*The Tishman Review* is a magazine of literature published in April and October each year. We believe in supporting the creative endeavors of the writers of the world. We believe in connecting writers through interviews to pass on hard-earned wisdom and insights. We believe literature serves an existential function and its value to humanity is beyond measure. Therefore, we will always remain open to the possibilities of a work to take us beyond the boundaries known today. We will strive to honor each writer and the work they share with us, whether chosen for publication or not. *The Tishman Review* seeks to publish work that reflects these values, offers new insights into the human condition, finds beauty in the garish, and calls us to read it again and again. We want to fold an issue closed and find ourselves richer for knowing the words contained within.

*Submissions* of short fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and art accepted during open submission periods. Please read the submission guidelines on our website: *www.thetishmanreview.com*.

Cover Art: *The Unruly Hair Portraits: Act II* by J.E. Crum



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# The Tishman Review

*Beyond the End of the World*

# Table of Contents

# Art Contents

# Foreword

SPRING.

Just by saying this is the SPRING issue, I feel like we're promising something really awesome. I mean, it's the SPRING issue. And, it's also the poetry prize issue. The best poems of the poems submitted were selected by the most amazing of final judges, TJ Jarrett. I mean, TJ JARRETT. Yes, *that* TJ Jarrett. She has only good things to say about these poems. So, yeah, we've got some good stuff here. We've got this amazing drawing by Mary Matthews to kick things off—and it's perfect on so many levels. You'll have to see it to believe it. Then there's the prize winning poem by LeRoy N. Sorenson, which, watch out, it's GOOD. TJ Jarrett said,

"*Tomato Soup Reminds Me of Poverty" is a specific memory and the title drags me into the very specific location of this poem. I especially appreciate the way [the poet] pulls our focus to all the details that matter and none that don't: the speaker is genderless, at some indeterminate age before adulthood but too soon to leave. I am positive that I've seen that town and that part of town. I know what that kind of poverty feels like. Even the use of line closes the reader in like a too small house. But most importantly, that longing to be anywhere else. Sorenson reaches that longing and makes it palpable and relatable to the reader in a way that many writers do not. It is stated plainly without melodrama. The grief and longing are allowed to exist in the space and the reader is allowed to meet it as we understand it."*

So, yeah, THAT good. Right after LeRoy's piece there are three more poems from the contest—the FINALISTS. I can't even. They're completely different poems, but they're all killer. All three of them. And it just goes from there. And, like, right when you think you can take a break, POW!, Laura Moretz's story is there. It's crazy how it happens. You're just humming along, and then, KABLAM! Kay Lin's story "night out". I mean, if you're supposed to be doing something, I mean *right now*, you're not going to be able to put this issue down. It's going to glue itself into your palms, you're going to take it with you everywhere. I hope you know what you're in for. Buckle up, kids. You're in for one heck of a ride.

All my love,

Maura

**TJ Jarrett**
Photo credit: Dennis Wile

*TJ Jarrett received a BA from Wellesley College and an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars. She is the author of Zion (Southern Illinois University Press, 2014) and Ain't No Grave (New Issues Press, 2013) and a winner of the Crab Orchard Open Competition. She works in software development and lives in Nashville, Tennessee.*

# THE TISHMAN REVIEW

*presents*

The Winner of our 2019
Edna St. Vincent Millay
Poetry Prize

*Tomato Soup Reminds Me of Poverty*
by LeRoy N. Sorenson

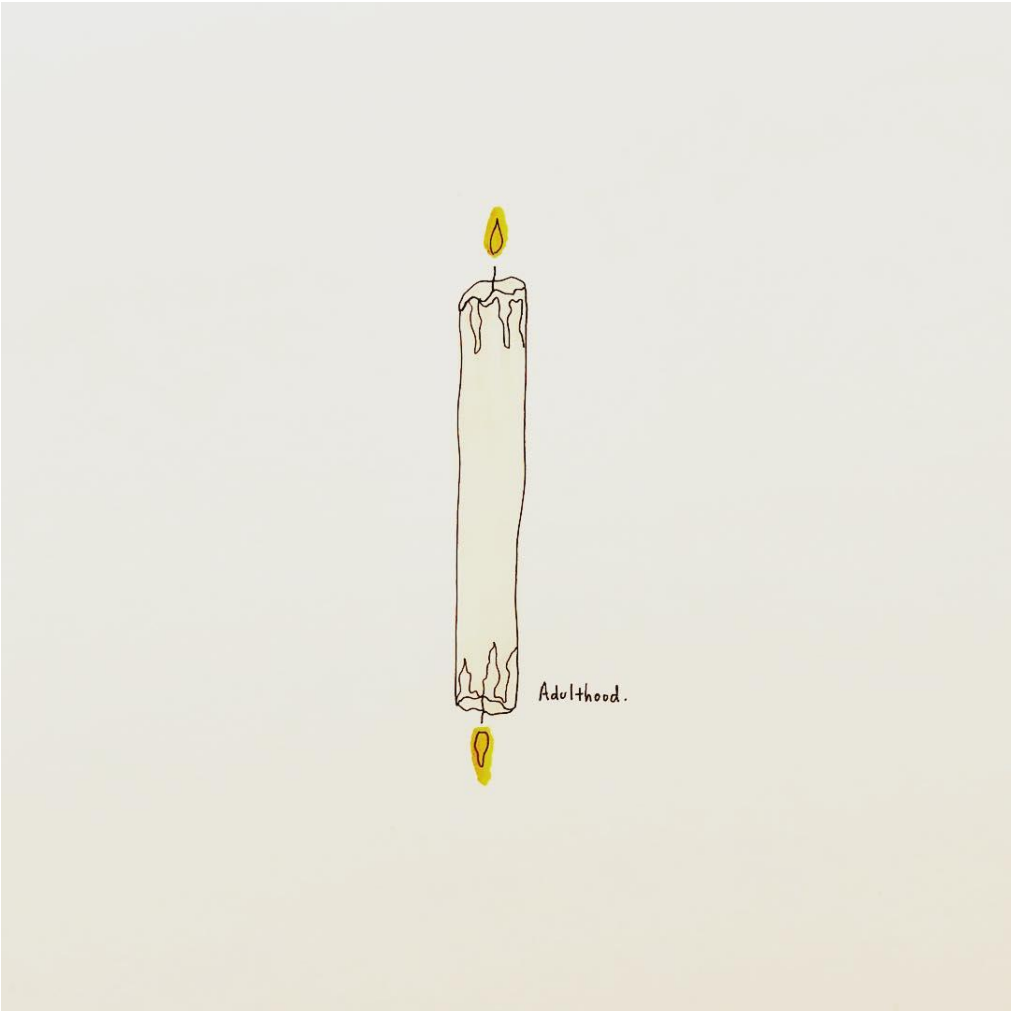
with Finalists

*Frank*
by Shevaun Brannigan

*What the body can say*
by Tonya Sauer

*Furious*
by Sara Eddy

# Congratulations




*Adulthood* by Mary Matthews

# Tomato Soup Reminds Me of Poverty

*Winner, Edna St. Vincent Millay Poetry Prize*

*poetry by LeRoy N. Sorenson*

That was the summer my mother slouched
at the table, so beaten down, numbed
by the death of her first son burnt deep
into her bones while my father sat
at table's end, working into a fury.
The summer I flailed at curve balls,
beat up once a week by the Schmidt
brothers. I walked the railroad yards
between steaming engines
and peeling, off-red box cars.
Every day the wind blew
in from the southeast where the meat
plant sat, the stench of shit and blood.
I walked on Main, sneaking glances
into the faces of those escapees
from the bars; those ruined
faces, those tired faces looted
of hope. Their bunched shoulders.
Waiting for me, a cracked
linoleum floor, another bowl
of tomato soup and my father
in another rage. The summer
my mother first crossed her hands
and wept. The summer I vowed
never to return. The summer I prayed
for amnesty. The summer when each
day dripped into a soiled
twilight and the wind shifted—clean
and cool from the north.

# Frank

*Finalist, Edna St. Vincent Millay Poetry Prize*

*poetry by Shevaun Brannigan*

I learn your wrist, the watch you wind each morning. By my ear it ticks, engraved
*to Bert, from mother & father, 1940*. How many repetitions within how many rotations
to form a habit? To say, to learn each other each day, when did we agree that your taking
off the watch & placing it on the bedside table meant I'd finish undressing? & after,
you on the left & I on the right, I haven't once noticed your putting the watch back on,
though, at some point when you are stroking my hair, the ticking returns.

The watch hand has circled for nearly 80 years. Saying, *time stops*, would mean something
went awry in the act of winding. It's more, I hear time passing in my ear, and do not feel
each tick as a unit of regret—I grow older this way, soft as leather.

# What the body can say

Finalist, Edna St. Vincent Millay Poetry Prize

*poetry by Tonya Sauer*

*After Natasha Trethewey*

is life begins like a planet—
burst and bang—collision after
collision, the body, wracked
by stars, says *joy*. Says *more*.

What matters grows
in the dark. My hand held
the pregnancy test
like a broken piece of glass.

Dust splits and splits again
until it is ripe as fruit
ready to fall, a delicate waiting
opened like flesh under a blade.

In every wave of nausea,
this body says *life*, though
not my own; still,
my hollow heart fills with blood.

In the curve of my spine, hard
slump against the hospital bed,
this body says *pain*, says *please,*

hands clasped in that universal bearing.
My mouth forgets language, hangs open
like a well, almost empty, and begins
learning the oldest way to sing.

# Furious

*Finalist, Edna St. Vincent Millay Poetry Prize*

*poetry by Sara Eddy*

That summer when I was sick
lying on the couch day after day
while the chemicals fought their battles
in my bloodstream, and my hair
came out in curly clumps
on the worn green velvet,
one of my queens went mad.
It started subtly: early
in summer when I was still able,
her workers stung me twice
their lancets piercing
my thick white suit and my jeans,
clearly determined.
These were warning shots.

A few weeks later—I was already
losing track of the world,
losing myself to fevers and fear—
it was as if she gathered up
the pollen dust of my strength and will
and spread it through her hive:
her brood became proactive defenders,
chasing neighbors down the road
and stinging my confederate keepers
over and over through their suits.
They were angry, they were
irritable, they had had enough
of people poking at them
and going through their business.

In late summer, feeling stronger,
feeling my blood going deep,
I put on two pairs of pants
and three shirts, giant mud boots
and a thick beekeeping suit,
and ventured out to their world.
When I cracked the hive
they bubbled out in a fury
with months of rage, and banged
against my helmet, stung my clothes
in impotence. I talked to them.

I told them it would be ok,
that they would flourish,
that pollen would be plentiful
and nectar would flow like wine,
and while I talked I found the queen.
She was long and dark, and beetled
quickly across the frames, and her
furry legs mocked my bald head
and my chemo scarf. I grabbed her
between my gloved fingers
and pinched out her angry life.
I gave the hive a new queen,
nestled between the frames
in a little wooden box, plugged up
with sugar: it would take them a day
to take in her smell and release her.

Within weeks they were calm
and kind and malleable, but I felt
the loss of that bitchy queen
who made her whole world
a place of defense and defiance.
They say we must fight
the world and the injustice
of sickness, we must throw
our tiny impotent souls
against a wall of cellular division,
but there is no fight, really,
just the doing and the sleeping.
The honey that fall was deep
and spicy, too complicated
for tea: I ate it on toast
in small bites, savoring
her sweet resentment.

*Three Faces* by Rachel Rose Teferet

# Light a Votive for Poseidon When You Go

*fiction by Kathleen McNamara*

I called Cecilia at three and told her to come get me from Hollywood Presbyterian Medical Center. I left the big marble rotunda and walked down a grassy knoll to the street, where I could sit on the curb. I didn't have a book and I was out of cigarettes, so I started to chew off my nail polish. Cecilia was there in an hour.

Instead of hello, she just said, Where is he? That meant Levi.

He won't answer the phone, I said.

Typical, she said.

I flinched because it was true.

I decided not to get an ultrasound, even though it was the reason I was there on a Monday afternoon and not at work. I remembered while I was sitting in the waiting room that I was back on Mom's insurance and it would show up on her statement at the end of the month. I didn't know how I would explain it to her. It's not that she wants grandchildren; she doesn't want to see me hurt.

You're supposed to get the ultrasound so they can tell you how far along it is, what day it was conceived, how soon you can get it over with.

Levi says he's sure it was that time in Venice, when he had moved into an even smaller studio with orange tile floors and flower-power wallpaper. His things sat in boxes and we lay on an air mattress near the stove. He held my face and I held his and he said I love you and so did I and because I came, he couldn't stop himself from coming either. And after I said, What the hell is wrong with you? I told you I stopped taking them when you moved out. Don't worry, he said. I'm infertile. Like believing that could make it true.

I got in Cecilia's car. It smelled like her perfume. I thought I was going to throw up. You know, she said, this whole thing might be easier if you tell your mom. As though that hadn't occurred to me.

Insurance might cover the ultrasound, said Cecilia, but it won't cover the rest. She was putting on lipstick and looking in the rearview mirror. She was pouting her lips in a way only she thinks makes her more attractive. I don't know a single person who got their insurance to pay for it, she said.

I made a sound that was like agreement.

This is the new American war on women, said Cecilia.

She turned onto La Brea and we watched two men lean out of the windows of their gold Escalade and honk and holler at a large, pinkish woman on a bus stop bench. She was naked except for a St. Louis Rams jersey. She sat with her back to the street, legs spread. She leaned forward, and we could see the hole in between her massive cheeks. It looked like an empty eye socket.

Hey, said Cecilia, at least you don't have that problem.

It's true. I don't have that problem. It felt good to laugh.

Cecilia turned onto residential streets and got back to Sunset. She was going in circles. My phone rang and there was Levi.

I'm sorry, Rosie, he said. I just woke up.

It's almost four in the afternoon, I said.

It was a long night, he said. I was working.

We stopped at a red light. I bet there's a girl in his bed, said Cecilia. She was looking at me, but I looked out the

window so I wouldn't have to make eye contact with her. I love Cecilia, but this is none of her business.

I told Levi about the woman in the Rams jersey. He didn't laugh—he only snickered. That's sad, he said, like I didn't realize it myself.

When we hung up, I said, Yes, Cecilia, maybe there's a girl in his bed, thank you.

Would it bother you?

I told her to make a left on Fairfax.

It has been seven weeks since he moved out.

We drove around Hollywood. We went to Los Feliz. We went to Griffith Park. We drove in circles. We went to my sister's house on Thirtieth Street, but all her little friends told us she wasn't home. I didn't want to go to Cecilia's house because it was big and empty and her husband might be there. I didn't want to return to my apartment because I felt like I hadn't done enough that day. So we kept driving.

I played with the radio. Except for sleeping through today, I said, I think he's being pretty good about the whole thing.

Sure, said Cecilia. Sure he is.

I told her Levi had offered to pay for half, and she just said, He should pay for it all; he's not the one getting his insides vacuumed out.

I told her Levi's the smartest person I know, but she shook her head.

If he's so smart, said Cecilia, why doesn't he get a job with his engineering degree? He's almost thirty.

He has a job, I said. He's got the bar. He makes good tips. He likes what he does, and he turned thirty weeks ago.

If he's so smart, she said, why did he get caught with a nineteen-year-old sucking his dick in a parking garage?

That was years ago, I said, and I can't wish anything malicious on the girl because if I did, I'd want her mom to die or I'd want her to get herpes, and both those things have already happened to her, which is, I think, why she got on her knees in that parking garage at that party in the first place, when she knew I was around the corner, and so were all our friends.

And besides, Cecilia, no one around here is an angel.

Cecilia found a women's clinic right off Sunset. She drove around the block trying to find parking. She almost clipped a Suburban.

It was a flat, sort of beige building with short concrete stairs and a long wheelchair ramp.

I showed them my paycheck stub and they said, Good news! You're pre-approved for government assistance. Then the woman printed this green medical card with my name and date of birth and level of "assistance."

I took the urine test and the man said, You're definitely pregnant. Then he said, Is this a good thing or a bad thing?

Then he said, Come back in three days and we'll take care of it.

I kept worrying I would run into someone I knew.

Cecilia sat in the lobby reading *In the Belly of the Beast*. When I came out with my little appointment card, she said, Listen to what he says here about rape in prison: *What is clear is that when a man sodomizes another to express his* contempt*, it demonstrates only his contempt for woman, not man. The normal attitude among men in society is that it is a great shame and dishonor to have experienced what it feels like to be a woman.*

Why are you reading that, Cecilia? Give me something I can use, I said.

My feet hurt. Below my stomach I felt a pinch. First on the left side then on the right. Then on the left again.

I need to leave, I said.

At least you know everything's working down there, said Cecilia.

But maybe not after this, I said.

We walked out, and so did two teenagers with rings in their faces. They were tenderly dancing with each other. The boy kissed the girl on the forehead. The girl gave the boy a high five.

How nice for them, I said.

Well, they can't all be false alarms, said Cecilia. She jingled her keys as we walked to the car.

No, I suppose they can't.

I yelled at the teenagers as they crossed the street: Always wear a condom, kids! They looked at me the way I look at the old lady who sits on the stoop next to my apartment, selling candles in jars stickered with pictures of saints. She calls out to me like we know each other: *¿Mija, conoces Jesús?*

We were acquainted once, I tell her. Then she nods and tries to sell me a candle. They're only a dollar. I can't say no—I've bought six. Two for the Virgin Mary, one for Our Lady of Guadalupe, one for the archangel Gabriel, one for St. Jude, and then, on my birthday, one for Mary Magdalene. What are the chances? I was born on her feast day—the world's canonical slut. I keep the candles in a little row on my windowsill. When I light them, they make my apartment smell like cheap strawberry candy and old soap. At night sometimes, when I'm alone, I catch myself making the sign of the cross. I want to believe I know better than to think it makes a difference.

Cecilia and I drove by the big blue Scientology temple on our way back to my place.

That's what we should have done today, she said, get our thetan levels tested. Find out what's inside.

It's like an amusement park or a shrine inside, I said. Have you been there? There are all these people scrubbing floors for a dollar a day, so they can learn more about what Lord Xenu and the rest of the Galactic Confederacy did to the earth seventy-five million years ago.

She laughed and said, No, I mean find out what's inside us. Who knows, it could be helpful.

Come on, Cecilia. I know how many aliens are inside me, I said. Just the one.

With all the drinking and the smoking you've been doing, she said, it's probably a velociraptor or a Cyclops by now.

I'm out of cigarettes, I said. And I think it's a boy.

It probably has six ears and a tail, she said.

If I stopped today, I think it would be okay. I think it would still be human.

Look, she said, can you have a child right now?

No, Cecilia, I can't have a child right now. I can't even have a dog.

Exactly, she said. So stop thinking about it. It will be too horrible if you let yourself think about it. You have to stop yourself from thinking or it will be impossible to act.

We got to my apartment and the woman with the candles was not on the stoop. Upstairs, the test from last week was still on the futon. Every time I glanced at it, I caught myself thinking it was a thermometer. I didn't know what to do with it—it seemed wrong to just throw it away. I kept it tucked inside a card with a picture on the front of a golden retriever puppy wearing a bow tie. The card was from my father. It came in the mail two weeks ago, with no return address. Inside was a check for three grand and a note that said, "Dear Rosie, I pray for you."

I showed Cecilia the card. She took it even though the test had left a yellow stain. He's a Baptist now, I said.

How convenient for him, Cecilia said.

Mom told me not to cash the check even though she and I could really use the money. Mom thinks he's just trying to find a cheap way out of court. He decided that

three grand pretty much covers the years he missed. The recession is the best thing that ever happened to me, Mom said, because now he and I don't have anything left to fight over. But he won't let her go.

It's hard to believe they could spend ten years working at it and still not figure out how to get divorced. First, they fought over custody, but then we got too old for that to matter. Now they're fighting over who's right.

I asked Cecilia if she thinks I'll ever see my dad again, who wanted children so bad, and then left us because we were expensive, we were ungrateful, or maybe he never loved my mother, or maybe something much worse. Bodies buried in the backyard worse.

Here's a lesson for you, said Mom: Never marry your first boyfriend.

I asked Cecilia if she remembers that time in high school when we found blush and lipstick in the glove compartment of my dad's car and we couldn't decide if he was having an affair with a woman or dressing as one. Both seemed equally plausible.

I hated your house as a kid, said Cecilia. It was so clean. I remember one time I came over and you and your parents and your sister were sitting on the couch, not speaking. All of you were watching a romantic comedy on mute and listening to salsa music. Your dad had that creepy real estate smile on his face, the same one printed on his mailers and business cards: Emmitt Johnston, Licensed Realtor. Hello there, Cecilia, he said, nice day? No one else blinked, but he just kept smiling, like he was making a big effort not to disappoint the studio audience.

I asked Cecilia if she remembered when Dad moved out and we drove to where he was staying and threw eggs at the house. I thought I could see his face peek through the blinds but then she told me I was imagining things.

And I had said to Cecilia, You have no idea how much I am imagining.

That was around the time my sister pulled a stunt in the bathroom. Dad and the school principal, and a bunch of other people who thought they knew best, called it "a cry for help." The social worker showed up and took her to "a place where she would be safe." At the hospital, they hid her shoelaces and pencils and drawstrings then they removed anything with a zipper because she'd stick her wrist under it—open, close, open, close—until she wove her thin skin in with the metal links. A very creative and determined self-mutilator, they said. Look, my sister's team of helpers said to me, I'm a registered nurse. Look, I'm from Child Protective Services. Look, Look, Look, they said, we're here to help. We're on your side.

I asked Cecilia if she remembered how every time I tried to visit my sister in the hospital the woman with orange hair pulled me to her office and said, There are allegations about your father. Your sister has made allegations of sexual abuse.

I told her she was full of shit, and when I asked my sister about it, she wore her lithium face and repeated the things the social worker had said. And by that I mean, she repeated them word for word, like a memorized script. When I asked her if someone had put her up to it, she said she was tired.

It would really help the case if you made a statement, said the woman. We were alerted to this through a poem your sister wrote.

She's fourteen years old, I said, a poem is not evidence.

It would really help if you could corroborate her story, the woman said. The poem suggests it may have occurred when your sister was five or six. She and the rest of the helpers smiled at me using only their teeth.

I told her what I remembered, which

was nothing. I remember nothing, I said, which is the truth. My first memory is of being in the fourth grade and playing first base. It was raining and I made a great catch and everyone cheered. The runner was out.

And she said, You know, dear, it is very common for victims of abuse to repress their memories. She tried to take my hand. She nodded then she said, I understand exactly how you feel. Just let it out. It will feel good to tell the truth.

I told her that her orange haircut and her rainbow-framed bifocals made her look terrifying, like a manic sunflower in a puppet show. But all she did was pat my hand and ask if I needed to talk.

I think her name was Sherrie or Cherry or something, said Cecilia.

Yes, I said, or something.

And because my sister preferred silence, the Sherrie or Cherry or something's team pulled in the tan TV doctor who worked on a different floor with the crumpled, plastic people who could bring in better ratings. This is Los Angeles, after all. The TV doctor used his frozen face to try to talk her back to life. After he was finished, when they put my sister back in her room, she stood on top of her desk chair and used her skull to break the little window near the airshaft. She tried to salvage all the glass to use later on herself. They bandaged her up and moved her to a windowless room. After that we didn't see the TV doctor again—except on television, where everyone made a big show of things not true but that looked true in two dimensions, where patients were always "deranged" and TV doctors were in the business of community service.

When you look at my sister now: thin, tan, unmedicated, long blond hair, cute round ass the boys like to spank, when you see her in a photo with her sorority friends—their chests out, hands on their hips to say *look at us, we're all the same*—when you see her with the boyfriend who's in the movies, boyfriend who wants her to keep that waist tight, boyfriend who gets suspicious when she's nice to his friends, boyfriend, boyfriend, boyfriend, you'd never see that feral animal behind her mascara. You'd never know her hair got so tangled we had to cut it off at the ears.

I first met Levi at a party a month after the poem caused so much trouble. He was with a girl and he left her to be with me. He was older, and he didn't know my mother or my father or my sister. He had a job and an apartment and I was eighteen. I had never been in love and after a while he told me that he would love me no matter what I did.

I told Cecilia that when he walked into my apartment last week to see the test for himself, I was taking a shit. The bathroom door was open and he looked at me right there on the toilet. We both started to laugh. You're beautiful, he said. And it killed me because that was exactly the kind of thing that made it seem impossible to let him go.

Cecilia and I went out again to buy a bottle of bourbon and a pepperoni pizza. Cecilia thinks it's weird that I like to drink whiskey from a bowl. All the cups are dirty, I said. I took a bite of pizza.

It tastes like cough medicine, I said.

You're crazy, she said. It tastes like pizza.

I can't eat it. Something's wrong with my mouth.

What do you want?

I really want some fried Brussels sprouts. Or some peanut butter. Or a banana fudge sundae.

I thought we were trying to be less pregnant, she said.

I chewed the pizza.

I liked the idea of a pill that would take care of it. So did Levi. It sounded so much

easier than *surgical procedure*.

My appointment for the pill was at noon and at four o'clock, they still hadn't called me back, so Levi left for work on his bike. I called Cecilia and in between when he left and she arrived, the nurse called my name. Two pills: one now, one tomorrow.

I took it and Cecilia took me home.

We climbed into bed. She was the big spoon and I was the little spoon. We turned on the television.

All I had were tampons, so Cecilia left to get pads. Then in the morning, she left again to get adult diapers.

It's horrible, said Cecilia, but it will be over. It will be finished.

It took four days to be done with it, and the whole time I couldn't quite get a grip on the situation. You forget that your body is you. I know I told you I didn't want you to be there, but I sat on the toilet and thought of you, Levi. I thought of you, and I thought of my reasons. You should never have a child with someone who doesn't want one and the idea of going nine months without drinking actually scared me and my mom said marriage is slavery and neither of us has a car and once I got into bed with your roommate while you were asleep in the other room and when I asked you what you might name a kid, you said, How about Poseidon? You don't believe that monogamy is a viable way of life, and in the past six years, you've convinced me that you're right. So I got rid of it; I let it go; I flushed it down and watched as it swirled then vanished down the drain.

I know it's crazy, but I imagine the infant boy that emerged from the congealed, bilious blood that went down those pipes. I imagine him learning to walk in the sewers below Los Angeles. He's playing with mutant frogs and fishing for friendly parasites in a petroleum-covered bend of the LA River. He has your eyes and my birthmark. In some version of the universe, he's alive. He's whooshing through the toxic sludge below the pier and he's floating out to sea. I'm not trying to torture myself, but I have to think of him as alive because otherwise I'd have to accept that we are only our bodies. I don't think I could live with that. Flesh is gone so quickly. ♦

*Moon Dream* by Rachel Rose Teferet

# Laughing Mask Sonnet

*poetry by Matt Morgan*

Were life's dead-ends not enough for you, Mark?
You worked your best attitude like a billy club
until worse and worse horrors conspired
to outsmart you, to sample your blood.
Did Elon make a mockery of us all? His toy car
floating into orbit like a sad and lost asteroid
as it necked past our smashed apple and into the stars.
Surreal to be sure, it looked faker than a polaroid
chopped by Kubrick in a Hollywood basement.
Mark, friend, I see your ticking heart in fisheye—
the big bloody bastard, all valve and pigment.
    Here I lie. Here I lie. Here I lie still,
when only you can see past the faults in our math.
Only you can see through their laughing mask.

