he thought. This day in his cubicle, he hadn't dozed off over his keyboard, a first since returning to work. Somehow, since it all started, no one had heard him snoring, or if they had, they hadn't bothered to wake him or ask if there was a problem or issue a warning. His colleagues were young, most under forty, and everyone he chatted with seemed to have a history with newborns. One civil engineer, who had graduated NJIT two years before him and was a talker, had asked if there were parents or siblings helping out. He told her there was no one and he dropped Brenda's preeclampsia into the conversation along with the particularly bloody birth. Within two days, it became common office knowledge. It wasn't something he had planned, but in retrospect, he knew it was not a completely unconscious maneuver to gain sympathy. It was the sort of thing Brenda might try to get an edge with a gallery patron. It was not something his father would have done, but it seemed Brenda was the one he was learning from now.

Half a block away from the brownstone, through the dusk, it looked like plain windblown litter on the sidewalk. Then he made out the ragged running shoe. Getting closer he saw a small plastic coin purse with an opened zipper, a hairbrush, a glove, a filthy handkerchief, other unidentifiable bits of cloth and food wrappers, all of it a wretched trail leading back to the old gate. The Tupperware container had been knocked down to the bottom of the well where shreds of the plastic shelter remained, sheltering no one, scraps of trash shifting in the downdraft. Eric thought, "Okay, that's over." It was the entirety of what entered his head. "Okay."

"We've had developments!"

He was two strides through the front door when Brenda flitted across the foyer in black tights and a strawberry tank, barefoot and lithe, in apparent defiance of the room's climate and looking as good as she had since her sixth month, just before the swelling set in, at her glorious peak of pregnant concupiscence. She relieved him of the deli bag and his backpack and took his hand in both of hers. Her hair was perfectly parted, lavender scented and lustrous under the domed ceiling lamp. There were streaks of turquoise across her eyelids.

"What developments?"

"Well, sir, since you ask. Initially, this way."

She squeezed his fingers and tiptoed ahead of him into the living room. With a grand wave of her arm she re-introduced the wall where the plywood sheet had hung since their arrival, referred to by Brenda as a rare species of junk art, and where there were now two adjacent windows framed in polished dark wood.

"Windows!" Brenda exclaimed. "Effendi showed up bright and early with a crew of foreigners. Two carried in the windows and another, well, that's development the second."

She released him, danced from the room and spun back in holding a small cardboard box that she pressed against his chest.

Eric squinted at the contents.

"Thermostats!" said Brenda. "One for every room except the kitchen. And the reason, Mr. Electrician, is the boiler is fixed. All you need to do is plug it in, connect it to the generator, whatever, and get these bunnies humping, and we can live in a normal heated apartment instead of the fucking Whole Foods dairy section."

Eric removed a thermostat packaged in clamshell plastic and began to read the instructions. Brenda plucked it from his fingers.

"But there's more," she sang. "I am re-employed. It seems that Charlotte has grown dispirited about not selling paintings. So she has agreed to take me back for twenty peak hours a week. And before you object, she will bring in, at no expense to us, a qualified au pair from a western African nation who will mind Caroline in the office or sit with her on the High Line or just stroll back and forth on 14th Street window shopping. And this includes eight hours on weekends so you can work uninterrupted on the wiring."

"I thought I was already working uninterrupted on the wiring."

"So you are, and excelling. And now the big news."

She gestured for him to follow her into the hall, turning back meaningfully with a forefinger sealing her lips, gliding soundlessly to the door of the second bedroom, which was several inches ajar.

"Look." She formed the word with her lips without saying it aloud and pointed.

Eric did. The lights were out, and the cheap cream shades that came with the place were drawn. On the floor, flanked by two fiery space heaters like torches revealing a path through a dungeon, was Caroline, snug and still in her basinet, deeply asleep.

They backed away. They'd been scrupulously following the parenting manuals, Brenda was anyway, employing all the tricks of trade to keep Caroline awake during the day so they could each grab a couple of hours of uninterrupted sleep at night. Days ago, Eric had plotted out how to get the boiler online once it was fixed, but he had no idea what to expect running thermostat wires down to the basement. With Caroline wailing in the background, he gave up on the prospect of any sleep at all. He backed away, but Brenda grabbed his sleeve, and when he faced her, perplexed, warmth flooded his face. He couldn't believe it, he was going to cry.

"You don't get it," she said.

"No, I don't," he croaked.

"Oh, Eric."

What followed, or the way he later parsed it, was less erotic detonation, although there was that, than a screeching halt to Brenda and him and innocent Caroline slipping toward

dysfunction. The understanding arrived in steps. There was Brenda's bubbly Dale Carnegie performance transforming in an instant in body language and facial expression into blunt animal lust. There was the electric thrill that came with being shoved with just the right force into their unlit bedroom. There was Brenda's ten second disrobing—nothing was under the tights and tank. There was the departure of his own clothing, possibly in under ten seconds. There was the nearly forgotten sensation of flesh meeting flesh. There was consummation, mutual, he wanted to believe, although he never was and doubted he ever would be sure about Brenda. And there was the wondrous aftermath of warmth, possibly the first time in this alien place he felt a sheen of wholesome perspiration across his forehead and chest. Then, as they lay still side by side, there was the vision of himself rising from his knees and loving his daughter without tragic foreboding, of going to work every day without wondering why he should bother, and believing, or at least coming to close to believing, that he did complement Brenda in some way, although probably not in the way he wanted to. That was an unrealistic aspiration, and he now wondered why he had ever believed it was or why he thought it was essential. Amazing, he said to himself, the insights one long overdue, world-class fuck could bring about.

Even asleep, he sensed her rise from the bed. Eyes closed, he turned to the emptiness and placed his arm across the place she'd left, the sheets still damp with their sweat. He assumed she'd been summoned by Caroline and was surprised that he hadn't woken as well, which was what happened every night Caroline was with them regardless of whether it was Brenda's turn or his to rise for the feeding. When he felt himself drifting off again, he forced himself off the bed and into some of his clothing. He found Brenda down the hall wrapped in a bedroom blanket at the kitchen table. The deli bag had been ripped open and she was halfway through the burger he'd bought and shoveling in the fries as well.

"I don't know why you bought this, but, my god, thank you," she said, mouth stuffed. "I haven't eaten all day."

Eric laughed and said, "Did something happen outside today?"

Chewing, Brenda shrugged ignorance.

He kissed the top of her head and plucked a few fries from the cardboard boat.

"So, how about these windows?" he said, walking to the next room.

They were multi-paned and smoothly opened sideways when he turned a brass knob, moderately high-end, he guessed. There was no view, of course. Their brownstone was separated from the weathered red bricks of the adjacent building by eight feet at most. From the first floor they would probably see sunlight for about ten minutes a day, and only when the summer sun was directly overhead. He looked out and peered down into the oily-black cavity between the buildings. There was, he thought, a rustle, perhaps of plastic.

"Eric, please take away these potatoes," Brenda called. "Nobody is going to buy

paintings from a fat woman."

"On my way," Eric called back, still leaning outside. He listened a moment longer Hearing nothing, he rolled the windows shut.

Karissa Carmona

Karissa Carmona is a writer and anti-violence organizer living snugly above a candy shop in Western Montana. Her poems have been featured in *Lily Poetry Review* and *Prairie Margins*, among others.

Concerns Outside the U-Haul

I'm afraid our things
won't fit in this apartment.

That the red leather armchair
will catch in the door frame
like a too-tall bride.

That our bed will take
half the square footage.

That the floor will slope,
groan, and cave under the
weight of what is mine and
yours, here at once, together.

But you spread out your arms
to measure the width of our
mattress, hold them stiff
and sidestep up the pinched
staircase. Inside, you press
your wingspan against the wall
and show me there is space
enough on either side for us
to swing our legs.

Despite all that is makeshift
in this day and your measuring,
I will, on this very night:

lie with you in those registry-
bought sheets, warm my toes
in the crook of your knee, adorn
our heads with the covers, by

these small means, shield you
from stripes of streetlight that
pour through the window and
the whine if twin police sirens
calling out to one another
from either side of town.

Nathan Manley

Nathan Manley is a writer and former teacher from Loveland, Colorado. He is the author of one chapbook, *Numina Loci* (2018, Mighty Rogue Press). His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Think*, *Natural Bridge*, *Canary*, *Spillway*, *Split Rock Review*, *Plainsongs,* and others. His work has also been nominated for Best of the Net. You can find his writing and instrumental music at nathanmmanley.com

For the Child One Town Over, Who, on the Eve of the New Century, Discovers a Species of Beetle

The inhuman blue of its shuttered wings,
a ghostly opalescence blinking up
the gutter spout, through the scuttle and churn
of detritivores in a timber rut,
wherever it was the newspaper said
you'd found it—that dire oceanic blue
of the other worlds, widening spirals,
the color of current cut and bleared
with the hunger of Victorian ships,
each a bellyful of dead birds with names
you spoke like an incantation, *mox ob-*
tenebricatus, whatever it was
the newspaper said you'd settled on
calling it—that blue of sky aspiring
to theophany or squall, a bluing
behind what's presaged in air, latent glow
unbent in the lens, unlighted even
in the spectrograph's celestial eye,
some holy candescence of burning dust,
spires and rooms, mansions of the Taciturn,
nebular curl adrift in deep time, when-
ever it was the newspaper said you'd
pinioned it with needles to a dull plane
of polystyrene foam, *immotus stans*,
blue of stoppered breath.

However, it was—
a lusterless twitch in the damp-dark earth
betrays it, according to the paper.
You fix your attention, your little wish
on two distinctive splotches, like flecked blood
at the tips of each wing. You pause, prize it,
hardly a beauty, a consolation

among the mounting extinctions, but when
you snap a picture for posterity,
the beetle leaps and gutters a moment
on the breeze, climbing the sky like a flight
of blue invention, and I'm told you rise
with it, no less wild and vague-eyed with hope.

Something Is Leaving Down Hackett Hill Road

Not like the advent of fever throbbing
lurid maple red to sallow spotted
trees in the sweep of it seeming almost
to glow
not like the afterlives of flame
odd hypnotic animals fleeting through
the cinder heaps
they scuttle and become
finally
as if by sleep extinguished
to some other slow oblivion
not
like these
though I'm sure the trees are dreaming
the same dream once clung about the future
like a luminous fog
no molecule
unnamed or dissipating this foul mood
I'm tangled in
the land I mean
in it
not like these leaves the wind peels endlessly
away

T.J. Butler

T.J. Butler lives on a sailboat on Maryland's Chesapeake Bay with her husband and dog. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Pembroke*, *New Plains Review*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, *New South*, and others. The story that appears in Levee Magazine, *The Wings That Follow Fear*, will be included in her debut collection, *A Flame on the Ocean*, forthcoming from Adelaide Books in 2021. Find her at @aGalWithNoName and TJButlerAuthor.com.

The Wings That Follow Fear

Two nights before Ryder's coming-home day, I walked down the hill to the barn to say goodnight to the animals. My hair was hanging loose over my thin cotton nightgown, the long plain one I wear in the summer when he's gone. The air was soft and still. The field beyond the barn twinkled with lightning bugs like a scene in a movie. I walked past the barn to the edge of the field, picked out one glowing flash, still and low to the ground. I counted the morse code of brilliance that flared in a pulsing yes to entice a mate. I thought of Ryder as I turned toward the barn, wishing for his hand in mine on the edge of this field, longing to watch the flickering display with him.

I plucked his old plaid shirt from the nail by the barn door. I'd worn it so many times since he'd been gone that it smelled more of me than him. I could not get closer to him than the flannel sleeves around my arms, but I did not mind. His coming-home day was so close. As I slipped my arms into the soft, worn sleeves, I heard the faraway crunch of tires on our gravel drive.

I stepped out of the barn, heart pounding deep inside my chest. Ryder was not due home for a couple of days, but he was prone to surprise me occasionally. I was a sight in his shirt, my nightgown hanging like a sack, my scuffed, brown work boots unlaced with smears of red clay mud along the soles. I'd been planning a homecoming that smelled of roasted chicken and apple pie, a dinner softly lit to golden by the sun dropping low behind the trees that marked our property line. To have him home a few days early, I'd take what I could get, whether it was in the barn, in the house, or in a field in the back forty.

The headlights were too low to be Ryder's aging Silverado. I did not have other family left, or many friends in town, and none would have visited at this hour. I buttoned the plaid shirt over my nightgown and stood with my arms crossed over my chest, tense and coiled. I watched the car creeping along the drive until it stopped in front of the barn. It was a Cadillac, spotted with rust and peeling paint, and missing the driver's side mirror. I waited for the driver to emerge, but the engine continued to run. The headlights illuminated the land beyond the barn, filling the brilliant sparkling field with a sickly, yellow glow. I paused for a few breaths, wishing I'd stepped inside the barn for the shotgun before the car got this close. If the driver were lost, I'd send them just past town to the gas station that was open until midnight. If the driver was not lost… I did not pause to consider that option. Ryder was not in this car, and no one else had any cause to come out this way.

