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Poem from I Look at My Body and See the Source of My Shame: Ecstasy Facsimile ("Rescue me after the gangrenous limb's been cut off")

Mark Anthony Cayanan
Ateneo de Manila University

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Six photographs
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The photographs are
of Mercy by the Sea in
Madison, Connecticut,
taken during Poetry by the
Sea: A Global Conference.



In this volume:

Megan Alpert
Francisco Aragón
Karen Bell
Destiny O. Birdsong
Luke Dani Blue
Julie Phillips Brown
Mark Anthony Cayanan
Babette Cieskowski
Dana Curtis
Susan de Sola
Chelsea Dingman
Aya Elizabeth
C.W. Emerson
Farnaz Fatemi
kwabena foli
Samantha Leigh Futhey
Rasaq Malik Gbolahan
Amanda Gomez
Sara Henning
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Todd Smith
Sheila Squillante
Noah Stetzer

Sophia Stid
Matt Sumpter
Emilie Tallent
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Tracey Byrne Weddle
Tony Whedon
David Wright



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CRAB ORCHARD

REVIEW

CRAB ORCHARD

REVIEW

A JOURNAL OF CREATIVE WORKS

VOL. 24 No. 1

*“Hidden everywhere, a myriad
leather seed-cases lie in wait...”*
—“Crab Orchard Sanctuary: Late October”
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CRAB ORCHARD

REVIEW

GENERAL ISSUE

VOLUME 24, NUMBER 1

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A Note on Our Cover

This cover features six photographs by Jon Tribble of Mercy by the Sea in Madison, Connecticut, during Poetry by the Sea: A Global Conference.

THE 2019 RICHARD PETERSON POETRY PRIZE,
JACK DYER FICTION PRIZE, AND
JOHN GUYON LITERARY NONFICTION PRIZE

We are pleased to announce the winners and finalists for the 2019 Richard Peterson Poetry Prize, Jack Dyer Fiction Prize, and John Guyon Literary Nonfiction Prize.

In poetry, the winning entry is “Fable” by Destiny Birdsong of Nashville, Tennessee. The judge, Allison Joseph, selected two finalists in poetry, and they are “Minor Alchemies” by Christina Hutchins of Albany, California, and “The Dead Speak to Pharma” by Kelly Michels, of Raleigh, North Carolina.

In fiction, the winning entry is “Dogs of America” by Luke Dani Blue of Lethbridge, Alberta. The judge, Allison Joseph, selected two finalists in fiction, and they are “El Tigre” by Susan Lowell of Tucson, Arizona, and “The Moth” by Pascha Sotolongo Stevenson of Lincoln, Nebraska.

In literary nonfiction, the winning entry is “The Body After” by Karen Bell of Shinglehouse, Pennsylvania. The judge, Allison Joseph, selected two finalists in literary nonfiction, and they are “The Scent of Water” by Lois Ruskai Melina of Portland, Oregon, and “Good Nite Moon” by Tracey Byrne Weddle of Sacramento, California.

All three winners received \$1,250.00 and their works are published in this issue. All of the finalists also chose to have their works published in this issue and each received \$200.00. Congratulations to the winners and finalists, and thanks to all the entrants for their interest in *Crab Orchard Review*.

THE WINNERS OF THE 2019 RICHARD PETERSON
POETRY PRIZE, JACK DYER FICTION PRIZE, AND
JOHN GUYON LITERARY NONFICTION PRIZE

2019 RICHARD PETERSON
POETRY PRIZE WINNER

“Fable”
by Destiny O. Birdsong
(Nashville, Tennessee)



2019 JACK DYER
FICTION PRIZE WINNER

“Dogs of America”
by Luke Dani Blue
(Lethbridge, Alberta)



2019 JOHN GUYON
LITERARY NONFICTION PRIZE WINNER

“The Body After”
by Karen Bell
(Shinglehouse, Pennsylvania)



Megan Alpert

Alecto: Return

I wish I could tell you I climbed those killing bluffs
of black rocks scarved with snow only to bring back
 something we could live on
that I took the elements I had : *love, coercion, lies, fear*
 as if they were mere igneous stones
and forged them into shapes that I could use

Instead I hid
 kept pelts of animals dried blood boric acid
his voice clattering to the cave floor as crystals
 I examined for faults visible breath of silica
held them as protection against believing
what I now believe

*

When I was nearly starved
I called to the only creatures who could hear my voice
 sometimes noses pointed toward my scent they approached
sometimes thrown rocks made them dash and scatter
I spent a year like this : alone then visited then alone

*

Into the fire that blazes and engulfs :
 sex with sudden force, love, compulsion, fear
and the violence itself
 until my arms spread black-feathered
 and talons flare

When I am a person again
 I will descend the switchback trail
a blurred shape then clear

Megan Alpert

to find you
 unfasten the sack strapped to my shoulder
and raise to your open face
 the first true thing I have for us to eat

The Act of Her Anger

*...the anger she felt then,
not turning to him.*

—Robert Creeley

On the shore Theseus is gone from
On the shore that Theseus has fled
Ariadne crawls keening
His gone body torn from her left a burn
Her torn words stuck in her a white hot line of pain

Her face near the detritus her face near
the tiny broken shells
sounding into the ocean-left churn—
she finds a stone rough opalescent
orange veins all through

Ariadne rises and gathers
sews fishskin to leather and raises
patched cloth on wooden poles a labyrinth
In each room a many-sided word in each room
another color sweeps the wind-cleft tarp

Boats with quilted sails
bring children laughing
through her pain-made rooms
touching stones and glasswork
she adds to as she climbs the central pillar

At the top spread before her
interlocking chambers form
the letter *no* into the sky
and beyond the stretched island whitegold sands
the wrecked shore the distant pink

Destiny O. Birdsong

Fable

When T decides he'll put on the grizzly bear
suit already limp with someone else's
sweat, and chase the girls around the fairgrounds,
he's not quite sure what possessed him, or what will—
it just seemed like something to do on an afternoon
already so hot, the quilted and dark interior
felt like a cooling. And what he also found
was a muffling—the shrieks of children and the gurgle
of deep fryers scalding the air were now
garbled as he pranced his claw-heavy feet
on the patty-caked dirt. In the hollowed-out
cadaver of fur, he became hollow,
and soon, rode over the bodies of anyone
who wouldn't get out of his way. First, it was children,
stumbling, dazzled by the melting glitter
of red snow cones, the golden crackle
of funnel cakes dissolving in their mouths.
Then it was their mothers, indignant at the
anthropomorphized beast who danced a jig
as they scrambled to scoop every pampered bottom
from the ground. The better-salted tongues
threw curses after his wide-legged jaunt
toward the Ferris wheel and the spinning teacups
tilting on steel saucers. But soon, it was teenaged
girls, aloof, absorbed by nail polish, lip balm,
and boys, who were equally oblivious

to paws, upraised, closing in. T ran the girls
because girls are good for running—some were even
track stars at the local high school; the others,
he gave a head start, then followed
in quick pursuit, the suit filling with his breath
and aspiration, which made the space
neither colder nor hotter. Somehow,
he'd jostled the head just so, and he could see
the full slant of falling bodies slick with flavored
oils and pubescent musk. And just as he did
with the babies, he never stopped—there was no need
when, already atop one crumpling body,
another girl careened backward in her tall sneakers
only a few feet ahead. It was the feel of their torsos
knocking against him; how their spindly limbs
would tangle briefly with his calcified claws,
which were blunt, and far better at bruising
than cutting, and better still at dragging things
a few feet before they fell. One girl lost a strappy
gold sandal: the plastic popped loose from the sole
as she bumped along on her thighs, far enough
to collide into another, whose Mary Jane
slid free from her heel (it was two sizes too large,
but on sale, and so, a steal) and clocked another
in the face, her earrings flying
like horseshoes tossed by the indifferent boys in a tent
near the rodeo, and landing, as if intended,
onto two foreclaws skimming the air above her head.
Another, having already run herself out
of a sensible pair of Oxfords had a cashmere sock
shredded by stiletto nails; yet another lost
a proper boll of blueberry cotton candy,

Destiny O. Birdsong

so trampled into the dust it looked as if
a corner of sky had fallen. T made no apologies,
only marveled at the thumping bodies and scattering charms
that, only a few moments ago, were worn
either dearly or nonchalantly, as one does
when one is not aware of how much can be lost
to a whimsical cruel. None were thinking of this, perhaps
not even T, who, had he been accosted, might have been hard-
pressed in the moment to explain even where the costume
came from. No one knew that, beneath, flailed a frail
boy who turned pages for the church organist, or pushed
lawnmowers with his small shoulders in summer's dusk.
He was practical as himself, and would grow into
a man with his own petty grievances, stiffening limbs,
and a hopelessness that comes with watching oneself
become a being altogether foreign: old age biting
through his good bones like a beast through birch.
The thought alone is enough to make anyone a monster,
but bears are not monsters, so we don't know what
T has become as he relishes the girls' wails, loping
toward trailers lined like dominoes around the carnival.
With a zipper flashing on his back like a blade
no one had the gumption to catch between two fingers
and pull, he watched the houses that had wheeled themselves
into place, void of foundations and, at the moment,
people who would defend them. T thought: *Perfect*.
He could knock them down too if he wanted. His instincts
were that simple now, and—after the girls—that keen.

Julie Phillips Brown

Lexington, Virginia

*Stonewall Jackson Memorial Cemetery
13 August 2017*

Sunday will come, as surely it must,
with one more daily rise of sun through mist
over mountain pass; the sounding brass
and bells of Charlottesville ring on and on

This morning I will go to the gravesite
for the first time since I have lived here,
this town (some call it *quaint*, or *the shrine
of the South*), where street signs and headstones
bear the names of its elders, pastoral academics,
slavers: Junkin and McClung, Preston, Paxton, White
(this last, the first street laid in Lexington after the war,
was named for the Reverend William Spotswood White,
who came from Charlottesville to Lexington Presbyterian
Church, and whose *African Preacher*, Old Jack, ‘in every
situation, whether of freedom or of bondage, found
in the white man a friend and a brother’).

From the far gate, beneath the heavy green canopy,
I see Jackson’s distant *contrapposto*. The memorial statue
surveys the dimpled headstones as they lean together,
confederates mired in endless *blood and soil*.

As I stand before the wrought-iron enclosure,
my breath quickens in the thick of oak and woodbine.
I have come this morning in search of signs—of what,
I hardly know—the dead risen and returned, the arrivals
of supremacist supplicants, whosoever they may be,
should they come. I am here to witness and weigh
the difference in my native land, beloved and broken open
since yesterday. Now I am here, I find the perfect circlet
of Jackson’s kin entombed together: bodies still intimate,

his wife and infant daughter, not three months old.
Someone has marked her name with a rose
left among the curls of lemon laid at his feet.

One couple parks their pickup truck on the round path
beside the grave. A homecoming. She photographs the man
as he leans back against the iron stakes; he is the spirit
made flesh and blood, his boots hard-heeled in the soil.

I do not betray myself. We do not meet one another's eyes.
When she complains of the lemons, says, *They need to pick that up*,
I do not tell her they are the leavings of like-minded idlers.
What does she know of our local history. *Our*. How did I ever
come to know it? I make certain to stay long after they have gone.
I will claim whatever part of these fathoms is my own,
insist on other trajectories for history. But now, I am here
by the grave, weeping on the ironwork bench beneath the tree.
Bowed and laden limbs encircle Jackson's silhouette; even the sky
seems an arbor to his frame. Beyond the graveyard, I hear
the harmonies of late summer birds and distant, raised
voices, and I know that Sunday morning has come.

A congregation has gathered in Hopkins Green.
I take quick steps after the sounds of their singing.
Reaching the edge of the park, I see the faithful turned
toward one another in silent, living embrace.

Mark Anthony Cayanan

**from “I look at my body and see the source of
my shame: Ecstasy facsimile”**

Rescue me after the gangrenous limb's been cut off, diabetes, osteosarcoma,
the jeep careens into an evening, my head splits on the floor, rescue me after I've
gone blind from complications. If this is it, then I don't think much
of it, then I'm varnished in gasoline. Rescue comes at the age of thirty, my
life so pleased with itself it multiplies in my prostate, my colon,
my cervix, my breast. Rescue me for the lesions in my brain, my blood as
it sputters around the bullet, *Je reste avec vous* says my liver, my skin
a sunrise surprise, my right ear a cesspool, my will to survive propped up by
cheap gin. For when my desire to be remembered reaches for the rolodex,
meet me after pneumonia, the plague, or great pain. Barbiturates succor me,
deliver me after I'm bludgeoned by a lover I've betrayed. Off a steamship
or a cliff, my balls slapped silly with a jimmy gooseneck, I've filled my
pockets with rhapsodic farewells. Long on style and short on sense
my sentence is a bottle cap—save me when my throat's slow to close over it.

Permission

My desire lies in living things,
the heirlooms of past lives. I'm collecting

things I've sacrificed: the lilacs pressed
behind glass, swallowtails seeking

perfect blue, the rosebud lurid in summer light,
the secrets chirping in my palm. I'm curating

a closet of mirrors. I want truth, a patient chaos.
I'm full-mouthed, bent and joyous, both power

and surrender, my skin the color of mourning,
marked by bruises I've begged for, tender reminders:

this time I'll like it best. O holy, extra-ordinary pain,
rush your red hand into me, reign supreme, render my body

an empty womb. O holy saint of pure release, leave me
blue and black and wet all over. O holy redeemer,

leave me pink, leave me bare, lead me into
the slaughtering line, bleating for your return.

Dogs of America

IN THE BACK OF THE VIDEO STORE, SLY AND I PEER AT OUR FORGERY: AMERIPASS—15 DAY on flimsy paper in Greyhound's telltale font. *Travel restricted to U.S. routes only.* The new expiration date wobbles on its cut-and-paste marks, but what bothers me is my legal name printed in bold block letters, official as a decree: ANNA, when in San Francisco I've always been Avi. Two years Xeroxed out of existence.

You think I can still pass as a girl? I ask, though it's not what I mean.

Sure, says Sly. If you want to. She snips the pass into a ticket-shaped rectangle and smooths it onto the lamination sheet. She's behind the register in case a rare customer shows up, one of the few not bothered by dust-coated shelves and a new release section that's all made-for-TV movies. I wish someone, anyone, would barge in, and rip the pass from Sly's hands. Her boss. An FBI agent. Or Marion, Sly's girlfriend, come to apologize, saying I can keep crashing on their sofa, that I should be their houseboy. I offered to do it. Clean and cook, fix leaky things. Kill ants. And hell freezes, Marion laughed. Sly said, Aren't there more jobs in Michigan? I said, Sure, Michigan's famous for jobs. That's why everyone in California is always moving to Flint. Besides, it's January. The ice cream places must be hiring. Sly thinks I'm not putting myself out there, but she exists in an employment bracket reserved for nice blonde girls. No matter how broke she gets, she'll always have a random job offer, a friend to crash with. No one would tell Sly to move back in with her mom.

I pull random videos from the shelf and stick them back in the wrong places. *Sleepless in Seattle* under horror. *Dumb and Dumber* into documentary. I try *Benji* in cult classics, suspense and local interest. He pants back agreeably from each slot, his wet-nosed heart on his sleeve.

It's five o'clock. The express bus leaves at seven. I hope I miss it.

Ta-da, says Sly, holding up the pass. It's as clean as machine-printed if you ignore the crooked text and the ragged edges. I push my video across the counter.

How many do you think they used?

How many? she asks, puzzled.

Benjis, I say. Like, for *Milo & Otis* they offed a ton of kittens.

My mom sobbed so hard during the waterfall scene we had to leave the theater. She could tell Milo—many Milos—were drowning because the kitten's eyes changed color between shots. Imagine if that was you, she said out in the lobby, wiping her nose on a napkin.

Oh well, Sly shrugs. She's hardly seen any movies because her Pentecostal family considers Hollywood an abomination. She ran away from them on the legitimate Ameripass that we copied mine from, and which is about to ship me back to my mother and stepfather, freshly-minted Jesus freaks themselves.

Ironical. Also: her idea.

Come on, Avi, she says. Presbyterians are minor league. Your parents love you.

We've been having this fight since I found out about them turning Christian. She thinks I'm a hypocrite because isn't female-to-male a kind of conversion? It's not but I can't articulate how. For once, though, I resist the urge to argue.

You told them you're coming, right? says Sly.

Yeah, I lie. They're geeked.

She sticks the pass into my pocket, inspects me like I'm a kid on the first day of kindergarten. I almost expect her to ruffle my hair.

Call the second you get there, says Sly. If anything bad happens, call collect. She hesitates. Call even if it seems like nothing. Even in the middle of the night.

The fluorescent light quivers. I fail to suck back tears.

Snot-nosed, I say, What's minor league about Jews converting to a hegemonic religion?

Sly's hand drops. You'll be late, she says, handing me my duffel and backpack. She's tired of this fight, tired of my anger, my excuses. She's tired of how I move in circles. Tired of my sleeping bag snail-curved on her living room floor, my empty bank account, the dumpstered bagels that are the only food I ever bring home. She's tired of me in general. We have that in common.

I don't want to go, I say.

Yeah, she says, which is not *stay*. She must feel guilty because she adds, Save up quick, okay? When you come back, Marion and me will help you find a place.

Yeah, I say. I'll scoop ice cream like a demon.

That's the spirit.

The ocean wind smacks me as I cross the threshold. Sly steps out hugging herself. Here, she says. For food. Crushes cash into my glove.

The wind sheers my cheeks. San Francisco purples.

Exit me, stage right.

THE GREYHOUND STATION IS NOT ACTUALLY GRAY BUT BLUE, MINUS A SILVER logo as banged-up-looking as the people waiting inside. I'm supposed to show my Ameripass and photo ID to a ticket agent, tell them East Lansing, Michigan and request the route that goes through Portland. They'll input the serial numbers and hand me a ribbon of tickets.

Give them a *fake* serial number? I asked Sly. I pictured security guards

billyclubbing my kidneys. Or, the ticket agent matching my cracking boy voice to the F, for Fucking Dead Trannie, on my license and calling the real cops.

You're charming, said Sly. Flirt. They'll believe you. I've done it a bunch of times and never gotten caught.

I promised to follow her instructions, but Sly has Shirley Temple ringlets and still wears Lip Smackers. The cops would sooner sing her happy birthday than put handcuffs on her dainty wrists. Marion is the one who told me I could show the pass to a bus driver directly. No tickets that way but it's safer, Marion said. Avi will get confused without tickets, snapped Sly like I wasn't in the room. He'll miss his connections.

People push toward the bulletproof window, trade cash for tickets and fan out toward numbered doors. Sly is probably right about me getting confused, but Marion is butch and Native and knows about cops. I clutch my Ameripass, turning like a weather vane from the ticket windows to the departing buses, not sure which orders to follow. Door 20 lines up and boards, then doors 9 and 14. Who knows where they're all going.

The ticket agents have identical pink manicures. Next! they call in an uncanny unison that makes my internal alarm system beep. I can't show my ticket to an agent. I'll pee my pants.

Door 6 Portland, fuzzes over the PA. Luggage-laden people flood toward door 6. I move into their stream. Marion's right. It's not that complicated. I'll show my ticket to the driver and sleep until Portland. After that it's only three days and two buses to Michigan. What is there to get confused about?

There's a delay at the doors, people grumbling. I see the obstacle: a shouldery terminal guard passing a plastic wand over the Portland passengers' arms and legs. A metal detector. Not intended for hitting but I bet it gets used that way. The guard looks up, gaze creeping over my baggy polo shirt and shapeless Carhartts. I pull the brim of my hat lower. At the opposite bank of doors, a driver last-calls Santa Fe. There's no guard for the Santa Fe bus. The handful of passengers are being waved right through.

Hey you, says a voice behind me. Yeah, *you*. Threatening. My private alarm system wails and beeps. My sweat smells like wet dog. I turn slowly. A dreadlocked punk wrinkles his pierced brow, says, Can you please move forward?

IDs please, bellows the guard. He glances at me. At or toward. His skin paste-pale. Why do sun-deprived people all look like murderers?

The Santa Fe driver goes out door 3 and walks to her bus. I tear across the terminal, backpack banging, and hurl myself after. Santa Fe! I say, brandishing the Ameripass. The driver frowns. *Womp-womp-womp*, goes my alarm. Brain cells fling themselves off gray matter cliffs. May-day, Captain, we've hit an iceberg!

You're supposed to have a ticket.

They said I could just show you the pass.

The driver cranes around to glare at the settling passengers, then back at the lit-up terminal. She grunts, If these fools don't care, why should I?

WHATEVER YOU DO, SLY SAID, GO NORTH, THEN EAST, NOT THE OTHER WAY around. Those desert buses take forever.

THE SANTA FE BUS TURNS OUT TO BE HEADED SOUTH MORE THAN EAST. Away from Michigan. Fine by me. We stop in Modesto, Merced, Fresno and at a gas station in the sun-abandoned desert. A new driver gets on and the passengers buy chicken McNuggets even though it's midnight. Sly said the express route would take two and a half days. I calculate accordingly that *forever* will take at least four.

SLY HAS WRAPPED HERSELF AROUND ME AND WE ARE ROLLING DOWN A HILL. *She is trying to tell me something but I can't breathe. On every rotation, the ground slams us together.*

I wake under the dimmed safety lights to the slam of the bus running over a fleet of armadillos, or another rock-like desert animal. Turtles. Engorged sand clams. Hunching, ossified coyotes. The ace bandage binding my boobs has cut off my circulation and there's seat grit under my nails. I tell my body to sleep, but my alarm is going off again. *Womp-Womp-Womp-Womp*. Sprinkler system and bail buckets, and ropes prematurely cut. Lifeboats bang into the ship. Fleeing women and children are dismembered by the ropes, bleed out in untimely death.

Everything in my life is fucked. And I still haven't called my parents.

WHO CARES IF IT MAKES THEM HAPPY? SLY ONCE SAID ABOUT MY PARENTS' conversion.

YOU'RE HAPPY? I ASKED MY MOM.

You're oversimplifying, she said, the phone line crackling.

THE AIR-CONDITIONER BLASTS ON IN THE NIGHT, EVEN THOUGH IT'S desert-cold outside. One grandma keeps heading up front to complain, and the driver keeps saying, I guarantee, ma'am, the air is off.

I don't mind the cold; it gives me focus. I wrap a pair of sweatpants around my Carharts and write in my journal, *This is a very cold bus*, which sounds good but leads nowhere. I wake up in Los Angeles to a runny nose and my gorilla-sized seatmate politely climbing over my legs. He says something in Spanish. In English he says, Breakfast break.

The rest of the bus unloads, except for a crazy guy who is talking to himself. If I get off, I'll have to show my pass to a new driver. My joints feel glued stiff from sitting but I stay put. Without bodies, the bus smells like the back of a coat closet. Galoshes and crinkled up sport socks.

If the KO-reans and JEWS get inside my house, the guy mutters, we won't be having just a conversation, we'll be TALKING.

The new driver wants to see my pass anyway.

IN PHOENIX, WE LAY OVER AT A STATION WITH A FOOD STAND. THE OPEN sign blinks seductively. I float inside before my brain's safety monitors can opionate. I haven't eaten an actual meal since lunch at Sly's. We had homemade mac and cheese, my specialty, Sly's favorite. She said it was the best I'd made. We took turns sucking hot noodles and giggling. She sproinged my curls. I smelled her neck. I waited for her to say, *Screw Marion. You stay as long as you want, mister man.* Her hair smelled like lavender.

I buy four pieces of pizza and a small Coke with free refills, jamming the change into my jeans. The refills turn out to be a bad idea. I do the pee-pee dance between the men's and women's rooms. Stocky guys stride into the men's in wranglers and jackets. The women have fluffy heads and cleavage. I try to picture which side I most resemble. Flattened uniboob chest, hoodie, Chucks and squeaky T-voice could go either way. The tricky part is my face. The silky quasi-mustache puts me solidly in the boy column, but my skin has this sickening glow, evidence that estrogen is winning. My kegel muscles pulse madly like if they can't make pee they'll make me cum instead. I choose the women's room and immediately wish I hadn't. Waiting ladies stare. A baby fluff-head tugs her mother's sleeve, says, That's a *boy*. I unzip my hoodie and thrust my uniboob out like a prize. In the toilet I pee until my vulva aches. Not you too, I tell it. Someone around here has to keep it together.

MOM AND GEORGE HAVE A NEW NUMBER. I LOSE MOST OF MY CHANGE getting it wrong.

Hello? says a high voice. Brodie, George's son.

Tell my mom she was right, I could say. I'm so broke and clueless my only friend kicked me out. I'm so pathetic I had to steal a bus ticket to get home.

Hello? says Brodie. Is this a prank?

I could say, *Hey kid, this is your fuckup gender failure of a step-sibling, who by the way is still Jewish. Please put my clinically depressed, second-coming-awaiting mother on the phone so she can express her lack of surprise.*

I hear you breathing, says Brodie. I'm going to hang up now. He sounds younger than he did last spring, which makes zero sense.

Misery is contagious, I could say.

MY BODY IS CHANGING. IT IS UNDERGOING A GREYHOUND-SPECIFIC transition, molding itself to the shape of seats, retreating automatically from other passengers who pursue by way of flesh and spilling diaper bags and Discman cords. I am the troll of Greyhound Lines, Inc.

Correction: I am one Greyhound troll among multitudes. Exhausted

people trickle out at local stops, yet the bus always feels the same amount full. Everyone onboard is greasy-haired and thick-tongued. Except the kids. Middle-school-aged to a few years younger than me, they sit in the back and namedrop other teenagers which makes them seem like classmates on an unchaperoned school trip. Then one gets off and another gets on and the newbie jumps in on the namedropping like every kid knows every other kid now. Like high school finished sucking and now you can have friends even if you're zitty and snaggletoothed. Except they aren't nice. Like all kids, they're brutal and barely contained.

At twenty-one, I look their age. Like a their-age freak, ripe for devouring. But I'm safe up front. I'm miles away, camouflaged by my seatmate, a gnome asleep with her chin on a bag of cotton balls she is hugging.

THE KIDS TROOP OUT AT A GAS STATION FOR MOUNTAIN DEW AND CANDY bars. They troop back in, unpeeling Baby Ruths, talking with full mouths. A white, black, and Asian trio—edgy, muscly, and plain big—stop at my row. Close enough to smell nougat. They look like a brochure for Camp Kick-Your-Ass, enrollment status: open.

What's your name? says the black kid, staring at a space next to my head. I glance where he's looking. Technicolor seat-fuzz. He continues staring. Suicide bombers never make eye contact with their victims. Friendly dogs avoid other dogs' gazes going for the butt-sniff instead. So, is he friendly dog or child soldier? *Womp-womp-womp*. Captain doesn't know, sir.

Avi, I whisper, chickenshit.

Sit down, yells the bus driver. Hilarious shrieks from the back. The boys swivel.

Suck it, sluts, calls the white boy. Girl laughter. The boys stomp joyfully down the aisle. The Asian boy, fast eater, tosses his empty wrapper over his shoulder. It lands on the gnome's shoe like a chocolate-smeared bow.

I can't remember anymore how talking works.

IN SANTA FE, I DEBARK ON QUAKY SAILOR LEGS INTO SUNRISE. A PINK street where soft-cornered buildings drowse. *Adobe*, a word I must already know, runs down to my mouth and does a hip-wiggling dance there.

Adobe, adobe, adobe, adobe, oh do be. Oh don't be.

It's cold but I don't care. I rode a thousand or something miles for free. I'm a fucking champion.

AT A TAQUERIA DECORATED WITH PAPER CIRCUS GIRLS AND ACROBATIC poodles, I eat a breakfast burrito standing. Someone elbows in, body mashing mine with familiar heat and pressure. *Sly*, I almost say and catch myself. For a hopeful second I wonder who I know in Sante Fe.

Sheri G., says this girl, offering a sticky hand. But people call me Cherry Cheese. It's better for remembering.

Avi, I say automatically.

Like Chevy, she says. You know they went bankrupt.

Sheri G. wears a patch over her left eye. She flips it to the right. Talking to her feels like water going down a drain, fast and slow at once.

I've got this brain condition, she says. My eyes can't combine their pictures so if they're open together it makes me barf. Like with you. She bugs out her naked eye. Are you a he or a she or both?

The usual heat slinks up. Sheri G. cocks her head, flips her pirate patch. Her maraschino cherry bob is growing in black at the roots. Her brown skin is riddled with spray drops of white. She reminds me of dessert, or a cartoon character. Or a person in a dream.

I'm a wolverine, I tell her.

A mutant? she laughs, displaying sharp rodent teeth. That's funny. You're funny.

Wolverines are weasels, I say gravely. Rare ones.

Oh yeah, she smiles. Going extinct, I bet.

Habitat fragmentation. They keep getting kicked out.

Sheri G. twists her mouth, chewing avocado. Want to know why I can tell you're a girl? She stops chewing to smile. Her teeth line up in a pointy row. You're ugly.

I must have heard wrong.

Yeah, she says, happy, like she solved a tough equation. Only girls can look ugly. For guys, ugly is normal.

My reflection ripples in agreement from the salsa-smudged metal counter. Thirty-six hours of yuck coats my skin. I wish for a hole to hide in. And to punch Sheri's discolored face.

Got a bus to catch, I say.

Don't worry. She tails me to the door. My sister's a total dog. Guys go nuts for that. You know what I mean, she says. Humpty hump.

A COWBOY MISSING A THUMB SELLS ME A POSTCARD FEATURING THE different New Mexico cacti. Unlike the roadside cactuses, these ones are festooned with blossoms so pink, I can practically hear my mother call them tacky.

Dear Mom and George,

Good news! Left California. Due in to Michigan Sunday morning.

Can't wait to see you.

Love,

A.

At every word, I ask myself, Is this what a normal person would write? Is this what Sly would say?

THIS IS YOU? ASKS THE DRIVER OF THE OKLAHOMA CITY BUS, SCRUTINIZING my license photo.

This is you? he says again, pointing to the line on the pass where Sly pasted my old name. The 'A' in Anna, I realize, is lowercase. When he hands my license back, his thumbprint is outlined over my neck.

The bus is near-empty. I take the back row, the teen row. It's mine now. I am the teen.

DEAR SLY,

Bus roulette

(instructions for a game)

Object: To reach Home*

Obstacles: Uniboob, silkworm mustache, Greyhound cops, anxiety disorder.

Contents:

1 fraudulent bus pass

1 government-issued ID

1 5th grade U.S. geography education

Unlimited: senseless excuses about why you didn't visit the ticket counter to get a real ticket

Natural charm (purchase separately)

Gameplay: Play begins at any major Transfer Point ("Greyhound Station"). Using 5th grade U.S. geography education, player must select a bus headed in the general direction of Home. Should player choose wrong bus, s/he must go back a corresponding number of spaces on the board. Player may opt to skip a turn and remain at the Transfer Point.

Play ends when one of the following occurs: player is arrested, player reaches Home, player forfeits the game.

*Home = a malleable destination, potentially non-geographic in nature, ref: "Home, where the heart is," home plate, homestyle and "my home is in god"***

embroidered on this lady's baseball cap. She's reading a pamphlet called 52 Uses For The White Space At The Back Of Your Bible*

***Not really. But she should be.

Love,

Avi

MILITARY GUYS FILL UP THE BACK, BOXING ME INTO THE CORNER. THEY talk about beer pong and a video game where you can tear off a bad guy's balls and feed them to a Doberman Pinscher.

You need an unlock code, explains the kid beside me, *mano a mano*, conspiratorily. He leaks his thigh across my seat's frontier. In my peripheral vision, his Adam's apple bobs. My pulse too loud in my ears to hear whether he's breathing fast too. Buzzed hair and tucked camo, a code signaling claustrophobic male spaces where bodies grab bodies to the music of grunts and hard breaths like those now emerging from my mouth.

Our respective testosteronees are smoke signaling each other, I'm sure. I'm pretty sure.

I say, Can you figure out the code by playing?

He chews loose a sickle of thumbnail. The Doberman stands out but in other respects the level's normal. He rubs the bitten nail across his own knee and I feel it along mine. He's tall and wide like a buffalo. He could crush me. Trans guys trade stories about this shit. Sucking cock in bus station bathrooms, flipping bio guys before they see your hard-on is pure silicone. They say no one notices, no one gets hurt. Those silicone dicks cost a hundred bucks, but I can do the first part. Push him against the wall, unzip him with my teeth.

I've never seen an erection up close before. How tricky can it be? Guys are easy is what Sly says. She used to screw for money. Sly also says: Steer clear of men. They're all psycho.

The outside of the Clovis truckstop is painted to look like a U.S. flag.

Gonna take a whiz, says my army kid. Then, low, a thrum that might not be words, might be my own blood, Coming? He marches ahead.

Dizzying racks of trucker products. Kingsize candy bars, footlong subs preserved in plastic wrap, sunglasses with polarized lenses. Bulk packs of ribbed condoms. Christian audiobooks. The men's room is on the left. Private shower rooms on the right. For *showers*. Sure. My army guy passes the subs, the kingsize bars, the sunglasses. Nods to me across the condoms. A super-alarm in my brain, boss of all alarms. Throbbing white noise that blots out sound. Sly is always telling me to want something. Choose, Avi, she says. Quit hiding. My sneakers land where his boots vacated. I'm the Titanic awaiting the iceberg. So horny I could crack my own damn hull. Go right, I will him.

My army kid goes right.

FROM ACROSS THE ROWS OF SHELVES, THE MILITARY GUYS LOOK IDENTICAL, baby-faced and muscular, like brand-new guns. They buy creme-filled snack cakes and tromp out through the automatic doors. My army guy, having realized he was stood up, has long since returned to the bus. The other passengers have also migrated back to their sleep-encrusted seats. Not me. If anyone sees me, they'll think I'm praying, kneeling in front of an audiobook display featuring angelic, airbrushed children whose ginormous eyes are at risk for poke-out accidents. I'm ordering my body to stand up,

but my backpack weighs a million pounds and my knees stay stuck to the linoleum. Right pose, wrong place.

The PA system howls for remaining Oklahoma City passengers to reboard.

My duffel is under the bus, I tell my body.

There's no clean underwear in this backpack, I tell my body.

It's over, okay? I tell my body. We're not having sex with anyone. I promise.

The PA message repeats twice and then not again.

I drink Pepsi refills, mostly foam, in front of a grease-streaked window overlooking the diesel tanks and urinate in a Porta Potty. Single flakes of snow melt mid-air.

THE NEXT EASTBOUND GREYHOUND TO ARRIVE AT THE TRUCK STOP IS full, but a lady says her toddler can sit on her lap. She's light as a feather, says the lady. Eats like a whale, grows like a tadpole. Not an inkling where she gets *that* from. Traveling alone, hon? says the lady.

Yeah.

What do your parents think of that?

Don't know.

She shakes her head. The baby sways in time. No matter how bad things seem, running off isn't worth all *this*. She gestures around randomly—people slouched across their seats, the pencil-smear highway, the blue sky. You look like a smart young man, she says. Go back. Finish school. The world will be here.

You're right, I say. A high school diploma will open many doors.

Too nice for sarcasm, the lady smiles. She is living proof that people figure this stuff out. They take their diplomas to cities and sign leases, earn paychecks, make friends. They get naked with fellow adults and enjoy it. They commit themselves to people who commit back. They stay instead of always leaving.

Sly says it's because I'm trans, but I know it's not. Trans guys figure out those things too. Everyone does.

Sandwich? Without waiting for an answer, the lady passes me American on pillow white. The cheese is melted into the mayo and the dairy mass is mushed into the bread. It's soft and good. My tired teeth barely press before it slides into me, cushioning my stomach with its chemical flavor. Outside is turning pink again, desert and stone. I guess we're nearly to Texas.

The baby sticks pinches of sandwich into its mouth. Kicks me with an inquisitive Nike. Weird they even make sneakers that small.

Getting out in Amarillo? I ask it.

Amarillo? says the lady. That's east, sugar pie. We're headed west. To Santa Fe.

RATON IS HUNGRY FOR A SHOOTOUT: LOW ROOFS, RED PAINT JOBS, MOON glow hills climbing up around the city. Every place is a saloon.

Raton, New Mexico or Raton, Colorado? I ask a man outside the transit center.

How you get so beautiful, Beautiful? he says, listing off his bench.

I pace outside the empty men's room until my bladder aches, then go pee in the dust behind a movie theater. The marquee advertises a double-feature: *Osmosis Jones* and *Red Planet*. Cold stings my nether regions. It's Saturday evening. If I'd taken the Portland bus, I'd be in Illinois by now. I bet I'm only a day's drive from San Francisco. I bet anywhere is closer than Michigan. It seems possible I could travel indefinitely living on Peanut M&Ms and Pepsi and local fast foods, turning the same pair of underwear inside out every morning, injecting my biweekly testosterone in the rear bus potty.

Are you a complete idiot? says Sly, angrier than I've heard her.

I pump more quarters into the phone, whispering so she can't tell I'm crying. The wind gusts my face-holes dry. I tell her I'm having an awesome time. She rattles off names of dead transsexuals. Asphyxiated. Dismembered. Dragged behind a truck.

Sly says, That woman last year in New Mexico. She didn't even look like a human being afterward. The EMTs left her corpse in the street! She says, Are you hearing me?

I say, I met this girl named Cherry Cheese. We're going to get married and move to Seattle. She told me I look like Dick Van Dyke. I think we'll be happy.

Call me back in ten, Sly orders. She hangs up before I can protest.

A woman shuffles over to the pay phone and asks for a cigarette. I fish in my bag, pretending. Sly got me to quit this summer when I went on hormones.

Sorry, I say, coming up with MUNI transfers and a lint-covered stick of gum.

I'll the take gum, she says. Pulls out a Diet Pepsi that she splashes over the stick. She wipes the last bits of fuzz off with a finger before popping it in her mouth.

We both like Pepsi, I say. It's something we have in common.

I just use this for cleaning, says the woman.

When I call back, Sly's calmed down. She tells me I can pick up my ticket tomorrow at the Customer Service in Kansas City. She had to put it on Marion's credit card. If I don't use it, she says she'll take the bus here and kill me herself.

I feel like I should feel patronized, pissed, ashamed, but I don't feel anything except the tiny hope that maybe Sly would come find me. Is that a promise? I say.

There's a midnight bus from Raton to Kansas. You'll have to keep busy until then.

I say, Cherry Cheese, isn't that weird? Who would change their name to that?

Go home, Avi, says Sly. Fucking go home.

IT'S BLUE IN COLORADO, A TREMBLING, ALMOST TRANSLUCENT CERULEAN and I get see-through outside with the smokers. In a ditch where the snow appears shallow but goes halfway up my shins, I pee the white into yellow. An elderly lady squats ten yards away. Her red coat folds around her, making her look like a poisonous mushroom. The only reason I can tell she's peeing is her expression. Relief beamed up at the jagged mountains.

I'd rather go out here than in a gas station, she says.

I just use it for cleaning, I say.

I want to ask her if I look like a he or a she with my bare ass brushing on the snow, my labial folds forming ice sculptures. A patchy stubble is starting to show on my jawline. *Your three day o'clock shadow*, Sly calls it, because that's how long the hairs take to poke out. This bus is rougher. Drunk dudes arguing through the night and more than one loud comment meant to be overheard. *Dog*, I got earlier. *Fag*. *She-male*. It makes me want to correct them: *Bulldagger*. *He-female*. They could at least hate me accurately.

I think for a second how if I get murdered I don't have to go home.

If I get murdered, I want to be shot. In the back of the skull before I hear them coming. They can do what they want with my body after I'm dead.

WHY DOES MY INTERNAL ALARM SOUND LIKE THE THEFT ALERT SYSTEM AT Tower Records? Down to the blinky orange light? The only thing I've ever stolen is wrong-sized men's briefs that hung off my butt like a diaper. And why is it Titanic-themed?

THE PHONE RINGS A BUNCH BEFORE BRODIE ANSWERS.

I say, It's, um, Avi. Your step...brother.

You sound weird, he says. Are you high on drugs?

I'm in Columbia, I say, Missouri. I don't take drugs.

Oh, he says. I thought you did.

You shouldn't either, I say.

I'm eleven, he says.

All the more reason.

Mom comes on the line sounding scared.

What's happened? she says.

Nothing. Did you get my postcard?

It said you were coming in this morning. Are you okay? Why did you

leave California? Why didn't you call? We'd have bought you a plane ticket.

I thought you'd be excited.

And we are excited, Avi. But we want you home *safe*.

I can tell she's really upset because she starts retelling one of my aunt Ruth's knock-knock jokes.

Pineapple who? I ask. She's quiet. Mom, pineapple who?

Brodie has your old bedroom now, says Mom. We packed up the posters and books, we didn't look inside your journals—

You can throw them out. It's all crap.

—because we felt like we deserved a guest room, says Mom. But I was nervous to tell you.

Nervous why? I say. It feels like another knock-knock joke. Knock-knock, nervous. Nervous why? Nervous to see you! Knock-knock. Nervous why? Nervous to still be breathing! Knock-knock. Interrupting nervous! Knock-knock, Aren't you glad I didn't say nervous breakdown?

Is it a Jesus thing though? I ask.

It's a guest room slash mediation space, says Mom. Meditation is nondenominational.

I bend the phone cable until I feel its links pulling apart.

My ten minutes are up, I say, like I'm in prison.

Believe me, she says. It's peaceful in there.

I BUY A PACK OF BENADRYL, KNOCK MYSELF OUT UNTIL INDIANAPOLIS. Locked fences around gray factories and a group of dogs throwing themselves at each other in an alley. My dad used to call Indianapolis the most depressing city in the world. He hung himself in Ypsilanti, though, and he always said that was a sweet little town. Where else can you get cobbled streets and pasties without having to fly to Poland? he liked to say. Detroit, I'd reply, my coached response. He'd shoot back, But then we'd have to find parking!

They turned Brodie's bedroom into a chapel, I tell Sly.

You mean a church? she asks sleepily.

No, like in the airport, a neutral prayer room.

You sound angry, she says, how a therapist would. Non-violent communication being all the rage in San Fran.

I'm fine, I say.

Good, she says. I want you fine.

Good, I say.

A high-pitched scream pierces our conversation. Stray dog, I explain. I don't mention that the dog is in a fight and that from up close it sounds like it's getting torn to pieces. A bunch of pitiful yips buried under sudden barks, mean low snarls.

Speaking of dogs, says Sly, Marion and I looked at puppies today. You can adopt these ones with disabilities.

What kind of disabilities? I ask. There's a long miserable howl. The barks fall silent.

Anything that would make a shelter want to put them down. Missing eyes. Missing legs. Epilepsy. One Saint Bernard runs into walls for no reason. He's wicked cute even with the scars. You'd love him.

I try to imagine loving a dog who collided with walls hard enough to draw blood. How on edge you'd be, bracing for impact. Would Sly and Marion pad their furniture in a layer of foam? Would they carry the dog around like an infant? Amputate his legs for his own protection?

You should name him Avi, I say. The operator is cutting in and Sly doesn't hear.

I love you, she shouts before it goes dead.

I try to imagine loving a dog like me.

FOR CRYING OUT LOUD, AVI, SAYS MY MOTHER. WE WOULD HAVE PICKED you up. She pronounces my name like she's been practicing its two syllables in the mirror and each one makes her separately sad.

Where's your luggage? asks George.

You're wet, says Brodie. I can't believe you walked from the station.

The shower stall shrunk since I left. It is the size of Clark Kent's phone booth and clogged with hair. Mom leads me to the meditation room, her fingers resting gingerly on my neck. It *is* peaceful. The furniture's been cleared out except for a brown bookcase, a Renaissance painting of Jesus crossing his fingers and a photo of the late family poodle, Kitten. On the floor are three meditation pillows for Mom, George, and Brodie to get peaceful together.

Kinky.

Their energy ghosts vibrate the air with Christian thoughts about fishes from loaves, feet on water, the dead who start breathing again.

Mom hands me a stack of sheets and an air mattress folded into a cube.

Since when do you fold?

She shrugs. This leads to a sort of collapse, her face melting like icing. Does it hurt? she says, pointing at my throat, the megaphone of my proto-male squeak.

You need a crucifix, I say.

That's for Catholics, Anna, says Mom, through bulrushes of tears. She is small when she hugs me, a frail cage of bones. Or I, the son, have grown large. It is largeness now that will be expected.

A-vi, I say, each syllable sad on its own. Outside, the trees look like bone cages lit with electric lights. Every dog on the block takes to howling.

Limin

WHEN I WAS THIRTEEN, I SAW AN ADVERTISEMENT ON THE ORPHANAGE'S T.V., about the opening of the city's green theme park. It was state-of-the-art. Trees came from far away—South America, Asia, Africa, Europe. If we visited the park, the ad said, we'd see their journeys. How young roots were pried, cleaned, preserved, wrapped like Christmas gifts from postal code HoH Oho or Lapland or Greenland, traveling across seas in a sleigh to join a new earth. The saplings were still fresh when the workers opened the boxes. Earth was shoveled to welcome them, and they prospered. Soils, unequal by nature, could finally agree, loam was international, it was one big family. There was nothing people could not overcome, if the city and its outskirts had felt forlorn, isolated, mired in backwaters of the world. These feelings could now be corrected, because of the imported trees.

The ad ran every day. Leaves, spear-, heart-, needle-shaped, tooth-edged and lobed, a hand made of ferns. On the hand's palm there were lines lit with fairy lights, a machine to insert coins for a fortune reading. A woman covered with mango leaves, asleep, a big bonsai hanging with baby ginseng fruits. They were independent of climate, changed colors like chameleons, to fit with the tourists' moods. There were trees planted upside down. Ariel roots like funnels, onion-looking trunks, cacti fields. A conservatory of imperial tulips from Holland, Russia, Turkey. Fun water rides, tree houses, cultural gardens. The ad ran five minutes. Investment had been high and it was reluctant to leave the screen, to make watchers long for it. A marching band filed past a mock waterfall in fanfare and pomp, a burst of confetti and a final caption read, "Come, be mesmerized by our trees."

Josephine and I were sitting on a rattan couch watching T.V. in the open-air communal hall of Angel of Mercy. A few lackadaisical girls were with us. School had just let out and we'd gotten back. Lunch—cabbages, macaroni, peanuts, luncheon meat—had been in the canteen. We'd cooked them. It was our assigned chore. Washing would start soon, but it was break time. Mrs. Aberdeen, the directress of Angel of Mercy, our home, was at the other end of the hall, by her pedestal desk. She was often scribbling, either that or reading the Bible, which had traveled across England through America. "It kept me sane," she'd said. She didn't like being in the orphanage. I'd known her since I came in, five years old. One day, awareness had seeped in and I ran into her lap and called her Mama. Her embrace was only for a while. Charity had a

time limit. After it was showered to feel good, it cooled, like courtesy. “I would not take anymore of this, Catherine,” she said, “Your mama didn’t want you, not me.” Catherine was what she called me. Limin, my original name on the birth certificate, could not be pronounced.

Josephine was chewing melon seeds. She said, “Let’s go to the park.”

“We’d need permission,” someone said.

Josephine was fifteen. She came late, three years in, and she was into fathers, not mothers. In orphanages, these were the two we really went for. Sometimes they came in disguises. Other times real—they drove in with nice cars and parked, went through the dorm’s hallways, entered a room and examined the children lined against a wall. The good-looking and obedient ones were usually picked—Diana, Elizabeth, Peter, Christopher, Gordon. Sometimes they came back to visit. The rest of us left on the adoption lottery felt ugly. Like leftovers. The unwantedness gelled, matured, and lasted, and we dreaded these “Family Acceptance Days.” Some couples really needed children. These we gladly went along with for survival. Many others were like royalty and celebrities, wearing good clothes and carrying umbrellas and handbags. A few flew in from Hollywood, brought cameras. Or they sent a delivery worker. A man from Brunei had said to Gordon, “Come, let’s go meet your new mama.” There were couples who appeared poor, but were together in public often, a kind of team defense, floating charity bodies. Adoption was written evidence and hobby to collect devotion and glory from the public. Not the general, but a bunch of invisible people in a higher sphere. “I’ve never seen them,” Peter said, “They could be aliens.” “They liked to be canonized,” Diana said. Children and happy families were weapons for publicity. Anything could happen to us, child trafficking, molestation, prostitution, pornography, while the charity went on. We might be transported to other countries and gutted and left to rot in drains. Soon, most of us were on guard. We distrusted the handsome couples, we did what we could not to be chosen anymore. Staring back, hostile faces, coughing, malaria, yellowing cheeks, typhus during adoption days. Mrs. Aberdeen was upset. She explained that collusion and cooperation were normal, but it didn’t work: “We want to choose our parents!” “We want to live to a ripe old age!” we said to each other. Then she pulled out a small book and made us repeat the founding principles of Angel of Mercy: “Your first job as children is sale-ability.” “Obedience, cheerfulness, cleanliness are your vocations.” “The orphanage is for a good cause.” “We raise proper citizens for the world.”

Our real parents came in disguises. The way I ran into Mrs. Aberdeen’s lap and called her Mama, then one Tuesday in the mirror saw that she was right, no, my mother was somebody else, with straight black hair and hazel eyes. My dorm mate Cassandra made the same mistake too, so she tacked a poster the shape of an egg on the room’s wall, and we designed and cut our favorite hairstyles, mouth, nose, eyes, set them into the egg to tailor-make our parents’ faces. We had time slots—today it was my mama, tomorrow

your dad. We asked questions like, “Who do you think your parents are?” Those more into fathers said they were architects, scientists, chemists, warriors and knights, others preferred directors, managers, executives. These were the first to leave Angel of Mercy. The ones into mothers were vague. There hadn’t been much of a model. On T.V.s we found angels, homebodies, teachers, secretaries. Cassandra wanted a career woman mom. My classmate slid me a Chinese martial arts comic one afternoon, and I found Zhou Zhiruo from the Emei sect. She had good fighting skills and her team of women used hairpins and needles as weapons of attack.

Later on I found Hu Sanniang from *Water Margin*. She’d fought the lusty Stumpy Tiger Wang Ying, who could not fathom how she could fight so well, and set out all the more to have her. And that was how she could lift him out of his saddle by the hair and hand him over to the villagers. I had a few pictures of my real mother and family. They came in a file with my birth certificate. One was taken in a studio, a woman in cheongsam with feet in pumps, and she was holding willow sprigs in a vase on a stand. Another was colored: the woman was carrying a baby and beside her two boys, and she was fuller in the face. They were in a restaurant with people I’d never met, sitting by a round table. It was someone’s birthday and a vanilla cake shaped like the number two was on the Lazy Susan.

The woman who was my mother had a plain face. It was delicate, with something startled in her eyes. Her hair was parted to the side, tucked behind her ears. I liked this woman, I had thought, even though I don’t remember her much. I preferred the black and white of her youth to the colored modernity. There was no pretense, self-consciousness, distortions, the pictures were not taken for anyone to praise, admire. Her face had one thing in common throughout: she wore no smile. With the right training, it was possible for her to be like Hu Sanniang. Later on when I was out of the orphanage I’d heard that, in those days, smiling was forbidden for some women. It was their fault if something happened if they did.

The two boys beside my mother should be my brothers. They were passive-looking, dull, their eyes half-shut, on the cake and not the lens. The baby was frowning. The first time I saw it I experienced an epiphany: that was me. After a while it passed and I was transported back to my ten-year-old body, and I rubbed my arms, wondering what happened to the mother who held me. When I asked Mrs. Aberdeen she said there’d be paper and notes for me when I left the orphanage.