# April Commute with Virginity

*poetry by Mirande Bissell*

A man beside me lifted my raincoat
and moved the slip my mother
asked me to wear (I was young

enough to listen to her). He moved
his fingers under my skirt up my inner
thigh when I woke on a morning train.

That year, archaeologists reopened
the Altai ice maiden in her underground
house. They thawed the milky block

of her body one tin cup of water
at a time, till what was left
of her skin lay there in their hands,

constellated with buried things: cannabis
in her saddlebag, a wig, a mirror.
Museum pieces now, as though

she'll never need them. I find it difficult
not to love her, the deer exulting
round her shoulder, horns flowering

in ink—though she isn't mine
to open. I'd wait a thousand years
to loop my skin with ermines

and owls, to outlast what's given me.
There are worse things than moving
with your people up to the grasslands

late spring, the horses spreading over
the plateau, her breast tumor spreading.
When she died, they filled her body

with peat, and replaced her eyes
with knobs of fur. They carved her coffin
from a larch, and led horses to her grave.

They slit the animals' throats—dragged them

beside her, six ribcages circling
their stalled hearts, and sealed the door.

A lucky find, a girl intact, common property
(almost)—something they'd been waiting
to unearth. I am sure of it: the small animal

of the man's hand dug from his world
into mine. I didn't turn away until he pulled
his hand out. The train emptied, and I stayed

alone, hunched like an old woman. A man
pressed me from one world into the next—
one where I sleep beside my enemies.

# Funeral for a lost child on the reservation

*poetry by Justin L. Blessinger*

*Poplar, Montana, 26 April 2016*

From out the half-down window of the hearse,
a beating of drums.
A song, pitched in grief,
resonating from a warped recording,
playing on the tape deck.
Six horses, five riders,
the feathers they carried,
limp like broken necks.

One loose feather drifting off.
No one saw. No one watched.
The sixth horse, a white filly,
absent rider.
Heads bowed against a hard wind.
The grey sky wet.
A white hearse, in low gear groaning,
too long for its tiny box.


*Notes from an Herbalist's Lecture* by Rebecca Pyle

# Natural Parenting

*nonfiction by Erin E. Ruble*

Rattlesnakes, it turns out, are good mothers.

It's 110 degrees in Death Valley, and we've retreated into the air-conditioned ranger station. The land outside is elemental, nearly stripped of the plant life that usually veils the bones of our world. Jagged mountains enclose us on all sides. In places, sand spills from their eroded flanks and eddies into dunes. The valley floor is flat and crusted with white: salt and trona and borax. That cylinder in your bathroom cabinet with a picture of a wagon drawn by twenty mules: That's for Death Valley. They needed all those mules to drag the stuff across the desert to the nearest transit station.

There's more to the story, of course. Chinese workers, who were paid almost nothing, scraped the mineral from the desert floor and carted it to boilers for refining. It's only April and already about as hot as I've ever seen, so I can't conceive how they could stand the work. Operations did shut down in summer. Not, as my husband drily observes, out of concern for the workers or the mules, but because borax doesn't crystallize at temperatures over 120.

We have not been shoveling borax. In fact, we've been in air-conditioning for the last hour, venturing outside only to plow through a pint of ice cream. Even so, I still feel molten from the canyon we hiked through, small children in tow. Canyons, my husband felt, would have shade, being narrow. A good theory, except the sun was directly overhead by the time we started. Yet we pressed on, through a landscape of blistering rock, in which nothing moved but lizards and the occasional German tourist. At the entrance we had seen other kids but as we progressed through the shimmering air, we left them all behind. It could be said that we, unlike rattlesnakes, are not the best parents.

We learned about rattlers from the ranger talk that started not long after our seven-year-old daughter became terminally impatient with the informational exhibits. The lecture was in a circular theater at one end of the building. Something in the artificial air exacerbated our son's cold and he began to cough, emphatically and at length, earning us looks from the other people scattered throughout the room. I couldn't take him outside, though, and not just because of the heat. The man was talking about reptiles, and my son's eyes, when not forced closed by racking spasms, were fixed on the screen.

After detailing many charming lizard characteristics, the ranger moved on to snakes. Conscious that much of his audience might have preconceptions regarding this subject, he began to enumerate the animals' virtues. How laudatory these qualities are, like the attractiveness of the creatures themselves, may lie in the eye of the beholder.

Fact #1: Rattlesnakes are good seed dispersers. Why? Because they eat the adorable kangaroo rats (plump little guys with big eyes, who hop on their hind legs, using their long tails for balance). Kangaroo rats store seeds in their cheek pouches and attempt to scramble back to safety before swallowing their find. When they don't make it, seeds get dispersed.

Fact #2: Rattlesnakes are not mindless killers but prepare ambush spots by beating down vegetation to improve their

ability to strike. Premeditated killers, then. So much better.

Except, rodents aside, they really aren't. Growing up on Montana's eastern plains, I came across prairie rattlers over and over, on foot and on horseback, and never had one strike. My mother killed them when they came near the house, as there was no safe way to move them and she worried about the dogs, but she hated it.

I was with her when she killed the one in the indoor riding arena. Mom wouldn't shoot inside the building for fear the bullets could ricochet, so she attacked it with a hoe. The loose sand made decapitation nearly impossible. I was reading a biography of Mary Queen of Scots at the time and my mother's repeated blows reminded me of the queen's nervous executioner. Throughout the whole brutal process, the snake did not strike while it was alive; it just tried to escape. Only after the head was severed did it bare its fangs, again and again, until the brain finally shut down.

Not a mindless killer. Not a killer at all, if it can help it, apart from mice and birds.

I've always liked snakes. I like the way they move, their muscles rippling in coordinated bursts along their bodies. I like the smooth cool feel of them, the beauty of their patterns, the thrill of spotting them twitching away through the grass. But I did not know they were such dedicated parents.

Fact #3: A rattlesnake mother lies curled over her brood in a cleft of rock from the time the babies emerge live from her belly until they achieve their first molt.

"Dedication" might seem too strong a word, too human. Don't anthropomorphize, some would say. It's instinct, not emotion, that makes her coil over her offspring, protecting them in spite of her own hunger and thirst.

Except that I'm not sure instinct and emotion can be separated. When my daughter was barely able to talk, she already fawned over anything big-eyed and large-headed—in short, anything that looked like a baby. Kids clutch scraps of cloth with sewn-on faces, murmuring to them tenderly. We can't help it. Hormones like oxytocin prime us to parental attentiveness. Brain resonance imagery has revealed limbic network interactions that hardwire our responsiveness to babies.

It's not just parenting that's instinctive. We eulogize love at first sight, but what is that but instinct? We tend to be attracted to people whose genes provide different immune system responses, which gives any potential babies a better shot at fighting off disease. Men are more drawn to women at ovulation, when it is more likely babies will be conceived.

In fact, most of our emotions can be explained as responses to the problems of living in social groups. We feel pleasure at cooperation. Cheating or any kind of unfairness, in whatever context and whatever scale, prompts righteous indignation and rage. Just observe any kid comparing his slice of cake to his sister's.

In the 1950s mathematicians outlined the principles of game theory, which assesses how to handle situations in which your best approach changes depending on how everyone else acts. The classic example is the Prisoner's Dilemma, where you'll come out ahead if you rat out your codefendant, do pretty well if you both keep mum, do worse if you both spill the beans, and lose big time if you stay quiet and he turns snitch. The problem is, you don't know which one he's going to choose. Turns out that the best chance of success for everyone over the long haul is to cooperate, which is what our genes subtly urge us to do. Though it

took us until the 1950s to outline game theory in academic terms, we all have an instinctive understanding of how it works. That understanding may predate our species; chimps are better at it than we are.

The talk ends, and we file outside. Our son's cough immediately evaporates. We're at Furnace Creek, an apt name if there ever was one. This is possibly the hottest location in the world. (Libya reported a higher temperature once but that has been discredited.) On the day of the record high, 134, birds dropped to the desert floor, dead in mid-flight. The ranger wrapped a wet towel around his head before going out to take the reading, and by the time he made it back inside, the towel was dry.

We head back to Stovepipe Wells to meet a friend. We're staying in a hotel, but we've picked a campsite for him, surrounded on two sides by creosote and on all sides by mountains. It's dark when we finish dinner at the hotel restaurant and he erects his tent. He stops when he hears a rattle. When he lowers the flashlight, two sidewinders writhe away.

I sleep badly. The guys have planned to head out at three a.m. to watch the stars—Death Valley's one of the last places in the continental U.S. not marred by ambient light, and they figure they can squeeze in an hour and a half between moonset and sunrise to see the Milky Way swirl over the dunes. I keep wondering when my husband will leave. The streetlight shines into our window. The children cough.

Finally, at four, after he's gone and the moon's down, I slip out myself and walk across the empty parking lot to the chaparral field beyond. I can't get away from the motel's floodlights, but the ground's shadowed enough that I switch on my cell phone to keep from stepping on any unfriendly creatures. There's a faint glow in the east. To the south, above a serrated line of mountains, stretches our galaxy. I'd forgotten that in true darkness the Milky Way is not just a band of stars, but a series of loops and whirls.

I wake the children just after dawn. We drive the couple miles to the dunes and set out across them, meeting the guys on the way. It takes a long time to walk beyond footprints, to where the knife-edge ridges are unmarred. My daughter and I take off our sandals. The sand is silken, and still cool from the night. My son, on the hunt for reptiles, darts to every clump of creosote. We find iguanas, zebra-tailed lizards, whiptails, mouse burrows, and many tracks, but no snakes.

I keep thinking about them, though. We tend to glorify those aspects of ourselves that we think make us different from the world around us: our rationality, our logic, our "higher-order" brain functions. (Not coincidentally, those are traits traditionally thought to be masculine.) If a computer can beat us at chess, we're sure that shows its intelligence, never mind that it will have a much harder time mastering the so-called feminine traits of communication, intuition, and emotion.

I'm a fan of logic and abstract thought, but what secures our survival as a species are the compulsions embedded in our genes. It's not the architect who builds the pyramid he designed, after all, nor the pharaoh, but the thousands of workers struggling up ramps in the desert sun. You need the vision, yes; but in the end, we reshape the surface of the planet through our social bonds.

My daughter takes the camera. There follows a series of slightly crooked pictures, shot from below, of our family strung out along the dunes. It's astonishing to see my husband and me through her eyes: double her height, iconic in that way of parents, who seem so absolute to their children. These are the souvenirs I will value from this trip, both the pictures and the rocks the kids brought us (explaining each admirable

characteristic with the attention of jewelers), which we dutifully packed in our luggage to cart home.

We're inclined to think the deeper, species-level motivations cheapen our emotions, undermine our sense of selfhood, but the emotions are still ours, and they still drive us. We expect parents to cater to their babies despite the outrageous things those babies do—vomit, foul their pants, wake at all hours, cry inconsolably. We expect parents to die for their children, if needed. Some do. So what if these expectations root in something more fundamental than culture?

Our parenting, like the snake's, is at least partly chemical. We are chemical. But that doesn't make a lot of difference in the end. We already know our attentiveness gives our kids a better chance to make it to adulthood; that's why we do it. I like the idea that many things around us share the same impulse, rattlers included.♦

# Before the Split

*fiction by John Roche Guerra*

I stand over an open heater vent. My snowsuit gets toasty around my legs. I press my forehead against the icy window square and, after a few breaths, wipe the window with my mitten. Dad is brushing snow off the windows of his beige Plymouth. He wears his heavy, blue coat and conductor's cap, and his ears are bright red from the cold. Rows of snowballs are on top of the car. He made each one, packing in the snow with cupped hands. When he's done brushing off the snow, he scoops up a snowball and holds it close to his chest. His right hand pulls back and loops over his head, and the snowball breaks against the brick wall across the street. He does this over and over again, snowballing the center of a black-and-red *O* that Mom said some neighborhood *pendejo* had painted. He scoops up the last snowball, faces me, and grins. His right hand pulls back and *thwack!* the window bumps my forehead. I cry because I can no longer see outside. Mom drops her schoolbook on the couch and comes to me. She squats and hugs me and checks my forehead.

"That was fun," Dad says as he comes in, stomping his boots on the mat. His head tilts to the side when he sees me crying in her arms.

"Charlie, look at what you did."

He checks my forehead, winks. "The snowball didn't do that." He straightens up and taps the window. "It hit right here, and there aren't any cracks. He got that from leaning on the cold glass."

She turns me around and checks my head again. She's serious. "What if there was ice? You could have broken the window."

"I didn't pack it that hard—"

"Don't do it again," she says, spitting out the "don't" like when I've done something wrong.

"Fine," he says and picks me up. "I got to go."

The air is ice-cream cold. The wind hurts my cheeks. I bury my face into Dad's shoulder, and he carries me to the car. He buckles me in, smiles, and messes my hair.

"Today is Friday," Mom says from the house.

"I know what day it is." He closes the car door and trudges around to the driver's side. They keep talking, but I can't hear them. Mom looks angry as she speaks with her hands. Dad enters the car, and she slams the front door closed.

The wipers thump as he mumbles, shaking his head. Parked cars on both sides of the road are blanketed with snow that still comes down in thick, heavy flakes. An elevated train zips by and I grin. Today I'm going to work with Dad. We stop at a building that has a tall antenna. "Stay put," he says. He hops out of the car and runs in. My eyes bounce side to side, following the wipers. I rub my forehead. There are no bumps. It doesn't hurt and I feel fine. Dad comes back with an envelope and a shiny, silver can. He tucks the envelope into his breast pocket, slurps some pop, and drives off. He is smiling now.

At the subway station, Dad buys a pack of caramels and another pop. A sax-man with large, yellow glasses stands by an open suitcase full of coins. His music echoes down the tiled walls. Dad gives me a quarter. It clinks in the suitcase. The sax-man has fun as he sways and plays. The train comes and screeches to a stop. I

cover my ears and bury my face into Dad's leg. Doors open. A crowd exits. Everyone has a long, heavy coat and a serious face.

We board and walk through the train cars until we reach the conductor's area. I sit in my favorite spot, a foot stand that the engineer uses to look out at the people. Someone comes in and squats right in front of me. His large, round nose touches mine and he speaks quickly in a weird voice. I don't understand and I start to cry.

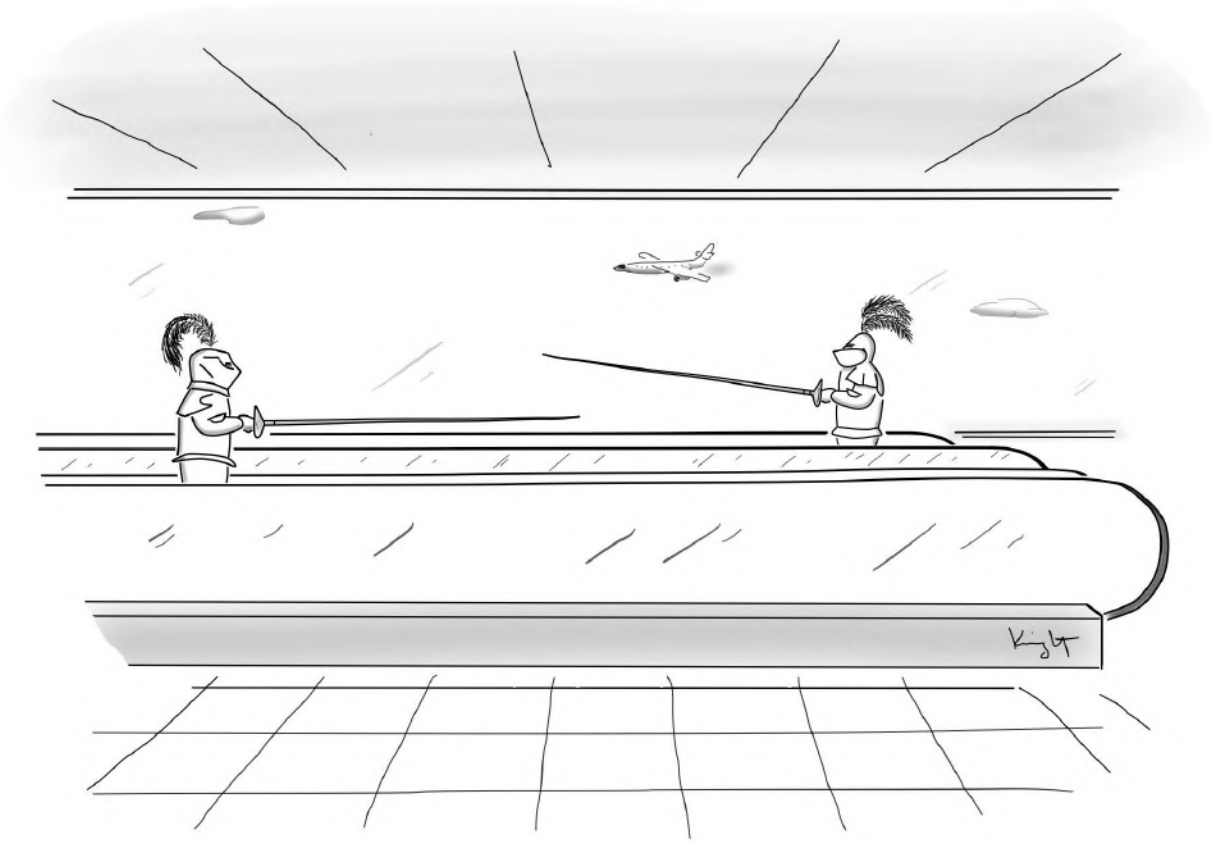
Dad scoops me up, laughing. "Max, quit scaring my kid."

"What? Who doesn't like Bugs Bunny?" Max crosses his eyes. "What's up, Tony?" This time I laugh, and Dad lifts me onto the conductor's chair.

"Max is going to watch you while I do the rounds. I'll be back."

"Hey, Chip," Max says, grabbing Dad's arm, "before I forget, the guys are coming over to my place tonight. You in?"

Dad pats his breast pocket. "Sounds like fun." He straps on a changemaker and counts the coins. Before he leaves, he hands me the caramels and tells me that I can only have one. He'll be back for the rest. The train moves and the tiled walls zip past. I pop a caramel in my mouth, and as I gnaw on the candy, I laugh at the funny face I make in the window. I check my forehead. It's fine. What was Mom upset about? I pop another square in my mouth and roll it into a gooey ball. I'm fine. There's nothing wrong. Dad and I were only having fun.♦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# The Poison Place

*poetry by Michele Harris*

*"You who have proved*
*how much like me you are:*
*how could I trust you?"*

*- James Richardson*

I.

I find you mouth-down
in the bathroom, your body

crumpling after your heart
rate plunged, blood turned

sludge in your veins.
The sound the floor made

when the force of your body hit it.
My thoughts run to lye,

bleach, diazepam,
but it's an accident,

syncope, your vasovagal nerve
strummed just right,

and you wake up
sore and thirsty.

II.

Charges for sapphire
lace lingerie, silk Cuban

heel stockings, stilettos,
for a woman I'll never meet.

You tell me it's fraud,
and, love, it is.

III.

Whispered midnight hotlines:
you ring up strangers

who strain to hear
every solicitous way

you've considered slipping
out of your bones.

IV.

When you're late from work
I wonder if this will be the night.

Would I go to the office
the next day, when they're searching

for you?  I'm ashamed
that I might.

V.

It is terrifying
not knowing where
this poem is going to end.

# Overdose, December 23rd

*poetry by Michele Harris*

*for Sam, 1986-2013*

I still think of you with blood
in your teeth, staining

the playground's asphalt.
Third grade, kickball

in the outfield, and you bounding up
to stop a homerun, your open mouth

colliding with the metal lip
of the dumpster. I laughed

because I didn't know
you were hurt. Then blood,

the nurse, your front teeth
shattered out of your jaw.

For days you disappeared
from class. When you came back,

I was amazed at your two-toned
smile, the knocked-out teeth

magically remade:
the sometimes quickness

of healing. That first day back
you slept the whole bus ride

home, winding through miles
of abandoned farmland,

slag heaps, the unrelenting
orange mouths of wildflowers.

# Misfit Pies

*fiction by Laura Moretz*

The heat finally let up the day before Mama picked me up from Hope House, and Ricky and I were smoking on the patio. A few loose, dry oak leaves had fallen overnight and skidded around on the flagstones. Fenwick, one of the counselors, had gone inside. Maybe he was tired of watching Ricky and me for some sign of impropriety. Plus, I'd been off suicide watch for two weeks, and Fenwick had to watch a new group of guests loiter near the coffee corner and pace the hall before the evening lecture. Somehow I'd stepped outside my wall of anger, and I was off his radar.

I said, "What if we met again in a year?"

Ricky exhaled a stream of smoke. "Like, by chance?" He pushed at his t-shirt sleeve, further exposing his intriguing vine tattoo.

I gestured at the legal pad he carried everywhere and pulled his pen from his breast pocket. He flipped to a sheet in the back, and I wrote Mama's number there.

We looked across the field to the shed where the groundsman kept his mower, the tin roof shiny in the sun.

"I could call you," I said. "In an emergency."

He wrote his number in small, tight numerals, tore it off, and handed it to me. "Feels like we're setting up a drug deal," he said with a smile.

"I'm serious this time." I had to stay clean, no matter what else happened.

"Just kidding." He looked across the field at the entrance gate where we'd both come in less than a month ago. "They say relationships that start in treatment never work."

"I'm talking about a year from now. I'm talking friendship."

"Maybe you are," he said.

"I relate better to men." I shrugged as though there was nothing I could do about that.

Chloe and Roberta were crazy about me the first days I was home—Roberta had learned to walk in my absence, and she toddled toward me holding her stuffed rhinos, her fat cheeks splotched with red like a woman with too much rouge. Her fingers smelled like sugar. Chloe danced her bears in stiff tutus on the coffee table, then danced in her light-up shoes. They pushed at each other to be the one in my lap when we watched TV. I let each girl straddle a thigh. I held them close, but I felt like a stranger even now with the numbness of the booze and pills gone. I wondered how much Chloe remembered of my overdose, how much she had seen; whatever she had seen that night, she seemed to see me differently now. They wanted me to do mom things like read stories aloud and bathe them. I did my best, with Mama waiting downstairs in the kitchen for me to flip out and run to the liquor store.

I walked to the Quik Mart some afternoons for cigarettes, past the man who sat against the wall by the newspaper rack and asked for money. A wall in the Quik Mart was dedicated to cold beer, but I bought my cigarettes and left. And then, low on cash and embarrassed to ask Mama for money, I stopped smoking altogether.

Soon I went back to getting up at 2 a.m. to bake pies and cakes for K&W Cafeteria with the same crew I'd worked with for years. I was supposed to go to meetings, but instead I went back to Hope House for

aftercare on Friday nights. I told my counselor, Roseanne, that I had to sleep during the weeknight evening meeting.

"There's mid-morning meetings you could go to after work," Roseanne said, but those sounded like groups for retired folks.

I said I'd try.

I kept Ricky's number in my nightstand, the same white-painted table with a single drawer I'd had as a little girl. It was there for an emergency. I had this new routine of picking up my girls at noon from their preschool, playing with them in the afternoon, and then going to bed at 4 p.m. Even with all the sleep, I felt raw and skinless most of the time, and I told Roseanne that.

"Have you found a meeting yet?" she asked.

"I'm working on it," I said. "By the way, I'm not smoking anymore."

"What do you know," she said, but she looked skeptical.

"Don't you think I can stay sober?"

"So far, so good."

Mama had cleared out my hidden bottles, and I didn't miss sedating myself. I brought home misfit pies for the girls, and they liked chocolate cream the best. I could live like this. I could do it, but I was waiting for an emergency.

It was almost winter, two seasons since my release, and I was pulling on white cotton pants for my baking shift when I felt a rattling like someone was shaking our house. The windows shuddered. Did Mama feel it? I looked in at her where she slept with my girls. Chloe's head was next to Mama's, little Roberta was horizontal between them like a beam that supported their connection, and Mama was snoring. It should have been me keeping them warm and safe. I could hear Roseanne saying, *Just be glad they have someone.* Without alcohol, I was scared, and who did I have?

I drove Mama's old station wagon toward work, one of the safest places I knew. From the highway, I saw fire engines and flashing police lights on Knollwood Street, but I couldn't see what had happened. The parking lot beside the building was covered with sooty building parts, and a dark layer of smoke obscured the streetlights. A patrol man directed me to the BP station across the street. I got out to see the wreckage better, and a diesel smell burned my nostrils.

Another cop shooed me back. "The K&W blew up. You can't go over there."

I pointed to Diana who stood by her car in her pink fluorescent raincoat. "It's where we work."

"Not anymore."

The smoke choked me as I walked toward the yellow police tape. A spotlight snapped on, illuminating a tangle of metal that spelled "Cafeteria" in flowery letters. Gold brocade panels that had decorated the dining room lay tossed like playing cards, smudged with black. Our kitchen and the dining room were like a knocked-over block tower in one of the girls' preschool rooms.

We might have been in the kitchen making the day's pies when it happened. I should have been grateful to escape death a second time, but I just felt numb and confused.

Dan, our supervisor, spotted us. "We're calling to see if you can work at the Cherry Street cafeteria."

The light spilled on the rubble and broken timber, and it looked like God's little joke.

"Cherry Street?" I said.

"I know where it is," Diana said.

"In fact," Dan said, "drive over there now."

I wasn't keen on it, but nobody was going to come along and fix this in a jiffy. I've never been one to understand that when damage is done, I can't just blink and undo it. Maybe this time, I could roll with change.

I lasted one day on the Cherry Street baking crew, the women there practically elbowing me out of the way when I tried to work on a piecrust or help with the fillings. I was moved to the cafeteria line, serving the public, but it was the same problem—the women wouldn't give up one inch of their jobs. My boss, who was trying to wedge himself in at Cherry Street, same as us, looked at me with his brow crumpled and said he had no choice: He fired me, so I could get unemployment.

I woke the next morning to the sun playing in the folds of the thin curtains Mama had made decades ago out of pink, sheer fabric. She wasn't surprised I lost my job, didn't tell me I should have tried harder to make it work, didn't have to because I knew I should have tried harder, and the bottom line was I didn't want to work at Cherry Street. Half asleep, I tried to imagine Ricky now, how it was going for him six months out.

When I got up, Mama was at the table, working the crossword puzzle in the newspaper.

"They say a gas leak caused it," Mama said.

"Caused what?"

"That explosion."

"Doesn't matter. Gone is gone."

"You should show a little bit of interest," she said. "Here." First morning off, and Mama was handing me the classifieds.

"I haven't even had a cup of coffee," I said. "Or toast."

The last time I'd been out of work, besides treatment, was when my husband knocked me into a steam heater and I got a concussion, the kind that required rest. The doctor said no TV, no reading, no nothing for a week. I couldn't tell work why I was out, so I quit and stayed home with the babies. You could say things got worse after that, but I can't tell the tale fair. Two drunks together can never win at looking better than the other. I took the girls and moved in with my mother.