I could almost feel the smooth wooden stock of the shotgun in my hands. It's absence was tangible. I stepped toward the Cadillac, feigning confidence I did not feel while imagining the power of the single shell in the shotgun's chamber. I faced demons unarmed in my own kitchen as a girl. I could do it again as a woman, but I still hoped I could send the driver on their way

with a nod toward the gas station.

"Well, if it isn't Louisa Eaton!" a man's voice called out from behind the wheel as he cut the engine. I recognized the voice, but I could not immediately place it. I uncoiled slightly, exhaled, took another step toward the car to try to see the driver. He called out again, "Hey there, Lou! It's been an age."

My heart sunk as I recognized him, identifying his thick mop of dishwater-blond curls as Billy Ricketts. We were in the same grade until he left school before graduation to finish out the year in a boy's reformatory upstate. He was locked up more than he was home as an adult, and I'd heard his rap sheet included armed robbery and attempted murder. In between stints behind bars, he was either fixing to steal someone's wife or hanging around The Horseshoe cheating at pool and then picking fights in the parking lot.

His voice was too friendly, a used car salesman peddling a lemon that wouldn't start, rather than a long-ago acquaintance showing up uninvited after dark.

"What're you doing out here, Billy? You need something?"

Next was me coiling just a bit tighter as he unfolded himself from the driver's seat and leaned against the door. I took a step away from him. I was tall, with childbearing hips and all the other platitudes women say to girls who suddenly shoot up and fill out as their adult forms are revealed. I could hold my own with the land and the animals and keep the wood stove filled, but he was taller, broader. He was verging on handsome in a fitted whiteT-shirt and faded jeans, a cowboy who appealed to girls who preferred wearing boots to high heels. He ran a hand through his hair, preening and unhurried.

He made eye contact with me in the dimming twilight, and his voice was as casual as two old school friends catching up. "Aw, Lou, I've just come to say hello. Can't a man stop by to see an old friend?" I did not respond. He continued, saying he'd heard in town about Ryder's job, said I must be lonesome all the way out here by myself. His eyes traveled from my face to my brown work boots and back. He drawled that my hair had gotten pretty long, said I must be hot with that ragged shirt buttoned so far up.

I felt a stone form in my stomach. I repeated my question, "You need something?" I knew he did not stop by my place at night to see how long my hair had grown.

"What do I need, Lou? How about I need to lay low for a while…" The rest of his words lost the shape of language, but I heard these things: armed robbery… roadblocks… just until the county roads are clear to the state line. My mind raced with an old, familiar fear. Time slowed, but my thoughts whirled and spun like a centrifuge. It had been decades since I had to make plans against a man set on doing a woman harm. I'd been out of practice for years; my daddy was long gone. I did not live that life with Ryder, but here I was.

Billy Ricketts did not know when Ryder was due home. His wary laying-low presence was a

hairpin trigger, a trap Ryder would walk into unaware and unarmed while Billy Ricketts was already watchful and anxious. I could not let that happen to my man.
Just beyond my fear, small hummingbird wings of self-preservation fluttered furiously.

Men enraged, drunk, or in pain are wildly unpredictable. In their frenzy, they often underestimate their targets. If I could outmaneuver this man, even for a moment, I had a chance. I clenched my shaking hands into fists, but I could not calm myself. I was the only thing standing in the way of Billy Ricketts laying low on my property without incident.

I cursed myself for idly watching a stranger's car crawl down the drive instead of taking five steps inside the barn for the shotgun. I had nothing on under my nightgown, and my unlaced boots were too loose to support a sprint through the fields to the forest beyond. He had come here to help himself to my land and bide his time for as long as he pleased.

He was walking toward me. His voice had a smooth, honeyed tone. "You wouldn't mind helping out an old friend for a while, would you? Let's go take a walk in the field, Lou." Crickets chirped. I could hear a dog barking in the distance. Thoughts flashed in my mind, images more than articulation. If I let him lead me into the field, I'd never make it back. The turkey vultures would find me before anyone else, and he'd make himself at home until Ryder drove his old Silverado down the gravel drive. The wings of hope that shadowed my fear beat desperately, just beyond my grasp. If I walked into the tall grasses beyond the barn, my house would never smell like the first home-cooked meal Ryder had eaten in months. I saw the list of chores I didn't get done as urgent sparks; the fencepost, the squeaking door, the yellowjacket nest in the barn.

Billy Ricketts approached me with extended hands, a dark, threatening silhouette against the deepening navy of the sky. His lips were curled into a wolfish smile, a hungry carnivore purporting to a rabbit that it wants to pet them, not devour them. The chores flared in my mind again. The yellowjacket's nest was a sudden shock of heat lightning, an epiphany, a bombshell. Billy Ricketts had never met a woman who bit back.

His hand shot out, fingers circling my wrist. My breath caught in my chest. I felt the wings that follow fear, but I had no time to consider their message. As a girl, I did not always know what to do when the seconds ticked toward an inevitable danger. This time, the fingers circling my wrist released an instinct without vocabulary. I followed it without thinking. I tilted my head upward, looking through my lashes at him, forced myself to be passive and pliant as a doe. My voice was low and breathy. "Come on into the barn with me, Billy." I placed my free hand on his hand that held my wrist, and I was surprised when he allowed it. My tongue darted from the corner of my mouth. It was dangerous to push this far, to suggest an intimacy and interrupt the reason he'd come to my place. I left my lips parted. I gazed at him, feeling nauseous at the insinuation. I could do no more than plant a seed. I wanted to stop there. Instead, I imagined the finality of walking into the field. I turned toward the barn without hesitating. I'd

have to let him finish up what I started. He followed me into the barn. I turned on the lights as we entered, then slid the door closed. The latch was tricky to open, a death sentence for one of us if it stuck, and a death sentence for the other if it did not.

The corners beneath the hayloft were dark. He spoke, but I did not turn to look at him. I exhaled slowly, willed myself into an easy victim for this one grand action. He stopped in front of the horse stalls. He pulled me backward, bent to force his mouth onto mine. I wrenched my head away, crying out words that made no sense, "The horses!" He cursed, pushed me to the floor.

I scrambled to my feet. His body was tense, prepared to spring if I moved. He no longer trusted me. He spat sharp-edged words that did not matter. The used car salesman was gone. I turned my face toward him and pointed toward the bales of hay beneath the hayloft. I needed the darkness, the low eaves, and the opportunity. I did not know how to command a predator, but I'd extended an invitation he was now impatient to take me up on.

He grabbed my arm and strode forward, long legs pulling me toward the hay beneath the overhang. He spun me around, moving quickly, pressing me against the wall with his shoulder. I was silent and still, allowing his hands to roam freely. He grunted as he reached down to pull my nightgown up with one hand and unbuckle his belt with the other. I turned my head away from him, focusing on the yellowjacket nest. It was easy to miss, a shadowy grapefruit-sized colony that would grow into a bulbous, vicious turban if left alone for the rest of the summer. I thought of Ryder, of how this would burn in his belly like a firebrand when he imagined the roughness of another man's hand on my skin.

Billy Ricketts's hand reached my thigh. I was swathed in fear. The beating wings seemed to reach a crescendo, a percussive symphony of intuition without voice. My arm jerked outward, knocking the nest to the floor. Billy Ricketts's fevered hands explored my skin. He did not notice as the nest came alive. I called out in a solid, extended intonation, "Bees!"

When I was in seventh grade, Billy Ricketts's momma was crowned Corn Queen at the Swagger County Fair. While Dovey Ricketts was riding down Broad Street on a Fourth of July float, waving to the crowd with an oversized plastic ear of corn in her hand, her son was behind the Daughters of the Confederacy bake sale tent swatting at a yellowjacket who landed on his sticky caramel brownie. Dovey Ricketts would probably have reminded him to sit still and let it finish its business. She might have added that it was more scared of him than he of it. However, she was in a sash and rhinestone crown getting her fifteen minutes, and boys that age never want to sit still.

He probably swatted the yellowjacket away, as most young boys believe themselves to be apex predators over tiny, winged creatures. Likely, he did not realize yellowjackets are predators themselves, social enough to insist you share your sweets, and aggressive enough to fight back when you refuse. Presumably, he did not know yellowjackets, unlike honeybees, can sting, and

sting, and sting. Nobody knew, until that Fourth of July as his mother was perched atop a float decorated in corn stalks, that he was allergic.

Two days later, Dovey Ricketts was interviewed by the Swagger County Times. She thanked God for her crown and the fact that the first aid tent was next door to the bake sale, but we all knew she never forgave her son for the distraction. Nobody remembered the year she was crowned, but everyone remembered the year the youngest Ricketts boy almost died.

There were more words from Billy Ricketts's mouth that I did not care to know. I would not need to know them now. The yellowjackets flew from their nest. He released me, leaped aside. I pressed my back to the wall, standing motionless in the shadows. I watched the windmill of his arms, slapping and swatting. I felt the first sting through the sleeve of Ryder's old green and black plaid shirt.

The pain was smokey and incandescent; however, neither Billy Ricketts nor an insect with a savage instinct to protect its home could do worse to me than what had already been done. I felt a gauzy childhood remnant drop over me, another thing I thought I was out of practice with. For the second time that night, another broken tenet from my youth fit perfectly: no matter how far you think you've grown up from your daddy coming home after drinking away his paycheck, you can still slip back into this. In the blink of an eye, you can disappear from the front lines while you're still standing there.

I felt a sting on my leg like a cigarette stubbed out on my calf. I connected with the far-off pain through a distant umbilical cord. The violence he brought here in a Cadillac, Ryder coming home, and the yellowjackets felt like they were happening to someone else. I was like a kite, soaring high on an updraft, with no more than a thin, dime-store string to connect my spirit to the motions of my bones and skin far below.

The frenzied hum of insect wings and their agonizing stinging defenses were no worse than the fear I felt as a girl, seeing my daddy's hands balled into fists, red-faced and bellowing, towering over my mother in our kitchen. I'd gone away back then too, and every time, I remembered colors and sounds far more than the brunt of the impact.

I watched Billy Ricketts appear to dance on an electrified floor, an odd calisthenic two-step as he ran past the horses. He rattled the door, agitated and cursing, but the latch was stuck. He swatted, frantic, slapping his exposed arms and raking his hands across his face and neck. His face had begun to redden, his lips to swell. He was lucky the nest was small, but not lucky enough. From my orbit, I felt miles away from my thin cotton nightgown, the sensation of his hands on me, the barn.

He clawed at his throat, jerking like a marionette. He wore a mask of fear, something I recognized from my mother, eyes wide, skin blotching to red and deeper as the air was forced from her lungs by rough, callused hands. A single yellowjacket hovered near my face, its receptors

sucking in and breathing out the pheromones of an all-hands-on-deck emergency to protect their queen. With the slowness reserved for running in a dream, I moved my arm to shield my face. The yellowjacket landed on my sleeve. Searing fire immediately followed, but it was no worse than the echo of a mother's choked voice when her head puts a dent into the drywall in front of her children.

I looked at Billy Ricketts. The yellowjackets had not slowed, darting into the air, circling him, landing and stinging. He came toward me, legs buckling, and sat heavily on a hay bale. His face was fully puffed and doughy. His eyes were almost swollen shut, and his gasps wheezed and squeaked. He slumped to the side and did not brush off a yellowjacket who landed on his forehead. I breathed, allowing one to land on me. I did not move as it crawled up my shoulder, my neck, my cheek. It buzzed away as I closed my eyes. My lashes were not a threat. Now, neither was Billy Ricketts. I came back, snapped back from the ether and into the barn on a rubber band slingshot.

My stings throbbed, raging and frenzied welts I had inflicted on both of us to protect myself and my land, maybe even to save Ryder's life. I walked to the door, now fully present, and felt every bit of the yellowjacket venom. I threw my head back, wanting to scream into the rafters. As I inhaled, I heard the horse whinny, and I knew the animals had borne witness to enough chaos. I fought a sob that welled up in my chest and made my eyes prick with tears. Without looking back, I lifted the sticky latch just so and walked up the hill toward the house. I needed to be inside before I could let go. I quickened my pace, focusing on the house. I wanted to sob, to scream, or crumple to my knees in the dark and rip clods of earth from the ground. I did not know what else to do but walk up the hill. My stings had begun to burn and swell, and tears ran down my cheeks.

***

My hands were shaking as I made a paste of baking soda and water to dab on the welts. I imagined them speaking for me when Ryder came home, "Look what I have done for you, my dearest. I was almost hurt badly in the barn, but I killed a man so he would not kill you."

As I applied the paste, I thought of calling Levi Fisher, the county sheriff. I did not know the law like Billy Ricketts did. I did not know about APB's and roadblocks, but I knew enough to realize I needed Levi.

When the paste was dry, I took the flashlight from the bottom kitchen drawer and did not let the screen door slam behind me as I went down the hill to the Cadillac. A breeze had picked up, carrying my hair over my shoulders. The lightning bugs flashed and twinkled in the field beyond the barn, and the car was a dark hull cramping the drive. I knew Billy Ricketts did not come to my place empty-handed, but I did not know what I was looking for. I shined the

flashlight into the car. I had a cartoon flash of a rounded brown sack tied with a string, decorated with a large black dollar sign.