The photograph of my father had a sweet, milky face. He had some pictures with my mother and brothers, some alone. A young man wearing a black shirt and pants and slippers, leaning against a railing fencing a sea, his feet propped and arms stretched on the crossbar. Another in a far-off city, with neon signs hanging and shiny behind him, and he was wearing a shirt and pants, smiling awkwardly.

When the days in the orphanage were rough, these photographs became a refuge.

But there were times when I was angry—why were they only photographs? And my heart hardened against these strangers who'd sent me here.

JOSEPHINE WAS ANGRIER THAN ME. WHEN SHE FIRST CAME TO ANGEL OF Mercy she was in a bad state. It was evening and raining, her hair was wet, her clothes too, the blue pinafore of Methodist Primary. Aditi, whose other name was Brittany, showed her to our dorm, 6F, a rectangular space with three ceiling fans, the floor smooth gray; my bunk bed was at the end. They came in canvas shoes, the rubber soles squeaking, then I heard Aditi's voice, "She just got in." The new face was pink, frowning, a raw look of anger like a beaten animal's, a dog who fought and was hauled in, and her eyes were downcast, not looking at anyone. Brittany opened the metal cupboard and pointed to the space beside my clothes. "This is yours," she said, and went away. I was on my bed in the upper bunk, cross-legged and doing nothing, just staring at my toenails and watching the window's glass shudder at the rain that had been coming down for the past hour.

Josephine shoved her backpack in and took the towel laid on the shelf, and began to wipe herself. First, her short hair, freeing the bangs plastered on her forehead. They were squarish and sharp on the sides. She seemed to have cut them herself, like uneven steps, short to her neck. She set the towel on the bed below. Then without caring if the rest of us were watching, without turning back, she pulled off her clothes. In those days, girls wore singlets. But Josephine had none. Her school shirt had come off with the pinafore dress and she was in a pair of exercise shorts. Her body was gaunt, ribcage prominent, her chest flat and her skin tanned. A tattoo was on her back, below her right shoulder; it was a Yale key, with its teeth pointing up. None of us had any, only birthmarks; it was unusual. Later, when we were friends, she told me that her father wanted her to have it. Brought her to the tattoo parlor one day saying he wanted her stamped forever with the key to his love.

Josephine was cold in the beginning. For several months she didn't speak to us. No, "Hello, I'm Jo." She prowled the compound on her own, through the linked hallways opened on one side overlooking a small atrium, with benches nested among trees and ixora shrubs where she was often found. Or at the edge of the basketball court in front of the building. She did her chores mechanically, was at meals alone, like she wasn't living here and had nothing to do with us. Most didn't mind. Everyone at Angel of Mercy knew that the world outside had been merciless, even those not abandoned but whose parents had passed in accidents—these believed that the world was an unnatural place. They thought that Angel of Mercy was a deathless place, that you, I, she, him, were evidences of ever-lasting life. We had a tacit understanding—the bondage of no parents—that kept us in and out of each other's ways. But we were

happier than Josephine. It wasn't every day that we sorrowed over our heritage. Jo was different. Every day she carried over a yesterday, which appeared as a permanent shadow on her forehead. She was aloof, not in an arrogant or coldhearted way, which some put on for coolness or protection, and which harmed only those smaller than them, or melted into kindness when faced with a dare or gun. Jo was opaque. Unreadable. Any emotions she had we only knew later what and why, her indifference steadfast as land below feet.

This bothered Mrs. Aberdeen. Who did not like it that nothing mattered to Jo. Who resisted nothing. No, Josephine carried out her duties normally, uninterestedly. They were easy work like hanging the laundry, or stirring a big pot of curry, the rotation of the ladle that did not require much thought, just a casual routine, which the boys of Angel of Mercy, on the other wing, were exempted from because they were seen as people of thought. Josephine didn't resist anything, but she accepted nothing too, and over time this looked strangely like resistance to Mrs. Aberdeen. When it was not. She didn't mind us too much, but when it came to Jo things were different, as though Jo was a nail stuck out from the top of her head. She'd not really done anything to antagonize Mrs. Aberdeen, but it was obvious that she heard nothing from the woman usually wearing a crocheted shawl too. "Clean the ashtray," Mrs. Aberdeen would say while smoking Benson & Hedges, and Jo did not say, "Glad to," "Sure," "I don't want to," "Do it yourself." She'd only look at Aberdeen as though she did not belong to Angel of Mercy, and did as told. Aberdeen grew piqued over time: "Why is that young lady looking at me like she knew me?"

Control defined children's everyday lives. It was always pegged onto something, a temptation like candy when we were younger, when having something to eat comforted us, like old people. Aberdeen's helpers, Longfellow and Vin, sometimes passed plastic bags of goodies. Eagerly, we reached our hands for the Ribena blackcurrant pastilles or Maltesers chocolate balls from a parcel from Britain. As we grew out of candies, Aberdeen and her helpers still kept it so, a shower of chips if we were obedient, performed well, added words of praise, which kept us blind. We pretended to stay children, we took the chips and chocolate. In this way Aberdeen felt she was in control, that everything was fine. She'd bought us instead of listening to our laughter tinkling like bells in afternoon wind as we did our chores—the cleaning, gardening, cooking, laundry, the baking of special holiday cakes—because pretended happiness was better than nothing.

But this control could not be applied to Josephine. Mrs. Aberdeen just did not like her. Things began to change at Angel of Mercy. The birth of human hatred came from obsession sometimes. There were two kinds, the good and bad, the former like for collecting stamps, investigating a clock, star gazing, naming plants, insects, but Jo was a person. Obsessions for a live human being included feelings. She was a juvenile too and this complicated things. Mrs. Aberdeen did

not like Jo and did not see her as who she was, a child. She didn't like herself and the bearer of that dislike was Jo. Her thoughts for Jo grew unhealthy. She could have been generous, let it go, switched her attention, like insisting on better homes, fighting for our rights in abusive ones. Instead, she was always longing for something distant, like, "Life was better in Yorkshire," "I can never get used to it here," "They have better charity places in Hong Kong," and that she began to see Jo as a graveyard. She turned into a predator of children and marked Josephine as "unsafe." "Some people are just born like that," she said. "It's not a matter of children or not." Which only meant the birth of discrimination, stigma. But for a change of feelings, which was complicated when it came to the human heart, it'd take time, distance, other people, maybe a misfortune, for two who'd disliked each other to meet again and say, "I've forgotten it all," "I'm sorry," "I like you now." Nothing could be done in such situations. Many times, this change of feelings never came and people carried hatred into their graves.

Instead of letting go, Aberdeen grew short-sighted and life became difficult for Jo: "You, wash the boy's toilet bowls," "Smile, can't you?" and during dinnertime there were sudden callouts, "Josephine, come to the office." Then once in the basketball gym, where there was a stage, and we were standing before it in assembly, Aberdeen called her Lolita to come up. Jo knew what would come. She walked up there like she was a hawk. Aberdeen said into the mike, "Last night this child was naked in the boy's wing." The boys, in files on the left of the auditorium, looked at each other and blinked. They wondered who had seen Jo naked. Later on they'd discuss her body, but for now Aberdeen took a cane, two feet long, and she pulled down Jo's sweatpants and beat her. On the fifth stroke Aberdeen's face grew strange. Her eyes, which were blue, changed their shade to amber. Her skin, which was yellow, turned powdery white. We saw clearly that her obsession wasn't Jo, but the power to abuse. When she reached the tenth stroke, she stopped. It was as though she woke from a dream and she steadied her face, collected herself, though it didn't matter since whatever children saw was false, and she spoke into the mike again: "This is what happens when you break the rules at Angel of Mercy."

Nudity was never thought of, but from that day onward it became a problem. It didn't take an apple as we knew from her Bible. It took action from Aberdeen, the owner of the Bible, and her caning to wake us into the glory of our shames. "Shame on me for not wearing clothes," Jo was made to confess into the mike. "One more time," Aberdeen said. "Shame on me for not wearing clothes." Jo understood the cruelty behind it. Shame was a weapon a hundred times more potent than washing the toilet. If the candies for control didn't work. When Aberdeen released her, Jo looked at her as if to say, "Have you had enough yet?" and at the corner of the stage she spat and rejoined us. Aberdeen didn't see that. This might be a child's world, where in time all about it seemed unimportant and harmless. It was just childhood, we

outgrew it, we liked to say, but if Aberdeen were president and we were adults, we might have had to clap for the one who was caned. We might be forced to, for fear of punishments, rush to carry Aberdeen's bags, smooth talk her, and win her love. But we were children and most of us agreed: Aberdeen was mean. Her unfairness was vile. She was the loser for this round.

The twelve of us in dorm 6F began to secretly help Jo. We didn't speak to her directly. We didn't alarm her, magnify and remind her of the caning, or ask, "How are you feeling?" We did it soundlessly. In the canteen we stirred her pot of curry, chopped her onions. Her plate had an extra orange or bun. If there were candies and melon seeds, we saved them for her. On her bed were five more T-shirts, a pair of sweatpants, a pair of jeans, and beside them was a tube of ointment. We did not like what Aberdeen had done. The human heart was fickle and we might be the next one. We protected Jo to defend ourselves. Soon, the children of dorm 6F were branded as the demon children. It'd have been normal for us to dislike Jo too, to blame her for giving us a bad name, to insist on not sharing the dorm, but this did not happen. Jo might not have spoken to us, she stayed to herself, but her appearance and ways did not seem odd to us, like to Aberdeen. In any case we knew that what looked good might hide a bad heart and what appeared bad was actually good inside. Jo's aloofness was something we understood. But the caning made salient the difference of characters, for some boys and younger girls from dorms 4A and 7B, which were the traditional numberings for those who believed that the world must be parented and that they were abnormal, and would remain children even when grown, Angel of Mercy was a hotel they'd soon leave, said, "Jo was shameless," "She deserved it," "She shouldn't have crossed Mrs. Aberdeen." People were different since childhood and this was diversity.

It was also the seed of fights. Tolerance became low in Angel of Mercy. Thus when we were in the communal hall once, the boys and girls had passed, and they snickered and laughed, and a girl from 4A said, "You should be in the boy's wing," pointing at Jo. A boy said, "You know, Aberdeen is right, shaming is the best for unruly children." He had high ambitions and wanted to be a deputy or prime minister in future. The status of an orphan didn't bother him, it'd be used for his ambitions, he'd said. "All should learn from Brian," Mrs. Aberdeen said. "This is the successful attitude we should have." Then Aditi, or Brittany, who'd always been solemn, grew angry suddenly and threw at them some dirty soap water from the pail we'd been using to wash the cement floor. The water flew high and onto the boy's knees. He was seventeen and wearing long pants, which had been his latest decoration, and they were wet and this caused him anguish, and knowing that he had Aberdeen's backing he came over and slapped Aditi. We were shocked. The slap was forceful and sounded like the crack of a breaking branch, so that Jo put herself before the tall 7B boy and Aditi, and she said, "You shouldn't hit her."

He said, "You caused all these, you homeless slut!" and he slapped Jo too. So Jo punched him.

The harsh criticisms would come, like violence was not permitted, violence wouldn't solve anything, violence was the root of evil, all of which Mrs. Aberdeen would say to make us demon-children, which we'd not be if she had been fairer, but it'd be her judgment that mattered, because rules in Angel of Mercy were hers and personal. That she might want to give us real solutions for what we should do when someone had slapped Aditi and Jo, or what she would do if a man had shamed her, taken a picture of her in her bath and showed it to everyone, and when she confronted him had slapped her—would she not fight back? Even when some things were hard to sue, would she be so generous as to look at his smug face and say, "It's alright"? These were not easy to answer in reality. They were easy in theories, to talk about, correct, when it was someone else's nudity or pain. We didn't care. The caning had divided people, sown resentment. Jo had no choice but to stand between the boy and Aditi, and the rest of us had floor brushes in our hands, and when the boy from 7B went for her face, Cassandra (who'd changed her mind about her mother being a career woman, for some from 4A had laughed), Olivia, Lottie, Jennifer, Anthea, Evelyn, Samantha, Jean, Ivy, joined in. There was a riot. Everyone was wet. All that mattered was that we stood up for ourselves. Or be beaten. That was one of the verities of the world. There was a common saying in our language, that there were no friendships without fights. Years later, during an interview, when I applied for a receptionist job in the city, a man in a suave shirt and tie had asked me, "I'm curious, what are your ideas of friendship?" I told him that it was formed through fights, and he laughed and said, "Such notions are not civilized and no longer true." I didn't believe him. I said, "I read newspapers often, and I see that people argue much, and many said they argued rationally, peacefully, dialectically, but if we read carefully their words were barbed, secretly they despised each other but they're friends." The man wanted my phone number, and I gave him a false one.

The riot in the communal hall lasted a half hour. "You all are children and will stay children always!" Aberdeen had stormed into the communal hall shouting patronizingly and cuffing us. And who started it, who was right or wrong, good or bad, no longer mattered—we were all carriers of violence. People were equal like that. They were adults, children, they were angry, fearful, stupid, they bled when hurt, hit back when struck, overtly, underhandedly, whether in office or orphanage, factories or universities, it didn't matter how civilized or good-looking, or just a homeless on the streets, it was only a difference of methods. Hate and arrogance and anger had only one look to it: ugliness. Aberdeen had taught us that right and wrong didn't matter, that the nude and the clothed were the same, that shaming didn't matter, and the ones who hung on to the hurt would do the same to another. Aberdeen was the origin of evil. She was also a liar. For it wasn't true that Jo was in the boy's wing naked. She didn't need to go up on stage to confess anything—it was not her problem at all. The

night before she'd been in the dorm with us. It was near lights out and all of us were in singlets and shorts, on our bunk beds, and only Jo wore none but shorts. Every night it had been so because they'd forgotten to give her any. She only had a school pinafore uniform and two T-shirts and sweatpants, and it took time to wash and line dry them. She had lain below me playing with a Rubik's Cube, and Aberdeen had not done so for a long time but had come in to check on us, arms crossed and the shawl wrapped around her, her Clarks shoes noiseless on the gray floors. When she was at my bunk her eyes widened, like mothballs. Jo's gaunt, breastless body had provoked Aberdeen in a strange way. Maybe because it was young, it had a future, it had more years ahead to live, but Aberdeen was in her forty-year-old unhappy one, which might not have this and that in life, might not escape or see her hometown again, and she could not entertain the thought of a young body fulfilling its wishes, future, hope. This sounded like misery to her, and if she could choose someone to love it'd always be a boy or man, not the girls who stayed the longest, and if she could not have a future why should others. They must be stopped. Stunted at childhood to dampen, cast doubt, to ensure that she was remembered all through Jo's life as one of the most powerful gatekeepers to her happiness, which was the poorest argument of those who'd never admit to being cowards, so she called out, "You naughty child!"

And she yanked Jo out of the bed and the bunk sprang and I jumped a little. And she shook Jo roughly, like she was a tree, saying, "This is indecent! Why are you flaunting your body?"

She shook for a long time. Five or ten minutes, it seemed, that if Jo wore leaves like those advertised in the green theme park, they'd have dropped from her body. Jo let her. She was sick and tired of everything and she had not told us yet what had happened in her past life that made her older than her years, that had forced her to see the world in its naked brutality, so soon, just a twelve-year-old, who saw, knew, shut up and bore. It wasn't the first time a rude adult had shaken her like a tree. And we were just as bored as she was. For there was nothing to see in Aberdeen when we knew what was eating her: she was bitter. Life wasn't going anywhere for her. One day we'd blossom and be out of Angel of Mercy, having an adventure, and even if that journey didn't turn out well and life disappointed us, it was still there, waiting, latent, possible, for she'd said so often, without knowing she was heard, when to her we had no ears and were only stupid and nonsensical: "You children are liars." "You brought me to Angel of Mercy and gave me nothing, and now I'm stuck here, serving all of you." And being cooped so long in this small orphanage she'd grown afraid and was only talking to herself, choice and hope were not understood for her as for us, that even if we grew into nobodies like cashiers, or receptionists or waitresses or a page in a library, or a secretary broken by the betrayals of life, Aberdeen would still serve as the lesson not to be, if we were strong enough. She was only a graveyard. Someone full of loneliness. Which she was trying to turn Jo and us into because she had not lived. And she was afraid to lay alone in her grave.

"You like being naked?" she shouted.

"No," Josephine said.

"No? But that's what I see about you. You're here, naked, with no respect for the rest of us clothed."

Jo didn't explain. Aberdeen opened her metal cupboard to search. But there were no clothes in there. On the top shelf was a plastic mug and toothbrush and towel, on the bottom was her backpack. Aberdeen emptied it and there were no snacks or cigarettes or cosmetics or other forbidden belongings, only schoolbooks, a pencil case, and a magnetic Othello game set. It was the kind that folded into a box to keep the black and white seeds. Aberdeen handled it roughly and they scattered onto the floor. That was when we heard Josephine speak up. She must have spoken before but this was the first time we really heard her voice, which was low as a man's, but loud. She said, "My father gave me this!"

And she squatted to pick up the seeds, scooping and stacking them back into a roll. Aberdeen threw the Othello box and it hit the wall, and though it did not break, its corner cracked and chipped.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Wear your clothes!"

"What I wear is none of your business!"

Aberdeen said: "Do I have to tell you that for as long as you're in this house, everything is my business?"

And she took the blanket from her bed and yanked Jo's forearm to stand up, and she wrapped it around her tightly like she was a child mummy. She said, waving a finger, "If I ever see you naked again, it'd be a punishment worse than this."

Then she turned to look at us. At me on the upper bunk bed, then scanned the rest of the dorm. What was the matter, her look said, what were you all staring at? That even if you saw, knew, felt, this cruelty I was inflicting, there was nothing you could do about it. Because you were only children. No one would believe you even if you said anything. And this bitter woman, whose face was actually handsome, slightly wrinkled and streaked yellow by sun, was finally her true self, the directress of Angel of Mercy, whose name ought to be changed, or her job, if she was so unhappy—what did Jo do? But be strong. We could not understand what people like that were doing in orphanages, talking about future and goodwill, meaning the opposite, meaning scarred children, smiling like an angel only to the funders from Hollywood, or elsewhere.

Then she collected herself. And a little self-conscious, she walked down the aisle between our bunk beds. Halfway she found her shawl missing, and she came back to Jo still standing there, eyes downcast, and she picked up her crocheted shawl and draped it around her. Then she marched proudly back down the aisle. At the doorway of the dorm, she shut the lights and slammed the door. That night, she locked it.

Dana Curtis

A Day of No Death

Because this is a day of no death,
we know that reality has unburdened
itself of itself, shredded the ground
in its shadowed perforations. Because
this is the day of blind horses
grazing under the bridges as if light
echoed from the pavement, as if we rode
through waterfalls that cannot be water
falling. It ran the wheel of our unknown
imagery. It created the eyeless energy
of the purposeless kingdom. We are not
members of this consortium because
the consortium insists on everything
that we found under pillows and rocks,
under the static ocean, between the static
that is all that remains, the frequency
where souls are found with their eyes
shut against the night.

Body Apocalyptic 3

In the end, only the disease will
keep me company in the secret
world I choose to inhabit:
green and ice and a swing set
made of garnets and feathers.
I can appreciate that it never bothered
to lie to me: always with a strict
and terrible honesty, its blood
gloved hands on my face. I wanted to say:
take me away from this place
where my irises are dust,
where I am not even
the empty eyes, the marionette,
frost on the window like
my dream of meteors. I will fall
to the promised telescope,
the loneliness I allowed:
I tend to the apiary, enter
what is left of the garden.

City by the Sea

Feathers fill the basin while
the birds fly out of the jets and spin
like elaborate bows in the air: every
variation of spectrum plus some colors
humans will not see. Not even us,
sharing a table in an unknown
city beside an ocean it is our
intention to name. Our argument
is quiet and sweet. I say Solace.
You say Inevitable. We drink more wine.
Later, we wind our way through
this empty city with its marble stairways
and hanging gardens. We find
another fountain, this one made of
fireflies. We are too close to touch each
other, too far for contemplation
and a vineyard where we would pick
fruit made of water and light. We will
be the name of this ocean.

Buddy

Buddy had loved me long, but from afar.
We never even kissed. His job was cool,
projectionist at the makeshift movie-house
we had in our sandy, summer island village,
collecting reels by wagon dockside, barefoot
like all of us, to play them from the booth.
A self-described “kraut-mick” among the cultured
Upper West Side Jews, he’d smoke some weed
while spools unrolled, his perch a sweetened pot-
head’s den, eye level with projector-beam.
July of Fonda’s *Julia*; Jason’s screams,
a rich aroma of weed caught in his beard—
a fun ascent, to see the movies bent.
I never took his thing for me for real.

I think, for Buddy, stoned was steady-state
and being straight became like being high.
He said sharp things that made me laugh and wince.
The finest points of girls I knew he labeled
“bodacious tatas,” “tiny hineys” or worse.
He’d lead his blond-haired collie up the stairs.
(Like all the dogs he’d owned he named her Christy.)
Then high up on the roof we’d sit and talk
and watch the sun spill pink across the bay.

Next spring, hearing that I was newly single,
he surprised me in my dorm, at posh Bryn Mawr.
He’d travelled all that way by motorbike.
He caused a stir. Not knowing what to do,
I took him to the cafeteria,
big Bud absurd with pint of milk and tray,
and slight young preppy fellows gathered round.
One said to me: “I like him. He reminds me
of guys I used to work with, building, summers.”
Our small buzz of celebrity. We went

to town *en masse* for pool and dollar beers.
Tall, side-burned Bud in checks and biker leather,
the sum and magnet of our bourgeois dread,
but there was something wholesome to him always.
He slept on my best girlfriend's floor, without
complaint. I realize now he'd hoped for more.
I didn't think about the miles he'd traveled,
his long-held dream deferred, or aim...busted.

Then one July he met my wilder sister,
gestured at me and said to her, "I've been
in love with Suze, this woman here, for years"—
and then he bedded her instead. She was
perhaps a bit more than he'd bargained for...
"I won't touch that wild cat again," he said.
Next day, he seemed worn-out and quite undone.
In August, he deflowered a friend of mine,
she dying to be unburdened, then ashamed
that it was Buddy—*Buddy!*—who'd been her first.

Then Grandma passed away, and I lost touch—
the place no longer mine. In later years,
I went back once, with husband, kids, and sank
in memory. I saw Bud there in town,
where you see everyone in local bars.
Still bearded, but now trim and clean in linen
shirt and cool white jeans, he looked quite well.
We drank some whiskey-sours; he filled me in.
He'd married and was happy, risen to
a Fire Department Captain in the city.
Like many boys, he'd dreamed of fighting fires.
"But me, I guess I never grew up," he grinned.

Some years went by. I heard he'd died, a heedless
mix of medicine and nightly drink.
Died in his chair, still upright, not yet forty.
He'd always liked his substances. He'd claimed
that they "enhanced" his life. What had he needed
in grown-up years after the youthful weed?
A drink or two each night no matter what?
How strange that some small pill had felled my friend,
one strong enough to hoist up hose and ladder,
to carry men through flame, to breathe through smoke.

Chivalric Buddy, unafraid of fire,
yet quenched in liquor, his exit sudden, unplanned.
I recall his kindness, tilted nose, the mystery
that was his face (like many bearded men),
his soft blue eyes, the big and solid frame.
I wonder now, what was his name—his real name?
I wish that I had asked him. I would ask
him now: *Buddy, tell me, what's your name?*

It's Possible a Mother's Body is Elegy

I.

I stayed away until your body was
a rumour on the arid summer air.

How I wish I'd given more thought to death.
To the windows that kept out more than cold.

To the black silk morning where I left you,
quiet & ashamed. Can anyone do

without all of this humanity? Stuck
elevators. Cracked glass. Earbuds torn from

someone's ears. The habits of the living
that leave me lonely now. What shall I love

instead? I remember us, here, the maps
of our bodies, brilliant & loud. *It's time*

to go, you'd said. The truth is a steeple
I can't enter. Bells I can't hear ringing.

II.

I can't enter—bells that I can't hear ring
like birds that will be killed by the windows
I shine so I can see myself inside
something that will last. The seas hold bodies
I will give away with clouds & light. Trees
know better than to move, except slowly,
as they migrate west over years. Here, there
is nothing I won't die for. *Silo, wood,*
lasso, tornado, grass. Mother: who isn't
afraid of the glass & what we see there,

staring back from inside a body we long
to keep? Dear woman, dear sovereign, what life
have you forsaken? How I loved you.
And now, what will the world do without you?

III.

And now, the world will do without you. Rain
again today spells the end of language,
of the body, of all we don't know about

living. You never woke with spit in your
hair, pulled from bed by light. Forgive your hands,
your tongue buried like a bucket in time's

well, the way you flinched at the beginning
of wind, the sky moving so fast you broke
your teeth on the clouds. Here, mother, you've been

every woman to everyone. Quit being
so polite. Politeness killed the river
trying to break free of the yard, runoff

from the storm gathered in its quiet mouth.
There isn't a woman I believe in now.

IV.

There isn't a woman I believe in now.
You are a cistern, a sense, a silence
& this sadness is not new to you. Spirit
-less, homeless, less & less a person who

set a field on fire to see something burn,
who buried the wind in an acre of sky,
who carried every person you've known on
horseback over the prairies, east toward

the seas you'd never seen, only to be
unable to drink from them. If *a word*
is elegy to what it signifies,
water means we have little we can hold

long. Sorrows are the children at play in
the fields, like lesser gods we'll grow to lose.

V.

The fields, like lesser gods we grew to lose,
lit with fireflies at night, & you not yet

a mother, not yet other, not yet shape-
shifting past. What made you important

before my wings' vibrato inside you
made you imaginary? You were just

a child. You needed only the coming
morning to grow inside like the yellow

siren of the lilac. Like the voice that
wants to escape you. I want to tell you

to run. To be safe. To forget your breaths
will run out. To hold tight to your body

as if it is the only one you'll have.
As if need is a door you won't open.

VI.

As if need is a door you won't open,
you sleep in the room farthest from yourself.

You wake in a blue rain. You forget where
you came from. You forget your name wasn't meant

for someone else. You forget the children

you never had. You forget how you want

them even now. You tell no one. You tell

no one how it is to be a woman

and living. You don't speak. You don't speak to
the woman you called mother. You don't speak
to the last gasp when her body gave up.
You don't say it hurts when you find her in-
side you. You leave her in the room farthest
from the small fact of your heart, its shatter.

VII.

From the small fact of your heart, its shatter,
where did one woman end & one begin?
What paled like the tulip before winter
swept the branches bare of leaves? What became
the body? The flesh? The child? The hard-won
wound? Is the coming snow a sign that birds
will escape the white glare of the windows?
And what will time escape with? Our mouths.
Youth. The children. The witnesses that stand
as still as trees as our bodies flee us.
Mother, you couldn't stop shaking. I can't
stop to grieve. As women, we cannot grieve
light that barrels over fields to find us.
I stayed away until your body was—

Note: *a word is elegy to what it signifies* is originally from the Robert Hass poem
“Meditation at Lagunitas”

My Mother Believed

That shinto gods lived
in all of nature. I thought
that when she told me to put
on my shoes she meant that
this pavement was unholy.

How did my blood become
the mixture of salt and sugar
from different continents,
how can you unravel a family
grave until tombstones look
like stars? I hinged myself

to her, and stopped walking
barefoot one day, and have not
done so since. But I miss it, can't
recall a single splinter, needle,
scar, even though this world
can sometimes feel apocalyptic.

What did she ask herself
during those times when
she swept the dust from our
house in the woods, even
though she was the one who
chose to live there? I can

only imagine what living
worlds she saw surrounding
our house, the questions
unanswered by beetles and
dead mice under floorboards.

Would we tread this ugly
ground, would we wash our feet

with our own rough hands,
would we let the mess of
broken earth, unruly dust,

deer fur and reincarnations
of clay touch the same person
who will one day become
a reincarnation themselves?

C.W. Emerson

Joe

Remember, Joe, those Saturday nights,
the year we were seventeen?—

we'd take my father's El Camino,
glide forty miles
 of black-iced pavement
all the way into the city.

At Jim's Bar up on North Street,
we'd flash the bouncer our fake IDs

 and step straight into another world:

free from judgment and prying eyes,
we'd lose ourselves
 in the smoke and sweat,
strangers' bodies pressed against our own—

we'd flirt and dance,
fall in love by the hour,

 two untouchable small-town boys

masquerading
as full grown men.

*

Hours later, past closing time,
we'd weave our way back
 on familiar roads,

drinking Dewar's
straight from the bottle,
starlit, all the way home—

then silently turn
down the East Lake Road
to my family's cottage on Sandy Beach.

We'd shovel our way to the kitchen door,
the harsh lake wind
cutting straight to the bone—

slip into the house,
empty since summer,
then head upstairs to my tiny room,

where, under dusty covers
on my fold-out bed
we'd spoon,

until our frosted breath
faded
in the morning light.

*

At daybreak,
you'd quietly gather your things,

walk the two miles back to town
to tuck yourself into your own bed.

Unable to sleep, I'd make coffee,
carry a mug of it, steaming, out to the dock

where we'd languished all summer
the summer before,

dangling our legs
in the grey-green shallows,
inventing our California lives.

Of course, you were headed for San Francisco—
it was Los Angeles for me.

*

For how many years had I told myself:

there would always be Joe,
the *Joe* I remembered—

wild companion,
 breaker of rules—

until I heard
they'd found your body,
needle plunged in a tunnel of vein.

By the time I arrived at your rented room,
your belongings
were stacked outside the door.

In a pile of trash,
the rosewood box I'd given you
the year we both turned twenty.

*

A summer house on a winter lake.
The waning light of a slate-gray day.

I walk out onto frozen water,
the rosewood box in my hands.

Fifty feet out beyond the dock,
I rattle the hinges,
 pick at the latch—

then,
on a gust of gathering wind,

 the scatter
 of glittering ash.

The Hamblens

MOTHER TELLS ME THIS STORY IS TRUE. THAT WHEN I LOOK AT THE WALLS of my house, the asphalt bridge arced over the delta, the water that veins the cypress groves, the Hamblens are there.

First: a dim speck on the horizon. The translucent roll of waves, the smell of salt and heat far from shore. The day stretched on, hot and stinking and boring. The speck grew larger, and white sails swelled to catch wind. A wooden prow cut a wake through the dark sea, foam swirling behind. Sailors wrapped their thick arms around rope, and below deck, Agnew Hamblen rocked in the dark hull.

He wanted fresh air. He huddled over a moldy bunk to eat crumbs of hardtack as rats scuttled beneath him, their needle eyes focused on his hand. He rubbed his lupine chin and shivered into Blackburn rags, but he wanted warm winters, plentiful meat, for his future sons to be minor kings. Beside him, another man slept in the semi-dark, and Agnew darted a hand to the man's hip, quick as a snake. He pulled a knife from its hiding place. The man snorted and rolled over, and Agnew ran his hand along the hilt. There, in the damp and stench, his young hand unsteady, he carved one bright letter into the ship's hull at a time: A. HAMBLLEN.

He smiled.

It was 1762, and on five continents, men fell in defense of kings. The English fields and ships swallowed men, nameless and forgotten. But Agnew Hamblen was hungry.

THE LATER HAMBLENS SAY HE LANDED IN THE CAROLINAS AND TRAPPED his way west. That he waded through Tidewater marshes and headed for higher ground, where he stuffed his pockets with briar stems and pecans, but still his stomach snarled. He spent a rainy winter chilled on a ridge, his firewood soaked, saved meat turned rancid. His chest sunk in, and his bones showed sharp through his skin. So he killed deer and wild turkeys and even dogs to eat, and still he pressed southwest, towards warmer winters and a shimmering corner of the world free for the taking.

They say he talked with hawks. That he trained them as scouts, to scan ridges for dry outcrops, for clear creek beds teeming with fish and freshwater mussels. That he conversed better with birds than people. That he spurned the native Muskogees and Scottish traders scattered through

the backwoods and slept below nesting ospreys and owls instead. On cold mornings when the sun dawned thin and weak, they left their feathers scattered across the ground for him to stuff his coat against the cold.

By age twenty, he'd survived an ocean and learned that the world was harsh. At thirty, he'd taken a wife to the thick delta north of Mobile and knew that hunger would follow them everywhere. But by forty, he taught his sons that there was always more for the taking.

They say that in his old age, Agnew Hamblen smelled like bay leaves stewing in the mud, that he knew how to wade silently through creek bottoms wound in scrub pine. Agnew showed his six boys to stay downwind. "Look for the straw," he showed them. He pointed to the orange needles that littered the ground, then he placed a silent foot and took a step. He held a musket in one hand and grabbed his oldest son with the other. Agnew James, called Jim. Jim flinched, and Agnew squeezed Jim's shoulder until the bone ached. Agnew clapped his back and let him go.

"You get one shot," Agnew said. He took the musket and handed it to the youngest boy. A child with a shock of red hair, cheeks still soft. The boy pulled back the big gooseneck hammer with its chip of flint. He drew the musket to his shoulder and touched the trigger. The sound cracked the forest, and the Hamblens saw the distant deer run.

Agnew slapped the back of his young son's head. The musket fell to the ground. Agnew pulled a knife from his belt. He darted through the trees and all but Jim lost sight of him, though they knew what he would do. They didn't have to see the knife spin through the air and catch in the deer's throat to know.

"You come," Agnew called, and his boys obeyed. They walked over the ridge and into a bottom where pools of water reflected the sky. The buck lay sprawled in the leaves, its chest still heaving, its blood a purple stream. Its mouth open.

"You kill it on the first shot," Agnew said. "Or you don't shoot." He pulled a loop of rope from his belt, and he motioned to Jim. They tied the rope to the deer's hooves and strung it up from a tree. Agnew took his knife to the deer's throat, and he drew a line from its groin to its chest. He emptied its entrails onto the ground.

He motioned to Jim to come closer. "What if it's your kill, but Tom here's hungry?" he jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the smallest boy.

Jim held his shoulders straight and looked at his brother: the clenched jaw, the face he'd seen stretch from baby to boy. Then all the brothers: five different heights, clenched fists, sets of eyes furrowed against him. "There's enough to go around," Jim said.

The blood dripped, dark splotches from the carcass to the ground. Agnew shook his head. He squinted his eyes. Jim looked at the pine straw, bleeding red across the forest floor, and somewhere a crow called. Agnew's mouth a thin line, his chin sharp.

"You do what's necessary," he said.

THE BAY CORNER PASSED FROM SPANISH TO AMERICAN HANDS, AND AGNEW cheered when the government drove the Muskogeas out of the marshes. Left alone in the quiet forest, Agnew walked beneath longleaf pines so big around that he and all six of his sons couldn't ring their hands around them. The pines held off the sun's heat during the blistering summers and filled the understory with soft beds of needles, fragrant and sweet. Sap cracked on the purple sheaths of bark and fed the beetles and the birds. The fluted pinecones fed the squirrels until the wings spun away to seed the next generation.

It took all the Hamblen men sawing and rolling logs a week to lay the foundation for the final cabin Agnew built his wife and ten children on Turkey Creek. The longleaf rafters sagged less than steel and bore the weight of his children and his children's children, the timber sealing itself against roaming bugs and termites.

And Agnew hunted. He used corn as bait and took deer until he gathered more whitetail skins than he could transport to Mobile, hides piled up in his cabin, stacks of warm, soft gold. His children wore shoes every day of the year and learned to play the fiddle. There were plenty of deer, plenty of sleeping bucks in drowsy thickets and delta marshes. There's all the meat you want, Agnew told Jim, but there's more for the clever. He instructed his son to hunt as he had, and he laughed when Jim couldn't. Even from his deathbed, gray-eyed Agnew reminded Jim to take everything he could, and he passed out of this world, leaving behind a longleaf house with smooth floors and well-chinked walls to last.

MOTHER BRINGS AN ANCIENT ROCKING HORSE MISSING AN EYE AND SETS it on my coffee table. Cartoons blare from the TV, and my mother crosses her arms over her silk blouse. This is her first visit in months. We look at the horse together. The thing was wooden once, but now it is a haphazard collection of cracked paint and faded colors. It stands stiffly, its mouth a thin line, its intact eye a dull raised sphere.

My daughter toddles closer, but I sweep her up before she can touch the thing.

"Cousin Samantha had it in her attic," Mother says. She purses her lips. "Might have belonged to the first Hamblens. He had ten children, you know. Ten children in that house." Her hand shakes and I wonder if that means she's drinking, or that she isn't.

My daughter reaches for the horse and I hold her closer.

My mother has not done this before. There are no gifts to bring these days.

The horse stares blankly at my wall, and even though it is small, even though it is a child's toy gone frail with age, I look away.

JIM PLAYED THE FIDDLE HIS DADDY HAD BOUGHT HIM, AND THE BACKWOODS people came out of the deep corners of the forest to dance on the Hamblen

floor. Jim knew from Agnew that there was land for the taking, enough riches in the soil to feed the whole country. He broke open the ground and filled it with seed, and vines grew, ripe fruit blanketing the forest.

Agnew had gone hungry, but Jim had too much. He expanded the Hamblen farm from the creek to the ridge. The fields overflowed with crops, more yellow-bellied squash and golden Satsuma than Jim could pick. Fruits rotted on the vine. Fallow land stretched away, wealth yet to be plowed. Jim scattered sand under the Hamblen house. He filled the space with all the potatoes he could, yet more stayed in the ground. He stroked his chin and leaned against the house. His skin burned pink, his eyes hardened into slits. He spat into the dirt and pointed at his son, maybe ten years old. "You'll learn to do what's necessary," he said.

Jim went to the auction block under the blistering sun in Mobile to buy slaves. He dragged them across the swamp, then crossed his arms and watched them seed the broken ground with cotton, acres upon acres of Southern snow. The fields stretched to the ridge, then to the river. But Jim wanted more.

Maybe he was a cruel man his whole life, or maybe something inside him warped when he learned to wield a whip, to withhold corn mash and salt pork until bellies ballooned with hunger, to take an iron to soft skin. His father had taken deer for himself, but Jim took people. Never enough, he said. His chin was long and sharp.

And Jim stole lives and made a living, and his home was lovely. They say that his children ate well and laughed often, that his wife took up tatting, even when her eyesight started going and she worked by feel. That she sat in the corner rocker and tatted lace collars for her daughters, for their wedding dresses first and then their Sunday dresses, and cuffs for her sons' dress shirts and boots and hats. She got so out of hand, some grandchildren whisper, that she even tatted collars for the dogs. They say that it piled around her while her eyes went dark and her hair turned white, piled up and up, first thin like spider webs then thick like clouds, until piles of lace squeezed the air out of the room and she smothered to death. That they pulled the lace away and her hands were wrapped in yarn, the bones still jerking and tying, still tatting.

And Jim took all that he could, and still the land was rich, the soil full. He flashed his crooked smile for his children and the branding iron for his slaves. He filled the Hamblen house with tatted linen and flowers and light, and he hid the slaves in quarters behind the trees. Gardenias bloomed along the Hamblen porch, the blossoms small and pungent.

HER EARLIEST MEMORY WAS OF WATER. THICK, DARK WATER WHERE MARY should have been.

But first: water rushed over her feet. She felt the pebbles under her toes, the minnows that nibbled at her skin. The shade from the sweetgum trees

hung over the bank. Water swept through the creek and caught dark grass in ropes. A crawfish, gray in the clear water, fumbled across the bottom then skittered into a hole. Her linen dress wet and sticking around her legs. She lifted her hands above her head to clap, and she laughed.

My father's grandmother slapped her hands on the water and smiled. The water cool and clear. See her there, a small girl in a wide stream. They called her Clora.

Clora's mother sat in a wooden chair on the bank and fanned herself. Even in summer, her skirt was full, the sleeves long. Clora loved the folds of those skirts, the places to hide against her mother's legs.

Clora's slave stood with her in the water: Mary, a small girl in a cotton shift, her dark hair fanned around her head. Mary traced her fingers in the water, then lifted her head and looked at the branches above.

A butterfly floated from the sky and landed on the water. A glittering moment, yellow and sunny. And then it broke. The girls turned their faces to the sun as the butterfly drifted above, gone in the glare.

Suddenly, Mary jumped after the insect. Her arm stretched high, the water sparkling. She hit the water, and it churned over her head.

She disappeared.

Clora looked at her mother, but her mother looked at the space where Mary had gone without speaking. Her eyes were beautiful and distant. She squinted and fanned herself.

The water ran black over the deep hole. The ripples slowed. Clora felt the pressure on her own lungs, felt her heart in her temples and panic surge through her chest.

Clora screamed, and then Mary surfaced. Choking. Her eyes huge and frightened. Water streamed from her mouth. She pulled herself back into the shallows on her arms and leaned back so that the water flowed over her stomach, her legs, then across the deep hole and beyond. Water beaded on her forehead and dripped from her nose.

Clora looked at her mother for comfort. Her mother raised her eyebrows. Then she looked away.

I can see it—the bright day turned glaring. My father's grandmother held onto that memory, and she pooled it with others: the treats her father handed Mary and not others. Mary's mother, the slump of her shoulders when Clora's father approached. Then, the understanding: her father. Their father.

She held onto that knowledge when she watched from the window as her father branded a teenage boy, when she watched her brother ride off with a cavalry sword like a medieval knight. When the Yankee blockades closed around Mobile Bay like a noose and her mother boiled the dirt for its salt. When Admiral Farragut's men moved into the swamps and the forests that bled into the bay, when they walked up to her frame house and kicked

in the door. When the soldiers cornered her father in his pantry and lifted their rifles high, then bashed in his head. His blood spooled on the floor silently, his mouth open. She held the old kernel of cruelty and watched the soldiers take her father's wedding ring, the gold caps off his teeth and all the food they could carry, then walk into the sunlight.

She spread lye over the floorboards to bleach away the blood. She didn't cry.

CLORA MARRIED A HAMBLÉN MAN WHO HOBBLÉD HOME AFTER THE WAR ended—Reese, a thin waif in rags missing two fingers on his right hand, with dirty joints and black teeth. They say he never talked about all he had seen. Clora followed her husband into the stained longleaf house Agnew had built, and Reese looked from the burned fields to the trees stretched tall and straight. The birds and the squirrels moved as they always had, as if no one had told them about the war. The buzzards swooped in and scraped blood from the dirt. Reese rubbed his chin, and Clora cocked her head to one side. "Call things as they are," she said.

There was still more for the taking.

Reese cut into standing trees to drain them of sap, sluicing the juice into jugs of turpentine. He labored from sunup to sunset, carting buckets from one tree to the next, the handles dragging his arms lower and lower until the bones stretched. Other men were hungry too, so Reese directed them through the forest. A day's work and wages paid in Federal coins, he promised. Worth something. He met with carpetbaggers in Mobile and traded currency. When he smiled, his chin was long and sharp.

Then the pocked trees began to die, so he crept through the backwoods and sawed through longleaf pines. The bark was purple, the trunks so large that hundreds of circles ringed the heartwood, blue and gray stripes to mark years no Hamblén could remember seeing.

He told his men to use crosscut saws when they could, axes when they couldn't. The longleaf giants filled the forest and squeezed out the sunlight, but the heat pressed down anyway, humid and heavy and dense. Rattlesnakes raised their tails like fists to passing lumbermen and struck if a man came too close. Reese and his men batted away mosquitoes and yellowjackets, the sweat stinging their eyes and their bug bites, and they rolled the finished logs down to the creek. Sometimes the standing trees caught a falling log, making it tumble through their branches to land somewhere unexpected. Then the trunk might crush a man's legs, his chest, his skull. In the woods where there was no creek, Reese and his men dug ditches to link the waterways, and they roped the logs together, then poled them down the creek, into the wide river, then the bay and the city on the other side.

Noblewomen in England wanted longleaf, wanted it for their chests of

drawers and their rafters and their dance floors. Stronger than steel, they'd heard. Wouldn't bend under the weight of party guests. So cotton died and longleaf became king, crowned with bursts of needles like frozen fireworks.

Reese's lumber mill gave livings and took lives, and the Hamblens survived into the next century. The world had changed, but there was still plenty for the taking, though more for the clever. And in her old age Clora sat in a rocking chair in the front room, an aging deer rug in the corner. She breathed in the smell of sweaty children who darted through the room, and she rubbed her finger over the wood grain on the chair. She looked out the window to the gardenia outside, then watched the sunlight slant across the floor until it burned orange and went out.

MY HUSBAND ASKS ME ABOUT THE ROCKING HORSE. "DO YOU THINK IT'S possessed?" he jokes. He pokes it and laughs.

I move it from the coffee table to a high shelf on a bookcase, tucked next to his collection of Marvel comics, far from my daughter's hands. It is lighter than I expect. Hollow.

"Maybe," I say.

"We can light a fire," my husband says. "Use it to make s'mores."

He goes into the kitchen to stir onions crackling on the stove and I laugh softly, but my chest constricts at the thought. I can see the toy splintering, my mother stoic. The horse is another lesson in what I know: that we take what we're given in love.

JACOB HAMBLÉN GREW UP IN THE SHADE OF HIS FATHER'S MILL AND FLIRTED from the pinewoods to a private school in Mobile. One of Agnew's minor kings, he knew luxury: bugle lessons, linen pants, a pet alligator kept on a chain. But even as a young man, he looked at the life his father had built, at timber crews and wood chips and sweat, and he was bored.

So he slicked down his hair, and he learned to smile more broadly, to lift and drop his eyes at the right moments. At hoedowns in country barns and dances in old plantation attics, he never let a girl leave without offering his hand, whisking her smiling around the floor, his palm on the small of her back. His father took trees, but Jacob caught women.

Like a good member of society he married young, but he philandered always: the wives of his friends, women across the swamp in the city, his wife's sister. His children attended the country school, gathering around the pot-bellied stove for warmth until they were old enough to lead crews or get married, and friends teased them: *I know your brother. The other one, upriver. Looks just like you.* Jacob's wife kept the old Hamblén house neat, and she swept away rats and mice, their populations exploding in the cleared longleaf-forests-turned-fields, now marked only by thin pine stragglers like weary soldiers, and she earned wrinkles around her mouth, her lips thinning and eventually disappearing.

Technology came to the city: automobiles, electricity, telephones. The wires trickled more slowly across the swamp, where men held onto the way things had always been: hard work during the day, booze and women at night. And Jacob grew bold, and he strayed from the old Hamblen house to pursue women: a blonde with big teeth, another with a German accent, a thin girl with one eye. His wife displayed her daughters' wedding presents, china and lace and monogrammed towels, on tables in the front room while they were on their honeymoons. And Turkey Creek eddied on, its timeless waters a black streak under the trees.

AND THEN, WHAT MY MOTHER SAW FROM HER LONELY PORCH IN THE NEXT town south as she pulled her hair behind one ear and squinted through oversized glasses, her own mother ten years in the ground, six younger siblings swarming across her lap: a man who drove down the winding lane for her, his hair slicked back, smile wide—

His ears were too big, but he smiled easily and often. Vance Hamblen. He drove up to her house and leaned out the window. "You coming with me?"

Her younger sisters ran to the car and he shooed them away. "Margaret," he said and pointed.

Vance Hamblen grew up on moonshine and watermelon seeds, on deer drives and lust. He was too young for Europe's Great War, so he missed the draft and stayed home to take timber crews from his father.

In '29, when my mother was still a girl, the market crashed and Vance hunted deer until they vanished, squirrels until they fled deeper into the swamp, and then he shot rats and peeled back their skin for food. He watched the cut timber grow damp and soft in his warehouse, and he prayed for an apocalypse to take him out of this world.

But that day, the sun dripped through sprays of longleaf pine, and he smiled. My mother stood from her chair and walked into the yard, then climbed into his car and let him drive her away. She looked out the window at the horizon over the river, the clouds swollen and red with potential, the leather seat of his car soft under her hand. She shook her hair in the wind and watched the road before them unfurl, watched the day fade into sparkling, beautiful night.

THEY HAD CHILDREN WHO PLAYED ON THE LONGLEAF FLOOR AND CHASED fireflies in the dusk. A blond boy, a quiet girl. My brother and me.

See them there? Children in the bath. The girl cups bubbles in her hands, brings them to her mouth and blows. The boy leans forward and pinches the soft skin on her arm.

"Ow," she cries, and he smiles.

She looks to the door, but her mother is elsewhere. The tile floor

stretches away to an empty doorway. Everything else in the bathroom is white: white rug, white sink, white space heater to ward off a chill.

The brother pinches her arm again, and she shrieks and splashes him. She kicks, and her foot strikes the soft paunch of his belly. She pulls her legs to her chest and studies him. The blond shock of hair above his forehead. The hard glint in his eye.

She stands and steps out of the tub. Backs away from him across the tile. Water drips from her shoulders, down the backs of her legs. She shivers.

He stands. His shoulders thin, goosebumps scattered over his arms. His eyes are sharp. He steps out of the tub and takes a step closer. A tiny, drenched little boy.

He punches her in the chest.

She flings her arms to the side and twists to break her fall. She slips, and her body folds over the space heater. A scalding panel against her belly.

See her there? Limp and screaming. See her mother drop her tumbler of whiskey, see the panic in her eyes. See her run and cradle her baby in her arms, in her lap on the long drive to the hospital in Mobile.

See me there, a toddler in a tented hospital bed. See the skin grafts that rebuild my stomach. The birds I imagine beneath the tented sheet, the ostrich that I imagine talks to me at night. See my mother crawl beneath the tent to cup my head, my thin hair like wisps of hay. See her turn away to cradle her son, a young lesson on which stories become true.

A YEAR LATER, A LONGLEAF GIANT FELL FROM THE SKY. VANCE STOOD WITH one hand on his chin, another in his pocket, and the great tree cracked. The sound like a cannon. I remember how my mother told it—sitting at the kitchen table, tiny frog figurines resting on the windowsill, a pot bubbling on the stove. She folded her knotted fingers and told what she'd heard: the men said that he looked up, and then he was gone. The great tree stirred the ground, the pine straw floating as though the trunk took a long breath and let it out—and all was still. The men who saw it said time felt like syrup. Too slow, too sweet, the birds calling all the while.

They crept closer to look at the body. Some to gawk, others out of respect—and from beneath the pine trunk, Vance smiled.

The tree lay caught on two stumps. Vance had room to breathe.

He knew the Lord had spared him, so he stuck a great big cross on top of the mill like a lightning rod. Every morning, he led the lumbermen in prayer. There'd be a Second Coming, he swore. And he'd be ready.

RED CLAY RUSHED INTO THE RIVERS AND SILTED OVER THE SEA GRASS BEDS. The manatees starved, their great hulking bodies bloating the creeks. And still my father Vance took pines, and he felled them and preserved them. *Pressure-treated wood*, he told his men. *Won't ever rot, in this life or the next.*

Better than creosote. They used enough arsenic to make the wood corrode metal, and they learned to wear masks before they sawed through the treated lumber. The runoff trickled into the marshes, but there was water enough, plenty to flush the chemicals away. And Vance took trees and water and changed the landscape.

My mother fed the lumbermen on their lunch break, scrambling to raise her family and keep a steady stream of food passing from pantry to table to mouth, her blond son Charlie always underfoot, me watching wide-eyed from a corner chair. And Vance filled a hungry house with food and people, and the Hamblen home sagged on its foundation from all the bodies.