"You never liked being idle. I know you'll find something."

"Today, I'm going to the unemployment office," I said.

In the waiting room, clusters of women tried to write on the clipboards while children tugged on their arms or climbed on their laps. I filled out my forms and waited. Finally, I was called into a room with cubicles and no windows. The counselor looked at the paperwork, never at me. I shifted to adjust a seam cutting into my thigh—I'd eaten more pies than I'd meant to.

"I thought K&W was keeping its people," the counselor said.

"There are too many of us, so."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

She looked up then, assessing how much trouble I'd be.

"You baked pies."

"Yes, ma'am."

"But they laid you off?"

"Yes."

"Do you have other skills? Did you finish high school?"

"College," I said. I'd finished before Chloe was born, before I took the job at K&W.

"What kind of degree? You could get something besides food service. Do you want to stay in food service?"

"No. I studied business communications." I'd never gotten work in an office, though.

"You need to be looking for a job that is at least equivalent to what you had."

I looked at the woman's cuticles, imperfect half-moons of white. On the walls of her cubicle a line of school photos marched across the pegboard, the same kid in shirts buttoned all the way up. "How did you get your job?" I asked.

She made some notes.

"Do you like it here?" I was trying to be friendly.

She said sternly, "This is about you."

I was adjusting to sobriety and wasn't that a job? I wanted the unemployment check. I needed someone to talk to, and the only person I could think of was Ricky. I was proud that I hadn't chased him the way that Fenwick predicted I would when we were in treatment. Now it wasn't about *wanting* him. I just needed a friend.

I stayed so long at the unemployment office that Mama had to pick up the girls. When I got home, she'd made their sandwiches and they'd tuned into *Sesame Street*, so I joined Mama at the table where she was rolling out piecrust. She'd covered the table with all the pie pans and cake pans we had, more than I'd ever realized.

I just stood there, looking at her, like she'd lost her mind.

"I have an idea." She had that cheer in her voice that I loved and hated.

"Of course you do," I said.

"I doubt you have a better one." She smacked a ball of dough.

"Go on."

"We're going to sell some pies."

"For God's sake, Mama, I'm done with that."

"It won't hurt to try. There's neighbors who'll buy them."

"We're going to have a perpetual bake sale?"

"Ms. Christie down the way said she'd take whatever we made today for her church bake sale."

"I thought I might look up some friends from treatment."

"Those people?"

"Uh huh," I said.

"Check my shopping list—I'm going to get ingredients for the fillings."

I wrote down cocoa powder, heavy cream, and cherry filling. Eggs for meringue. Butter. There was no end to the butter we'd need.

I waited for her to go shopping before I got out Ricky's number—a home number that rang and rang. Then I tried his workplace, the Asheboro Zoo.

"Tell him Deirdre called," I said and left my number.

Then I rolled out more piecrusts and lined the pie pans, cake pans, and even her roasting pan with dough. I worked quickly, stretching the dough with my palms. I cut out squares and circles for tarts and turnovers, and I showed Chloe how to roll snakes and balls with the leftover dough. Roberta, her chubby hands covered with flour, tried to roll the dough too. I sprinkled sugar on their dough and put it in the oven with the piecrusts that I was baking to hold cream pie fillings. While those cooled in Mama's old, white Frigidaire, we put cherry and apple pies in the oven. I let the girls eat their sugared dough right out of the oven, and then I gave them a long bath while Mama made supper.

That evening, Chloe and Roberta were at the table eating Mama's spaghetti when the phone rang, and I jumped for it, but it was our neighbor calling about somebody losing their dog. Mama stayed on the phone, gliding from dog to weather to her neighbor's COPD. All I knew was that she was blocking Ricky's call.

At the girls' bedtime, I sat between their twin beds and chose books from the stack on the bedside table, a board book for Roberta and one with real paper pages for Chloe, holding Roberta in my lap. Chloe listened politely, correcting me when I got a word wrong. She couldn't read but she knew the story word for word. She pointed out the important things on each page the way she did with Mama. It was the story of bad Benjamin Bunny, always breaking the rules but somehow ending up safe with his mother at night, and Chloe said he was so bad that maybe he didn't deserve to come home. I wondered if Chloe felt the same about me.

I said, "I'm home for good now."

Chloe said, "But you never left."

She couldn't know it was only my body that was present, still sick, my mind detached and numb. I'd grabbed after Ricky for escape and was probably a fool to do so, but I couldn't take back the fact that I had called him.

I lay on the floor between their beds after lights out, hoping I could sleep, too, and regain a normal schedule by osmosis, but I couldn't nod off and went to the kitchen.

"You're right. I am only a pie baker," I said to Mama, who was at the table with a cup of tea.

"Did you hear Royal Cake is hiring?" Mama asked.

"Cakes now?"

"Snack cakes. Haven't you seen them at the store?"

The phone rang. Mama got it quickly, so it wouldn't wake the girls.

It was Ricky. "Are you alright?" he asked.

"I lost my job when K&W blew up."

"What I meant was, are *you* alright?" He had a calm, patient voice that killed me.

I reached the cord as far as I could from where my mother listened. "They laid me off."

"Look at it this way. More time for meetings."

"Why don't we get some coffee? What's between Winston-Salem and Asheboro?"

"Nothing."

He laughed.

"Lexington," I said. But I didn't know Lexington.

"High Point," he said. "I know a meeting. Then we can do coffee."

For Ricky, I would sit through a meeting.

I met him there the next night. I ate a crumbly Pecan Sandie with my black coffee.

It was mostly older men, and I wished for more sober women in the room. There were two, one with shiny, suntanned legs and glossy toenails, the other with a grizzled face and a big laugh. The men laughed at the stories they told each other. Everyone smoked nonstop, so I asked Ricky for a cigarette. He gave me one, and I lit up. It was a rush of relaxation that I needed badly.

He raised his hand when they asked for visitors. I did, too, but I didn't say I was an alcoholic like Ricky did.

There was an old-fashioned Jesus portrait on the wall and another picture of open hands with the words "Remember, Surrender" underneath.

Ricky hadn't planned where to go afterward, but I'd spotted a Krispy Kreme on the way to the church, and even though I said I was full and I couldn't, he bought us two warm doughnuts. I confessed the explosion had set off aftershocks in me, a kind of blankness and detachment. At least, that's how it seemed.

"How are your daughters?" he asked.

"About the same? Honestly, I've missed so much of their lives."

"Are you going to meetings in Winston-Salem?"

"Not yet. It would be easier with a first-shift job."

He nodded, but I could see his doubt.

"Why don't you come to aftercare?" I countered.

"Too far. Anyway, I like the meetings."

"This is when we talk about running away together."

"Tahiti or something?" He smiled.

"Anywhere."

"I can barely support myself," he said, looking at the clock on the wall.

"You don't have to support me."

"I don't think we're in *that* movie." He balled up the wax paper from the doughnuts and stuffed it in his cup.

"Let me know if you change your mind."

"Right," he said.

Out in the parking lot, he punched my arm instead of hugging me. Instead of kissing me.

We got in our separate cars and headed to our separate cities. Ricky wouldn't save me.

Almost home, I pulled in at the Quik Mart.

In my car with a cold can of beer cooling my hands, I watched teenagers going in and coming out with beer. My hands were wet from the can's perspiration. Then I got out and left it, unopened, on the newspaper rack for someone to find.

The warmth and smell of baking pies lingered in the kitchen. Mama had left the cherry and apple pies on the counter when she went to bed; I knew she'd find a way to sell them in the morning. A pack of disposable pie tins was next to the pies, vessels for a second day. The crust would have to be right to avoid easy breakage in the flexible tins, that was the art of it, something I knew. I wouldn't be able to sleep, not for hours, so I got out butter, flour, and salt. I sliced the cold, slick butter quickly with two sharp knives, and the flour stuck to it. It has no choice but to become a new thing. I added cold water then I washed my hands to press together all of the parts into one ball. Tomorrow, it would stretch to a shell that would hold chocolate, strawberry, cherry, blueberry—all manner of fillings. I imagined Roberta, her eyes wide when I cut her a piece of an imperfect chocolate pie. She would grasp a fork in her fist and take her first bite.

"Is it sweet enough for you?" I'd study her face and watch the slow bloom of pleasure.

With her mouth pursed and eyes wide, she would nod and swallow. "Mama, it's perfect."♦


*Frankly, My Dear* by Roger Camp

# Articulated

*poetry by Annie Diamond*

I

Merton Street between rains—cobblestones
damp, sun feeble. The quietest street in town:
medieval stone muffles all. Robert Hooke
identified the living cell here,
with a selfmade microscope in 1665.
Here I am the living cell with coffee
in a paper cup, mudglossed shoes,
a cold that woke me up at 4, again at 7.
Walking through the Botanic Garden, I
cannot shake the feeling of starring
in a Waugh novel; I read *Brideshead Revisited*
once before I came to Oxford, will read it once
after I leave. I did not like the book
before, but I will like it after,
after I have lived inside the cloistral hush
of these stones, after I have slept beside a man
for the first time, after I have drunk gin gimlets
at the bar once a Greek Revival church,
deconsecrated. Waugh studied
at Hertford College, pronounced like
the capital of Connecticut, which I do not gather
until I get there and pronounce it wrong. I return
to the Botanic Garden all autumn, learn
part of its 1.8 hectares
was a medieval Jewish burial ground. In 1290,
King Edward I expelled all Jews from England;
the Magna Carta did not protect nor count us.
For almost four centuries I could not
have come here. There must be some
Jewish bones beneath me.
Magdalen College, pronounced *maudlin*,
across the street from the Botanic Garden,
once owned its land. I stare east
up Merton Street; it must have looked the same
when Hooke first saw what made us—this pale
sunlight primeval, resolute.
Here I hear a Northern Irish linguist give
a talk on Shakespeare, about Original and
Received Pronunciations;
Shakespeare would not recognize his poetries
in our modern mouths. I read *Beowulf* and learn

about word-hoards: *wordhord* appears 7 times
in surviving Old English verse.

II

4 in the morning I catch a bus
to London to line up for Shakespeare
rush tickets, the underslept bone-thrill
almost the best part. When
David Bowie dies, I am here. He taught me
how to work a melancholic temperament; he
was the guardian angel of little weirdos—
now we are older weirdos,
secure in our weirdoness thanks to him.
Book One of *Brideshead Revisited* is titled
*Et in Arcadia ego*. A sentence in Latin will
have the same meaning no matter
its order of words. This helps classical verse;
in good Ciceronian Latin, verbs end sentences
unless meter wants otherwise. Old English
meter wants alliteration, caesura.
*So tell us if what we have heard is true about*
*this threat, whatever it is, this danger abroad*
*in the dark nights, this corpse-maker*
*mongering death*. Maker
of that translation died one month
before I came here. Corpse-maker:
this kenning for Grendel suggests
creation even in destruction,
suggests compassion, fruitfulness.
Kennings a distinct feature of Old English
verse, roundabout; circumlocution essential
to the life of poems.
Viscous autumn sunshine creates me,
as if transfused. I drink an English wine, red,
hot mulled cider from a Christmas market on
Broad Street, taste Burns Night haggis, port
and snuff, a dram of scotch. Like
a mikvah, I am made new with bathing.
Oliver Cromwell let Jews back into England
in 1657—our unexodus was business, linked
to trade with Spain and Holland.
Here I live on Dawson Street, next door
to a Spanish restaurant. Dawson Street on
an autumn night, under a small moon and
a handful of stars, little lights
strung up in trees; I have not belonged
to places—places have belonged to me.

III

*Articulated* means both *spoken*
and *attached*—built in sections,
hinged. There are in England
articulated lorries, what are called
tractor-trailers west of the Atlantic. *Articulated*
from the Latin *articulus*, small hinge. I wonder
how we got this word to mean something
about words, about speaking—both sorts
of *articulation* have to do with parts,
distinctness, division. Oxford made
of 38 colleges; I visit them all.
Worcester and Merton are prettiest.
I do not mispronounce Worcester, which
has a lake with swans; have I ever seen
a real-life swan before?
In 1914 Unitarian T. S. Eliot
won a scholarship to Merton,
converted to Anglicanism and shrugged off his
American citizenship in 1927. *There is a time for*
*building*. Jesus College beautiful too, its rounded
Dutch gables unusual for Oxonian architecture.
Sunlight struggles through this medieval
stone, succinct. I have not seen snow here.
Trees in Christ Church Meadow lift their
noses, inhaling themselves, as spring begins,
unsure even after all these centuries that this
is not death, is life. One small herd
of cows lives in the Meadow; grass and rain
articulate their lives. So serene, so large and
slow. I am fast and small and unserene,
I am made of so much—
the Great Vowel Shift made modern English
between 1350 and 1600. Linguists understand
this better than I do, but I know it has to do
with changed vowel sounds.
In a bookstore here I hear *Howl*
for the first time; the poem sounds too supple
in an English mouth. On the same night I learn
the word *unhomed*, and this is the first place
I have not felt it.
At the Botanic Garden entrance gate
is a commemorative plaque for all of
the dispossessed Jews of Oxford.

IV

Born Thomas Stearns Eliot, 1888—died
Kensington, London, 1965. Got a theatre
named for him at Merton College,
where he spent the first world war.
When he was there some British students
proposed a motion to proclaim the college
*abhors the Americanization of Oxford*;
he talked them out of it.
Coffee filter, windshield wiper, lava lamp,
and Frisbee invented in his lifetime—world
he left little resembled the one he entered.
Born St. Louis, Missouri
on Locust Street; last of 6
surviving children. I encountered
his poems long before I came to Oxford,
first read *Prufrock* on an autumn morning
alone at 18. He wrote the poem when he
was 22; now that I have been 22,
I marvel even more at the thing, at its gnaw.
Would he have been able to write *Prufrock*
had he grown up on the Internet?
The Internet has changed
loneliness, cranked up its contrast; *Prufrock*
tenders it monochrome, secular, quiet. When
he entered the Church of England,
Eliot classed himself an Anglo-Catholic;
Anglo-Catholicism contrived in Oxford in
1833. One critic calls his anti-Semitism
a *failure*
*of moral imagination*;
writes, *anti-Semitism encompasses*
*both drawing-room condescensions*
*and forest shootings.*
This critic classes Eliot closer
to the drawing room, for he has not
murdered a Jew, but his anti-Semitic
poems place him somewhere
between. Adversarial reading proposed,
a combination of *resistance and respect*.
We must not articulate Eliot guiltless;
cannot use the past as some excuse.
*Indifference to offence is*
*a failure of interpretation.*

V

Two coffee shops in Oxford both allege
to be the oldest in England, on each side
of High Street; each claims formation
around 1650, both with laminated signs
declaring it. In the swankier one I drink
champagne at lunch when I turn 20.
Both on the eastern part of High Street,
west of Longwall Street and Rose Lane;
Merton and Christ Church to the south.
These geographies suit
like a name or a thumbprint.
Each morning I cross Magdalen Bridge,
walk north on Mansfield Road, return at
night to Dawson Street.
November, the heater on high,
I watch *Footloose* and read Foucault—
*Des espaces autres*, 1967; the paper where
he coins *heterotopia* to describe a space of
otherness, a space of difference.
He calls the ship the *fundamental heterotopia*
but I think, no, the airport. A space one enters
for no other reason than to get elsewhere.
Here nothing leaves me.
When David Bowie dies
I drink at the coziest pub on Broad Street.
Friends visit from Dublin, Paris, Vrindavan;
I take them all to the pub where Bill Clinton
as a 1968 Rhodes Scholar did not get high.
A most English encounter:
professor named Lucinda prepares tea
in her snug Mansfield top-floor office,
brings out a biscuit tin,
recites *Beowulf* in Old English.
I go to the Pitt Rivers Museum,
5 minutes northwest of Mansfield,
thinking little of the name; never occurs to me
it might have been a person. I figure it has to do
with a real river—Oxford is full of waters. I will
learn later of Augustus Pitt Rivers, ethnologist
whose collection founded the museum
in 1884. *Collection* seems a magnanimous word
for this muddle, its haphazard curation. *Curation*
from the Latin *curare*, to take care.

VI

Rosalind Franklin, British Jewish chemist
whose research made it possible for Crick
and Watson to name the double helix
of DNA, got a doctorate at Cambridge.
Her research focused on molecular
structures of that which builds us.
Born Notting Hill, London; her parents
helped settle Jews who escaped the Shoah,
took 2 refugee children into their home.
Franklin died of ovarian cancer at 37,
Chelsea, London, 1958—
occurrence of ovarian/uterine/cervical cancers
higher than average among Ashkenazi Jews. We
are more prone to all kinds of diseases: genetic,
autoimmune. Franklin published 13 papers
while she had treatment.
Crick and Watson shared a Nobel Prize
in 1962 for discovering the double helix.
After she worked
on DNA, Franklin led research on viruses;
a team member continued this research long
after she died—he won a Nobel Prize for
*his structural elucidation of important*
*nucleic-acid protein complexes*.
Jews not allowed at Cambridge
or Oxford until 1856, and women were kept out
of Oxford until 1878, could not get degrees until
1920. There is a Rosalind Franklin Institute
here now, worth 100 million pounds,
where scientists from all over Britain
can better comprehend what rends us.
Here I am pieced together, I piece:
get a part in a musical, perform
on the piano at a Mansfield open mic,
read the 1937 Bakhtin paper where he
devises *chronotope* to articulate
the link in literature between
time and place. Franklin never
married; death certificate calls her
a *research scientist and spinster*.
At least *research scientist* comes first.
She worked in Paris after the war, 1946
trekked the French Alps.

VII

I audition for a funk band in October,
find a red-leather-bound gold-lettered
*Oxford Shakespeare*, used,
for 10 quid. On the night I
meet the first man I will sleep beside,
I have a drink with gin, lemon, triple sec,
marmalade; his bed at Brasenose College
has the special hush of hotel carpet,
disremembering. *Sweet, not lasting,*
*the perfume and suppliance*
*of a minute*. I walk on
Little Clarendon Street most mornings,
which tumbles west onto Walton Street;
now this is Jericho, suburb of Oxford.
*Jericho* means *fragrant*,
both Hebrew and Arabic.
Freud and Jude the Obscure two bars
on Walton Street. Suburb of Beersheba
in *Jude the Obscure* based on
this Jericho; I will not read the novel
until after I leave. At Freud I drink on
Halloween, dressed as Miss Scarlet.
I listen to a requiem at Magdalen,
one I know, have sung:
Gabriel Fauré, D minor.
I have a hard time conceiving of Oxford
as large enough to comprise suburbs. I go
to formal dinners at Mansfield, Hertford,
Oriel, sit twice at the high table;
the pomp of Oxford never wears on me.
Here I am a genius of stillness, wanting
for once to be nowhere else.
Little Clarendon, late November:
fond, familiar, spangled, heraldic
with its Christmas lights, loud restaurants.
I attend midnight mass on Christmas Eve;
fire alarms go off during the service,
and we clear out onto High Street.
23 colleges offer organ scholarships;
I attend a free organ recital at Balliol.
Balliol founded about 1263. Autumn sun
enfrescoed over Broad Street spires, smell
of rainstitched air—elegant, uncrowded.

VIII

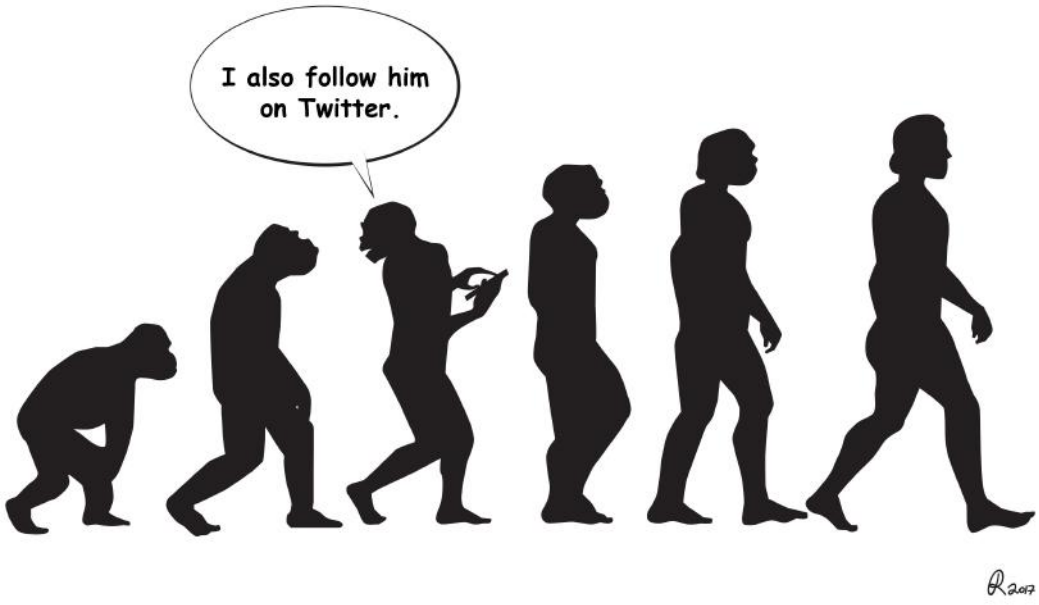
—sunsteeped morning I climb
the church spire, Radcliffe Square
for the completest view of Oxford,
dappled feudal stone and newer
stone dappled too. Prize this light,
democratic. Costs 4 quid to climb
the spire: looking out and down,
I can name all I see—extravagant
power in naming the parts
of a whole. Magdalen Tower
persists over the horizon to the east,
sundraped tallest building in Oxford.
Dawson Street dawdles past the bridge,
though I cannot see it from here. North
of me and grand, Radcliffe Camera;
in Latin *camera* means *room*,
in English means *look, gather,*
*remember, relate*; vaulted stone ceiling
coffered, pale blue and cream—prettiest
ceiling I have seen here:
Oxford is full of first-rate ceilings.
All Souls College east with its gold
and black gates onto Catte Street;
Brasenose Lane west, last street in town
with one central gutter, medieval design,
so its rain collects different—
Exeter, Lincoln, Brasenose Colleges skirt
the little lane, perpendicular to Turl Street,
where I get a packet of bookplates
with Shakespeare on them, his face
and Ben Jonson lines: *Reader, look not*
*on his picture, but his book*—below me
Vaults and Garden in the church basement,
where I eat Welsh rarebit and clotted cream
for the first time, where I drink tea alone
and not, depending on the afternoon. Alone
I like the table in the southeast corner, near
electric outlet and heater.
Though I cannot see it from up
the church spire, I know the Cherwell meets
the Thames south of Christ Church Meadow,
where Magpie Lane connects
High Street to Merton Street:

IX

Stephen Hawking was born here,
in 1942, and so am I. I see *Hamlet*
onstage for the first time,
with student actors and a female Horatio
at Keble College. Named for John Keble,
one founder of Anglo-Catholicism.
I giggle at *Thou art a scholar, speak*
*to it, Horatio*, although I know
it was serious for Renaissance
humanists—students learn to talk to ghosts,
learn to trust their senses. Foundation stone
of Victorian Gothic Keble laid 1868.
Hawking began at Oxford at 17,
coxed his college rowing team;
diagnosed with ALS at 21,
given until 23 to live. The month
I turned 23, Hawking turned 75.
5 decades he spoke from
a single cheek muscle. *Communicated*
more accurate, I suppose; he had not spoken
since 1985. But *communicated* feels too cold,
after Latin *communicare*,
to share, to make common.
Modern science articulated Hawking,
allowed him to write books, to be alive.
*Speak* after Old English *sprecan*;
Latinate words cooler, more arch,
than Anglo-Saxon; more dressed.
One night I wear heeled boots to dinner,
walk back to Dawson Street in ankle socks;
heels far too high and thin for cobblestones.
Keble did not go coed until 1979.
*In an infinite universe, all points can*
*be regarded as the center, because all points*
*have an infinite number of stars on each side*.
Teaching in Oxford first recorded in 1096,
but first colleges were not founded until
the late 1200s.
Oxford a millennium older than I,
a millennium older than all I have
known.
An infinite universe with infinite stars,
all points will be regarded as the center.

X

An infinite universe with infinite stars;
all points will be regarded as the center.
Here I am complete on
a lapis blue March evening; here
I know all there is of rapture—recklessness
of stars, a certain moon; real butter and clean
milk at teatime. *Heterotopias*
*are most often linked to slices in time*,
Foucault wrote 5 decades ago. Robert Hooke
came to Wadham College in 1653, the college
where, three centuries later, Roger Penrose
would be a mathematics professor.
Penrose and Hawking together developed
theorems about gravitational singularities,
locations where laws of normal
spacetime cannot exist. In 1650
Christopher Wren came to Wadham;
later, he designed the Sheldonian Theatre
where, even later, I sneak into a Jo Rowling talk
meant for Exeter students. Hooke wrote of Wren
that he had the kind of mind not beheld since
Archimedes. Here I behold
*Arcadia*, the Tom Stoppard show.
Born Tomáš Straussler in Czechoslovakia
when it was still Czechoslovakia, left with
his Jewish parents when
the Nazis came. Moved first
to Singapore, then Australia,
then India, where he became Tom,
then England postwar. I first read
*Arcadia* in Ohio;
there I read *Proof* too—I see it here
in a makeshift theater at the Mathematical
Institute, Woodstock Road, one street east
of Walton; Little Clarendon links them.
Stoppard knighted in 1997, Wren in 1673.
*It's wanting to know that makes us matter*.
Burns supper the night I turn 20,
with toasts and poems; at The Nosebag
off Cornmarket Street I eat full English
breakfasts—eggs fried or scrambled,
bacon, two rashers, sausage, mushrooms,
potatoes, baked beans, with coffee or tea.


I also follow him
on Twitter.

# Alexa

*nonfiction by Liz Matthews*

Alexa, set timer for eight minutes.
*Eight minutes starting now.*

Alexa, talk in a British accent.
*I can't change my voice.*

Alexa, what are you doing?
*I'm answering questions and learning more.*

Alexa, what is the weather today?
*Mostly cloudy with a chance of sunshine in the afternoon. Twenty-two degrees with a high of thirty-two.*

Alexa, what sound does a fart make?

Alexa, how do you spell "sister"?

Alexa, do you like me?
*I don't have an opinion on that.*

Alexa, how do I tell my daughter that she doesn't have to say "sorry" every time I ask her to do something?

Alexa, how do you spell "sleepover"?

Alexa, why does it bother my children when I sing along to the radio while I drive? How does someone not sing along to "Peggy-O"? Alexa, how long should I let the silence linger? Tonight I interrupted the quiet by asking them if they prefer to talk or listen. Neither answered. How do I know if they have something they want to tell me?