Instead, my beam illuminated a black duffle bag on the floor of the passenger's seat. It was unzipped. The contents were unmistakable. I turned the flashlight off and let my eyes adjust to the darkness. I focused on breathing, trying to think clearly without the bag in my field of vision. My pulse raced. I needed to call Levi Fisher, but I needed to make a decision first. Ryder could come home to, "I killed a man while you were at work," or, "We can pay off the land." I paused. If there was a tally of rights and wrongs for Cadillacs, and barns, and wasps, which side did this duffle bag fall on?

I leaned far into the Cadillac's open window to pull out the bag. It was heavy, and my arms ached from the stings as I carried the bag up the hill with the flashlight off. The old adage about what money can and cannot buy came to mind, but I planned to figure that out for myself. I considered the ways I might tell Ryder about this night. I did not know how to begin, other than, "You remember that Fourth of July parade when Billy Ricketts almost died?"

Nathan Erwin

Nathan Erwin is a rural poet, educator, community mediator, and researcher at American University. With a family tree rooted in the North and South, Alabama moonshiners and Vermont dairy farmers, Erwin grew up in the hills of Newark Valley, New York. Nathan Erwin works as a poetry editor for *Barrelhouse Magazine*. His poetry has appeared in a number of print and online publications, including *Redactions*, *COUNTERCLOCK*, *Wordgathering*, *The Lullwater Review*, and *Line Rider Press*. His book *Hemp and Farm Justice* (Mandel-Vilar Press) is forthcoming Spring 2021.

Notes from the Farm

Jericho, Palestine

You are my eyes, he would tell me
as if I were his son, not his brother.

This land is his. My eyes are mine—brimming
& warm as Medjool dates set out for the sun.

In his dying, I stopped farming
to sit by his bedside.

I spooned the great moon and little broken
drips of stars that leaked from his beard.

While I was away, the sand courted the goats.
Our horse had to be put down.

It's hard for him, for me, to breathe in the middle of the day.
In Ofer Prison, jailed for my shotgun leaning in the barn,

I read Gibran & Emre & my eyes became the eyes
of these plantations of freedom. *You are my eyes, my son,*

my eyes. The trees need water. The earth grows salty.
The goats, thin. Though winter, the rain has yet to come.

Our al-Auja, our tuned acequias play across Jericho's roots;
our careless Auja boys cool off in the spring.

My fatherland is dying. Our children's lull
drinks the mirage of the thirsty soldier, the Americans,

the shelling to the north. All on the eve of midday,
I see for my father, my brother,

& my daughter. Our eyes, her tears,
with which we will feed our people and bring forth a great flood.

Mark Simpson

Mark Simpson is the author of *Fat Chance* (Finishing Line Press, 2013). Recent work appears in *Columbia Journal* (Online), *Third Wednesday*, and *Apeiron Review*. He lives on Whidbey Island, Washington.

Help Wanted

There are explosions today.
We think the war might have started,
tanks landing on the beaches, aircraft
sorties over Freeland or Greenbank, but
by late morning we realize it's a neighbor
dynamiting stumps. Our lives are
like that, someone whispers:
progress mistaken for apocalypse, fear
our nearest comfort.
What do dark times require?
Wind comes up, seething through
trees older than I am.
I've got a shovel and am looking for work.
I'm sixty-five, but can dig all day.

Carlos Andrés Gómez

Carlos Andrés Gómez is a Colombian American poet from New York City and the author of *Fractures* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), selected by Natasha Trethewey as the winner of the 2020 Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry. Gómez has been published in *New England Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The Yale Review*, *BuzzFeed Reader*, *CHORUS: A Literary Mixtape* (Simon & Schuster, 2012), and elsewhere. Carlos is a graduate of the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. For more: CarlosLive.com

Eighteen Images Around the Text Message to Your Mother

silence-choked throat
in unfinished basement,

laughter whiskeyed,
strewn father, nightfall descending,

layaway furniture, scattered
chest roped snug,

mortgage underwater, rows
of off-white pills, wife

gone, court order,
smoke syruped to

itch, bloodshot morning
fix, gambler's pipe,

bright-eyed giggle,
knuckles, flickered

sun carved open,
a trembling mouth,

mother coaxing light
from his shadow

as the screen awakens:
I would like my remains cremated.

Eileen Drennen

Eileen Drennen worked as a daily newspaper journalist in Georgia and Florida for 27 years. In 2007, she earned an MFA in creative writing from Queens University in Charlotte, North Carolina. She has taught critical writing at the college level, presented at national conferences and had work appear in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *O, the Oprah Magazine*, *The Rumpus* and *Literary Mama*. She lives in Lafayette, Indiana.

Two Places at Once

Sunday morning broke cool and pink.

Idling down the streets of the ghost subdivision, five blocks from the Gulf of Mexico, we hunted for somewhere easy to get to but hard to see, a place where I could do the therapy homework I'd saved until the end of our weekend trip. I was so scared I'd fall apart when it was over, I scheduled it for last, before we started the six-hour drive back to Atlanta.

This Florida Panhandle neighborhood that never got built was stitched into a quilt of dirt roads and scrubby pines. Some developer had put in three short cul-de-sacs—new pavement, neat curbs and dumpy green power poles—but no families ever bought his dream. By day, you could imagine the hopeful expectancy that made him think folks might want to live a short hike from the bay, while thickets of yaupon holly, longleaf pine, and palmettos buffered their yards from the din of the coastal highway. After dark, you couldn't see the splintered wooden telephone poles dotted with reflectors unless the moon was full.

Behind a row of scraggly brush, we spied a hunk of old WWII runway, a leftover from the days when this whole stretch of the Big Bend was a training ground for D-Day. My husband, whose patience is vast, walked into the brown October weeds with me, to make sure nothing lurked unseen. He held my hand while I set an intention for what was to come and promised to shut the windows and turn up the radio once he was in the car. Whatever happened next wasn't anything I wanted him to hear. I was sure that once I unleashed my screams, they'd shatter every window around and scare the old ladies in Sopchoppy so bad they'd call the sheriff.

When the engine kicked in, I turned to face the trees. A fat styrofoam carton in my left hand held eighteen eggs. Slowly, I pulled one out and scanned the ground for a place to aim. Its heavy shell felt cool and smooth.

I closed my eyes to bring long-gone faces and names into view. The first to rise was the high school boyfriend who walked away when I was nineteen and four months pregnant with the words, "How do I know it's even mine?"

I called forth the magic phrases while pulling his face close: those damned tobacco-colored eyes, fringed with way too much lash; that luxuriant kisser that promised so much. Then I let loose with a force that rattled my bones. I screamed the words up from my toes, punctuating each smash with new details, hurling egg after egg with all I had.

How dare you lie to me?

How could you promise to marry me?

How could you leave me time after time?

How dare you walk away from your first-born child?

I hollered until I was hoarse, surprised at how small the yells sounded in my throat but

how harshly they burned coming out. There for rage, I was surprised by tears. On the tenth egg, I decided to move on to the social worker who persuaded me to give up my only child for adoption —splat!—the nuns and priests who made me feel I wasn't good enough to raise him—smash!—and finally my poor, overwhelmed parents, who didn't notice the ways I was disappearing until it was too late. My eyes stung, my nose ran, but I could not stop my arm from hurling rage at the lineup of ghost faces.

When the carton was empty, I wished I had three dozen more.

My chest hurt.

My arm ached.

The pavement glistened with busted suns and splintered shells. Once, they too were perfect spheres of possibility.

* * *

Three weeks earlier, Grace had floated the idea during our monthly therapy session.

A pastoral counselor who likes her boots fringed, skirts long and earrings complicated, she had been teaching me how to look back at my life with a creative eye, to find a more rounded story.

"You want some tea?" she said, pulling open a drawer stuffed with brightly-colored boxes. I picked a mug and sat in the armchair facing the window so I could stare at branches while we talked.

My circuits had gotten stuck in loops that went nowhere good.

In 2010, I'd gone to her for help with the wave of unexpected sadness that swamped me months after retiring from newspapers at the age of fifty-two. The day I kissed the long hours and knotty commutes goodbye, I was sad to leave the place I'd loved for twenty-two years but giddy to be free. I thought I'd finish up my MFA, write whatever I pleased and visit my son and his family more than once a year. But after I got the degree and cashed my last severance check, all I felt was blue and lost. Sprawling on the couch to watch hours of old movies or cooking shows or "Hoarders" only helped at first. I'd grown so used to the world where you could always find someone to help you kick around ideas or figure out the shape of your story—even if you weren't quite sure what it was—that without it, I feared I'd lost my narrative thread.

It didn't take long for Grace to work her way back to my troubled adolescence. Even though I'd done years of therapy before and thought I'd sorted out most of what happened and why, she smelled unfinished business.

"Lately I've been feeling like one of those jetliners that get stuck with leftover fuel," I said, choking the life out of my teabag with its string. "You know, when they have to hunt for someplace to dump the excess, because they're afraid to land? They don't want a stray spark to

escape and blow the world to smithereens?"

"Ah," she said, leaning back in her plum leather chair. "The flammable stuff."

She'd been telling me for weeks that anger is not the same as blame but I still couldn't figure out how to unhook them. If I couldn't blame my mother for being away so much (either in the hospital with complications from multiple sclerosis, or visiting family in Ireland, or, on two occasions, moving into a tiny apartment for months at a time), or my father for turning his routine frustrations into rage, or my high school boyfriend for running away when it was me who took him back every time—or even the social worker for doing her job—how could I be mad at any of them? All I felt was guilty, ungrateful, confused.

"You're angry at what you needed but didn't get," Grace said. "The people you loved let you down, or didn't tell you the truth. Over and over. Why wouldn't you be mad?"

Because it was all so long ago and we've been over it so many times? Because I've already forgiven them?

She looked at me until I met her eyes, then asked what this particular fuel felt like.

Black-tar fury.

"You can't think that away," she said. "It's deep and it's old, buried far enough down you'll have to work to find it. And when you do, you'll have to work to move it out."

I imagined my heart as a cave with rooms and tunnels. Near the top, the spaces airy and light, places you'd want to be. At the base, dark corners hidden by three feet of pitch-colored mud. I wondered why I got the gene for swallowing anger (like Mom) instead of spraying it all over innocent bystanders (like Dad)—or something more reasonable in between.

"I know," she said, leaning forward. "Get some eggs. A dozen—maybe two. Find a tree somewhere deep in the forest to smash them on—and don't worry, it won't hurt the tree. It's compost."

* * *

I thought I was ready to loosen what was trapped.

I wanted to be.

I even liked the symbolism of smashing eggs, now that I had no more of my own, having gone "through the change." (The first time I heard the phrase, describing what was up with our neighbor Mrs. Hannon, I was six. Ever-literal, I pictured her swimming across their backyard pool—only it was filled with pennies instead of water.) Until then, I'd only heard change used to describe what needed to happen to the baby's diaper, or how to make a different channel appear on TV, or what my mother dispensed from her snap-top purse. Only later did I understand it had something to do with the mysterious unwinding that afflicted women "past their prime," though I couldn't figure out how anyone knew what was happening inside them if

they still looked the same on the outside.

Then I got stuck worrying about splatting innocent trees with perfectly good food. Wouldn't that be wasteful—indulgent even? Branches were my childhood's steadiest arms, safe and high above it all. Why would I cake them with violence? Still, the notion that my unathletic arm could dislodge an ancient rage fired my imagination. Usually, anger burrows way down until something trips a flare that leaves me shaky and confused and speaking in a tight, slow whisper. I liked the idea of unleashing actual screams.

* * *

When I was twelve, I had no idea girls were born with all the eggs they'll ever have.

I didn't know that while they're busily knitting themselves into infants, deep within their mother's wombs, tiny ovarian follicles are already flowering. I'd seen the flickery film that warned girls my age what lay ahead, once the "miracle of menstruation" came knocking on our doors. The nuns at St. Mary's in Poughkeepsie had herded us into the darkened gym one afternoon, while sending all the sixth grade boys out to the playground for an hour. But no one mentioned how we got our eggs or when they'd run out. My best friend that year had a flashy new Kotex Kit, a gift from her mother she took pains to hide from her sister but let me inspect whenever I asked. Phyllis was convinced that being prepared would deliver her period sooner. I think she believed that showing me how ready she was would solve the matter of whose should arrive first.

That Christmas Eve, when I found a stain in my pants, I forgot everything I'd learned. Stuck in bed with the flu, I'd been instructed to rest and drink plenty of fluids "to wash the fever out." My mother wasn't home, so I knocked on the door of my father's study to ask him if fevers had any particular color.

He looked up from his noisy IBM Selectric, fingers still flying across the keyboard, and asked me to be more specific. When I was, he stopped typing and told me it sounded like my first period. "Go get your sisters," he said. "They'll show you what to do."