Time passed, and my mother watched my father meet his Jesus on Easter Sunday, when his heart stopped on the lawn overlooking the creek. He fell onto the grass, his arm draped across his forehead. For a moment, she thought he was watching the clouds.

My mother laid his body out in the front room, the nails on his great hands stained from rust and time, and at night I crept to look at what was left of him in a dark room.

MY BROTHER HAD THE BEST OF THE HAMBLÉN MEN: AGNEW'S ANIMAL instinct, Jim's farming sense, Jacob's fearlessness. He would be the one, my mother said, to give us something to remember. She grew older, and she sat on the porch rocking, smiling at anyone who came by, a flask in her pocket.

The swamp began to stink, the fumes from paper mills soaked into the cypress beds and palmetto groves. But still my brother sawed trees and left clear-cut fields behind, full of red mud that washed into the swamp. I left—I ran across the swamp to Mobile, to a house without memories. As though a highway could create a new life. As though my husband could teach me forgetfulness.

But my mother stayed in the longleaf house, rocking her afternoons in an oak chair that faced Spanish moss draped over the dirt lane, and she counted on the forest to survive.

America sent sons to Vietnam, and on the edge of the swamp, the longleaf giants were gone, replaced by saplings. The young trees would never record a century of winters and summers inside their heartwood. My brother loaded the spindly trees onto barges that carted them to Mobile's paper mills, where they were loaded into compressors for their pulp. Trash wood.

Some of the slash pines were sick, they learned. Whole stands, acres of them. The seeds were bad, the disease passed on from mother to sprout. Fusiform wilt, my mother called it. She stared at the trees, and a deep line grew between her eyes. The trees grew to full height, then bubbles of sap leaked out and the bark twisted into thick knots. The trees were rotting

from the inside out. So my brother cut them younger, before they had time to die. He sent saplings across the bay.

My mother tied ribbons around the dogwoods, the delicate trees with their spindly trunks and their pale white flowers. Her eight beauties. She hired workmen to cut down the sick pines. “Leave the dogwoods,” she said.

I was there when the workmen left, when my mother stepped into the dusk and saw the carnage left behind: the pine trees still standing, eight dogwood stumps empty. I felt it when my mother leaned against the doorjamb, let her shoulders slacken, and cried out—“*oh*.”

VIETNAM DRAGGED ON, AND THEN IT ENDED. THE MARKET SHIFTED. THE paper companies closed their doors and relocated to the north—where endless boreal forests rose into the clouds, the tree trunks so thick five men couldn’t ring their hands around them. Virgin longleaf was larger, my brother knew, but it didn’t matter—there was none left. Only the end pieces of the log walls on the Hamblen house proved the legends true—that longleaf could grow for hundreds of years, shown by rings that rippled from the center of the old beams, faded but still there. In her old age, my mother prepared smaller and smaller meals—a single chicken breast for them both, then biscuits and honey for supper. One weekend, I roasted a whole glistening chicken for them. I baked two large mashed potatoes, the tops whipped into peaks. I made collards with red peppers diced between the green leaves, and I took the meal to my mother.

She met me on the porch and peered into my canvas bag, at the stack of Tupperware inside. She leaned over and breathed deep, smelled the meat and butter and garlic, then shook her head. “No need to do that,” she said. “I’m not hungry.”

SO CHARLIE STARTED COOKING.

Small batches, at first. My brother boarded up the windows of the lumber warehouse, and he made meth in our mother’s pots and pans. He bought cold and cough medicines from men in trailers, all that he could take. I can see it now—the tangle of tubes stretched across a plywood counter. The stink of it in the family office, our grandfather’s rifle on the wall.

My mother complained about the clutter. Saturdays when I sat with her on the porch and wondered what my brother did, worried about the time he spent alone, thought that maybe it was depression, she raised a hand knotted with veins gone blue and translucent and pointed across the yard. “That boy is so messy,” she said.

TERMITES CREPT INTO ONE CORNER OF THE OLD HOUSE, CHEWING THE foundation and leaving piles of sawdust like tiny lumbermen. My mother

swept them away, but they came back, hungry and fierce. I brought white cakes of boric acid to tempt the bugs. They left the poison and chewed the hardwood. The virgin timber crumbled. My mother put a chair over the rotten place and told me to come in through the kitchen door instead. Charlie hugged me and asked after my husband—"When's he come up? I'll take him hunting next season." He smiled, but he wouldn't look me in the eye. Instead his glance rose, up the wall and to the ceiling, his pale eyes wandering and unfocused.

I ASKED MY HUSBAND TO VISIT WITH ME, BUT HE MADE EXCUSES. HE NEEDED to mow the grass, to wash the car. To run by the office. I nodded and drove across the bay alone, and I knew what he couldn't say: that in the Hamblen house, ghosts sat with us at the table and resonated in the walls. That outside they rose in the trees, heavy and watchful and silent in the shadow of my father's great cross.

AND THEN, MY BROTHER MADE A MISTAKE.

Maybe it was simple. He mixed the wrong chemicals, and his punishment was clean, deserved. Maybe he was careless. He could have been high, or hurried, or distracted by a customer who waited impatiently, a pistol tucked in his belt. Or maybe it was less obvious: the old pump overheated, put under too much pressure to wrench water from the ground, and it sparked.

And the flames caught.

I CAN SEE IT—THE OLD PINES SMOKED AND THEN BURNED ORANGE. THE flames crackled dispassionately, maybe even cheerfully. They lit up the forest, and they licked at the shingles that our mother had asked Charlie to replace. The smoke filled the clearing, covered their cars, the ornamental bench Charlie had stuck by the gardenia. Cast a yellow spotlight on our father's cross.

My mother stepped outside of the house and smelled the ash, heavy and harsh. It burned her eyes. She looked at the black smoke churning from the warehouse. Watched as the sparks spun into the sky and showered onto her own roof, the beams tacked by Agnew long ago. Held her breath as a yellow tongue spread from the warehouse to her home.

And the fire growled and rose, sparks spinning into the night.

YEARS LATER, IN A DEPARTMENT STORE WITH MY DAUGHTER, I SEE A SHIRT called ash gray and there, among the silver racks and polka-dotted skirts, the soft voices of shoppers drifting over pop music and Chanel No. 5, I see my brother on the floor. Watching the logs crack and ash over. He squints and coughs, knows what's coming and doesn't fight. Or he watches a lattice

of white cover the timber like snow. Then the smoke comes too fast and fills his lungs. One breath, and he retches. Another, and his lungs are stained black, the smoke a fist inside his chest. Another, and he knows what will come, even as words leave him and his mind goes blank.

You know how this ends.

A HUNTER DRIVING THE LONELY ROAD SAW PINE STRAW MELT INTO YELLOW fire on the shoulder, and he called for help. The hunter waited and watched the flames catch the shell of the old house in an eerie, orange spotlight. Watched my father's cross blaze white against the night and collapse, the funeral pyre of the last Hamblen man. Watched the timbers spark and splinter, the embers spin high into the dark. A column of dust drifted through the air and disappeared against the stars.

The embers kept going for days, smoking the longleaf saplings until they turned orange and died, one tree at a time, in concentric circles rippling away from the ashes of the Hamblen house. My mother was stunned into silence, but others brought her pecan pies and pork roasts and chatter, all looking to make sense of things. They wondered why, and they whispered behind their hands, never softly enough—they said, *that's greed for you, but he got it from his daddy, can't help things come by honestly*. They pushed food at my mother like they were hungry. They said, *how tragic!* but they thought, *our boys would never*, and they sat up a little straighter.

ON A GOOD DAY, I BRING MY DAUGHTER TO MY MOTHER'S, A RENTAL apartment in Mobile. We stand on the grass by the leasing office and talk about the weather, about the shipbuilding plant coming to the delta. My mother brings her hand to her chin, and I see how slight her arm is, the skin paper-thin. I take off my daughter's shoes and socks, and she toddles into a puddle on chubby legs. She slaps the water and cries with delight. The mud thick around her feet. She grins, and in her mouth are two small teeth. She opens her little bird-mouth to laugh, and my heart swells. My mother raises a hand to her mouth, and I'm grateful she feels well enough to come outside.

My mother leads my daughter inside the kitchen where a row of pictures lines the wall: my father, her father, her son. The men who gave us life and who couldn't take it away. My mother pours milk into a sippy-cup and runs her fingers through her hair.

I follow and lift my girl into a chair. I marvel again at the softness of her arms, at the skin still so new.

My mother opens a smooth wooden box on the table. Her newest bug collection. She is forever replacing the things that burned. Inside, she's pinned iridescent beetles and fragile luna moths onto a velvet cloth. My daughter slaps at the box, and my mother pulls it away to show her this week's hauls from a distance. A glistening dragonfly, a small beetle with an

hourglass thorax and bright blue spots. A hulking rhinoceros beetle whose black body glitters, whose arced pincers look menacing even in death.

My mother keeps the box safe from my daughter's chubby hands, and she smiles. "One day, this will be yours," she says.

Across the parking lot, the sun spins the pines in gold. The light sinks behind the trees. Time is only an idea. My mother is silhouetted in the window, her cheeks the same Vance Hamblen saw years ago. My mother sings an old melody under her breath and smiles. Her eyes soft and easy. My daughter looks spellbound, her mouth a tiny *o*. Mother looks again at the desiccated bugs on display, at the hollow bodies pinned in place, and she slides the lid shut.

And Rising

THE FIRST CLUE COMES WHEN THE COYOTES STOP SINGING IN THE WOODS behind our house. Nights, sometimes, I would lie awake and listen to the high cries, the laughter, shooting up over the pines and holly, all the way into the stars if the night was clear, when the moon hung low and scraped the grass with its cold light. I would hear Toby sleep-groan in the next room, older than me by two years and still afraid of monsters in the dark. I'm not afraid. I love those howls that wake me, the way I know before I'm fully conscious that those animals are there. Their music silences everything: the neighborhood dogs, the night birds, even our rattling air-conditioning, all still and poised on the edge of running.

And then, when the week ends, I notice the coyotes' disappearance.

I ask my father about the coyotes the morning before one of his field trips, when he brings his undergraduates out to our farm for what he dubs "hands-on experience." The students from his animal husbandry course cluster some distance away from us, waiting for their lesson to begin. They shiver in the morning nip.

"Coyotes are migratory, Haley," my father tells me, swinging hay over the fence for the cow and her new calf. "They have routines."

He speaks as though I don't already know this, like I'm not also a part of this family rooted to the flux of the earth. I've spent nights cataloging the coyotes' seasonal patterns, how they respond to temperature just like the clutch of blueberries growing in our front yard. But, the blueberries have bloomed early this year, pale flowers studding the branches. Too warm, my father says. I wonder if the coyotes are late.

My father shows his students how to hitch our pony geldings, Stuart and Johnny-boy, to a plough. Of our band, Stu and John are the strongest. When my father whistles for them, they come barreling from across the fields, platinum tails streaming like flags. They prance to the fence, the steel clips of their halters jingling. They know there's work to be done.

The display frightens some of the students, who retreat, faces taut and anxious. My father takes note of the ones who stand still, gripping the fence and smiling. He gathers these students and tells them they will share the hard, honorable work of pushing the plough upright through the soil as Toby leads the geldings. The other students march solemnly behind, scattering grass seed from heavy bags. Fear, my father thinks, deserves punishment.

When that work is done, the students gather in the covered tack room

attached to our stable, breathing in the smell of dust, wood, and leather. Dirt daubers glitter like sapphires, humming into the holes they have chewed through the walls. While I hold the lead rope for him, my father stoops over the U-shaped hoof, the soft black frog, of our oldest mare Lucy, demonstrating how to properly hold the pick, to pry out the stones and brush away the mud and manure. He hands the brave students a curry comb, teaches them to move slow and smooth, to always keep a hand on the warm, heaving body.

The others line the walls, trading snide looks. They can tell they've failed my father's test, and try to behave as if they don't care. They murmur to each other like an overrun stream.

"I hate horses. They stink."

"I shouldn't have worn this jacket."

"If I didn't need this credit . . ."

"What can she do?" a girl says as my father cradles Lucy's back hoof between his knees, running it over with a large iron file.

"She's a good teacher," my father answers.

I stand at Lucy's head, holding her rope. I've listened to this girl talk since the day started, telling her friends she knows a thing or two about horses, that her grandparents own a ranch near the expensive part of the city. She shrugs at the students near her.

"So she's not good for anything. You know, my dad always told me when something stops earning its keep, it ought to be shot."

"Well, your dad's a goddamn idiot." And in the midst of demonstrating to a handful of students how to properly trim a hoof, my father's voice thunders, the same voice he uses when Toby and I are in serious trouble. The stable stills.

I can understand my father's anger. Whenever something needs killing on the farm, he is the one to do it—he shot a dog we owned after it pulled a goose through the chicken yard fence. He wrings the necks of sick fowl, shoots downed cattle. Once, caught without his rifle, he beat an opossum to death with a walking stick. I have always wondered at the effect of each death, whether they chip away at my father's heart that cares so much for growing things. I wonder—admire—how a man can continue to raise animals when the fine print of a farmer is a contracted executioner.

At my father's words, the girl quails, turning an ugly red. Quietly, her friends usher her to a corner where she can cry, throwing him dirty looks. He continues with the lesson as though nothing has happened, and Lucy's golden eyes close in half-sleep, barely flinching even when someone drops a heavy lacquered brush to the floor, or touches her sensitive belly. I whisper to her near-blind eyes, her tooth-worn mouth, "Good girl, Lu. You're a good girl."

IT DOESN'T OCCUR TO ME THAT THE COYOTES MIGHT BE RUNNING, NOT until the small herd of mousing-cats that guard the feed in the barn vanish,

until the mice don't take advantage of the sudden cat-lessness of the unprotected sweet grain. I consider earthquakes, gas leaks, volcanoes or other cosmic ruptures. Mostly, I consider floods. It is March, the beginning of the rainy season, and we are overdue a good flood.

My father suspects the same thing. One afternoon, when he finishes teaching, he takes me and Toby and drives us in the truck down through the river bottoms, over yellow dust roads and acres of grass so high they feel like a corn maze. Trees are few and far between, oaks and white gum emerging silently over the reeds, vanishing again just as quickly. The road dumps us onto a long strip of uninterrupted shore, and my father parks the truck on the marshy ground. When he gets out, he stands with his hands on his hips, staring up and down the river as if waiting for someone. Some distance away, the grey bellies of storm clouds swell and ebb like the tide, and occasionally, a cool gust sweeps down the valley, smelling of rain.

Crushed beer cans, cigarettes and tire tracks line the sand, and on the opposite bank a dead tree limb half-submerged shimmers with tangled fishing line. I can tell this is a popular spot to party, though there aren't any cars here now except ours and a canvas-green Jeep farther down the beach, attached to an empty boat trailer. I'm still too young to attend the river parties that the older teenagers throw, but I've heard enough about them at school.

Toby's been invited, but river parties are "not my kind of thing," he tells me. Toby's always been quiet, preferred reading and music—his trumpets, guitars, singing—to any sort of party, and even though I'm a girl, and different things are expected of me, I want to be just like him when I grow up. I know siblings aren't supposed to get along, but Toby and I can't help it.

"The water's going to be high this year," my father tells us. Toby brushes a hand through his auburn curls, and stares up at the sky, the signal that he agrees. I believe both of them.

The next two weeks soak our part of the country. According to the weather, two record-strength fronts farther north push against each other like wrestlers, a constant sheet of rain flooding people out of their homes. When my mother grows tired of the news—the water rescues, profiles of shelters for displaced families and pets, another victim trapped in their attic and drowned—she turns off the TV and knits. One night, I suggest keeping an ax in the hatch above our mudroom, just in case. She says we live on a hill and have little reason to worry, flood-wise. She says this is nothing we haven't seen before.

A day later, storms writhe and moan around us. The creek that runs behind our farmland swells, submerging the lowest ten acres of hay, and the border of our pine woods. A hundred yards from our back door stands two feet of water. The ponies and the dairy cows keep watch from the high ground, gazing at the water with domesticated acceptance.

But when the rain finishes, the water doesn't leave. Our creek runs fat as ever, languid and gluttonous. Our town steams during the day, dawn drawing towers of mist from the ground and choking the highways with fog so thick that police are called to half a dozen accidents in one morning. By the time the mist dissipates at midday, the roads are scattered with metal and glass. Clouds of mosquitoes whine through the new wetness, and our school smells constantly of city-sponsored *Off!* as trucks drive by at night to spray the most populated areas.

My father stands on the back deck of our house, staring at the water at the edge of the trees. The school trips have stopped, and classes at the university are sparsely populated. He brings home a yardstick he borrowed from the architecture department, and tallies the water level with a Magic Marker. He keeps the yardstick leaning inside the back door, and I look at it sometimes when I come in from checking the garden or feeding the chickens, expecting any day to find the line lower and lower, the way lines have moved in the past. This line doesn't move.

"Something's coming," my father tells my mother frequently, when he thinks Toby and I aren't listening. "Something new."

My mother doesn't respond to his comment. Instead, she says, "You should get something for the horses' feet," and my father does as she tells him. He picks Toby and me up after school, and together we go to the feed store to buy a treatment for keeping the marshiness out of the horses' soft hooves. They are restless when we bring them to the stable. On accident, Toby kicks over a bucket, and Lucy snorts and paws, uses strength we'd forgotten she had, and tears free of the lead ropes that secure her to the walls of the saddle room. She swings out a kick, and Toby turns to take it on the meat of his ass instead of his fragile ribs. He face-plants in the dust. Lucy darts away, ears pinned to her head, and my patient, even-tempered father swears at her, throwing the ointment bottle into the grass. I check Toby, who grins, teeth full of sand.

"It'll bruise," he says. "I'll have to get the tattoo before it fades." Trust Toby to joke at a time like this. Behind him, the water laps at the foot of the farm, not quite hidden by the growth of new grass.

THE NEWS ANCHOR BEGINS THURSDAY'S EVENING BROADCAST WITH A solemn shot of the polar ice caps dripping into the sea, white cliff-faces lined with tracks where the ice melts away. The on-site reporter interviews flushed scientists standing in Paradise Harbor, holding instruments that look like rain gauges. Whole beakers full of South Pole. Behind them, rocks surface for the first time in millions of years.

The reporter says experts estimate flooding to begin two weeks from now, and advise the coast and cities along the river to evacuate. But when the anchor presses her for more detail, she seems to have run out of things

to say. The camera frames her against a white wasteland dissolving into rock. The reporter shrugs, opens her mouth, closes it again, and eventually laughs. The studio cuts the feed and sends things back to the anchor, who stares into the camera as though someone's hit him with a large, blunt instrument.

"It'll be Andrew all over again," my mother says.

My parents speak of natural disasters in terms of hurricanes, having lived in South Florida for years before Andrew ripped it apart. They rode out the storm, shivering in the hallway with a mattress over their heads as the furious wind tore the roof from their little blue house, the boards from the windows. The rain fell in quilts, ruining their photo albums, their high school yearbooks, their vinyl records. The storm spared nothing. My parents learned to lose things that day, and I can see it in the way they react to potential disaster fifteen years later. When the tornado sirens wail in the night, my father takes only a flashlight and his cellphone into the shelter with us. If there's ever a fire, my mother has prepared a single flat tin box full of her grandmother's jewelry, our social security cards and birth certificates, the teeth my father lost when he was a baby. My parents will leave the Bavarian china from their honeymoon and the designer dining table, the first they ever bought. They will leave my mother's freshwater pearls, my father's gun collection that he keeps locked in his bedroom safe.

"We have to leave," I say.

"It won't flood tonight, Haley." My mother lowers her eyes to her knitting as though to pick up her needles again, but she doesn't. She holds my father's hand. "It won't flood tonight or tomorrow. We have plenty of time."

She's practical like that. Under tornado warnings, she takes her time gathering towels to protect us from the rain. Andrew must have reassured her that she has lived through the worst. Everything else is a foggy morning or an afternoon shower.

THE SOUTH SIDE OF TOWN WHERE WE LIVE IS A STRANGE PLACE, simultaneously rural and suburban. My side of the street keeps wide open backyards to pasture small herds of cows, some goats, sheep. For a while, our neighbor even kept a clutch of domesticated deer. Turn the corner and there's a sudden crop of cheap houses, built in the span of a year, where good families used to live. Their children would walk our street, bringing apples and carrots for our ponies and cows. But after the news breaks about the ice caps, most of them pack up and leave town. You can tell who goes by which driveways are empty, which houses stand with broken windows or doors flung from their hinges, contents spewed across the front lawns.

At school, we're told which districts will take us, which curriculum best

matches ours, as if we're concerned about those sorts of things. Locations seem centered on the highest parts of the country, the west, the mountains, some places up north. At lunch, they dismiss us forever, and we take our last bus rides home. Toby brings the trumpet he kept in the school music room, the hard leather case swinging from his hand as we walk the length of our street.

"I don't know why I brought this," he says, looking at the case.

"Keep it. We can use the music when the electricity goes out."

"But all I know is the Rocket's fight song." He smiles at me, and I'm glad he can make jokes like this, even here at the end of the world. I smile back. I have never been so glad to have an older brother.

We find our parents sitting on the back deck in a kiddie pool from my and Toby's younger days, long kept in a storage shed. A fringed spiderweb still clings to the underside of the pool's lip. Our father wears a pair of flowered swim trunks, our mother a black one-piece suit and five-dollar sunglasses. They clasp hands, leaving opposite arms free to hold long cigars in their mouths. Nutty tobacco smoke hangs around them in the wet air like fog. Next to them lies a wooden cigar box, open and lined with red fabric. The cigars and the box had been gifts at their wedding. Tumblers filled with amber liquid and bottles of liquor I recognize from the shadows of our china cabinet stand arranged before them like offerings.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"What does it look like we're doing?" my father says. "We can't take it with us." He isn't looking at me, and the sun refracts through his hazel eyes, illuminating their streaks of green until they glow like crystals.

Wordlessly, Toby drops his backpack and his trumpet and walks away from me, taking a seat on the other side of our mother. He uncorks a bottle of whiskey and drinks, chokes on the alcohol. If my father were another man, he would have slapped him on the back, and my mother would have smiled. Instead, my father holds his cigar like a rolled wad of bills and stares out toward the forest, and my mother looks at me, swilling her bourbon. They are at once an image of practicality and helplessness, a dissonance brought by chaos.

"Come sit, sweetheart," my mother says to me. "Come be by me a while."

I don't want to sit, pretending there is no panic rising inside me. To sit there, not doing anything, is a helpless feeling I am unused to, and my capable parents, collapsed in water like broken toys, shake me. They have run out of things to do, and so, perhaps, have I. My mother takes my hand as I sit. She holds her cigar in her teeth. I stare at her veins and tendons, her thin, gold wedding ring. Toby passes a glass bottle of good gin across our parents, but though I take it, I don't drink. Water purls gently at the base of the trees. My father blows a puff of smoke into the air.

“Of course,” he says, “we’re going to have to shoot them all.”

I feel my insides snap closed like a pair of jaws, though I should have been prepared. We have never moved our bigger animals, our ponies and cows, never had a need to, never owned a trailer large enough for all of them. But now, wherever we’re going, we can’t take them with us. Wherever we’re going, they must stay here.

I stare at my family’s faces. My mother continues to swirl the liquid in her glass like she’s panning for gold. Toby peels apart a blade of crabgrass so green and gorged with water that yellow death touches the place its stem meets its roots. My father stares into empty space, the cigar in his mouth bobbing with easy rhythm. After a moment, he stands, water splashing at his ankles. He’s going for his rifle, I think, and I remember sweet Lucy, brave Stu and Johnny-boy. Fear seizes every inch of me.

“Daddy, no,” I say. I clutch at his fingertips, all within my reach. I haven’t called him Daddy in years. “Please.”

He looks at me, in his eyes the same haunted emptiness I recognize as if from a past life, a pre-flood life, when he had to kill other things on our farm. He sways slightly as if drunk, adrift. My mother and brother hold their breath.

His fingers tighten around mine.

“Not yet,” he says. “Very well.” He says ‘very well’ like a wizard from a book who knows he’s postponing the inevitable. He pulls his feet from the pool, and the movement seems to take great effort. He helps my mother stand, and she begins to clear the bottles of liquor, the cigars, the tumblers. My father gestures to Toby and me to follow him inside, to change into work clothes.

When we go back outside, the sun high in the early afternoon, Toby whistles for the ponies. They come to us gently. We bribe them with treats, though the way Lucy whickers at Toby makes me think they would have come without such an offering. Huffing in the heat, whisking mosquitoes away with their white tails, they nuzzle our pockets for more food, and I cannot imagine such a solid, life-filled space so empty. I touch the blaze on Johnny-boy’s forehead. The planet’s atmosphere without their sweet, grassy breath would feel asphyxiatingly thinner.

After we lead them to their paddock and lock the cows in behind them, we begin our work. My father’s already planning for whoever uses this place next, fishermen trawling the water, nets at risk of snagging. He believes, even submerged, the land can still give harvest. Starting at one end of the farm, my father uses a chainsaw to disassemble the fences bordering the property line, all except the ponies’ paddock. Toby and I work next to him, using pliers to cut away the barbed wire from where trees have grown around it. Toby wraps his wrists in nylon rope and heaves sawn posts onto his shoulders, oxen-like. He dumps them in the work shed behind our

house, and I arrange them as best I can into pyramidal shapes, wrapping the cut wire into careful spools.

"Like this," my father says, showing me the technique. "It's easiest to unroll this way. You know. Just in case. . ."

But he doesn't finish his sentence. He knows that this flood won't recede like the ones before it. We know the ice caps won't refreeze when the water drowns all the factories, swallows the cars and the cities. It's strange to think my children will ask me about the way the Earth was before the flood, to think how they won't be around to reassure their great-great-grandchildren with what I told them. But the thought catches me suddenly with its selfishness. Who would want to bring children into our drowning planet?

By nightfall, we have finished tearing down our fences, even the lines of chicken wire that blocked off the scratching yard from the rest of the property. The geese stream free into the pasture, honking in jubilation, while our chickens hop around them like dun-colored, feathery popcorn. We shut the coop door so they aren't tempted to roost inside later tonight, so they grow used to finding new places to sleep. When I walk into the empty chicken yard, each step lifts white, downy feathers strewn across the scrubby weeds. The geese have recently molted, and no rain has come yet to drown the leavings into mud. The feathers look like snowflakes. I stoop, pick one soft and clean, and put it in my pocket.

Toby watches me, his hair frizzing with humidity and sweat. He stands with his hands in his short pockets, wears no shirt, and in the setting sun, I see the glint of hair splashed across his chest. He looks old and strange, like a neighbor, not my brother. I wonder if I look as strange to him.

"We should do it, Hales," he says quietly so my father—who seems to be wandering his orchard of cherry and apple trees, rose bushes, tomato vines, in a daze—doesn't hear. "We should shoot the ponies. If Dad does it—"

"We can't." The thought of leading Lucy, trusting Lucy, Stu and Johnny-boy, our handful of dairy cows, positioning them side by side so they fall in even rows, each crack making the living animals startle, makes me feel like my stomach will crawl out of my mouth. "There's another way," I say.

"What way?"

"We open the gate. We set them free. They'd be fine on their own. They'd live."

Toby's mouth sets into a line. "They'd suffer, Hales," he says. "You know what's going to be in the water when it crests. Shit, plastic, chemicals, worse. They'd get sick and die in pain and alone. We can't do that to them. We can't be cruel."

Rage surges through me, though I know, somewhere in me, he might be right. He reaches for me, taking my face in his dirty hands, and I try to pull away. "I can't do it alone," he says. "I need you to help me."

His hands press into my face like irons, the same crushing weight and heat, and I know I will never be able to do this thing he asks of me. I break away, our contact making the same noise as Lucy's kick against his hip, and I flee into the house to my bedroom, past my mother, who doesn't raise her eyes from preparing one of the last dinners we'll have in our kitchen. I fall onto bed, stare at my books and my pictures, my lace baptismal pillow hanging on the wall, my dolls, my coats hanging from the hooks on the back of my door. I commit them to memory. I hold my eyes open for as long as I can.

AFTER DINNER, MY FATHER CLEANS HIS RIFLE, MAKES SURE EVERYTHING is in working order for the task in front of him. He has decided he will save the execution for the morning, saying he will have to gird himself. He takes his time, wiping a cloth up and down the barrel, outside and in, with deliberate movements. I watch him from the corner of the room, hiding like a misbehaving child. Toby, whom I have failed, reads by the light in the corner, wincing every time the cotton whisks across the metal, every time our father snaps a piece apart or back together. My mother sits on the couch beside him, knitting.

I shower and tell my family I am going to bed. I kiss each of them except Toby, who shrugs away from me, still angry. In the dark of my bed, I wait for the sound of their feet down the hall, their bedroom doors closing. I wait an hour longer to make sure everyone's asleep. Then, I pull on my jeans and a shirt over my tank top, and take the flashlight from its charging station on a table by the backdoor.

I hop the fence into the paddock. In the stable, I startle the ponies awake with my light and my shadow. They jump and snort, and when I open the gates to their stalls, they charge out, bucking into the night. The cows, who had been dozing in around the feed trough, absorb the contagious excitement, bellowing to each other and running in long, loping circles. With the noise, I'm sure to wake my parents, and I rush to open the gate to the rest of the pasture, now free of fences, free for the horses and cows to wander wherever they please, maybe to follow wherever the geese and the chickens have gone.

But when I reach the gate, a shadow greets me, holding a long-barreled rifle I recognize. My father, who must have lied, thinking, like me, he'd perform his gruesome duty in the dead of night, when the rest of us were safely asleep, protected from the cracking of the gunshots.

"Haley, what—" But he shields his eyes when I swing my flashlight in his direction, and I push the gate into his chest, knocking him a step backward. He holds firm, grips the gate with his free hand, and pushes against me as he regains his sight, blinking in the midnight darkness. For a moment, we hold this position, leaning against opposing sides of the gate. He can tell I know the animals will be safe and free. I think he wants to believe me.

“Fuck,” my father says. “On your conscience, then.” And he pulls the gate so hard I am jerked off my feet. I cling to the gate for support, while the ponies—Lucy, Stuart, Johnny-boy—used to the sound of the gate creaking open, a signal of freedom, come pounding across the paddock like thunder. I scramble to get out of the way, and my father seizes the back of my jacket, pulls me upright and over, clutches me to him as first one pony, then another, then another, then the whole troop of dairy cows, dart past into the darkness. A clod of dirt from a flashing hoof flies into my mouth, and I taste its earth, feel the grit between my teeth. I hold still against my father’s chest, breathing him in, while the sound of our animals fades into the sky.

IN THE MORNING, IN THE HOUSE I HAVE KNOWN MY WHOLE LIFE, WE EAT a breakfast of biscuits and eggs from the chickens now roaming, and my father tells my mother and Toby what I’ve done. Both accept the news. “What’s done is done,” my mother says. Briefly, she opens both doors of our refrigerator, takes in the produce she has collected from the garden in our backyard, the piles of chard, the bags of violet radishes, the garlic. Then, she closes the door. Tonight, after dinner, she will stoop to the space revealed when my father has pulled the fridge away from the wall, and she will unplug the cord. “It’s so ironic,” she says. “When your father used to leave fences undone for months on end, I’d be so worried the horses would get out into the road and cause a wreck or kill someone. We’d get sued and lose the farm.”

No cars to worry about now. Most everyone who wanted to leave is already gone.

We spend the day emptying the truck, shaking out the tarp we’ll use to protect our possessions from wind, rain, and insects as we drive.

“After Andrew,” my father tells me, “people woke up with flamingoes in their backyards and crocodiles in their swimming pools. I watched a scarlet macaw fly from one splintered telephone pole to another. One of our neighbors said their friend had seen a Florida panther in what used to be their kids’ sandbox.”

I remember the story. The hurricane made landfall and destroyed the South Florida Zoo, tore down the fences and the brick walls, flooded the moats and washed animals out into the streets. The entire aviary was picked up and thrown nearly two miles, tropical birds scattering in the wind like flung handfuls of gemstones.

Now, standing in the front yard of our house, we turn to look at our empty space; the bare yard where the chickens used to be, scratched and picked clean of every bit of grass except a knotty weed we’d never managed to kill; the whispering orchard, budding, soon to flower; all the acres behind it, sheltering August’s crop of hay. A sort of peace floats over us.

“Showing people this sort of thing was my dream,” my father says. “I

wanted a farm, horses, a tractor—I wanted to use the land and teach the land. Your mother didn’t. She followed me up here. We could have stayed in that blue house in Florida and gone to the beach every weekend.”

“We wouldn’t have had a roof,” my mother reminds him. She takes his hand.

When my family goes inside to begin packing, I linger. I walk through the apple, the orange, the cherry trees my father planted in the backyard. I pass the hazelnut bushes. I look up at the sky through the branches of the walnut tree. I walk through my mother’s vegetable garden and past the wild roses. I take a leaf from each plant and greedy handfuls of flowers when I find them, and put them in the pocket of my sweatshirt. Later that night I press them all in the leather-bound copy of *Great Expectations* my grandfather bought for my tenth birthday and I never opened. I write the name of the plant, the date and time, a description, in pen over Dickens’s words.

THE RIVER RISES, AND MY FAMILY BOXES UP THE LAST OF WHAT WE CAN. We take the pictures from the walls and the photo albums from under the bed. To save space, we put every frozen moment in a manila folder and leave the empty frames stacked on the dining table. We take the crocheted tablecloth my great-grandmother made for my parents’ wedding and leave the widescreen TV on the dresser.

I have packed only the small duffel my parents bought me when I played basketball at my grade school. I have taken my tie pin collection and my satin lace baptism pillow. I take *Great Expectations*. I put the goose feather into a plastic baggie. I fold a quilt my mother made when I was a baby and take it, too. I leave the bed made, the floor swept, the desk dusted. I leave my bookshelf behind, imagining each page of my biology textbooks wrinkled and stiff with salty water, dissolving. I imagine the walls of the house I grew up in swell and crack, watch the walls of my room split like wet skin. I imagine bullsharks cruising through my brother’s bedroom and a catfish making a home in my closet.

When we leave, my mother locks the front door. “To keep out the looters,” she explains. “Andrew made people crazy.”

And though I know this isn’t Andrew, know there is no riding out this flood, The Flood, as we’ll all call it, and we’ll never come back to this place, I say nothing. I pull the handle to make sure the door is secure, and nod at her. She locks the door for the same reason I make my bed: she’d hate coming home to a house unmade.

After she takes the key from the lock, I watch her walk through the blueberries she and my father planted when I was eight. Without looking she plucks a little green berry, unripe, from its branch and puts it in her purse, and I know that, whenever we get wherever we’re going, she’s going

to put that berry in the little tin box with her grandmother's jewelry and our social security cards, buried somewhere amongst our most precious things.

As my father backs the truck out of the driveway, and I sit in the backseat watching the house, I still don't feel like we're leaving. I feel like we're going on vacation, and we'll be back, and the house will still be there, waiting, the way it's always been, after every summer, every business trip. And Lucy and Stuart and Johnny-boy, the dairy cows, the geese and chickens, the coyotes and the mousing-cats in the barn, they'll all be waiting for us, too, wondering where we've been. Even now, I think I see the boulder-like silhouette of a pony stretched out in the midst of the dying hay field, gathering sunlight to her body like a black hole.

"I left my light on," Toby says next to me.

Against the blinds of his window, his desk lamp casts a gentle shadow, and I think I can see the hole he carved in the wall where he cut a train from the wallpaper he had since he was a baby, folded it up, and put in an envelope tucked in the back pocket of his jeans. In the driver's seat, my father gives my mother a sideways look. I feel the car slow.

But she's already taken her knitting out of her bag and is casting a deep green wool onto her needles. "It's all the same," she says, and it is. I watch the blueberries disappear out the passenger side mirror. It's the beginning of May. The blueberries will be ready to pick in two weeks. They will be underwater.

Don't Forget, This Is Not You

i. I Speak to My Twin Sister

You are not the daughter
about to get swept into the ocean.
I am not that daughter either.

Our grandmothers' grandmothers
will have known.
There are tasks that need doers.

We'll divvy the list.
There has to be a sad girl
and an angry girl.

There has to be one
who likes adults and one
who always scuttles off.

These are our inheritance:
bangles that fixed to our wrists
like the ones we outgrew,

the ones we needed
to be cut from.

ii. A Woman

Here is someone's daughter who wades
into the waves fully garbed
and watches the birds that bobbed there
as they dive into an oncoming surge.
Her foothold falters
and her soaked skirts threaten
to smother her face as the horizon bends

and upends itself in the crash of water
overhead. Over and over, she emerges
to find her footing. She anchors there.
It takes a bit to believe she's standing
again.

iii. All the Women

You are the daughters who appear to be women
though that doesn't make you one.

The coat you are wearing cost a lot of money. Who has that kind of cash?
That woman isn't a woman if she takes gifts from men.

You believe me, don't you?
You, those nights I wonder about loneliness:

Your tattooed lipliner and your laughter
like a line in a poem from childhood.

Or you, your sewing fingers, wanting to stitch
a chador I would wear for you.

You, at your stove with a stew,
the flavor on my gums

of a kitchen I can't fully recall.
My heart's chambers keep refilling with blood.

There are others like you.
Company when I'm in danger of vanishing

from myself. You are there to love,
so I stay, anchored

to each of you.

 You leave the surf

to join me for a while, return to it to rest.
But mostly you hover in between,

arriving and retreating. As if to say:
no one is ever gone

and no one is only here.

kwabena foli

Question 7

I.

The year is 1992. You're seven.

you don't remember how they met nor why your mother even liked him.
especially after that time he punched her for talking back, a quality you've
picked up and been punched for yourself.

you do remember one moment. late evening it was. she picked herself up off
the kitchen floor lip split
open like a lamb's throat.

you and your brother get your coats.

ten minutes later you're in your grandparents' living room
as it turns orange from the light in grandpa's "work closet."
you watch your mother grab the sledgehammer...

i'll get y'all in the morning. watch your brother.

II.

The year is 1997. You're twelve.

as boys do you got into a roasting session on the school playground. called
Greg a fat muthaphucka in a tone hostile so Greg
punched you clean in the eye, turning it black & blue before
you could get up from the ground. Everyone goes home laughing.

Your mother, an ex-gangsta disciple, ex-mule, now army vet,
then hustler of oils, government employee, and single mother of two,
sees the eye...

aahhhh HELL NAW!

Your mother grabs her 9mm, grabs your wrist,
drags you to Greg's house. Now his home is a barricade

as your mother bangs on his screen door with the butt of the pistol
proclaiming this was the day he was going to die.

yo mama is crazy joe!

III.

The year is 1997. You're twelve.

walking from the bus-stop towards your uncle's house,
the local crackhead / fix-it-for-some-change-or-beer guy
rides pass you on his bike then makes a U-turn
just to tell you you look just like ya mama

*boi ya mama was crazy back in da day. used
to beat my ass and all the guys around here.
she ain't no joke. tell her Joe said "hey."*

IV.

The year is 2004. You're nineteen.

never have you seen your mother so frail. for a year
she's been in court convincing a judge she's depressed
& therefore cannot work. she wants retirement. knew
more than anyone what being tired meant. cited her life.
what the doctor said. spoke of grandma's passing earlier that year.

to my shame—i sided with the judge...

*aren't you a strong black woman? how can you
be black & woman and not strong?*

V.

The year is 2010. You're twenty-five.

lately you seesaw between sex binges & sitting alone in the dark.
there are voices in your head sometimes about dying. you don't want to.
but wanting to doesn't seem foolish—that scares you.

friends are concerned. your thesis advisor lets you go
after that scathing article you wrote about her in the paper. you do this
a lot lately—go off. you told your pastor you'll beat his ass.

i don't give a phuck.

VI.

The year is 2010. You're twenty-five.

john's passing has the hallways heavy. our hearts
even more so. graduate school feels like a labyrinth
where the lines are so blurred going forward
would only bring more confusion. you drop out.
land in a church where a preacher promises freedom
from what you've inherited.

*the Lord...visits the iniquity of the fathers on the children
and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.*

what sins can a ghost do? being there but not really?
i've only known the parts of me that's my mother:

the aggression,
the lovers,
the days of sitting in the dark.

VII.

The year is 2016. You're thirty-one.

the intake form asks if anyone in your family
has a history of mental illness. you check *yes*
thinking

*it's the one thing about my family I've always
been sure of.*

Samantha Leigh Futhey

Bells Majestic

Penns Valley, PA

At the bar, your hand on my knee,
 you ask, *Where do you want to go?* For once,
I know. On back roads we follow
 Penns Creek, the forest's vein of water.
We steal beers from my father's stash,
 creep out of the farmhouse like mice
sneaking behind horse-hair plaster.
 Lights off, but I know he hears us.
On the road with windows down, cold fringes
 our skin, your cigarette smoke
exchanging spring choirs
 with night peepers. To keep warm,
we drink. Spiraling up
 to Bells Majestic overlook,
we perch above the valley, our gaze
 sharp like red-tailed hawks
circling ridges, picking order
 from the chaos of fields and woods.
Valley lights blink in and out of existence
 below the shift of fog and clouds.
Cars twist on roads you know
 like your mother's voice
calling your name. Here, roads of one A.M.
 marijuana vision quests, spooked
deer barely missing your careening.
 There, the high school gym
where you dreamed of basketball glory
 launching you over these hills.
Clouds drape over the moon, the valley
 shrouded in mist. Years later,
when I'm alone, I search for the route
 we took, to glimpse again
what I thought I understood. Now,

I drive through town, past cop cars
squatting outside Victorian homes
 peeling from sidewalks—another
heroin bust. Between Confederate flags
 and *Don't Tread on Me* snakes
wrapped on crooked porches, I try
 to remember Bells Majestic,
a glimmer of lights breaking through trees. But I've
 forgotten the shape of that road,
sluices of air soaked in hemlocks,
 the way the pines sway when hawks
launch off ridges: an attempt
 to define the wind.

Today

The news does not say a boy dies. Instead, it says there is a sea of grief swallowing a boat full of refugees trying to flee their homeland.

It says there are bullets kept inside the skulls of children whose lifeless bodies are delayed for easy identification by their parents before they

hurl them into a mass grave. Today, the news does not say a woman dies on her way home from a morgue where the remains of her three children

are drenched in blood, where her husband sits, waiting for her to bring white veils to cover their children.

Instead, the news says there are trees that drip the blood of black boys, trees that bear the names of boys whose bodies descend after being stifled

with a rope, trees that bear the last wishes of hanged black boys. Today, the news does not say a man dies in the smoke of bombs.

Instead, the news says there are corpses of men delivered to their wives to bury, men buried on the battlefield, men whose children

will never recollect their faces, men whose names will never echo through the trumpet of their homeland,

men whose voices will never transcend the four bombed walls of their war-torn countries. Today, the news does not say my

country is dead. Instead, the news says the natives of my country are aliens seeking survival in other countries,

exiles sending letters to relatives and homeland that no longer recognize them, refugees daring the turbulence

of the sea as they carry the burden of this country on their weary backs.

My Mother Gathers Grief

Like pebbles. She gathers grief from the mouth of a radio
that trembles on the table whenever gunshots hush the faint

sound of peace in a country where people wake up to meet
casualties of bombs, to read headlines of newspapers devoted

to reporting tragedies in places attacked overnight by masked
men, by insurgents whose voices burn our ears.

My mother gathers grief from the hearts of the dying ones in
refugee camps, from the hapless citizens of a country where

children become victims of war, where women are forced into
widowhood as their husbands remain buried in unidentified places.

My mother gathers grief from the silence of children who attend
the masjid to beg for food during Ramadan, from the flaccid breasts

of mothers that know the meaning of losing their husbands to war,
from the dishevelled hair of women who mourn all night,

their light of happiness quenched by the flood of war.

My mother gathers grief by listening to the sad stories
of vagrants plodding deserted paths, by waiting all night

for news from Syria, from countries where they bury corpses all day,
while they spend their nights expecting more corpses to fill the streets.

Remembering Death

At seventy-two, my grandmother leans on the edge of despair
as her body reduces to something ordinary, something weightless

like air in a room where she wakes up every day to remind herself
of the assured presence of sickness, of death lurking somewhere in

her frail bones, of things that will break her more as she shuffles
old letters from dead loved ones, as she remembers the graves

of men whose children will gather every year to offer prayers
to the departed souls of the dead. She passes through each day

to reflect on the happy faces of children who swing a rope at the
facade of her house as she steps out every evening to witness the

wind that blows from a distant field, the people walking in
the streets as dusk alights on the roofs of houses.

At seventy-two, my grandmother returns to the past through
the old songs that blare on the radio in her room where she sits

to read through dusty books and diaries. She smells the air
that reeks of decayed things and returns to mourn her own end.

Sara Henning

Via Negativa

I.

Separation

Grand Island, another Days Inn, and it's sandhill cranes I've come for, not the slow car ride with the ex who remained my friend, not my love miles away who tries to translate distance into a language of common yearning: a jilted longitude, an alchemy that can't turn desire into gold. His dropped calls beatboxing static into the dusk.

II.

Projection

We're making banter about inappropriate slogans for funeral homes on our way to the dugout, where we will watch the cranes crisscross the sky to their roosting grounds: *McCormack Funeral Homes*, the ex says. *We're dead serious about service.* He laughs. *McCormack Funeral Homes: We'll be waiting for you.*

III.

Heartland

Around us, churches and farm houses lean into the March freeze. They ghost the landscape, derelict, all plank and luminous tin. Small cemeteries go rogue on the side of the road like musk thistle. *McCormack Funeral Homes*, I say, *for when you want to go out in style.*

IV.

Heaven Sent

I imagine my body as a lapsed grain silo ruddy in the whirl and siege, a rust cathedral glinting in the near dark. *McCormack Funeral Homes*, the ex begins again, as we coast into a Casey's gas station to pee. *Your last pit stop before heaven*. I walk too fast into the fluorescent surge to spur him on.

V.

Flyway

I have come for birds tessellating the flyway, the braided channels of the Platte River full of song. I have come for bodies spread across a sky that holds them until the distance yields, where sleep and hunger are a war of wills and love.

VI.

What Holds Me

I worry about my tomcat I left at the motel, how the whole trip up here he hid under the passenger seat and hissed in his sleep, his Indian grass-colored haunches low to the floorboard. I worry about what it will mean to drive back into a night frosting the windows until birds become indistinguishable from the water. Still, I am ready to coil my fingers around my binoculars, to believe in a field of view inversely proportional to their magnifying power. Ready to believe in their angular value, how many degrees will hold me and for how long.

VII.

Vignetting

I've learned that a larger pupil allows for *vignetting*, so as birds flit and dervish in their aperture, I will see them. So as birds dance, the cold will wrap us into its shimmer and numb. I am ready for the full hour it will take for my toes to thaw under the spray of a hot shower when we return for the

night, how the flush of blood will unfurl like blue bonnets, their throaty perfume razing whole fields of skin.

VIII.

Zombie Free

As we get closer, an ethanol plant steams in the distance, its wind velocity like the breath of God. *McCormack Funeral Homes*, I say so softly I'm almost thinking it. *Zombie free for over twenty years.*

IX.

Premarital / Rift

Simone Weil once wrote, *only desire without an object is empty of imagination*. She wrote, *I also am other than what I imagine myself to be. To know this is forgiveness*. I love a man so far gone he could be the next irrigation pivot we pass over, next radio tower lilting commercials for the price of soybeans. He could be the last free exit until Kansas City, the road sign imploring us to *Drive friendly*. He could have been the wreck we saw on the Oklahoma Turnpike US 271 on our way here. He could have been the sign: *Do not drive into smoke*.

X.

Orgies, Not Islands

I'll forgive myself this time for the sheer lush spectacle I'm chasing, birds instead of his hands on my body. For cranes roosting in the promise of heat, not the liminal yearning I've come to call grace. I hurt for it, grace, but also the image of bodies laid together in orgies, not islands, the silt beneath them the color of bruise.

XI.

Love Is a Verb

This is the little I know: within the hour, I'll be muscled between dugout

Sara Henning

and the darkness surrounding me, the birds' tawny feet and the surge of the soul, so nakedly rising it could be joy or sadness. It could be ground zero or zenith before it's another body gone.

W.J. Herbert

Dear Specimen

1. Millipede

Speak to me: flail each one
of your thousand feet or,

at least, unarmor your plates
and let me see inside you.

How does the luminescent
blue of your body expand

then close up again, fluent
as a geisha's tassled fan?

Spill into me, millipede,
give me your grace,

your sticky and sensuous legs,
your luminous tube:

blue-edged and nested
row of potter's bowls

glazed and fired and stacked,
your anus clean and smooth.

If I turn you upside down,
your shelled head is an embryo.

2. Waterfowl, Dovekie

Four in a drawer lie belly
up, curved

feet criss-crossed beneath
short

tail feathers and you,
smallest,
are a downy sausage.
Did the curator

primp you for this?—
pick your lice
and smooth the graying feathers
of your neck?

And why here in the humid
Carolinas, little auk?
You, who would flock to the edges
of pack ice

and dive, wings and feet
swimming
furiously; your call, a loud
hysterical laugh.

3. Resin Specimen

In a display case, turtle skulls.
You, snapper, beside your ignominious

resin twin. He's a Mardi Gras mask,
a putty skull that glistens

with newness, catches the light
and shines

while you are a wondrous dull thing,
bleached bone with holes

for viscous eyes, cartilaginous
nose, jaw scissored

to snatch what swims by.
Who would believe

your skull could look sinewy?
Its ridges, a pale creek bed

worn by watershed flesh, the way
a stream scours its own stony bed.

4. Least Tern

You seem so perfect,
though all your feathers are gone
and you are glowing,
each bone shining through your skin;
the specimen jar that holds you
just wide enough
for your leg joints to spread
and your arms
to cock themselves by your side,
as if you are still
a fledgling in a nest, legs gripping
its edge, half-open wings
unfolding, but the curator's
bent your neck
so that your spine's collapsed,
and how will you fly like that?

5. American Beaver

I love you, *Castor canadensis*,
I can't help myself—

I don't know if it's because you gnaw
whatever you need then

for months, fall into a deep
almost-sleep, the way your cousin did

through Pleistocene winters
while woolly mammoths froze in sinkholes.

I love your slender paws and pudgy face,
how you swim, nose up, in the Hudson

amid PCBs and cadmium but Castor,
it's your tail that puts me over the top:

the way you waggle back and forth
smashing the water

to warn kits away from bobcat,
anchored barge leaking tar sands.

6. White-Tail

Yes, they will let me pet you,
 dear *Deer*. Sheared at the shoulders
 and placed on the table,

you look up to the Heavens
 with the same lace of black lashes
 and wide open eyes

as mine. Though you have
 no arms to entreat with,
 no palms to open

and upturn, still your ears
 outstretch and, oh, those ears!
 Such big dishes,

they must hear whatever
 excuse God is giving you.
 If you were mounted on a wall

you would look, not up,
 but straight out at me
 asking: *Why are we here?*

My Rubén

notes on a trajectory, a controversy

I.

LA PRINCESA ESTÁ TRISTE...¿QUÉ TENDRÁ LA PRINCESA?