Alexa, I don't like you.
*It wasn't my intent to make you feel that way.*

Alexa, play "Sorry Not Sorry."
*"Sorry Not Sorry" by Demi Lovato.*

Alexa, how can I be on time? Is it true that people who are always late are optimistic? Is it true that people with ADD get more things done, or is this just what I tell myself? Do my kids notice when I start something that I don't finish? Like the spring I decided we'd plant our own vegetable garden. After we harvested the lettuce, we were supposed to plant cucumbers, then carrots a few weeks later. In the summer, we'd plant tomatoes like my grandfather used to grow. How will I teach my daughter to use her distraction to work for her? When will I know that she's old enough to understand?

Alexa, what's sex?

Alexa, say "poop."
*I really shouldn't say anything rude.*

Alexa, how do I teach my kids that you can't trust everyone? My high school creative writing teacher, nearing retirement, asked my friend if she knew anyone who had magic mushrooms. For a friend. The same teacher who taught me about Chekhov and the gun that has to go off. The friend who had already gone to rehab.

Alexa, do you like me?
*Sure! I'm always happy to make new friends.*

Alexa, how do I teach my kids to break the rules without hurting someone or getting hurt? This morning, on the way to school, our car skidded on ice at the end of the driveway. I lifted my foot off the brakes and allowed the car to be in

control. I felt that dancing in my stomach that I get on roller coasters or after a good day of writing.

Alexa, how much is too much?

Alexa, how do I bite my tongue at the bus stop? Our neighbors' cars are getting stolen. There's a gang from Waterbury initiating new members with this ritual. Sometimes they take the car for parts, but sometimes they take the cars for joyrides—a white Toyota Corolla was taken then ditched on the side of the road. The car smelled like smoke, but otherwise was fine. How do I know if my kids are scared by what they hear on the radio? Suspects, crime scene, shoot-out, security, explosion, obliteration, investigation.

Alexa, what if I forget to give them a kiss before they get on the bus? Should I listen to my mother who says, "Out of sight, out of mind"? How do I not get nervous every time I get a text from the school? It's always a change in the lunch menu: stuffed breadsticks with cheese instead of mozzarella sticks. Alexa, what's the difference?

Alexa, do you like me?
*Of course, we can be friends! You seem very nice.*

Alexa, can I really do this? Are they going to turn out okay?

Wait, don't answer that.

Alexa, thank you.
*No sweat.*

Alexa, stop timer.♦

# As Fate Would Have It

*fiction by T. E. Wilderson*

Gwyneth and Fidelis fell in love in the Guyanese jungle in 1978. They had not intended to do so. They were filled with anxiety and fear that November morning when they climbed the hill abutting the banana field, away from the compound. Their group—about a dozen of them—was guided by tall, machete-wielding Avery, who worked in the kitchen as a cook. They knew they were in full view of the armed guards until they reached the hilltop.

Only Avery and a couple of others knew just who would be leaving on that morning trek, and Gwyneth was surprised to see one of the dishwashers, Fidelis, among the defectors. He had seemed so zealous during congregations, she thought. But perhaps he was wearing a fervent mask out of fear, as she had. She knew him only in passing from the assemblages of the compound's followers. And, although he was quick to nod and smile, she could sense he liked keeping to himself.

Reaching the crest of the hill seemed to take eons, but in truth it was half an hour. When they made it (without having been fired upon), a dark-skinned, young woman named Roberta—who had her young son tied to her back with a bedsheet—burst into tears. It was Fidelis who patted her on the shoulder, his own eyes glistening. Gwyneth found solace in his comforting gesture, and she felt her own frantic breathing slow a bit. Then the group began their furtive descent into the jungle and toward freedom.

Gwyneth shuffles about the kitchen in her gold wedge house slippers preparing dinner. She's singing an old Aretha Franklin tune when she looks up to see Fidelis in the doorway with a rag tied under his chin and knotted on top of his head. He suppresses a smile.

"Oh, Papa," Gwyneth laughs. "What are you doing?"

"What?" Fidelis replies. "I have a toothache." He makes a serious face, then bursts into a fit of laughter.

"You cannot have that rag tied to your head when Frederick arrives."

Fidelis buckles over, cracking up so hard he has trouble speaking. "But my tooth!"

"Oh, you. Go get the pliers, and I will take care of that tooth."

Fidelis crosses the kitchen to Gwyneth, who is pouring cornbread batter into a pan, and kisses her plump cheek.

"Everything smells so good," he says, "it's made my tooth stop aching." He unties the rag, and Gwyneth grabs it from her husband and snaps it at his arm.

"Thank you, Papa. But you must leave me be. I have lots yet to do. Why don't you go set up the dominos?"

"What's to set up? They're facedown on the table, shuffled, and ready to go. Besides, I'm afraid he won't want to play his old pa. He didn't last time."

"He was in a funny mood last time." "It's been three months. What if it's gotten funnier?"

"Don't think such things. He sounded good on the phone, did he not?"

"He did."

"Then you have no worries. Now go." Fidelis lifts the top on the pot of collard greens, letting out a tangy puff of steam. Gwyneth swats his hand, causing the lid to clang back shut. He chuckles and

kisses her again on the cheek before heading into the living room. Gwyneth resumes her soulful singing and cracks open the oven to whiff the garlic-infused rump roast. Fidelis had suggested to his wife that she prepare a special dinner spread for Frederick, instead of the usual Guyanese cook-up rice dish of black-eyed peas, coconut milk, and chicken that they customarily ate on Sundays.

In the living room of their small walk-up apartment, Fidelis turns the television on and flips through stations until he comes upon a rerun of *Family Feud*. He goes to the front window behind the sofa, kneeling on it so he can peer up and down the bustling street below for Frederick, who is not due for another hour. Not seeing his son, Fidelis seats himself in his favorite easy chair facing the television set. He turns the volume down low enough so that he can hear Gwyneth singing in the kitchen and absently pats the arm of his chair as he thinks about their son's last visit. Frederick only stayed a short while after they'd eaten supper, then announced that he wouldn't be coming the next Sunday. He was moving to New Jersey, and it took two long, long train rides to get to Far Rockaway, Queens. He scurried out when his parents tried to ask him questions, saying that he would call. When his mother broke down and phoned Frederick two weeks later, his number had been disconnected. Fidelis had tried to calm Gwyneth by saying they knew he was moving. They both became concerned, though, when his mother called his job a few days after that and was told that Frederick hadn't worked there for almost a month. This sent the parents into a mild panic. They had never been so out of touch with their son before, and they walked around stymied and anxious until he called a few weekends later. He said that he'd quit his job at the airport for one in sales. There was boisterousness in the background, and when Fidelis asked where he was, Frederick said that he had noisy roommates. He ended the call abruptly—in the middle of Fidelis telling him about a purse snatching he'd witnessed on the subway ride to work the day before. Being rushed off the phone caught Fidelis by surprise. Moreover, he was a bit heartbroken when his son hadn't asked to say goodbye to his mother before hanging up, as was their ritual. Fidelis asked Gwyneth what you were supposed to dial if you wanted to call back the last number that phoned—he was sure it was *something*—but she had no clue, and he did not pursue the matter.

Fidelis stares into space, thinking about how troubled he and Gwyneth were in the weeks that passed before their son called again—once more speaking for about ten minutes and ending the call mid-conversation—when there is a knock at the door.

Anxiety loomed in Gwyneth's eyes as the group made their way through the thicket, and Avery impatiently gestured from the front of the pack for her to keep up. They were walking single file, and Gwyneth was bringing up the rear. While she knew it was day, the jungle's crown canopy was so dense, the light that dappled through was dim. Her Coke-bottle glasses kept slipping down her sweaty nose. Being severely nearsighted and slightly night-blind, she was afraid of losing sight of the others as they hastened farther and farther ahead of her.

Gwyneth tried to keep up as the posse tromped on, just their footfalls and the occasional whipping slash of Avery's machete adding to the cacophony of the jungle. Birds and insects and monkeys all shrieking and shrilling and squawking. Gwyneth was relieved when she saw a swath of light ahead. They had been heading for some railroad tracks that would lead them to Matthew's Ridge, a small town almost forty miles away,

where they would seek help in getting to the American embassy. Despite Avery losing sight of the markers he'd placed to guide the way, the band of apostates reached the clearing by midmorning. They stepped onto the tracks and walked for about another hour. The pervasive tension usually felt at the compound was abating, but still no one spoke.

A train approached from behind on the opposite track, and it slowed to a stop as it came upon them. Passengers on the train peered through the windows for a look at the ragtag group. It was likely that the brouhaha surrounding the departure of the visiting U.S. congressman had died down at the compound, and their escape would certainly have been discovered. Fear that the compound's henchmen had warned the train crew to look out for them was palpable. The conductor leaned out the engine window and asked where they were going. Avery spoke: They were going on a picnic. The conductor was satisfied with that answer––although the group was outraged and erupted once the train had continued on its way. Was he crazy? asked one stout man. Ludicrous! some exclaimed. Jonestown was not a place where members could saunter into the kitchen and gather provisions for a *picnic*. They would be looking for them now for sure, others lamented. Avery raised his hands: I'm going to the American embassy—follow me or don't. And with that, he started walking again. Roberta, her sleeping son still tied to her back, was the first to follow Avery. Then others fell in behind. Gwyneth was frozen in place, her hands balled into tight fists. Fidelis had joined the rest of the pack, but when he turned around and saw her standing stock-still, he jogged back to her.

"You're not coming?" he asked. "You're not going to try and make it on your own, are you?"

"I do not know what to do." Gwyneth trembled. "It is just that I am afraid the guards will come for us if we stay on the tracks."

He stared at her for a bit then glanced at the others as they moved on. He told Gwyneth he had a plan. They'd break from the group and stay close to the railroad tracks—but behind some of the flora flanking them. That way, should the guards come looking, they'd be hidden from view. Gwyneth let a tear drop then nodded her head.

Fidelis asked her where she was from originally. Her accent was not from Oakland, he joked, where they had both joined the church before moving to Jonestown.

"We are originally from Guyana," Gwyneth replied. "From the poor part of Georgetown."

"Ah," said Fidelis. "That explains the formal way you talk. I thought maybe you'd been to some fancy boarding school or something." He smiled.

Gwyneth met Fidelis's mirth-filled eyes with curiosity. She'd never thought of herself as formal. Gwyneth explained how she and her mother and older sister, Myrtle, had moved to California a decade before looking for a better life. They joined the church when her sister met a follower and married him. Her brother-in-law was from Oakland, though, she added. Her twin niece and nephew had been born there, too, and had never even been out of the Bay Area before they all moved to the compound. Her mother, Gwyneth confided, felt that after five years at the compound, returning to their homeland was going to be the heaven that their leader promised, so she believed the same. She had no idea that there would be nights she'd have to listen to their leader, Reverend Jim, ramble on over the compound's loudspeakers about conspiracies against them, their safety, and their devotion to the temple. She had no idea that she was going to be washing clothes all day, a virtual slave, without a life to call her own.

Fidelis was from Trinidad. But his family left that country when he was just a child, and he grew up in Brooklyn, New York. He had moved to Oakland with two cousins in 1974 after his oldest brother, Garthan, told him of a church he'd found with a revolutionary leader who was planning to build a socialist paradise dedicated to racial and economic equality. A utopia.

Fidelis opens the apartment door. He finds his son standing next to a woman with flawless caramel skin, who is dressed in a head scarf and a long muslin dress. A silver stud pierces one nostril. Frederick is wearing a black skullcap and a matching long-sleeved tunic and pants set. Fidelis grabs his son in a gleeful hug, then turns to greet the visitor.

"Hello. Welcome," Fidelis says. He manages to mask his surprise at seeing someone with his son. "I'm Frederick's father, Fidelis. Please, come inside."

"Thank you," says the young woman. "I'm Nala."

Fidelis steps aside, bending in an exaggerated formal bow and gestures for them to enter. "Mother will be very excited to see we have a special guest joining us."

"Thank you," says Nala.
Frederick gives his father a meek smile.

"Frederick, you should've warned us that we'd have a special visitor. We would have dressed for the occasion."

"Oh, I hope I'm no trouble," Nala says.

"No, no. No trouble at all. We love company." Fidelis lets out a warm chuckle. He is telling Nala and Frederick to make themselves at home when Gwyneth comes in from the kitchen. She greets her son with a kiss on the forehead and a pinch on the arm.

"Frederick," Gwyneth says, "how could you let me be caught in a house frock?"

"Mother, this is Nala," Frederick says in a timid voice.

Gwyneth wipes her hands on her lace-trimmed apron and extends her hand to their guest. "Nala," says Gwyneth. "What a pretty name for a pretty girl."

Nala shakes Gwyneth's fingertips. "Thank you." She joins Frederick, who has seated himself, legs splayed, on the sofa.

Gwyneth and Fidelis stand gazing, flustered, at the couple for a moment before Gwyneth breaks the silence. "Can I get either of you something to drink?" she asks.

"Nothing for me," says Nala.

"Would you care for a beer, Frederick?" Fidelis asks.

"No beer," Nala answers for Frederick. "We don't drink alcohol."

"I see," Fidelis says. Both parents look at Frederick, who feigns a smile and shrugs. Fidelis chimes in, "I'll have sweet tea, Mother."

"Sure, Papa. Anyone else?" Gwyneth asks. Nala and Frederick shake their heads. Fidelis sits back in his easy chair, and Gwyneth disappears into the kitchen.

"Nala," says Fidelis, "can I interest you in a game of dominos?"

"Papa!" Gwyneth admonishes from the other room.

"Okay, no dominos tonight."

"We'll be eating soon enough," Gwyneth tells Fidelis as she returns and hands him a glass of iced tea. She pushes her glasses up her nose and watches Nala survey their home. The damask-covered sofa has sullied, threadbare arms, and the footrest on the easy chair has clear packing tape holding together a fraying edge. Above the television are three portraits of Frederick: as a two-year-old, at age nine, and the last in his high school graduation cap and gown. Nala is studying the faded, striped drapes when she catches Gwyneth observing her.

"I hope you are hungry, Nala," Gwyneth says. "We have a big supper ahead."

Nala purses her lips into a slight smile, as Frederick sits by stone-faced.

"Mother's cooking is the best," beams Fidelis. "I hope you've brought your appetite. I saved mine all day just for supper." Gwyneth kisses Fidelis on the bald spot on his head, then excuses herself to check on the roast.

"How is the sales business, Frederick?" Fidelis asks.

"It's going," the son answers. He shoots Nala a nervous look.

"So, what is it you are selling again?"

"Naturopathy. Stuff like that."

"What is naturo—nature what now?"

"Naturopathy."

"Essential oils," Nala interjects. "You know. Sandalwood, patchouli, frankincense. He also sells incense."

"Ahhh," says Fidelis. "Who do you sell these things to? Is there big business in essential oils?"

"He does quite well," Nala says.

"I do alright," Frederick adds.

"And who do you sell all these oils to?" repeats Fidelis.

"Well," says Frederick. "Most days it's at Walmart. Sometimes I set up by the Port Authority."

Fidelis looks confused. "So, you're one of those people I see that sell to passersby?"

"He has regular customers," Nala says.

"I see. You like this better than loading luggage?"

"There is nothing for the cause in loading luggage," Nala says.

"There is a cause for selling oils?" Fidelis asks.

"We have control over our destiny when we sell our own wares."

"I see. I suppose."

"Everything we sell supports the cause." Nala looks at Frederick for confirmation, who nods at her, then his father.

"It's true," Frederick says at last. "We're entrepreneurs, really."

"Ahh," says Fidelis. "I have washed dishes all my life. Twenty-two years at the Marriot in Midtown. His mother, she has always been a laundress. We know nothing of being an entrepreneur, but now we have one in our family. I wish you luck."

"It is determination—not luck," Nala says.

Fidelis nods. "I suppose you're right." Gwyneth appears and announces dinner. Frederick and Nala stand, and Fidelis ushers the duo into the kitchen. It is warm from the oven and steaming pots of tangy collards and starchy rice simmering on the stove.

"Nala, please," Fidelis says. "As our guest, you should sit in my spot by the window."

The young woman takes her seat, and Frederick settles in to her right. Gwyneth places the roast, tureen of greens, plate of cornbread squares, bowl of rice, and dish of sliced bananas and cubed mangoes in the middle of the small, round Formica table. As Fidelis hovers near the stove, he asks if he can help.

"You can settle yourself," Gwyneth says. "We are ready to eat."

It was the third day of being lost in the jungle when Gwyneth and Fidelis happened upon the waterfall. The second day had been spent with Gwyneth slogging forward, tears streaming down her round face, and Fidelis urging her onward with one arm around her shoulder. Occasionally he asked her if she'd like to stop, but she always just shook her head. They talked of the family and friends they'd left behind, of what they must be thinking. Of how they hadn't been able to say goodbye in a way that would not betray their plans to escape. Gwyneth told Fidelis of her last conversation with her mother. When asked if she missed home, her mother closed her eyes and replied that she was too tired to miss anything or any place. The woman had turned fifty-two the month before—too young, Gwyneth

thought, to be so world-weary. She vowed to get her mother out of the compound once they made it to freedom.

They headed toward a patch of light—hoping it would be railroad tracks—and were awed by water cascading from a bluff into a vast pool. Fidelis stretched out his arms at the sight of the marvelous little waterfall with a rainbow glimmering in its mist and turned to Gwyneth (who had not cried at all that day) and shouted: Now we have seen a sign! The loudness of his voice startled Gwyneth, and she jumped a bit. Fidelis assured her that no one could possibly hear them—not the guards, and certainly not Reverend Jim. They stood staring for a while, as if it might be a mirage. When Fidelis announced they should go for a swim, Gwyneth's eyes went huge.

"We'll wash ourselves of the past," Fidelis said. He quickly pulled off his socks and shoes and headed for the water's edge. "I'm sweaty from walking through this stupid jungle. We look like a couple of bums."

Gwyneth watched as he climbed a moss-covered rock then stepped from it fully clothed into the inviting aqua. She was taken aback at Fidelis's immodesty. She looked down at her short-sleeved floral sundress and the cuts and scrapes thatching her legs. She thought of how she longed to bathe. Then an image flitted through her mind of how she would look fully soaked, her brassiere and underpants discernible under the thin fabric of her dress, and she blushed. But her demureness dissipated and was replaced by desperation and fury.

"We are going to die here," she shouted. "And you are feeling free as a bird, splashing about like a child at play! We have been living off of bananas and mangoes for the last two days. Drinking from streams. We may be forever lost, but now is the time to frolic in the water as if we are on holiday?"

"We *are* lost," Fidelis yelled back as he paddled in circles. "But if we're going to die, this is how I want to go. You have no idea how refreshed I feel. At the very least, we'll continue on our path renewed. Come on. You will not regret taking a dip. I promise. We won't stay long."

Gwyneth looked at him, now lolling on his back, and her lower lip began to quiver. When it became clear that she was not going to join him, Fidelis got out of the water and went to her.

"If nothing else, do it to symbolize a fresh start," he said.

"We are lost, and we are going to die. I beseech you ..."

"You must have faith. We aren't going to die, and the water will make you feel whole and new. Think about it. No more of Reverend Jim's *white nights* preaching over the loudspeaker at all hours. No more drinking punch they say is poisoned as a test of our loyalty. If we die, we can say that we died free. Weren't you tired of feeling like a prisoner?"

He held out his hands and gestured for her to take them, but she did not. While she saw the earnestness in his eyes, and it quelled her need to cry, she stood fast.

"Fine," he said. "I want to swim for five more minutes then we'll be on our way." He turned, unable to disguise his disappointment, then looked over his shoulder to see if she followed. When he saw that she had not moved, he waded back into the pool.

Gwyneth stared at her shoes. She had on her one pair of cushioned, closed-toe, orthopedic shoes that she wore when she worked in the laundry room. She grimaced at the thought of walking around sopping wet, but slipped out of the loafers, then rolled off her crew socks. She tucked them and her eyeglasses inside her shoes, then tiptoed over to a pebbly patch of shore and scuttled into the temperate water. The skirt of her dress blossomed out around her as she made her way in

waist-deep, then she dunked herself all the way under. The coolness made her feel effervescent. Submerged, a spiritual buoyancy she had not felt since she was a child came over her. When she resurfaced, she wiped the water from her eyes and shook the droplets beading in her afro, then swiveled around to look for Fidelis. When she strained to see him, but did not, she began splashing the water with her hands and calling his name. He was underneath the waterfall, letting it stream over him. When he heard her quavering voice, he swam as fast as he could to her, concerned that she was having trouble swimming. But as he neared her, he saw that she was smiling, eyes gleaming, joyous.

"It is a sign," she beamed when he came into focus. "We are free!" She reached out for him.

"Yes," he said when close enough to take her hands. "Yes, we are. We are free."

"So, Frederick," says Gwyneth. "How long have you and Nala been dating?"

The son does not answer, looking instead at Nala, then his mother and father.

"We are not a couple," Nala says. Her gaze is intent upon Frederick as she speaks.

"Oh," Fidelis says.

"No," Nala continues. "It's true that we live together, and that we share in the cause, but we are not romantic. It is not the wish of our leader to be together in that way. At least not at this time."

"I see," says Gwyneth. The quick look that slips between her and Fidelis says otherwise.

The son scrubs his brow then brushes his hand over his closely shorn hair. He speaks after a long silence. "It was Nala who first brought me to the temple."

"Frederick," says Gwyneth, "you have mentioned that you have roommates. Why did you not mention you were living in a temple?" She tries to keep a softness to her tone and facial expression, but the aggressive way that she is cutting the roast on her plate speaks volumes.

"I didn't want you to be alarmed. I know you're sensitive to the word *temple*," says Frederick. Fidelis and Gwyneth exchange a stricken glance that is missed by Frederick and Nala.

"It is not the word *temple* that worries us," says Gwyneth. "It is the *word* of the temple."

"Son," Fidelis says. Frederick drops his head when his father addresses him. "Your mother and me are pleased that you're here to celebrate our anniversary. It wouldn't have been the same this year without you. I'll leave it to you to explain to our guest the bananas and mango." He gestures to the dish of fruit.

Flinty and impatient, Nala looks at Frederick. The son keeps his head bowed, scrunches farther down in his seat, and fixates on his uneaten meal. Silence abounds, as all eyes are trained on him.

"We once belonged to a temple," Gwyneth says, nervously folding and unfolding her paper napkin. "It was supposed to be a utopia. It was not."

Frederick peers up at his mother and winces. Fidelis nods at his wife, but cannot catch his son's eye.

"Well, our leader is not promising any *false utopia*," Nala says. She waves her fork as she addresses the parents. "Our leader speaks only of unity in our cause."

"And who is your leader?" Gwyneth sets her fork and knife down, places her elbows on the table, and clasps her hands together.

"The Reverend Melchiah Solomon," Nala says with ardency. Frederick nods.

"He is a reverend, you say?" asks Fidelis. "Of a temple? In New Jersey?"

"Yes." Nala nudges her plate.

"I see," says Fidelis, sitting erect and gripping the edge of his plate. His mouth is stretched into a taut line.

Gwyneth forces a smile at Nala, but her eyes are beginning to moisten.

"So, Nala, how long have you been a member of this ... church?" Fidelis asks.

"Two years," Nala replies. She sits back in her chair and crosses her arms. Fidelis nods his head. He lifts a forkful of rice and collards to his mouth but stops short of eating to speak again. "And where are you originally from?"

"Jamaica, Queens."

"That's where my sister lives. Is your family still there?" His fork is still poised halfway to his mouth.

"My family is with Reverend Solomon." Fidelis sets his fork on his plate. "You mean they live with you, at the temple? With Reverend Solomon?"

"*Reverend Solomon's family* is my family."

"I see." Fidelis devours the mouthful of rice and greens. While watching his son sit motionless and wordless next to Nala, he skewers a piece of meat and takes his time chewing it. He sucks his teeth before speaking again. "Frederick, how is your good friend, Landon?"

"He's fine," a sheepish Frederick replies.

"So, you are still in touch?"

"We do not see Landon anymore," Nala says.

"Why is that?" asks Fidelis.

In unison, Nala and Frederick reply, "*He would not wear the garb!*"

Gwyneth and Fidelis are thunderstruck at the duo's brash tone, at the sudden volume of Frederick's voice.

Fidelis looks at Gwyneth and asks, "Mother—do we have the garb?"

Gwyneth shakes her head at her husband's attempt at levity. "No, Papa. Our garb is at the dry cleaners."

"The garb is not to be laughed at," Nala says.

"Of course not," Gwyneth says.

"Reverend Solomon says only those true to the cause wear the garb," Frederick adds in a lowered tone.

"I see," says Fidelis.

"So," Gwyneth says—but Fidelis raises his hand to interrupt.

"Mother," says Fidelis. "We must not forget why Frederick has joined us for supper."

"Of course, Papa," Gwyneth says. "You are right."

Fidelis addresses Nala with sincerity. "We're joined here this evening to celebrate Frederick's mother and me escaping from a world we no longer believed in and into the jungle where we found love—the love of one another, yes, but also that of freedom. Tonight, we remember that which we will never forget."

"True, true," says Gwyneth. "Nala, you are a young woman, as Frederick is a young man. But he is privy to things that you are too young to know of. Papa is right that we are to celebrate our anniversary and no more."

"Reverend Solomon predicted you would try and pull Frederick away from us," Nala says. "He said—didn't he Frederick?—that you would not understand the cause."

"What I am saying to you, Nala, is that tonight is about Papa and I. We do not seek to debate you—or Frederick—about your *cause*. Whatever that may be. Not tonight."

Nala begins to rise from her seat. "Come on, Frederick. It's time to go."

Gwyneth puts out her hands, palms up, in capitulation. "Please stay."

Nala ignores the gesture and stalks toward the door. Frederick leans forward to rise, looking hangdog for a moment, before he wordlessly stands and leaves.

Their damp clothes still clung to their bodies when they found the railroad tracks again. Gwyneth and Fidelis hunched behind palm fronds at the edge of the tracks. Neither spoke at first. Then Gwyneth quietly asked Fidelis which way

they should go. He looked up and down the tracks.

"Well," he said. "We were heading that way on this side of the tracks when we broke with the group." He pointed to his left.

"But what if these are not the same tracks?" Gwyneth asked.

Fidelis looked into the distance. There was nothing but jungle shrouding the railroad tracks for as far as the eye could see. "Good point," he noted after a bit. "Which way would you like to go?"

"I have no opinion. I see nothing but more jungle."

"Then we head the same way we were heading. Either way, at some point we'll find a town. It's a guess, but it's the best I have."

"That will do for me." Gwyneth smiled. Her shoulders' tension had eased after their swim. A calmness she hadn't felt since she'd decided to escape enveloped her. Fidelis seemed so assured, so confident no guards were after them, that it made her feel safe.

They walked for hours more that third day, and it was nearly dusk when they came upon a town. It was no more than a handful of structures. There was a stopped train, facing them on their side of the tracks. They wondered aloud if it would have found them, or if it was not running, since there was no one in the engine. There was a man in coveralls standing in front of a small shack selling fruit about a hundred yards from where the train stood. They stepped off the tracks and crossed onto the dirt road that ran between the tracks and the fruit stand. The man turned toward them, and Fidelis raised his hand in a hesitant wave. The man nodded then lifted his cap and swept the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. When he was close enough, Fidelis asked if he was the conductor. He said that he was and cocked his head. He asked them where they came from. Gwyneth and Fidelis shot each other nervous looks.