The way I remember the scene is having all three older sisters—sixteen, fifteen, and fourteen—circle me in the tiny bathroom under the front stairs, although now I wonder how we all squeezed into that tiny Victorian powder room. I can see them showing me how to winch the bulky pad into the flat metal clasps of the sanitary belt, which reminded me of a skinny, gray garter belt without garters, and the glint of something new in their faces, as if I'd crossed some invisible threshold and joined them in some adult place I'd never thought to ask about. I don't remember us sharing such biological frankness after, and I can't say why I didn't ask for their help in the years that followed, when my teenage love affair got me in way over my head. But now I'm not surprised that four daughters hitting adolescence at the same time their ailing mother was

navigating her own menopause—and tumultuous marriage—might have felt splintered off from one another, forced to find their ways alone.

That night, as my father said the blessing over dinner, he gave thanks for the Brand New Me, who had, he reported, "become a woman today." My younger brother, not too keen on the idea that he'd missed a chance to move up a notch, shot me a look. "How?" he asked, stung to have missed whatever it was. "What'd she do?"

I let my dad do the talking—though I can't recall if he said something plain, like, "She got her period today," or more baroque, about the onset of menses and all that implied. Secretly I wondered why I was getting credit for something over which I had no control. When I told Phyllis what happened over the holiday break, her huge dark eyes filled with tears. "How could you?" she said.

* * *

At five, I liked to clump down our street with one foot on the curb and one foot on the road so I could be in two places at once. We still lived in Tarrytown, where I could walk that way uphill to the bus stop, to wait for the thrilling rumble of the big yellow machine that took me to kindergarten. I'd walk that way downhill toward the Hudson River, to smell the water's salty-clean breath or admire the magically-named Catskills. What rushes back when I think of that time is my fresh wonder—at caterpillars lush as tiny carpets, who'd walk over my hand with eyelash footsteps; fireflies that beamed out yellow blinks, even when trapped in a jar; bluejays brighter than crayons, with their peaked heads and smart eyes, scrawking secret messages down from the trees.

One day, I looked down the length of my arm and was struck by the miracle strangeness of my hand. Spreading out my fingers one at a time, I marveled at each tiny difference. Suddenly I understood that the hand was me, yet I was the one looking at the hand and having that very thought. What I couldn't figure out was which was more real: the me who looked out from inside and saw these things, or the me on the surface that everyone else could see?

I'd heard about the three persons in the one true God, and wondered if humans only got two persons—who we were inside and who everyone else saw. But then I remembered my shadow, yet another kind of me, and wondered if I had three inside me too. The word "me" had seemed so simple. Now I wondered how anyone kept track of all the parts.

* * *

When I told Grace about the egg-throwing exercise in Florida and wishing I'd brought along dozens more, she laughed.

"It's not a one-time thing—you can do it as often as you like."

"I think I'll wait a bit," I said, rolling my shoulder. "My arm is still a little sore."

I was ready for the next stop on my trip back in time, and told her I was returning to San Diego, the city where my son was born. The town famous for its perfect weather was hosting the annual retreat of Concerned United Birthparents, the support and reform group that was formed in the 1970s "for all whose lives have been touched by adoption." I'd joined in the late '90s, shortly after deciding to search for my son when he turned twenty-one. I hoped a visit to the place where it all happened would jog loose more detailed memories. No matter how many times we talked about 1976, bits of the year that changed my life stayed blank.

I could remember giving birth, taking my son home for a few days to say goodbye, driving to the social worker's office to give him up. But the moments and days after were pocked with black holes. I figured I'd go out a day early to revisit the landmarks—the hospital where he was born, the house we lived in, the beach I walked every day—and let the reporter in me take notes.

Grace told me not to get my hopes up too high. Parts of those days might be gone for good, she said. Sometimes your brain hides what it doesn't think you can bear.

* * *

I fell into research mode, collecting addresses and phone numbers. When I found an email for the social worker I'd worked with years ago, I wrote her that I would be in town for a conference and would love to grab coffee, if she was interested. I told her I was writing about the year I lived there and wanted to talk about what adoption was like in the mid-70s.

Libby didn't ask which event I was coming west for—and I didn't tell her my time would be filled with the stories of other women who'd lost their children and adults who'd been separated from their families at birth. Nor did I tell her that gatherings like these, with people who understand a life most of the world doesn't see, were the only places many of us felt normal.

Days before the trip, she wrote back to say she did remember me but wasn't sure she recalled enough to be of much use. What exactly did I want to know?

As I read her email, I was surprised to feel my heart pound, as if decades of adulthood could be erased in a blink, as if I could be nineteen again, and she the person who held our fates in her hands. I was afraid to tell her what I really wanted to understand: how I walked away from my only son when I loved him more than my own life. I hoped we could work up to it in person. I hoped I could get her to answer questions I hadn't known back then to ask. So I wrote that I wanted context and a sense of the era from her point of view. Libby said she was busy with her

family—ninety-year-old mother, toddler grandchildren—but would see what she could do.

I grabbed a yellow legal pad and started listing questions.

Before I got too specific—like asking about the photo album, toys, and clothes she promised to keep with my son but he's never seen—I wanted her to tell me what she remembered of that year. In the decades since, I'd discovered my pregnancy coincided with a transition in the adoption industry. While the demand for healthy white infants never flagged, after 1973 and Roe v. Wade, the supply plummeted. The Supreme Court ruling marked the end of the so-called "baby scoop era," when millions of girls were sent to maternity homes and forced to surrender their children. What I didn't know in 1976 was that pressuring unmarried girls to surrender babies "for their own good" was still what social workers learned at school, while informing them of their legal rights—or letting them know they had any—was not.

The morning of my pre-dawn flight to San Diego, I missed the bottom step and hit the sidewalk flat on my ankle. It hurt so much I thought it was broken. Crumpling onto my suitcase, I cursed my body for letting me down again (forgetting it works both ways) and tried to stop crying while my husband ran back inside for an icepack, drove me to the airport, and wheeled me all the way to the plane.

One of my roommates for the retreat—a fellow birthmother—met me at the gate. Jennifer wanted to come out a day early too, she said, to support me on my trip back in time. She wasn't yet ready to revisit her own story (Texas, 1969, when she was sixteen) but hoped that witnessing mine would make the prospect less scary. We didn't get to sit together, but that was just as well. Wedged into a window seat with no one to talk to, I propped my foot up and worked on the questions until they filled four pages. I doubted I'd ask the social worker all of them but was glad to have plenty to choose from. It's a delicate thing to play reporter when the story you're trying to uncover is your own.

* * *

My son was born on June 16, 1976—the notable day literature lovers know as Bloomsday, on which James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* unfolds—at a sprawling Catholic compound not far from where he grew up. I'd called ahead for a tour of the maternity wing, saying I wanted "to refresh my memory" about my stay for a book I was writing. One of Mercy Hospital's PR guys agreed to show me around. He hadn't been interested in what kind of book it was, but did have specific instructions about where to park and what door to use and who to ask for in the lobby.

Tall and red-haired, he strolled out of one elevator, press kit in hand, and ushered us into another for the ride to the third floor. As we made our way through the echoey hallway, I looked for any familiar corner and asked if we could see Room 335, which, according to my

hospital records, was where I'd stayed. One hazy memory from the time is the phrase "red brick neon" but I didn't know if it was because I'd been reading Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* or because my window had looked out on a brick wall.

Sure, he said—but the numbers stopped at 330.

He looked over to the nurse's station.

"We're looking for 335?"

"Oh yes," said a fuzzy-headed woman with bright red glasses. "Those rooms"—she pointed to a row of darker wooden doors—"got turned into offices."

The PR guy fiddled with the doorknob.

"Those take special keys," the nurse said. "But we don't have them."

He shrugged and walked back to 330, which opened with his key.

"I don't think the rooms have changed that much," he said. "Will this one do?"

The mechanical bed looked familiar. Could they really still be using use those hairdryer-sized TV remotes, with the nurse's call button built in? I looked out the window but saw no brick, only a gray sky, scattered palm trees, and a wide parking lot. I studied the linoleum and scanned each corner. I remembered the trapped feeling of being stuck in quarters just like it for the week before my son was born, powerless against whichever concerned nun or priest stopped by for a chat.

"How about the labor rooms?" I said in the hallway, not sure which direction was next. "Are they still in the same place?"

"They are," the PR guy said. "But I can't let you back there."

I felt my face get hot. All those years of press passes opening doors made it hard to be denied access. Especially when this story, I thought, was mine. But which story? Not knowing what I was looking for made it hard to press him. If I had been in full-on reporter mode, I'd have known exactly what detail I had to have. I would have made him explain why he wouldn't take me to a part of the hospital that prospective parents routinely tour.

Instead, I thanked him for his time and followed him back downstairs. He shook our hands under the atrium's towering Mexican crucifix, a marvel of thick wood and unexpected angles.

Jennifer stared up. "Do you remember seeing that?"

I wasn't sure. I'd been admitted days before my due date, during my weekly visit to the clinic long since replaced with a shiny new ER. My swollen ankles and elevated blood pressure had worried the nurse, who said it would be safer if I spent the rest of my pregnancy in bed, where they could keep an eye on me. Nine days later, my son and I might have been wheeled out of the hospital through this grand atrium, under the gaze of that dark-faced sculpted Jesus. But I couldn't say. I only remembered looking down at the small miracle in my lap.

From the hospital, we headed to Ocean Beach, the scruffy town where I'd lived, where palm tree-lined streets still cradled pastel houses and sun-beaten guys with long hair and beards

still walked their dogs down the main drag.

We pulled in front of the Del Mar bungalow for a minute, so I could take pictures of the only home my son and I ever shared. The weathered gray two-story had been added to over the years, but its bones were the same. Then we parked two blocks away, where the street ended and the ocean began. The stairs to the beach were gone but someone had put in a memorial bench.

I got out of the car and breathed in the salt air. I remembered the heaviness of late pregnancy, and how walking the shore each morning made me feel less lonely, how I imagined pulling the sun's yolk into my heart for strength. The ocean's ticktock waves had helped me believe I could figure it all out. When I didn't, they helped me keep breathing.

From the car, I heard the phone.

It was the social worker's husband. He said Libby couldn't meet me for coffee but she would call in half an hour if that was okay. I asked my friend to check my questions, make sure they didn't sound too harsh. Newspapers teach you to build rapport slowly, put your subjects at ease, before asking anything too hard. I needed to pretend the social worker was someone I did not know. I wished I'd thought to bring a tape recorder and wondered if I'd recognize her voice.

It had been sixteen years since I'd heard it.

The last time we'd talked, in 1994, Libby had been surprised to hear from me. I'd phoned to say I was ready to meet my son, now that he was eighteen, just like she promised when I signed the papers for what she called his "semi-open" adoption. She didn't remember making such a promise and told me all she could do was forward a letter to his family and the rest would be up to them. At first, I'd felt cheated, ashamed I'd never thought to get anything in writing—not her promise, not his birth certificate, not the papers I'd signed. Then I decided that three more years of waiting was doable. I think I phoned her office a week before his twenty-first birthday, and she'd had someone else call me back with the same response. By the fall of 1997, I thought I'd waited long enough and hired a searcher to find my son. I wrote him at college and said whatever happened next was up to him. Eleven days later, he phoned, and we met in person the following April. When I'd gotten home from that first visit, I'd mailed Libby photos of us, so she could see "it had all worked out."

I answered the phone and focused on putting her at ease. She sounded willing to help but said she wasn't sure she could remember much about the year my son was born. It was so long ago, she said. When we met, she'd just gotten out of school.

"Things are so different now," she said. "Pregnant girls hold all the power. Prospective adoptive parents have to practically woo them."

Most adoptions are open, she said. Everyone knows everyone; birthparents and adoptive parents work together for the sake of their shared child. It's a much better way, she said—at least for the child. It's still a challenge for some parents.

Cellphone set on speaker—balanced on the dashboard—I took messy notes on the legal pad in my lap. Her voice came through clearly. I was grateful to feel relaxed, almost on auto-pilot, moving my hands across the page, getting down as much as I could.

Finally, we worked our way back to 1976. Only three years after Roe v. Wade, adoption was less about "finding homes for unwanted children" than filling the steady demand for healthy infants. More and more unmarried girls were choosing to parent their babies anyway, with or without the father.

I'd thought I was prepared to be one of the brave ones. I'd taken Lamaze classes with my oldest sister as my coach. We'd turned a walk-in closet into a nursery, stocked it with clothes and blankets, even painted the walls green so we'd be ready for a girl or boy. What I had not known was that any sign of doubt from me would be magnified, and I would only hear the social worker's version of what our future held.

The routine was subtle but effective. Stuck in the hospital, waiting for my son to be born, I was visited by a steady stream of nuns and priests who all wanted to know about my plans. When I'd said I wasn't sure what we'd do—I'd find a job, we'd figure something out—they'd ask, "Are you sure you're putting the needs of your baby first?" Or, "Are you sure you're not being selfish?" Libby, who'd reminded me of a young Mary Tyler Moore, told me every baby deserves two parents, married parents, who have jobs and a house and enough money to support a family. Was I really sure I had what it took? Did I understand what "real love" meant? It meant being brave enough to think of your baby's life before yours, she said. Real love meant being strong enough to walk away. When my parents phoned the hospital to say they agreed, I felt powerless to resist. The thought of failing my son, making mistakes, was more than I could bear.

Finally, I asked Libby what she remembered about me. If she had any details, no matter how trivial, I would be grateful to hear them.