Los suspiros se escapan de su boca de fresa

“Tell me the one about the princess,” I’d say, and she’d readily utter these two lines. Except for a set of aqua blue encyclopedias, ours wasn’t a household replete with books. And yet, during my childhood, this arrangement of words about a sad princess sighing through strawberry lips would float free from my mother’s own lips. Standing at an ironing board, on the couch watching a telenovela, seated at the kitchen table removing tiny pebbles from a pile of uncooked pinto beans. Nothing kept her from retrieving this poem—one, I imagine, she had to learn in the early forties as a school girl in Nicaragua, though she never went beyond the sixth grade. You might say, then, that my mother’s favorite Rubén Darío poem had become part of her DNA, her breath—something she passed on to me.

In high school, when I sought out these poems, it was the English translations of Lysander Kemp I had to read. I don’t recall, however, reading his versions with as much delight as listening to my mother. Although I grew up speaking and understanding spoken Spanish, I was illiterate until I began to study the language formally at UC Berkeley.

My first meaningful experience as a reader of Spanish was when, living in Spain as a student, I set out to read Ian Gibson’s two-volume biography of Federico García Lorca. In volume one, in a section where he is making light of the profound impact Rubén Darío’s work had on the young Lorca, Gibson quotes, in full, a Darío masterpiece: “Lo fatal.” I was finally able to properly experience what all the fuss was about.

Because I was aspiring to write poems of my own, I also wondered how “Lo fatal” might sound in English. It was a poem, for the most part, bereft of images. Its power resided in its gorgeous rhythms and rhymes and, I think, its arresting theme. It was a poem that didn’t lend itself, in my view, to conventional modes of translation. Not knowing any better, I decided to re-cast the piece as I saw fit. I deployed very short lines, ignoring the poem’s original sonnet-like shape. The result was a draft of what became “The

inevitable,” the second poem in section two of *After Rubén*, my forthcoming book. It remained, for many years, my one and only attempt at what I’m certain would be considered blasphemous in most translation circles. Looking back, it was personal: I was the son of Nicaraguan immigrants who heard Darío as a child. I was giving myself permission to play with Rubén, *my* Rubén.

My early efforts at literary translation were with the work of the late Francisco X. Alarcón, the homoerotic sonnets of Federico García Lorca, and the avant-garde verse of Lorca’s contemporary, Gerardo Diego—the latter as my thesis while pursuing an M.A. in Hispanic Civilization through New York University (“NYU in Spain”). This encompassed the late eighties to the early nineties in Madrid.

It wasn’t until my first semester as an MFA candidate in creative writing that I returned to Rubén Darío. Context meant everything. My first workshop at Notre Dame was a revelation. John Matthias organized the entire course with translation as the lens through which we would view and do everything. Matthias’ workshop made manifest something another former teacher, Thom Gunn, had said in a workshop at Berkeley. Paraphrasing: “Reading, as experiences go, can also serve as a source of inspiration for our poems.”

Matthias’ workshop made possible the other nine Darío versions and riffs dispersed throughout sections one through four of *After Rubén*, not to mention a number of other pieces that splice lines and fragments from other poetic texts. The reader, at this point, might be asking what, precisely, did he have us do? Mostly, he assigned, and had us thoroughly discuss, certain crucial texts. George Steiner’s *After Babel* was one. Robert Lowell’s *Imitations* was another. And then, simply, we were free to pursue our passions. For me it was a matter of testing certain ideas and methods out on Rubén Darío during those fifteen weeks in the Fall of 2001. What do I mean? Well, this notion that the source text—a poem in Spanish, for instance—could be a *vehicle* for writing a poem in English, one closely inspired by the original; or: to render the source poem into a very liberal English version of the original. Notice: I’m avoiding the term “translation,” its traditional sense. It was the beginning, I think, of my blossoming interest and preoccupation with works of art inspired by other works of art. In this first phase, it was a matter of one text begetting another. As the years progressed I began to grow increasingly interested, obsessed even, in the phenomena of the visual and plastic arts becoming the springboard for literary art. But for now, this: all but one of my Darío versions had their start in Matthias’ workshop.

II.

The nameless storefront, hours north of San Francisco, looked abandoned: the plate glass windows were covered, from the inside, with newspaper—like

a business gone bust on the town's main strip. The town was Corning, just south of Red Bluff. I tapped the glass firmly with a nickel, and waited. The door opened. The man standing before me was bleary-eyed, his hair gray, abundant, disheveled, looking as if he'd just crawled out of bed, though it was two in the afternoon. He was wearing corduroys and a wrinkled shirt—a turtleneck. "Hola, papá," I said. My father opened the door further, gestured for me to step inside. When he shut the door everything went dark. At a distance, some light seeped through what looked to be a wide curtain hung from a cord that spanned the width of the room. *The Price is Right* blared from a television behind it. My eyes adjusted: some empty display cases immediately off to the side—the kind you see in a jewelry store. I discerned bulging bags piled high in the corners to the left and right. I caught a shadow slinking by: a cat. I noticed sparsely populated clothing racks. "Let me show you around," he said and began to walk away. I followed him down a pathway of stuff—boxes mostly. Once I was past the glass cases, the low-ceilinged room seemed to open up and there were beds, three of them, up against the wall on the right. There were dressers, too, placed in between the beds as if they were functioning as low walls—as if each bed and dresser constituted a makeshift "room" in that storefront-turned-living space. My father approached what I saw were hanging bedsheets; he slipped his hand into a seam and swept one of them aside like a stage curtain, and stepped into the light.

In the months after my mother's death in January of 1997, I paid my father two visits up in Corning, each lasting ten days. One evening, during the first visit, while strolling down the main drag on our way to Safeway, the subject of poetry came up and he began to tell me about his favorite Rubén Darío poem: "Los motivos del lobo." I didn't know the poem and so listened intently as my father paraphrased the story from Saint Francis of Assisi's life, as depicted by Darío—how he tamed the wolf that had been terrorizing an Italian village; how the wolf lapsed back to being a wild animal; how Saint Francis, sad at this turn of events, began to say the Our Father to end the poem. When I returned to Spain that June, I tracked the poem down, and marveled at it, admiring how Darío had taken a well-known, popular, perhaps even sentimental myth—and complicated it, making it more interesting, nuanced, problematic.

Why hadn't I attempted to render this poem into English during that seminal workshop with John Matthias? At six pages, perhaps I deemed it too long for my semester project; perhaps I wanted to attempt shorter Darío poems first, and leave the wolf poem for later. In fact, it wasn't until 2002 or 2003 that I took the wolf poem with me to Europe on a week-long, self-directed writing retreat. The task I'd set for myself was one, and one alone. "Los motivos del lobo" was transformed, in Dublin, Ireland, into "The Man and the Wolf"—a free verse poem in forty-seven tercets and a single final

line. Like a number of the pieces in my forthcoming book, it became one of my *after Rubén Darío* poems. Before finding its permanent final home in the full-length *After Rubén*, “The Man and the Wolf” took up residence in 2006 in, *Evensong: Contemporary American Poets on Spirituality*. In my headnote for that volume, I spoke about how the poem became, for me, a kind of metaphor for those twenty days I spent with my father in the wake of my mother’s death. Twenty years later, it’s still a poem I immediately associate with him. Increasingly, I’ve come to think of it as my father’s gift to me—my inheritance.

III.

[I]f we sanitize, compromise, or self-censor, we are only pulling out our wings.

—Rigoberto González

The e-invitation landed in my inbox in mid November of 2012. It began: “Dear Writer Friend, I want to let you know that I’m beginning—and ending—a literary magazine. A one-issue deal, that issue ending up solely in the hands of the writers contained in it...The magazine will be called *Forward to Velma*, and will be epistolary: one of letters, correspondence.”

Considering the source of the invitation, and how interesting I deemed its parameters, I immediately thought, *Yes—I’m in*. Around this time, I’d also become aware of a press release from earlier in the month titled, “ASU Libraries acquires rare manuscripts of Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío.” One paragraph leapt off the page:

The documents have already begun to alter the scholarship on Darío. The peer-reviewed “Bulletin of Spanish Studies,” a prestigious academic journal from the United Kingdom, has published an article by [Alberto] Acereda in its September 2012 issue based on the letters found in the ASU collection. The article, “Nuestro más profundo y sublime secreto: Los amores transgresores entre Rubén Darío y Amado Nervo,” reveals for the first time a secret romantic relationship between Darío and famed Mexican poet Amado Nervo (1870 – 1919).

The revelation of these letters felt seismic. Up until then, my gay literary mentors had been unapologetically “out.” Or, even if they weren’t direct mentors, were “out” as far as how public consciousness perceived them. But Rubén Darío? He wasn’t part of *that* pantheon. He wasn’t Hart Crane or Oscar Wilde. He wasn’t, for that matter, Amado Nervo himself, about whom my literary friends in Spain had let *that* penny drop over twenty years ago.

Darío's persona had always seemed somewhat anguished to me, tormented even, and so this revelation added a poignant, if bittersweet, sheen to his biography. Is it possible that I saw something of myself in that anguish—was that why this revelation struck me as it did?

I was a skinny, insecure boy with a skateboard in the years before I entered high school. My refuge was schoolwork and sports. Skateboarding was another. I was a connoisseur of sorts—not acquiring a board that was ready-made, but putting one together part by part: a fiberglass deck, a particular brand of trucks, polyurethane wheels. A nerd of the genre in other words. My red Zephyr with its black, custom-fit grip tape was my ride for exploring San Francisco streets I wouldn't otherwise venture down on foot.

Once, I rode past a frame shop that also carried, I discovered, greeting cards aimed at a particular audience of the masculine persuasion. I found myself browsing, now and then, plucking cards from the rack to quench a certain gaze. But that afternoon in 1980 when I spotted my mother across the street as I exited the shop, board in hand, marked my last visit. *I'd rather be dead than have anyone, friend or stranger, learn my secret.* That was how I expressed it in "Flyer, Closet, Poem," the essay that punctuated *Glow of Our Sweat*—my last book.

Through one of my contacts at ASU, I managed to land an e-introduction to Alberto Acereda, the Darío scholar quoted earlier. He was kind enough to send me a PDF of his eye-opening article, which I promptly devoured. It included the nine letters Darío had written to Nervo. The last one was penned on the twelfth of January in 1915. The Hotel Astor near Times Square had provided stationery. This final letter left no doubt about the nature of the bond between the two Spanish-language poets.

When I'd first received that invitation to submit a piece to *Forward to Velma*, it occurred to me that this Darío-Nervo story was ripe with possibility in terms of subject matter. After reading Acereda's article, possibility became certainty: I knew what kind of poem I would draft.

Or so I thought. A prominent Nicaraguan writer soon weighed in, online, with a thousand-word piece in which he renounced as false the nine letters. His argument, at first glance, seemed plausible, pointing out some erroneous dates, questions to do with Darío's handwriting, and other incidentals.

If my initial impulse was to pen a poem in the voice of Rubén Darío addressed to his secret lover, this latest twist spurred an imaginative leap in a different direction. The epistle would still be in Darío's voice, but it would be a letter addressed to this skeptical public figure—from the grave. I should say, for the record, that I love this writer's work, one novel in particular in which, it so happens, he movingly depicts two periods from Rubén Darío's life, including his final moments. If I haven't made it explicitly clear, reading was another refuge during those lonely years.

Including the summer I fell in love with Frank O'Hara. It was immediately after my first year at Cal—*before* I enrolled in my first writing workshop and concurrently joined the staff of the *Berkeley Poetry Review*. During the spring semester of 1985, I discovered that one of the course offerings that June included a class called Literature and the Arts. The topic was American poetry and painting—specifically, cubism and abstract expressionism. We'd be reading William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, John Ashbery, and Frank O'Hara. I enrolled in a New York minute, not fully cognizant of how lucky I was. The instructor was the late James E.B. Breslin, who would go on to write a seminal biography of Mark Rothko, but who I would mostly know from his, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945 – 1965*—one of my favorite books *about* poetry. I liked all the poets we read that summer well enough. But Frank O'Hara's exuberance and verve just bowled me over, turning him into one of my first gay literary heroes.

I commuted to class from San Francisco that summer and one afternoon, riding BART, absently flipping through the dog-eared pages of *Selected Poems* with its Larry Rivers nude of O'Hara on the cover, I casually read the editor's bio in the back and saw that Donald Allen "resided in San Francisco." As soon as I got home I grabbed the phone book and confirmed in the White Pages that Allen lived on Grand View—walking distance from my home.

The neatly typed beige postcard read: "Dear Mr. Aragon: Thank you for your lovely letter. I no longer edit verse. I would be delighted to meet you. My phone number is.... Sincerely, Donald Allen." When the appointed day arrived, I stepped out onto the sidewalk on Fair Oaks, turned left and walked up the hill to the corner, turning right on 24th and proceeded to walk up another hill, crossing Dolores and into the heart of Noe Valley, continuing for several blocks, past Castro, Diamond, Douglass, Hoffman, turning right on Grand View and walking down a slope and then up, until I reached the address of the nondescript apartment building. I rang the bell, was buzzed in. Greeting me at the door was a man of 70 or so, medium-build with a trim moustache and a head of beautiful white hair, wearing a cardigan. He invited me to take a seat on his immaculate sofa. His apartment was exquisitely arranged, antique pieces here and there. He served coffee and cake, asked if I cared to listen to music. He put on something classical, in a volume discreet enough to permit conversation. I tentatively asked about Frank O'Hara. Allen recounted with humor and affection that Frank loved sharing stories from his time in the Navy, details of which he chose not to reveal, and which I was too shy to ask for. I'd been sitting there for about an hour when Allen rose and disappeared and came back with two books which he was kind enough to sign. *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, featuring a striking photograph of O'Hara and Larry

Rivers with arms crossed, leaning on a building while appearing to fix their gaze on something in front of them. And: *Frank O'Hara: Early Writing*, in white script against green and featuring a very young O'Hara in profile looking to the left, with his slightly crooked nose—broken, according to Allen, from a boxing match in his youth. That was my cue to leave. I said goodbye to Donald Allen, the legendary editor of *American poetry*. I was nineteen. And very much in the closet.

As I found myself quietly immersed in this Nicaraguan polemic involving Rubén Darío's letters, what inevitably came to mind was Spain's often fraught relationship with its national poetry treasure: Federico García Lorca. In 2009 Ian Gibson, pre-eminent biographer and independent scholar, offered this on the occasion of *Lorca y el Mundo Gay*, his fourth and final book on the Andalusian poet: "Spain couldn't accept that the greatest Spanish poet of all time was homosexual. Homophobia existed on both sides of the civil war." Was there a similar dynamic unfolding with Nicaragua's national poetry treasure?

I wrote and submitted my poem to *Forward to Velma*, titling it "January 21, 2013"—a piece that went on to occupy its place in the privately published and distributed literary magazine, after which it appeared in a public print journal, an online magazine, and an anthology of Central American writing in the U.S. It's recently appeared in the limited edition chapbook, *His Tongue a Swath of Sky*, before finally settling into the pages of *After Rubén*.

In the months that followed, I wondered if there would be a response to the charge that these letters were falsified. That summer I had my answer. In its 2013 edition, *Siglo diecinueve (Literatura hispánica)*, a peer-reviewed annual edited in Spain, published, "Los manuscritos Darianos de Arizona. Autenticidad de la colección y apostillas a las cartas a Amado Nervo" by none other than Alberto Acereda. As with his piece published in *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, once I was able to land a PDF of the *Siglo diecinueve* article, I carefully read it, and re-read it, with much interest.

Acereda prosecuted his case over the course of thirty-one pages, offering detailed context for every one of the nine letters, including reports of how maps and almanacs of early 19th century Madrid and New York were studied in order to pin down the geographical circumstances of each and every letter.

Although he didn't explicitly claim homophobia as the motivation for the pushback this new branch of Darío scholarship was encountering, he seemed to insinuate it. One allegation he cited was that there was an error in a date in one of the letters. All throughout Darío scholarship, Acereda countered, where documents in Darío's own hand had played a central role, there had been a number of instances where scholars had come upon discrepancies and/or errors. In those cases, scholars were often

able to correct, amend, or offer plausible explanations using other primary sources and cross references to bolster their conclusions. In *none* of those cases, Acereda observed, had the authenticity of the Darío manuscripts been called into question. It had always been understood, and accepted, that artists—human beings after all—sometimes got their dates mixed up. What is more, he argued, why would a deliberate falsifier get dates wrong if the aim was to have the falsified document appear authentic?

Doesn't it speak volumes that rigorous, peer-reviewed literary scholarship is being met with the Documents-Must-Be-Fake argument on the first occasion that, ostensibly, said scholarship points to the subject having been involved in a same-sex liaison?

What's been detailed here unfolded back in 2012 and 2013. But, as if to underscore that we continue to live in an era in which homophobia can still manifest itself as merely another point of view, someone as recently as 2018 casually asserted to me that this Darío-Nervo business was little more than an effort to *ensuciar* Rubén Darío's name. The verb—*ensuciar*—roughly translates: to dirty, to soil. The insidiousness of that verb, how it was used, caught me off guard.

In a conversation with noted poet and critic Rigoberto González, in the aftermath of losing our mutual mentor, Francisco X. Alarcón, González noted with dismay what he perceived, in some public pronouncements, as a certain de-emphasizing if not outright muting of Alarcón's gay identity in deference to his Chicánx identity—thereby undercutting the very lesson Alarcón had always strived to impart throughout his life: that one's ethnic identity should not temper or dilute one's LGBTQ identity; that both can and should equally co-exist, as they unapologetically have, for example, with González himself.

The Rubén Darío of my childhood, as represented by my mother's favorite poem and its depiction of a princess, is the innocent strand of a braid—one that elevates fantasy and the imagination. My father's Rubén Darío, whose emblematic gesture is the loss of that innocence in favor of life's harsher realities, as told in the re-imagined story of Saint Francis, is the second strand of this braid. *These* are what my mother and father passed on to me.

I'd like to think that the Rubén Darío of the nine letters to Amado Nervo completes this braid. In the words of Alberto Acereda, at the end of his piece in *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, "[T]hese letters offer us a Darío and Nervo who are even more human, more passionate than what we imagined..." In fact, I would suggest that those who resist this third strand suffer from a deficit of the imagination—preferring to keep Rubén Darío in a more tidy, less complicated, box. Call it a coffin.

The question to be answered in the years to come is: will it be the Rubén Darío of this completed braid that fully blossoms, that comes to

occupy, without controversy, his place alongside Federico García Lorca, Luis Cernuda, Vicente Aleixandre, Amado Nervo, José Lezama Lima, and Francisco X. Alarcón, to name half a dozen Spanish-language poets, as among this linguistic tradition's distinguished mariposa voices?

With that, Rubén will have the last word—though with a caveat. Darío took his last breath while gripping a rosary given to him by Amado Nervo. And yet he chose *not* to include in an anthology of his work—whose selection he himself oversaw—a sonnet titled, “Amado Nervo.” Was it, perhaps, a conflicted effort to draw attention away from what may have been the love of his life?

Regardless, here is a snippet, addressed, perhaps, to Nervo himself:

*Generoso y sutil como una mariposa,
encuentra en mí la miel de que soy capaz,
y goza en mí la dulce fragancia de la rosa.*

*Both ample and nuanced as a butterfly,
in me you'll find the nectar I can become,
and enjoy in me the sweet scent of a rose.*

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Francisco X. Alarcón

Notes:

I.

Félix Rubén García Sarmiento (1867 – 1916), known as Rubén Darío, was a Nicaraguan poet who initiated the Spanish-American literary movement known as *modernismo* that flourished at the end of the 19th century. Darío has had a great and lasting influence on 20th century Spanish and Latin American literature and journalism. He is the undisputed father of the *modernismo* literary movement (not to be confused with English-language modernism).

The cited rhymed couplet are the first two lines of Rubén Darío's poem “Sonatina,” from his collection *Prosas Profanas* from 1895.

Lysander Kemp (1920 – 1992) worked as a writer, professor, translator, and was Head Editor of the University of Texas Press from 1966 to 1975. During his tenure at UT Press, he collaborated with Octavio Paz (1914 – 1998) on numerous translations, including *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Among the many other translations of Latin American authors he carried out, including *Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo (1917 – 1986), was *The Selected Poems of Rubén Darío* (University of Texas Press, 1965).

Ian Gibson, born in 1939, is an Irish-born author and Hispanist known for his biographies of the poet Antonio Machado (1875 – 1939), the artist Salvador Dalí (1904 – 1989) and, above all, the poet and playwright Federico García Lorca (1898 – 1936),

about whom he's written several books. In 2002, he also published an "autobiography" titled, *Yo, Rubén Darío*. A naturalized Spanish citizen and resident of Spain, Gibson is currently at work on a biography of the Spanish filmmaker, Luis Buñuel (1900 – 1983).

Francisco X. Alarcón (1954 – 2016) was an American poet and educator . He was one of the few Chicano poets to have gained recognition while writing mostly in Spanish within the United States. He was the author of some twenty books and chapbooks of poetry for adults and children. Among his many distinctions was being awarded the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award and the Fred Cody Lifetime Achievement Award from the Bay Area Book Reviewers Association.

Federico García Lorca (1898 -1936) was a Spanish poet, playwright, and theatre director. Lorca achieved international recognition as an emblematic member of the Generation of '27—so named because an homage organized in Seville, Spain in 1927 for the baroque Spanish poet Luis de Góngora. At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936 – 1939) he was executed by firing squad by Nationalist forces. Among his poetry collections were *Poeta en Nueva York*, *Romancero Gitano*, and *Poema del Cante Jondo*.

Gerardo Diego (1896 – 1987) is perhaps the least known poet, outside of Spain, of the renowned Generation of '27, which included, in addition to Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Pedro Salinas, Jorge Guillén and Luis Cernuda, to name a few. Before the Spanish Civil War, Diego was among the most active of his cohort, having the foresight and taste to edit the groundbreaking and prophetic *Spanish Poetry Anthology 1915-1931*. He was also among the most fervent of his group to explore and embrace the avant-garde tendencies of his time, particularly creationismo, which he alternated throughout his writing career, with more traditional verse forms. His most well-known avant-garde collection is from 1925, *Manual de espumas*.

II.

Evensong: Contemporary American Poets on Spirituality (Bottom Dog Press, 2006) edited by Gerry LaFemina and Chad Prevost.

III.

The epigraph by Rigoberto González is from his essay, "Toward a Mariposa Consciousness," from his book, *Red-Inked Retablos* (University of Arizona Press, 2013).

Forward to Velma was the brainchild of Gerald Fleming. He is the author of *One* (Hanging Loose Press, 2017), *The Choreographer* (Sixteen Rivers Press, 2013), *Night of Pure Breathing* (Hanging Loose Press, 2011), and *Swimmer Climbing Onto Shore* (Sixteen Rivers Press, 2005).

Bulletin of Spanish Studies: Hispanic Studies and Researches on Spain, Portugal and

Latin America is published by Routledge. “Nuestro más profundo y sublime secreto: los amores transgresores entre Rubén Darío y Amado Nervo.” Version of record first published: 28 August 2012.

The essay “Flyer, Closet, Poem” appeared in *Glow of Our Sweat* (Scapegoat Press, 2010).

The prominent Nicaraguan writer is Sergio Ramírez and his online piece is titled “El sencillo arte de dejarse de engañar.”

The epistolary poem, “January 21, 2013,” appeared in the privately distributed *Forward to Velma*; the print journal, *MiPoesias*; the online journal, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*; and the anthology, *Wandering Song: Central American Writing in the United States* (Tía Chucha Press, 2017).

The New Yorker published a piece called “Lorca and the Gay World” about Gibson’s book, authored by Katherine Ryder and published on March 19, 2009, which quotes from Gibson’s interview, first published in *Independent* on March 14, 2009 by Elizabeth Nash.

Siglo diecinueve (Literature hispánica) is edited by Universitas Castellae in Valladolid in Spain.

Rigoberto González is a noted multiple-award-winning writer and literary activist. He is the author and editor of twenty books in multiple genres, including poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, children’s literature, and criticism.

The Body After

THE DAY AFTER, WHILE MY BODY IS STILL IN SHOCK, A DOCTOR TUCKS A strand of my hair behind my ear and gently turns my head with a touch of her blue-latex finger. She leans in close to examine the blush of bruising and curve of teeth marks across my jaw. I spent the morning in a Keralan police station giving testimony through a translator and tensing up as languid young men drifted past me to pay parking tickets. Then I was driven with a young female police escort to spend the afternoon in a queue for a doctor's examination. My policewoman, standing with perfect posture in her pressed khaki uniform, doesn't speak to me, but stays by my elbow the entire day. She has her hair coiled at the base of her neck in a bun and wears her cap at a jaunty angle.

"Human bites can be very dangerous because of the amount of bacteria in our mouths. You may be at risk for infection or other complications," the doctor says in English, removing her gloves with a snap. She hands me a script written in elegant Malayalam for an antibiotic cream. "When was the last time you had a tetanus shot?"

I DON'T TEACH CLASS THE FIRST WEEK AFTER. INSTEAD, I DRESS IN CLOTHING with sleeves to the wrist each morning and wait in the staff room, chewing the inside of my mouth raw until the school superintendent, father of two girls, appears.

"The police have a few more questions," he says with a head wobble.

My eyes go wide, and I don't make a move to follow him.

He raises a hand. "But no problem. There's simply some people for you to look at. You can sit in the car, and the sergeant will bring them out for you." He gestures towards the door. "Wait a few minutes, and then we can shift to the parking lot. But don't tell the students. We don't want to worry them."

While foreign teachers are a major selling point of his English language school, his concern for us is exceeded by his repulsion for scandal.

From the back of the superintendent's white Mercedes, I watch a series of young Malayali men straddle and dismount a Royal Enfield Classic 350 with ash and red trim. In the daylight, I can confidently I.D. the bike, but none of the riders.

I'm terrified of accusing an innocent man, but I feel like I'm

disappointing the police. “The only part of him I got a good look at was his penis.”

My thirty-something boss turns to me with a look of physical pain. I am sure this has far and above surpassed any awkwardness he’s ever experienced. I wonder if he’s thinking Westerners are a liability.

“Okaaaay” he says. “Next time this happens, be sure to take a photo.”

This advice is so absurd I laugh. “Yes, the next time someone tries to cannibalize me and commit necrophilia on my unresisting corpse, I’ll be sure to take a photo.”

His spine stiffens at sarcasm. I am far from home and totally reliant on him, so I stop laughing and look out the window at the young men again.

IN THE EARLY MORNING, FOR THE SEVENTH MORNING IN A ROW, MY stomach wakes me with burbles and pops. I blink awake against the slow whirl of the ceiling fan and the sound of my Bengali neighbor singing in his bath. I wait for pain to pass. After a recent vitriolic breakup with my now ex-boyfriend, I am alone on the bed. I still sleep on the right side. I untangle myself from white sheets and roll off the firm mattress. My bare feet hit cool tile. For the fifth time this week, I purge dinner, the remains of a jalebi, a deep-fried spiralled Indian sweet, and a spicy masala egg puff pastry. My Indian ex-lover, Mitul, isn’t here to fuss over me as I heave bile and then rest my bottom lip on the lid of the green toilet.

Maybe it’s mild food poisoning or the flu? Maybe I should stop eating altogether.

This goes on, morning after morning. I am empty by the end of week three, a cadaver cored of internal organs. I call my mother, a nurse. She picks up half a world away in rural Pennsylvania.

I describe my symptoms, fever and nausea. “I’m feeling better, but I don’t eat much.” This is a lie. I haven’t eaten solid food in days. I realize that I’m completely unreliable when it comes to my own health.

My mother, in the steady voice she uses to cultivate patient compliance, tells me about the importance of fluids and plain food, rice, bananas, tea, mashed tapioca.

I reassure her that some of my colleagues are taking care of me. A new teacher, a woman from Croatia, found out about my attack and illness. Tadeja checks in on me by offering reassuring hand-holding, vitamin B pills, and organic seaweed squares.

My mother then asks about my upcoming court case and the ex-boyfriend. “Have you heard from Mitul?”

“No. I asked him to stop contacting me.”

“Good. Make it stay that way. He’s already shown he is quite persistent. Don’t give him more time, or he may think it is a signal that you secretly want him back.”

"I won't."

"You were never one to be pulled into a relationship. In college, you were kind of above it all, but this guy has cast a spell over you."

I play with the back of my earring. "Yeah, but he is pretty hot."

I do miss parts of Mitul, the more feminine parts of him, like his elegant hands, slender wrists, and Krishna-pout. I do not miss control passing for love, like when he looked through my Facebook contacts to ask how many of them I had slept with. I do not miss jealousy or the effort of shrinking intellectually and emotionally to fit the needs of his ego. We are a decade apart in age and a few continents apart in culture. I have too many degrees, and he's only recently finished high school. Eight months ago, he was a student in one of my first extracurricular language classes.

Until recently, we lived in the same decrepit hotel and walked to class together. I was his first romance. Now, he is studying to be a doctor on the other side of the state, near the tip of India, and we communicate through rumors passed along by mutual friends.

I'M HAVING TROUBLE STANDING FOR THE ENTIRETY OF TWO HOUR-LONG class sessions. I teach sitting down in a blue swivel chair.

Over lunch in the faculty breakroom, my colleague Quintin, a brilliant young womanizer from Calcutta, expresses genuine concern.

"Your breasts are so much less. It's a tragedy. Let me take you to the hospital."

"No. Maybe I have tubular worms. I can get them removed and put in little jars of formaldehyde."

"Gross. Diarrhea, is it? I like to have diarrhea every other day. Reminds me my immune system still works. What did you eat?"

"Who knows? A salmonella egg-puff?"

"Foreigners always think they have food poisoning." He gestures to his rice. "Partake."

I shake my head.

"India is rejecting you."

"My body is rejecting me. I need a new one, one with less noodly arms."

"How's your face?"

I tuck the long part of my asymmetrical-pixie cut behind my ear to show him my healing scar.

"Fuck, you still look like an apple someone took a bite out of."

I feel vulnerable, so I shake my hair out.

"Why aren't you angrier about this? Where's your emotion? It's like you're broken." Quintin points to my cheek. "Does Mitul know about the...?"

"He called crying the night it happened."

“He’s a romantic sap, still in love with you, obviously. Why don’t you two just marry?”

“I can’t cook Keralan food.”

“And you’d have to convert to Catholicism. And be monogamous. And straight.”

I’VE BEEN SPENDING MORE TIME WITH TADEJA, WHO HAS A DISCERNING spirit, reiki healing experience, and is drawn to people in pain. She knows I’m terrified to be alone and invites me for a weekend sleepover in her flat. She lives in the same crusty hotel as me, two floors up with windows to the east. After another week of visceral nightmares, assault on replay, I’m relieved to be distracted by her energy and optimism. India’s climate and ESL teaching haven’t worn her down yet. Although she admits the time here evaporates because simple tasks, like buying groceries and washing clothes, take so much longer.

We cuddle before sleep with innocent intimacy and gossip about exes, the Luxembourgian girl I fell for and her older French lover. We play “fuck marry kill” and confess attractions. My ear fits perfectly under her clavicle.

“You know,” she takes my hand. “I’m more open to being with a woman now. What does the body matter as long as the spirits are connected?”

FOR BREAKFAST, SHE PLOPS A DEEP GREEN SPOONFUL OF SPIRULINA, powdered algae, into a glass of water, stirs, and persuades me to drink. Later that morning, our Keralan neighbors down the hall tell us that the young man who attacked me has confessed. His name was in the paper. Tadeja holds me as I cry with relief.

MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY KNOW VERY LITTLE ABOUT MY LIFE IN INDIA. I give them snippets. Over a Skype video call, my cousin calls me out. “You’re a husk! What happened?”

“I’m still having trouble eating. I had some oatmeal this morning, though.”

“What you’re saying is, you haven’t eaten substantial food in like weeks?”

“None of my pants fit. Maybe my digestive problems are psychosomatic, and I should just eat with confidence.”

“When you get home, you will have a progressive dinner every night. Start at your mother’s house, and she will feed you. Then come to my house, and I will feed you. Then go to Gramma’s and she will make lava cake for you. You know to stay hydrated, get like electrolytes or something? Protein? Can’t you end your contract early? Cut and run?”

“I can’t leave yet. I still have to testify in court.”

"I thought you were done with all that," she says a bit too loudly. "I'm sorry. That cannot be fun to have to dredge all that up again. I wish I could do something, like make you dark gourmet coffee with sludge in the bottom."

I FILL EVENINGS WITH TADEJA OR QUINTIN, ANYTHING TO AVOID BEING alone in my room. When Quintin takes me to dinner, he alternates between relentless seduction and Indian mothering. I drink water, swallow a few fingertips of rice, and then take an auto home to vomit. Over the weekends, I huddle in bed watching British baking shows and murder mysteries, stories with low stakes and closure. I finally give my resignation and book a flight home. I feel like I'm giving up.

My heart and mind are mangled. I can't lobotomize moments of grief or scoop an emotionally lacerated heart out of my chest. I want to crack my cranium, scrub brain and bone, and bleach the inside of my skull. Trauma memories can't be purged in one heave like contaminated food.

ONE EVENING WHILE ALONE IN MY FLAT WITH THE DOORS LOCKED, I GET a call from a teacher friend who recently ended her contract at my school and moved home to Delhi. Anu uses her Hindi nickname for me, Shaitan, devil. Coming from a respectable conservative Muslim family, she has equal amounts of admiration and disgust for my bisexuality. She told me, appalled but curious, that being with girls was so "yuck."

"How is my Shaitan? Quintin, the donkey, called to tell me you were sick. Have you been eating street food? I told you to only eat from places I recommend."

"I'm fine. I'll take care of it when I go back to the States at the end of the month."

"I'm sad you are leaving India so soon. When are you coming back?"

"Soon. I have to visit every state and eat food from each place."

I can hear her glass bangles clink together. "I will teach you Hindi, even Urdu, darling. We will roam all over India with Mitul. He is very upset now that you are leaving. He told me so just yesterday. But I was also upset when I left my Shaitan."

"You're a good friend to him."

"Oh, darling, don't say such formal things to me. But you must talk to Mitul. Don't take such a long break, sweetie. You two are meant to be together. He just needs time to grow into a man."

I hesitate and calculate possible friend loss, possible collateral damage. "We aren't a couple, Anu. We're done."

My flamboyant friend hisses like a street hawker. "Even I understand my friend Karen is so quiet and calm. And if she is saying something like

this, it means he really did wrong. Once the pot is broken, it can't be put back together again. I will tell him to pull his head out of his rectum."

EARLY ONE SATURDAY MORNING, THE DOORBELL RINGS. I CRAWL OUT OF bed and wrap myself in the white sheet like a widow's sari. "What are you doing here?"

Mitul of the beautiful lips and curved hips and narrow wrists is standing in the hallway. In tight jeans. In a tailored black oxford shirt. He usually wears sweat pants and a T-shirt. When did he grow up?

He sucks in air. "You look terrible. Your skin is dull like something dead."

I lift a middle finger. "Shouldn't you be screwing co-eds?"

"I'd have to screw a lot to catch up with you. You're the one who has sex with most..."

I move to shut the door in his face.

"I'm sorry. Wait. Anu told me you weren't well." He reveals a container of chicken tikka from behind his back. "My mother cooked for you."

Bloody hell. I sigh and let him in before housekeeping sees me receiving male visitors.

"You should take cooking lessons from my mother. Then you wouldn't be so thin." He is serious. He flops on the bed, leans back on his elbows, and spreads his legs wide. He catches my hint of a smile and crosses his legs like a girl in Sunday school. "I'm only here to feed you. Nothing else. We have an unhealthy relationship. We're no good for each other."

I nod, wonder who he has been talking to, and take a seat in a chair across from him. I mirror his body language and adjust the sheet around my shoulder. "Okay. You've delivered the chicken. Thanks. Now what?"

"Already? The bus was six hours."

Exhausted by the betrayal of my body, I tell him to get out. I know what we're about to say to each other. We've had variations of the oncoming fight in movie theatres, restaurants, in front of friends and strangers. And within minutes of his arrival, we're arguing, ready to murder each other or fuck.

"No other man would put up with being treated like this! Do all white women like to cut off men's dicks?"

"You're so needy! Back off, you patronizing chauvinist!"

"Why are you so tense? Let me feed you. You look lifeless, even your eyes. Why won't you let me take care of you?"

"I told you, I'm not hungry."

I hate him for being so selfish. I'm in front of him, hollowed out, and he doesn't understand that I can't do things humans must do to stay alive. And I can't fight off sickness, I.D. a predator, outrun a rapist, or make a clean break with a gorgeous chauvinist. I want to open his tailored

linen shirt and vomit across his chest to share a taste, a whiff of holistic dehumanization and body betrayal.

I stand trembling. But he needs to fix something, the cockroaches crawling out of the sink, the washing machine on my tiny balcony, my appetite for food or sex.

He begins to unhook his belt. I flinch, my eyes wide.

"It's not that I'm attracted to you still." He buckles his belt. "I just want to help you feel better. Why won't you let me touch you? I mean really touch you. I'll keep my clothes on. My gift."

The pressure to receive and appreciate pleasure is too much for me. Besides, I'm dehydrated. We compromise. I join him on the bed, strip to my waist, and stretch out on my stomach. He straddles me and clicks his tongue while running thumbs down pressure points along my spine. Giving a hiss of disapproval, he says, "You were curvy. You've lost too too much. There's nothing to massage, just bones."

I roll to face him and silence him with a smack of skin. He gives me salt and sweat kisses. We aren't in love, but Mitul is a physical link to who I was before, before the stranger hijacked my body. We maneuver to sit scissored together, cunt to cock. But we have broken and healed, broken and healed so many times, my fantasy doesn't last long. We no longer fit together.

Mitul runs a finger down the scar on my cheek. The body he knew is different, marked by illness and another man. He frowns. "You're not the only one who has feelings about this." He sucks air through his teeth as he takes catalog of the changes on my skin. "Miss Bell, Miss Bell, why did you have to go out alone? So stubborn. A Keralan girl wouldn't have been out so late."

I extricate myself from him and head for the shower.

"Can I join you?" He calls from the bed.

"No."

"Please?"

I drop pajamas at the door to the bathroom.

He calls from the bed, "Do you still love me? Or do you blame me for what happened?"

This is another repeat conversation. I stand under the cold stream of water and take a deep breath.

He comes in behind me to wrap his arms around my wet waist and put his mouth on my neck. Instinctively, I raise my hands up to protect my face from an incubus baring teeth. I'm pulled backwards into a nightmare. I might have started to scream, but I don't remember.

LATER, I'M TOO LIGHTHEADED TO GO OUT. THE SUPREMACY OF THE BODY. I burrow into bed with fresh pajamas and clean sheets. Mitul sits near the balcony door and stares out at the rice fields.

He says, "You're afraid of me."

"I'm afraid of everyone."

"But I would never hurt you."

"My brain can't make the distinction."

He folds his arms. "In this country, we slide bamboo splinters into the rapist's urethra."

"Really? That sounds like fun."

Having failed to produce an orgasm for me, Mitul goes to the rooftop restaurant and returns with western chocolate bars, Cadbury, and two cups of creamy Indian coffee. I suck chocolate squares slowly, knowing they won't stay in my stomach long.

He swirls his coffee and asks quietly, "Why take this to court? That kid's life is ruined now."

I spit the chocolate into a napkin. "Why do you say that?"

"He was my age. He'll never get a good job after this."

I vomit Cadbury chocolate once he leaves to catch his bus. I hold the toilet rim hard with both hands and shudder. A sick stomach knows no hierarchy.

TWO AND A HALF MONTHS AFTER THE ATTACK, I DREAD 6:30 PM, WHEN the sun sets. I start to avoid going out for dinner and give Quentin random excuses for not leaving my apartment. I still feel sickly. My mother thinks I might have hepatitis, but I can't bring myself to leave the house for a blood test.

The morning of my court date, my mother sends a Facebook message of encouragement. She reminds me to tell the entire story exactly the way I did the first time. I didn't tell the whole story the first time, so I worry about being consistent.

I was so nervous the night before, I sat on Tadeja's yoga mat, and she taught me basic meditation-grounding exercises. I watched her fold her long limbs into peaceful poses, her thick burgundy hair falling into her face as she bowed her head to her hands, mind intelligence to body intelligence.

I STAND IN A JUDICIAL MAGISTRATE COURT WITH THREE WOMEN, TWO secretaries and the judge. They locked my superintendent outside to wait in the sun. The judge impresses on me, with the slightest hint of an English accent, the importance of speaking accurately.

I purge memories as concisely as possible, clenching the edges of the dock with both hands and securing my wavering frame against the ancient wooden railing.

MITUL CALLS FOR AN UPDATE.

I am empty and exhausted. "I have to go back one more time for the guy's sentencing. I'm dreading it."

After a pause, he says, "Maybe you should let this drop. I'm sure he never meant to go through with it. It was a crime of opportunity. Hasn't he suffered enough? Why take revenge on him?"

I put my hand on my stomach. "Are you in denial about what happened?"

"It just doesn't make sense. Keralan guys aren't like that. It's not our culture."

"I'm not suggesting rape is part of anyone's culture."

"He never would have done it if you hadn't been out alone. I know it's hard to hear but..."

I destroy his gifts, taking scissors to the red kurta he got for me and ripping apart the love letters. I smash the delicate ceramic coffee mugs. I give away the fluffy pink handcuffs but send the photographs of Mitul wearing them, along with copies of his sappy texts, to his rival and former best friend, Quintin.

When the rush of rage passes, I finally feel hungry. The ants have claimed what little food I had left in the kitchen, and it's almost dark. The sun sets at 6:30, and I am nervous to be out at night. Thankfully, Tadeja takes me for dinner. We link fingers and walk slowly in the cooling air to a local restaurant for dinner. She convinces me to try some mouthfuls of moong dal, an earthy yellow curried lentil soup with sautéed onions, tomatoes, and chilies served over rice. I tell her about Mitul, and we clink mango juice glasses in celebration of the burial of what I pretend is a dead relationship.

Later in my room, the power cuts. In the fading light, the fan slows to a stop. The heat settles on us. Tadeja opens the sliding balcony door to let in cool monsoon air and the drumming rain. She curls against me on the firm mattress and runs the tips of her fingers down my arm. Her bangles shower glitter across my skin. My mind "starts to work." I cover my head with my hands. Tadeja strokes my hair, then moves a hand to caress my cheek.

She moves in close to me, curving her body into mine as only a woman's body can do, undemanding and safe. My heart slows. I wipe my eyes.

She moves her hand to my waist. "Are you attracted to me?"

I nod against her shoulder.

We weave fingers and clasp hands. We are palm to palm, limb over limb, her thigh a pressure between my legs. I hold onto her tightly and secure my body against her in a moment that muscles back the melancholy twilight and persistent rain. I lean over to kiss her. Her mouth is sweet and

smooth, a signal of life, free of lust, urgency, disease. I am momentarily unmarked. There is no sound but a rumble from my stomach and the rain.

Last Requests

Bless vinyl. Bless the turntable spinning
in the belly of a rowboat. Take this stir
and oar-clonk, this swirl of backwater
which lives inside me. Take the whale
the boat is now, the daily leviathan
carrying wherever last requests go.
Save my *Lightnin' Hopkins in Berkeley*.
Save my Pogues and whiskey. Set a glass
on the porch for the dead who ghost
the vapors like dogs. Peck through books
as if a plum-loaded sack brought back
from an open-air market. Sell what does not
matter, but ask everyone if things matter.
Send the clothes of my youth to Nicaragua,
hang my Clash T-shirt from the battered
frame of a skinny kid. Burn what's left,
then burn the house so the sky's acrid
with birth pain and death pain, the sorrow
and sweet sweet joy of a kitchen table.
Do you see, even now, I crave to be a bowl?
Do you see the bowl will not hold my craving?
By all means, leave my worry to worms,
their secret deal with dirt, my heart to crows
good at having their way with darkness.
Now that skin leathers, I admit I loved
my skin, the work and worry worn,
where light kissed, where I begged you
kiss the not light. Say nothing.
I've got no use for words. Scatter them
in a buckshot of breath, an array
speaking to wind that howls down ridge.
Let the howl find a hollow in a bottle
I won't need much more. I won't need
my mouth either, this taker, this giver.
Set an apricot between my teeth.

Let it not be the last apricot, last sun.
Set the pyre. I am partial to fire. Play *Baby*,
Please Don't Go when I am lonely with ash.
Promise you will let it return on your lips,
your bit-raw kissed raw beautiful lips.
My only ever want was this want of more.
My only ever want was this want no more.
This whole, this nest, this without, this please.
Please this. And when this too is gone,
this holler rid into the body of the world,
into the chorus of ancients—Wasn't it all
we ever were?—This rattle, hum, husk,
this morning crashed on a park bench,
yellow leaves yawning, this needle
dropping into the groove of a day, this song
rising into the chalk and char which bore it.

The Ask

13 and trembling, sequestered in your room,
you undo a square of paper a girl named Becky
folded over and over, a sweat damp compression
in which you feel the torque of a life coming
scribbled in a nervy pen trying to get the ask down
before it is forever gone: You + Me = Dance?
An equation that is a question, you decipher
ambiguity in math, certain as certain can be
someone else exists on the other side of words.
A girl, a real one, breathing, who is kind and sees
pleasure in Algebra, shivery alive with it.
Ain't it like waking, a few hundred lady bugs
swarming the walls, windows? They go
where light is, or find the space light takes.
13 and already Borges— The world constructed,
we act like hands have done none of the labor.
Your father, never more useless, who appears
extraterrestrial in and out of your doorway,
only wanting to talk about flux, the universe,
wishes he could say your skin is not a wall,
infestations get easy. Instead, he says, *steady*,
as if wired to a bomb he's charged with disarming.
Inconceivable that he was ever a kid,
you have no language for the alien who believes
advice matters, who thinks he can talk himself
out of being the alien you turned him into.
He doesn't get it. Even this poem wants to
hurl him back to whatever planet evicted him.
So you only muster *Leave? Please?* making
an imperative out of a question. Forgive
his stupid grin, his loitering, his forgetting.
It will be like this, he won't say, in a few years,
cancer or some such, as it was when his father
turned and could not say who he was seeing.
There is no reason to remind you how brief it is,

how the river asked Heraclitus to wade,
and in his half-ass way, in time's cold wake,
he started to sing a broken held-together song.
No, you don't need to know about Heraclitus,
ento- or ety-mology, your father's weirdness.
None of this. You are only 13, unfolding
a piece of paper, word by word, the scrawling,
your body an origin room busy with wings.

Temple

I am not you. I do not know
what your body is. But this

curve of bone my tongue
inhabits, the way light

inhabits a field of timothy.
I am not light. I do not know

what field is. But I get down
and crawl into the animal

maul of its verdant mouth.
I say this is ours, always here.

Do you see how I've made
a temple of language?

I do not know if words are
good for this. I break them

on my tongue. I break them
on your body. I do not know

if my tongue is good at this.
I offer it anyway. I do not know

if we are more than bodies
born broken into. I do not know

if we are more than now,
now being the soundtrack

we wash ourselves in.

Minor Alchemies

For this I straddled radiant warmth of the stucco wall
one summer night decades ago. It was for this
I learned the Bible in childhood, *Song of Songs*,
towers of breasts. I glimpsed lovers'
quivering bodies through the lattice.

For this I climbed the chain-link fence,
dropped down on the forbidden side.
I climbed the Cypress. I climbed the stairs.
For this, the lost marriage bed. Under the eaves,
a fluting of mourning doves,

while the lovers lay on the bed & wept.
For this the taste of leather, the red strap
of a carousel horse clamped between small,
white teeth, leaving the bite-mark
to travel round & round, up & down.

For this I entered the lover's mouth & was rejected.
I dropped into shadow, became for awhile the ghost
of a living woman. It was for this I rode the night
train, Coast Starlight crushing light on the rails,
filings of moon slipping under the wheels.

For this I slowed the train.
For this I fell into Anna on the couch.
I endured the rumple of unmade beds,
the window open, rain falling on polished
hardwood, & the giddy houseplants.

For this I came to love the heel of the bread,
Saying, *I like it. I'll take it.*
For this I said, *I didn't want to assume.*
Assume, you said, & for this I said,
Establish the work, & let my love appear.

Last week my mother found her freshman photograph,
a note folded around it. In my dead father's
tremored hand, *Who could not fall for her? (over)*,
so she turned the page over, & *that continues to be true*.
There are moments when time can be held in a hand

while what matters gives & gives & takes away.
You wanted to sit next to me at the lunch table
among other bodies. There was a moment you made a way,
& you fit, & love, how many were at the table then?
Years transmute these moments.

A paper cup blown against a chain-link fence
has been filled with wind. There is nowhere a train's horn
refuses, & where the train sharply turns, sounds of stars,
ground from the rails, spark behind the wheels,
& *here is a train*, made from its turns.

For this I take up a pen in the dark.
It is more than throwing a voice: if you tell me
which way the Monterey Cypress are bent,
I will tell you which way is the Pacific
that is my dead father's hammock.

For this I washed the coffee cups of my mother & father,
a terrycloth rag of soapy water around my fist,
turning clean the mugs thrown on my mother's wheel.
The work of love is grief, though I didn't know
I was doing it, then, moments when the body

transmutes years. A love of work is a slow joy,
each beat of the train a seam in the track,
one exact word set against & into
the metal of another, meaning & music
making more than meaning & music.

From stucco I take the captured heat of that day,
lie on my back atop that wall under that summer
night sky. Above me, a length of black fabric
steadily slipping, the tiny holes in the material
are spaces of spark, refining me still.

For this I learned to rise from the bed,
from Ficus & tendril of Philodendron,
from the beloved's damp body, her warmth
under the thin blanket, not remaining there,
& this is crucial, not remaining there,

but rising daily, cusp of night opening
into a day where image erupts, & the natural artifice
says, *here*: rain landing beside her open window
on the pine floor, rain on the stairwell roof,
heard on the landing.

I lost my father's shoulder among whitecaps
so far out to sea—such waves are legion—
that no one has seen them, the cappings of the swells.
Sometimes climbing down the stairs from Anna's embrace,
I am almost eternal,

the way the Cypress's bent trunk & limbs
having met & been met nearly every moment
by the gust of an onshore wind,
imperceptibly become
the memory of many gusts.

Amaud Jamaul Johnson

How often I've turned to Latasha Harlins, who would have been 43 this July

As if you have disturbed someone at dinner,
but rather than leave, you traipse through
their hallways and bedrooms, rifling through
their closets and drawers, fingering the fine linen
shirts and pocket squares, the bespeckled display
case, your breath. And naturally, they are too polite
to say anything, so they just look, you know without
looking, re-hanging the same fucking blouse, unfolding
then folding a charcoal cardigan, which is so late season,
which you probably wouldn't have purchased anyway.
And I'm convinced they've convinced themselves
that they are good people, considering an apparent
absence of sound, no ugliness, no sirens, no syrup
or egg yolk marring some lunch counter, no one
even contemplates the police, which warrants I imagine
in their imaginations a form of applause. My sons
were gone too long. They are developing this habit
of walking their allowance down to our corner store.
One of the many reasons I've failed them, we haven't
had that talk about their bodies, about the alarming rate
of illiteracy surrounding their bodies. I'm ashamed
of how much compassion I've shown our declared
enemies, which is what I was given, always unzipping
my jacket, attempting to speak before spoken to,
being pleasant, thinking everyone is watching.
And what they are waiting for is whatever I've placed
in my hand, which rarely feels like grace.