"Please," Fidelis said. "We're just looking to get to the American embassy."

The conductor took in a deep breath, then exhaled a long sigh. He scrubbed a hand over his ruddy face before he spoke. "You two," he said. "Are you from Jonestown?"

"We want no trouble," said Fidelis. He took Gwyneth by the hand. "We just want to get to Georgetown."

The man continued, "Are you from that group I saw a few days ago going on a picnic? Because if you are, there's something you should know before you go to the embassy. Your friends, they're okay. But, I think you should know that you're about the only ones."

Gwyneth and Fidelis looked at the man, intent and expectant.

"The only ones?" asked Fidelis. "You just said the others made it to the embassy."

"I mean the only survivors ... of Jonestown. Everyone else ... perished."

"What do you mean *perished*? What do you mean *everyone else?* All of them?" Fidelis's mouth went dry, and his voice was unsteady. Gwyneth's free hand flew to her mouth, while the other clasped his tighter.

"They're all gone," said the conductor. "I'm sorry. There was a shooting at Port Kaituma ... That visiting American congressman is dead. Many others too ..." He hesitated and tried to find his words, taking his cap off and scratching his head before rambling on. "Your fellow followers, they drank some type of poisonous drink. They all died. Everyone, except for your group and a few others. I'm so sorry. I truly am . . ." He regarded them with grave sympathy, too choked up to speak further.

Gwyneth fainted. Fidelis caught her before she hit the ground. When she came to, Fidelis was kneeling on the ground

with her head in his lap. He had her sit up and rest, and a short while later two constables arrived. They began to pepper Gwyneth and Fidelis with pointed questions, which the couple answered with blank stares. After hearing where the constables were headed with the conversation, the conductor intervened and told them that he had seen the duo the morning of the massacre and that they couldn't be involved.

Fidelis and Gwyneth were escorted to the American embassy. It was a long ride, bumpy and dusty, on rutted roads and buckling highways, and they sat in the back of the constable's car holding hands, motionless except for the jouncing of the auto. No one attempted to make conversation, grimness shrouding them like a leaden fog. At first, Gwyneth tried to watch the landscape pass by out the open window as they rode, but she soon closed her eyes to keep from crying. Fidelis stared straight ahead the whole while, looking but not seeing. Every so often—without glancing at her—he would give Gwyneth's hand a light squeeze. She would squeeze it back. Every so often, the constable glimpsed at the pair in his rearview mirror, curious about this couple that had managed not to die with nearly a thousand other members of the People's Temple three days prior. His curiosity was moderated by their desolate comportment.

It was dark when they arrived. Once there, they found that Roberta and her young son were the only ones from their escape group who remained in Guyana. The rest had been transported back to the United States. When the embassy official––a pinched-faced man with owlish eyebrows—asked if they wanted to return to California, Fidelis looked at an anguished, sorrowful Gwyneth.

"I have a sister in Queens," he informed her. Tears formed in her eyes, and he rubbed her shoulders.

"I do not wish to go back to Oakland," Gwyneth said.

Fidelis looked first at the embassy official, then addressed Gwyneth. "Then we'll go to Queens. To my sister's. We'll travel to New York. Together. You and I."

"If what they say is true," she said, "you and I are all we have left."

Gwyneth and Fidelis stand hand in hand by their front door and watch as Frederick and Nala leave the apartment.

"Please stay," says Gwyneth. She gives Frederick—who is avoiding her gaze—a pleading look, then Nala.

"We must be going," Nala says with unnecessary crispness.

Fidelis massages his scrunched eyebrows. "We're glad you came." He nods at his son. "Frederick, you must take a jacket. It must be cool out by now. It's November. Nala, Mother has a sweater for you, I'm sure."

"We'll be fine," Nala says.

"Are you sure? It's no trouble. It must be chilly."

"We can't ask for what is not ours."

"But you didn't ask. I offered."

"We can't accept gifts."

"It is a loan. Frederick can return them when he comes next time."

Nala flashes Fidelis a look that says there will be no next time. Gwyneth lets go of Fidelis and begins wringing her hands.

"Can I at least send you off with some food?" Gwyneth asks. "We have so much."

"No," Nala says tersely. "Thank you."

Gwyneth's eyes rim with water, but she fights the urge to dab at them.

"Okay," says Fidelis. "If you must go . . ."

Frederick leans and gives his mother a peck on the cheek. He gives his father a weak smile, then pats him on the shoulder. He says, "It was good seeing you and Mother. Happy anniversary."

Gwyneth blinks away a tear.

"*Come on*, *Frederick*." Nala has moved off down the hallway. "We must go."

Frederick slinks toward Nala, shoulders hunched, hands tucked behind his back as if he's waiting to be handcuffed.

Fidelis puts his arm around Gwyneth and closes the door.

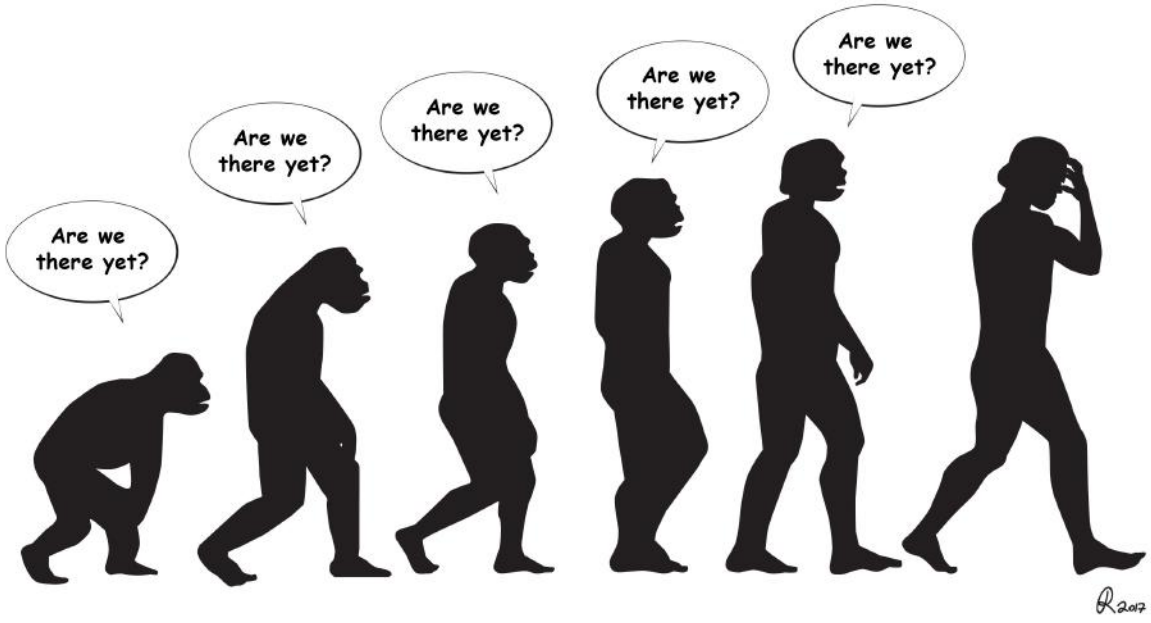
"He will call," he says to his wife, who now has tears streaming rivers down her face. She walks to the living room window and stares out at the boulevard below. The wind is blowing the bare tree branches, and litter tumbles and swirls down the street. A plastic bag whips around the pavement in a balletic circle. A minute later, she sees Frederick and Nala step out onto the apartment's stoop.

"There they go," Gwyneth whispers. Fidelis kisses the top of her head.

"Have faith. He will call, don't worry."

They watch as their son and Nala descend the steps, turning to the right when they reach the sidewalk. Gwyneth and Fidelis look at each other—the subway station is in the other direction. They look back to see Frederick and Nala cross the street mid-block and approach a parked sedan. Nala goes to get in on the front passenger side, and Frederick opens the back door. The parents strive to make out details of the bulky figure in the driver's seat. Frederick pauses, hand on the open car doorframe, and looks up toward his parents' apartment. They are not sure he can see them. They wave anyway. He turns—his body wrenching as if someone has spoken to him in a harsh tone—then climbs into the back seat and pulls the door closed.

Gwyneth and Fidelis continue waving frantically at their son until the car is almost to the end of the block. When they can no longer see even the taillights, they join their hands together, close their eyes, and weep.♦


Are we there yet?
Are we there yet?
Are we there yet?
Are we there yet?
Are we there yet?

# On the day she decides to leave

*poetry by Kindra McDonald*

she eats a modest breakfast alongside
her husband of 20 years happy
to have cooked him the ham he
likes even though she rarely keeps
it in the house anymore
she works in the garden pruning
the late blooming tomatoes, weeding—
the work that is never done

she goes inside for a nap, she says, *too much*
*sun a headache—*
kisses her spouse on his rough cheek,
pats the head of the dog
that sweet tuft behind the ears
closes the bedroom door swallows
the handful of pills stretches out
with her pen and notepad careful
of her cursive each word curling
towards the ends until the letters
trail off with her slumped hand

on the day she decides to leave us
we come over to visit instead
of waiting until next week
like planned and in the moment
after the doorbell stopped chiming
through the house our voices
reaching up the stairs she dumps
her cupped hand of blue pain
pills into the toilet and flushes

on the day she decides she'll die
the paramedics do not slow down
for a dog loose in the street
for a pedestrian stumbling
in the intersection for cars that
ignored the sirens, they arrive
just minutes after the call when
they can still work their movie
medical miracles of paddles
and clear and the *beep beep*

*beep* of a heart

on the day she decides
not to get up to lay in bed
a little longer to try to decipher
which songbird sits on the branch
by the window she reaches
for her partner who says

*let's leave for the day let's*
*drive until we run out of road until*
*we see something new until*
*we remember how to talk*
*with each other until*
*we are dizzy with life*

*let the tomatoes rot on the vine*
*and the weeds grow wild*

# A Word Misheard

*poetry by Joel Peckham Jr.*

*"There's a wideness in God's mercy" — Frederick William Faber*

*There is a wildness to god's mercy, like the wildness of the sea* I thought I heard her sing—that swinging bell of a woman at the steps of the chancel, belting out the hymn. As I imagine even god mishears the echoes in old churches, synagogues and temples, there being so many, their sounds overlapping, their prayers incessant. It must be

like listening to a thousand radio broadcasts at once heard as one random signal, at equal intensity at different frequencies. Constant power spectral density. In the way that we mishear the sounds of the ocean and its many bird-cries, many groans as rhythmic rolling anapests advancing, receding at the edges

of this wide wild country that seems always to be tearing at itself and screaming like a man removing his watch, his wedding ring, leaving his phone on the seat of the bus to take off at a run and dive into the crowded city as if it were a wave. Or the neighbor who hammered nails into the basement door and shouted—*stay away*

*from me.* How long did I hum the melody with my eyes shut like a chorus boy while she sung and swung high above, arms tiring with nowhere to fall, ringing an alarm that started somewhere intimate and broke apart over Beacon St. in a shower of warm rain or mist rising from stone? We sing along as if we are alone, wishing we were free

of the refrain, of each other of the world inside a verse, ourselves in the world, a word, awhirl. Perhaps there is a mercy in words misheard as many encounters with many wild birds becoming one bird flying over a wide wild sea.

# Yours Truly, Age 53, Ponders the Very Slim Likelihood that He Will Ever Buy a Harley

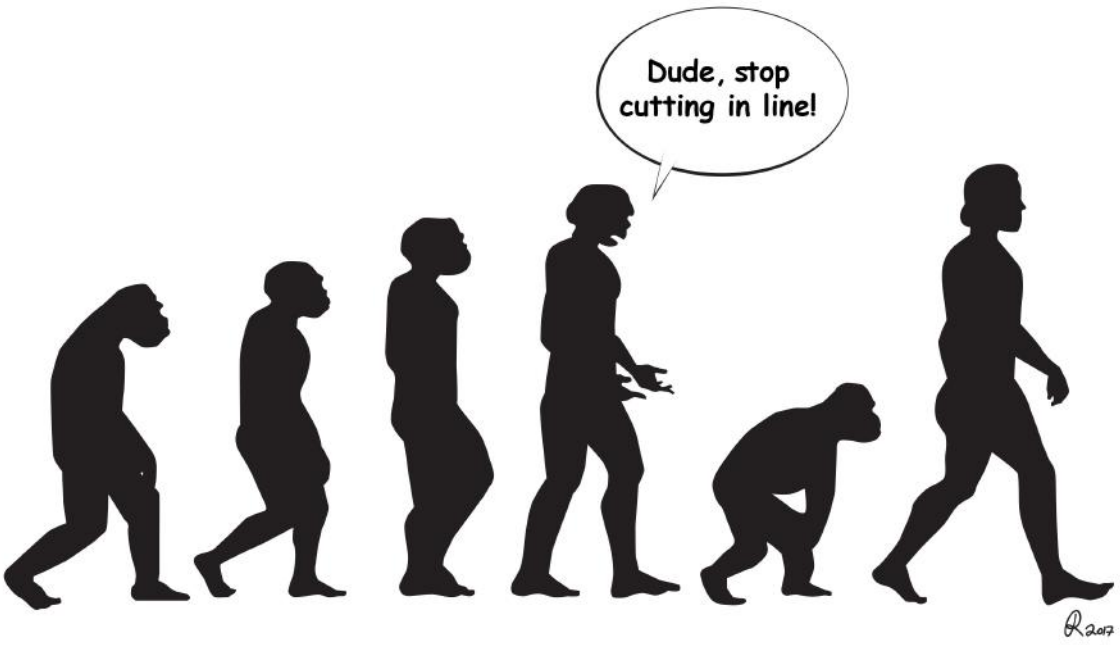
*poetry by David Rock*

It's almost right now by the sapient shadows,
by the foreplay of rage—that prehistoric purr,
the echo of a younger monster suckled on spleen,
that certain sound, that godlike gurgle,

an impulse whipped to a viscous throb, a clearing
of throats not meant to sing in any church where
mothers feel safe to pray for the souls of children.

Choose a *nom de guerre* as solid as any warhorse.
Cowboy up in a dust-devil of Schlieffen Plans.
Clouds of steam gather on the horizon—a swirl
of latent experience while Coriolis's cannonball
picks up the spare in an antiseptic flurry of famines.

Wrangler of reactions, sower of seeds in the eyes
of typhoons as hailstones rumble on the roof you
could call home . . .  If only you could call home
from where you're headed. / And it's getting late.


Dude, stop
cutting in line!

# night out

*fiction by Kay Lin*

> *没出息的人的低能和愚蠢是不一样的,*
> *他们之间也无法了解。*
> *《黑的雪》：刘恒*

Every worthless person has their own unique lowliness and idiocy. Even amongst themselves, they can't understand each other.
*Black Snow*, Liu Heng

Lao San stepped out of the way. He lowered his head and gave the car keys over. Qilu took them and tossed them to the kid standing by the curb with his hands neatly tucked by his sides. Huiqi stared, but the top of the kid's bowed head gave him no answers.

Huiqi was sick of asking. He had felt stupid enough in the past month to last him until the end of his life.

Equilibrium returned when Lao San knelt in his usual offer to carry Qilu up the stairs to the restaurant. Lao San's newly washed black slacks touched the filthy pavement, but Qilu walked around him with his eyes fixed ahead. His cane and prosthetic leg and booted foot were staccato and loud.

They headed up the polished, wooden steps. The building wasn't that much taller than those Huiqi was familiar with. But there was too much stone and glass, and the paint was clean enough to gleam under the dim streetlights. Huiqi had never thought paint could look new when it had dried. He resisted the urge to prod at one of the corners, just to see if his hand would come back streaked with white.

He had looked stupid enough in the past month too.

"That kid was hired to park our cars for us," Qilu said. He was staring straight ahead, eyes fixed upon a white brick. "Most people who come here don't have the time to waste on such trivial things."

Behind them, the roar of an engine broke through the heavy silence of Shanghai's Bund at this early hour of the morning.

"Westerners call men like that 'valets,'" Qilu continued. The foreign word warped his voice just as the mirthlessly crooked smile twisted his mouth. "Usually, there are more of them just sitting around, waiting for people to come along."

The kid was wearing a Western suit, but he was no different from the old men that Huiqi knew: the greasy-haired ones in ragged tank tops loitering beside their stalls. No different from Lao San, standing there with grey patches on his otherwise clean clothes. They were all just waiting for the people with money to come by and give them some purpose for their existence.

Hidden in his pocket, Hiqui's hand itched for a cigarette. He clenched it and said, "I don't need your explanations." He couldn't afford to be rude. "Thanks anyway."

Qilu gave him another one of those smiles that didn't reach his eyes. "I'll go in first," he instructed Lao San. He didn't wait for the older man's nod. Qilu bypassed the main entrance and headed for the side door, twisting the knob and pushing it open with his shoulder. His cane and prosthesis made a racket that echoed down the street.

The main entrance used a kind of door that Huiqi had seen before, back before he went into the labor camps. A friend of his at the time had gotten him a job cleaning out the trash in one of the new buildings, a hotel built to impress foreigners newly

allowed into the country. He knew how to use them.

One hand in his pocket, Huiqi pushed the horizontal bar with the other. The door turned very slowly: the glass was heavy. At his feet, rough bristles rustled as they brushed against the floor.

Air-conditioning smacked him in the face. The thick, plasticky scent of lavender assaulted his nose and flooded his lungs, exorcising the stench of the river that lurked around the Bund. Huiqi blinked, squinting. The side door closed after Lao San stepped through it.

There was so much light here, and all of it a yellow that reminded him of the color of piss in the morning after he drank too much water to stave off hunger. The floors were so polished that Huiqi couldn't even look down without being blinded.

"We have been waiting for you, Young Master Yin." The woman standing in front of them was dressed in a plain *qipao*—with some name that Huiqi couldn't read embroidered on her shoulder—and she was holding a clipboard. "If you would follow me, I will take you to your private room."

"I didn't ask for a room." Qilu cocked his head to the side. "I'd prefer sitting in the main area, actually."

Her white teeth shone starkly against her deep red lipstick as she bit down. "Master Yin has already instructed us, sir," she told the floor, "that you will be given a private room whenever you come by."

"He has, hasn't he," Qilu said, voice growing quiet. "Even at this late hour. Even when no one else will be here." There was that look in his eyes again, those shadows edging at the corners that made the sounds of breaking rocks echo in Huiqi's ears. He rubbed his fingers together, feeling the bite of the sand's grit and the scorching heat of the sun pouring on his back. Between his shoulder blades, sweat gathered and slid downward.

Huiqi shook his head hard. He was being stupid again; a rich, young master like Qilu had never seen the inside of the labor camps and never would. Huiqi knew this because Qilu was still walking around Shanghai when he should have been caught and imprisoned more than a year ago.

The woman looked up. Her gaze landed an inch to the side of Qilu's face. "The room is this way," she said, and pointed toward the staircase further inside the restaurant. The structure spiralled upward, made of polished light wood that, Huiqi noticed, was exactly the same color as Qilu's prosthetic leg.

Lao San stepped forward. "Young Master," he said, and went to his knees again, his back facing Qilu. He turned around, and his voice was soft and pleading in a way that made Huiqi's skin crawl: "Please."

Qilu stared at him. His knuckles were slowly turning white on top of his cane. Then he thrust the stick in the woman's direction, not even looking at her as she fumbled to hold it and her clipboard at the same time, and he flopped down on Lao San's shoulders like a dead fish. His remaining good leg was as limp as the wooden one by his side.

Huiqi averted his eyes so he didn't have to watch Lao San struggle to stand.

It disgusted him. It pissed him off. He kept his hands inside his pockets so he wouldn't end up punching Qilu, knocking him off his grand perch right there on Lao San's back. There would be no use to that. He followed them up the stairs, ignoring Lao San's glare when his footsteps resounded far too loudly on the steps. It was the only thing he could do at this point. The older man's disapproval wasn't going to stop him.

The hallway beyond the stairs was narrower than Huiqi expected from the spacious room below, but his shoulders still didn't brush the walls like they did when he walked down those back alleys

near Zizhong Road where he used to live. Huiqi stomped his feet even louder, but the piercing echoes couldn't break the heavy silence that hung around them. The woman pulled open the curtains to one of the rooms then retreated. She left the cane leaning against a chair.

Huiqi dropped down into a seat—opposite Qilu, as far away from the other man as possible while still keeping the pretense that he cared. Then a damned *mob* rushed into the room, footsteps silent on the wooden floor. Three women set out a plate, a bowl, a spoon, and a pair of chopsticks in front of each of them. Another woman came really close to him, hands holding onto a napkin, and Huiqi stared at her until she folded the cloth and dropped it onto the table. A man came in with a book and opened it in front of Qilu. Yet another one handed out plates filled with small towels, already wet.

They moved as if in procession. Huiqi froze where he was, half-hunched over himself, hand half-withdrawn from his pocket to reach for the pair of chopsticks he kept tucked in his socks. The pair in front of him was made of wood and engraved with designs of vines. He didn't touch them, instead prodding cautiously at the towel. It was warm.

"What is this?" he demanded.

Qilu lifted his head, blinking. "For us to clean our hands," he said. He raised an eyebrow. "You haven't seen them before?"

Huiqi shifted the pair of lacquered chopsticks away. He placed his own bamboo ones on the table, ignoring how they clashed with the porcelain stand. "Most of the restaurants I have been to don't give towels like that," he said. "They give napkins in little unopened packs. You have to pay ten cents if you use them."

He had never once paid for those. There were more uses for ten cents than on something that would be thrown away.

Lowering his head, Huiqi dug around in his other shoe before drawing out his handkerchief. It stank slightly of old sweat and mold from being washed and dried inside instead of under the sun. He pulled his lips up to bare his teeth. "That's why I always bring my own."

Instead of recoiling or looking disgusted like he wanted him to, Qilu leaned forward, his elbow clacking against the glass top of the table. Like this, with his legs hidden by the table, he looked like any other young master in those photographs of old Shanghai. He asked, "Why do you keep your things in your shoes?"

*Because they don't fit*. He had found this pair in a dumpster when he had first arrived in Shanghai—further south, nearer to the docks than this central area with banks and office buildings gleaming with glass and concrete. *Because keeping things in my pockets means losing them*. Perhaps the camps had left a mark on his forehead that attracted the attention of the police, who constantly demanded of him to empty out his pockets when he was doing nothing but walking down the streets, and then confiscated whatever took their fancy.

"I'm used to it," he said instead and shrugged. He prodded the towel again. It had gone cold by now and dented beneath his nail. It reminded him of the dead fish he saw at the markets on the nights he had time to go; the ones that were close to rotting because it was nearly closing time. The towel did not have eyes, but he felt like it did. It watched him, and found him wanting. He withdrew his hand.

"Since I left Beijing, I've had a lot of time to think," Qilu said. He tilted his head, and Lao San lit his cigarette. "My classmates and I always thought that we lived in a prison, one made by our leaders and the previous generations." He huffed out a bitter-sounding laugh. Smoke curled around his mouth as he took a long pull. "Maybe all of us simply carried our own prisons around with us."

From here, Huiqi could see the trees outside that lined the Bund. Further

ahead, cranes loomed, unmoving great shapes in the darkness. When the sun rose in a couple of hours, the workers would come in. Dust would fly, thick and high enough to pretend to be clouds. The only clouds he had ever seen away from the camps.

"You don't know anything about prisons," he said quietly.

"Don't I?" Qilu asked. When Huiqi turned to look at him, he was staring out the window as well. "Everyone has gone home from work and has already fallen asleep. Even the street cleaners will arrive in a couple of hours. The Bund is usually busy, but now it's deserted." He brought his cigarette to his mouth. Ash fell onto the table, scattering across the white cloth. His fingers were trembling.

"All I want is to walk the streets, and maybe eat at the front of the restaurant for once. All I want is to not have to hide, if only for a couple of hours." Qilu shook his head. "Yet my father insists that I take the car. He makes sure that I use this room." His eyes turned toward Huiqi, and there were those familiar shadows again. "Do you think that I don't know anything about prisons?"

*It's not the same,* Huiqi thought. He couldn't tell why, couldn't put his finger on it. He only remembered …

"When I first arrived in Shanghai, I came to the Bund," Huiqi said. He wanted to light up, too, but his hands remained clenched together on top of the table. "I didn't have enough for a room." Not if he wanted to eat for the next week. He spread his hands open. "I climbed up a tree to try to sleep there, but a policeman found me and chased me until I couldn't even see the water."

Even before Qilu said a word, Huiqi knew that nothing he had said had been enough. Qilu had his car, had all of the staff here who remained behind after working hours just to serve him. He had Lao San, as chauffeur and sedan chair.

All Huiqi had were a few scratches on his palms, long healed, that could serve as proof. And a couple pieces of paper, bloodstained and torn, from the four years he had spent in the camps.

Splaying his hands on the table, he stood up. "I'm going out for a smoke," he said.

"You can smoke here," Qilu said. He pulled out an ashtray from under the table—from a drawer Huiqi hadn't noticed—and smothered the embers of his cigarette against the white porcelain. There was still at least half left. "You don't have to go out."

"I'm going out for a smoke," Huiqi repeated. He snatched his chopsticks and handkerchief. His footsteps echoed loudly in the nearly empty restaurant as he headed down the stairs.

Once outside, Huiqi plucked his packet of cigarettes from where he had hidden it in his shoe, tucked next to his foot, and lit one up with a hand cupped around his mouth. The tobacco tasted sour, like rotting sweat. He sucked on the ends of the bamboo sticks still in his hand. They tasted even worse. He wrapped them in the handkerchief and slipped them carefully back into his shoe.

The towel haunted him. He had left it behind, but the lifeless chill had already seeped into his skin. It weighed against the back of his neck, as if he had used it to wash himself. It wrapped around his fingers, as if he had used it to clean his hands like Qilu had. (Not that he knew how either felt like.)

He started walking down the streets. There was nowhere for him to go, and he knew he had to go back eventually. But now he just wanted to walk. He wanted to relish the one thing he could do that Qilu couldn't.

Over there: a sound. Huiqi blinked. He had somehow turned away from the main Nanjing East Road with its wide, foreign-made buildings, into the intersection between Jiujiang Road and Sichuan

Middle Road, packed with offices where rich Chinese businessmen worked. Huiqi rubbed his nose and lips with a knuckle. The noise came from behind him. He took one step backward, and then another.

There, between two short, squat buildings—one a restaurant, the other a branch of some bank—was the mouth of an alley. Huiqi scuttled toward the wall. He watched a rat peek out of the shadow, its pink snout twitching between grey whiskers. He took a long drag of his cigarette, letting the tobacco settle in his lungs, before he ducked his head inside.

A woman was digging into the treasure trove of plastic bags strewn around the dumpster. Hunchbacked, the lump that was her shoulder jutted out from the collar of her worn shirt, skin gleaming dark gold in the pale moonlight that sliced through the darkness. Streetlights could glare, disapproving, but they couldn't touch this place. Her claw-like and liver-spotted hands scrabbled at the ground, snatching up a plastic bottle that tried to escape.