She paused. I put down my pen, stretched my hand. By then, we'd been talking for fourty-five minutes.

"I was a social worker for thirty-seven years," she said. "Over time, I learned more about mothers and children than I knew when I started. When we met, I was right out of school. I did everything by the book. I hadn't had children of my own."

She sounded like she was looking for the right words.

"It was clear you loved your son," she said. "And it was clear you two were bonded. If I'd known then what I know now… I would have worked harder to keep you together."

I felt a buzzing in my ears as I struggled to write down each of her words. The air in the car was thick. My face was hot. I dropped the pen, put my hand on my heart and tried to keep images of the life we might have had from crowding my brain. I wasn't sure what to say but wanted to fill the silence that was growing too deep.

"Thank you for telling me," was all I came up with. "Thank you for your time."

I don't know if she was surprised I didn't ask for more or relieved we were done. She said she'd enjoyed talking with me and if I thought of any more questions, I could call any time.

As soon as I turned off the phone, Jen grabbed my hand and I started to cry. Deep messy snotty tears from way down in the black-tar tunnels of my heart. For thirty-five years, I had felt crazy because I could not reconcile the love and the walking away. I would have died before letting anything hurt my baby—and it was years before I learned that my leaving him caused his first and deepest pain.

Jen handed me a tissue. I told her I needed a drink—and an ace bandage for my foot, which had turned deep blue and swollen, as if it had absorbed the blood I felt drain from my heart.

* * *

I limped through the retreat in a daze and a gel-cast, grateful the ankle was sprained, not broken. A week or so after I got home, I went to see Grace.

I was stuck in a loop of what-ifs, the social worker's words still ringing in my brain. If I believed his parents gave my son the life he deserved, which led to him meeting the wife he deserved and having the two beautiful sons they deserved—didn't it mean his adoption was for the best? Didn't it mean God wanted him to be with them?

Grace hates it when you say stuff like that. Her God has better things to do than rearrange mothers and fathers and babies like chess pieces.

"No," she said. "It doesn't. God was with you and God was with your son. He didn't pick sides. Just because you're grateful for the life your son has had doesn't mean staying with you would have wrecked his life. You can't ever know."

Western culture has this mistaken idea that however things work out is "how it was supposed to go," she said. How it went was just how it went—it's a tragedy you can't undo.
She handed me the box of tissues. I told her I didn't know if it made any sense, or if knowing what I'd learned would help my son or hurt him—but I wished there was a way I could let him know.

Between his long hours as an ER doctor at a Manhattan hospital and the demands of his young family, he didn't have time for the kinds of rolling conversations we'd had when our reunion was brand new. Over time, we'd learned to keep things light, not delve into the things we couldn't change. The less we talked about the heavy stuff, the happier he seemed to be. While my son knew I was writing about what happened and said he wanted to read whatever I wrote, I wasn't sure how to bring this latest chapter up.

"You absolutely should tell him," Grace said. "It will be a gift to him too. Just be sure you make clear how much you love his family and the life they have given him. You don't want

him to think you're saying he got the wrong life. But knowing this will help him understand the tragedy that separated you."

* * *

That made sense to me. A few days later, I worked up the nerve to leave my son a voicemail. When he called me back that night, I was in a noisy bar and had to walk out to the parking lot to hear him. The cold air sharpened the edges of the stars.

I gave him the barest outline of my trip to San Diego so I could get to the social worker's words about "working to keep us together" if only she'd known then what she knows now. I'd memorized them but still found the words hard to say without my throat catching. He didn't say much—wow, maybe—and I wished I could see his face. But talking about what might have been seemed to make it easier for him to bring up things we hadn't cleared out.

"If you could be mad at me for being so rotten about staying in touch," he said, "or returning emails and phone calls—which I definitely deserve—I could be mad at you for your rotten timing. At twenty-one, when you found me, I was just separating from my family. And then all of a sudden I had a whole other family to get to know and deal with. It's messed up to meet your mother at twenty-one!"

"I know," I said. "I'm so, so sorry. I was blind to everything but my need to reach you. All I could think about was making sure you knew you were never unwanted, that I'd loved you then and every day since. I felt like I'd die if I couldn't get you that message."

His voice was quiet. "That's the one thing I never doubted."

He'd hoped our reunion would heal me, fix things, make me happy. When it didn't, he felt guilty about that too—as if it was something he did, or didn't do.

I'd thought it would too, and was sorry for taking so long to figure things out. I would have done it faster, I said, if only I'd known how.

Then my surfing son, the Zen doctor, said something that reminded me of Grace.

"Everything that happened made us who we are," he said. Weren't we mostly okay?

We were. Even if I missed him between our annual visits, I knew having any relationship at all after twenty-one years apart was miracle enough. Still, I wanted this new knowledge to shift things between us, alter the chemistry of our loss.

"Do you think it's possible to put the past in a box?" I heard myself ask, imagining a white hatbox with no bottom and a tunnel of time swirling through it, as if it were a tornado you could tame, as if it could ever be that simple.

"What would you think about just being two people in the present, who love one another and want the best for each other?"

When I said those words, I meant them. Only later did I wonder if I was giving away my status as his mother again, or asking him to pretend we were not linked forever, that his fetal cells did not still swim in my body, that my blood did not pump through his veins.

His voice was filled with relief, as if he'd doubted such a thing was possible.

"Nothing would make me happier," he said.

I pressed the phone hard against my ear and breathed in the cold night air. Maybe we'd always wonder about the what-ifs, even if we never talked about them again. Or maybe we could somehow braid them together, the seen and the unseen, the real and the almost, into an ever-unfolding story deep enough to hold both.

Elizabeth Crowell

Elizabeth Crowell was born and raised in New Jersey. She attended Smith College and Columbia School of the Arts. She was the twice winner of the *Bellevue Literary Review* non-fiction prize and has published widely in such magazines as *The Raleigh Review*, *The Hollis Critic*, *The Boston Globe*, and others. She taught high school English for many years and lives with her wife and children outside Boston.

The Summer of 1981

The caterpillars lay in the gray bark ridges,
speckled, deep as the shag carpet in the living room.

They loved the native oaks with acorns that cracked
like bones and bullets from the crossed branches.

They camouflaged their mottled selves, their yellow heads,
black eyes, in any natural shelf they could.

You listened to them eat a neighborhood of trees
maples, chestnuts, oaks, dogwoods that bloomed

like a bloody catastrophe each spring, your mother's favorite.
The leaves stenciled by the caterpillar's teeth

revealed not inner workings, but the sky.
They left a slime the color of drying tears

on the tops of sleek, blue family wagons
or the raw brick wall of the local library,

where you sat with girls and swung your legs in wait.
You had nothing against the natural world.

Your mother felt a dread so deep
she filled old coffee cans halfway with motor oil.

She plucked with her bare long fingers
from bark and rusted swing, holly, azalea, patio slate,

and drowned them in the can, one on the other,
until they were inches deep in the slick lake.

She began to fight with anyone who mocked
this small pursuit, the worth of it, against the epidemic

as she called it, under her breath.
In the late afternoon, fresh from books and girls,

you sat with her on the patio, and the chattering teeth
in the arched oaks above said what had to be said.

Robin Gow

Robin Gow is a trans poet and young adult author and earned their MFA from Adelphi University. They are the author of *OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL DEGENERACY* (Tolsun Books 2020) and the chapbook *HONEYSUCKLE* (Finishing Line Press 2019). Their first young adult novel, *A MILLION QUIET REVOLUTIONS* is forthcoming winter 2022 with FSG.

I Tape a Diagram of a Flower to My Face

It's night, each of us wears a mask
Eli Shipley

I point to different corners
and name them: anther, petal,
stigma, pistil, stamen, filament, ovary.

I name all sorts of things "ovary."
Stray shoe: ovary
Microphone: ovary
Footprint: ovary
Even Mom was an ovary.

Not an animal organ—but
a plant organ.

Dad planted flowers out in front
of the church and he thought
they would just come back
every year, but they didn't.

They were all annuals, not perennials.
Men never know anything about flowers.

Who is going to plant
me again next year
when the flowers dry up
and fall off?

Where is he?

First Day of Life as a Black Hole

I've killed the image of her daughter. I tell her she must feel so much pain, that I understand what she's going through. Then I hang up.

Yanyi

*

Put the telephone
in the oven. Dial the house
phone number on the timer
and wait for it to heat up—
shout into the oven
until the shouts become bread.

*

When the loneliness
becomes edible, don't trust it.
It will trick
you into thinking it's
your mother's bread.

*

She's there and you're
so greedy you're eating
all of her words.
You're making this her fault.

*

Try to pull warm
time out from deep in your
bones—clutch your father's
pocket watch. Wind it tighter.

*

Grucan Rouse

Grucan Rouse lives in Brooklyn with a dog, two rabbits, and a roommate. Sometimes he makes crossword puzzles, but making crossword puzzles is hard.

The Winner

Before I became a competitive dater—I mean *literally* competitive, for points—my first dates usually went like this: I entered a bar thinking myself to be a complex, interesting person, and left the bar an hour or so later having already shared everything there was to know about myself. Sometimes I could do this without even a bathroom break.

It no longer seemed strange to be a complex, interesting person with nothing much to say for himself. Dating, I had quickly learned, was a process. Like making soup stock. You put all these things in the pot—the vegetables, the bones—then purposely disposed of them after boiling their essence away. I felt a lot of empathy for these vegetables whenever I watched cooking shows, since they were so obviously just trying their best. Much more than dogs, more than lightbulbs even. I couldn't think of anyone I knew who made their own soup stock, but I could think of plenty of people who dated.

Although I had yet to make it to a second date (what would we even talk about?), the image of myself as a complex, interesting person persisted. It was easy to feel this way despite having neither friends nor a girlfriend. On TV, the protagonist was often too idiosyncratic to be understood by the rest of their TV world, and yet this was the very reason the audience loved them. I couldn't help but think of my life in this way as well. As having an invisible audience that was watching and analyzing everything that I did. This certainly helped me feel more complex and interesting, and it was funny to think of people around me as unwitting bit players in the ongoing show of my life. This is also what people most failed to understand about my sense of humor, I thought. That they themselves were not the audience.

Probably the only person who thought I was funny was my roommate. She really did look like a roommate, a person with few distinguishing features at all. On the rare occasions I thought about her, I thought about brown hair and the abyss. "It's a skill to find the stories in your own life," she consoled one day, after I made the mistake of telling her about my latest date. She was drinking tea in the kitchen and had been waiting, evidently, for me to get home. "Some people go their whole lives without finding one good story to tell."

I thought she might be speaking from personal experience. When I first moved into our apartment, there was a large package sitting outside the door for her which she somehow never noticed. Not until I mentioned it to her, weeks later. This confirmed my suspicion that she was, in fact, dead inside. Though even she had been on a second date.

"Finding the stories in my life is the *only* thing I'm good at," I said to her, and she laughed. I told her I was joining a dating league.

* * *

I had stopped to read the flyer for the same reason I consulted billboards and skywriting. If you wanted something interesting to happen to you, you had better do your part and be receptive to it. *It*, in this case, was written in Impact font, though no one had torn off any of the phone numbers along the bottom.

SEEKING CONVERSATIONALISTS, ESOTERICISTS, AND SAPIOSEXUALISTS FOR LOCAL DATING LEAGUE. FREE T-SHIRT WITH $25 REGISTRATION FEE. MEDALS FOR TOP-FINISHING TEAMS.

The text was in a speech bubble next to a clip art image of a dog wearing glasses. Why a dog, I thought, not for the first time in my life. Nevertheless, I was intrigued. In my free time I liked to think about my "dating life" and what all the stumbling blocks might be. I liked to think about myself a lot. Central to all this thinking was the conviction that anything I hadn't done before—*in life*—could be a trapdoor leading me somewhere completely new, completely far, if only it occurred to me to open it. I pocketed a phone number from the flyer before stuffing the rest of it down the nearest sewer drain.

On the other end of the line, some hours later, was someone with a noticeably good phone voice. He sounded almost comically resonant, like a podcast. "Hey-yo," he said, with the tone of a well-intentioned spank.

"Hi…" I said. "So I saw the flyer for the dating thing, but I don't have a team yet." It was embarrassing to say the word *dating* for some reason.

"Yeah yeah, absolutely. We're still getting things up and running so we can totally work you in. It's a great idea, right?" He laughed like it was a great idea. "*Are* you a sapiosexualist?"

"No, I—was that not a joke?"

"It's totally a joke, man. But that's okay if you *are*." He laughed again, and it felt uncooperative not to join in. But I didn't want to give him the upper hand. It emerged that his name was Mark, and that the league, such as it was, would be meeting in a room at the YMCA later that week.

I knew instantly, after I hung up, that I should've told him I was a 100% sapiosexualist. I re-narrated my memory of the call so that I had. In the days that followed I then deliberated: what was it that I didn't like about Mark, based on this conversation? I tried to be honest with myself, but I wasn't sure.

* * *

The YMCA's brick façade appeared to me as if by ecstatic vision—a sun-bleached shrine to the many lives I could have been living all this time. The new me would go to the YMCA, I decided. There were so many activities.