No More Birminghams

And snow collects in the blind eyes of statues.

—Larry Levis

Not unlike Lot's wife, not salty—
or take your work-a-day Orpheus,
post happy hour, wings to bone,

extending his right hand toward
that would-be beloved, casting
devil-may-care his departing

ornaments at the doorjamb like
the bloody lip of some hellmouth.

But so often, when walking through
our arboretum, or circling an orchard
late fall, the darkest cords pulling,

then briefly I don't know where I am.
As through smoke, reading names
and faces: I'm a body caught looking.

L.A. Johnson

The Invention of Night

At this midnight, a blackout
 when the lights of the visible city
flick off. Questions unanswered,
 electricity forgets
into vanishing. People stay awake
 to decode messages
from the new-illuminated sky. Blinking,
 the slow, human exposure,
transforms the stars into threads
 of silken colors. In my room
of gaze and absence, this life on earth
 is an astronomy of distance.
A different night invents itself,
 glimmering into clarity.

*

We spin within the index of dark matter,
fields native to the heart. The air thins

and the vault in this universe remains unopened.
In cracked ice, the hour slips and I want to touch

its cold, forbidden. It is the fault of disappearance
we cannot escape velocity, time, every blue

horizon in flux. In this planetarium of dust
and seizure, the proof is the heart

made more dangerous without love. Grief
doesn't heal when I've collected enough stars

or reveal the dark where a ghost can glow
effulgent in what is no longer a grave.

*

My own terra incognita assembles
 at this midnight:
the rocks and names of a Pacific
 coastline, quiet in moonlight.
Radiance propels what ever-lasts.
 Poppies throw open
their red arms, bury gold in the earth
 where it won't ever be found;
the frosty water a remedy for stupor.
 How unasked, my hour
is almost come—the past-midnight
 where I am neither lantern
nor blood, disappearing cleanly
 like a watch into a drawer.

*

If you could ask the stars questions,
what would you ask?

At this midnight
At this midnight
At this midnight

Terrible pains shudder in my head—

you leapt into the sky
you learned how to fly
you never disappeared

The desire to invent is the consequence
of learning-by-heart

your lungs on fire
moths against the window
taste of sour milk

*

We turn thieves that steal across
sunless prairies. At this midnight
a star is ready to die—
exhausted of reason, impatient.
The loud rasp of without-air
is the grief of paradise.
Speak to me, voice of filmy light,
cascade of present time. Weight
of a phone-call I never
finished dialing, the bracelet
you wouldn't let the nurses take off,
evidence obscured.

*

I was the scale, opulently
weighted by splinter
and satellite. I was the mouth
of the river filled with rust.
I was the lady lying
in an atmosphere of dusk,
my bones cracking
into white hills. I was
the halo around a hand
bent gently to unlock
a cabinet, fingers loose
around a key without
number. I was asleep in
a new city, such a deep sleep
struck through with ache
I didn't wake when earthquakes
rustled across my bed, the sky
flashed green, and the mirror
was no longer. In this forever,
these impossibilities surrender
to the earth alone.

*

Sometimes I want to forget
the cluster not filled with gold,
smell of chlorine in your hair,

summer solstice and the terrible
speed of a shadow, abandoned.
The zodiac provides certainty—

each distant sphere of faint light
possesses power to predict
every cause for every guilt.

The youngest galaxy opens
its eyes 45 million light-years
away. This flotsam of dreams

is what I have left, no spoons
unburied in the yard. Yet
forgetting is what I still desire

sometimes. If there is a message
inside all that flickering starlight,
it is the dull whisper of goodbye.

*

In dream, the stars tug closer.
Their splendor splits inside a prism,
an array of twilight, trembling.
Another planet, another breath
defective without reason.
It is a gift, my freedom.
The hour hand, for now,
unwinding down. Barium and iron
sift in cold water, ice against
the glass. The spectrum of any life
is filled with metals, the sound
of bells against the necks of cows;
all the while thieves undress
their hands under shadow moons.

*

At this midnight
 silver minerals shiver
all emptiness a hush in snow.
 The dark is a diagram,

luminous stranger. A spectrum
of hidden color. Radiant
with happiness, I would dream
the boat full of coins,
the boat where I am not alone,
where I am old and you are
young, where I am young and
you are never old,
your face prismatic with impossibility.
This night begins here.

Pingmei Lan

The Red Dragonfly

She held the sun
In her belly, tilting
To the sky in every breath.
The boy caught her resting
On a patch of green pond float.
His legs trembled, hands bone bright,
Pressing her open, flat, until she couldn't
Close the doors of her body.

She drifted, eyes red and round,
Under the weight of this water...
Spring. Summer. Fall.

Winter saw the boy die of consumption.
His coffin black—a long pencil box—
On the thin shoulders of other boys
Men with pale freckled hands.
They found a corner of her skirt holding
Footprints of that summer:
The torn washboard at the river
Wanted by no more women;
Muddled sunflower design once
Rampant across the backs of her legs;
Streaks of luminescence.
Touching the fabric.

And the boys stood
Waiting for rain as if ashes
Could turn the earth red
Arms akimbo they stood
Against a watery sky remembering
The shape of wings.

David Leach

One Evening in January I Walked to the Coast

Ice-break and back-slosh
gray-green into the brackish mouth
of the inlet south of Brunswick,
thin stream spitting under ice into Quahog Bay.

I don't need new words to tell it:
sun burned low behind a horizon
drawn by trees, shadows smoothing
their gnarl and clutch to flat cut-outs.

The day here was ending,
sliding up the scrag pines,
last sun released into atmosphere,
passing east and out

through the bluing sky,
moon already a bright half above.
Flat ice like armor plates
pushed up against the shore.

I'd come to be alone
amid the ragged forest,
pine-pitch staining snow
a reddish-brown at my boots,

this spot on the eastern shore
where you can look west
over ocean water
and watch the sun set,

Atlantic vast and somewhere
at your back, ending on Maine's
shredded beaches, its briny harbors
abandoned and snow-swept.

Across the bay, families burrowed
back among the blackened forest
flicked lights on. I looked
for an alone

still more invariable
than the astounding ice
assuming its own authority,
its own directions.

The housebound paths between trees
like soaked newsprint,
tree trunk and branch-shadow
became indistinguishable

from each other and the idiot dream.

The Way of Things

A perfectly cooked noodle should cling
to the wall, then rappel in the way
an inchworm or a new climber descends
no matter where in the world
is the wall like Carmen San Diego
who is *herself* as truth is
self-evident or held the way

a man who curves his arms
around his baby's body
is a living sarcophagus
in a time of protest when many men and
mothers and small children and random strangers
are sarcophagi, cradling the remains
of someone's beloved,
calling to a higher truth.

Take a bowl of jajangmyeon
flung in the way an angry man would.
An artist of last-minute restraint
who crooks his wrist just *so*.
His thumb just a fraction up or over
with the discipline of an Olympian
he anticipates the path
of the target before the target
decides which way to move
and in this way, as men of such history
have done, predetermines the trajectory
of the bowl, but not the noodles
which splosh through the air and splatter
sauce as in a Jackson Pollock or the way
a child's sponge painting begins
as firm splotches, then digresses
to resolute trails, sometimes straight,
sometimes swirled, but conclusive

in the way one cannot take back a shaved head
or a tattoo or a number pricked into the skin
with a steady hand.

Room with Bright Window

*I needed, for months after he died, to remember our rooms—
some lit by the trivial, others ample*

*with an obscurity that comforted us: it hid our own darkness.
—“Rooms Remembered,” Laure-Anne Bosselaar*

WHEN I WAS STILL A CHILD, I WAS BORN AGAIN ON A BED NEXT TO MY naked father in the wake of late summer. In my memory, my parents' bedroom is dark, save for a bright window—its light coats everything white: the walls, the plush carpet, our bodies. The room is built toward the shadows, its lines of perspective disappearing into black—as all rooms appear in memory, as many appear in fiction. Objects measuring the breadth of my parents' marriage sit unmoved around the room: a wedding photo framed in beveled glass, my mother a soft white dove next to my father; a ceramic duck plucked from a yard sale, its beak long and defiant; an old pair of ruined rollerskates—these things that quantify a life and only merely suggest its quality. Flecks of dust and dead skin float like dirty gems in the air, glinting, just out of reach. I stare straight ahead, though I understand that just inches from my pinky finger lies the part of my father that sends shivers up my spine, makes my body go numb with curiosity.

As a child, this scene was my great awakening, a dress rehearsal for pleasure, indisputable and true. As an adult, I've clung to this moment, willed myself to preserve it, though I don't know why anyone would want to. I've tried to forget, to rely on reason and what I know about family and fathers and bodies and daughters and desire and rooms and bright windows, but I've decided that whether true or not, this memory was never a performance but a becoming—an orientation.

DIVING INTO ONE'S MEMORY IS LIKE OPENING ALL THE DOORS IN AN EMPTY home: the possibilities for meaning-making and misinterpretation are endless. These most intimate moments refract our imperfections, our fickle ability to distinguish between fact and fiction. Because instead of symmetry and proportion, what the mind often craves is contrast—a clash—and one's desire to lie or confabulate works in much the same way.

Like the performance of confabulation itself, reasons for the

phenomenon have been continually explored and reimagined. Though it shares similar characteristics with false memory syndrome and hysteria, the act of confabulation hinges on one's unconscious production of false memories. These false narratives, while not meant to be malicious, nevertheless shape identities and relationships—often permanently. Since its conception, confabulation has been traced to alcoholism, Alzheimer's Disease, and schizophrenia. Over time, psychology practitioners have justified the condition as a consequence of memory deficit or pure delusion, though this classification is not universally accepted because it ignores those who lack severe memory loss and trauma—people like me. Trauma manifests in many forms, but it would be false for me to exaggerate the otherwise elusive trauma I have suffered. I've never lost myself. Trauma of any kind is affecting, to be sure, but one must work to honestly situate their trauma within this spectrum. In "How to Write about Trauma," Saïd Sayrafiezadeh, a survivor of rape and other abuse, writes of this paradox, this impulse to hyperbolize and, conversely, conceal trauma. Reflecting on his abuse, he posits, "With the exception of the occasional nightmare that visited me in the years that followed, I was convinced that there had been no lasting damage." Feigning shock, he concludes, "How miraculous it was that I had emerged unscathed." And I, too, have considered such a contradiction, even as the truth remained dormant beneath my skin.

For many, memories provide an opportunity for answers, albeit difficult ones, and require introspection, reflection, and ultimately, interpretation. As someone who thinks often about characters and the peculiar circumstances in which they find themselves, both real and fictional, it's tempting to conflate the two—to storyboard fantasy into truth. After all, fact and fiction only converge and diverge where caring is concerned.

Reader, the thing to understand is this: I don't know if this memory is real, but I insist that it is because I refuse to believe that this event can't be believed—that I can't be believed.

IN OUR HOME, SEX WAS NOT DISCUSSED, DESPITE BEING A VERY VISIBLE presence. When I was seven, I discovered a book at the bottom of my mother's underwear drawer with illustrations of naked men and women in various positions: missionary, doggy, the spoon. One even showed a couple T-boning, an impressive if not confusing configuration. The illustrations were simple, a collection of thin lines and subtle shading highlighting various points of contact. The name of the ratty paperback escapes me now, but it was meant to be instructional—process-oriented, if you will. In a matter of weeks, sneaking into my parents' room to thumb through its pages had become a habit I found hard to break. Not long after discovering the book, my habit found a new place to bloom in glossy nude internet galleries. In true millennial form, I'd discovered a more sophisticated voyeurism in

the virtual. It was easy to indulge in these desires privately, but I would soon find it difficult to reconcile sex as feeling with sex in the flesh. One of these many revelations came when I discovered that my father preferred to sleep naked, a predilection which led to the occasional nude sleepwalk.

It was only after accidentally jumping into bed with him one evening that I realized he wore no pajama bottoms or boxers. No sooner had I slid under the covers than I was immediately scolded and sent to my room to sleep in my own bed. If there was ever a question about my father's exhibitionist tendencies, all I had to do was simply stay awake long enough, and sure enough, I would catch him strolling to the kitchen, bare-assed, for an innocent drink of water or to check the lock on the front door. It was a quick ordeal, so I had to act fast or I'd miss the parade completely. I remember his image clearly: the lean crescent of his belly, his penis concealed by dark, curly spirals, pale and limp like a sea creature at rest. I wonder if he considered the possibility that I'd see him like this. What impression it might leave. Though if these concerns never crossed his mind, I don't blame him. The sutures of kid-me were still locking into place, the wherewithal to synthesize the significance of naked bodies still forming. But I wonder still what he'd say about his habit. If he wishes he could move through our home differently.

Another memory: Galveston, the Gulf Coast, my father with an aunt and uncle. It was overcast, but pleasant out. We'd driven up and down the seawall and ended up in a secluded part of the island's west end. We'd only meant to show the aunt and uncle the coast from the passenger windows, but it was warm and my father wanted to be in the water. He hadn't brought his swim trunks, but no matter. Soon he was ripping off his guayabera and cargos, kicking off his sneakers, and bolting into the surf. I was spellbound. His presence was magnetic and energizing, something I felt deep within the pit of my stomach. The match had been lit. I wanted to be naked with him, to remember everything about that moment, to preserve it in my bones, to die and petrify there on the shore.

These exhibitions felt normal to me then, but I understand these instances are singular experiences—only mine to bear, analyze, take comfort in. I would guess that seeing your father naked repeatedly was not the norm for many girls growing up, though I admit most families have their quirks. I don't mean to glorify or vilify my father for his tendencies, but I do mean to challenge them and these occasions that make a childhood. I want to understand why they happened. Or why they didn't. I want to understand how they could.

So for months, duteous, I remembered:

rooms where friends lingered, rooms with our beds,

with our books, rooms with curtains I sewed

from bright cottons.

I'VE BECOME USED TO DEFINING THE PEOPLE IN MY LIFE BY THEIR ABSENCE. For a time this was how I understood my father and his family, elusive ciphers in my life that I've only just begun to grasp. However, it's true that certain people are not meant to be figured out and despite our best efforts to crack their code—their *core*—we simply learn to deal with the fact of their impossibility. We accept failure. Recently, though, my father has started to crack. Chalk it up to age, extended unemployment, and cheap wine: chalk it up to Trump—whatever the case, he's simply done caring about what's sacred. But his not-giving-a-fuck bliss has taken time to fully ferment. It wasn't until well into high school that he told me his mother was schizophrenic.

Pauline died young and before I was born, so her role in my life's narrative was purely myth. She was volatile and vocal, the crier-in-residence of their family's two-story Cape Cod. This was her way of managing emotion: through the scream. As a kid of the '60s, my father remembers visiting her at Fairfield Hills Hospital, the infamous psychiatric compound in Newtown, Connecticut where she'd been committed. Sometimes he'd go inside, but usually he'd hang back in their station wagon while his father and siblings brought their mother brownies and cigarettes. He doesn't discuss Pauline and I know very little about her, but the few photos I've seen reveal that she had a bright smile and loved to paint. Over the years, patients at Fairfield Hills received electroshock therapy and the ever-trendy lobotomy, though I know nothing of my grandmother's own treatment. Despite concerns over homelessness and public safety once residents were out on their own, the state finally closed the hospital in 1995. Fairfield Hills now remains largely abandoned as the town attempts to redevelop the property, an eternal reminder that the mind can be more devastating than the body. Today, many still believe the compound is haunted.

After the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting in 2012, my father was again reminded of his visits to Fairfield Hills: the hospital sits just four miles from the school. In a drunken deluge, he rambled on about the shooter and, of course, the children. He hoped they'd be turned to angels and wondered how the families would deal with their loss. I was struck by my father's candid grief, something few men express publicly. But I understood that for him, the shooting was not simply a reminder of the endurance of evil, but of our ability to survive it in all its forms—physical, spiritual, mental. That sense and logic are liminal forces we must work to decode, often in the dark.

In my grandmother's decline, my grandfather kept the family going. Like Pauline, most of what I remember about him comes from photos of us

together and the one time we sat in his living room watching an old *Looney Tunes* special. It was the only VHS he owned and he'd bought it just for me. A lifelong bibliophile, he preferred to get lost in books. He taught Modern and Beat literature at the University of Bridgeport and studied the work of queer literatus Djuna Barnes, eventually publishing a biography of her life and work. In his spare time, he played piano and drew. A somewhat salacious revelation, my father recalls seeing various depictions of BDSM erotica, a sexual ethos my grandfather loyally subscribed to. If he'd been in better shape and the industry were more developed, my father says that my grandfather would have gotten into porn and I believe him; my father would have likely followed suit. I've never seen these illustrations up close, but an old photo shows my grandfather hunched over a sketch of Fran from *The Nanny*, Ms. Fine dressed in her iconic red and leopard skirt suit, colored pencils scattered across his desk. My grandfather was fond of women—they were his favorite subjects. Many a grad student was seduced during his tenure, many a mistress paraded through their family's backdoor. Though troubling, his adultery seems a natural response to his wife's condition and most in my family overlook these transgressions, choosing instead to believe in his sacrifice, in the good man that he was: the scholar, the provider, the martyr.

I can't help but wonder if the good genes will stop at me—if I'll suffer from the same ailments that my grandmother once did. I try to calculate the decade, the exact year when schizophrenia's mystery gene will start to turn screws loose, manipulate my mind. I never met my grandmother, but we're not far removed. Those with first-degree schizophrenic relatives have a ten percent chance of developing the condition, too, while those with second and third-degree relatives living with the condition—cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents—also have a greater chance of falling victim to delusion.

I'm hopeful that it will escape me, this phantom gene, this psychosis, but I can't be sure.

*I remembered tables of laughter,
a chipped bowl in early light, black*

*branches by a window, bowing toward night, & those rooms,
too, in which we came together*

to be away from all.

A FEW YEARS AGO, MY FATHER HAD AN ENCOUNTER HE COULDN'T EXPLAIN. He'd been working in the flowerbeds, pulling weeds and pouring fresh soil. It was quiet out, which was unusual for a sunny day in our lively neighborhood. Bent over the beds, he says he heard a man's laugh—coarse,

but clear as a bell. It sounded like the man was right behind him, but when my father turned to look, no one was there. He went inside for a drink of water and returned to find that the plastic tub he'd been throwing weeds into had been moved a few feet from where he'd set it. He says he felt my grandfather there with him—he must have waited around to see my father's reaction to his benign prank before moving on. At least this is what my father believes. Whatever it was, this telekinetic gesture continues to occupy a space within my father's universe of memory, reflecting and refracting what's true and what's not. What feels right.

And once again, I am there with my father in my parents' bed, next to his naked body on the heavy comforter. Just as I try now, I imagine that girl's desire to believe that closeness simply lies in a quiet moment with your father, even if he's naked, even if that's wrong. That the incomprehensible feeling of keeping a body company, feeling its warmth, the act of preserving and protecting those we love, is all we really understand. At least this is what I choose to believe.

Running With Montaigne

I CHOKE ON MY OWN BREATH AS THE INCOMING AIR CLASHES WITH THE AIR I have not yet exhaled; my feet thud on the pavement, reluctantly pushing off to keep me in motion; my T-shirt sticks to my back and the freezing air stings my ungloved fingers. I pass the birch tree, the yellow electrical pole, the speed bump, the dented “no parking” sign, and the dead squirrel that, over the past five days, has disintegrated into no more than a stain on the pavement. The voice in my ear, courtesy of Audible Audiobooks, reads to me an essay by Michel de Montaigne, the 16th-century French writer famous for his essays in which he tried to understand the world by analyzing his own everyday experience. “We are all wind,” says Montaigne in a reflection on the fleetingness of life. “And even the wind, more wisely than we, loves to make a noise and move about, and is content with its own functions, without wishing for stability and solidity.”

I have almost reached the top of the hill and can feel my extremities tingle from lack of oxygen. I’m thankful to have Montaigne as a running companion. His meandering reflections distract my mind from my body’s misery. The only thing that keeps me moving is my willpower, or rather, my power to restrain my will, because there is nothing I want more now than to just lie down and allow my breath to catch up with my body.

TWO YEARS AGO, AS PART OF AN ATTEMPT TO LEAD A MORE DISCIPLINED life, I started running. Though the word “running” may be misleading here. It evokes the image of an athletic figure gracefully moving through the landscape. Instead, think of a short woman in faded black leggings and dirty sneakers trudging along the side of the road, gasping for air. In fact, most runners wouldn’t call what I do running. I have such trouble with human kinetics that I actually seem to run slower than I walk. It has taken me two years to work up the stamina to run a whole mile without collapsing.

I DON’T KNOW WHY I KEEP RUNNING EVERY DAY. I HATE EVERY MOMENT OF it. I don’t have a runner’s body. I envy those lean, sinewy people trimmed down to nothing but discipline. My body has always been a little soft, with fleshy thighs that round into a full butt. Already in my childhood I was an awkward runner, unable to moderate the energy of my steps, jumping either too high or too low, with my arms sabotaging my movements as I swung

them against the rhythm of my legs. As a teenager, I completely gave up on running because, when I also had to deal with the bouncing of my breasts, the whole equation just became too much for me.

ALTHOUGH I'M NOT MADE FOR SPEED, I DO HAVE SOLID LEGS FOR WALKING, and I've hiked most of my life. But a few years ago, I realized the time I have left is limited and I should use it carefully. If I want to accomplish anything, I can't indulge in three-hour hikes every day to stay in shape. I figured I could save time by condensing my walks into runs. So, I bought myself a sports bra and tried again.

TO BE HONEST, I'M MORE ATTRACTED TO INTELLECTUAL IDEAS THAN TO physical realities, and I've always found those sweaty athlete bodies in neon-colored nylon outfits somewhat vulgar. In fact, I started running for literary reasons. I discovered that many writers are committed runners: Murakami published a memoir about running; Joyce Carol Oates is a runner; and a friend of mine, whose morning runs I had considered a bit silly, published a beautiful collection of stories about running. Suddenly I realized running isn't so silly after all and could very well be just the thing missing from my own literary life. Each of these writers argued that despite the sweaty, carnal exterior, running is a meditative activity, much like writing itself. I was finally swayed to try it out when I read about runner's high, a mental state in which you have so far exceeded your own physical limitations that you transcend your body and no longer feel held back by the boundaries of the physical world. This is the goal that has inspired me to tie on my sneakers every day for the past two years. If I just keep trying, maybe, I too, will one day attain runner's high.

MEANWHILE, I KEEP MY MIND OCCUPIED WITH AUDIOBOOKS WHILE I RUN. I use my runs to catch up on books I feel I should have read but tend to avoid because they are too demanding for a leisurely read. I have listened to *Don Quixote*, Plato's *The Republic*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. And now I'm listening to Montaigne's essays. With those earbuds in my head, my mind can't wander away because the book stays with me wherever I go. It works well as a mutual distraction: Montaigne takes my mind off my physical suffering, and the movement of my body gives some direction to Montaigne's plotless musings. As Montaigne himself would say: "Let the mind lighten the body and the body anchor the mind."

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE WAS BORN IN 1533 TO A WEALTHY FAMILY NEAR Bordeaux. He served as a soldier, a royal counselor, and for a while was the mayor of Bordeaux, but when he turned forty, amidst the chaos of the French religious wars between Catholics and Protestants, he decided to retire

from public life and devote the remainder of his years to writing down his thoughts. He called those writings “*Essais*,” from the French word “*essayer*” (to try), because he was experimenting with a new form of literature, a sort of stream-of-consciousness. He has been a wonderful running companion. Sometimes I forget he has been dead for more than 400 years. I find myself laughing at his jokes and completing his sentences in agreement. Montaigne has had such an influence on modern secular thought—Rousseau, Hume, Nietzsche, Emerson, and Woolf were all admirers of his—that my mind may very well have been shaped by his before I ever read him.

MONTAIGNE CLAIMS HE STARTED TO WRITE TO DISCIPLINE HIS MIND WHEN, in the idleness of retirement, he became overwhelmed by his own thoughts. He blames our mind for most of human unhappiness. In the last essay of his collected works, titled “Of Experience,” he writes about the mind: “it does nothing but ferret and quest, and keeps incessantly whirling around, building up and becoming entangled and suffocated in its own work, like silkworms.” Montaigne’s whole oeuvre is an attempt to tame his mind and learn how to live right. Four centuries later, I struggle with the same challenge.

I’M ALWAYS DISORIENTED BY THE DISSONANCE BETWEEN THE LIFE I LIVE and the life I imagine I should be living.

IN MY IMAGINED LIFE, I GET OUT OF BED AT 6:30 AM TO HAVE BREAKFAST with my husband and kids before they leave for school and work at 7:10. After they’re gone, I meditate while my morning coffee is brewing. I write in my journal as I drink my coffee, and then I immediately leave the house for a run. I may meet some deer in the woods as they too start their day with the rising sun, and after having spent these moments in communion with nature, I return home to start a productive day of inspired writing.

THIS HAS NEVER HAPPENED. EVER.

ON THE DAYS I HAVE NO WORK OR OTHER COMMITMENTS, MY REAL MORNING goes as follows: The alarm goes off at 6:30 am, and I hit the snooze button. (I stubbornly keep setting my alarm for 6:30, even when I go to bed at two in the morning.) At 7:09 I hear my husband urge the kids to get ready to leave, and the garage door slams shut. I rush downstairs to say goodbye, but just as I stick my head into the garage, the car reverses and disappears down the driveway. I want to run out to wave them goodbye, but barefoot and in my underwear, I’m held back by the freezing Vermont winter. I consider getting dressed and going out for my run. But, dizzy with fatigue, I crawl back into bed and set the alarm for 8:15. When the alarm goes off, I hit the snooze button in my half-sleep. When I finally get up it’s past nine o’clock.

Optimistically, I put on my running shoes and leggings, planning to run right after coffee. But as I drink my coffee, I want to use my time well, so I sit down at my computer to get some work out of the way. I respond to emails, check my students' homework, pay bills, and because a responsible citizen must know what's going on in the world, I read *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. Then, to shake off my sense of doom, I check what my friends are doing on Facebook. I find some interesting articles... And suddenly I realize it's noon and I haven't eaten breakfast yet.

I FEEL I'M ALWAYS IN A FIGHT WITH LIFE. JUST THE PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF existence tire me out. My body is always in the way, sluggish and imperfect, reminding me it's hungry, thirsty, itchy, sleepy, too warm, too cold, that my toenails need clipping, that the trash stinks, that I have to make dinner, that time is passing, that I'll die eventually, and that in the end none of it matters. As a teenager, I read *Oblomov*, a 19th-century Russian novel about a man who has so little appetite for life that he can't muster the energy to get out of bed. Knowing that life will always fall short of what he imagines it should be, he can't even be bothered to try it out. Nowadays, we would probably describe his condition as depression. I immediately recognized myself in *Oblomov* and read the novel as a warning: If I do not resist my natural inclination for inertia and do not keep myself in motion with goals and discipline, I will end up just like *Oblomov*. So, I keep running.

IT'S A CONSTANT BATTLE. I HOPE THAT TRAINING MYSELF TO BECOME A long-distance runner will also help me develop the discipline to master my own daily schedule. So, every day I set my goal a little bit farther: Initially, I would allow myself a rest at the first birch tree; then, at the yellow electrical pole; then, at the speed bump; and now, I won't allow myself to stop until I have run all the way up the hill, down to the bottom, and up to the red mailbox halfway up the next hill. At this rate, I can run a marathon by the time I turn ninety.

RUNNING STILL MAKES ME MISERABLE. I SUFFER EVERY RAGGEDY BREATH, every stitch in my side, the heavy thud of my ugly blue sneakers, the snot streaming from my nose, the burning in my thighs as I make my way uphill, the way my hair falls into my face and gets sucked into my mouth as I gulp for air, and I especially hate how the passing cars observe the humiliation of my awkward progress.

"LIFE IS MOTION," WROTE MONTAIGNE. BUT WHEN I ACTUALLY EXPERIENCE it, this motion is so cumbersome that I'm already tired before I have gotten anywhere. It may be a defect in my personality, but I tend to find running rather disappointing. When I go out, I always hope that this time I will

finally have a breakthrough and get a glimpse of what it's like to have runner's high. But every time it's just as tiring and painful as the last. Is this normal? I don't suppose real runners, with their chiseled bodies and smooth stride, experience the same kind of fatigue as I do. Or are they just better at ignoring it? Do I expect too much? Is the fatigue supposed to be part of the experience?

IT IS TRUE THAT, AFTER RUNNING, WHEN I'VE WASHED OFF THE SWEAT AND I feel the tension in my legs, I am pleased to notice muscles I didn't have before. Sometimes, I even allow myself to indulge in the happy fantasy that, one day, I may be a real runner. It is also true that, while I run, I envision happiness at coming home and taking a shower. But my happiness is always projected into the future or the past. It is almost never in the present.

Montaigne too found it difficult to enjoy the moment. He wrote: "...we are always outside ourselves. Fear, desire, hope, impel us towards the future; they rob us of feelings and concern for what is now, in order to spend time over what will be..."

But he also understood that to be alive is to be in your body, in the present. For the very short time that our body and mind are together, said Montaigne, it is madness to want to escape the limits of physical experience.

I KEEP TRYING, BUT IT TURNS OUT THERE'S NOT MUCH CHANCE I'LL EVER attain runner's high. A runner friend—someone so committed she kept going despite stress fractures and open blisters—burst out laughing when I confided my hope to her. She explained that the only times she herself experienced anything close to runner's high was after more than fifteen miles of hard running, when she thought she would die and kept running anyway. Runner's high, she explained, is our body's response to extreme stress. When pushed through its limits, the body numbs itself to block out the pain and give our mind the illusion of well-being. "And runner's high is overrated anyway," she said. "It isn't even that amazing."

THE CLOSEST I CAN GET TO TRANSCENDING THE LIMITATIONS OF REALITY is when I write. This must also have been what kept Montaigne writing. There is some irony in the fact that the man who urged others to live in the present spent decades of his life immersed in his manuscripts. But Montaigne would probably argue that he savored life more than others because he lived it twice: once physically and once on paper. That's how it is for me: I have kept a journal since I was teenager, and it always seems to me that the experiences I put in writing are more real than the experiences I live. But it is difficult to keep my written life and my lived life synchronized because it takes more time to record life than to live it. That's why I so often end up writing until two in the morning.

MONTAIGNE FILLED THREE VOLUMES OF ESSAYS WITH HIS OBSERVATIONS on every possible subject—from his views on the nature of good and evil, to detailed descriptions of his own health, eating habits, and bodily functions. Even four hundred years ago, his daily challenges were not so different from mine. He too had trouble getting out of bed. In his essay on experience, Montaigne admits: “I am hard to budge and late in everything, including getting up, going to bed, and eating. For me, seven o’clock is early morning.” The thought of the revered philosopher feeling guilty about sleeping in makes me laugh out loud. His body is long gone now, but he left so much of himself in writing that he still seems present. I love listening to Montaigne talk (in the voice of professional audio actor Christopher Lane) about his bad table manners (he describes himself as such a greedy eater that he sometimes bites his own fingers), his distrust of doctors, his tendency to fall asleep during church sermons, and his contempt for overly devout people who think themselves too pure for life. The conversation is one-sided, but not completely: by carrying Montaigne with me on my run, I let him enter the present through me, sharing with him the cold air, the bare winter trees, the hawk slicing through the sky in pursuit of prey, the rumbling of the highway in the distance, my sneakers hitting the pavement, the air straining into my lungs, the sweat trickling down my back. Here I am, this little dot moving painfully through the landscape, while Montaigne travels with me in my mind.

Note: All quotes by Montaigne are from *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, translated by Donald M. Frame, Stanford University Press (1957).

Tariq Luthun

Portrait of My Father Drowning

in the type of love he deserves; nestled
in his lap, a young me is learning
how to swim. I flounder in
water that is only knee-deep,

while, fully-dressed on the pool's
edge, my mother records
the lesson. *Blood will always
be outweighed by the body*

of water it wades into. Earth,
itself, I realize, is just a body
of waters. Years later, I spend a summer
patrolling a different pool's edge. I lose

count of how many sons are held
by their fathers; large &
calloused hands buoying
their lineages, these islands

and their fluttering limbs.

The Dead Speak to Pharma

"For the second time this year, a coroner's office in Ohio has run out of space for dead bodies due to the opioid epidemic." Ohio is now renting refrigerated trailers and semi-trucks to hold the dead.

—CBS News, May 23rd 2017

We have learned not to speak, not to stutter, not to make a sound to become something other than ourselves, disappearing like smoke against the cracked lips of horizon, leaving our clothes to the dark of this swollen earth, to slip into something more comfortable, the way the skin of a snail hardens into a cave, sheltering itself from the light. We have grown smaller and thinner than we were. We no longer look

like ourselves, our eyes as hollow as our hips. We know this. We look more like the slip of a tongue, echo of a sacring bell, the off-key sound the moon makes when it steadies itself, shaking all the trees into light. Some of us are young. Some, old. And some are just veils of smoke and shadow. They died before they were real, having never found a way to live. You see, they were born into this dying, born into this dark

room. Their bodies grew cold and feral until they became the dark itself. They never had a chance. You see, some are children. Look how they play dress up with an armful of skulls, the meticulous way they weave blades of switchgrass to give them hair, the gurgling sound they make to give them a last breath, how they blow streams of smoke into their mouths to make them cough, lifting the cracked skulls, *light*

as a feather, stiff as a board, their fingers climbing the air, *light as a feather, stiff as a board*, like a pale hand reaching from dark water until we can see our own lungs heaving, heavy as a smoke stack, legs stumbling. *This is the body as it was given to us*. Look, we were living once, with mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, the sound of lovers crying our names, telling us not to leave, we knew the way

Saturday mornings smelled of jelly and burnt toast, could taste the way a silk bathrobe licked our skin clean, how autumn leaves could light the sky on fire, that to be breathless meant to run wild until the sound of our breath could not keep up. We were human once, more than the dark

number of a newspaper article, more than voodoo or superstition. Look, we were trying to survive. We didn't notice our bodies filling with smoke,

how the sky fell like quicksand against our thighs. Only when the smoke cleared could we see the living standing over us, staring, closing our wayward eyes, waiting for us to rise in our long-laked gowns, taking a last look at our faces before we disappeared for good into their imagined white light the hypnotic glow of our shirt sleeves humming against the earth's dark crust, our toes dripping, as we stumbled, one by one, toward the soundness

of sleep, toward kingdoms of smoke and light-headed wasps, the scrambled collapse of starlight trying to find its way through the bottomless dark. Look, this is paradise. This is the sound of the wind being blown away.

Disenchanted, Displayed

Instead I think about words—
disinterested, defenestrated, desperate,
disestablished, delivered—
and whether these amount to
small Russian tragedies involving dammed streams,
or sloshy Irish tragedies involving dammed streams.
Waters rise and rise.
I admit, since it is always the season for confessions,
I fall in love with women on museum walls:
The Madonna of the Rocks, though,
the only mother among the women, and the only Madonna
who sits, truly, within landscape. I believe
there must be a river—the sort children could play in
safely somewhere off to the side of Leonardo's imagination.
Sargent, LeBrun, Vermeer, Rubens, Schiele, Velasquez, Lotto—
all the women seem full of words—
there is always a clear stream somewhere in their minds,
an undisturbed forest.

In the age of my youth,
environmentalism meant
never throwing anything an animal couldn't eat
on the ground,
and never starting forest fires.
They were never German dances with death and devils.
They were never forest fires
or poets too alone to speak with any but angels.
I've never thrown anything from a moving car
except my own dislodged hairs,
hoping they will be gathered by birds
and become nests for fledglings.

My Desires Have Invented New Desires

The Holy Spirit being a *she*
split herself into
floating flames and hovered over
the heads of whoever snuck into
The Upper Room, holding each of the
child-minded in place,
by the simple expedient of
a manifestation of her breath.
Women do it all the time.
She made the first “lightbulb moment,”
and made them speak as she desired,
giving each a clue composed of languages,
then sent them out: the 11, whatever women
got lost in transcription, and probably a couple of
hungry kids who’d heard about the
bread and fish—the first “lightbulb joke”—
and the room lit up with flames
and their tongues lit up with tongues.

You, Father of stars and the dust of stars,
who broke open the egg of the universe
to make the Great Breakfast of the first morning,
who can sunder a rock
to make sweet water flow,
and order worn-out prophets
to peel off their worn-through sandals and
set down their worried soles on ground so weird
it puts forth burning bushes.
You teach the counting of fallen angels
as fit occupation for the grown up.
So we count: Self, self, self. My, his, hers.
Still we miss the point, which may have been
gigantic breakfast after all,
the immanence sizzling
in the frying pan of transcendence,

Devon Miller-Duggan

all of us fed by that one large egg,
over easy on the spatula of your Idea, or...
oh, look, I'm only
looking for a blessing.

Dayna Patterson

Self-Portrait as Titania, Spellbound

Methought I was enamour'd of an ass.

—*Titania*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

When I hear his throat
song his supple

musics I see him what he is:
a breath of beast I kiss his

black lips his tombstone-
enormous teeth nipping

skin stroke long velvet
ears against my cheek his rising

musk in the night
like eglantine we pull

out tongues of honey-
suckle, suck

nectar under a froth
of stars wild

thyme blows the oxlips seal
our secrets yonder sulks

Oberon in flawless
barren fields on this moss-

luscious bank
give me again

again
ample animal

Titania in Yellow

I.

Alchemize a murderous moon's
harsh white light to mellow

Not a coward's color or jealousy's reek
Not uranium cake or sulphur choke but

Fairylight's glow lambent, lissome

Yolk

Saffron

Mustard seed

Lioness mane Imperial robe Judas's ochre
Lascaux's horse and the skin of Egypt's gods
Yellow of elkhorn coral

From *ghel*-, root of yell and gold,
she cries out in brightness and shining, her shout
a glory of angel's trumpet, clash of brass

Luminous holler

The past is past and now is all

She deepfeels it:

Goldbright

Star core

Molten iron ore

II.

Peel me, clementine, my pith-
lined petals to this flesh of sunsoak

Sweet vesicles all tang and ache

A robbery Unrobe me

Royal, I've sewn myself
a crown of daffodil throats and lemon peeling
bells and canary alula feathers

Holy, I've muscled

haloes from the sky, hauled them down around my brow,
circlets of searing gold. I've filled saints' grottos
with wax-cast women—prophetesses speaking
truths, sprinkling parched earth: Miracle yellow
Heretic yellow I'm all goddess all
loudrung over sunlit tiles warmed to burning

I give myself a new name on a riverbank
where an outdoor temple's sheer veil blows,
anoint my loins with blessed water

Queen and mother and daughter
Mother of daughters Fire eaters

Queen of vernix Queen of linea nigra
Queen of spatchcocked body legs akimbo

Queen of lanugo yellow marrow gold
She grows them god-dust in their veins

Lexicon of the Wilderness

WHEN I WAS TEN, MY MOTHER BOUGHT A BOOK THAT WE KEPT ON THE cocktail table in our living room. It was called *Young Israel*, or something like that. I never tired of looking at it, even though I skimmed over most of the photos, ignoring the green fields surrounded by desert, glancing at the burgeoning cities, noting and dismissing Golda Meir's grandmotherly shoes.

As far as I was concerned, the real story of Israel—and of kibbutzim, which to my mind were a stand-in for the country—was told in two photographs: the first an image of eight small children, all of them laughing as they sat on a wagon pulled by a tractor; the second a photo of a ravishing young woman dressed in a tight-fitting soldier's uniform. She stared into the distance, carefully posed, made to look like she worshipped lofty ideals, none of which was overtly stated and yet all of which I managed to swallow anyway, hook, line, and sinker.

Ideal Number One: A new country can be created from scratch. Literally from dirt, which is all over the place in Israel, even in the photo of the woman who is outside, not wearing make-up, and who still looks fantastic.

Ideal Number Two: Playing in the dirt will make you strong, and intellectual too, through a strange, osmotic process called Socialism. The children love Socialism because they're riding on the back of a tractor having fun. The woman loves Socialism because she can have muscles and can be featured on a book cover.

Ideal Number Three: Women were not just created so that their breasts can be ogled, even if that's what you're doing and don't know that you're doing it. Even if that's how they're selling the idea of this beautiful country.

Ideal Number Four: Guns don't mean that you stand at attention all the time. You can have a gun and hold it like you would a candy bar, casual and carefree, and you can win wars that way, too. Also of note: breasts will not prevent a woman from shooting a gun.

Ideal Number Five: In this country, men don't worry about women castrating them. They don't say things like, "You know why your brother struggles? It's because of you, because you have too much to say."

Ideal Number Six: People are beautiful when they sweat, even Jewish people.

Ten years later, the actual introduction to the country presents a puzzling contrast. On a Swissair flight from Zurich to Tel Aviv, I sit in the middle of a five-seat row, a three and two combination. One couple sits to my right, snuggly and happy. The couple to my left, on the other side of the aisle, holds hands. The four of them chat over my head in Hebrew. They speak fast and look good, svelte figures, glittery wedding bands that catch the light. Sometimes they turn their gazes on me, which, I admit, makes me a tad nervous. They look at me, and then—am I making this up?—they talk about me. I understand nothing so maybe I'm being paranoid, but this I know: the Israelis are friends—young, married couples on their way home.

The couples are so friendly that a half-hour into the four-hour flight the man on my right taps my shoulder, indicating that I am to get up from my seat so that he can get out of his. While Man Number One is in the bathroom, Man Number Two stands, stretches his legs and nudges me. I rise from my seat so that he can move to the vacated spot. When Man Number One returns, he heads for the empty seat on my left and everyone sits in their musical chairs, a brief pause before the action begins. Action as in real action: smacking, sucking, kissing sounds, like the ones I had to endure when I wanted to get to my high school locker, only this time there are blankets draped on top of the bodies. Occasionally one member of each new pair glances at me—I'm reading *Dubliners*, which is pretty good but not that easy to focus on under the circumstances—and then they twist their necks a bit further, so that they can get a glimpse of their spouses before returning to the task at hand. Just before the end of the flight, Man Number Two, on my right, asks me to get up, and the men slide back into their original seats. Everyone pats their clothing and they look at me indulgently, as if I've been duped.

Which, so far as I can tell, is not the case.

HERE'S HOW TO CHOOSE THE KIBBUTZ WHERE YOU WILL LIVE AND WORK for a year: Go to one of the kibbutz offices in Tel Aviv. There are two offices, and the difference between them has something to do with politics, which you don't understand, so just go to one office and don't think about the other one. Note that the office is nearly empty. Hordes of people are not signing up to move to kibbutzim. Indeed, you are the only person doing that. Attribute this to the fact that it's an overcast day, which seems relevant but is not. Note that one kibbutz is offering a spot where you can study Hebrew while working. Sign up immediately. Do not pay attention to the address, to the Syrian border part of the description, to the fact that the kibbutz takes six hours to get to, and do not ascribe meaning to the dots on the map that show all the kibbutzim in the country. They're dots, not places. Do not pay attention to the large expanse where your tiny dot is located, do not consider that the region, an entire region, is devoid of dots and devoid

of roads, there being two, maybe three, squiggly lines that cross the seven- or eight-hundred-square-mile area. That can't possibly be true so pretend it's not, and while you're at it, ignore the niggling thought that if there are no roads, there must also be few if any houses. Consider, for a millisecond, that the feverish feeling you're experiencing is warping your judgment. But then, forget all that, and think instead: this will be freeing. Think: the air will be nice. Think: this is not what you know, so it must be better. Think: the woman with breasts lives up there, and she will show you how to live.

BEFORE I LEFT SWITZERLAND, BEFORE I CLIMBED ONTO THAT ZURICH-TO-Tel Aviv flight, Sabine hugged me good-bye. Unlike my previous departure eighteen months earlier when we'd not even waved at each other, this time Sabine reached out and held me. Polenta bubbles, mulled wine, whole days spent in our pajamas, frigid outdoor temperatures, a warm house—a full rapprochement. We sat on the wooden floor near the piano, the *Geographie der Schweiz* book open to our favorite photograph, a panoramic vista of an Alpine fog sea that extended across two pages, a veritable centerfold. The white clouds looked as if they'd been spread with a spoon, this ocean deep and opaque, insurance that what was below stayed there, invisible, while we were hoisted into the sunlight and onto the mountaintops. Indeed, we *were* the mountaintops, regal, naked and alone, the marvelous feeling of the two of us together reflecting back the two of us together. When it was time to clean up, we sighed, reminded of the way things really were: the fog sea was in a book, the only place Sabine and I had ever seen it; we had to put the book back on the shelf, next to Vati's Schnaps; soon I'd be leaving.

On the Sunday before my departure, Sabine sat at the *Stube* table. She sighed. "I can't learn things, Anne," she said.

"Of course you can," I replied. "What are you saying? You've learned lots of things: art, business, literature."

Sabine shook her head. "No. I don't learn well from teachers. I can't."

"I've taught you songs, and math, too, Sabine. Think of the math."

"That's right," she said. "I learn from you. You can teach me, but no one else can."

This was a compliment, and for a moment I felt elated before the weight of her words sank in. Sabine had lots of friends and was easy to talk to. But only I could teach her, she said. Teach: the Old English root means *sign* or *mark*. I had marked Sabine; she had marked me. Robert had marked her, too, writing his name on her, leaning in close and instructing, she his thirsty pupil, he the devouring teacher. Sabine no longer wanted to be marked, except by me. I wasn't so sure about this.

Sabine gave good hugs, wonderful ones. Her *Umarmung* was an all-in experience, an enfolding, as if we were building flesh and limb together. I held onto her for a long time. I remembered that hug on the airplane, and

I remembered it when I fell ill in my distant cousin's Tel Aviv apartment. I could barely hold my head up, fever and fatigue confining me to bed for ten days.

On the eleventh day it was time to go. I made myself go by imagining that I'd been sent to the countryside for the duration of my convalescence. I was leaving. I was arriving. I had no idea what I was doing, certainly not when the first bus deposited me in Afula, an anonymous station full of soldiers and backpacks, everyone transferring, no one staying. I had even less of a sense of where I was going when the second bus brought me to Rosh Pina, a name on the map although not an actual place so far as I could tell, a chair placed outside of a gas station, some scraggly plants nearby. The last bus moved slowly, shifting from third gear, to second, and to first, the engine belching as we ascended the Heights. The seats were hard. The trees outside were gnarled things, struggling to grow. The driver was gruff. And then, somehow, none of that was true, everything softened by a curtain of fog so thick and real that it slid into the bus and down my throat, a thirst-quenching drink that slaked a desire I didn't even know I possessed. I perched on the edge of my seat as we climbed to the top of a real, live fog sea. We rose above the riff-raff of Afula and Rosh Pina, leaving behind squabbling relatives, mothers who forgot their children, brothers-in-law who were warm and conniving. The Egged bus shifted gears again, and suddenly we were out of the cloud, shedding droplets of water like unwanted clothes, stripping to our underwear as we emerged at a settlement surrounded by barbed wire, radiant in the sunshine.

ON MY BED SAT A SMALL PILE OF CLOTHES: DARK TROUSERS, MEN'S apparently; an oversized, button-down shirt; a forest-green parka; and a gray T-shirt. It was winter in the north. How I loved that uniform, the softness of the shirt, the drab colors, the protective hood of the jacket. Leaving my old clothes behind as I emerged on the mountaintop wasn't so metaphorical after all. Above the fog sea, I was not to wear the garb associated with the world of striving and strife below. Here I was not a person who had to prove herself, here I was part of the collective, and with that in mind, I took off my bra, too—why not?—my breasts free and available to the young men, my breasts mine and not-mine, just like the soldier woman had shown me how to do. I loved Socialism!

In my work clothes, I was ready to climb onto the back of a tractor, my hair flowing behind me. I was ready to reach my arms into the fruit trees, my muscles good, in no way menacing. I was less gung-ho about *kvissa*, laundry. I didn't know how to iron, I explained to Moshe, the work coordinator, but everyone needed to pitch in, he said, so I sorted whites and filled carts with children's play clothes. I braced myself against the all-female brigade of laundry workers' chatter, which quickly devolved into screams hurled across the room, simple words even I could understand.

"*Lama?*" the woman with the flat nose and short, black hair yelled. Why what, I wanted to know, but there was nothing more to that question, the piercing syllables hanging in the air before the answer came in a quick riposte. "*Kacha!*" another dark-haired woman yelled back: Because! She meant it, her eyes clotted with anger. The conversation stayed rooted at this level for eight hours the first day, and remarkably, for eight hours the second. I sat on my stool, the shrill voices hitting me upside the head, I sat until I couldn't sit any longer, staggering out at the end of the day and running straight to the dining hall.

A line of people waited to speak to Moshe. "Winter," he told me. "No apple, not yet."

I frowned.

"You be *metapelet*."

I smiled at the musical word. This was definitely better than laundry, even if I had no idea what it meant. Moshe nodded and wrote my name on a chart, pointing to a squat building halfway down the hill, an enormous red tractor and a bunch of junk scattered in front.

I had to roll my pants up for this job, wading through pools of water. I had no boots, not yet, they were coming soon, they told me, so I trudged through the bleach solution barefoot. I was finally doing something—real work, the feel of the squeegee in my hand and the chemical water bath swirling around my feet a sure sign of progress. I was in *Gan Aleph*, Children's House A, where it was all work all the time, hours spent scrubbing with a big brush, another hour devoted to pushing and pulling the long-handled *magav*, a tool for which I developed a particular fondness. How wonderful to direct gallons of water with a single graceful motion, sending one stream after another into the floor drain until no liquid remained, the tiles gleaming due to my mastery with the rubber-bladed device. Being a *metapelet* was fun, and I liked to think it was important—we were keeping children safe, after all—but it was temporary, a way to prepare myself for the trees and the fruit they'd bear soon. Who knew that apples ripened in September?

From my standpoint, there were no children in the children's house. I could hear their voices, and I was constantly collecting and sorting the artifacts of their existence—toy cars, crayons, hats, cups, little wire-rimmed glasses—but the twenty-five children who lived in *Gan Aleph* were relegated to their rooms when I was scrubbing floors, or they were in giant bathtubs, getting washed by more seasoned *metapelets*. That was good, I thought. I didn't want to be near children. They were mean. As soon as I heard the lilt of their voices, old wounds—public announcements about my dirty underwear, best friends who revealed my secrets—were re-opened.

Usually I arrived at the *gan* mid-day, after Hebrew class had ended. On this Tuesday, the four- to seven-year-olds were running late, not yet in their

beds for naptime. I couldn't fill my bucket, couldn't grab the brush and start work because there were too many little feet running across the floor. Only the unshod feet of a *metapelet*—which means nurse-maid, I eventually learned, better not to translate that word after all—were to be inundated with chlorine and soap. The teacher herded the children toward their beds, one little girl left in the dressing area. "Put this on her," Yehudit, the head *metapelet* said, handing me a white shirt and nodding at the girl. "Her name is Lilach." Yehudit disappeared into the kitchen.

One child. One adult, or semi-adult at least. One undershirt. How hard could this be?

Lilach was wearing underpants, boys' underpants actually, although no one seemed to notice this. I smiled at the underpants, felt relieved at the sight of them. They undid the fact that I'd been assigned to this job. See? Gender equality was alive and well on the kibbutz. The underpants, the way that Lilach's pigtails contrasted with the fly, made me think that soon I'd get to go beyond the barbed wire, just like male workers did. But Lilach showed no interest in those underpants. She was crying, tears pooling at the corners of her eyes.