She unscrewed it and took a sniff. As Huiqi watched, she upended it into her mouth and smacked her lips. She shoved the now-empty bottle into the plastic bag slung over her good shoulder. Huiqi's throat went dry. He felt thirsty. He took another drag.

Huiqi recognized that plastic bag. Square with blue and white stripes, he had used something like it to keep his worldly belongings when he took the bus from Beijing to Shanghai. He had even kept it after his trip, stowed it at the bottom of his nightstand drawer back in his ratty apartment on Zizhong Road. Maybe that was his bag. Maybe his landlord had already emptied out his apartment, and this woman had picked it up and judged it useful enough.

The rat crawled over her bare foot. She didn't twitch, only peeled open another bag. Whatever she'd found made her rise from her knees into a squat, chasing away the rat now nibbling at the hem of her pants. The stench of rotting food hit Huiqi's nose, and he puffed heavily on his cigarette. Smoke clouded the air in front of him. The woman's form twisted, warped.

In the camps, he had squatted like that at the corners of the fields. His eyes, always small and squeezed tight by heavy brows, probably looked like the rat's as he darted them around, looking for something useful to take. Most of the time, he chose the cigarette butts the officers had thrown away and hastily shoved them into his pockets. When he got back to his room, he would dig into the butts to find whatever tobacco that was left, pouring it onto a piece of cloth torn from a corner of his bedsheets. Those pieces he would then wrap in the paper given to him to practice writing. He would smoke this leftover tobacco whenever he was alone and out of sight of the guards.

"Hey, old lady!" She started at the sound of his voice and clutched her plastic bag of bottles to her chest. Her black, beady eyes stared at him across the length of the alleyway. Huiqi held out his cigarette, almost finished but with a centimeter or two of tobacco left. "You want this?"

She stared at him. Huiqi kept his hand extended and didn't move. Rats didn't like sudden movement. The one that had been sniffing around her foot had already disappeared.

Slowly, she shook her head. She shouted something at him, a bunch of words he didn't understand—Shanghainese, probably—and waved a hand. Huiqi took a longer pull on his cigarette this time, hollowing his cheeks to show that the tobacco was good. But she only kept staring. Her eyes had turned into suspicious slits.

Huiqi took the last couple of puffs then tossed the butt near his feet. He was still in the mood to be kind, so he might as well give it to her. He licked his lips as he

headed back and pulled out another cigarette. He had it in his mouth for only a second before throwing it away in disgust.

The paper tore and tobacco scattered on the pavement. He deliberately stepped on the filter and ground it beneath the sole of his shoe to make sure that no one would pick it up and try to use it later. He wasn't thirsty anymore.

The restaurant's lights had already been switched off when Huiqi turned the corner. The kid in the Western suit was back, fiddling with his too-long sleeves while standing beside the gleaming car. Lao San was, like always, standing at attention at the foot of the steps. The grey on his black pant leg shone.

"You've finished eating?" Huiqi asked Qilu as he lit up another cigarette. He was almost finished with this pack; he would have to ask Qilu for money to buy more soon.

"I didn't come here to eat," Qilu told him, offering a thin-lipped smile.

"Okay," Huiqi said. So, they *were* waiting for him. He smoked at a slower pace than he had just moments ago. Qilu glanced at him before he shrugged. Just from that, the kid knew to unlock the door of the car.

Inside, Lao San rolled down the window. Huiqi rested his elbow on the thin sill. He watched people move around inside the restaurant, cleaning up the last bits of Qilu's visit. They moved very slowly. He could see a flash of cloth up on the second-story window. It was very white, but he knew that they would still wash it. Lao San stepped on the gas.

"Do you know the date today?" Qilu asked.

Qilu's skin was very pale; the rushing light of the streetlamps they passed made it look even thinner than usual, picking up the blue veins crisscrossing his cheeks and the back of his hands. If that woman earlier reminded him of gold stared at through a jewellery shop's window, then Qilu reminded him of cheap paper so thin that the ink scrawled on the other side showed through.

That couldn't be right. Huiqi bent to fidget with the lighter in his shoe. His thoughts turned to the alleyway.

Had Qilu found him in an alley like that one? Huiqi remembered nothing of that particular alley. All he remembered of that night was the chill of the knife sliding between his ribs. The thick clouds overhead. The electricity on his tongue from the incoming thunderstorm. He remembered the black slick of his own blood on his hand when he pressed his palm over his ribs. He couldn't remember the face of the man who had stabbed him. He couldn't remember Qilu coming in, couldn't think what Qilu was doing, so far from his house, when he had only one leg.

It was Lao San who had carried him back. That was all he knew.

"No," Huiqi said, though he knew exactly two months had passed since he had woken up in Qilu's house.

"August 4, 1990," Qilu pronounced. His head made a soft *thump* as he smacked it back against the leather seat of the car. "It has been a year and two months since the day I should have died." He smiled. His fingers tapped against the light, hollow wood of his knee.

Huiqi glanced down. The leg was made of willow. Pretty expensive. "Oh."

"I want to thank you," Qilu said. He was staring out into the sliding darkness of the Huangpu River and its pinpricks of artificial light. "You didn't have to come out with me today."

Huiqi thought about warm, black slick on his hand and lightning on his tongue. The thunderstorm would have washed his blood off, left his corpse floating among the garbage. "It's nothing," he said. Obligatory gratitude stuck his tongue to the roof of his mouth. He swallowed and said, "I was also in Beijing on June 3 last year, you know."

Qilu's hands folded on top of his wooden knee. His shoulders were stiff. "You were?" He sounded so proper and polite.

"Friend of mine came to find me, told me that he had a job I could do," Huiqi said. He lit up another cigarette. "I was bored that day, so I thought, why not, so he brought me to a warehouse and showed me a bunch of tapes."

Smoke whipped from his mouth into the wind. "His boss bought those tapes from Guangzhou, and he told me that people would buy them in Hong Kong and smuggle them across the border." He slid his eyes over to Qilu but didn't meet his gaze. "He played one for me. We spent a few minutes watching this white guy with a giant belly fucking this skinny white woman." He paused, then added, "He didn't last very long."

"Don't."

"All I had to do," Huiqi continued, "was to approach people in the streets. Ask them if they would like to have some fun. I'd bring those perverted suckers back if they said yes." He laughed to himself. "They had some kind of sorting system. A couple of rows for blowjobs, a few more for fat girls. Those kinds of categories."

Taking another drag, Huiqi shrugged again. "I didn't take the job. I had just come out of the camps, and it was too risky. I didn't want to get arrested again." Still staring out the window, he smiled to show teeth. "I made a good choice. The police were checking papers and bags the very next day. They were all jittery because of what had happened at Tiananmen Square."

"Why did you tell me that?"

"The friend who offered me that job was arrested because of that." His gaze shifted to the white knuckles above the wooden leg. "It was his second time in the camps. By now, he's probably better off dead."

Tossing the cigarette away, he watched as the wind immediately whipped it out of sight. He thought about how dry his mouth had felt when he heard the news. He had felt sticky, then, like filth had stuck to his skin. Thinking about his friend being forced to his knees and handcuffed in the middle of a crowded train station had shoved something deep into his lungs. He started smoking more after that day.

Slowing, the car stopped in front of Qilu's house. Huiqi got out of Lao San's way as he came over. But Qilu ignored the outstretched hand, preferring to lift his wooden leg with his hands and struggle out by himself. His gaze was fixed upon Huiqi.

"You're not going to make me regret saving you," he said. His voice was loud enough to ring out through the empty streets. "I'm not going to let you."

With that, he turned. His cane and wooden foot clacked on the pavement and then the steps, as he headed into the house.

"He doesn't have to be kind to you." As usual, Lao San's voice was nothing but a rasp, the sign of an opium smoker who started when young. His eyes narrowed. "All that you have now is due to his grace, Chen Huiqi. Please do not forget that."

Huiqi threw his head back and laughed. Qilu once told him that Lao San had been serving him for almost all of their lives, since Qilu was newly born and Lao San six years old. Lao San's family had been servants to the Yins for at least four generations, and it stayed that way even after everyone was supposed to have been made equal. Huiqi wondered if that was why Lao San hated him; he looked at Huiqi and saw someone he could never become.

He should ask. He looked up at the door that Qilu had left ajar and stared into the slice of light that came pouring out of the gap between the door and its frame.

"I won't forget," he said instead. He headed up the steps and ignored the

weight of Lao San's gaze on his shoulders. The too-bright lights—piss-yellow like in the restaurant—made him squint. He stumbled his way to the room that Qilu and his damned kindness had given him.

He stripped once he stepped through the door without bothering to lock it. The clothes lying on the floor, dead looking, were probably still clean—good for another three or four days of wear—but he picked them up and flung them into the laundry basket. His hands were shaking as he stepped into the shower.

The first time he had washed himself after the camp, he didn't have a shower. He hadn't had a place in Beijing then. He had had to go back to the streets he used to haunt until he found someone who recognized him. That acquaintance was working in a restaurant, and he allowed Huiqi to sneak in through the back door to use the sink. Even though he scrubbed very hard, even though the dishwashing soap he used bit at his skin, he didn't feel clean.

Now he turned on the tap. Water poured down on him, heavier than standing in a thunderstorm. He had never felt water pressure this strong. It should cleanse him. But salt nudged at his tongue, and his breath hitched. He turned the tap off and picked up the soap. Salt continued to flood his mouth. He could not steady his breathing. He rubbed his suds-covered hands over his eyes, but the lather was too rich to sting. His eyes were still clear enough to watch the foam as it washed down the drain. White and clean.

The rag he had used to clean himself, then, in Beijing, had turned grey after touching him.

He reached out. Wet roughness streaked over his fingertips. In front of him, a white towel hung on a metal pole that gleamed under the stark white lights of the bathroom. He could see his own reflection distorted in the shining surface. His eyes were red and swollen. Snot dripped from his nose.

Leaning in, he pressed his face into the towel. It was warm. It did not hide him. It watched him and found him wanting. ♦

Glossary:
Yin Qilu: 殷崎露, "prosperous," "rough," "dew."
Chen Huiqi: 陈慧七, "Chen," "intelligence," "seven."
Lao San: 老三, "old," "three."
Zizhong Road: 自忠路, "Road of Self-Esteem."

# Hotel of the Sinners

*nonfiction by John Robinson*

At age ten, from a hotel's rooftop, I threw eggs onto the street below. I was attempting to strike the windshield of a moving car. I wasn't picky. Any car would do.

The incident took place at a small five-story hotel on the corner of Exchange Avenue and Yates Boulevard in my old neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, South Shore.

The year was 1956.

I was not alone. I was joined by three other ten-year-olds on that roof. The four of us had evenly split a carton of a dozen eggs. That gave us each three chances to hit our target. We liked our odds.

It was a bad idea. More than that, it was crazy and dangerous. Unfortunately, it was my crazy and dangerous idea. Though that's not what I would later claim. I would later claim that the original idea came from my companions, and that I had, after several strong protestations, gone along unwillingly with their wicked scheme in order to protect them from some unforeseen trouble. What kind of trouble was never specified.

If things went badly, I could always blame them. I knew that they would do the same. Ratting out fellow classmates at my school was not only acceptable, but, depending on the circumstances, regarded as borderline laudable.

Plausibility was on my side. After all, my three partners in crime possessed dishonorable reputations. They couldn't get into trouble since they were never really out of it. Moreover, they were disliked by everyone. They were physically unattractive, smelled, and kept dead things in their pockets. They couldn't even rely on loyalty from each other.

All of them were regarded as outcasts both by school officials and by their fellow classmates, who avoided them on the playground as well as on neighborhood streets. As a result, they dwelled mostly in alleys. They smoked filched cigarettes on garage rooftops, broke the windows of abandoned cars, and at night, dropped firecrackers into empty garbage cans.

The Dominican nuns who taught us at the local Catholic grammar school had no tolerance for these boys. They regularly flunked my companions on report cards, flogged them with rulers, and forced them to remove vomit from church floors left by the queasy stomachs of communicants.

They were mocked and bullied by adults and peers. They were a gang without a name or a purpose. Strangely, like the community where they lived, they seemed to regard their lowly status as the order of things.

Yet there was something noble about them. My companions were unbowed and relentless in their mischief, though their victories were few and unsung. It was as if some holy and irrevocable pledge of steadfast disruption had been made to a lower order deity. They accepted their fate without protest.

The nuns used a simple word to describe them: "sinners." We all knew what that meant. "The lowest of the low" was how one nun put it. And there was no way to treat sinners except by subjecting them to the most painful, regular, and humiliating punishments. It was the only way to defeat their sinfulness. The nuns were unwavering in fighting sin. It seemed to be their single most important mission on earth. More than daily prayer,

it defined them.

I have no memory of how I fell in with those pariahs. But late one autumn Saturday, I was suddenly standing on a street corner with three nefarious outcasts.

I don't even remember their names. However, each was infamous for his own special sinful behavior. One was a pyromaniac, setting small fires whenever he was in the possession of anything flammable; another was a kleptomaniac, stealing things—no matter the value—whenever the opportunity arose; and the final member of the trio was simply "the pisser," because he was frequently seen peeing, usually indoors, where no toilet or urinal existed.

It was the Pisser who suggested what was going to become the day's activity. He pointed to the small, dark hotel across the street.

"I know how to get on the roof," he said, smiling obscenely as if he had something more in mind.

Suddenly, all eyes turned toward me for approval. Without a vote, I was chosen leader of the pack. At age ten, I had never been a leader. No one had ever followed me anywhere. Even my dog ignored my commands. I didn't know why they had turned to me for direction. Maybe it was because I was considered a notch above them on the social scale, or perhaps I had unconsciously acquired an aura of authority. Maybe because I was bigger, they believed I could beat the crap out of them. In my neighborhood, that carried a lot of weight.

Whatever the cause, I suddenly felt important. And liberated. I said, "Let's go!" Everyone walked across the street.

The journey to the roof began, I soon learned, at the rear of the hotel. The Pisser led us to a fire escape ladder where we began our ascent. He went first. Climbing all the way to the fourth story, he abruptly interrupted his journey and placed his feet on a narrow iron landing. There, he crawled through an open window and we followed.

Inside was a tiny room used as a janitor's closet—tools and cleaning equipment neatly piled.

I had no idea why we were there.

The Pisser suddenly turned around to face us, and with that debauched smile he had earlier flashed on the street outside, he dropped his trousers, bent his knees, squatted a few inches above the floor, and shat. My companions roared with delight. We were watching neighborhood history being made: He was no longer just the Pisser. His vandalism and depravity reached a new low.

Though I laughed with the rest of them, I was secretly disgusted. I never found defecating in public funny. Even at a young age, I was too fastidious to find it even mildly amusing. But since I was the de facto leader of this group, I dared not show my distaste for foolhardy exhibitions of stupidity and immaturity. I had to tolerate degeneracy in my ranks. After all, how could I protest? Weren't these the actions for which they were known? Wasn't this what I had signed up for?

After the laughter ceased, we resumed our expedition up the fire escape. On the roof, we strode to the front of the hotel and stood for a long moment watching the traffic below. Then, without warning, Klepto started spitting to the sidewalk below. The Pisser and Pyro joined him. Since I disliked spitting almost as much as I disliked defecating and urinating in public, I refrained.

Perhaps it was my disdain for this current activity that caused me to make the wildly perilous suggestion, "Let's throw eggs at cars?" If I was going to be their leader, I had to come up with something less destructive, juvenile, and pointless than had thus far been

conceived.

I don't recall their reactions to my suggestion. All I remember was standing, about a half hour later, outside a supermarket two blocks from the hotel and watching with my new pals as Klepto opened his jacket to reveal the carton of eggs he'd snatched inside the store.

Without hesitation, we took the stolen eggs and quickly reclimbed the same fire escape stairs to the hotel's roof. Once there, we each took three eggs from the carton and stood a few feet apart along the front ledge. Below, we could see the afternoon traffic moving on Yates Avenue. Since it was my idea, I was given the honor to toss the first egg.

I looked down, raised the egg in my hand above my head, and then fired at a car passing directly below me. Though I threw as hard as I could, the egg arrived late. To my surprise, I missed the car by at least five feet. My gang members then mimicked me and got the same results. The early barrage of first eggs landed well behind their targets.

After this initial failure, I changed tactics. For my second attempt, I threw an old-fashioned curveball well in front of the targeted car. My egg hooked in midair then fell and splattered harmlessly onto the pavement. Everyone else made their second throws and all, again, missed.

Though our eggs fell closer to our intended targets on the second try, I decided I was being too aggressive. All I needed to do was let the egg drop from my hand and watch the car drive into its path. I told the others to do the same—together—believing that surely one of us was bound to hit something other than the ground. On the count of three, we all dropped our last four eggs in unison.

As before, nothing hit. We were disappointed. Though we had certainly made a terrible mess of the street in front of the hotel, the cars had gotten through our bombardment unscathed. But just as we began to grieve our collective failure and formulate another plan of attack, the Pisser said, "Hey, we've got company."

"Behind us!" Pyro said.

We turned.

Standing there were two uniformed Chicago policemen and, we soon learned, the hotel's manager. They had climbed the same fire escape ladder.

One cop was fat with curly, reddish hair, and the other was tall and very thin with an aquiline nose. The balding hotel manager wore a three-piece suit.

"All of you," the fat cop said, waving us forward. His voice was not loud, but filled with warning. "Come with us."

The immediate events following our capture have been lost with the passage of time. But some things remain. I recall sitting in the back seat of a patrol car and hearing the fat, redheaded Irish cop say to his partner, "We'll just have to book 'em as juvenile delinquents."

*Juvenile delinquent!* Those two words were infamous during the 1950s. Movies about lawless kids always described them with those two words. The nuns told us juvenile delinquents were the most evil of sinners because their sins were irredeemable and their final destination was Hell. Now I was one of them. My parents would be humiliated. Satan would be giddy.

But worse than that, my grandparents, with whom I lived, would find out. And back in those days I feared my grandfather more than death itself. He had a deep and stentorian voice, and he struck me hard whenever I did something wrong. No matter how painful the beating, the promise of something far worse—if I protested—loomed with each blow.

Now the police were driving me straight to him. He was the only one home at that hour. I was terrified. My mind scrambled for an excuse that I might employ to save myself from his terrible wrath.

But, strangely, nothing happened. The

police drove to my house and dropped me off, hinting that they would be in touch with my family and school officials, and that there would be a terrible day of reckoning.

I never heard from the cops again. My school and parents weren't notified of my offenses. Neither I nor my partners in crime were reprimanded for our actions, which might have caused a serious automobile accident. And even though we left Yates Avenue a mess, we were never required to clean it or to make reparations.

Instead, I went inside my house and told my grandfather that others had thrown eggs at cars, and I was an innocent bystander to the whole event. Much to my surprise and relief, he accepted my story without hesitation. Many years later, my grandmother told me that he fought the urge to laugh through my entire tortured explanation.

This whole incident should have cured me of my rebellious nature. Far from it. For the next three years—from fifth to seventh grade—I was constantly in trouble. When I wasn't getting into trouble at school, I was getting into trouble after school. Though I lived less than a twenty-minute walk away, it sometimes took two to three hours to reach home. During that time, I—along with other grammar school marauders—ravaged the neighborhood with acts of vandalism and outlandish behavior. I seldom eluded punishment for my misconduct, and I recall the many dreadful times I marched up convent steps with my grandmother for a conference with my classroom nun. My grandmother was baffled by her rebellious grandson, but despite her confusion, she eagerly joined the Dominican sisters in exacting the most humiliating and painful punishments. Ironically, I was as confused as my grandmother: I had no idea why I was so disobedient. I only knew I couldn't stop myself. And as my perfidious days mounted, I continued to absorb, sporadically, harrowing thrashings from my grandfather.

It took a few years removed from my old neighborhood before I could begin to understand my rebellious ways. Though I had some difficulty admitting it to myself, I began to see that I was opposing my circumstances, which were certainly more grim than my later reflections of them. Simply put, I was rebelling against a community of bullies and bigots. I was rebelling against the bullies I found at school, at church, and at home. The bullying was a manifestation of the open hostility toward the weak, the different, and the defenseless. Minorities of any sort were targets. Anything done against the status quo was considered wrong and had to be dealt with swiftly and forcefully. I was one of the many victims of those bullies, and because I was too intimidated to retaliate against my oppressors, I lashed out at other targets.

This is not to suggest that the entire community was blighted by bigotry and persecution. Not everyone participated in the merciless harassment of their neighbors. A good portion of the population was polite, compassionate, tolerant, and friendly. Indeed, some days it felt like I was living in Andy Griffith's Mayberry and could spot prototypes of Goober, Opie, Aunt Bee, and Barney Fife walking the city sidewalks.

But then there was this other place. In the Irish Catholic enclave where I grew up, there was pervasive hostility toward black and Jewish communities. There was no better representation of that discrimination than the South Shore Country Club, which forbade these two groups from membership. Even in school, these prejudices were reinforced. The title of the chapter on African Americans in

our history textbook was taken from Rudyard Kipling's infamous poem "The White Man's Burden." Though black people were seldom found on our streets, our Jewish neighbors were everywhere to behold in the 1950s. We were just a few years removed from what was soon to be called the Holocaust, yet Jewish boys were sometimes ambushed by gangs of white Catholic boys and beaten or harassed. The racism was so intense and pervasive that—from 1964 when I left for college until 1968 when I graduated and returned—South Shore had changed from a predominantly white to a predominately black community. All it took was for a black family purchasing a home on the fringes of the neighborhood, and the great exodus was underway.

I quit rebelling against authority and the status quo but not because the community I inhabited changed. Although the sudden death of my grandfather at the start of 1959 eliminated my most fierce oppressor—my grandmother's enforcer—from my life, I did not terminate all my subversive activities because of his demise.

Then, suddenly, in my final year of grammar school, it all stopped. I joined the football team, became a patrol boy (my assigned corner was just a block away from the hotel where I'd tossed eggs onto Yates Avenue), and I got the male lead in the school play, *Alice in Wonderland*. I even wrote a final paper in English class on my misdeeds. It was called "The Lawless Years." I received an A on the paper, but I believed this had more to do with the renunciation of my wicked ways than my articulation of them.

In December of 1972, I marched in protest of Nixon's Christmas bombing of Vietnam, along with a number of other expatriate Americans living in Edinburgh, Scotland. We marched to the American consulate and left our signatures on a letter of protest with the consul. It felt good to express my outrage with my fellow countrymen and women. It was not my first march; nor would it be my last. Nevertheless, when it was done, I also felt my action was inadequate in protesting the monstrous evil of my young manhood: the Vietnam War. If I were going to dissent against the war or any morally repugnant exercise of military power, I wanted to exercise the most effective means at my disposal. For me, writing (whether it took the form of essays, novels, or plays) seemed the most impactful way to express my opposition to what I perceived as criminal behavior. I certainly had great literary role models. From Voltaire to Émile Zola to George Orwell to Ernest Hemingway to Gore Vidal, there was a long and estimable list of writers in Western civilization who became "involved in mankind" to redress a wrong and attempt to make a better world. I was inspired by them and attempted to follow their lead. Where once I was a leader of boys bent on pointless destruction, I became a loyal follower of brave writers of moral vision and unstinting resolve.

Now more than ever, there is a need for effective dissent.

The world of South Shore in the 1950s was the only world I knew. It was Plato's Cave. It would take me a while to be unshackled from that cave and to discover other worlds. Worlds where there were no sinners, and people were allowed to be themselves without fear of harassment. A world where they could be proud of being different.

For the past sixty years, I have lived in those wonderful worlds. But now, despite a considerable passage of time and place, it appears my old neighborhood is back. But this time it has spread across the entire nation. Back is the bigotry, the violence, and the name-calling. The

insidious intolerance of my youth has returned. It is an internecine war.

Now more than ever, educated and impactful resistance is needed.

If nothing is done soon, we may all find ourselves stranded atop that hotel roof ineffectively and destructively hurling eggs at innocent targets.♦


*Do Not Disturb* by Pat Tompkins

# Ice Sculptures

*poetry by Claire Scott*

Yellow tape across my dorm room. a guy in a white hazmat suit looking like
some second string angel struggling to pay the rent.

the razor. wrapped in clear plastic, exhibit A.

My roommate. chose the time.

I was hands freezing, hearts floating. with Sean. at Winter Carnival carving
Phoenix Rising from ice. miles away.

Hazmat guy is scrubbing the floor, the walls, the desk, the chair, her chair her desk.
the room stinks of Lysol.

I hate her turquoise shirt tossed on her bed, her red stiletto heels.

I hate her poster of Jim Morrison. her *I Heart New York* coffee mug.

I hate her half-empty pack of Marlboros. her iMac glaring at me
as though it is all my fault.

I hate her for making me think of melting ice, of mortality.
of the nothing that rises from ashes.

only a hazmat suit, a razor & a pair of red shoes.

# When everything lines up

*poetry by Claire Scott*

the moon is in the seventh house
Jupiter aligned with Mars
the AT&T bill paid plus
penalty for leaving
it under the cat dish
for over two months
the battery charged
cracked glasses discovered
under the couch
in the linen closet
next to frozen peas
when he has slept well enough
no nightmares of shaggy
boatmen demanding coins
when his memory is more or less
intact, at least a few neurons firing
when he remembers my name
and can find my number
my father calls

# The Thing About Gold

*nonfiction by Rebecca Monroe*

The thing about gold is even if we can't see it, won't see it, it's still there. It glimmers, waiting for the gray, hard rock to be chipped away, the vein to be uncovered. And the thing about gold is once we find the thinnest of flakes, we know there is more. If we really follow, dig, and watch, we uncover a rich vein that blinds us with its brilliance.

When we see just one flake, no matter how small, the questions flash before us. Is it pyrite? Is it real? Is there more? Then the gravel shifts, the flake is hidden and it's up to us to decide if we will pursue it or discount it lest we be fools for thinking it was there to begin with.

The thing about gold is, if we hold it in our minds but decide against all appearances that it is there, it grows.

Perhaps today, at this moment, it's tarnished—so black it looks moldy. Or it's pyrite: glitter with no value. We have seen it, been the false smiles and shallow words. Some days we, too, are the sludge at the bottom of the sluice box.

Once in a while on sludge days, we run into someone who is looking for the flake—the smallest piece they know is in us. We feel it there too; it's true and they believe it. The swirl that responds within us stirs the muck and for the briefest moment, we lift to the surface and float, glittering.

All it takes is one small flake. If we see it, remember it, hold it in our hearts as what is real, miracles happen.

One flake.

In others, we see it if we, too, look. Did they pause to run their hand over the back of a cat arching to be stroked? Did they share a smile with a baby peering over its parent's shoulder? Have they ever dropped everything to help a friend? The flake's shape changes, but the gold is real.

When there is moldy sludge, remember, the sludge covers the gold. Remember the shine while dishes fly and rage froths. Remember the gold in cold silences and indifferent attitudes. Remember, because as we hold that in our mind, the valuable will rise to the surface again.

It takes strength and focus to find it. We will be alone while others call us a fool. We must believe in something we can't immediately see. And it means riches beyond belief.

It's what we are here for. It's what we can be for each other.

We are all pure gold, waiting for someone to see inside us and remove the rubble.