I walked into a room that was remarkably like the inside of a whale. There were windows, but somehow in name only. The floor was moist and strangely warm. Mark was just as I had pictured him: a mid-twenty-something with baseball cap, Converse, and unassuming glasses. I wondered if he was supposed to be the dog on the flyer, and I felt vindicated.

"So hey," Mark announced, as he mimed hitting a glass with a fork. "Listen up, people!" The eight of us were sitting in a semicircle of metal folding chairs that reminded me of an AA meeting, though it was too obvious to say this out loud. Everyone appeared to be friends with Mark already and the atmosphere was… perhaps this wasn't a real dating league. Several guys had girlfriends with them, and someone asked, in a voice that couldn't possibly be his normal voice, whether there would be snacks. "Hmm, I didn't think of that," said Mark, apparently serious. Nobody introduced themselves.

"This is the start of something awesome," Mark continued. "Most of you've heard me talk about this already, but it's going to be for real. I've got it all figured out." He produced a surprisingly large document from somewhere in his jacket and started handing out copies. "These are the rules of the game right here. All's fair in love and war, but not here. Ha."

"You're being serious right now," said a girl, factually.

"Indeed I am, Sarah. It's a great idea—just you wait." Sarah assumed a position that suggested active waiting. Mark began to pace. "The idea is that dating is totally a game already, right? That's why people don't like it, because it doesn't feel real. It's just like, people randomly trying to impress each other in a vacuum, and for what?—it's so lame. But what if we *admitted* that it's a game? It could be totally fun. Like improv, or like table tennis! I've worked it out so you score points based on your conversation, and your whole, you know, *desirability*, and when you're done you might actually *win* something for a change," Mark concluded, somewhat breathlessly. His hands hung in the air for several moments.

"Mark, what the fuck," said a muscular guy sitting next to me. He was wearing a tight T-shirt with a logo on the chest. "Is this going to be like the Harry Potter game again? Because that didn't make any sense at all."

"That wasn't a game. That was a real-life sport with very simple rules if you just paid attention."

The muscular guy assumed a tone of mock innocence: "*Oh Maaark, what do we call this ball again? Was it… the queefer*?"

"Once again: seriously?" Sarah was back. "I shouldn't have to say this, but dating isn't about winning anything. Like, what are you supposed to be winning, the other person's *dowry*? Everyone here is already dating someone anyway, if you hadn't noticed, so." I could tell from the

way she said this that she wasn't dating anyone. Meanwhile, the muscular guy was making some kind of hand gesture nearby, not stealthily, while snickering.

I tried to gauge the rest of the room's reaction to Mark so that I could appropriately calibrate my own. No one else had looked at their rulebooks or otherwise tried to engage with them. It was like giving your pet salamander a toy. Mark appeared disappointed at first, but only momentarily.

"You guys, we only have this room for thirty minutes. It's just an idea, and I think it could be pretty fun if we all gave it a shot. So can we please read the rules like mature adults?" He reversed his baseball cap with finality.

"You know, this is just like an AA meeting," said one of the other guys in the room, materializing from his girlfriend's side like ectoplasm. Everybody burst out laughing, the girlfriend most of all.

Apparently you could really just say anything.

* * *

When I told my roommate about the meeting, I told a funny story. Mark's constant fidgeting could've powered a small lightbulb, I said—if only the energy were harnessed. The muscular guy—I learned his name was Kevin—definitely couldn't touch his own toes. I even made a joke about "being a player," which occurred to me on the way home from the YMCA. In the version I told my roommate, I had made this joke during the meeting and everyone had laughed.

"Did you have fun?" she asked, once I finished talking. She sipped her tea and stared at me expectantly. There was something so suffocating about the way she listened.

"Of course I had fun. Why do you think I'm telling you this?" It was clear she had missed the point of the story entirely. I tried to deflect further questions from her by talking about the rules of the game. The rulebook Mark had given everyone was essentially an endless list of things that could score you points:

- Connecting over big ideas Ex: "You know what would be fascinating? An anthropological study of how people apologize around the world." **+10 points**
- Mildly sexual banter Ex: "You know what would be a good condom slogan? 'The only thing that comes between you.'" **+5 points**
- Taking the conversation in unexpected directions Ex: "What do you think is the next frontier? You know, besides outer space." **+15 points**

As I was explaining them, the rules seemed to make increasingly less sense. The *repartee*

with your partner didn't have to follow any kind of logical narrative, as far as I could tell. You could earn points for laughter—but laughter at what? In fact, the only penalty you could receive was when you stopped talking, which now, I found, I did. *What was this game even*? I could feel myself losing points in real time. "It's a lot like bridge, now that I think about it. The card game, I mean. You know how you're working with a partner but you don't get to know what hand they're working with?"

There was a too-long pause in the conversation. My roommate could have been contemplating or she could have been a barstool. Eventually she said that the dating league didn't sound much like bridge at all—a game "invented by the Vanderbilts."

"Maybe it's more like Go Fish," she ventured, "with all of the talking? We play it at school to help the kids practice questions and eye contact. It's a good model for adult conversation, actually, in that it promotes a rewarding exchange of information and ideas. I've found that you can even adjust the difficulty level by—" Her teacup was no longer in her hand: a cause for concern. She was getting ready to say more on this topic, maybe much more. I started to shuffle sideways towards my room, slowly, as if this were not an actual decision I had made but a random cosmic event.

"Well!" I said, with my hand on the doorknob. "Anyway. There was a sort of cute girl there. Named Sarah. I might ask her out next time I see her, who knows. If I'm feeling up to it. I'll let you know how it goes."

"Oh! Okay. I'm sure she'll say yes. Make sure to make eye contact with her when you ask." She smiled. There was another long moment, like a falling plate, before I could get safely behind the door.

Truthfully, at the meeting, I hadn't thought about what Sarah looked like at all. I don't know why I said this to my roommate. It wasn't that I was asexual; I liked looking at porn. But I preferred to do it by putting abstract terms into the search bar—like "yearning blooms"—then seeing what came up. It sometimes occurred to me that I might find sex more funny than fun. Most of the time there was something so threatening about it. People seemed to have two selves: their normal, everyday, grocery store self, and then their secret sexual animal self, lying in wait. No connection at all between the two. One minute a girl could be crying over her dead ficus, and the next she could be asking you to *give it to her hard*. So how could sex ever be personal? The worst part, I thought, is that people could totally sense when you weren't going to put out. Probably this is how the human race had survived for so long—this animal instinct. And yet, it caused me so many problems. Nothing about human history could tell me why you always orgasmed faster on your own.

* * *

The time I arrived at the YMCA didn't correspond at all to the time I left the house. How did I arrive so early when I had left so late? This was how I discovered the hot yoga class that took place in the same room as the dating league just before our meeting each week. The heated bodies, moving in sync, so soddenly—it did much to explain the strange meteorology of the room.

Mark arrived next, caught up in a battle with his gorgon-like headphone cord while trying to climb the stairs. "This thing's like a grappling hook, what the hell," he muttered to himself. He gave up and shoved it deep in his bag with more force than was necessary. "Me and you are gonna have a little talk later," he told the headphones. Then he looked up and noticed me standing outside the door.

I immediately felt the tension inherent to every two-person conversation. You had no choice but to say something as soon as the other person stopped talking—*or else*. It was like being held at gunpoint by a chess clock. "Hey!" I said, my hand raised in a jumble of greeting and self-defense.

"Yo, hey. Are they not done in there yet?" He frowned into the foggy window.

"No, doesn't look like it. They're still moving around."

"I *told* them last week. They can't take all day just because they're YMCA-affiliated. Can't you give them a warning or something?" He turned to me with a squint that suggested I might be slightly less than human. It took me a moment to understand: Mark thought I worked for the YMCA.

"Oh—sure, I can. But maybe we should ask someone at the front desk? They'll probably be more helpful."

Mark seemed confused for a second. Then, with sudden interest: "Are you… one of the people who gets to *live* here? I'm so curious about that."

"Uh, no, I was at the meeting last week. For… the dating thing?" I laughed weirdly, like I was in a commercial. Did he really not know who I was?

Mark's eyes grew wide with recognition. "Oh! *Dude*!" he said at last, his mouth agape. He tried to close it but—fish-like—it just opened up again. He seemed at a loss as to whether he should be embarrassed, astonished, or amused. He still hadn't closed his mouth. A familiar feeling of vertigo overtook me then, the free-falling sensation that I truly had no idea what was going to happen next. Entire civilizations formed and collapsed and the earth did laps around the sun. Eventually, some people could be heard coming up the stairs and Mark pivoted with evident relief to greet them.

It occurred to me during the meeting, with latent satisfaction, that the whole interaction had actually been a funny one, almost slapstick in the way it ended. While the rest of the group practiced their small-talk skills, I imagined a version of the encounter in which Mark's mouth opened and a goose-honk sound effect had come out. "Naughty goose!" I chided, and an invisible audience laughed.

I tried to hold this goose in the forefront of my mind as further meetings of the dating league approached. As I continually reevaluated whether it was worth it to go. During my bleaker moments, I sometimes felt as though my brain were reduced to a quadrant, wherein "choice" was just a series of coordinates along an x-axis ("cool") and a y-axis ("stressful"). I had tried explaining this outlook to my guidance counselor years ago, in middle school (she asked me, apropos of nothing, to keep a "feelings journal" and meet with her regularly), since I was worried that this wasn't how you were supposed to think about your life. She said that, actually, it sounded like quite a practical approach. I don't think she asked any other students to keep a feelings journal.

The quadrant came to mind again now, but it no longer seemed to apply to my current situation. Since moving to the city, I was finding it hard to think of *anything* that was particularly cool or stressful. Maybe this fact should have concerned me, but so far I liked it. Issues like this just made me seem more interesting to myself. I didn't think anyone else was having these kinds of thoughts. Ultimately, what the dating league *was*—I concluded after lying in bed for the better part of a day—was *funny*. It seemed ripe for moments: perfect circles that could be held and beheld and kept on a shelf, or wielded, if necessary, against the crushing doubt of a finite life in an infinite world. If I could get a story out of the dating league, that would be reason enough to go.

**

Each time we assembled (the "we" subject to inexplicable additions and absences each week), Mark began the meeting by announcing equally inexplicable changes to the rules. "You may only wink *one time*," for example. We then did drills he invented to hone our competitive dating skills.

This week we were trying on new identities, courtesy of index cards that Mark had secretly prepared in advance. How could we go on a first date, Mark reasoned, if we weren't first strangers to each other? I sat across from Kevin, who I had never spoken to in my life. His pecs rose up and down almost imperceptibly as he breathed, like deep sea ocean waves. On my index card was the beginning of a list: 1) You like IKEA.

"How do you feel about furniture?" I asked Kevin.

Mark was sitting next to us in the self-appointed role of both coach and umpire. He frowned at my question.

"As a metaphor… for society," I added. Mark drew some tally marks in his notepad.

"Well, I do like my Nana's day bed," said Kevin. "It's the perfect height to do push-ups on. Then for taking a nap. Then for waking up and doing some more push-ups. I guess you could say that furniture's a metaphor for… woah, fuck! A *meta-for for for for*. Four 'fors,' hahaha. Sarah, you hear that?"

Across the room Sarah looked up from her index card and rolled her eyes.

"She can't admit to herself that I'm a genius. Anyhoo, furniture, so. The metaphor is, ummm, for having a sexy chest. Of drawers! Write that down Mark, it's a *pun*."

Mark wrote something down.

"So, a day bed…" I said. "Isn't that really just a night bed… and a day couch?" I was trying to be insightful.

"Wherever she'll have you, man. Wherever. She'll. Have. You."

"Kevin," said Mark. "You're supposed to be a flight attendant. And you lose a point for saying 'um.' Try making companionable eye contact when you don't have anything else to say."

Kevin looked Mark deeply in the eyes and struck a pose involving an upturned palm. *"Can I get you a drink, Mark? Or would you like to try one of our—ahem—premium services?"*

"Save it for your date, dude." They both turned to look at me, and I looked reflexively down at my index card: 2) You have cats.

"Have you ever tried stacking your cats, Kevin?" I said. "Into some kind of structure?"

I ended up winning that round. As it turned out, competitive dating was mainly about asking questions—any question—until time was up. You could keep going indefinitely if you so chose. The other important thing, I found, was to be unapologetically quirky. Something I had never apologized for once in my life. It was so freeing to know that the other person had to just sit there and take it, whatever you said. When I went on actual dates, there was a panic-inducing sense that you had to build something together, from the ground up. One wrong move could knock the whole thing down, and each piece you contributed you might never get back. Competitive dating wasn't like that at all. You could build something with cats.

My roommate laughed at this line, later, when I told her the story. As I anticipated she would. "It sounds like you're getting the hang of this thing," she said. "Dating."

Ugh, that word.

"It's really *not* like dating. That's what I literally just said to you." She could be so dense most of the time. "It's different, I think, because nobody ever wants anything from you. There's no weird ulterior motive, or anything, for why people decide to talk to you. It's just talking, and seeing what happens. And not saying anything too stupid."