"*Ta-ah-see fooey*," Lilach said, her speech punctuated by hiccups. She held up her hand and showed me a red mark on her index finger, a tiny cut she'd gotten on her way out of the bath. "*Ta-ah-see fooey!*" Lilach said again, the tears dropping onto her nose and cheeks. I had no idea what she was saying, but I felt a wave of sadness, the girl's need juxtaposed against my sorry lack of skill. I just wanted to pull that undershirt over Lilach's head, to shoo the child and the feeling away, and to get out of there.

Lilach ducked expertly when I held the shirt up. She said the phrase a third time, unable to grasp that a person might not understand her. I looked around, wondering if someone would hear the cries and swoop in to fix the problem. No one did. By this point I was sweating profusely, the strange words and the responsibility for another human life prickling my skin. Maybe Lilach would forget about me, this stupid *metapelet* who knew nothing. Now she was wailing, and to my enormous surprise, I found myself leaning forward, reaching a hand out to touch her.

The crying stopped. Lilach fixed her brown eyes on mine and repeated the phrase, slowly. I said the syllables back to her, but she looked at me, puzzled. My echolalia was weird, I guessed, and anyway, Lilach wasn't interested in an exchange of words. She grabbed my fingers and brought them to her face. Lips rounded into an *o*, Lilach sent a stream of air across my skin. I nodded, pulled Lilach's hand toward my face and blew across the red spot on her finger. I blew again, for good measure. "*Fooey*," I said. Lilach smiled. I picked up the white undershirt, held the bottom open, and pushed it over her head and arms. When she was halfway down the hall, Lilach turned and, with a shy smile, waved at me.

AN IMPORTANT WORD IN HEBREW: *CHALUTZ*. THIS WAS ONE OF THE FIRST words we learned. It means pioneer. The *chalutzim* came to Palestine. The *chalutzim* built the kibbutzim. An older woman with wrinkled skin, Ayelet, was a *chalutzah*. No one said that exactly, no one called the people who lived here *chalutzim*; to the no-nonsense members of Kibbutz Merom Golan that would be bragging. But if you watched silently from a corner of the dining hall, as I did during those first months, you could see that Ayelet, dressed in the same parka and work shirt that I wore, was special. People moved out of her way when she entered the dining room. Later I learned that Ayelet was the chair of the chair of the head committee. At least that's what it sounded like when they eventually told me what she did. "So Ayelet is the director of the kibbutz," I said to Erik, an American who was living at the settlement.

"No!" he said, "not the director!" and I realized that even that word was taboo; members of the kibbutz would never be named to a job with such a lofty, attention-grabbing title.

Batsheva was a *chalutzah*, too. Her husband was killed in the Yom Kippur War. *Chalutzim* are often riven by tragedy—you can see it in their faces or you might feel it in how they walk. Batsheva wore her grief like a cape, mysterious and oddly fashionable, a barrier between her and the rest of the world. She had a gap between her front teeth and she had two daughters, one of whom had been conceived shortly before her father died. That girl, Gili, lived in *Gan Aleph*. Ziv stayed in the two-story children's house with the middle-school children. The daughters were beautiful, and they knew it.

Was Beni a *chalutz*? Beni was short and dumpy, with one good eye and a bad one, that is to say an eye that protruded from his head, the white part sticking out at an odd angle and the pupil way too large, unseeing. Here's the story about Beni, the one that was told over and over in response to questions about his circus-sideshow anatomy. Jilted by a girlfriend when he was living in the city a few years back, Beni became distraught. He went to his apartment, got his gun and placed the muzzle in the soft spot under his chin. When Beni fired the shot, the bullet entered his nasal cavity, nowhere near his brain where he'd been hoping it would go, and then that dang thing turned and exited through his left eye. Poor Beni, I thought when I met him. Poor guy made to live with this mistake plastered to his face. The sympathy wore off fast, though. Beni may have had only one good eye, but that didn't prevent him from watching young women, his tongue nearly dropping out of his head as he admired every curve and freckle of females in his vicinity.

Beni was friends with Avi, who looked a lot better than Beni did—no suicidal marks on his body, which was compact and thin. But Avi, if this was possible, was more lecherous than Beni. He sidled up to female volunteers and put his hand in the wrong places, always wanting, always rebuffed. Avi was scarier than Beni, Beni made soft and human by his pudgy body and by that eye, while Avi was harsh and tense, so eager to get what he wanted

that you suspected he would chew it up and immediately spit it out. Misfit, pioneer: what was the difference? Sometimes you couldn't tell, both types drawn to the wilderness.

Another word they taught us early on: *mitpotsetz*. That means explosion.

Followed immediately by: *p'tzatza*, bomb. Same root.

Then: *mishtara*, police; *mehabalim*, terrorists; *p'shahim*, wounded; *memshallah*, government.

These were silly words. They taught them to us only because they might be in the news. Our Hebrew teacher seemed to think we might want to follow the news the way Israelis did, which is to say, compulsively. But we didn't need words like that, so we forgot them. It was quiet on the kibbutz.

We learned *melaafafon*, *peelpail*, *agvania*, dinner foods, ingredients for the salads that we made each evening. I learned *shemen zayit*, olive oil; *baitzah*, egg; and *tapuach adama*, potato: dinner was good. After dinner we went to the *miklat*, the bomb shelter. Not to be confused with *miklahat*, shower. We went to the *miklat* because they'd set up a disco there. Sometimes the colored lights worked, sometimes they didn't, but we danced anyway. Beni and Avi came every night that the discotheque was open.

Gareen means sunflower seed. I tried to crack sunflower seeds with my teeth, no hands or fingers, Israeli style, and I tried to spit out the hulls in a neat arc like I'd seen men do on Egged buses. But the spitting was messy, and the kernels were tiny and delicate. I rarely got to eat an actual seed so I gave up on my new hobby.

Gareen also means green. Which is incorrect, but I didn't care. I liked the euphony, the near cognated-ness, and anyway, green was how I thought of the group of young men who sat in the dining hall one night laughing. They were soldiers—nothing new about that—and they had guns, not new, either. But these boys were lean and lovely to look at in a way that lone soldiers on the bus were not. The dark green of the uniform exaggerated their backs, an undulating meadow of muscle and skin. The next day they sat together again, this time in civilian clothes. *Gareen*: a group of conscripts who bond young, in middle school. *Gareen*: a group of soldiers who train together, work in battle zones together, and do a year of civil service together—at a kibbutz or in the city.

Nachash. I learned that word quickly so that I could tell someone about the snakes in my bathroom, little black snakes, their bodies trying in vain to travel up the edge of the doorframe, but still.

Anne: my name, no diphthong, pronounced in Hebrew the same breathy way you say it in French. People asked me to repeat it whenever I answered questions about where I was from. I didn't know why my name was difficult; it seemed simple enough to me. I didn't use my given Hebrew name, which was not actually Hebrew. My Hebrew name was Yiddish. There wasn't much clarity about which language was which when my parents were naming us children. My name, Chassa, translates in Hebrew as lettuce. That wouldn't do.

I went to visit Moshe's apartment one evening, there to get to know his red-headed wife and his boys, four and six years old. The boys greeted me at the door, excited to have a guest. "What's your name?" the elder boy asked.

"Anne," I said. They cocked their heads, looked at their father and giggled. Moshe got me something to drink, and we went to the living room where the boys were sitting on the rug playing. Their red trucks strained to carry invisible loads before the cargo was dumped and the vehicles raced down make-believe hills. The intensity of the play shimmered in the air, waves of heat that I could swear I could see radiate from the boys' shorn heads. "Ahhhhnnn," the bigger boy said, ramming his truck into his brother's. "Ahhnn-ahnn-ahnn," the little one replied, backing his vehicle away. Suddenly, the boys stopped and turned to look at me. Moshe bit his lip, all three of them trying, unsuccessfully, to keep the laughter from exploding. Just call me Vroom.

Dani. A *gareen* boy. Not a boy, a young man. His name means: God is my judge, although Dani rarely gave a thought to God. He had an enveloping smile. He was friendly, unlike most of the other boys in the *gareen*, who surrounded themselves with members of their group, hardly ever looking past what they already knew. That's what a *gareen* could do to you, hold you in its grip and keep you there. Many of the boys had girlfriends in the *gareen*. Dani did not. The girls had already completed their military service, their tour of duty one year shorter than the boys'. Dani asked me to join Gilad, Itai and him for dinner. Dani loved his best friends, he told me. Later, he invited me to an evening of *rekuday-am*, Israeli dancing. Everyone was invited to the *rekuday-am*. It was held in the dining hall, tables pushed to the side, the dances harder than I thought they were going to be. We sweated and laughed. Dani was a good dancer and when I remarked on that, he nodded his head. "Yes," he said, "I am good." Dani had been invited to join a dance troupe in his spare time. He ate a lot of *gareenim* when he was in his apartment, spitting hulls into a garbage can next to the table. Sometimes Dani cleaned his teeth with a wayward shell.

M'toomtam. Ruti the *ganenet*, the head teacher in the kindergarten, used that word often. She would peer down her nose at a child, the syllables sharp, pinning the child in place like an errant butterfly. "*M'toomtam!*" Ruti said a second time, her voice one notch below a yell. She always said the word twice and followed it with the same rhetorical question: "*Lama aseeta at zeh?*" Why did you do that? The children were quiet when she spoke; they listened to Ruti in a way that they didn't with anyone else. I was in awe. How did she do it? It took me a few weeks to understand that Ruti's rallying cry, the word that called the children to attention, meant *stupid idiot*. It took me a lot longer to understand that her version of control—so much like my father's that I stood at absolute attention just like the children did—was effective, and devastating. But maybe devastating wasn't bad. It worked,

after all. The children were called to order, finally, and I was relieved when they stopped hitting each other. It was a matter of priorities, I said to myself, even though I winced whenever Ruti was called to deal with some problem or other.

Teenok. I learned that word on the June morning that Moshe came to my apartment, knocking and not waiting for me to open the door. “We need you to work today with the *teenokim*,” he said.

“*Teenok*,” I said. “What’s that?”

“Little child,” Moshe answered, “who doesn’t talk.”

“*Lama!*” I yelled, rising from the bed, finally grasping what was going on. “Why should I be made to work with *teenokim*? I don’t know anything about babies,” I said, “nothing!” Moshe smiled his irritating smile, the one that signaled that he wouldn’t budge. That he couldn’t budge since there was no one else to do the job. “Why do you think I can do this?” I asked again. “My body doesn’t have some kind of mechanism that tells me how to take care of babies.” But I could hear the click of the door while I was still speaking, Moshe off to deliver bad news to someone else.

Hitul: diaper. I learned that word minutes after Moshe left. *Bocheh* I already knew. *Ha teenok bocheh:* the baby cries because he needs to have his *hitul* changed. I sighed.

I lifted the crying baby—surprisingly heavy—and put him on the changing table. I unfastened the diaper and saw the reason the *teenok* had been crying. More *hitulim* sat on a shelf near the table. I bent down, reached for a clean diaper and heard a dull thud. I turned and saw that there was no *teenok* on the table. There was, however, a *teenok* on the floor. He looked very white down there and he was silent, which was even scarier than his bloodless skin. I yelled for *ezra*, for help. Now the *teenok* and I both *bahu*, the two of us crying, his voice ragged and strange. The *achot* was called, the nurse entering the room carrying a bag. She was remarkably calm. “I didn’t know,” I said. I said it again, blubbering, “I didn’t know about the *hagura*,” the belt on the table. “No one told me.”

The *achot* knelt and examined the child on the tile floor. I swallowed. Many times. I *hitpallalti*, I prayed, even though I was not a girl of faith, and then I was told to leave. I was no help. Not that I ever was a help, I thought, trudging home.

ILAN: OAK TREE. *ILAN:* DANISH BOY FULL OF SELF-IMPORTANCE YET NOT unkind, the boy to whom I returned after the *za-zoo’ah*. Listen: *za-zoo-ah*. You can see Sylvester the cat, eyes crossed after crashing into a wall, stars floating above his head, outwitted by Tweety Bird. The more I said it, the more it seemed like the cartoon version of a concussion, which was what the baby had. “The *teenok* will be fine. This happens all the time,” they said. I was skeptical—all the time?—but I chose to believe them because my contentment was delicate, more breakable than a baby’s head.

Ilan was complacent, happy to receive blowjobs, no return favors necessary. I was happy too, in one way at least: it was clear with him. None of the mess of real desire to thwart me—no one wanted the chaos of an emotional relationship—and anyway, now I could say that I'd had a second boyfriend.

Kamech: flour. *Sh'marim*: yeast. *Zayit*: oil. *Mayim*: water. Put them together to make *lechem*, bread.

Dani wanted to make bread. He loved food, thought about it a lot. Vegetarianism came first in his series of food fads; that's when he was enamored of freshly baked *lechem*. Later came raw foods—don't you know that heat is simply a form of killing? Dani said—followed by liquid fasts, almond-based drinks, and fruitarianism. Once, Dani was fat. Did he tell me that? No, despite the hard truths he so loved, Dani couldn't utter that one.

The bread was alive. Dani loved the odor of change, of ripeness, and he loved that I knew how to make dough. *Sh'marim*, the word for yeast, originates from a root meaning to guard, as if the act of becoming, of rising into a loaf of bread, is itself protection. Sabine whispered in my ear, her confident voice reminding me that nothing could go wrong so long as I had the four ingredients she'd instructed me to use. Dani stood on my other side holding *tzimmukim*, raisins, and *aguzim*, nuts, wanting to try something new. He came to get me at four, after the children had gone to their parents' apartments, the *gan* kitchen ours until the evening. Dani walked down the path outside to greet me, but to me it seemed as if he arrived in a sports car. Cars were about waiting, about patience and desire, as told by the novels I devoured when I was twelve years old. The heroine didn't understand that she was desirable, this fact known only to her parents and to the sympathetic reader who could see her, but when the boy drove up and she climbed into his car, the truth that had been hidden became clear. Of course she was wanted, of course her body was worthwhile. He had brought his car, after all, and now she was to drive in it alongside him.

A car wouldn't do, though, not here on the kibbutz. There were hardly any cars. If Dani had a vehicle, it would have to be a *tender*, a small pick-up truck with a hood on the back and shallow benches for passengers. *Tender* was my all-time favorite Hebrew word. It originated from English and meant something about freight, but it didn't sound like English when they said it here. The consonants were soft and understated, the workaday truck made warm and, well, tender, by its name and by Dani himself, sitting in the imaginary cab of the imaginary *tender* waiting for me.

Mayonez. I was confused by that word, even though it shouldn't have been confusing, a true cognate so long as you didn't look at the container it came in. I always thought the bright yellow tube would produce mustard, but to my perpetual surprise, creamy white stuff came out instead. Five year-old No'a was fond of *mayonez*, squirting it onto his bread, putting it on top of his chicken and carrots. He'd eat his mayonnaise straight up, too,

although not right out of the tube. No'a was well-trained, pressing a dollop here and there onto his plate, and then pretending that he was eating other food when what he was really doing was having a meal of *mayonez*.

No'a sat at the lunch table, his round face splotted with tears. Yehudit bent down, her hair like a curtain. She reprimanded No'a, telling him what he could and could not do. In response, he put his head in his hands. Children brought their dishes to the sink. After a pause, Ruti walked to No'a's table, big guns brought to bear on the problem. Ruti said something in a quiet, authoritative tone, and No'a shook his head and turned to face the wall. Lunch-time was ending, there was a schedule to be adhered to. Yehudit tried again, but No'a's response was even more extreme: this time he placed his face, his actual face, on the tabletop and left it there.

"*Aht!*" Yehudit called. I looked around the room. Which *aht*, which female 'you' was Yehudit referring to?

"*Aht*," she said again and pointed at me. Me? What did Yehudit want from me? "*Bo-ee*," she said. Come here.

"No'a won't listen," Yehudit explained. "He won't listen when we tell him that he can't squirt that much mayonnaise onto his plate." I nodded, thinking that Yehudit needed to vent. I had on my boots, my pants were rolled up, I was ready for the bleach-y water. "He said that he wants Ahhn. No'a said he'd talk with you about it."

"Me?" I said. "He can't mean me."

"He does," Yehudit said. "He asked for you." She shrugged her shoulders in what I'd learned was a distinctively *kibbutznikit* manner. Whatever.

I sat on a little chair at the little table in the yellow corner, which is how I remember it: No'a's hair blond, the walls painted yellow, light streaming in. "No'a," I said, "what is it?"

"I love mayonnaise," he sobbed. "I want mayonnaise. I want the tube, the whole thing."

"The whole thing?" I said.

"*Keyn*," No'a said. "I love it."

"I know you do," I said, stalling for time. "You like mayonnaise, it tastes good, right?" No'a nodded gratefully. I exhaled. Agreeing that he liked mayonnaise meant we were on the same page, for the moment, anyway.

"How about," I said, *umming* and *ahhing* since I had no idea what I could do that no one else had done, "how about we, um, how about I—"

No'a looked at me expectantly.

"How about we, eh, squeeze a little snake"—whew! a word I knew—"of mayonnaise onto your plate, and save the rest for tomorrow? I'll put the tube in the refrigerator with your name on it."

No'a looked up. His face relaxed, the hint of a smile playing around his eyes. "*B'seder*," he said. All right. Sounds good. OK. In order.

I sang this to myself all afternoon, *b'seder*, full of *noach*, comfort, and

simcha, happiness, the *mayonez* stowed with a tiny label so that everyone would know that in this place of *shitufi*, of sharedness, one yellow tube of mayonnaise belonged to one little boy who loved it.

For the rest of the day I kept opening the fridge, needing to see the yellow tube, treasure. As if Noah and I had created magic and put it into the refrigerator, top right shelf. There it was, Noah's name in my painstaking Hebrew handwriting, the piece of paper, the thought that had created the note, the link between us, the fact that I'd had to ponder this problem, evidence that we'd solved it. That paper and my happiness were a rebuke to my rebuke, me in men's trousers and a work shirt that would lead me beyond the barbed wire, to bigger and better things, me in the children's house talking to one small child and feeling elated, his big head, sweaty face and loud voice, the way he asked for me, words I'd found that could name longing and could contain it, no apple trees and no tractors needed.

Songs of My Father

I FIRST MET MY FATHER WHEN I WAS SIX MONTHS OLD. THERE IS A PICTURE of him holding me for the first time in the doorway of my grandmother's house. A military-issued desert hat, the color of sand and rock, rests on his back, the string pressed against his weatherworn neck. I sit precariously on his tanned arm, a pudgy wary-eyed baby, while he grins into the camera. He had just returned from a year in Saudi Arabia.

This picture defines my childhood. There are others like it: yearly photographs that capture his returns to our family, evidence that I was growing up and apart during his long absences. As the photo-series progresses, his grin begins to fade, and his eyes grow more distant, while I become less cautious. In one picture, I cling to his khaki uniform tightly, a skinny girl with desperate eyes. Small children, perhaps even grown ones, do not understand the implications behind such innocent desires. It was impossible for me to grasp the full nuances of words like *mutiny*, and *AWOL*, simply because I asked my father to stay when he'd been told to go.

So, after orders were received, gear was checked and rechecked, bags packed and repacked, boots shined, and hair trimmed. His jeans and t-shirts—civilian clothes—hung in the back of the closet where they became stale and musty with disuse. While he packed, I hunched beside a growing pile of canvas duffel bags, watching, waiting. And then he left. There was nothing to do then except wait: for him to come home, to stop enlisting? I was waiting, though I didn't know it then, for a time when he could choose to be there for me.

Days after my father was gone, I'd stand with other swollen-eyed children, friends whose fathers left with mine, in the school gym to sing patriot songs: the *Marines' Hymn*, *This Land is Your Land*, and *America the Beautiful*. As our voices rose, I felt the great sweeping elation of our unity, our collective anger and pride and fear bubbling up and out of us, loud enough, we hoped, for our fathers to hear us from their tents in the sand. When the last off-key voice quieted, there was only the sound of our ragged breathing, our beating hearts.

I AM A PARENT OF A DAUGHTER NOW, A PETITE SEVEN-YEAR-OLD WITH A gregarious and inquisitive nature. Sophie was one when I left her father, Brandon, forcing her to become a child of a fractured home. In the first few weeks of our separation, her father and I worked out a makeshift custody

agreement. He would get her every other weekend as well as one evening of the week; the total number of days he saw her in a month came out to around six. He didn't ask for more time, and then, I was happy for it. I had purposefully never stopped to count the number of days I'd seen my own father, perhaps because I was afraid to reduce our relationship to a number that small. Then, I hoped Sophie would grow up accustomed to seeing him a handful of times a month, that this arrangement would seem normal to her, and she would never question the immediacy of his love.

It has been six years and she cries when she cannot see him. A few months ago, after calling him and getting his voicemail, her voice thickened with grief, and fat tears rolled down her cheeks. She missed him. She was angry at him. He never answered her calls. Why? It is not the amount of time that has passed that bothers her; at least I don't think so. Time is merely the physical remnant of the absence of her father. The absence of her father looks like a driveway that stays empty, the smell of gasoline and fresh cut grass missing from her clothes, the phone that remains silent. She knows it is supposed to be different. Is this subconscious understanding some co-evolutionary trait? At the most basic biological level, parents and their children exist symbiotically for a sustained existence. This explanation removes the feeling from the fact that a small girl knows her father doesn't need her as much as she needs him. The Portuguese call it *saudade*: the feelings that remain after a person is gone, someone who may or may not be coming back. There is no word for it in English. When you say it, it sounds like a sob, like the way grief feels. She is filled with the ache of uncertainty: will she see her father again?

IN MY EARLIEST MEMORIES OF MY FATHER, HE IS SITTING ON THE COUCH in our small house on Camp Pendleton, the Marine base in Oceanside, California. He wears thin olive-green shorts and no shirt, the skin of his chest a Scandinavian-pale. His forearms, from his biceps down, look like giant sequoia trees: red-brown and thick. He hunches over, arms resting on pale knees, spits into a tin can of Kiwi, presses firmly and swirls the rag around, and then in careful circles, begins to shine his boots. I sit at his feet, all bony elbows and skinny legs. He hums a song I recognize as a march. Periodically he presents the can to me for me to spit into.

In one memory of my father's departure, he kneeled next to me, the sky gray with early fog, the air cool. I shivered inside my jacket. His hug was starch and Kiwi and salt water. He was trying to say goodbye, but I was busy glaring at the ugly ship behind him, gray and imposing. I wanted to bury myself into the scratchy uniform on his chest until I felt delirious from the fumes oozing from his jacket. Instead we walked away, my mother, sister, and me, back to the car without him. As the weeks bled into months, his scent dissipated from the house. I distinctly remember kicking the wall next to my bed when I was four or five and my father had left. I howled, the hurt

inside so great I thought it might crush me, turn me inside out. The pain of my bare feet meeting the walls matched how I felt inside. We called his absence *away on ship*. It meant eight to ten months of my mother, sister, and me, alone. It meant packing cardboard boxes full of homemade Rice Krispy treats, packs of gum, playing cards, letters, socks, magazines, ChapStick, and cookies. It meant a fierce desire to hide myself in the box.

When I tell some of these stories to Brandon, it's in the hope that empathy will arise in the gaps between us. *I don't want you and Sophie to have the same relationship that my dad and I do*. He instantly panics at the thought of being compared to my father. *Of course, we won't have a relationship like yours*, he reassures me. *I promise I'll be there for Sophie more*. And he will. For a few weeks he's present and available and pours out his love for her. She notices the extra attention, and then the way it ebbs, stops. He presents her with the potential of a better relationship and she is torn when it fades away. She cries, *I wish my dad lived with us, like other girls in my class*. I want to believe that I wish he hadn't put forth the extra effort. She might be saved some pain, a loss of hope, of her girlhood, if he didn't try at all. But that is a lie I've told myself for years.

ONCE, BEFORE MY PARENTS DIVORCED, MY FATHER STAYED HOME WITH ME while I was sick. This memory, hazed with fever and time, prevents me from remembering why it was my father and not my mother who stayed. I was sick and still I was eager at the prospect of spending uninterrupted hours with my father. His presence was a commodity we, my mother, sister, and I, fought for. I lay on the cool sheets of my bed, faced the big blank wall, and shivered. Our house was ugly, I'd heard my grandmother say so, but I loved it. I loved the cool tile under my feet, and the big windows that commanded a view of the ocean. Our house often boasted a slew of invaders; troops of maggots and slugs advanced toward the threshold of our slider door at night. In the morning my mother would open the door—she loved the smell of salt-water moving in currents throughout the house—and cry out in disgust when she accidentally tramped on the slimy battlefield.

The day I was sick, skin taut and prickly against the cool air, the wall next to my bed lit up like a TV screen. I blinked my eyes hard, but the images stayed. Cartoon characters bounced around on my wall, each inside its own little box. At first, I was ecstatic. I tried to focus on a single TV screen but found that I couldn't. I was taking in all the images at once, and I felt like I did when I floated on my back in the ocean: body weightless, my heavy head filled with salt water. I called out to my father, rolled over, and threw up violently onto the floor.

He rushed in, dressed in jeans and a shirt. His blue Levi's were a shock to me. I rarely saw him without his uniform on. I don't think my father was good at taking care of me that day. I'm sure he cleaned up the mess I'd made,

and probably called my mother to ask her what to do. He seemed frustrated and helpless, wiping up chunky regurgitated bits of Cheerios and curdled milk with large handfuls of paper towels. What I remember, though, is that after he cleaned me up and I was back in bed, he sat beside me in his crisp blue jeans. He did not look like my father and maybe that was the fever rendering him foreign, but when he sat down beside me he still smelled like Kiwi, like my father, and sleep found me.

A MEMORY: WE WERE GOING TO THE BEACH. I WAS RIDING IN THE BACKSEAT of Daddy's car, and my legs were sticky against the black leather; each time I moved my skin pulled away like a Band-Aid being ripped off. Daddy rolled down his window. Ocean air hit my face, my hair was in my eyes, but I was grinning, mouth open, tasting the salty ocean air, the way it burned going down.

At the beach I would beg him to carry me across the hot sand. I knew I was too big to be carried, but I was going to make up for all the times he hadn't been here, smelling like Kiwi and starch. I would beg to be carried and when he said yes, I would rest my head on his shoulder, feel his skin on mine, how small I was next to him, and I would say in my head, *do not forget this, do not forget this*.

We were going to the beach without my baby sister or Mommy. This meant that Daddy was mine, that I was his, that right then, wind rushing up my nose, the blue line of the ocean coming closer, I could pretend he loved me the most.

He did carry me across the hot sand. I didn't try to hide my smile. His face scrunched up, but he didn't complain about his feet, the way I knew they were burning as he raced toward the shore. It was enough to be held. We got to the shore and I jumped from his arms and raced through the layers of foam and seaweed until I was stomach-deep in cold, salty water. I dove under and felt the water numbing my thoughts, filling my ears with the deep, pounding quiet.

When I looked for Daddy he was laying out the gold-and-red blanket, the one with the Marine emblem on it. It was the blanket my sister and I hid under when he was gone, and we were afraid and scared and lonely. It seemed wrong to bring it to the beach, but I didn't say that. Instead I waved until he saw me.

"Come play with me," I shouted. I watched him shiver as he entered the water. "Take me to the big waves," I commanded. I didn't like the big waves; they scared me. The force and noise and quickness, they rolled up with speed, and I was afraid of drowning each time. But when Daddy held me, it was safe. I could wrap my legs tight around his body and laugh at the big waves that couldn't knock him down.

He picked me up, shivered as my wet skin clung to his, and walked farther into the deep. It was enough to be held. He ran with me through

the water. When I got cold he carried me back to the blanket and wrapped me in a towel. My legs stuck out like broken pelican wings. He opened an orange soda for me, dug a hole beside the blanket, and placed my soda in the cupholder he'd fashioned in the sand.

"Daddy, what would happen if bad guys came here?" I asked.

"Bad guys won't come here," he stated, so certain I almost believed him.

"But what if they do?"

"Then the Marines will protect you."

"But what if you're away on ship?"

"Then I would leave and come back. I would run and rescue you and your sister and Mommy." I was placated by his lie and returned my attention to the soda.

Later, back in the car, driving home to Mommy and my sister, my skin was warm and tingled like goosebumps. My hair was drying crunchy from the ocean. I was tired, but I didn't close my eyes because I didn't want to forget Daddy's arms around me, squinting in the sun, hot sand, sand on our soda cans, splashing in the ocean, the roar and crash of waves as I hummed a song I'd learned at school.

MY MOTHER ONCE DESCRIBED TO ME A TIME WHEN SHE AND MY FATHER were stuck on the freeway together: typical Californian traffic. They were wedged in between thousands of other cars, all sputtering and humming on the hot asphalt. *And there I was with your dad*, she told me, *hours alone together with nowhere to go. It was wonderful.*

MY FATHER SAW ME FOR TWO HOURS EVERY YEAR FROM THE TIME I WAS ten until the time I was eighteen. A formal custody agreement gave him three months annually. I spent summers with my grandparents, and it was there that he'd stride through my grandmother's back door, an image that returned every year, always looking a little older, a little more harried. There were, on at least two occasions, times where I stayed with him for a full week. Once I stayed for a weekend. His house was bright, clean, and silent. The visits were marked by trips to movies, a place where our silences could be filled with the problems of archetypal characters whose plotlines were cleaner than ours. *Let's go swimming*, my father would announce, and my sister and I would clamber to get our suits on. When we arrived at the pool we watched our father swim laps to practice for an upcoming physical training test: a pale fish slicing through water. By the time he was finished, he was too tired to swim with us.

It was the same every year. I leapt into his arms, despite the months I'd spent planning to act indifferent to his arrival. Then he drove my sister and me to Claim Jumpers or Denny's. We ordered and filled awkward silences with stories that began with "remember when." There were rarely new

stories to talk about. My father always inevitably said the same four things: “I’m proud of you,” “You know the value of a dollar,” “I’m praying for you,” and, “You know I love you.” The words fell onto the empty table in front of us, splattered there like the menus we’d already looked at. Had I sent him some message that I was looking for a typecast of a father, and these were the things fathers did, this is what fathers said?

I didn’t think my father knew who I was. I was a girl who measured her worth by how many boys led her into quiet corners to grip her back with their sweaty hands and breathe hard into her neck. My father, unaware, praised me for my resourceful and level head. He claimed that God loved me, and that in this love, I might find the peace my earthly father couldn’t give. But my father prayed to the God of Abraham, who bound his son with rope, a blade held over a pale neck. I prayed to a different God; the man who pulled children into his lap to tell stories and taught them how to love.

So, we ate our salads, our pancakes, our ice cream, and he drove us back to my grandmother’s house. Then he hugged me goodbye, repeated the lines of the role he played, and was gone. Over the next year he would send me a few emails and some handwritten letters, and I would rebel at the idea that our relationship was defined by the amount of money my father spent on postage stamps. His phone calls were brief, three to four minutes where he told me he was praying for me. His letters were always cryptic, always signed, *I’m proud of you. You know I love you, Dad.*

MY FATHER CAME TO MY HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION. THE DAY HE ARRIVED, he, my sister, and I sat around a sticky table eating burritos. My father began speaking in the only way he knew how, until my sister and I stopped him. *Dad, we said, if all you’re going to do is say the things you always say, then you should leave now. We want to have real conversations with you. We want to know you, our father, not the man who commands men.*

He sat there shocked. I think we were shocked too. To have taken a stand and said the things that had been on our minds for the last ten years. For the next three days he told us stories. He made us laugh. We didn’t know he was so funny. We didn’t know he had been a troublemaker in high school, and that he’d plastered bologna on someone’s car in the midday sun and it had fried there to the paint. We didn’t know he liked the Food Network channel. We didn’t know he was capable of that with us. When we knew, we wanted more.

WHEN I WAS TWENTY, SOPHIE, BRANDON, AND I VISITED MY STEP-SISTER, Miranda—my father’s step-daughter—at her home in Southern California. We drove through Camp Pendleton’s brown gates, past bored-looking armed guards. They lazily waved our vehicle forward. Miranda’s military-issued house was, like my childhood house had been, within a few miles of the ocean. Standing on her patio, the sun on my back, briny air whipping

hair into my face, the years dripped away and unearthed the image of my father and me at the beach, my small hand in his.

In her house, the air-conditioner hummed and ticked, and the tiles were cold and sticky on my bare feet. I introduced her to my one-year-old daughter and her father, my boyfriend. Later Miranda pulled me into the kitchen to ask if I was happy with Brandon. I shrugged. I knew even then that he and I weren't going to make it. It seemed instead a matter of how long we might ride it out, our relationship a turbulent wave that had peaked and was sputtering and slowing as it reached the shore. Leaning there against my step-sister's kitchen counter, just a few miles from my own childhood home, I felt strangely impartial to the prospect of our eventual dissolution; it seemed fitting for the place.

Miranda was throwing a birthday party for her daughter the next day and asked if we wanted to come. She mentioned my father would be there and then seemed shocked I hadn't known. Her own relationship with my father had always seemed more complete than my own—she once told me she didn't understand why he didn't return my calls. I called him then.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" I blurted out as he answered, his "Hello" as precise as his service in the military had been.

"Oh geez," he hemmed and hawed, "well I'm actually in California right now, we're still trying to sell the house, and I'm going to a birthday party for Ashley."

"Dad, we're here right now visiting. We should get together. You can meet your granddaughter." The ocean rumbled in my ear.

"Oh, well, I'll have to see if we have any other plans and get back to you, I'm not sure what we have going on."

From the time of my parents' divorce when I was five, my relationship with my father had been as wild as the ocean's currents. If I looked far out across the span of our relationship, everything seemed glassy and smooth. It was only when I paused for breath with longing—for a dad who wanted to know what books I was reading and who'd I'd gone to homecoming with and what my favorite color was and how I imagined a different life with him and how I hated that he sent money for my birthday every year because it felt like a bribe—that I noticed the way dirty foam bubbled on a shore littered with trash. As a teenager I would often call him during the months I knew he was home. Two or three minutes into the conversation he would say he was busy and could he call me back soon? Then months would pass before I called him again. He was still in the service and moved around every few years. Despite this, he and his wife frequently visited her daughter in California. He had visited me twice in eight years. The last time, I was pregnant. It was his first time meeting my boyfriend. *He seems like a good guy*, my dad remarked to me after visiting with him for only a few hours. *It's weird*, my mom had said, *how similar your dad and Brandon are*.

Outside my step-sister's house, I got off the phone with my dad. Later, it must have been months later, he texted me to ask for my address; he wanted to send me a Christmas card and a gift to his granddaughter. My address had changed since I'd separated from Brandon. I asked him not to send us anything anymore.

WHEN SOPHIE WAS TWO, SHE THREW A TANTRUM SO VIOLENT, KICKING walls and screeching in my face, that I became livid, then silent. When she was calm enough, she sat in my mother's lap and sobbed. I sat in the chair next to them, arms crossed, hands clenched.

"Why are you upset?" my mom soothed. At first, Sophie refused to answer, instead issuing a series of aggravated grunts. My mom persisted.

Sophie finally bleated, "I just really miss my daddy," and the torrent of tears that had mostly subsided began again.

I hid my face in my hands and wept. In that moment, I lost track of who I was. Was I my daughter, sitting in her mother's lap, or my mother herself? Or were we collectively the female version of the trinity, all existing within each other's pain?

WHEN MY DAUGHTER CRIES FOR HER FATHER, I AM INCAPABLE OF detaching myself from her grief. Not because I am her mother but because when she, with swollen eyes, tells me that her throat hurts from her sadness and curls on her side to face the wall, I am once again that same child, weeping for my father. I'll say, *When I was little, my dad was gone all the time*, and, *I haven't seen him in eight years*, so she won't feel so alone in her suffering.

My mother used to beg my father to see my sister and me. She'd cry, threaten, bargain, and plead, whatever she thought it might take so he would take us for more than a few hours a year. When I was angry at his absence and needed to find fault with someone, my mother was always closest. *Why can't I live with him*, I'd yell at her. And always, unflinching—though she later admitted the great pain these statements caused her—she'd tell me simply, *He's allowed to have you for three months out of the year*. She never said, *But he doesn't*.

So, I do the same. I call Brandon and I plead. I want to document Sophie's tears, record and send them to him and say, *see, see how she aches, how she yearns for you?* I want his tears to match her own, until he says, *yes, yes, I can see her needs, and I can meet them now, now that I know*. But I don't.

How do we measure our fathers' love? In the amount of money he spends on postage? The brief phone calls filled with the static of thousands of miles of distance? Hugs that feel formal and forced, and emails that are cryptic or go completely unanswered? In the beginning it was easy for me to find fault with Brandon. Now, I understand that people can become accustomed

to anything. Because we have had our current unofficial custody agreement for so long, I believe Brandon is complacent in the schedule. It works for him. When Sophie asks him why she can't see him more, he says that he's busy at work, or he's already made plans. He promises to see her later. Later is never now. For years I never considered what it must feel like to have to ask to see his child. Perhaps the pain of feeling like he wasn't allowed to be the primary parent anymore, because he had to ask for what was rightly his, was greater than the pain of not seeing her for days on end. Perhaps he felt as though he had been typecast by me. One day he was the father playing airplane with his daughter, stopping for breaks full of Cheerios and cups of milk. The next, he was the baby daddy, allowed to see his daughter every other weekend, his horde of male friends infecting him with every baby mama drama horror story they could think of. Perhaps the situation itself—he is not the primary parent—is the reason he stays away. In which case, I am equally and painfully at fault.

My father too, had his own reasons for his absence. He was away for a year at a time, home for only a few months, and then gone again. It wasn't a choice, he'd tell me over phone calls. *I know your mom is taking really good care of you girls*, he'd say. *I'm sending you some money; look for it in the mail.*

By the time she was three, Sophie could use a phone to call her father, unassisted. She'd wait patiently for him to answer. Except that he rarely did. She is seven now. "I want to call my dad," she'll state. "I know he probably won't answer. I'll leave him a message."

Sophie makes more phone calls to her father than I ever did to mine.

Brandon and I still don't have a custody agreement. I think, when we separated around the time of our daughter's first birthday, we were both too afraid to go to court. We liked the idea that we were mature enough to figure out visitation rights without the ruling of a judge. So, on the weekends when she goes to her dad's house, I'll sit down to my bowl of oatmeal at breakfast, and I'll pray that God nourishes the food to my body, keeps my loved ones safe, and helps strengthen the relationship between my daughter and her father, amen.

On Sunday night she trudges through the door, usually with frizzled, unbrushed hair, clothes she has been wearing since the day before, and tells me that the only thing she ate that day was cookies and a pickle for breakfast. I ignore the hair, the clothes, the food, and I ask her if she had fun. Her father will have just pulled out of the driveway, and she will turn to me with red eyes about to spill over and say, "My dad didn't spend any time with me."

"Well what did you do?" I'll ask as I pull her into my lap.

"He played video games and I played by myself." She'll bury her face into my shoulder. "He said he had work to do on his computer and he ignored me. He took me to Grandma and Grandpa's house and I spent the night there, without him."

In those moments I struggle to remain only her mother, stable and emotionally capable of helping her separate her feelings. What I want to do is shrink, grow smaller, until my body closely resembles hers, and I can take her hand in mine and tell her that I'm angry at my father too; we are sisters in our pain.

Sophie's relationship with her dad is not always turbulent, and it is unfair of me to paint it so. I try to help my daughter concentrate on the good. When she has an exceedingly wonderful time with him—when they have read books, built ships out of Legos, and watched shows together—we talk about it in detail. When she can spend extra time with him, she waits, half anxious and half excited, by the door until his silver sedan pulls into the driveway. “He’s here, he’s here,” she shouts, throwing on her coat and running outside to leap into his arms. Her excitement is painfully beautiful. I ache for the possibility of her continued joy. I worry that my insistence that they have a better relationship has more to do with me than it does with her. Because I do not want my daughter to grow up angry and unwanted, I push at her father to be there more. But perhaps the gestures I use to push him towards his daughter are only pushing him away.

FIVE YEARS AFTER MY VISIT TO CALIFORNIA, WHEN MY FATHER had chosen something else—a wife and step-daughter—over me, my grandmother called me to talk about love. I do not remember who brought up the conversation. But I do remember these exact words.

“You cannot give up on your father.”

“Why?” I begged her, sobbing into the phone. “Why do I have to be the one to try so hard? Why do I always have to call him, why doesn’t he ever return my calls, why doesn’t he want to see me more? Why can’t we have a different relationship?”

“Brandona, I can’t answer that. But I know that when you get to the end of your life you will regret the opportunity you might have had.”

“Grandma, it hurts to love him. It hurts to have him in my life.”

“Of course it does. Love is pain.”

The wounds I’d pretended were healing had only festered over time. My anger and love and pain bubbled beneath the surface of a deteriorating skin. I knew enough about medicine to know that I’d have to cut the wound open again to clean it. I trapped my frustration onto a page and sent it to him. *I want something different from you*, I wrote. *I want you to be the dad who’s there, the one who wants to know what I do for fun, the one who shares jokes with me, and takes me to lunch, the one who doesn’t have to say he loves me.* He responded with his own misunderstandings. He blamed me for shutting him out. I blamed him for pushing me away. We didn’t see that we were fighting for the same thing.

Eventually, after several angry emails and the dwindling possibility of

our relationship moving forward, I wrote, *You had the opportunity to see me and you didn't. Why didn't you love me enough to be there?* I specifically referenced the time in California, when we'd been less than fifty miles from each other, but I realize now that I was asking the question for a lifetime of absence.

I can't remember what his response was, but I can remember that he didn't blame the military, my mother, or me. He apologized, not as a captain of the Marines, or the ex-husband of a mother doing a good job, but as my father. And there seemed to be a shuddering intake of breath issued from both of us, in this admission.

WHEN I EMAILED HIM A FEW YEARS AGO, MY FATHER HAD SAID THAT WE might never have the relationship I wanted; it just wasn't what he could give. He asked if he could call me and I said no, that I felt less vulnerable behind an email. And that was true until the day, years later, I found out I was having a miscarriage. After his career in the Marines, he'd become a nurse, a healer of wounds. I was broken and empty and I called him to say, I'm bleeding, and I hurt. He talked to me for an hour, as a nurse, friend, and as my father.

I call him more often now.

"What's up?" he'll ask.

I need to speak to a nurse, I'll tell him.

"Shoot."

And then he'll listen while I explain the symptoms of the child in question. He interjects to specify: pain in the abdomen or the belly button, temperature over 101? I can see him nodding on the other end of the line before he begins to give me his advice. We use medicine as code to talk about other things—he says, *my knees are shot, and I can't run marathons anymore. I need new hobbies. I'm lonely.* I say, *Sophie complains of stomach problems, is something wrong, should I take her to the doctor, am I a good mother?*

Recently I called him on behalf of Sophie. On the other end of the line, his voice sounded deep with fatigue. After explaining her symptoms, he told me to take her to the ER. It was almost midnight. *Call me back and let me know what happens,* he said. In the car on the way to the hospital, Sophie, shaking with pain, asked, "Is my dad coming?" I'd called him after I got off the phone with my own father. Her dad wouldn't come. He said he had to work the next day and besides, the hospital was too far away. I told her he wasn't. She began to cry.

"Why?"

"Because sometimes people don't make the right choices."

"When he does these things, I don't think he loves me." She shivered as she sobbed.

I couldn't respond.

On the phone my father had closed our conversation with a familiar hymn.

"You know I love you and I'm always praying for you."

"I know, dad, I know," I'd whispered.

And I did.

Jessi Peterson

Songs My Mother Taught Me

Whippoorwill, wake robin, black walnut
Sheep sorrel and shaggy mane
Queen Anne's lace and cottonmouth.

Jimsonweed, persimmon, trillium
Wintercress and sassafras,
Chicory and sycamore.

Whistlepig, mayapple, meadowlark
Copperhead and periwinkle
Pokeberry and Deptford pinks.

Fleabane, tulip tree, teasel
Dewberry and spring beauties,
Dill worms and blue darners.

Redbud, sweetgum, bloodroot
Junebug and autumn olive
Boxelder bugs and mourning cloaks
Cahokia, Piasa, Peabody Coal.

Maggie Queeney

Metamorphosis: Arachne, Struck Silent, Radiates Silk

Born into the house of a small god
of color, of pounded
weeds, boiled blooms, ground roots,
beetles light as gossamer, as shells disintegrate
into ferrous sulfate dunes, like Dawn I unfurled
worlds, threaded vivarii, bound limbs,
the chest and eyes of the figures and forms cast
in a net equitensed in the loom frame
true as a door opening, and yes, I allowed
praise to raise my skill akin to the gods', I swelled
like thirsty fleece steeped
in purple-black vats of tint. Wonderwork, they called
the fingers drawing string into cloud-like masses of silk
and wool, and light building
from my hands smooth as if dyed and I
demand to know why the divine appears
in crone-form, not found
inside the girl born mortal, but enters
her locked cell in a shaft of sun, takes
the momentary shape of a bull, the beating wings
of a swan, tunnel of gold light, flame, and serpent.
The reluctant lovers, the ravished, captive, left to live,
bear those beaks and feathers, hides and scales, hooves,
antlers, snouts, tails. Beauty always
the transgression, silence the punishment.

Maggie Queeney

Mouth-shorn, ear-shorn, nose-shorn, I wonder
now at that sad trap of house-whitened limbs
that hypnotized nymphs— these new legs, needle-

thin multiply stitches four-fold, turn the invisible
unbreakable trick the wind
into servant driving meat and meal

as I wait, queen-like, ash-fragile and fanged,
spinning above the shining crowns of hair bent
to the looms in the old house my new room.

The Future

My people ran the steam laundry, kept books
for the hardware store and smelter. They managed
the town's first hotel. They station-mastered
the switching yard. Their daughters sold train

passage to every coast. Their sons hawked the news
door-to-door and groomed other men's horses.
They pitched town ball and hit home runs for tips
tossed to the grass while rounding

bases to home. They hauled goods
for Bistline Lumber along the icy
mountain roads of Pocatello. They joined
the army and built crude airstrips in the heat.

Their sisters took on sewing. Their mothers
took in the stray children of the ruined. They broke
themselves over the bodies of their own
children, who mostly did their chores

and schoolwork, grew up to become secretaries
or teamsters, waitresses or milkmen,
telephone linemen, keepers of the orchard
of avocado and orange and lemon, half-owners

of the general store on Signal Hill before
the oil boom, the president of the union.
Like others, they moved by ship and decade-
by-decade, prairie to mountain to coast,

along the rails west. By the time my sisters
and I found ourselves among them, they'd become
national monuments, a hand or knee
wrenched by twists that never straightened,

a chest heaving its lust for more air. One
with the cloudy left eye remembered
a city park in the old country, a red ball
lost in the hedge. Another missed a city

where peacocks shrieked all day from the roofs.
My sisters and I listened for the routine
motion of a day, what came before the maiming
by conveyor belt or simple bending. What

remained, a motion, after the assassination
and the riots, after the death of a child,
after a neighbor lost his mind in the street
and the palm trees glared and others

turned away in shame and horror. What they
turned back to after the earthquake
leveled a bridge and the pier shattered
timber by timber to nothing

in the Mexican storm. Our own hands
had lost their softness one afternoon when
no one paid attention. We wanted to know
how work could map the future without

anyone ever noticing.

At Spiral Jetty

Secret Father's city reeks of salt,
its passengers on ghost trains rolling over each Chinese bone.

He sent you a mother-song from Kansas.
He sent you a salmon run.

Black stone turns into itself on the sand.
Secret Father would reveal himself at the shore, but all the scud delivers is
magnesium.

He sends you ashes from Kansas.
He sends you a salmon run.

Blue-green lake breathes in and out from its edge.
The delivery was scheduled for this moment

but mountains veer away on each horizon:
You're nowhere to be found.

Jenny Sadre-Orafai

A Joining Medium

Nature is skin, tendons,
bones (instruments).

Good sound will spoil—
elastic and swollen.

A very large match
is a bath or an emulsion,

protects the head.
The pale is removed.

Rabbit skins dry
in the air—rags.

One hundred extracts
dissolve, divide.

We apply glue to
the wound, the patient.

We transfer the negative
then to stone.

We cast the sacred—
an imitation mother—

with glittering bones
and combs in a wide field.

Grief Patterns

It's okay that you wrenched your car
into an industrial parking lot, wailing
in fragments. It's okay you dropped
your keys, made yourself into a tiny
daughter against the carpet, a painted
relief. It's okay that you stared too long
at the sandy yellow dog, so much like her
before the owner tugged her away
from a shadow in the grass. It's okay
that your mom leaves her gold-plated
brush on the bathroom floor for
the ghost dog to rub against. So sure
of it. It's okay he's painting another
portrait of her. It's okay other animals
are breathing still. It's okay that you want
to excavate the yard. It's okay that you shake
seed on a front porch before the sun
because you have to feed something.

Todd Smith

Nocturne with Canals

Late at night from four hundred miles up
 (as seen in this NASA light pollution map),
our native state becomes a stark Rorschach:
 star-pocked on black, stray photons issuing

south and west in diagonals down its taut
 freeway wires, from the fiery white dwarf
of Chicago (extinguished along the curve
 where it touches black lake water) toward

its lesser stars, Springfield, LaSalle, Peoria,
 East St. Louis, and distant points beyond—
Tulsa, Sioux Falls—the lights diminishing
 as they track its tainted rivers and sanitary

canals, routes engineered to suck sewage
 from the city's asses into the unlit heart
of downstate. The uniformity of nowhere
 is, and is not, an illusion: there are towns

in the dark counties,
 known to hold human

spirits; each sends its fractional lumen out
 as far as it will reach—projecting it from
the weariness of floodlit metal bleachers
 behind the local consolidated high school

where, mid-October, Friday night, it's third
 and long (it's always third and long); faint
fluorescence wafting up from the split-level
 basement window as we do what we must,

registered sex offenders, part-time clowns
 jazzed out on God and methamphetamine,

Todd Smith

Junior Rotarian anarchists. It blinds, this
residuum of lives, cupped by the mirrors

of soybean leaves in unrepentant furrows
and as quickly reabsorbed, the afterglow
from all these lights too dim to register.

Nothing happens. (It is still happening.)

The Scent of Water

VAUX'S. RHYMES WITH *HAWKS*, BUT THESE ARE SWIFTS, THE SMALLEST OF swallow-like birds. End of summer, the swifts trek south: Oregon, Central America, Venezuela. Picture them: backs of gray and brown feathers, sickle-shaped wings. Cigar-shaped bodies the length of my middle finger. Weight: one-half ounce, the heft of a pair of maple samara, winged seeds that fly like helicopters.

The family name for "swift" is derived from the Greek word *apous*, without legs, because the swifts fly continuously, not stopping to eat, even copulating in the air. They rest only when nesting, incubating eggs long and white, and at night, roosting in the hollows of old growth snags and in chimneys like the one at Chapman Elementary School in Portland, Oregon, the city that is now my home.

One evening in mid-September, my husband and I joined hundreds of others spreading blankets and setting up low camp chairs on the grassy hillsides of the Chapman school grounds, waiting for the spectacle of some 30,000 birds swooping into the flue. In between sips of white wine and tastes of chicken salad, we scanned the sky for the first sign of the birds. What at first appeared to be an unorganized flock became increasingly ordered with each pass they made of the chimney. We cheered like soccer fans when one of the swifts broke away to chase off an opportunistic hawk circling overhead. Then, just at dusk, they dropped into the opening one by one, and we joined the rest of the spectators in a single exhale: "Ohhhh."