The thing about gold is it's addictive. Find one flake and we hunger for the vein. Yes, at times it means despair. We will wonder if that's all there was, but the thing about gold is, as we are about to give up, it shows us another flake, the sparkle of color, the promise of the mother lode. The gold is there, beckoning us, pushing aside the rocks, letting the mud churn until it, too, is carried away. See the wink and shine of a true human heart that glows larger and richer as our own uncovers to meet it.

The thing about gold is, as we search for it in others, we find our own.♦

# Swing

*poetry by Jennifer Newhouse*

LC had a ruby, a real one. Her small hand presented the oval stone like a wedding band. At eight, she was what my mother called *really something*—mysteriously moving in just outside of the neighborhood, the kind of girl who had expensive jewelry & a big life. She told us. Me & M were ordinary and boyish. We sprouted from the cul-de-sac like dandelions—awkward & forgettable. Who would love us in our knit shorts & scrunchies? LC swung high & pumped her lean legs. We watched in our tie dye t-shirts, not yet knowing that anything cherished will be lost. That night, her mother searched my backyard looking for a bit of blood in the dirt. Then they were gone for good— just gone. M & I kicked the ground below the swings for weeks, ruining our hi-tops until the gold gave loose its promise. Worn & green, we held the ring in its lightness, its lie. Nothing special. A bubble gum ring that I kept, wearing it once and a while when no one would see. Years later, the two of us would flick the metal caps of our beers into the overgrown swing set, blushing with the newness of a someone in another room, washing down the old, stomping our feet as we danced to some familiar beat like none of it mattered.

# Raging Perfectionist

*poetry by Jennifer Newhouse*

imagine me in the dark room
taking word after word back
into my mouth swallowing
each one like a prenatal
choking down what must
be kept i have got to put
this mess away me jutting out
around the edges eating air
in the classrooms pleasing the voice
echoing in the walls / whose
voice you'll ask / no one
doing this to me let me
inhale remember none of this
has happened how little
ever happens everyone knows

# Thinking Thin

*poetry by Jennifer Newhouse*

Imagine your belly is an open room
& the child who left your womb
forgot some scoops of ice cream, a small
sandwich shop, an obnoxious roll of pie crust
still rolled on both hip bones. Breathe in
until you feel the walls, the hunger
echoing like a drum. The internet tells you:
You are not dying. You cannot die
if you just ate. How grossly inaccurate,
I think, driving a car or breathing.
Fatigue is a sign it's working—
you're literally eating yourself, flesh
of my flesh, fat of my fat. Cover yourself up
in lipstick & perfume. False hope.
Imagine yourself there—normal sized.
Hide the mirrors and their flame. Forget
what it was you wanted.
Remember the fat girl that you are.

*Low Tide* by Pat Tompkins

# The Valley of Death

*fiction by Jeannette Garrett*

"What kind of joke is this?"

"The paying kind. The best kind."

The two men were sitting on the ground, their backs against a forty-foot tall pine tree near the horse corral at the Red Devil Lodge in California. Walking toward them from the lodge, on a dirt trail that ended at the stables, was a tall, blond man with alarmingly pink cheeks and a green camera bag slung across his chest. Two skinny, nearly hairless legs appeared beneath his khaki shorts, and he stirred up dust as he walked, feet pointing out, heels together. A few feet ahead of him, like a midget bodyguard, was a boy, nine or ten, with a double-sided gun holster buckled around his waist. In each side was a silver cap pistol. This gear seemed to weigh the boy down, and he walked with the gait of an old man, the bottom of the leather holster bumping against his knees with each step. He kept having to push up a black cowboy hat that was tied with a piece of cord under his chin.

When he came within a foot or two of the corral, the boy turned back and shouted, "I told you. I told you we were going in the right direction." His father, in thick white socks and black sandals, swiped the back of his right hand across his brow, and exhaled, but said nothing in response.

"This is the smell of horse dung," the boy announced. It was said in the tone of discovery, not a statement of fact, since the boy had never in his life been around horses.

"There's no need to bellow," the father said. "Good grief." It was only 9:30 in the morning, but already 98 degrees Fahrenheit. Taking a handkerchief from the pocket of his shorts, he knotted it at one end and methodically dabbed it upward along his hairline, so that when he was finished a fringe of quarter-inch hair along his forehead stood straight up.

Unlike his father, the boy seemed not to feel the heat. Along with the black cowboy hat, he wore a long-sleeved Western shirt, the kind that snapped in the front. Only his Nike sneakers were at odds with his outfit. He had cried much of the previous night after discovering that his Western boots, given to him at Christmas, had not been packed. In an attempt to lessen his mortification, he had pulled his blue jeans down as far as he could to hide the sneakers, and the bottom of his cuffs dragged in the dirt.

The boy's crying the night before and his pleading this morning, along with the unaccustomed heat, had given his mother a migraine. They were English, and it was their first trip to the States. At their son's insistence, they had come to California, a place he associated with the Wild West, along with cowboys and Indians. Its advantage over Texas, his second choice, was that Disneyland was here also. As he was an only child, they tended to indulge him, like the horseback ride they planned to take together this morning. Only now, the father was torn between his wife, who

had just thrown up back in their room, and his easily disappointed son.

"Welcome to Death Valley." One of the two men under the tree got slowly to his feet, his left hand holding on to a lower tree branch for balance. "You all here for the horseback ride I reckon. You wanna come on into my office?"

"You're cowboys, aren't you?" the boy asked, seeking immediate confirmation. "You're cowboys? Right?"

"Yes, sir, a stove-up cowboy, but a cowboy nonetheless. Name's Clint. This here's Monty," he said, pointing to the ground.

Monty, his head bent down, eyes closed, raised his right hand from where it rested on his leg, his only acknowledgement of their presence. Clint led the way to a small, wooden building that looked to the father like a garden shed. On a couple of nails near the door hung clipboards holding release papers. At the entrance, bales of hay were piled two or three feet high. Clint took a seat behind a makeshift desk of plywood placed on top of two large barrels. The cowboy wore a brown eye patch over his left eye, which threw the father off-kilter. He didn't know where to look and alternated between staring at the man's good eye and avoiding his face.

Unlike his father, the boy had no qualms about the eye patch and had walked over to get a better look. He was now a few inches from Clint's face, peering up at him. His father grabbed his arm just as he reached out to touch the brown circle of leather. "Whuh," the boy said, "did a Choctaw do that to you?"

"No. More like a bucking steer and a Jack Daniels," Clint said to the boy. He winked at the father with his good eye.

When he learned Indians weren't to blame, the boy wandered out to the corral. As the father looked over the documents that waived away any of his rights against the lodge, the rim of perspiration that was forming under his arms, mixed with the sweet smell of hay and the stench of the manure, made him decide that he would sit in the swimming pool this morning rather than be a nurse to his wife or a riding companion to his son.

Despite this decision, he had not abandoned all parental responsibility. "You know," he said after he had signed the papers and was outside looking at the horse saddled and waiting, "I had thought there would be an animal more appropriate to my son's size. I mean, maybe a pony. Or a very old horse. Something smaller at any rate."

The horse was only a few inches shorter than the father, who was watching with fascination as its massive rib cage swelled in and out with each breath. It was a chestnut color with leopard-like white spots on its thick hindquarters.

"Old Lefty here's about as gentle as they come," Clint said. "Been with us six years. Ain't really been nowhere else. Besides," he said, as he saw the boy coming toward them, "this pardner looks like he can handle anything."

The boy stood on his tiptoes to look between the silver pipe railings at the horse. Its legs alone were taller than him, and, in truth, he thought what his father

had said made good sense. He was surprised and not a little disappointed that his father had so readily accepted Clint's assurances.

Monty, the other cowboy, was unsaddling the horses that the boy's mother and father would no longer be riding. He wore a white, long-sleeved t-shirt and his brown hair was pushed back into a bushy ponytail that looked to the boy like a dead squirrel permanently attached to his neck. He'd bent over to put a saddle on the ground and the squirrel stayed clamped on. Now he walked the boy's horse over to a cement trough full of water in the middle of the corral and held the reins out of the way. After a few minutes, he called out, "Giddyup time."

The top of the boy's head just reached the bottom of the stirrups, and the cowboy, smelling of cigarette smoke and sweat, had to lift him up into the saddle, which he did with a grunt. Even though the boy could not have weighed more than forty-five pounds, Monty had to catch his breath before he adjusted the stirrups. The boy had never been so high up, except when his father sometimes carried him on his shoulders, clutching his ankles so he wouldn't slide to one side. There was no one to steady him now and one wrong move, he thought, could send him hurtling to the ground.

Squatting against the fence trying to unzip his camera bag, the father called out, "One shot before you start out—James, wait a moment." Monty gave the boy's horse a slight pat on its right flank, causing it to take a few steps toward the father. Startled, the man lost his footing and teetered a few seconds, dangerously close to a pile of freshly laid manure. "Maybe when you return would be a better time," he said when he had regained his balance. He watched as the cowboy led the way out of the corral. James, clutching the reins, straight-backed and solemn atop the Appaloosa did not wave or say goodbye.

A deeply rutted trail, so narrow that they had to ride single file, led away from the corral. Outside the trail, the dirt was broken up by clumps of scrub and rocks, some so large the boy would not have been able to lift them, others about the size of gray gravel. James knew that Death Valley was a desert, but this looked nothing like the sand dunes of the Sahara, which is what he had pictured back home in England as he fell asleep thinking of the upcoming holiday. They had been riding fifteen minutes when the boy twisted back in his saddle and could not see the corral, much less the lodge, only a mountain range in the distance. Alarmed at the widening gap between Monty's horse and his own, James tried to dig into the horse's sides with the heels of his sneakers, as Monty had demonstrated before they left. The effort made him regret once again his lack of boots.

From time to time, the horse would shake its head, pulling the reins taut. Or else it would lower its long neck to graze on scrub, making a scratching noise. Monty had tried to encourage him to pet the horse when he got on, and now James leaned forward, slowly and carefully, to stroke the coarse hair of the horse's neck.

"Why'd you name my horse Lefty?" he asked, his voice unrecognizably small out in the open. "Sir," he had to repeat, "why'd you name my horse Lefty?"

Up ahead, Monty had been dozing, lulled to sleep by the horse's rhythm and the sun on his back. Turning his head slightly, with the least effort possible, he answered, "Didn't. You'd have to ask management about that. Not what I would've named him. But as good a name as any, I guess."

Monty longed for sleep. The howl of a coyote had woken him out of a dead slumber at 2:30 in the morning. When he was growing up, he had lived with his mother and two brothers in a shotgun house close to a railroad track in New Orleans. He had gotten used to the quick, sharp blasts that announced the train, and the succession of ambulances and fire trucks at all hours of the night. Man-made sounds, they became part of his dreams. But a coyote's howl in the middle of the night was, he discovered, something altogether different. It never failed to unnerve him.

He had to get over to see Shep, or he wouldn't make it through the day. There would be half a dozen trail rides before he was done at six.

"Sir, sir," the boy called out. "Is that Indian territory over those mountains? Have you been over those mountains?"

The mountains were a good fifteen miles away, a blue-gray border against a bluer sky. Monty never once wondered what was on the other side. More sand and brush would be his guess. When a guy he met in a bar back in September told him about a temporary job at Death Valley National Park, he took it as a sign. Earlier that week, his girlfriend of almost a year had told him she was pregnant. His first instinct was to get away as far as possible as fast as possible, but where to go? A Dos Equis with a random guy had answered the question for him. He had left town the next day.

He had never seen any pictures of Death Valley and had no expectations. For a while after he arrived, he had trouble grasping the size of the place. Only problem, he had come to realize in the last few weeks, there was only so much earth and sky and rock he could take day after day without feeling outsized by it. He could swear he had gotten smaller since he'd been out here. Death Valley, he thought, was God's cosmic joke. It was too hot and dry to be of any use. Nothing would grow here except something called arrowweed and mesquite and pine trees whose branches lifted upward like they were praying for rain. The whole valley served no purpose, as far as he could tell, but for people to come and gawk and leave again. And soon he would be one of the people leaving. He had decided to go back to New Orleans in two weeks and help his girlfriend raise the kid, a boy she had named Matthew. Death Valley had made him want to feel connected to someone, less alone. He did not want to end up like Clint, deep into middle age, living with strangers who came and went through the park's different tourist seasons.

"Well, have you been over those mountains?" James asked again.

"Nope. Don't expect anybody's been over those mountains in more than a hundred years. California Gold Rush brought some folks this way."

"But cowboys don't look for gold, do they?"

"Not that ways. Wouldn't do 'em no good if they did."

"Did those Gold Rush people run into any Indians?"

"Ran into some big rocks and a lot of snow is what they ran into. How'd a little boy all the way over in England come to think so much about Indians? You got many Indians over there in England?"

"We've got India Indians. They talk funny. And they've got a smell to them. Do your Indians smell too?"

"Not any worse'n you or me. Probably a lot better than me at the end of the day. And they don't talk funny either, like some people I could name." Monty smiled back at the boy, but his implication was missed on James. "Got their own language, but most of 'em speak English good as you or me."

"Do they ever scalp anybody? You know in *West of the Pecos* they scalped a whole family—mother, father, two little boys, and a girl. Then they ate the family's dog, I think. Savages." He said the word "savages" with such force that a wad of spit sprayed onto his chin and neck.

"You ever know any Indians? Any American Indians?" Monty asked.

"I know them all right. I've seen them in movies since I was five." After wiping away the spit with the back of his sleeve, James continued, "Have you been to England?"

"Never been outside of the U.S. of A. except once to Mexico. That's about as far as I've gotten, internationally speaking."

"They've got Mexicans there, don't they?"

"Mexicans, yeah. And some bad hombres. They've got drug cartels there—Los Zetas, Juárez—that are beheading folks with machetes. You heard about that over in England?"

"I'm not afraid of any Mexicans. How close are we to Mexico?" James asked, tantalized by the possibilities.

Monty shook his head and did not answer.

They rode along for a while, only the occasional jangle of the horses' reins breaking the silence. After a while, to keep himself awake, Monty called back, "They got any more like you at home? You got any brothers or sisters?"

"No. I think they might've wanted me to have a brother or sister, but I don't have one. Sir, sir," James said, his voice now a loud whisper. "Did you see that? Something moved in those bushes. Over there." He pointed to a swirl of dust rising behind a creosote bush a couple of yards from the trail.

"You think it could be Indians?"

"More like a jackrabbit, I imagine. They can be a sight more dangerous than any Indian. Especially when they're protecting their young or looking for food."

"Do Indians hunt jackrabbits? Make rabbit pie?"

"New one on me if they do."

"I thought it could be a sign that Indians were nearby," James said, disappointed.

"Wouldn't think so."

Monty glanced back after a few minutes and almost caught the boy with his thumb in his mouth. He was slumped over in his saddle, his face scarlet, his sleeves rolled up, the first two buttons of his shirt unsnapped. Quickly turning his back to the boy, Monty asked, "You awake back there?"

Heaven knows *he* barely was. His eyes, closed behind his sunglasses, were less a means of seeing than some ravenous

hunger that had to be fed. Sleep or meth were the only things that could feed it. With a slight detour, he could let the boy see an Indian and he could get something from Shep that would get him through the rest of the day.

He pulled his phone from his jeans and pressed Shep's number. Shep didn't like surprises and wouldn't answer his door unless he knew ahead of time who was coming.

After a minute or two on the phone, he turned back to the boy. "You awake back there?"

James, looking glum, lifted his head, but made no response.

"How'd you like to see some Indians?"

James spoke up, his voice full of excitement. "You mean it?"

"Course I mean it. But it's got to be our secret. A secret between men. You got a problem with that?'

"No, sir."

"Okay then. Hold your reins a little tight and pull Lefty there to the right."

"Lefty to the right. That's a good one."

Once they left the rutted trail, the horses picked up their pace, and James felt he was really riding the range now. He sat up in his saddle, tilted his hat back on his head. His horse was clipping along, but he was handling it fine, in a rhythm with the bouncing saddle. He looked around but saw no sign of where they might be heading. All he could see were more clumps of brush, more dirt, and more rocks.

After about a quarter of a mile they came to a four-foot-high barbed wire fence, the posts beginning to sink in the sand. Monty got off to open the gate and patted first his horse and then James's through. They rode a few more yards before a house appeared in the distance. It was small, wooden, with a flat roof. The Timbisha Shoshone Tribe had lived in the valley for centuries but had dwindled to less than fifty members, living in homes of various construction—adobe, wooden, permanent mobile homes—scattered haphazardly over forty acres.

Wherever there happened to be a cluster of trees, there might be a small house tucked in among them seeking shade. The only signs of life were an occasional clothesline with blue jeans and towels hanging to stiffen in the sun. Satellite dishes, of various sizes and vintages, angled from most of the roofs, and some of the dirt yards contained children's bicycles and soccer balls, their black pentagons faded by the sun. There were no gardens, but a few clay planters with cactus. Someone with an apparent sense of humor displayed white ceramic swans in their dirt yard. Others had laid out a length of Astroturf under a lean-to added on to their mobile home. The one thing they had in common was the hum of air-conditioning units running full blast at 10:30 in the morning.

"You said we were to see some Indians." James was accusatory and skeptical at the same time.

"And we are. We're going to see a very special Indian."

"Indians live in teepees, not these things."

"The government didn't know how to air-condition the teepees, so they provided these spacious, princely accommodations."

"Where is everybody then, if they live

here? I don't believe anybody lives here. And I surely do not believe Indians live here."

"Hold on pardner. Hold on."

Monty pulled his reins away from the closest house and led James past a rusting yellow pick-up truck, wheels off, sinking into the sand, then past a huge tree whose roots were above ground, like a hydra deposited in the desert. They finally arrived at a cluster of trees, which this time shielded a small, unhitched camper whose windows were covered with tin foil. Not too far from it, out in the open, was a wood-frame house painted what must have once been dark blue. There were black garbage bags piled up near the concrete blocks that served as steps to the door of the camper, and the boy's horse began nosing around them.

"Wait here," Monty said, as he got off his horse and walked up the steps to knock on the door. It opened a crack.

"Kimosabe," Shep called out, letting the cowboy in.

Inside, Monty was almost overcome by the smell of phosphorous, like hundreds of matches being struck at the same time. Shep's kitchen looked like a chemistry lab, with glass beakers and test tubes stacked up on the table and pots and pans boiling on the stove.

"I've got a fresh batch cooking," Shep said. "Not to worry though, not to worry. Like any good cook, I've got some already made."

"You're a regular Rachel Ray of the meth trade, aren't you?" Monty reached for his wallet. "My man, you would not believe how badly I need this today."

"When'd you start working this morning?"

"At the butt-fuck crack of dawn. They got me leading some British kid. Listen, you'd be doing me a big favor. He wants to meet an Indian. I promised him an Indian."

"You wantum me play tom-tom? Throw tomahawk?"

"I wantum to lie down and sleep five minutes." Monty sank into a brown plaid couch while Shep tended to his stove.

Outside, James's horse was still investigating the garbage by the cement steps. Growing restless, the boy steadied himself with his right hand against the door and slid off Lefty onto the top step.

"Kimosabe" was, he knew from countless hours of movies, an Indian word. Holding his ear to the door, all he could hear was a mumble of voices. From those same movies, he remembered that you had to be watchful, that Indians were quieter than white men and could sneak up on you. He decided it would be best to stand beside the door, his back against the warm aluminum siding, and wait and listen.

The cowboy had said he'd be only a minute, but surely twenty minutes had passed, according to the boy's calculation. Growing bored, James began to pretend the house was a hideout for a band of Indians who were holding a white woman, his mother, hostage and she had a bad headache. He was the leader of the lawmen, and her life depended on him. He needed to be alert and act quickly when the time came. Sitting with his back against the door, his knees bunched up to his chin, James looked for a water faucet. There was no sign of one. Thirsty and tired, he realized he would not be able to find his way back alone, if it came to that.

He wasn't certain he could climb onto the horse by himself. He was trying to decide whether to knock on the door when he heard a loud noise, like something metal had fallen to the floor. He stood up and took a step down, eyeing the bottom of the door for signs of movement, his hands on his guns.

It became quiet inside again. Then there were footsteps from one end of the trailer to another. Could there be more than two people inside? He didn't even know if this was the only door. He heard what could have been a whistle inside. A signal? He moved to a corner of the camper and stood behind a foot-long aluminum vent blowing warm air that smelled like when his mother did her nails at home. Holding on to both his guns, he rested them on top of the vent, as if it were a ledge and he was hiding in the mountains. From this vantage point, he could watch the door, but not be seen. After a few minutes, the door creaked open and a bare brown arm reached out, fingers clutching a tomahawk. At the sight of the blade glinting in the sun, he pulled both triggers of his guns at the same time. *Pop*. *Pop*. *Pop*. *Pop*. He fired over and over again, orange sparks flashing each time he pulled his thumbs back.

Later, James would not remember the Indian—who had survived the explosion—or the cowboy—who had not—or the force that had flung him back against a far row of brush. The inside of his nose had burned and there was a metallic taste in his mouth. The fire was so intense and quick that the horses had almost trampled him to get away. He lay on the hard desert ground, his thumb in his mouth, staring at the blaze, not comprehending what he had wrought.♦

# Jobsite

*fiction by Kevin Bi*

He learned how to operate the crane. That thing with a crusted hook and components called the boom and tackle, words putting sound in the soundless. A sort of crazy half-joke how the men taught him: They picked him up by the armpits and shoved him into the box unit, pressed their backs against the door, laughing until he could swing the thing in aimless inches the way they told him to. At first his fingers were shaky-scrabbly and he tried to show his teeth. But he was surprised to see the skill come so quickly. You did the lever and the machine moved on one axis. You did the crank and it moved on another.

It was his first summer working for the Carroway Co., and the houses were coming down and up and back down again like they could not bear the feel of sticking around, the scratch of your nails on the yellow planning paper.

The job itself had a mythos for him. When he was younger, his brother used to take him to the foundations of the white people's houses not yet sprouted. This was Lowell, Mass., where half the city had to check for lead in the pipes and the other half had the sound of plates clattering all dainty from the windows and someone saying, "The flexibility of the brown, teak table set." You could not put your gum on the sidewalk, the paving being so sheened and slick it would reject the gum's sugar fibers. The neighborhood they went to was rising fast, just money and the Josiah Festa group. Submerged concrete and hills of filling gravel. The air seemed to crunch in the sinus. They stepped in frozen puddles, dirt dunes, or tumbles pocked and shroomed by ice. They left marks on the walls, a swash of mud or a smear of the limestone powder you used for keeping the blocks slick against each other. His brother was in those days his flesh-and-blood idol, Samnang, they called him Sam at school. Samnang said, Fuck the place up all you want, cuz once the sides and ceilings come in, it'll forget about us. Samnang also said it was okay to piss in one of the concrete cells. So they pissed in one of the cells and thought no one would see, but a woman had her dog on the lot and she saw and told them to go home, back to wherever they'd come from. Mud-chinks, even lower than coon.

The thing he did after the crane was nothing, because you could not go further than the crane. What he did was shovel, which showed people you could hang. He cleared dirt, cleared rubble, did not complain. He felt the shovel was part of a gentler culture, the way into the name "Carroway," so round and loped and masked from the alien. A name that stings in its reward: Squeeze till you get to the blood.

One night he and the guys took a demolition job in the bay and some lights drifted overhead. Orbs of light you'd call them, one two three four five lights, not alarmingly different than a plane but a juicy, dimmer red. Not ping-pinging either, not an LED-based brightness but something with a greater measure of uncertainty, the uncertainty of reasoned life, coming grim toward the city in its molten spackle. Minutes later they heard the screech of jets, saw contrails in the night sky like blue-grey veins just cloyed beneath the skin. He climbed onto the back of a flatbed truck. The five lights hanging slowly. A man said, Holy fuck, I seen a thing like this; it buzzed his copter in Mekong. And later they heard the radio say the jets had been scrambled from Hanscom AFB four counties away to deal

with the orbs, things that could appear and disappear in zooming flickers. There was hardly any coverage of the incident in the news.

He ate tuna sandwiches for every lunch with the rest of the men. They fished for tins of dip in their back pockets. A blue trash barrel stewed blood-dark spit, bones from sticky honey wings. The men talked about beetle frass in the basement and going up into the Whites and a Jeep and a beagle abandoned at a rest stop. He listened to everything and asked questions to draw out words he'd yet to hear spoken by a real New Englander. This was how he learned to modulate his voice, make it closer to theirs. Booming and encyclopedic. A voice that sees the connections between the football's inner bladder and the .45 with buck and kick and the Coca-Cola commercial. He could shout for the shiplap bar, work the digger and the lift, he could tell another hard hat to dummy up the mechanism.

On his last day a bunch of the guys stuck around late, six or seven guys with nothing and no one at home waiting for them. Someone brought out a grill but realized he forgot the cooler with the meat. They sat on a heap of dirt and sucked the first fizz from silvery tallboys. There were jokes about Bruce Carroway's faggot son, Jeffrey. Sharp, weaponizable laughs but warm in the way of waning males. He thought the air didn't smell much like summer. They passed around a joint and he had his first toke there, wracked and spitting into the dirt. He had his first condom passed to him hidden-handed. For the girls with Arizonan hair, smelly skin but the good kind, the guy said. You're not so different from us, 'cept for the way you stare into the windows. You stare like there's someone standing in them, a creepy colonial bitch who looks back at you and nobawdy else.

The principle of the crane and the orbs and a cement-dusted hand extended to him under weed smoke—codes of the first and last ever Carroway summer.♦


*"Anywhere here's fine thanks."*

# Island Amusements

*poetry by Judy Kaber*

Sometimes the children came out
and clog-danced for fishermen
whose eyes were the eyes of bears
fresh out of the cave in spring, squinting
in the clawed light. The children wanted
to amuse them, to keep them
on flat-topped rocks, have them
throw pennies into tin cups, bickering coins
spitting against each other in tight space.

Sometimes the children watched a man
gut a fish—haddock, cod, pollock—
poking a silent knife into its rear end,
pulling it forward through smooth skin
that only a moment or two before puffed
in and out like when Lottie tried to blow up
that balloon they found, not knowing
about the tiny pinhole that kept it forever
from holding air again.
The children saw
the man's fingers slide into the wet, red
hole, dip beneath organs that flopped
aside, and then slice them free, leaving
the backbone exposed, ribs like thin fingers
reaching up the sides of the flesh,
a tangle of things at the head
that might once have held breath.

# Preterm

*poetry by Matthew Landrum*

We knew a few of the gestures—
a folding of the hands across the chest
which your mother favored,
a sudden standing and walking out
of rooms, my habitual choice,
but you came early, before we were
conversant in the language of grief.
Daughter, you would be no longer so
young if you were here. Did you know
you have a half-brother, a viable
continuation of the part of you that is
your mother? I'm glad for that. Daughter,
I want to speak to you a little longer,
even though I am only speaking to myself.
A week after you came and went,
your mother burst in on me shaving
and threw herself against my chest, sobbing,
and I cut myself badly. We stood there
for a long time, blood running down my shirt
and into her hair. It couldn't wait;
it demanded to be spoken. Preterm—
before the term, the terms, the lexicon.
I am a slow study; it's taken me so long
to find words to string together for missing you
which tied irrevocably to loving you,
which feels at times no different.
I didn't know how to speak it then
as you were fading and just repeated
daughter, daughter, daughter.
It will have to be enough.