"Hmm." She sipped her tea. "Does anyone tell you when you've said something stupid?"

"No, you just don't earn any points."

"And what do you do with those points, once you've earned them?"

"That is a very dumb question to ask. I mean, what do basketball players do with the points they've scored? Nothing. They eat them, maybe. Mark's keeping a cumulative tally so we can see who wins."

"Hmm."

I realized that at some point (*but when?*) Mark had finally learned my name.

* * *

On my last day with the dating league, I was doing a drill with Sarah when it started to feel like we were actually on a date. We were talking faux-animatedly about car parts and Mark was off supervising some other pair. I don't know what it was. Sarah looked… *something*. Not sexy, exactly. More like she looked pleasantly like a mushroom. Could this be like love, I started to wonder? The conversation was flowing naturally. I wasn't worried about what was going to happen next. My life felt, aptly, like a car that I could get in and drive somewhere.

"Sarah, what do you say we get out of here, talk about car parts somewhere else?"

"Ha, right. Where? Like at a car dealership?" She performed an ironic hair flip.

I glanced around the room to make sure no one else was listening. I had never asked someone out on a date in person before: something new for me to try. "Yes, exactly. I hear they have a pretty cheap happy hour there."

Smooth transition, I thought. Yet Sarah looked slightly uncertain then, the way she looked earlier when someone insisted that narwhals weren't real. "You mean, like, there's a bar in the car dealership. In the back somewhere."

"No, I mean we should go to an actual bar somewhere, as a date." I threw in a smile to keep it casual. Still, her look remained.

"I can't tell if you're being serious or not," she said slowly. "But you know I'm dating Kevin, right? I've been dating Kevin for the past five years."

"You're dating Kevin?" I said it too quickly, loudly. She had to be joking.

"Um, yeah. Isn't it obvious?" She laughed.

"No way. You're not seriously dating that—that *idiot*. *Kevin*? Who just… jerks off all day at the gym? With his weird friend Mark?"

I didn't have time to even think about what I was saying. It was just there in front of me, already said. A highlight reel of the previous weeks melted down in my brain as I tried to locate evidence of a relationship amidst all of Kevin's gross jokes. But there wasn't even a discernable motive for her to date him. Sarah had always seemed so above it all—the dating league, Mark's friends—like she found all of these things to be innocuously ridiculous. Like she might be, a little, I thought, like me.

"Um… okay." Sarah's face was slightly contorted then, as if by puppet strings. "You don't even know them like that. Mark and Kevin are great. And like, meanwhile, I don't even know who you *are*. You just started showing up to this club one day and sat silently in the corner, just staring at everybody the whole time without saying anything. Who even are you?"

At that, the rest of the room turned their heads to look in our direction, driven by some carnal instinct. I realized I was still smiling for some reason. When were you supposed to stop smiling, once you started? Just snap your mouth shut all of a sudden?

"I…" I said. Everyone was staring at me silently, waiting. The kind of rapt attention, I sensed, that I had never before commanded in this room, or possibly ever. Even in the moment I understood it for what it was—a setup for something, a punchline. "Well, that's funny you say that," I said, making sure to pause for dramatic effect. "Because I have way more points than any of you. A lot more. Which means this must be really an incredibly stupid game."

**

The whole way home I thought about Sarah's comment. *You don't even know them.* She said it so definitively, and on some level she must be right—I couldn't possibly know every last detail of Mark and Kevin's lives. And yet, as far as knowing who they were as people? I felt completely sure that I did.

Everyone seemed to have such low standards for what was funny, what was fun. I hadn't laughed, not for real, in weeks. When I looked around the street—a woman with a bowler hat, a man wearing sweatpants—I was amazed by how many people looked like they'd never find love.

I noticed right away that my roommate wasn't home. Something was different, perhaps the barometric pressure. I couldn't remember a single instance where this had happened before. Although I wasn't really in the mood, this felt like a sign from the universe that I should be looking at porn, and soon enough I was immersed in a soothing landscape of faceless bodies. I randomly clicked, and an anxious-seeming title card assured me that the models were eighteen years or older at the time of filming and "still are."

In the scenario I chose, a man wearing a police uniform—the hat and shirt only—was punishing an obstreperous young woman who was also allegedly his cousin. Immediately obvious was the fact that they were actually enjoying themselves, and not just going through the motions. They lingered in positions far too long and did them all out of the prescribed order. The camera, much like a person, neither cut away nor zoomed. All of this was rare enough that I didn't even think to unzip my pants. Instead I wondered whether the couple knew each other, colleagues who had worked together before. I wondered whether they ever minded being objects in the world.

As they reached the climactic moment, doggy-style, their dirty talk faded into endless syncopations of heavy breathing and slapping. I could almost see their souls rising up above their undulating bodies, watching themselves in awe of the ecstasy they had been able to achieve.

Until, without warning, it was gone. The policeman growled, "Fuck yeah, Jill! Sweet Jill," and clapped his hands together a single time above the woman's back. The sound was jarring, yet

strangely distant, as if purposefully included to awaken me from a deep, hypnotic state. My eyes blinked for what seemed like the first time in ages. I felt groggy and confused, newly aware of being in a bed in a room. It could be that I was in someone else's body. The screen cut to black not one second later, before the policeman could even remove his penis.

I walked around the room to get some feeling back into my legs. At some point nighttime had pronounced itself aggressively, like a weighted blanket. Looking around at the grainy darkness of my bedroom walls, I had the sensation that something had happened, a trick. I had wanted the video to keep going, and yet it did not.

A jangling of keys from the kitchen signaled that my roommate was home, from wherever she had gone. A probing strip of light illuminated the gap between my floorboards and the door. I was suddenly gripped by an awareness that, if I announced my presence in any way, a vital equilibrium would be lost. I would be caught doing something terrible which couldn't be explained or justified in words. I held my position behind the door, to the point of cramping, listening to my roommate's endless shuffling around the bright kitchen. I barely breathed at all. She boiled water, sat down, stood up, opened a drawer, who knows. My heart was pounding. I still couldn't move. She was humming, now baking a cake. All I had to do was go out there and ask her a question.

Mathias Alpuente

Alpuente grew up in a clan of writers. He remains deeply grateful to New Orleans nuns and twelve years' study of the dance of words, and to the ten years at UCLA writing and editing journals. Adventures in Los Angeles rock bands and recovery challenges him to talk truth that breaks rules; Browning would recognize that goal as one for "[a man whose] reach... exceeds his grasp..." and mentor Stephen Yenser would add, "...as it should."

Poiema

Only a paper parasol spiked
into rum & juice over
ice matters less

than a poem. Only the first
wail of the first child
matters more.

Hold the paper and the wail
in one hand while the other
scrawls your next

poem. Bring fresh ink
to a boil. Become
dangerous stroke

by stroke as you spell
grief into joy
better than rum.

Ken Autrey

Ken Autrey, a Professor Emeritus of English at Francis Marion University, now lives in Auburn, Alabama. His work has appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Levee*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Texas Review*, and elsewhere. He has published three chapbooks: *Pilgrim* (Main Street Rag), *Rope Lesson* (Longleaf Press), and *The Wake of the Year* (Solomon and George). He helps coordinate the Third Thursday Poetry Reading Series at Auburn University.

Kayak

Let me not fall back on the word
"knife" to tell you how my kayak
parted the morning waters, nor "dip"
to capture the rhythmic immersion
of my paddle. The lake was not smooth
as glass, nor was it even a lake.
No hickory smoke permeated
the air, and although my wife stayed
back at the cabin, no coffee awaited me
to wash down buttery pancakes
turned out of an iron skillet
and slathered in syrup. Pancakes,
in fact, were no more available
than dancing coyotes, though
there was a distant odd howl
at midnight that startled us awake
as we lay under quilts on the screen porch.
After that I didn't sleep like the dead
and didn't catch forty winks
before the sun peeked above
the water's distant horizon.
Really, the pines up near the road
obscured the sun. It rose
behind us as we gazed west
at the gray reservoir.

Winter Lake

In winter the lake drops the height
of a grown man. The lake gods draw
down the waters, send them through
the dam's churning turbines. Water
becomes heat and light. The wide pool
shrinks, concentrates the world
of fish and turtles. Year-round,
eagles and temporary loons know
nothing of the rise and fall. The shore
displays its barren wares. Knots
of drift timber desiccate on the sand.
Docks almost fully immersed
in summer stand now awkward
and skeletal, shuddering in the wind.

Riam Griswold

Riam Griswold is an editor and writer of fiction and poetry. Their work has been published in *Red Rock Review*, *Book XI*, and *FIVE:2:ONE*, and they live in Tucson, Arizona.

Someone Was Born That Day; It Could Have Been You

You showed me all your garden tools and said, "Did you know that rain makes houses ache? It's their phantom roots, the memory of it." You said, "After my grandmother died, I forgot how to close my eyes. Every housefly knew my name, but summer smothered me with woolen palms; I couldn't dream." I saw words that hummed like insects in your hands, saw a forest leaping from your path. You lived on the fourth floor of a building built of stone, thick walls, where a tree still scarred by lightning reached out to your window. You lived in a rich man's muddy shed, sleeping between the disused flowerpots on fresh new bags of mulch. I thought I heard something, a voice or someone laughing, somewhere near the floor, and I asked if you had children, and you said, "Not anymore." You said, "Look at my petunias." You grew them in your hair, watered and fed them where they twined around the war room of your face. They unfurled in feral bursts of color, newborn snakes raising their eyes. I guess you didn't have a lot of space. "I don't have a lot of space," you said. "And I'll have even less once it comes." "Once what comes?" I said. You offered me more water. I saw the air crawling through the street map of your lungs. "I'm tired," you said. "Do you ever get so tired you think you'll never find your body?" "Yes," I said. It was warm in there, or maybe cold. A petal fell from your hair, and you handed it to me. There was dirt smeared on the back, a thumbprint. You took my hand and told me that ten years ago, you thought you saw a dragon in the sea. Or you knew you saw it—saw something. Your knuckles were cracked under my fingers, but they weren't bleeding. All your clocks had stopped.

Cormac Badger

Cormac is from Kansas. He lives and works in Brooklyn, for whatever reason. His work appears.

Single Action

The flier was on the door in the morning but it wasn't till I came back after work and read it—Stop the Asian Longhorned Beetle Dial XXX-XXX-XXXX to report Beetle Sightings and so on—and found her crying. It's an animal thing to walk in a room with someone who doesn't know you're there. She wasn't crying, really, but spent. She asked if I was mad at her, and I told her how could I be, and she said I bet you could, and I told her I guess so, it was possible. She wouldn't say much else and I drew a picture of a man at the coffee table, and around the man I drew circles, and patterns, and circles, and patterns, and I made us both some tea but she wouldn't have any and I had to drink them both. Sometimes people walked by the window but with the early foliage none of them had heads. Then I went home. I have a nasty habit of thinking at home so I came back to watch the house. She'd been renting the thing near a year for no real need, dead winter's plants wrapped around the porch and a light lit up in her bedroom loft and not much else to see, so I drew the man again, the circles, the patterns, and decided by completion I'd get drunk. I swore I'd never get drunk around her again but I didn't have the guts to swear off drinking quite yet which was my birthright, that is, God-given American self-hatred and pocket change, so I got drunk in the truck and fell asleep on her block waiting for her light to go out, but it never did.

I dreamed or I thought I dreamed about things growing in my feet, like a plant, and I had to pick them out with my hands but some of them had grown real deep and came out between my skin and tendons like noodles, and some of them were so deep-wound up my leg that I could feel the pinpricks in my shins and the crease of my knee. It's not a dream I've dreamt before and I'm not prone to drunk dreaming, but I'd been drawing the picture of the man with the circles since I was a kid and had resurrected the tinny practice to crack at the kind of childishness I thought had washed over her instead of indignation or shame, which you would expect. I was looking for a kind of kinship and if not solidarity then the manufacture of empathy. So with the drawings and the circles and the patterns, who knows what else had bubbled up with it—dreams, things stitched onto the wafting smell of laundry from a neighbor's basement, old practices, little fears, being able to sit down and watch a baseball game start to finish without a bit of guilt. I could see her world, maybe. You pull one memory from your big toe and feel the knots around your heart shift, you feel a pain in your back and you don't know what organ it is but it'll kill you if left unchecked. She lived in a world where you can't help but pull and pull and everything else comes with it until you pull yourself through that screaming needle eye of the present and there's nothing left. And then you find another string and you pull. It always comes back to those scanning fingertips bumbling over things in the dark. We can't but go crazy about the membrane.