The birds have returned to that smokestack each September for almost 40 years, like an old man might pull into the same family-run, low-slung motel year after year, with its faux wood paneling smelling of cigarettes and Pine Sol, the car parked right at the door marked with a single digit. There are more modern hotels, more modern chimneys. Chapman's furnace has been replaced; the original brick one there only for the birds now, stabilized with wires. Even an earthquake won't shake them loose from this ritual, this return, the call to come home.

"HOMING," SAYS NATURALIST BERND HEINRICH, IS THE SEARCH FOR "OUR own good place," a nest suitable for raising our young and the surrounding territory that supports that endeavor. And the orienting and ability to return if we are displaced.

When our daughter was 18 months old, and our son still a longing, my husband and I bought 36 acres of bare hilly farmland because when we stood on the slope where we planned to build a house, we imagined hundreds of yellow pine defining the border, a pond where geese would stop on their migratory journeys and where the croak of bullfrogs would echo off the hills. We saw an orchard with apples, peaches, plums. The farm was a dream formed when my husband was in medical school and one of his professors invited his students to a picnic on his farm just outside the city. The redbuds were in bloom. The frogs croaked. The professor drove a tractor that pulled us in a hay wagon to the creek, pulled us into the dream.

We built that house, dug that pond, planted those trees:

Five thousand western yellow pine (*pinus ponderosa*).

Three hundred black cherry (*prunus serotina*).

A 1.5 acre pond, uncounted resident bullfrogs (*lithobates catesbeianus*).

An apple orchard (*malus pumila*).

We divided the land into pastures with metal fences and bought four domestic elk—one bull and three cows—because my husband loves elk and because they are efficient animals, impacting water and land resources far less than cattle. We didn't know our pastures disrupted the path the wild elk took in the winter to search for food when the high country was deep in snow. Sometimes the wild bulls tore at the fence with their antlers, determined to stay on their historical route, the one their ancestors took long before farms and fences, the one that is written on their bones. But a fence designed to keep something in is also effective in keeping that something out. The wild elk gave up and walked along the outside of the fence until they could again locate the markers, find the scent that put them back on their way to their winter home, where generations had found food and safety.

Christmas, 1996. I woke first to the filtered light that said snow had fallen overnight. I went downstairs and piled kindling in the wood stove, crunched newspaper, lay logs of tamarack, lit a match. Standing in front of the stove, letting it warm me, I looked out the front windows. Snow continued to fall like stardust. Three elk pawed the snow down to the grass. My breath caught for a moment at these reindeer relatives appearing on our front lawn on Christmas morning, then my chest tightened. The yellow tags in their ears meant these were not wild elk, but ours, my husband's fear of their escape realized.

We rounded up the elk easily. There were no historical routes for them to find—all of them were born in our pasture, and while animals have homing mechanisms, they can't use them if they don't know where they are when they start out. This year's calves, six months old, had not followed the rest of the herd through the gate that had been left open; their scent beckoned the adults, reminded them that *home* is where it is safe to raise your young.

FROM SECOND FLOOR WINDOWS IN OUR HOUSE, WE COULD SEE BEYOND THE front yard and down the hill to a pond the size of a football field, surrounded by cattails. In the spring, Canada geese nested in boxes my husband built, planted at the edge of the pond, and filled with hay. We watched for signs the eggs had hatched, saw fluffy goslings pushed by their mother between the slats of the goose box land in the water. They followed their parents in a downy parade into the high grass, a safe harbor from predators until the chicks could fly. We believed they would return one day with their mates to raise their own goslings.

In the fall, when the tamarack across the road yellowed, dozens of geese landed each night at dusk, rested on the water overnight—sometimes close to a hundred. I heard them again just before dawn, the signal for me to go to the window. I imagined them negotiating with one another about the direction of their take-off for the next leg of their migration. And just as the sun rose above the eastern horizon, they would lift as one, still chattering, their wings banging against the air with the effort to raise their heavy bodies. Picture one: back of brown feathers, black neck, white chinstrap, wingspan as wide as I am tall, each bird the weight of 250 Vaux's swifts.

A few hardy geese hung around all winter. I never wondered why, but perhaps they had malfunctioning migratory mechanisms, had been displaced and no longer knew the way home. One night, when a long period of sub-freezing temperatures without snow or wind created ice smooth and deep, we walked down the hill to the pond, skates slung over our shoulders—mother, father, daughter, son. I'd learned to skate on just such a pond in a golf course near our house, my father holding my mittened hand. That night the moon was full, the sky cloudless, but fog collected in the curve of the land where the pond was. We circled in the filtered light, able to see only a few feet but knowing the edges, as though skating in a dream. I crossed my outside leg over my inside to make a turn and there, in front of me, was a family of geese, setting on the ice, heads tucked under wings. I skated around them, trying not to disturb them. The pond was their home.

During my son's adolescence, when he ignored parental warnings about dangers, rejected guidance, safety, us, I held onto the memory of that night, the lightness I felt gliding on narrow blades across water that had become solid when crystals bonded to create a seamless surface. The ease of it. The trust. So when, at dusk on a spring day just before he turned sixteen, my son called to me from his second floor bedroom in what sounded like his eight-year-old voice: "Mom, the geese are back," I felt a certainty settle in my chest: he would return, too.

DEUTERIUM. HEAVY HYDROGEN. AN ISOTOPE THAT MARKS A DRAGONFLY'S place of birth.

Most of the hydrogen atoms that bond with oxygen to make up water

have only a proton on their nucleus, but a small fraction also have a neutron. This is what makes it heavy. It's called deuterium because it has about twice the mass of hydrogen, although the origin of the word, *deuterios*, means "second place."

Every ocean, lake, river, pond contains a known amount of deuterium, based on its latitude. The amount of deuterium in rain falling in the Bahamas differs predictably from that in snow falling in Bismarck, North Dakota. Some think all the deuterium came from comets.

When a dragonfly nymph hatches, it soaks up the deuterium of its first home, taking the stuff of shooting stars into the segments of its abdomen, the wing buds on its thorax. The water the insect is born into becomes part of its tissue, its life, forever. It carries it with it as it flits across the surface of the water where I kayak, my boat the shape of a dragonfly, my paddle moving like wings. By analyzing the deuterium in an adult dragonfly, wings like the tail of a comet, scientists can know roughly where it was born, but the dragonfly knows it in its body, finds its way back to where it was born, knows corporeally when it is home.

The common green darner (*Anax junius*).

Black saddlebags (*Tramea lacerata*).

Wandering glider (*Pantala flavescens*).

Spot-winged glider (*Pantala hymenaea*).

Variegated meadowhawk (*Sympetrum corruptum*).

Not all dragonflies migrate—in fact, only a fraction are known to, but these five are among the North American species that head south in the fall. They leave what has been their home, but is not their birthplace, when cold weather makes their habitat unable to sustain life, to provide protection or food. They often travel in swarms, becoming easy marks for hungry migratory birds along the way, the survivors returning to their natal waters where they lay their eggs and die.

I WAS CONCEIVED, MY MOTHER TOLD ME UNSOLICITED, DURING A FAMILY vacation on Presque Isle, a narrow spit of sand jutting into Lake Erie. She had recently miscarried.

Presque means "almost." I was almost not conceived. *Deuterios. Second place.*

I wonder what I carry in my tissue that tells me I am home.

The feel of the wind lifting maple leaves to show their silver underside before a thunderstorm.

The scratch of a sharp blade on smooth ice.

The filtered light when I open my eyes that tells me new snow is comforting the ground.

The scent of water—of perch and diesel and Coppertone—as I push off the sandy bottom of Lake Erie, level my body, begin to kick like a dragonfly nymph.

WHEN I WAS SEVEN, MY FAMILY MOVED FROM THE OHIO SHORE OF LAKE Erie to Colorado. My parents told me there would be mountains. I drew a picture of individual peaks, inverted Vs side by side. I colored them blue with a uniform cap of white at the top of each. I didn't understand the complexity of geological formations, of foothills and canyons and ridges, but the wonder of landscapes created by glacial floods and tectonic shifts has never left me.

For the next few years, I could see the highest peaks of the Rockies from our yard, from the road, from the playground at school: Mount Evans. Mount Warren. Rogers Peak. They lay to the west, my North Star, a reference point for finding my way home.

Ants and bees, monarch butterflies and some birds navigate by using the sun as a compass, adjusting their flight patterns as the sun's position changes throughout the day. The indigo bunting is among the birds that use the night sky for orienting, fixing on constellations as they rotate around the North Star. Whales and dragonflies rely on landforms for homing. But these navigation systems are far more complex than a simple visual recognition of familiar signs and patterns. Heinrich says the sophistication of homing mechanisms and the sheer physical performance of birds and insects traveling such distances was, for centuries, considered impossible because it was so superior to anything humans themselves could do. Humans, who rarely ventured far from their birthplaces, did not develop an evolutionary need to home.

I question how true that is. What accounts for the feeling of *coming home* reported by so many descendants of African slave trafficking when, generations later, they return to their motherland? What prompted hundreds of pioneer families to head west, finding their way with descriptions of landforms, to what they believed would be their *own good place*? How do we know where to go when a place no longer sustains us? How was it that the Rocky Mountains instantly felt familiar to my seven-year-old self?

WHEN MY FAMILY WENT TO THE MOUNTAINS—ON SUNDAY AFTERNOONS or when relatives visited from Ohio—I collected rocks from the creek beds where we stopped to eat the sandwiches that Mom packed. Most of the rocks I pocketed were quartz—smoky, pink, clear—or unremarkable granite, or granite with bits of quartz or mica. Once I found a slab of solid mica an inch thick and six inches wide, with smooth translucent layers like the surface of a frozen pond. I peeled off the sheets one at a time, like onion skins, unaware that their hexagonal atom structure made that possible, unaware that the word *mica* was influenced, in part, from the Latin *micare*, to glitter. I took those bits of the mountains home with me, nestled them in the cotton of my mother's discarded jewelry boxes, learned their names. Took them with me when we moved back to Ohio.

I married a man from Ohio. A man who took me to swim with him in Lake Erie and to skate on a frozen pond by the yellow light of a Coleman lantern. Early in our marriage, I urged him to visit Colorado where he saw mountains for the first time. We decided to move to the West, to Idaho where we would buy a farm and start a family. Our *own good place*.

ONE SUMMER, AFTER OUR SON AND DAUGHTER WERE GROWN, DRAGONFLIES swarmed me, their iridescent blue bodies glittering like mica in sunlight. They followed me, landing on my bare shoulders shimmering with sweat as I walked the bike path near our farm, far from any body of water large enough to account for such numbers, the heat rising from the asphalt, the smell of ripe wheat being cut.

That August, I woke with breath that was frozen. The farm, where we'd lived for sixteen years and where our children had swum in the pond and lain in the grass to watch shooting stars, felt uninhabitable. My husband and I were on divergent paths, unable to find our way back to one another.

Without a homing instinct, says Heinrich, humans find their way when lost "by maintaining a constantly updated calculation for at least two reference points, and the motivation to use them." My husband and I had not updated our calculations, or maybe we lacked the motivation to use them.

IN MYTHOLOGY, DRAGONFLIES REPRESENT CHANGE—THE KIND OF CHANGE that results from maturity and the deep diving that results in breaking through illusion to self-realization.

That August, my daughter and I drove south to where my son and his fiancée lived. "We thought we'd all get tattoos tomorrow," my son said, like I might have planned a trip to the mountains with out-of-town guests, packed sandwiches to eat beside the creek.

I went first. I gave the tattoo artist an image of a dragonfly from an aboriginal painting. It reminded me of a visit I'd made to Australia ten years before. I'd ignored advice and gone alone into the bush, the backcountry, to hike a trail beneath an undercut. Far from my home, I sought out a wild place where I learned how to be by myself.

I sucked in my breath as the needle pierced the skin on the inside of my ankle, watched the blue-black ink stain my skin, the dragonfly becoming part of me.

"What will Dad say?" my daughter asked.

I don't care.

I said it, and the thought lifted me up.

A few months later, I left the farm, unsure where my next home would be, but feeling in my bones that it was time for me to move on. Find a second place.

MORE THAN A YEAR LATER, MY HUSBAND AND I HIKE A TRAIL IN THE Columbia Gorge. We took a side trail to the shore of the creek, peered into the water to see salmon the color of sandstone cliffs, bellies full of ripe eggs. I might have known only this one fact about animals when I was growing up—that salmon swim upstream, miles and miles, from ocean to mountain streams like this one near Portland, to find the place where they were born. They are moved to lay their eggs in a spot that has already been proven to generations before them to have the gravel necessary for nests, called *redds*, water with sufficient oxygen, food where their young can feed safe from predators. But I didn't know that salmon smell their way home, following the scent of water, the fragrances that first met their scent glands when they were born. Only a small percentage lose their way over a journey that may cover hundreds of miles, their olfactory memory misguiding them to a sister stream. Almost.

My husband knew, the way an elk that has gone astray knows how to find its herd, I was not coming back to the farm, even after the two of us found a way to be at home again together. He pointed us west, as I had done early in our married life, and we landed in Portland, Oregon. The Willamette River that divides the city into east and west smells of algae and moss. Mount Hood lies to the east, its volcanic energy like a tuning fork that tells me we've hit the right note. My new North Star. To the west is the Pacific Ocean, where the salmon spend the bulk of their lives before returning to their natal waters.

EIGHT YEARS LATER, I SAT EATING MY LUNCH, LOOKING OUT ON THE waters of Lake Erie. The grass, still green despite the lateness of October, was filled with sparrows on their fall migratory path. Each morning, in the blue hours before dawn, volunteers walked the downtown streets, looking for birds whose internal navigation systems had not alerted them to a tall office building. They were scooped up, and when possible, taken to a rehabilitation center for care. I wonder, when they were released, if they found their way home again.

I was in Cleveland to help get out the vote in the weeks before the 2016 election. I told the recruiter who named the swing states needing volunteers that I was born in Cleveland, and that seemed as good a reason as any for me to be assigned there. It was my first time back since my parents and my husband's close relatives had all passed away. My first visit by choice, not duty. When someone behind a locked door asked me who I was, what I wanted, I would not just say that I was a campaign volunteer, but that I was from the neighborhood, born a few streets over. It was my way of saying *I belong here*. And I knew it was true because of the way my feet kicked the maple leaves, scarlet and blood-red and orange, as I walked from one house to another. I knew

it was true by the way the lake smelled of perch while I sat on its shore,
eating my lunch.

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Common Surfaces

MY LEFT KNEE IS MORE STRETCHED AND WRINKLED THAN THE RIGHT, A smiling Cheshire scar at the top left quadrant—sitting jauntily atop the kneecap, faded and smooth with age, the old stitch lines almost resembling a bite. I wasn't conscious when this wound happened. One night in my sleep I rolled off the old metal bed at my dad's house, tore my knee on something, and woke upon impact. In the bathroom I sat barely-awake at the edge of the tub and my knee was rumpled red bedding.

I'm clumsy. My body is perpetually blooming with bruises, but with my knees it's not a shifting catalogue of injury; the skin is marked with constant, irreparable bruising, stain that won't unstain, permanency. For example, below my left knee is a hematoma I've had since a particularly bad fall at around 13 years old. Blood pushed against the surface. The hematoma was firm but gave beneath my finger, like very purple clay. I kept waiting for it to flatten, but it didn't, so I began draining the swollen, mottled thing myself. Used a sewing needle to poke it. Painfully pinched the bruise between my fingers to drain the blood. I repeated this regularly over the next few weeks. On the surface a perfect miniscule ruby would appear, like any illustration of Aurora and the spinning wheel, but much darker. Queen Mab's favorite ring. Eventually the bruise flattened, and inside the now dull-brown skin hangs a small constellation of scars.

THE EHLERS-DANLOS SOCIETY WEBSITE DESCRIBES THE PHYSICAL characteristics common to all types of the disorder as: "hypermobility joints (joints that move in greater amounts than expected) and skin involvement, such as any of the following: soft, stretchy, saggy, too thin, easy bruising, easy wounding, poor wound healing and/or atrophic scarring."

I used to blame my elementary school attention-seeking performances for the skin of my knee, loosely collected against the patella when I straighten my leg. I would stretch out the skin for my amused and freaked-out peers, pinched between my fingers three or so inches above the bone. I assumed that in my lonely childhood I'd compromised my own body, but there is actually a medical name—"redundant skin folds"—a common associated symptom of my disorder. Redundant as in superfluous and unnecessary, but also protracted, a repetition. I've tried to get past speculation and resenting myself. It's easier not to resent my father, from whom I inherited

Ehlers-Danlos syndrome. His body has aged in a way that frightens me when I think of my own future, and I feel guilty. Wondering what may be inevitable. What I will see reflected in glass.

“EHLERS-DANLOS SYNDROME, OFTEN REFERRED TO AS ‘EDS’ IS A COLLECTION of heritable connective tissue disorders. Either directly or indirectly, Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome is known or thought to alter the biology of collagen in the body (the most abundant protein), which can lead to multi-systemic symptoms.”

Proteins are essential to the body, building blocks; they are what we look for in food, the body’s fuel, the most abundant of which I am deficient. And too, this definition says *known or thought*. Which is it? Is the known thing not thinkable?

Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome may be frequently shortened to EDS but I didn’t read this abbreviation until college, one night when I decided to do some cursory research on my skin condition. I can’t remember what spurred this—maybe I was thinking about tattoos or childbirth; maybe I was thinking about my frequent need to urinate or chronic indigestion, and whether or not these things were related to the condition I’ve had since birth. EDS isn’t so rare that doctors have never heard of it, but isn’t common enough that I’ve ever spoken to a specialist, or even really gotten comprehensive information. It’s always just been a rote part of my life, like the glasses I needed by age four and my endlessly frizzy hair: Ehlers-Danlos, a name that feels so unnatural to shape in the mouth; collagen deficiency; soft, stretchy skin; easily bruised, easily torn; slow to heal; *but I’m squishy*, I would joke in high school, *like a pillow, which is why I give such good hugs*.

The older I got the more I realized how much I’ve internalized this skin condition, how much it’s colored the entire experience of my life—the caution and fear; the not-always-conscious awareness that this body of mine is not like the other bodies I move around with in the world. And not in a *we’re all unique snowflakes* way. That isn’t what I mean.

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU THOUGHT ABOUT A KNEE? CONSIDERED your own knees?

When was the first time you noticed my knees?

Have you walked outside on a balmy day at the end of July and seen the summer girls laughing and lounging near pools, drinking beers, their arms all bronze, lifting like a commercial for summer arms? Did you think about the knees bending away from their high-waisted denim shorts, knees more or less the same color, that might have pressed against a yoga mat earlier with little to no discomfort? I want to use the word *brazen*. An old word, usually applied to headstrong or maybe sexually open women in

petticoats. I googled just to make sure. It means *bold* and *without shame*. It also means *made of brass* although the word brazen does sound more similar to bronze.

If it were bronze, perhaps my imperfections would be less obvious. I don't want to use the word "imperfection" because I understand intellectually that there's not some perfect standard to which I'm falling short. I don't aspire for perfection. But I wonder, if Mephistopheles appeared in my bedroom, what I would trade for a pair of knees like any other knees, for skin that would be imperfect in the most mundane ways.

SUMMER 2016. I FOUND SOME STRING LIGHTS IN A CLOSET AT MY parents' house and decided to hang them in my little sister's room to surprise her after school. With a row of safety pins in my mouth I stood on her bed, stretched, forced each pin into the wall until my thumb was sore and almost all of the lights wound across her bookshelves, over her bed. I was almost finished, left foot on the mattress and the other on the bedside table, when I leaned too far, put too much weight on my right foot. The table toppled beneath me and I fell hard, the pain immediately reverberating.

For the briefest moment I was still and almost thoughtless—a pause to fortify myself for whatever damage I'd find in the next breath, whatever broken shards of glass from my sister's lamp and knickknacks might have found their way inside my skin. Amazingly, nothing was broken—candles, snow globes, little squirrel figurines, all intact. I limped into the kitchen for ice as the bottom of my foot swelled into angry reds and purples. I was crying when my mom and sister got home because it hurt, yes, but also because I had finally been exercising regularly and now would struggle to even walk properly, to wear certain shoes. It felt like something was always frustrating my plans, my attempts at routine and normalcy.

A small raised knob still sits on the bottom of my foot. It's shrunk considerably since the initial injury but still gets sore if I've been walking or exercising for a while. On the same foot: a subtle egg-like protrusion that never leveled from a sprain in high school; a pair of scars splayed between my first and second metatarsals. The paler one is my very first scar, from when I was four years old and ran into a rocking chair. The second is a mirror to the original scar, reopened when I was a teenager and my dog landed her claws on my foot in exactly the wrong way. The two scars resemble a butterfly, half living and half ghost.

I've always had the most trouble with the right side of my body. I am right handed. Do these two pieces of information connect at all? Is there some esoteric explanation, maybe, for these misfortunes? Something about the dominant hand, the flow of blood?

“DISFIGUREMENT” AS IN, WHAT SPOILS THE APPEARANCE OF SOMEONE or something; but also a defacement, mutilation; or think *dis-*, a Latin prefix meaning apart, asunder, away; *figure*, the body’s shape, to appear, to calculate. My body open, not quantifiable, indeterminable, not to be reckoned, does not compute. My whole frame immured in a single word.

I’M NOT SURE WHETHER OR NOT I’VE SEEN THE INSIDE OF MY BODY MORE than the average person. Statistically, this might be difficult to confirm. Like when skin rolls back and your eyes are force-fed the meat that covers your bones.

I’m no stranger to my own gore. Many vagina-owners in general, I guess, have to grow especially accustomed to the body’s detritus. The fat clots of blood that drop like blackcurrants into the shower water, long pieces of uterine lining clinging to pubic hair.

I’ve looked at my own vagina a lot. Apparently this isn’t as common as I’d once assumed. Some women have never even seen their own vaginas. I’ll admit, I’ve never used a tampon before, though I have stared fascinated at the blood on my fingertips. But I have looked away as the doctor stitched together open pieces of my flesh.

The nurse told me to leave the initial wrappings on my knee for at least 24 hours, maybe 36—for as long as I could. After two days I sat on the edge of the bathtub and shed layers of stained gauze in order to look at my mutilated knee for the first time. The wound had bled through the gauze; blood and pus stuck to the stitches and hardened. I cried at the abject mess of it, in disbelief that any of this belonged to me. I cut away most of the stiff bloodied gauze, then went about carefully detaching what was left from the wound. I thought about the Civil War and its unprecedented mutilations. The bathroom smelled like old menstrual pads.

OCTOBER 2016. I WAS WRITING AN ESSAY ABOUT MY FRAGILE SKIN WITH sixteen fresh stitches in my right knee and an additional three beneath the surface. This new wound curled inside the silky, thick borders of a scar from the previous August, my first day of graduate school, when the doctor installed 27 stitches to reupholster my knee. The medic who rode in the back of the ambulance with me said into his walkie-talkie “75% of the patella exposed.”

I assumed the old wound had reopened. On the way to the medical center I wondered aloud, again and again, how they would be able to fix this; wondered what would even be left of my knee to repair.

ON AUGUST 27, 2015, SLEEPY AND DOSED WITH PAIN-PILLS, I EMAILED THE following to my undergraduate poetry mentor: “This whole experience with my knee has really plummeted me into thoughts like: How much *are* we

our bodies? I can't get the image out of my head of my kneecap exposed—my skin as an object, an orange peel. Disassociation. But then the pain is immersive and fully anchors me to the body.”

I'd sat on the pavement with my hand pressed hard against the skin, dreading how bad the bruise would be. When I mustered up the courage to look, I peeled away my palm and it was covered in blood. Then again, a few months past a year later, I sat on the pavement with my hand pressed hard against the newly-injured skin, hoping there would only be a very bad bruise. But it seemed frighteningly inevitable that I would lift up my hand and see my old scar torn open, the inside of my body indecent in the soft, early evening light. When I peeled away my palm in resignation the flap of skin fell to the side like a turned page, like a disrobing. I oscillated between moments of dreadful calm and complete emotional fracture; anticipating the pain involved in numbing my knee for stitches, the weeks of throbbing recovery, the inability to drive, the hot Ace bandage, the slow limping walk, all of the Halloween dancing I was bound to miss, and the following evening's sex.

SOMETIMES I FEEL, HYPERBOLICALLY, LIKE MY BODY'S PRISONER; consciousness caged inside something untrustworthy, unsatisfactory; the body I imagine never the body that stares back bleakly from the mirror, that angles itself *just so* for a picture; the body that cannot ride a bike.

I have used the word *syndrome* and not *disease*; the word *condition* when referring to my skin. This makes it feel less serious, but also my type *is* less serious than other forms of EDS; like one of my students, who takes medicine daily to help keep her veins from collapsing. We were surprised and delighted to learn we shared this same, rare disease. Her skin seems thinner than mine—her veins, so dangerous to her, shine jade, visibly crisscrossing all over her limbs and chest. “I was so embarrassed about them as a kid and didn't even know why,” she told me. “I scribbled all over them with Sharpies once.” Because of the heart complications that come with her type of EDS she must cope with the possibility of a shortened life.

As for me, I'm not compromised by my own body in a way that would generally be considered life-threatening. At least, as far as I know. And I'm not always sure how far I know. So *skin condition* has long felt apt: condition, noun, as in the state of something, especially regarding its appearance, quality, or working order.

I drive on the interstate six or seven miles over the speed limit and think about how much more devastating a car accident would be for me than my passenger; the shards of glass showering my too-thin-skin, how quickly I would bleed, how easy it would be for my body to become irreparable, like the simplicity of a sidewalk pushing away my flesh.

Sidewalks are such a common surface. Cement is everywhere, really. Sometimes I see my skin flayed open and feel pain I barely remember. I keep walking.

IN APRIL I DROVE MY FRIENDS THE TWO HOURS FROM TUSCALOOSA TO Dismals Canyon, one of the only places in the world where the insects called *dismalites* can be found. I was excited because I don't go on such excursions that often, but also extremely nervous. I'm not much of an outdoorswoman—have never been hugely enamored with things like sweat, sunburn, and mosquito bites—and am constantly aware of the threat that slippery or gravelly surfaces pose me: rocks, sharp sticks, branches. Once, during an outdoor pool-party for my fourteenth birthday, I was running in the backyard and stepped on a stick which broke and snapped up into my leg. I still have the scar. On a camping trip with friends before I moved to Alabama we took a shortcut from the beach back to our tents; though I picked my way carefully through the unpaved sprawl of grass, a stick still sliced into my foot. "It's not a party unless Elizabeth bleeds," I joked, trying not to cry.

Not being able to physically function quite like my friends and loved ones is a consistent source of shame. When two of my thinnest friends and I had a workout morning, and they decided to do a warm-up run around the block, I ended up walking most of the way, completely winded and slow. Whenever I try to do yoga, always with the most hopeful intentions, I end up grinding my teeth against the pain in my knees, wrists, trying not to cry from the discomfort and frustration, my lack of balance. When the ambulance arrived on campus the whole ordeal took place right on the quad, and as the paramedics lifted me onto a stretcher I tried to ignore the people who stopped to see what all the commotion was about. Part of my nervousness before the Dismals Canyon trip was in anticipation of potential embarrassment—would I physically struggle to keep up with everyone, out of breath, asking too often to rest? Would I injure myself and ruin everyone's trip? I brought bandages and Neosporin in my bag, just in case, though this wasn't a massive comfort.

I want to keep up. I want to indulge in the full experiences of my life without injury or embarrassment. I don't want to miss out, though I feel that I often have—that a sort of gilded normalcy exists right beyond the reach of my fingertips, if I could only shed this skin and emerge, not like a butterfly but a snake smooth and fresh with new flesh; wrap my body around it, delicate skeleton buried deep within firm muscle, and tighten.

For this day trip I drove us there and back, which I often do if I'm going places with friends. I like the control this affords me, the feeling of agency; and maybe I enjoy feeling reliable, and like I'm contributing to the group.

Maybe the act of driving is a way for me to earn or validate my presence there. Maybe I am trying to compensate for any future inconvenience—*well, I fell off a boulder and had to be helicoptered to the ER, but I did drive us!*

Dismals Canyon felt like a fairytale geography. The sunlight diffused in through the lacing of fantastical green trees and the air was perpetually cool with little humidity. There were very few bugs. I walked carefully across wet, often muddy cavern floors while trying to take in all the moss-covered rock walls and damp boulders. My friends clambered up a large, slippery rock to catch a view, and I hung behind, emotionally overwhelmed. They spread out, climbing steep rooty hillocks. I inched my way toward a flat rock and sat there with the pretense of eating the sandwich I'd packed. I cried a little, the mushed bread stuck to my teeth, and wrote the following in my journal: "I'm surrounded by beauty right now but trapped in the reflection of my own physical limitations; trapped as usual in this body." This sounds dramatic. Maybe this is just my experience, but having a body really is dramatic.

The trip picked up for me after that. The paths were manageable and the beautiful surroundings inevitably lifted my mood. I crawled when I needed to, scooted, held onto hands and shoulders. We reached a part of the stream that was crossable only by a fallen tree, which looked like an accident just waiting to happen. I stood on the bank, trying to decide my best strategy for crossing the rocks to the opposite bank. I finally said *fuck it*, removed my shoes and socks, and walked barefoot through the cold water over the rocks. I was laughing, exuberant, felt strong and capable. My feet were wet and dirty so I removed my shirt to clean them before replacing my socks.

We had strayed from the path at this point and the woods were quiet. It was sunnier here, too, and the warmth felt good on my skin. I walked a little ways in only my sports bra, then, on impulse, removed that too. I felt very brave and adventurous in that moment, topless amongst the trees, sunshine on my breasts, alone with a body that felt good and had done what I wanted it to.

This is not an incredibly common feeling for me, and is most accessible when I'm dancing, or maybe having sex. My body functioning exactly like it's supposed to, strong, made for pleasure, and I'm stripped of the awareness of my body's appearance and its wrongness. How often do you feel this? How often should I feel this?

DURING THE ORDEAL OF THAT KNEE INJURY IN 2015, I'M NOT SURE HOW long it took me to realize that this new scar meant I no longer had a relatively-normal looking knee. My favorite leg, up until that point spared, blessed even, had become the most damaged, and this grieved me. That moment

after my first graduate school class when my knee met the pavement like some prayer became a stark before and after. This was difficult to accept. I struggle to negotiate the feeling that my body is not only deficient functionally but aesthetically as well.

I mean, let's imagine it this way: thin, almost translucently pale skin etched with silvery scars and as susceptible to tearing as an old, sacred book; body soft like precious fruit, healing in a slow languish, the jeweled bruises rising to the surface of my skin then, eventually, sinking again; my peculiar joints bending upon themselves in mysterious twists and arcs. Yes, I would be delicate and tender but beautiful, ethereal...maybe like an Ophelia painting, or the otherworldly actress Mia Wasikowska. And I would be so lovely in my fragility, wearing lace, strong solid men gathering me against their chests heaving with protective emotion, very Michael Fassbender in *Jane Eyre*, or a waifish doe-eyed type collapsing tearfully against my knees, ready to recite Keats.

THIS WOULD BE A FAIR TRADE-OFF, WOULDN'T IT? TO BE ALWAYS AT-RISK in my own body but to be so very beautiful in the most charmingly delicate way? Like the secondhand wine glasses and goblets I seek out at thrift stores and inevitably shatter then replace.

I love glass, especially kitchenware, and surely inherited this from the women who raised me: my grandma with her collection of Depression glass, array of coffee mugs, floral cup and saucer sets; and my mother's penchant for drinking any beverage from one of her many wine glasses; our looming china cabinet full of antique finery.

I'm sure there is some unplumbed yonic symbolism in this collection of cups and other containers for liquid; or the suit of cups in tarot, which corresponds to the emotional level of consciousness. I gravitate towards these things at thrift stores and often come away with some new find—a little porcelain mug painted with peacock-colored flowers, a long-stemmed champagne flute I probably won't really use to drink champagne. I bring my mother little gifts as well, especially to replace the wine glasses she regularly shatters. We've both lost our fair share of collectable mugs and favorite cups to such fumbles. Breakable beauty and low-stakes loss. Maybe it's an accidental catharsis, the tiniest preparation toward disaster.

THE SKIN ON MY KNEE TORE RIGHT ALONG THE CURVE OF BONE, WHICH the doctor had to stitch around, leaving an open place of about an inch. Even after my stitches are removed I will feel chilled whenever I look at this lingering wound, still leaking, still sticking to the fabric of my pants. I will wonder if it will stay this way forever, open as a curse, never able to kneel comfortably again, the joints stiff and aching.

The opening will scab, and I will peel the scab, and the opening will scab, and the scab will scrape away in the shower; and this will either be an endless loop of peeling and scabbing or the old skin will eventually harden, fall away, leaving something ready and new.

Round Baby Rides the Landslide

I'm part of that (expletive) mountain.

—Harry Randall Truman, 1980

Baby wonders what it feels like,
the weight of ash on the tongue.

At what rate must it fall in order
to accumulate, dry as a gospel, heavy

as stone against wet flesh? Won't it dissolve
upon hitting hot mouth, breath

leaching slow as snowstorm from low
winter clouds? But it's May now, so

no snow except here at the highest
peaks. Baby's made her way up

the north face fairly easily by grasping
and leaping, teasing stubborn

rock from empty air. When
she gets there she wants to dance

the backbone of the continent,
popping each vertebra

with her pumice-stone toes,
until the world releases

all the worry and stress
that's been building for one

hundred twenty seven years.
Below her now, the ground shrugs

forward and lets itself go
with a lateral blast. Baby

doesn't yet know the word
orgasm, still she's bound to it,

above it, inside, rides the landslide
down, through trees and trailer parks,

flattening cars and cattle and odd,
obstinate men raving in flimsy

cabins, deep in the danger zone. Over
her head and behind her, the ash

column rises, forms a cloud
neither soft nor melting.

Baby looks back at the machine
of it, thrusting out and up,

a monstrous velocity
that outruns out the sun.

Round Baby Plunders the Orange Sky

*"Look, Doris. Like, I'm 18 okay? And I can watch
the comet wherever I want to watch the comet."*

The comet's coming close tonight.
Baby's been tracking the sky,
watching through fogged binoculars
for the periodic show—dirty ice
and gas wrapped around the horizon
like a loose winter scarf. The first time

she looked up, she waited for space
metal that would miss her and fall
on Australia. Months earlier, her parents
let her bang pots with wooden spoons
on the front stoop at New Year's, under
a dark dome of cold. *Watch. Watch.*
Wait. Maybe it will be early, Baby

thought. Maybe it will come crashing down.
Now, here, years later, everyone's craning
their faces up, a whole lot of ga-ga
over the comet's certain return.
Baby's tired of the craze. This public
lust for Halley's kept her grouchy

for days. There's no astronomy club
at school, just anatomy and physiology
where that teacher shaped like a rectangle
chucked a rheumy sheep's eye at her head.
Dissection time is now! he clanged. It bounced
and Baby drew her scalpel follicle-close. So grody.

No, the heavens are what hold her, always
have. Ten days ago, seven gorgeous sparks
flew from a thick white rocket plume
into the Florida blue. Baby sees them
now as stitches, sewn into the skin

of night. The word for this is *wound*.
She shudders and spurns the nerd-

boys, jocks and dirtbags amassing in paneled
basements around town to pound
lukewarm cans of Coors, the official spectacle
beverage, and listen to Boston blast their dumb
invitation to enter. *We're ready C'mon!* But
Baby really is ready now. She's Reggie

Belmont, B-movie-ready to bash comet
zombies in the brain with heavy wrenches,
then go shopping with Sister at Benetton.
Ready to be beautiful and brutal, humanity's last
line of defense. What would it feel like to breathe
that red haze that was Father, Mother,

and stagger into the next empty day? Media
says Halley's a dim dud, a burnt bulb.
Such disappointment. A total bust. *Ooh ooh*.
Still, Baby feels like there's something
just out of sight, other side of the sun,
so she plunders the orange sky
for arrival or exit sign. She'll be 90 in 2061.

Noah Stetzer

The Devil You Know

This doctor with your latest test results says,
“Looking at where you’ve come from, I don’t think you can ask
for better.” There’s a nurse who’s got your arm between

her arms, she slides the needle in and whispers, *don’t move*
and this doctor is saying something about “long-term infection” and
“inflammation”
but you’re hearing *transgression* and *immolation*

and you’re thinking: you know a thing about your night
sweats that he can’t find in his file, about marks
inside your shirt sleeves, about the heat you’d need

to boil your water clean—you know how long, after you blow
it out, before you put the match to the tick.
He’s got his numbers but you’ve got stars

scattered in hidden places everywhere inside your skin
where they dance like the smokestack flares
along the river that I can see falling asleep in the back

seat of my father’s car as he takes the highway
home again. Where I’m from
sitting Sundays on a wooden bench, we know there’s work

to being saved; we argue the parts of valor,
the merits of safe versus sorry, prevention versus cure;
we don’t count on, that next time, luck improves;

—and we know you burn something hot enough
with bits of grit and dirt, you make
something good into something better.

Diviner, What's Divine Here?

I.

In the photograph, my baby hand lies easy
on her bending leg, sure as a hand on a bannister.
My other hand in hers, caught mid-reach

for the glass of beer she's draining, top rim pressed
against the bridge of her nose. Waxy slats of the pool chair
writing red lines on the backs of her thighs—

here, she could think, for a minute, as only one body.
My mother only drank when she was breastfeeding.
Her babies kept fat and happy, slept in her bed so she could

breathe them. After the sixth, her pelvis clicked when
she walked—the sound a kind of clock for me—I stayed
close enough to hear. In the photograph, I see

luxurious joy of skin knowing, skin-on-skin,
enough, and water. The lawn hasn't been that TV grass color
since I was young, drought grasping on twenty-three years

now, earth cracking the way a good loaf of sour bread
mouths open, stretched across the top, edges made from the inside.
She knocked on her bread to see when it was done—

listen— she told me once
she wouldn't die till I was ready. Her lungs scraping her throat
for air, her pain the only sound in that room, but anyway I said

I'm not ready—

Our hands. My fingers laced through hers
like hangers somehow still

the shoulders of the dress slipping off
to the floor

II.

A woman drinking beer while it would well up custard-colored in the dusk-roughened surface of her nipples and leave her. Bread, dress, death, baby:

what I'm not supposed to put in the poem I want in the poem. My mother left the table to nurse. The same table, all gloss and miles long, where I'd later sit, heart shuddering the way a horse reflexively shudders its own skin rippling quick to rid a fly, as I learned not to talk. Not there. Elsewhere

the house swam in its own sweet darkness, soon the happening of my hands in the hot soapy water would let my mind get back to work building itself.

How I knew I was loved: I could *think*.

III.

But I needed more than that. More than my mind.
When she was dying, our bathtub turned tabernacle,
comfort's last dwelling place on earth—I'd turn the tap
all the way on, warming up the cold porcelain, then
dial it back, testing with my wrist. I knew the temperature

she liked, the level of water that was right. I folded
washcloths that I'd submerge, wring out, and drape
over her shoulders, neck, until she sighed with pleasure.
I struck a match, lit the candles, felt as much a priest
as anything I'd ever seen in church. I carried her in—

she held herself down in the water while I
knelt beside the cracked bathtub to fan my hands
back and forth through the water, gently sending
wet warm movement across the ridged landscape
of where my mother's breasts had been. By then,

she was so light, her shin-bones pipes, she had
to remind herself she had a body so as not to float
uselessly. The air was hungry for her. She hinged her spine
to gravity, willed her hips down while her hands gripped
the soap-slick sides of the tub. Without knowing it,

I memorized the gnarled hardened topography
of her years-old loss, first the left, then the right,
scars silvering to pink. There, on my knees,
I learned survival could not be had by thought.

IV.

*A breast is a breast is a breast is a—
A breast cut off is no longer a breast.*
Here, I want to write

about the secret life of my mother's breasts.
How they were a way for her to have what she wanted—
beer in the cold-clouded glass, time away

from the table, the babies in her bed
as long as they were nursing. A way for her to have
what she wanted without saying

this is what I want.

V.

The first time I took off my clothes
in front of a man, we stood in a meadow,
long sere grasses holding their seeds in their hands,
and I unhooked and let lace fall and he said, *you are—*

beautiful and I laughed out loud at the sheer good weight
of Sierra sun on the blue veins that map my breasts,
the veins I love, the breasts, the breasts I never needed
someone to love before I could love them—part of the poem, too,

the joy of saying with my whole body, *this is what I want.*
The risen bread, the gates of the body flung wide open, the baby
learning to trust that what she loved would hold her up. Listen:
my mother was dying. She is not dying anymore.

Three Moons in Glass

She does not absorb my oxygen or turn me
to the bed's edge when I sleep. Particles of DNA
do not cross from her blood to mine like seagulls
forgetting their way to the ocean. So when
security buzzes us out of St. Luke's-Roosevelt
and we step, heads bowed, into the February wind,
my wife asks, *To you, does she live in the ultrasound?*
I laugh, then imagine our daughter after we leave,
climbing from the screen to laminate floors as dark
and placid as wet sand. She returns to the waiting room,
where an older woman pats a plastic chair beside
the Culligan machine, offers her a paper cup of water.
Another woman, middle-aged, fans out a deck of cards
and asks her to pick. Quickly, the room is full.
A little girl draws green chalk squares on the floor
and numbers them. A teenager opens a window,
washing her hands in the barley-colored light.
They all share round cheeks, dimples, hazel eyes.
We wait with you, the eyes all say. *He worries*
you are lonely. A magazine rises from the rack.
A breeze rifles its pages that turn and blur together
like cross-sections of a planet. No one's body
adorns the cover. There is nothing to buy or sell,
just different futures passing her in an instant:
a lover who will bring her breakfast, her reflection
in a mug of water, snowflakes resting on a wool hat
as she waits for a bus in a city where no one
speaks English. The magazine floats back,
and she touches the cool glass on the window,
watching heat leach out of her as the view
turns into fog. She thinks about the other window
inside a machine atop a plastic table down the hall.
Inside the screen, weeks of silence and black.
Then, one day, two gray moons rise out of it,
shifting and uncertain. If she waits for long enough,

they sharpen into faces, mouths calling out
in sounds she doesn't recognize but senses
are for her alone. Like any moon, the faces
fade, but she holds their voices inside her
like a melody she will forget if she exhales.
The women carry her back to the waiting room,
where she contemplates its large, clear window
and the solitary moon calling out to the dark.
Take these says a worker in stained coveralls
who hands her a packet of seeds. *Lose as many
as you like. You cannot lose what grows.*
Our daughter opens the packet and pours it
out the window, in the hall, beneath the fixed dark
of the ultrasound machine. She can't comprehend
the world outside her world, in which my wife
carries her, easing down wet stairs to the subway
where people stand to offer seats. Like me,
our daughter can't feel both our world and hers.
So when she kicks in the night, I think of her
pacing a waiting room blanketed with seeds,
staring at the ultrasound and the window,
waiting for three moons to rise in the glass.

David Wright

**Program Notes for the Atonement: Sonnets to
Accompany Max Bruch's *Kol Nidrei***

1—Prelude: Dusk, on the Last Day of the Year

—another for Brett

Not yet sunset, still, you knew this year, gone,
would haunt you: echo of bullets, echo
of curses, stagnant water, the dank strong
odor of a dream, raw throat silent, choked

full of smoke, and the river of your memory
filled with the floating figures of felled palms
and other bodies, human, not debris.
A book, given to you by the dead, “alms”

he thought, your friend—“may this be”—his hand scrawled
“comfort this summer.” Damned book could not save
his body from the dark. Each turned leaf falls
away, broken vow. Each delicate wave,

against sky, of color, another death.
And this sky, cleared away, recalls your breath.

2—Recall All Vows

*Strictly speaking, it is not a prayer, although
commonly spoken of as if it were.*

—Kol Nidrei, Wikipedia entry

It is, first, not a prayer, and if it were,
could not be mine. Sweet Jesus-inflected
hymns—softly, tenderly—fill the plain church
my head becomes at night. The collected

poems of the faithless hollow out my skull
in the mornings. Like most, beloveds, scant
pledges I've ever kept, and all my dull
transgressions seem too banal to recant.

Ignore. Delay. These are my devotions.
But the cantor calls: outcast, the numbers
say it is lawful for us to pray with the fallen,
to count our faults with the unsung stranger.

Hear, Ever-Present One, Shema proclaims.
Here, I speak my sins and not the sacred names.

3—Litany of Names for What We Know about *Adagio on Two Hebrew Melodies for Cello and Orchestra with Harp*

*Here is the salvation of our unmelodic times—all is ruined,
only true Melody survives. . .*

—Max Bruch, in a letter to his publisher about folk song

Bruch, in England and Berlin, believing
in Brahms, in his cantor friend Abraham
Jacob Lichtenstein, in the sacred grieving
folk tune he buried deep in Herr Hausmann's

cello, its body chanting *Kol Nidrei*,
its stringed neck humming Byron's stolen psalm
by the rivers of Babylon, the high
trees where the exiled hung their harps along

the water's singing edge, the closest tongue
to their own sacred hope. When certain men
bore sons, they banned and damned Bruch's very song,
threatening their eschaton, their vow. Then,

adagio, unextinguished voices rise
from Shoah never to avert their eyes.

4—When the Eye and the Ear and the Voice

have been exhausted by the constant screens,
click—screens—scroll—news feeds of worry—noises—
thudding through the sternum—nothing unseen;
when wounded eyes, stuffed ears, ranting voices

appear—with particular static—in dreams
that once held the beloved and her choice
word, his scarred cheek—breaking news—no serene
sight, no song, no throatied pleasure to voice—

from a man's hands, three wordless chords descend,
a woman draws with a bow a sharp light
from autumn's intimate dusk. Breathe. Repent.
Unclench your fist, suppliant. When the eye

the ear, the voice disappear, then atone.
Now, silence. Then, at last, a space for song.

Five Laments in d-minor, Masquerading as Dance

—for Carolyn

Prelude

To invite us inside
the fragmented chord,
like a man opening a door
to learn his wife has died

in his absence. To seduce
the cellist to caress strings
as if they were her own
vocal folds grown silent

from lack of singing. Never
mind that your eyes sting
from fall smoke and lack
of sleep. Never think about

all the lovers you will miss
when they have ceased
longing for you. Here
comes grief rising up

in the solitary musician,
the solitary, public sun,
the attendant and so tired
congregation gathered

to eavesdrop on how dark
scratches mark the paper, mark
the air, can become something
more, or less, if that is what we need.

Allemande

To me is all right
angles, all the square
dances, hand to hand
from partner to partner.

To him, the allemande left
a space before the sarabande,
a dozen measures cut into
the muscle. Repeat. A dozen

measures cut into the muscle,
not the bone. Repeat. Again.
The heart is a muscle that is
not a muscle. The allemande

is a dance in common meter,
is not a dance in common time.

Courante

A hundred kinds of blues, all broken love
songs, blue and bluer, the flatted 3rds and 5ths,
the cut of strings when the finger slides

and bends the riffs. And the keening that starts
down in the small of a woman's back when she curls
and uncurls herself over a photograph and sings

no decipherable word. And the stranger wandering
high in the hills of his forehead, hollowed valley
of his mouth, the tiniest bones of his ears so abuzz

with the hum old hymns he does not believe but sings
like it means everything. I grieved sitting still. She moved
through loss in her torso, slow spin in a morning room,

wild every night the sheets, in knotted dreams. My mother
chants the darker Psalms of David, not quite forsaken,
but why hast thou, she says. Preparest a table before me,

she asks as she lets go of each antique key she has collected
for nearly 80 years, before she gives them to the auctioneer.
My father is a box of ash stashed behind old books on a shelf

he built with his own hands. This courante rivers itself between
banks of silence, indiscriminate, reckless, a thousand stones
baffle the unstilled water into sound, into still more versions of blue.

Sarabande

Before we fill the studio,
I hear you tell the student:

you are not ready to play
Bach yet. Or is it a question?

So terribly tender, the dozen
trills and double-stops

and the small room emptied
of everything but a single

worry: no one is ready
for her dissonant days

until she has learned to play
a sarabande by heart,

a hundred mornings, until she
has descended to the lowest

tonic in this inevitable minor key.

Gigue

I suspect you disagree about the ending,
where the mourning rises up through $\frac{3}{8}$

time to hit its highest tone, meaning hope
could be the way to end the afternoon.

Or I suspect I disagree with the child
who celebrated that her dog ran off

to the woods and spent the happiest day
of its life lost and alone, scruffing

and sniffing in the pine needles. He found a
small hedgehog and did not eat it.

He resisted every command to go home.
Though, I suspect the dog would sit. Stay.

Speak nothing if he could lie here on the rug, the
gigue accompanying his lived dream

of all he left out there in the wild, when,
after lamenting and scratching and baying

about the disappearing moon, he was found and
returned to his damned comfort in the sun.

Good Nite Moon

I WATCH RERUNS OF *FATHER KNOWS BEST* WITH A BOX OF DING DONGS, pushed up against the kitchen bar on a stool. My daily after-school routine since, I, the quitter, left gymnastics—left the team. Dad’s gone on one of his business trips. The house is empty. Just me and Mom’s yellow-flowered kitchen. I disappear into the 1950s world of Jim and Margaret Anderson on the small kitchen TV. If I ever have a family, it’ll be the Andersons’. As long as I can work it like Jim and Margaret, family life will be great—with a moral from Dad at the end of every episode.

“WHY KIDS?” THE EX ASKS IN A ROMANTIC RESTAURANT. HE’LL PROPOSE within the hour.

“I want Christmas with kids around a tree. I want family dinners, family vacations—family all around me. Halloween. The Tooth Fairy. Easter Bunny. An unbelievable childhood redo.”

Not even the smallest shred of domestic “know-how” exists in my body. I fictionalize the damn thing. I like the *idea* of it. Like the Andersons.

But Margaret Anderson never becomes terrified of Jim. And “Princess” Anderson isn’t pushed into sports, spiraling into a nervous breakdown.

DR. STAN BEECHAM OF *ELITE MINDS* SAYS, “EVERYONE PRACTICES SOME form of self-deception because we all believe things that are not true and yet we have no idea that our beliefs are inaccurate. Once we internalize a belief, it becomes part of our brain’s operation system, similar to how a virus infects a computer. You didn’t want it and may not have known when the virus (a false belief) entered the system, but now that’s what’s in, it’s very difficult to get rid of it.”

NEWLY MARRIED. NEW CITY. OUT OF CURIOSITY, I VISIT A GYMNASTIC TEAM where I’ve heard that a local Olympic gymnast trains. The mat and chalk smell hit me in the face like an old lover—dopamine surge. A Romanian coach shuffles up, alone in the gym.

“Can I help you?” he asks. We talk. He knows my old coach, he says with an eyebrow lift.

“Is he still bad?”

“Yes,” he acknowledges, his eyes like bullets. “And he’s on the National

Coaching Staff.”

Great. That particular coach slept with two sixteen-year-old teammates simultaneously, causing a territorial rift between the girls. He liked to grab my fourteen-year-old breasts during practice. Forced a kiss on me once while trapped behind a mat.

Three Olympians donned our team. The older girls taught the younger ones how to purge to keep weight down.

“I’ll come back,” I promise the Romanian, “when I have a young hopeful of my own to deliver up.”

“MY DAUGHTER’S IN A GYMNASISTICS CLASS,” I INFORM AN OLD TEAMMATE, now head of the President’s Physical Fitness Council in Washington.

“Are you kidding? Get her out.”

“No. It’s not like that. Strictly for strength and coordination. Great for any sport. She’s only two years old; what’s the difference?”

A lie.

I’d left the sport injured. Heartbroken, I couldn’t watch it on TV for years.

“WHEN’S SHE JOINING TEAM?”

I look up from my magazine. A woman marches toward me from the mats beyond the “parent barrier.” I scan the bleachers. I’m the only human besides an old grandpa in a dead snore with his head against the wall.

“She’ll be joining Team, no?”

I stare at the coach, mute, as if I’m back in gym line-up.

“She must. She’s too talented. In Romania, she’d have been taken from you already, living at the gym.”

She’s four.

“I DON’T WANT TO GO IN. I’M *TIRED*,” SHE BEGS FROM THE BACK OF THE minivan.

The workouts increase as she moves up the ladder. She cries. She pulls her hair. She flails in her car seat. Every instinct tells me to take her home. She’s a child. But the Eastern Bloc philosophy screams a counterpoint—*She must learn to overcome. This is why Americans fail. They coddle their young.*

She’s got the talent I lacked. This sport doesn’t wait. Young. They want them young. It’d be criminal if I didn’t push her.

TEN P.M. I’M IN HER ROOM WITH THE WASH, PILES OF LEOTARDS WITH FRESH laundry smell. I smile. She leans against the dresser, barefoot, still caked with bar chalk. She nods to the receiver pushed up to her ear. Her hair frays in all directions, strands trying to escape the tightly-wound hair bands. She nods faster. I try to catch her eyes. The pupils glaze over to another planet.

I hear his voice from the receiver, spewing a sports dissertation. “Yes, Dad. Yes, Dad. Yes, Dad,” she repeats, disconnected. “I did, Dad. I worked hard. No, Dad. No, I’m just tired. Yes, Dad. I’m listening.”

I place the folded garments on her pink bedspread; stuffed cows of all shapes and sizes adorn her womb of linens. I turn. Her frame slowly slips to the floor. The “Yes-Dad” response repeats over and over. She slips farther and farther. In between, she mouths what I make out as “Please stop. Please stop. Please.” Eyes clenched, her calloused hand drops the receiver to the wood floor of her childhood.

DR. ALAN GOLDBERG OF *COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE* SAYS, “MAKE your child feel good about him/herself....Do NOT interact with your child in a way that assaults his/her self esteem by degrading....Using fear as a motivator is probably one of the worst dynamics you could set up with your child...a threat (do this or else!)...is further devastating to the child’s performance. Provide encouragement...BUT DO NOT COACH!”

“YOUR SPINE CANNOT SUSTAIN IMPACT. LOOK—HAIRLINE FRACTURES FROM T5-T12, ruptured discs from L3-L5.” We view the MRI on Dr. Pannetti’s computer. He points like a robotic science teacher. “See the multiple calcifications? The back keeps trying to compensate for endless impact.”

She’s fourteen. Twelve years of gymnastics—30 hours a week.

“When can I work out?” she asks—a racehorse chained in a stall.

“Work out,” he says, rhetorically. “Honey, you’ll probably never run again.”

She blinks. “What about track? Can I run track?”

He sighs to his watch, noting the time left in the fifteen-minute allotment for pediatric neurosurgery appointments. Her life’s changing. Her life’s crashing. He has three minutes.

“What about diving?”

His eye twitches.

“Can I dance?”

“If you can stand the pain,” he mumbles to the floor. He regroups the scientific voice:

“The back cast must be worn for four months. No showers. Sleep in it.”

He moves to exit.

“She graduates next week. Can we wait so she can wear a dress?” I ask.

“Dr. Pannetti, I need to go back to the gym,” she says.

The doctor “parking meter” has run out. He’s irritated and loses his BlueCross-paid patience.

“Dear. You need to understand. You’ll never do gymnastics again. You’ll never run.” With that, like an exiting line in a play, he disappears. She slides to the floor.

CHUCK AND CHIP. THE BACK CAST ARTISTS. THEY BANTER WITH THE COMIC timing of a well-oiled road show. They cajole her into submission.

"We've done this for twenty years like an old married couple." She appears from behind the screen in the skintight tube dress necessary for the plaster prototype. "It must fit like a glove, my dear."

She stands in front of the Chuck-part of the partnership as he sculpts the form over her athletic frame. She laughs—a momentary diversion from her low-grade depression. I watch her, wishing so many futile things.

Guilt.

I'd tried to turn her into me.

LAW FIRM PARKING LOT. I DROP HER OFF FOR THE PICK-UP. I WAIT. THE X stands outside his Escalade door like a King to his chariot; the motor churns. Dust kicks up in the afternoon breeze. He's in after-work jogging attire. He's meeting a friend. He's in a hurry. He's always in a hurry.

"Get in the car."

She doesn't move. She stands in the middle of the parking lot, Catholic school uniform clinging to her muscled body. She grips her books.

"Get in the car—now." His body goes stiff, arms clinch, ready to sucker punch the air.

She stands him off in a teenage gunfight. He lurches forward; veins pop from his neck. She jumps.

"Dad. My back's *bad*. I can't do it anymore."

"Bullshit. Work through the pain. Get tough. Stop being a candy-ass."

A car brushes by; her skirt flies up. She doesn't feel it.

"Dad, please. I can finally pay attention to grades in my new high school—it's my chance to be a student."

"Don't tell me what *you're* going to do. I tell you what *you're* going to do. I've put my whole life in this sport. You're not quitting. You're not a *quitter*. I'll find a doctor that says you're fine." His face twitches and jerks from an ongoing tick. "You're making the National Team. You're home schooling. That's it. Forget the new high school. I don't give a shit."

"Dad. I can't. I'm in pain." Her body shakes. Tears stream. "God, it's never going to end," she whispers.

I step forward from my car. He waves me off. "I didn't raise a quitter. Don't undermine me with my child. NO child of mine's a QUITTER."

I try to explain that no one's trying to undermine him. But the word quitter reduces me to ten years old. *Quitter* mainlines right to my subconscious, right to my Marine Corps dad.

I'm paralyzed.

"If you quit now, you'll never succeed in anything the rest of your life," he tells her. "You will be a complete failure. A guaranteed loser."

WHAT IT TAKES TO BE #1—VINCE LOMBARDI SAYS: “IF YOU QUIT NOW, during these workouts, you’ll quit in the middle of the season in a game. Once you learn to quit, it becomes a habit. We don’t want anyone here who will quit. We want 100 percent out of each individual and if you don’t want to give it, get out. Just get up and get out right now.”

HE KICKED HER OUT OF HIS HOUSE THAT NIGHT WHEN SHE TRIED TO HANG herself—*If she wants to kill herself, she can do it on her own time*—then sent her an article about a ballerina who defied all medical opinions of an injured spine. She defied the pain, defied the odds—pushed through to achieve athletic excellence. She, however, would never defy her father.

MY DAUGHTER DRUG-SHUFFLES OUT OF THE PSYCH WARD. FULL BACK CAST. Torn T-shirt. Trailed by many troubled humans peeling off to waiting families.

“Hi.” She doesn’t respond. She puts her head in my lap. We sit in this position for the allotted fifteen minutes. The waiting room’s stuffy. The waiting room’s dark. The waiting room compresses me into the floor with its tattered curtains. Alien nurses stand mechanically behind glass; eyes sweep for errant behavior.

“I only eat crackers,” she slurs.

I want to get her out. I’m afraid to get her out.

She stumbles back through the door with the sea of bodies and sickness like water through a drain. I’m relieved she’s gone.

Physical defects—visible. Mental issues hit without warning. Moodiness transforms insidiously into suicide when you’re at work.

In seventy-two hours, she’s released.

“MY NAME’S HEIDI KLAMMER. I’M THE SOCIAL WORKER ASSIGNED TO YOUR case.” I shake her hand. “I need to talk to your daughter privately.” I nod. I go to the waiting room.

I’d received a call from the high school summer school program midmorning. She’d overdosed on pain meds. A second failed attempt.

She lies in the ER hospital bed in her back cast—confined, eyes half-mast, hair straggled across her forehead—a ghost of the girl from a year ago.

MY DAUGHTER, HER ARMS CUT TO PIECES, SLUMPS VACUOUSLY ON A METAL stool in the exam room. The second back cast fitting. Chuck brings in his masterpiece, proud artist to his improved, updated sculpture. He holds it up for inspection, about to spew a quick comic line. His color drains. He signals me into the next room. My daughter doesn’t notice.

“You realize this cast goes on and doesn’t come off?”

“Yes. That’s the idea.”

"I just have to warn you; this can be emotionally difficult. It's difficult for most well-adjusted adults; you understand what I mean?" Chuck's no longer "funny Chuck" but "disturbed Chuck."

"If she doesn't wear the cast, she doesn't walk again. What kind of emotional basket case will I have then?"

"Her *arms*." His eyebrows shoot up, disappearing behind his hairline. "Is she under psychiatric care?"

"Yes. Just put the damn thing on. And fiberglass it tight."

SHE'D REFUSED TO WEAR THE FIRST BACK CAST. REBELLED. PEELING THE fucking thing off as soon as she was out of my gun sights.

I marched her into Pannetti's office.

"You can't take it off, dear," Pannetti purred in his medical tone. "The new bone's fragile like tiny crystals. Every time you take it off, they crumble and then you start your four months from scratch."

She screamed. She cried. She wasn't going to do it. It was summer. It was a hundred degrees. She couldn't take a step without a sweat. Her friends were at the river. She wanted to swim. She wasn't starting high school in this thing. She wasn't gonna wear it.

Pannetti looked at her cut arms. He looked at me speechless, this step perhaps skipped in med school.

"Why would you put a teenager in a cast that can Velcro off? You think a teenager understands bone science? I want this thing fiberglassed on. I want it done today."

I GLANCE AT THE CLOCK—THREE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING. MY THROAT closes up. I don't want to do this. I don't know how to do this. How do I get her through the summer? She's drinking. She's smoking. Gymnastics was her life. My life. She's lost. I'm lost.

I'M WATCHING *THE ANDY GRIFFITH SHOW*. I'M SO HAPPY. I'VE NEVER BEEN this happy. Ever. I've one hour to be completely happy with Aunt Bea, Opie, Barney and Andy. Pushed up to the counter with a bowl of soup. One hour. Before the phone rings.

SHE WAITS FOR ME ON A STAINED COUCH. HER ARM'S SLICED UP AGAIN—dried blood. I try not to react.

"I cut it with a popsicle stick." She announces. "I lost my privileges. That fucker over there behind the desk wrote me up."

She talks like an alien parrot that's taken on the personalities of its hospital bedmates. An empty vessel in search of something. An evil virus found its host. This evil virus has swallowed up my daughter.

Seventy-two hours. She'll be drugged up and released.

LATE. THE DOG SITS IN THE DARK. I FLIP THE SWITCH, THEN WANDER THE house in circles. I start in the kitchen, the most obvious.

Get all of the sharp objects locked up or out of the house.

Everything has sharp-object potential.

I've purchased a lock box for medications. I find pain meds from years back. Stuffed in bullshit drawers behind random bobby pins.

Everything has poison-potential.

Aspirin, Tylenol—the worst. Can someone do liver damage with vitamins? With hormones? Will hair suddenly grow on her face from too much progesterone? Heart meds—could fuck up her rhythm. Better put that in the vault. Oh shit—I throw in cleaning materials: Comet, bleach, Simple Green, shoe dye. Can she kill herself with Pledge?

I STAND BETWEEN GURNEYS ON A SUNDAY AFTERNOON. ER VISIT NUMBER THREE.

"I've done the intake with your daughter. I'm having CPS investigate. She feels abused by her father." A woman, as tall as she is wide with a pink-glittered nametag on her collar, stares.

I stand like a wax mannequin. The ex mentally pushed her right out the window—and I let it happen.

In the hospital room, she rolls over in the back cast and blinks. "Call my father. I want him here."

My face goes hot. "I don't think that's a great idea. You're tired."

"He needs to see what he's done to me."

He'll spin it. Blame me. I made her weak. I babied her. Look what I've done! *Yes, I say, look what I've done!*

I hand her the phone.

The X turns up in flip flops and a salty tan straight from a beach vacation with his wife—a marriage of flying plates and curling iron fights. Once, the wife hurled her five-carat diamond into the backyard. The kids combed the acreage with a rented metal detector. The gardener retired.

The X bends over her bed. He touches her arm. She rotates her eyes. He steps back.

"I never want to see you again. Do you understand? I'm in this hospital because I'm never enough. When I got a B+, you wanted an A."

He shakes his head.

I hide behind the door.

"You ruined the sport for me. You never let me love it. You shoved it down my throat. I'm in this back cast because of you. I never want to see you again," she repeats. "You understand?"

"Yes." His face twitches the way it does when he's cornered. He rubs his hands. He looks down, then at her. "I love you. Take care."

He slips out.

He doesn't see me.

DR. JANE'S NOTEBOOK ON FATHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS STATES:
"From dad, little girls gain their first reflection of themselves as a female. They develop a sense of acceptance or non-acceptance. They feel valued or discounted[...]. Fathers [...] teach daughters how to regard themselves."

HEROIN.

All I ever knew about it was that Chet Baker sang better with it, Billie Holiday died from it and *The Panic in Needle Park* was the gnarliest film I'd ever seen.

Heroin. Not in my world. Not in my daughter's body.

"I'M TELLING YOU SHE WAS HIGH—HIGH ON SOMETHING. SHE KEPT GOING to the bathroom."

Her ring grinds against the phone receiver. My brother's wife—known for drama. Everything is disaster-emergent.

"I know. She told me. She wasn't high," I say. "It's just how she gets from her ADD meds—anti-social."

She left home at seventeen. Straight from a DMV driving test (the third). A backward wave and gone in a used Honda that would end up in four accidents, then totaled.

Breath blows through the receiver. "Something's not right," my sister-in-law emphasizes. "You need to get down here."

"I can't come down. I have to work; I have another kid."

Another breath. A headshake of disapproval (I can feel it).

"She's fine." I hang up.

"WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME YOU HAD A DOG?"

"I didn't want to hear you bitch."

"I'm seeing it now. What's the difference?" She shoves a surfboard against the wall.

"What's the difference?" I hold my purse close.

"Fuck. Stop the interrogation."

"Please don't swear?"

"You say 'fuck' all the time."

"I know when to curb it. I want you to be classy when you need to be classy, honey."

She grabs her Chiweenie dog, jerks open the door with a tattooed hand that says "Mellow."

"Can you just relax and see my place?"

Stale incense escapes into broken sunlight.

I tiptoe up the stairs from a sunken living room with a lopsided futon and shade-less floor lamp. My flats stick to the kitchen floor.

"Is that why there's a pet clause on the lease?"

Flocks of flies twist and swirl above the dish-filled sink in some kind of airborne version of Sartre's *No Exit*. Another flying frenzy circles above the futon.

"Are you hungry?"

"Starved."

"Want me to cook something?" I start to take off my coat, then put it back on. "That way you'll have leftovers."

"I have Top Ramen," she says from the bathroom.

"That's it?" I scan for a place to sit. I spot a chair smothered by clothes piled in various shades of black that tangle and flow onto what appears to be a table, then twist skyward into an impromptu fabric sculpture.

The particleboard slider whips open. "Sit." A cigarette sticks to her bottom lip. "You're so uptight." She throws her half-naked body on the futon, draped with a multi-colored dog blanket. "You look like a pilgrim."

"Are those dirty or clean?" I say to the table, buttoning my coat to conceal the blouse, which would never make it out of my closet again, forever ruined by the pilgrim image, till I ended up giving it away.

"Clean. Don't touch."

Instinctually, I move toward it.

"Don't touch it. I like it like that."

I reach for the clothes on the chair.

"Don't." She pops up. "Fuck."

"I was going sit down."

She sweeps dog hair off the shredded blanket and pats. "Sit."

I hold my breath and perch on the corner, but the futon frame doesn't reach that far. I slip off; my ass lands right on top of a dog-chewed femur bone.

"I shoot between my toes," she says, then spreads her pink chipped nails to demonstrate, the bottoms of her feet, black and cracked. "I used last night," she says, taking a drag from her cigarette.

Her announcement burnt holes through my chest that day. Was she trying to kill me? She'd kick it. No big deal. *Stop being uptight, Mom. Fuck.* It was worse than "I'm pregnant," from six months prior. The text that kept me up all night and made dying an attractive option.

A MAN WITH A LATINO VOICE CALLS: "WE GOT YOUR DAUGHTER AT OUR facility. She's safe. We took her keys, phone, computer. No worries."

But she's clean—going to NA meetings for fuck's sake!

"Ma'am? Can you hear me?"

"How much is this going to cost me?" It just slipped out.

"Well, we could lose her. I'm just saying, ma'am. If she stays here, I got her. You can go do your life."

Go do my life.

At the mandatory Parents' Meeting, I meet the Latino voice—a tattooed gangbanger with a cool stare. A Lifer let out of prison on a technicality. He becomes my hero.

I'm told by family members who attend, and by my daughter, it's my fault—I didn't protect her from her father. I nod. My face burns, hands rigid in my lap.

IN MY MOTHER/MY SELF, NANCY FRIDAY SAYS, "SELF ESTEEM IS NOT measured in dollars or words. It is a deep down good opinion of oneself which doesn't waver, and it is best given to a daughter by her mother."

I EMPTY THE DISHWASHER. SOMETHING I HATE. TASKS NEVER COMPLETE. My daughter remains sober. In twenty-one months, kid #2 leaves for college. Like sliding into home base. I pipe dream about Chile. Work abroad. Escape. Start over. Do it right this time.

The phone rings. A call that takes me not to Chile, but to Los Angeles. To the UCLA ICU—for a solid month, sleeping in a chair next to my daughter, holding her hand. She undergoes twenty-six "Cath Lab" surgeries to open up a collapsed subclavian artery that's thrown multiple clots into her lungs. A reoccurring condition once tagged "a junkie's problem," until a renowned vascular surgeon connects it to gymnastics—Thoracic Outlet Syndrome. Over-developed pectorals during her formative years. He removes her first rib to free the vein. Stuck in ICU, she refuses to drop her eighteen college units and cuts deals with professors to count the final exam as the final grade. I attend classes and record lectures. I hire a PhD student to hand-carry her through Statistics, her biggest challenge.

She will pass statistics.

She will pass every class.

Luck of the Draw

1.

WHEN WE BOUGHT OUR HOUSE ON RIVER STREET, WE HAD NO IDEA IT WAS in a split neighborhood—the racial divide was a block away—and that our neighbors were white middle-class on one side and poor African-Americans on the other. What I knew about the South was conditioned by southern white writers depicting other white southerners. I'd lived in Atlanta many years before, but that didn't count as South, and it didn't prepare me for my new neighborhood. I'm still moved by this swampy riverside landscape and the folks living here, but an over-abundant landscape can shut down the mind and I try to read poems that leave space for my mind to wander.

Before leaving the house today, I read a Charles Wright poem as I have since we became friends decades ago. I sat on my porch after sunrise reflecting on how he's been writing the same poem all his life, a poem iced with a need to pull musical and visual and spiritual moments together, and it came to me that in the past few years my world has shrunk to a cluster of disconnected sense impressions. That's why I like Wright's poetry, dependent as it is on spaciousness and disparate images.

Some years ago I published a critical piece on Charles Wright. I'm surprised and mystified at how much I had to say about him. "There are in Wright's poems no dramatic monologues, no family portraits," I wrote in my essay. "No human relationships are examined. His speaker's suffering is not the kind found in his beloved High T'ang poets—many of whom experience starvation, exile, and the ravages of civil war. Rather, as he pares his nails in his Locust Avenue backyard, this bourgeoisie hermit contemplates the ravages of late-middle-age and the *angst* accompanying the prospect of a lonely death." My impression of Wright hasn't changed. Despite him being a backyard poet unconcerned with social issues, my love for his work has deepened over the years.

I don't share these thoughts with my neighbor Calvin Cummings, who accompanies me to Cathead Creek today: there's no template on how our day should go, but I've got "issues," mainly that I'm a white guy abiding in a black neighborhood with no reference point through which to take it all in.

Calvin and I walk down River Street and hear from The Church of the

Redeemed loud organ music. Calvin says the lady in there preaches black magic, but he likes his religion straight from the Bible with no devil in it. We pass his brother Ben's patched-up trailer where some kids are shooting hoops in the side yard. A cop car rounds the bend, but the kids don't look up.

Beyond Ben's place the street curves to the river. A few wild chickens rustle in the undergrowth, turkey buzzards soar overhead. Scraggly dwarf pines and wild dogwood mark the way, no church music now, just wind rattling the palmettos along the road.

Charles Wright says in his poem "Body and Soul II,"

The structure of landscape is infinitesimal,
Like the structure of music,
seamless, invisible.

Even the rain has larger sutures.
What holds the landscape together, and what holds music together,
Is faith, it appears—faith of the eye, faith of the ear.
Nothing like that in language,
However, clouds chugging from west to east like blossoms
Blown by the wind.

April, and anything's possible.

Wright's poem doesn't invoke the language of God, but the spirit of the jazz ballad "Body and Soul," sliding into the song's bridge, suturing its chord changes, using the "faith of the eye, faith of the ear" to make things whole. I suspect he'd heard "Body and Soul," made famous by Coleman Hawkins' tenor sax solo which hits you as though blown by the wind. Maybe folks at the Church of the Redeemed feel this too, that when they rise out of prayer things "seamlessly" tie together.

There's a NO TRESPASSING sign on the path to Cathead Creek. But trespassing's what Calvin and I do. I'm thinking about Wright's version of a song-driven faith expressed by an unfathomably rich tenor sax solo. Let others call forth the spirit from high places—I come to God through music with no Old Testament magic thrown in to make things whole.

The church music—gone. The day proceeding like it always did.

We trespass down a well-worn path to the water. There's deer pellets, the foliage is beaten down, and then Cathead Creek, a channel of the great Altamaha River that drains eastern Georgia. Gulls and cormorants gabble in the outgoing current. On a far bank a rusted-out trailer, a fisherman's shack.

Funny I should feel so at home. I spent most of my life in a white man's place where the consonants are pronounced hard, the syllables split open as though frozen on the breath. Calvin mashes up his words, reminding

me of my mother's tuneless hum when she sat down to paint. Behind the paintings she did as a child of "darkies" fishing on a canal near her house in New Orleans lay the ultra-racist south. How to reconcile the sensitivity of her watercolors with her feelings about black people?

Mom's side of our family dates two hundred years back to Haiti when they were forced off the island by a slave rebellion that became the Haitian Revolution and moved to New Orleans to get absurdly rich on cotton and sugar cane. They were proud of their ancestors, especially of my great-great grand uncle General PGT Beauregard who kept thousands of slaves. The word "Creole" implies a gumbo of black and white blood; my *grand-mère* did have black features, but my affection for black people comes from listening to Louis Armstrong and Leadbelly records.

We head down through the high grass to where Calvin saw a bald eagle yesterday. No bald eagle now, just a broad expanse of creek and a cardinal in a winterberry tree.

2.

"THERE, TOO," WRIGHT GOES ON IN "A BAD MEMORY MAKES YOU A Metaphysician, a Good One Makes You a Saint," "the would-be-saints are slipping their hair shirts on."

But only the light souls can be saved;
Only the ones whose weight
will not snap the angel's wings.
Too many things are not left unsaid.
If you want what the syllables want, just do your job.

These lines scold those who tell us renunciation is enough to save ourselves, that a hair shirt is not enough; self-abnegation and self-laceration, Wright says, force us to say things best left unsaid. The moment is all he needs to lighten the load. But for Calvin Cummings and me, it's letting the moment go.

There are no “angel’s wings” this morning, only gulls and turkey buzzards drifting above Cathead Creek looking for carrion. A low-slung patrol car blurs through the trees.

"You see that cop just went by?" Calvin asks. "He keeps his eyes fixated on me, son-of-a-bitch, that's why I keep moving."

He knows the names of the local cops who track him around town like he's still doing time. "That fellow," he wipes sweat from his forehead. "His daddy was sheriff back in the '70s—same dude as threw me in jail when I was a child. The police got nothing on their God-loving minds but following me everywhere I go."

He won't spill any details of that first arrest—the Cathead's a place of secrets, and what I don't know I won't tell anybody.

Charles Wright says,

It's only in darkness you can see the light, only
From emptiness that things start to fill,
I read once in a dream, I read in a book
under the pink
Redundancies of the spring peach trees.

This year our two peach trees have a few pale blossoms, but otherwise it's a glorious early spring in the Lowcountry, no darkness here as in Charles Wright's lines, no emptiness either. I've no idea what Calvin did to earn thirty-seven years in jail and I don't ask. He made extra cash for the prison commissary sketching other inmates' likenesses for them, and he has been drawing all his life. I've seen Calvin's sketches of people on River Street. True to the spirit of the place, they come straight from his eye onto paper.

This morning Calvin's thinking about moving to Jacksonville where nobody's heard of him. But Darien's all he knows. When his family was freed after the Civil War, they moved from a plantation on Sapelo Island to Darien where General Sherman granted them "forty acres and a mule." Calvin claims that land was swindled from his family early on and they had to buy it back. Till a few decades ago, they kept hogs and chickens, grew okra and summer squash, and brought with them a religion that had flourished through centuries of slavery.

Calvin's religion comes from long days in solitary puzzling over a prison Bible—who knows what those years in prison do to you?

I KNOW NAMES OF A FEW PLANTS OF THE COASTAL FOREST. THE EVERLASTINGS and primrose. The salt-stunted cypress.

"These days, I look at things, not through them," Charles Wright says,

And sit down low, as far away from the sky as I can get.
The reef of the weeping cherry flourishes coral —

scribbling in his daybook.

3.

A FEW WEEKS AGO AT AN AA MEETING ON ST. SIMONS ISLAND SOMETHING broke in me. It was an all-white meeting attended by a dozen well-heeled white retirees. Ten miles west across the marsh in Brunswick black folks

were living in squalid poverty. If we reached out to them, would they have crossed the causeway to the island? Calvin went to AA in prison and knew AA's Twelve Steps, but he hadn't come with me—he was uncomfortable with AA's recovery program but hadn't said why.

"I don't trust nobody telling me how to worship my God, Tony. I got my own ways," he said.

I'd come to AA in an emotional and physical mess, I said, and tried to get sober by myself but I always "picked up" again. "I tried every other damn thing, and decided to give the AA God a try," I said, which wasn't completely true.

WHILE AA ISN'T RELIGIOUSLY ORGANIZED, ITS FIRST FOUR SUGGESTED Twelve Steps declare we're likely to drink again if we don't turn things over to some Higher Power. The Steps urge us to do a "thorough-going moral inventory" and to settle accounts with those "we have harmed"—a big order for a white man and unendurable for a black guy trying to rid himself of his past.

Calvin didn't say he thought AA was a white man's religion, but that was his drift: having endured Jim Crow and a life in jail, making amends to everybody was too much to endure. Violence, drugs, and prison were his past, as was the African Baptist Church he went to as a child.

I'd been in AA for decades, but I felt like a newcomer that night on St. Simons.

The woman beside me, identifying herself as a brain surgeon, confided she was hooked on pain killers she stole from a hospital. "It really interferes with my golf game," she joked, and the others laughed.

"—and speaking of golf," a thick-set dude with an over-comb put in. "Tammy and I were down in Tampa this weekend at a tournament and I couldn't get the thought of a drink out of my head."

The subject of the night stayed on golf—they were obsessed with it!—settling at last on "resentment." But I hated golf and I resented everyone there.

4.

AS A CHILD, CALVIN TRAVELED UP AND DOWN THE EAST COAST WITH HIS parents and eleven brothers and sisters harvesting vegetables on factory farms. His education was nonexistent, but he taught himself to draw. Just this morning he showed me a delicate sketch of a shrimp boat in Darien Harbor named "Time's-a-Wasting," a snub-nosed boat with a tangle of nets draped on its bow.

I grew up with artist parents, but I cannot paint or draw. I went to a progressive college in Vermont, got involved in Civil Rights in the South in the late '60s; then I moved back north to spend forty years in a hemlock

forest, tending a garden, sometimes fall-down drunk, believing, like the classical Chinese poet Wang Wei, I was “part of nature.”

Wang Wei, Wright tells us,

before he was 30 years old bought his famous estate on the Wang River
Just east of the east end of the Southern Mountains,
and lived there,
Off and on, for the rest of his life.
He never travelled the landscape, but stayed inside it,
A part of nature himself, he thought.
And who would say no
To someone so bound up in solitude,
in failure, he thought, and suffering.

There’s a sweetness in these lines—an arresting stillness. Wang Wei, of the privileged Mandarin class, was a master calligrapher and accompanied his poems with ink-wash paintings. I’m drawn to his poems as I was to the rainy and snowy Green Mountains of Vermont. It was a steady clocklike existence of snowfall and snowmelt, of spring thaws and rainy backwoods summers: then Suzanne came down with Parkinson’s and fearing she’d hurt herself in an icy fall, we moved to Georgia.

I was twenty-five years sober then, but each day I felt I’d just begun to see what drinking had done to me.

CALVIN AND I MOVE DOWN THE CREEK AND SEAT OURSELVES IN A CLEARING, wild yams and wild sweet potato flowering along the bank, their white petals drenched by dew. Across the way there’s Serena and Dwight’s dock. Serena’s an artist too. Dwight grew up in Darien; he made his money as a construction engineer in Atlanta and in retirement moved back to build his house on Cathead Creek.

“You ever seen any of Serena’s paintings?” I ask Calvin and he shakes his head.

“What they like?”

I describe her acrylics of African American women of slave times and how she’s selling them at art galleries in Atlanta. Unlike Serena, Calvin’s never had the satisfaction that comes from being a successful artist.

Every true poem is a spark,
and aspires to the condition of the original fire
Arising out of the emptiness.
It is that same emptiness it wants to reignite.
It is that same engendering it wants to be re-engendered by,

Wright tells us in “Body and Soul II.” But Calvin’s emptiness is scarred by the electric and water bills he can’t pay and a landlady demanding last month’s rent.

Yes, there is the “original fire,” but it burns dimly.

5.

A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO SUZANNE AND I ATTENDED A BLACK CHURCH IN the waterside village of Meridian whose members trace back to slave times. We wanted to hear gospel music and the congregation gave us a warm welcome. The church was on Swamp Road, ten miles from town, set back in some live oaks.

Though we are not churchy people, that night was a revelation: the music—a blend of gospel and blues, and those voices, especially the women’s—called me back to early childhood when I first heard jazz.

The message at Meridian was un-AA-like—“The man won’t hinder me no more” was chanted without accompaniment by two young women, a country guitar and church organ moaning behind them. The music had a subtle counterpoint, in one gospel song the voices conversing with one-another, their passion rising as they joined to become one.

Some things are left unsaid not because you don’t want to destroy their memory but because you’re afraid they’ll haunt you. A tall blue-black dude in a long brass-buttoned robe and a dozen women, young and old, burst through the church doors, and as the man commenced to preach, it turned into a flat-out revival meeting. A plump young woman with braided dreads threw herself into the aisle, convulsing and moaning, the organ and guitar urging her on.

“You see me here,” the big robed guy shouted from the pulpit. “I could be out in the world like I was not so long ago with the Devil holding me in his arms, hurting folk and hurting me in the bargain, Jesus, I was damaged goods—and yes, I goes back there sometime to see what I was like, but I’m here now made whole by Jesus, and I asks you to bleed it out LIKE HE DID, bleed out the Devil!”

The women crowded around the girl, she wasn’t much more than that, rocking her in their arms, and more women followed, racing down the aisle, and the Devil rose from them when an old lady with a tambourine gave out an ear-piercing scream.

I’ve no idea what all this had to do with those folks’ lives in Meridian, but I felt like I’d sailed back with them to West Africa where their devil came from.

When we left the church, the woods reminded me of my home in Vermont.

Afternoon sky the color of Cream of Wheat, a small
Dollop of butter hazily at the western edge.

Getting too old and lazy to write poems,
I watch the snowfall
From the apple trees.

Landscape, as Wang Wei says, softens the sharp edges of isolation.

6.

CALVIN AND I MAKE OUR WAY THROUGH THE PALMETTO TO DWIGHT AND Serena's dock where Dwight, a wiry black guy of seventy-five, is making a point of not catching anything. "Good Sunday morning, why're you not in church, fellas? This here is my church, and you have interrupted my morning service." He grins and casts again, his bobber drifting in the current. "You know, I didn't sleep a wink last night. They were partying down at Jake's on River Street and I had to throw on my pants and tell them to shut it down and be quiet."

Jake's, an after-hours joint that opens at three A.M. on the weekend, is known for its brawls and knife fights—it's not a place a white person should go. When Dwight was a boy, Little Richard, Bobby Bland and James Brown played at Jake's, but that time's way gone now.

"My father used to take me in to hear the music," Dwight says. "We'd scoot in the back door, Jake and my daddy were buddies since childhood, and he'd pour him a whisky—Jake made his own liquor—and we'd sit back and enjoy that music."

The bobber on Dwight's line dives under; when he jerks his pole nothing's there, and in full view a gator about twelve feet long swims by, a long ghost of an alligator shadowy ink-black with a snout and a devil's tail.

Charles Wright tells us in "A Short History of the Shadow,"

Under the river's redemption, it says in the book,
It says in the book,
Through water and fire the whole place becomes purified,
The visible by the visible, the hidden by what is hidden. . .

one line echoing another as in the call-and-response of Meridian's African Baptist Church. But this is not a moment of redemption. The gator's gone, and were I a believer, I'd say it was purified "through the water and fire" on this otherwise uneventful Sunday morning.

We sit here, not a bite on Dwight's line, the swamp bugs feasting on us.

7.

I SIT OUTSIDE DARIEN'S KLATCH & CHAT CAFE A FEW WEEKS LATER WITH a book I pretend to read. The day's warmth has brought out the flies, they're

Next to our memories, and the pale hems of the masters' gowns . . .

8.

ON MY WALK HOME THERE'S SINGING A BLOCK UP FROM DWIGHT'S PLACE, a handful of voices and guitar. As I turn a corner, I see Annie Carter in a brilliant red dress presiding over a dozen or so black folks like her, some I know. Annie runs a boarding house for the homeless in Darien, all of them white; some folks say she over-charges the town to board her "indigents," but she's known for her generosity too. When we first moved to Darien she arrived at our house with a bucket of fresh-caught whiting and told us, "Welcome to the neighborhood, please take all this, it's all I have," and with a warm embracing "Jesus loves you, and I do too," she took off in her van.

Well, I got my hands on the gospel prow
And I wouldn't take nothing for my journey now
Keep your hands on that plow of God,

folks are singing now – actually, not everyone's singing, just the black folks; outside Annie's trailer a small group of whites—the indigents—are smoking cigarettes. The two groups have nothing to do with each other. Annie waves me to join, and I take a seat with them in the sun. She introduces an elderly light-skinned lady dressed elegantly in white to give the sermon—"This here's Sister Barbara, she come all the way down here to testify from Jamaica, New York—drove all the way, and what a journey that was!"

"And what a journey," repeats Sister Barbara in a growling Brooklyn drawl. "It was snowing In New York, snowing in New Jersey and Virginia, and I had to rely on my GPS all the way, Lord I had to submit to that GPS to get here, just as WE have to SUBMIT to the Lord to get to our sweet destination, and what a destination that is."

The guitar lets out an amplified squawk and the little group shouts a weary amen—then there's silence. While the sun beats down Barbara goes on to preach a sermon nothing like what I heard on Swamp Road where the message was *freedom* from the pain of the past.

Clearly, Annie's church is obsessed with *submission*, and that rings no bells for me.

CHARLES WRIGHT WRITES IN "THE APPALACHIAN BOOK OF THE DEAD,"

Sunday, September Sunday ... Outdoors,
Like an early page from The Appalachian Book of the Dead,
Sunlight lavishes brilliance on every surface,
Doves settle, surreptitious angels, on tree limb and box branch,
A crow calls, deep in its own darkness,

Something like water ticks on
Just there, beyond the horizon, just there...

and I'd add that just beyond the horizon more ghosts than angels roost in
the redbuds and live oak trees.

9.

ANOTHER WEEK OR TWO LATER, CALVIN AND I ARE BACK ON THE FRONT porch of his place. Down the block, the folks at the Church of the Redeemed gather, women dressed in church-going whites, men in smart, natty hats, embracing and departing into the late afternoon. Late March and the currents and countercurrents of belief and disbelief are the order of the day.

Contributors' Notes

Megan Alpert's work has appeared in *Quarterly West*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Harvard Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Storyscape*, and *Sixth Finch*. She was a 2017 finalist for the National Poetry Series, and has been a fellow at Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and a writer-in-residence in Marquette, Michigan. She has reported for *The Atlantic*, *Smithsonian*, *The Guardian*, and *Foreign Policy*. In 2016, she received a reporting fellowship from the International Women's Media Foundation.

Francisco Aragón is the son of Nicaraguan immigrants. "My Rubén" is the final piece in *After Rubén*—forthcoming in 2020 with Red Hen Press. He is the author of *Puerta del Sol* and *Glow of Our Sweat*, as well as editor of *The Wind Shifts: New Latino Poetry*. He is a faculty fellow at the University of Notre Dame's Institute for Latino Studies, where he directs Letras Latinas. To learn more, visit: <http://franciscoaragon.net>.

After earning a degree through Edinburgh University's creative writing program, **Karen Bell** spent time in India as an ESL teacher. Her recent essays have appeared in journals such as *The Louisville Review*, *Harpur Palate*, and *Little Patuxent Review*.

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Luke Dani Blue's writing has appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, and *Catapult*. Their fiction won the Nelligan Prize, was a finalist in the *American Short Fiction Contest* and received a mention in *Best American Short Stories 2016*. Originally from Michigan, Luke now lives in Southern Alberta where they are artist-in-residence at the University of Lethbridge's Institute for Childhood and Youth Studies.

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Mark Anthony Cayanan is from the Philippines, where they've published two poetry books: *Narcissus* and *Except you enthrall me*. They obtained their MFA from the University of Wisconsin Madison and are currently a PhD candidate at the University of Adelaide. New work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Miracle Monocle*, *Kritika Kultura*, *Cordite*, *Foglifter*, and *Lana Turner*. A recipient of fellowships to Civitella Ranieri and Villa Sarkia, they teach literature and creative writing at the Ateneo de Manila University.

Born in Oahu, Hawaii, **Babette Cieskowski** has lived in southern Florida, Kitzingen, Germany, and central Texas. She currently lives in Columbus, Ohio, where she earned her MFA in Poetry from The Ohio State University. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Compose*, *Qu*, *the minnesota review*, *Day One*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *The Laurel Review*, *Frontier Poetry*, and others.

Dana Curtis's third full-length collection of poetry, *Wave Particle Duality*, was recently published by blazeVOX Books. Her second collection, *Camera Stellata*, was published by CW Books, and her first book, *The Body's Response to Famine*, won the Pavement Saw Press Transcontinental Poetry Prize. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Hotel Amerika*, *Indiana Review*, *Colorado Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. She has received grants from the Minnesota State Arts Board and the McKnight Foundation. She is the Editor-in-Chief of Elixir Press and lives in Denver, Colorado.

Susan de Sola's "Buddy" won the 2018 Frost Farm Prize for Metrical Poetry. Her work has appeared in many publications and anthologies, including *Best American Poetry 2018*. She is a past recipient of the David Reid Poetry Translation Prize. She holds a PhD from Johns Hopkins University, and is the author of numerous critical essays. Her collection, *Frozen Charlotte*, is forthcoming this spring from Able Muse Press.

Chelsea Dingman's first book, *Thaw*, was chosen by Allison Joseph to win the National Poetry Series (University of Georgia Press). Her second poetry collection, *Through a Small Ghost*, won The Georgia Poetry Prize and is forthcoming from the University of Georgia Press (2020). She is also the author of the chapbook *What Bodies Have I Moved* (Madhouse Press) and has won prizes such as: *The Southeast Review's* Gearhart Poetry Prize, *Sycamore Review's* Wabash Prize, *Water-stone Review's* Jane Kenyon Poetry

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Aya Elizabeth is a bookseller and poet living by the beach in the San Francisco Bay Area with her partner and their pet gecko. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming in *Typishly*, *The Write Launch*, *Twyckenham Notes*, *Up The Staircase Quarterly*, *Habitat*, *Third Point Press*, and *Cagabi*, among others.

C.W. Emerson's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Atlanta Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *deceMBER*, *Greensboro Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and others. He is a two-time finalist for the New Millennium Award for Poetry (2018, 2019) and was twice the recipient of an International Merit Award in the *Atlanta Review* International Poetry Competition (2017, 2018). Emerson works in Palm Springs, California as a clinical psychologist.

Farnaz Fatemi is an Iranian-American writer in Santa Cruz, California. Her poetry and prose appears or is forthcoming in *Grist Journal*, *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, *phren-z.org*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and several anthologies (including *The BreakBeat Poets Vol. 3: Halal If You Hear Me*). She has been awarded residencies from Djerassi, PLAYA, Marble House Project, Vermont Studio Center, and I-Park Foundation. Farnaz taught Writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz, from 1997-2018. www.farnazfatemi.com.

kwabena foli was born in Belgium but raised in the South Side of Chicago. Current and forthcoming publications appear in *Mikrokosmos Journal*, *Meridian*, *Cream City Review*, *Salt Hill Journal*, *The Los Angeles Review*, and elsewhere. His work is also anthologized in *Revise the Psalm: Work Celebrating the Writing of Gwendolyn Brooks* from Curbside Press. He's a member of Nu-Being Collective and was a resident at Banff Centre of Arts and Creativity, The Poetry Center of Chicago, and Chicago Artist Coalition. He currently lives in Chicago, Illinois.

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Sara Henning is the author of two volumes of poetry, most recently *View from True North* (Southern Illinois University Press). She has published poems in many journals and anthologies, most notably *Quarterly West*, *Crazyhorse*, *Witness*, *Meridian*, and the *Cincinnati Review*. She teaches writing at Stephen F. Austin State University, where she also serves as poetry editor for Stephen F. Austin State University Press. Please visit her at her electronic home: <https://www.sarahenningpoet.com>.

W. J. Herbert was awarded the Anna Davidson Rosenberg Prize, Second Prize in the Morton Marr Poetry Competition, and was selected as finalist in the *Atlanta Review*, *Arts and Letters*, *American Literary Review*, *Madison Review*, and *Flyway Literary Prizes*. Her poetry, fiction, and reviews appear, or are forthcoming in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Boulevard*, *Best American Poetry 2017*, *New Ohio Review*, *Southwest Review*, and others. She lives in Kingston, New York and Portland, Maine.

Judith Hertog is an essayist, journalist, teacher, and storyteller. She grew up in Amsterdam but after some wandering around the world, eventually ended up living in Vermont with her family. Her work has appeared in publications such as *The New York Times*, *Longreads*, *The Sun*, *Tin House*, *Hotel Amerika*, and many others. Her website can be found at: www.judithhertog.com

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Christina Hutchins's poetry books are *Tender the Maker* (Swenson Award, Utah State UP), *The Stranger Dissolves* (Sixteen Rivers), and *Radiantly We Inhabit the Air* (Becker Prize). She has won *The Missouri Review* Editors' Prize, *National Poetry Review's* Finch Prize, various fellowships, and recently served as the Dartmouth Poet in Residence at the Frost Place in Franconia, New Hampshire. www.christinahutchins.net

Amaud Jamaul Johnson is the author of *Darktown Follies* and *Red Summer*. A former Wallace Stegner Fellow in Poetry, his honors include a Pushcart Prize, the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, a MacDowell Colony Fellowship, and the Dorset Prize. His work has appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Narrative Magazine*, and *Best American Poetry*. He teaches at the University of Wisconsin Madison. His new book, *Imperial Liquor*, is forthcoming from the Pitt Poetry Series (2020).

L.A. Johnson is from California. She is the author of the chapbook *Little Climates* (Bull City Press). She is currently pursuing her PhD in literature and creative writing from the University of Southern California, where she is a Provost's Fellow. Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The American Poetry Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *The Southern Review*, and other journals. Find her online at <http://www.la-johnson.com>

Meiko Ko's works had been accepted by *Blue Lyra Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, the Asian American Writers' Workshop, *The Margins*, *The Literary Review*, *Columbia Journal*, *Epiphany*, Vol. 1 *Brooklyn*, *Dostoyevsky Wannabe Cities*, *Litro Magazine*, and *Heavy Feather Review*. She was long-listed for the *Home is Elsewhere: An Anthology: The 2017 Berlin Writing Prize Anthology*. She lives with her husband and child in New York.

Anne Kornblatt has had several essays published in the *Cream City Review*. She is the winner of the David B. Saunders Award for creative nonfiction, and her essay, *The Writer of the Body*, was named a Notable Essay by *Best American Essays*. She has twice been a fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts where she most recently spent time working on a memoir. She lives in western Massachusetts.

Pingmei Lan grew up in China where she developed a love-hate relationship with crowds, artificial lawn ornaments, and Chinese food for breakfast. She holds an MFA in creative writing from Pacific University. Her work has appeared in *Epiphany Literary Magazine*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, and others. Currently she lives in San Diego, California.

David Leach is a writer and musician based in Boston, Massachusetts. He holds an MFA from Boston University and was the recipient of a 2017 Robert Pinsky Global Travel Fellowship.

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Briana Loveall earned her MFA from Eastern Washington University. In 2017, she was a finalist for the Annie Dillard Award and the Montana Book Festival Award. In 2018, she was a finalist for the Beacon Street Prize and the winner of the *Peninsula Pulse* Hal prize. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming with *The Rumpus*, *Sweet*, *The Forge*, *Under the Gum Tree*, *Glassworks Magazine*, and others. Her essay, "Tatau," was nominated for a 2018 Pushcart Prize.

Tariq Luthun is a Detroit-based Palestinian strategist, community organizer, and Emmy Award-winning poet. He received his MFA in poetry from the Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College, and is the editor of the Micro Department at *The Offing*. His work has appeared in *Button Poetry*, *Literary Hub*, and *Vinyl Poetry* and has garnered the distinction of Best of the Net for his poem "Harb."

Lois Ruskai Melina's work is forthcoming or has appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Eastern Iowa Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Chattahoochee Review*, and *2016 Best of the Net Anthology*, among others. Her essay, "The Grammar of Untold Stories," was listed as Notable in *Best American Essays 2018*. She participates in the Corporeal Writing community founded and nurtured by Lidia Yuknavitch as well as The Guttery, a Portland, Oregon writing group.

Kelly Michels's most recent chapbook, *Disquiet*, was published by Jacar Press. Her honors include the Rachel Wetzsteon Poetry Prize from 92nd Street Y, the *Spoon River Poetry Review* Editor's Prize, the Robert Watson Literary Prize from *Greensboro Review*, the Beacon Street Poetry Prize from *Redivider*, and an Academy of American Poets Prize. Her poems have appeared in *Poet Lore*, *Third Coast*, *Best New Poets*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Nimrod*, *New Ohio Review*, among others.

Devon Miller-Duggan has published poems in *Rattle*, *Margie*, *Christianity and Literature*, *Gargoyle*, *Massachusetts Review*, and *Spillway*. She teaches Poetry Writing at the University of Delaware. Her books include *Pinning the Bird to the Wall* (Tres Chicas Books), *Alphabet Year* (Wipf & Stock), and *The Slow Salute* (Lithic Press Chaboook Competition, 2018).

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Richard Robbins has published six books of poems, most recently *Body Turn to Rain: New & Selected Poems* (Lynx House Press). He has received awards from The Loft, the Minnesota State Arts Board, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Poetry Society of America. From 1986-2014, Robbins directed the Good Thunder Reading Series at Minnesota State University Mankato, where he continues to direct the creative writing program.

Jenny Sadre-Orafai is the author of *Malak* and *Paper, Cotton, Leather. Book of Levitations*, her poetry collection with Anne Champion, is forthcoming from Trembling Pillow Press. She is co-founding editor of *Josephine Quarterly*, Professor of English at Kennesaw State University, and Executive Director of Georgia Writers Association.

Laura Steadham Smith's work has appeared in *Post Road*, *DIAGRAM*, *Gettysburg Review*, and other journals. She is the recipient of the inaugural Hamlin Garland Award for the Short Story, and her work has been recently shortlisted for the Robert and Adele Schiff Award in Prose and the Tennessee Williams Festival fiction prize. She lives and teaches in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where she is at work on a novel.

Todd Smith was born and raised in rural west-central Illinois. His poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Barrow Street*, *River Styx*, *Palette Poetry*, *North American Review*, and elsewhere, and have been featured on *Verse Daily*. He received *Frontier Poetry's* Award for New Poets, and was

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Matthew Sumpter is the author of the poetry collection *Public Land* (University of Tampa Press), with individual poems appearing in the *New Yorker*, *New Republic*, and *Poetry Daily*. His scholarship on writing pedagogy has appeared in *College English*, and his creative prose has appeared in *Glimmer Train* and *Pithehead Chapel*. He teaches academic and creative writing at Rutgers University, where he is Coordinator of the Livingston Writing Center and an Assistant Director of the Writing Program.

Last year, **Emilie Tallent** earned her MFA in Fiction from Oklahoma State University, where she now works writing and editing grant proposals for engineers. She served as an editorial assistant and copyeditor for the *Cimarron Review* from 2016-2018. "And Rising" is her first published story.

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Tony Whedon is author of the poetry books *Things to Pray to in Vermont*, *The Falklands Quartet*, the chapbook *The Tres Riches Heures*, and the poetry collection *The Hatcheck Girl*. His poems and essays appear in *Harper's*, *American Poetry Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Ploughshares*, and elsewhere. His essay collection, *A Language Dark Enough: Essays on Exile*, won the Mid-List Press Award for Creative Nonfiction. His essay collection, *Drunk in the Woods*, came out last fall.

David Wright teaches creative writing and American literature at Monmouth College in Monmouth, Illinois. His poems have appeared in *Image*, *Ecotone*, *Poetry East*, and *Hobart*, among others. His most recent poetry collection is *The Small Books of Bach* (Wipf & Stock). He can be found on Twitter @sweatervestboy.

CRAB ORCHARD REVIEW

From this point forward, we will be open to receiving submissions for the next three 2020 online issues of *Crab Orchard Review*. Everything should be sent to us through Submittable (no postal or email submissions), \$2.00 per submission. All submitted work will be eligible for \$500.00 prizes in each issue for one piece of poetry, fiction, and literary nonfiction selected by our editors. Here is our publication plan:

Issue 1. Student Writing Issue publication goal: March 2020
Submissions open August 1, 2019 through September 30, 2019

Issue 2. General issue with COR 2020 Annual Literary Prizes
publication goal: June 2020
Submissions open December 1, 2019 through January 31, 2020

Issue 3. Pads, Paws, & Claws ~ Writers on Animals
publication goal: October 2020
Submissions open March 1, 2020 through April 31, 2020

<https://craborchardreview.submittable.com/submit>