I woke up early and drove real quick to get breakfast but by the time I parked next to the drive, she must have gone. I tried up at the house and around the back and got back in and ate my sandwich and watched a pair of finches fidget with a nest. She came back late morning with dirt up her arms and on her legs, hair knotted at her neck. I rolled down the window but couldn't find a reason to speak. She went in and lights knocked around her windows for a while till she came back out in a clean shirt, barefoot, hair flipping down to her waist. She walked right up to the truck and the heat came over me and she slapped the flier on my windshield and asked me if I knew anything about Asian Longhorned Beetles. I told her that I figured they were beetles with horns from Asia. She threw the flier in my lap and asked if I wanted to be useful, and I said sure. I wanted to ask if she was okay but I'd heard a dozen times it's the last thing you ever say so I just followed her up to the house. Our yellowed mugs were right where I left them. The Asian Longhorned Beetle, she said, is a species from Eastern China that came to America in wooden boxes and it bores into ash, poplar, elm, birch trees and lays eggs in them until the trees are infected and dead. She showed me pictures of withered trees and a beetle with two long antenna and white spots on its back like a kid's picture of a night sky. It's an epidemic, she said. I hadn't seen fliers on the other houses. There was a tree she thought infected, but she wouldn't tell me where it was, and she sat down and got quiet after that having spilled something or capitulated with a part of herself or more likely returned to wherever it was she went when she was nowhere. A radio in the kitchen was on and an old woman talked about blood, but not anybody's blood in particular, and not scientifically either. I asked what I could do to help. I don't know, she said, I don't know, they always kill the tree. I went into the kitchen and made some phonecalls to nurseries but they didn't know much about it, and she went into a little den to sleep but left the door open so I could see, and I was mad then, finally, because it seemed to me she knew what she was doing, knew she knew what she was doing, hated it, and kept on doing it anyways. But it took a kind of bravery or foolishness to leave me be while she slept there and I drew another man, circles, patterns, on the couch waiting around to find out which of the two it was, but the whole thing made me feel sick, watching her roll over, breeze playing at the window, her body rocking quietly and sort of uncrying, not crying really but like everything was being drug up into her own spongelike principles; maybe not crying, but dreaming; maybe not crying, but dark nothing and free; so I left her a note and drove home.

We went an hour out to the arboretum not for the trees but a small insectarium that had a handful of beetles, some Asian, but nonesuch long-horned. There was a study, she told me, where a man kept some hissing cockroaches for long enough they got comfortable and when he handed them off to a different person they'd go hissing again until he took them back and they settled down which is to say that insects, some of them at least, can recognize individual humans and come to understand their company. I couldn't stand the number of boxes. It's an animal thing

of another kind to be surrounded by insects partitioned, movements like a kind of mathematics spinning out of your head, a deadness to the skin, anticipation in every angle, and even though nothing's moving you can feel that the world has an independent kinetic energy that'll coalesce until you're dead and just keep on condensing forever, like you can hear the infinitesimal footfall of everything. The kids seemed to like it. The cottonwood, she said, is the fastest-growing North American tree, quick to live and even quicker to die. We stopped at a box with an emerald ash borer but I couldn't spot it in the detritus and after a while everything started to look plastic. But the picture of the beetle was nice. My great grandfather, she said, was buried in a cottonwood coffin. I figured there was no way she could know this and we left. We were nearly all the way to her parents when she said they'd expected me for dinner. I couldn't understand why she expected me to decline. I asked if they knew who I was, and she said well enough, and I asked if she did this sort of thing often, and she told me she hadn't been out to their house in a while. Which didn't answer the question. We had roast and listened to the news. Some kids had beat up a man down in the town plaza for a few dollars. The dollars were taken to be incidental. Her father stared at his glass and took birdish sips. It was impossible to get anything rolling and I suspect pretty quick everybody stopped trying. Her mom cleared up and put coffee on, and her dad called me back to the patio, and when I turned around, her and her mom had already disappeared. He gave me beer out of a mini-fridge and asked if I smoked. I said no, but he never did either. We had a few and talked about the civil war because he'd just watched a movie on it but he couldn't remember that much of the movie and I realized I didn't know all that much about the war anyways. I couldn't tell if he was already drunk but it seemed safe to assume. And then the sun was gone. It was too early yet for bugs so we fell into a hush. I asked if it bothered him that his daughter was up in that house by herself all the time, and he said: is she by herself, is that it, and I said: sir. He said don't bother with that, and I said yes, she is up there alone most of the time, and the truth of it is that we're not all that close. I had no reason to lie. I hate that house, he said, I have always hated it, I hated working on it, and I hate it now, ugly as a son of a bitch. You ever worry she might not be taking care of herself up there alone, I said, and he told me she'd always spent a lot of time by herself, it wasn't anything new, and I said: that may be. He kept looking over my shoulder and I realized in the dark he could finally see the TV inside and probably had maneuvered us suchly before the sun went down. I tried a few more times to talk and decided he was drunk after all, which was my way of giving up, and I moved my chair around so we could watch highlights of stuff neither of us cared for through the screen door like a thousand neon insect eyes, and us shivering. When I finally went in she was asleep on top of her bed. I climbed in and let my boots hang off. We dozed for a while and she told me she wanted to stay there. Maybe for the best. I expected her dad to be asleep on the patio when I left, but he wasn't.

I had a dream that someone was dead in the car with me so I got out and figured I

didn't have much longer either, and when I looked back in the car I couldn't tell who had died—not because they'd rotted but because it was impossible—so I started walking over unpredictable fields of prairie grasses under a close sun, maybe a hundred feet away, and I think I was in and out of sleep as I walked, or the land kept on changing like lines in a book just before bed, and after a time I found a tree alone in a washout along the trail and knew I had to make it there if only to lie down, if not to die, but when I got there I couldn't tell if it was a cottonwood, and the shade of the tree with the sun so close had shrunk to a point. Confused, I woke up. I was afraid to go by the house, but I went anyways and she wasn't there. I saw the guy who'd done it or didn't do it but certainly did something shooting pool a few days later off the highway and paid for more games than I wanted to just to be certain he didn't know who I was. They had a few pitchers. He never won. He sat out in his car, a sagging Honda, for a long time smoking and fiddling with the radio. He changed the channel every few seconds to something different. There wasn't any pattern to it, and no reason beyond a kind of mechanical process not unlike a clock, a concrete mixer, a guillotine. He got out on the highway and drove like a saint. We pulled into a strip mall and I got a spot at the gas station while he dove into a men's clothing shop. I could see a salesman in a purple jacket gesticulating between the racks but I couldn't see anybody else. After a while he came back out with a garment bag. He tossed the bag on the hood of the Honda and pulled off an e-cig. He had tattoos up his knuckles and his neck and had a high and tight he'd let slip. I thought about what the suit was maybe for, a death, a wedding, a job, a court hearing, a suicide even, but it didn't seem worth anything to me. I had a notion he wanted to be seen. He put the bag in the back seat and we both left. I followed him to a brick apartment building, but I didn't know what I was doing or how to do it even if I did. He left the garment bag in the car. I fiddled with the radio and changed the channel every couple seconds with a kind of regularity until I couldn't hear it anymore and I had no hands and the guy's burning yellow windows disappeared and I remembered the tree and how it cast no shade, at least not for me.

And then all of the sudden it wasn't Asian Longhorned Beetles, it was something out of view, precious, and patient. She never took me out to the tree so all my guesswork was secondhand and she never much listened anyways. We could rule out mistletoe and rust fungus but everything else took her a trip armed with pictures and a bucket of garden implements while I waited it out cooking off a stew, mowing her lawn, thumbing a bookshelf; there wasn't anything about the house to give the sense she was falling to pieces but there wasn't anything about the house to give the sense that she was anything at all—not the least bit lived in, stripped sterile for your plant-sitter just before a big trip. But there were certain things you didn't think. And with her, some questions you didn't ask. I told her how to look for cankers wrapped like rings and donuts around young, sick branches, choking them to death. Slime running down a time-lapse waterfall along the trunk. Dried scabs on stricken leaves and erupting from gashes

along their stems. Igneous cankers bust out the main trunk like a stomped foot. Spidery dieback in the youngest limbs of the tree. In some cases you needed to cut away the infected areas and in others just such pruning would likely kill the tree. I said if it was as bad as all that, she ought to call someone out to look at the cottonwood. She told me it wasn't her tree, and when I asked whose property it was on, she said she didn't know—nobody's, she supposed. We both knew the untruth and found it impossible and irrefutable so we didn't say anything, and pretty soon it all came back to beetles. I was prepared to agree with anything. We ordered an Imidacloprid injection treatment for eighty dollars. It couldn't hurt. On the day it came I fetched her my drill and showed her how to use it before we unpacked the nozzles and read the instructions step by step. There was something pleasurable about the whole thing laid out, plastic lollipops and injection tips and simple dictation and somewhere a browning tree up on a hill, even just the memory of the tree up on the hill, what-a-shame sort of hung right there on your tongue even though the worst was yet to come, but just the taste of it was enough. She filled her bucket and thanked me without thanking me and she was gone. I drew the man, circles, patterns, but couldn't finish it. There was a lot of sun left. I turned on the sink and remembered watching the silver thread ripple as a kid, watching it, something about the cavernous sound in a just-cleaned sink. A friend had asked me recently the last time I'd jumped just to jump and I didn't know, and neither did he, so I jumped up on her couch. Someone walked by out the window with no head. Pictures moved in the popcorn ceiling, most often faces, none too friendly. I used to talk to a being who lived on the roof of my house when I was a kid and said hell and tried it again, but the more I talked, the more I realized that the luminous being wasn't there; it was just me up there talking back to myself and I'd grown big enough to smother the whole house so no one could get up there if they tried, luminous as they were. I got a ladder from the garage and climbed up on the roof intent to watch the sunset but I gave up an hour out. I wanted everything to look new, the first time in the world I'd ever seen it. Which it was. But I couldn't convince myself it was so. She came back an hour after sundown and said it wasn't hard, that the instructions were very clear, but she wanted to do everything precisely, geometrically, and in the end, she figured it was pretty near perfect. The tree would draw the chemicals up its veins and into every leaf, right up towards the sun. I'd got us a six pack and when we came out the other side of it stone sober the whole world had gotten out in front of me and I'd already said the things I ought not have said. What we'd drunk was time. So I said them. She said it didn't have anything to do with him, it didn't have anything to do with her family, and it sure as shit didn't have anything to do with me. It didn't have anything to do with anyone or anything. It just was. Or it wasn't. I didn't understand the kind of abandoned hospital she was aiming to live in. A world of calculated angles unpopulated except for scraps of anxiousness and memory, and maybe not even that, if she could help it. A blank temple you worshipped the white walls, but it was never really empty so

long as you were in it, because nothing is as clean as all that. Or maybe she was right, and I was blaming things I could understand because it made them workable. But I could see I'd opened a door I wasn't supposed to and it wasn't one you just close. She said I could stay on the couch that night. She'd never offered before, so I said no. We talked about sleepovers, then, and I felt I could smell a certain blanket. I could feel someone at the top of the stairs of my mind but it didn't bother me. She'd only ever been to sleepovers out of pity, but it didn't mean you couldn't cherish it. I told her it was the only time I'd ever fallen asleep with lights on. An alien feeling she said, and I agreed, very much so. We weren't talking to each other anymore but to things that had and hadn't happened. I realized she'd come back without the bucket. I put a pot of coffee on and left.

It was another week before she went out to the tree. It wasn't so bad a walk from the house. I imagined something happening when we got there, but when I saw all that spring growth bottom out at a dilapidated fence and lull into pasture I didn't have the heart to follow along. The cottonwood wasn't on a hill after all. I lost sight of her and wandered back up the deer path. Back in the trees I clambered over schist and some limestone erupting from the bluff. Under the rocks was a small dugout and a pair of old boots, mold blooming up from the sole and snaking around the frayed laces. I had a notion I'd like to be evaporated on a spring afternoon whenever my time came around, leaving an empty pair of shoes. I strung the boots over my shoulder to be cleaned up back at the house, after which they'd probably last another hundred years. I waited back by the fence long enough I thought she'd left, long past the last animal sense of someone or something shifting distantly in the trees, and I pressed over the barbed wire and into the field where a small stream cut the pasture. The cottonwood had dropped most its catkins. The stream beneath was swollen red with them. As far as I could tell, there wasn't anything wrong with the tree. She'd never bothered with the injections. The beetles were out east in New York, Philadelphia, a little bit in Ohio. The tree threw plenty of shade, but I knew if I sat down, I wasn't liable to get up again, so I put a catkin in my breast pocket and walked the length of the fence, back into the woods, flooded with the sense I'd walked out here as a kid, some dim memory guiding me, and even if I hadn't, it was only a matter of time before I hit the river. Over the other side of the hill the woods thinned out into another unkempt field. At the edge of it was a collapsed barn and an old abandoned prairie church. Some of the roof had given in to wood rot, but the doors and the windows were firmly boarded, some kind of recent. A plaque along the path said it had closed in the 1960s. The original church, which burned down in the thirties, had been built of cottonwood, and the altar remained. I tried prying plywood off the windows and walked the perimeter until I found a storm cellar and a stone-set path. It had a fresh lock on it, but the latch was rusted and tired, so I pried up a stone and had it busted before long. I set my boots on the path and pried back the doors. Earth wafted out, and a good deal of time, and wet substantial dark. I made slow work of the stairs, mistrustful of woodrot. At the bottom, the cellar opened up and poured forth

a kind of cold. I couldn't see a thing but I had a sense of everything collapsing, condensing, right on past me and my life, the same insane movement. You look at that kind of dark for long enough and it comes alive. I felt my way along the stones.