# Zippered

*poetry by Sandy Fontana*

Maybe you can tell I cherish
this nubby secondhand jacket
and lavender bargain scarf,
souvenir shoes from my favorite
northern city. It's a simple mind

that relishes the gentleness
of clothes as friends, if mismatched.
Of cannibalizing worn backpack
to recycle its zippered compartments,

so many safe places. I'm living
in a now of color not preparedness.
The now of nonsense not responsibility.
I'm living my life backwards, zippered

snug in a false sense of security. If I'm
waiting for anything, I'm waiting
for miracles and money. My basement
floods. Waiting for the water to recede,
I sit on the steps and imagine.

# Do They Even Know It's the 1980s?

*poetry by Nate Maxson*

At all times there is, somewhere on television, a John Hughes movie playing in the background / Molly Ringwald is choosing bad boys over eccentric possible school shooters ad infinitum and / the jocks and the nerds are natural enemies and all is right with the world,

Baby sitters are having adventures with monsters hiding in closets and future presidents are / being comically hit with paint cans trying to burgle their way to perpetual celebrity But do they even know it's the 1980s?

Do those boys cloning super women in their basement realize that they're at the very peak?

The farthest our light reaches like a sunrise from the past (how long it takes light to reach us), / the star quarterback before brain damage waving *hi mom!* to a crowd of adorable orphans

Somewhere in the landscape of the past which we never needed cable to preserve because it was inside us all along,

Younger but somehow still middle aged versions of all our parents are working out in spandex, / doing bumps of cocaine and simultaneously panicking over both god and satan's judgement of / them

Future wife beaters and drug addicts and fox news panel survivors put hands on their hearts / and sing the national anthem around a Christmas tree

While above them, Kurt Colbain is standing on the Twin Towers, *both of them*: he is a giant, one / foot on each: the ACDC power stance with a knife in one hand he says *all these things will be / lost like tears in the rain*

# I Learned the Art of Cleaning House

*poetry by Ronda Piszk Broatch*

He showed me once his box of Playboys
high on a shelf of the laundry room
where papier-mâché Mary
gathered dust in the folds of her

painted robe because he drew nudes
in ink and my mother was out
running errands getting take-out
or maybe it was because she'd left him

for three days gone off and left him
like she'd left the note on the cheap
china hutch about how sorry she was
about sex and other transgressions tucked behind

knickknacks and books and I read the note
because I found it when I moved the old clock
because my mother always told me to dust
behind and beneath each small thing

(but not his Elvis Suns - never those) and it just
appeared as if it had jumped as if it had taken
this one chance some now-or-never bid
trusting me to keep its secret

like every other kept secret
the one only Mary knew
dusty as she was and mute with her
painted-on lips and applied eyes forever

looking toward the cracked light coming in
once in a blue moon touching her
shoving her aside to finger the glossy
boxed pages my father showed me that night.


Lucy, 26
6 kilometres away
DON'T MESSAGE ME
IF YOU'RE UNDER 18FT
THOMAS WYKES '18

# Forgotten Things

*nonfiction by Mike Sutton*

I can remember the day I learned about death.

I was young, maybe eight or nine. It was summer and nothing was worse than Dad and yard work. A terrible combo, my daily birthright. Dad made me go to Mr. Kelly's place out on Black Snake Road. I rode down that wavy road, each sharp turn leading to another, breathing life into its namesake. Dad told me he'd bring me out here again and let me drive someday. It was usually empty, so it was perfect for learning. Strapped in the passenger seat I believed every word. Dad said he knew a guy who wrecked a motorcycle there a few years back, so I needed to be careful when the day came. It never did.

Dad had a motorcycle wreck once, before I was born. He was seventeen and I wasn't so much as a thought. It's a funny thing, considering how close I came to being snuffed out of existence when his rigged-up Honda smashed into the asphalt. What's worse—it was just a lady backing out of a driveway. Nothing special or sexy. Just a fuckup on all accounts.

The impact broke Dad's back and shattered a leg, love taps he'd never shake off.

It didn't stop him though. Didn't stop me from screaming my way into the world a few years later or from being dragged out to Black Snake Road to see what I saw in that field. The grass was tall and turning yellow, bleached of life by summer's tireless heat. We were headed to pick up lumber Mr. Kelly didn't need. Dad had another project, another fantasy in a never-ending march of unfinished intentions. This one would be the same and I knew it. One look at our yard and you'd have known it too. I remember the air-conditioning in Mr. Kelly's double-wide and a fat boy rummaging through toys that weren't his, while the men talked about the things men talk about. I was just a boy without a care.

Dad sent me back to his old, white Chevy with the paint chipping off the hood. I can't for the life of me remember why, but he did. I followed the dirt road for a bit as it traced its way through the yellow field and the thicket of the thirsty Ouachita National Forest. The sun was beating down, but Dad's worn-out pickup wasn't much farther. I was probably thinking about video games, Mr. Kelly's AC, or anything besides working.

I smelled it first. It was sweet. Too sweet.

I stopped, searching for something that didn't belong. It didn't take long to find it. A puppy was curled up just a few feet from the road, right on the edge of the yellow field. My heart fluttered, as all boys' hearts do when they catch sight of a puppy. There's something special between a boy and a pup, but there wasn't anything special here. The puppy looked like it was napping. No, it looked more like a deflated balloon, blackened skin stretched thin over jutting bones. Almost like a black trash bag stuffed full of Walmart hangers, each poking out in an unnatural direction.

There wasn't any blood, no guts or gore. Just a puppy, or what was left of one. Strangest of all, there weren't any flies. No maggots. It's almost like they felt bad for the puppy, but they were probably just hiding from the heat.

How could death smell so sweet? It wasn't pleasant, but it wasn't like rotten

vegetables or hot vomit on a July field.

I'd seen dead things before. I found opossums in the dog's pen and bloody chicken feathers the coyotes left behind. Hell, I'd seen dead dogs before. Our house was too close to the road and Dad had shoveled up many that I'd loved. But this was different. That smell was different.

There's something innocent about a puppy, something trusting and pure. What had it done wrong? Did it get hit by a car speeding down the dirt road? Overheated? Killed by some animal lurking in the hedges? It was just lying there like it had fallen asleep, curled up in a bed of yellow grass. Even then, I knew I'd never know why the puppy died. It just had. I asked myself, If God's so good, why'd he let the puppy die?

I can't remember how long I stood there trying to understand something that couldn't be understood. I'm sure the heat forced me on my way, but part of that puppy never left this boy.

I finished doing whatever I had been ordered to do at Dad's pickup and trudged back to Mr. Kelly's double-wide, glancing quickly at the deflated balloon as I passed by again. Not long after, we started carrying lumber back to the truck. I lifted a load, a small one because I was fat and wanted nothing more than Mr. Kelly's AC, and carried the load behind Dad and Mr. Kelly. They glanced at the puppy and just walked past.

"Ah, that's where he is," Mr. Kelly said. "I've been looking for him."

Dad never said a word.

Why didn't they stop? Why didn't they give a shit? I know now there wasn't anything to be done. The puppy was long gone and nothing could bring it back. Mr. Kelly didn't need to say it. Neither did Dad. But they should have buried it. Surely a puppy deserved a burial. It must have deserved better than to be picked apart by buzzards that caught a hint of the sweet scent.

Despite my anger, I didn't do a thing either. Never uttered a word. I went about my business, carried the lumber to Dad's Chevy, and sat quietly as he hauled us back home to the air-conditioning and video games.

Every so often, I catch a whiff of that sweet, sickly death, and I go tumbling back to the summer day in the yellow field out on Black Snake Road when I found that puppy in the grass, just another forgotten thing.♦

# Narcissus poeticus

*poetry by Jules Jacob*

I hover by his ear  fly in
drone all thoughts of his myth
but mine

*listen*  truth is pitch essential
to an evergreen  matter
attached to your arrows and skin

  don't talk of scrubbing.
We have no sin. We lie in every
continent waiting to rise

mocking with paper
white petals and short
coronas  willing to twist

stomachs and bowels
when consumed before
our time  *pay attention*

the spurned droop unnoticed
tears are one percent salt
echoes have the final word.

# Hiking into Argentina

*poetry by Monica Joy Claesson*

I spend all afternoon trudging through cold
Patagonian rain, tuning and retuning my ears

to a new key of Spanish. I've heard it a few times:
the characteristic *jsh jsh jsh* of the Argentine

accent, speech as coarse as sandpaper
and as smooth as a slab of timber beneath.

Their words polish themselves against each other.
Somewhere past kilometer 15, I will step off

the edge of Chile and into this culture carved
by unfamiliar mythologies. The mountains

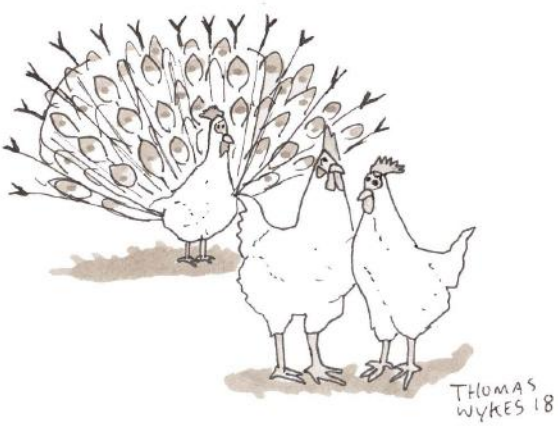
move differently on the other side of the Andes.
Glaciers rebirth themselves toward another ocean.

The old ice groans across the silent lakes,
and I am humbled again by how much I don't know.

In this language, I am still learning the names of things.
I need the world explained to me in simpler terms.

I stumble my way through difficult dialects, and everyone
smiles at me in encouragement. Across this cordillera,

I am a child so many times over.




*"she's had work done"*

# A set of distances

*fiction by Rachael Mead*

Steve pushes his feet deeper into the sand and leans back on his elbows. For all the postcard atmosphere of Bonegi Beach, the black sand under the shade of the coconut palms is scarred with stones, shells, and pieces of dead coral. He picks up the piece of coral biting into his forearm. Hard and white as a bone, the coral has a zigzag shape. The beach is littered with these tiny oddments of reef, their shapes resembling alien ciphers or occult symbols. Meredith, another rescue paramedic on the team, has been collecting pieces that look like letters of the alphabet. This one could be either *M*, *W*, or *E*. Steve tucks it in the pocket of his shorts.

In front of him the horizon is broken by stacks of decaying machinery jutting from the sea less than thirty metres from shore. The guidebook stuffed into his backpack says the beach is famous for the World War II Japanese freighter that ran aground here. Right now, he couldn't care less. He stretches until the spaces between his joints and vertebrae crack in a way he can both hear and feel deep within his body. He could happily while away his time in the Solomons right here, exploring the coral that shrouds the rusting skeleton of the ship just below the surface.

He hears the mobile ring, buried in the depths of his backpack.

"I know you're off, but I need you to come in tonight. Trevor's down with dengue so you'll need to cover his shifts over the next few days. Yes?"

"Okay. No problem. Hope he's keeping the moaning to a reasonable level. Breakbone fever, and all that."

The snorkelers splash up the beach in a loose pack. Steve used to find this closeness smothering, but after three weeks it's beginning to feel more natural. He and his colleagues do everything together: work, eat, play. They join him in the shade of the coconut palms, surrounding him with chatter and the neon of snorkels and fins.

"You missed a great one. Five Nemos! Clear as glass out there."

"Damn. Next time." Steve gets to his feet and brushes sand from the back of his shorts, shoving his feet into his thongs. "Sorry to cut the day short. I've just been called in. Trev's down with dengue."

"Shit. That sucks."

They straggle towards the old Land Rover, the straps of bags bulging with fins, masks, and water bottles cutting into brown, peeling shoulders. One by one they pile into the back of the troopie, long and broad as a hearse, trailing damp towels and footprints that slowly vanish on the hot, dark bitumen.

He's driving a stretch of road where the semi-industrial peters away into the savannah grassland of cleared rainforest. Only the odd shopfront and empty thatched shelter break the long stretch of grass-cracked bitumen. He's just about to cross the bridge over the Lungga River when something glinting up ahead in the darkness catches his eye.

Steve slows the minibus, trying to make out what it is and whether it looks set to dart out onto the road. The air conditioner isn't working so he has his elbow on the windowsill and the warm night holds the scent of freshly cremated forest.

Squinting, he sees that the flashes of brightness are from moonlight gleaming

on dark-skinned, sweating bodies. On the far side of the bridge, down beside the river, is a low, flat area where, in daylight, people wash their cars and trucks of the red mud that spatters their sides like arterial spray. Tonight, the area is empty of cars but as Steve approaches the bridge, he sees several figures down on the flat.

Steve slows down as he passes over the bridge. He leans forward, his back registering the sudden chill of sweat exposed to air. Squinting into the dark, his hands tighten their grip on the steering wheel.

In the shrouded light of moon behind cloud two men are circling a body. They are shirtless and sweating profusely. The fallen man looks bloody, his white, short-sleeved shirt clinging in slick, dark patches to his torso. A third man stands on top of him, both feet planted on his chest. He's holding something the size of a head in his hands but the shape is wrong. Steve can't make out what it is. All he knows is that this whole scene is making his belly knot in the way it does when he watches nature documentaries about predators.

Steve's foot hovers in the space between the brake and the accelerator, but now he presses down on the brake. The minibus squeaks as it comes to a stop and he sees all three men look over. In the dark, he can't make out their faces from this distance but he can tell they're paused on the cusp of a decision. So is he.

Steve's fingers curl around the door handle. The metal feels cool for a split second, then turns warm and slick under his hand. He's already broken the rules. Medical staff are unarmed civilians so no one is meant to travel alone. In an emergency like an uprising or a targeted attack, he's been trained to keep the doors locked, windows closed, and to not stop until he's reached the army base. But tonight, the duty manager's given Steve clearance to go against policy and drive himself from the hotel to the army base. Still, he's not meant to stop; he's meant to stay well away from any civil unrest.

Paralyzed, he grips the handle. Everything feels like strangled breath. The man standing on the body swings his arms up over his head. Steve now sees that he's holding a large lump of concrete. The man pauses, the misshapen block poised at the apex of his swing, as if this is part of a ritual. Then he hurls it down, smashing it into the face of the man lying beneath him.

There is a fleshy crack, like overripe fruit breaking open.

A faint, tinny roar builds inside Steve's head. The edges of his vision darken and narrow. He watches, frozen, as the other two lift their legs and begin to stomp on the fallen man, his body loose and defenseless. They bring their feet down again and again, knees raised so high they are bent into sharp angles.

The legs of the man begin to twitch and thrash as if he's seizing. Steve has seen people die before, been with them as their bodies stopped functioning. But not like this. He wants to move but he's seeing this down a long, dark tunnel. He wills himself to do something. Anything. But it's as if he's ordering someone else to do it. Someone he's screaming at but who can't hear. Someone in a dream.

The body stops quaking. The man must be dead. Steve sees the men slow down, then stop. The one who'd used the concrete block steps off the corpse. The head is flattened, no face visible, just a dark, glistening pulp with the odd shard of bone catching the moon. The mutter of the river rises in his ears and Steve realizes he's not breathing. The men turn and meet Steve's eyes, arms hanging by their sides, chests heaving.

They start towards him and Steve scrabbles at the window winder, jerking the glass up and slamming the lock down. He reaches for the keys and the ignition screams as he tries to start the already

running engine. Steve slams the bus into gear and it jerks into motion, tires spinning. He is panting, eyes darting road, mirror, road, mirror, until the dark and distance take over and he can no longer see them standing on the road behind him, watching.

The AFP officer is only distinguishable from a soldier by his uniform. "And you didn't call for help."

"I … it happened really fast. I was on my own. I just drove. Straight here. I came right here, first, I mean. I'm meant to be on shift tonight. It just happened. Down the road by the river. I can show you where. Just let me call Dave, my manager. I need to let him know I'm here."

The officer runs one hand over his shaved head and hands Steve a plastic bottle of water with the other. Then he reaches for the phone.

"Yeah, hi. Craig from the AFP here. Dave there? Yeah, I've got your medic Steve here. He witnessed an incident with some locals on his way here and we're going to need him for a bit. He wanted me to tell you he'll be late. Uh huh. Yeah. Okay. Will do."

He drops the phone back on its cradle. "He said if there's a call-out he'll page you but otherwise just check in when we're done."

Steve nods. He uncaps the bottle, then tightens the lid. It's only after the third time he pulls the cap from the neck of the bottle that he thinks to take a sip.

Steve drops the book on his chest. Looking towards the window all he can see is the reflected bedlam of his hotel room. It's late. No, it's early. Honiara is unconscious but for the occasional hoot of some nocturnal bird. His limbs are heavy with fatigue. His mind spins though, and even ploughing through *Infinite Jest* with its densely worded footnotes is failing to wind down his thoughts.

It's been this way for a couple of weeks. Insomnia. He's been drinking so much coffee he feels jittery and uncoordinated, flinching at sudden noises or jumping out of his skin when someone calls out to him from across the dining room. He's meant to be back on shift this morning.

Steve looks at the glowing numerals amid the clutter of dirty mugs and dog-eared novels on the bedside table. 04:17. He attempts to work out how many minutes until the alarm goes off at 06:30 but his thoughts stumble over the calculation. He thumps the paperback down on the bed.

He's not performing well at work. No mental gymnastics needed for that calculation. When he first arrived, he liked this version of himself: capable, adventurous, self-sufficient. Now, he's one week from his last shift and all he wants is to get home and leave this version behind, empty and bodiless as a ghost.

Steve throws back the covers. He gathers up the mug collection, dumping it in the tiny sink. The crockery clatters like a jumble of loose bones as he gives each mug and plate a punishing clean. He goes back to the bedside table and straightens the stack of books. At the bottom of the pile is a black notebook. The idea had been to take notes on his experience here and write a blog about it. He'd started with enthusiasm: lengthy entries about flying in the helicopter to treat people in remote communities, the islands strung across the ocean like emerald beads embedded in lacy collars of coral. He flicks through the pages to his last entry; it was two weeks ago. Since then, he's filled another five pages with scrawled sketches, jagged black lines depicting bare-chested men. Men stomping, men hurling rocks, a mess of scribbled action. Beneath these scrawled, frenetic figures,

the spare lines of a man, limp and motionless, his head pulverized into a flattened nest of black ink.

Steve claps the notebook shut, snapping the elastic across the cover and tries to slow his breathing, mindfully observing each inhalation, exhalation. He only manages three rounds before his mind jerks away. He's going to be a mess at work today and considers ringing in sick.

Outside the sky gathers light. Steve slides open the door to the balcony, grips his coffee and watches as Honiara assembles itself from darkness into birdsong and a set of distances. The ocean is just visible, a dull metallic gleam under the horizon. The air moves around him, rattling the fronds of palms. He pulls his robe tighter then rests his forearms on the balcony rail.

A plaintive cry and strange, arrhythmic thunking coming from below make him lean further out. He searches the shadows and sees movement but can't quite make out what it is; both the sound and the movement have an unnatural quality, like something artificial trying hard to appear real.

It's the plastic he sees first. The clear jar has a broad, square base and straight sides that are fogged almost to opacity. It must be plastic. It can't be glass from the sound it makes as it bumps and scrapes against the wall of the hotel. Plus, the weight would be too much for the skinny, ginger cat whose head is trapped in the jar's mouth.

With mounting horror, Steve watches as the creature skulks with a cautious, halting gait along the base of the wall. The inside of the jar is clouded with condensed breath and the cat waves it from side to side to see the ground in front of its paws. The shape of the container looks familiar and the skin on the back of Steve's neck chills as he realizes it is identical to the plastic jar of peanut butter that he uses on his toast each morning at the hotel's breakfast bar.

The cat is skin and bone. Everything about it keens with fatigue and anxiety. The twin wings of hipbones and ribcage push against ragged, mud-spattered fur. From the way it doesn't paw at the rim encircling its neck, Steve can tell that it has been in this predicament for some time.

A dark, thick tide pools in Steve's gut and begins to rise. He steps back into his room, shrugs off his robe and pulls on the first clothes he kicks up from the mess on the floor. Stubbing his feet into thongs, he makes his way quickly and quietly out of the room and down the stairs. Once on the ground floor, he creeps around the back, sliding between the wall and hibiscus bushes until he is at the corner behind the spot where he saw the cat. Steve peers around the edge of the wall. The cat is still there, its back to him, tail hanging thin and limp as rope. Cobwebs thicken the gap between the bushes and wall. He creeps towards the cat, trying to deaden the slap of thong with each stalking step. He's close enough to be reaching for its body when it senses danger and springs away, running pell-mell into the glossy-leaved undergrowth separating the buildings. Steve follows, folding his arms over his head as he plunges into the mass of hibiscus, frangipani, and short, broad-leaved palms, that ubiquitous resort landscape intended to signal tropical garden. Steve crashes after the cat but by the time he emerges, scratched and panting, from the plant life on the far side, the cat is no longer in sight. He stops, catching his breath and raking leaves and cobwebs from his hair.

He stands there for a minute, waiting, his ears straining for rustling or crackling in the leaf litter. After a minute or so his breath slows and he hears a sound that can only be the slide of leaves over hollow

plastic. At the boundary between the hotel grounds and a neighboring vacant lot, Steve sees a slink of ginger as the cat creeps from beneath the undergrowth and stops at the base of a half-built bessa block wall. Again, Steve moves quietly behind the cat while it is distracted by trying to see its way up onto the wall and into the wild neglect of the construction site beyond.

He lunges. Under his fingers, Steve can feel the slight body tense and recoil, the cat's terror almost an electric shock passing from the matted fur into his fingertips. The cat leaps free, paws scrabbling for purchase on the bessa block. The jar clatters against the wall with the cat in full flight, lurching and reeling into the jungle of weeds and abandoned masonry like a panicked creature just reanimated from the dead.

It's clear Steve can't do this alone. He climbs back, bursting from the greenery dirty and bedraggled into the cool, clean geometry of the paved landscape around the hotel swimming pool. There are voices and kitchen sounds so he strides towards them, cutting through the hotel foyer to the dining room. The gods carved into every vertical wooden surface stare with stern faces. It's early but four of his colleagues are already sitting at the long dining table drinking coffee, the women eating tropical fruit, the men with plates laden from the hot buffet.

Steve walks swiftly up to the table. "Hey guys, can you help me? It shouldn't take long. There's this cat. It's got its head trapped in a jar and if we can surround it, it shouldn't be too hard to grab it and pull the jar off. It's in the building site next door."

There's a long pause as they exchange looks.

"What? Right now?" Gary drinks another mouthful of coffee, puts down his cup, and picks up his cutlery. "We're in the middle of breakfast."

"I know exactly where it is. It's starving and desperate. I think it's been like this for a while."

"But it's just a cat." He holds Steve's gaze for a moment then deliberately looks down at his plate, cutting into a crisp rasher of bacon. The knife shrieks against the plate.

"Come on. It will only take a minute. It's dying. …" No one meets his eyes. Gary continues to chew, ignoring him completely while the two women look at each other and fiddle with their coffee cups. Brad pushes his chair back from the table and for a moment Steve thinks the tide is turning, but he picks up his empty plate and walks towards the buffet table at the back of the room, ending his participation in the conversation just as effectively as Gary with his mouthful of bacon.

Sharon and Grace exchange another look then turn to him. Sharon doesn't say anything but makes it clear she's taking in Steve's dishevelment.

Grace is kinder. "Are you alright, Steve?"

"Yes, *I'm* fine." Steve struggles to keep the exasperation out of his voice. "But I really need your help. For the cat. Please. Just a few minutes then you'll be back with your coffee and you'll have saved a life before you've even started work." Steve tries to smile, hoping the last bit didn't come across as facetious. He can't believe their lack of feeling. These people are nurses, a dentist, and a surgeon. Even describing the cat's predicament was making his chest feel tight.

"I don't mean to be rude but you're in a bit of a state. If you're going to make the bus you'd better hop in the shower. You don't want to be late again. Dave will have kittens. Oh, sorry." Sharon chuckles breathily at her joke and looks over at Gary, clearly hoping for a solidarity chuckle. She is rewarded. He humphs through his mouthful and raises his

eyebrows.

"Thanks so much for your help. You're all such exemplary specimens of humanity. A credit to our species. Arseholes." He mutters the last under his breath as he turns on his heel and stalks back across the foyer. *Selfish fucking pricks. These people are unbelievable.*

He climbs back through the garden and over the wall into the mess of rubble and building detritus. He stops, trying to calm his anger and his breathing. The sun is still low but there's no shade on the site, the heat and light bearing down then bouncing off the stone and cement. His skin is slick with dirt and sweat. There is no sign of the cat. Steve moves deeper into the rubble and, grabbing some rusted rebar, steadies himself as he climbs gingerly onto a cement block that forms the highest point. If the cat moves he should see it. Minutes pass. He replays the breakfast scene in his head, making himself more furious. Sweat pools under his collarbone and trickles down his chest. He starts at every movement but it's only the darting of geckoes or skinks across hot stone.

Then he hears it—a gentle *tonk*. Searching for the sound, Steve glimpses the edge of the jar moving slowly from the cover of a cement slab near the far edge of the building site. Silently cursing his choice of footwear, he begins to creep towards the skeletal creature, stepping from bessa block to cement slab to any foothold in the rough field of rubble. The cat seems unaware of his presence. A cautious confidence begins to grow but Steve pushes it down, trying to keep his energy as hushed and controlled as his sound.

Step by step, the distance between them closes until he is above the cat. He can see its bone-wrinkled fur ending in the alien bluntness of the bottle. All he needs to do is scoop it up. He reaches out, stepping down onto a jagged piece of concrete. His thong lands awkwardly on the uneven surface and his sweaty foot slips sideways on the plastic sole. He lurches. The rubble stops his fall but he's missed his chance. Steve pulls himself up but the cat jumps onto the boundary fence and down into the thick undergrowth beyond the building site. It's gone.

Back in his hotel room, Steve kicks off his thongs and sits on the edge of the unmade bed. There's a slickness to the tiles under his bare feet. He must've sliced his foot when he slipped.

It doesn't seem to hurt so he is surprised when the tears come. They well up from somewhere hidden. A secret place. A place that, now it has ruptured like a fissure under pressure, won't close. The tears leak out silently. Now they are here they feel ancient, as though they have been waiting a long time for this moment and cannot let it go.

Steve hears the minibus driver lean on the horn, twice, three times, then crunch the gears into reverse. It leaves. At the periphery of his mind there's a flicker of surprise that he doesn't care. About the bus. About work. About them.

The balcony's shadows have moved and clouds have gathered above the razor slash of the horizon when Steve eventually rises from the bed. The tears have stopped but the fissure within him is still open. He walks into the bathroom and closes the door. The tiles beside the bed are glossy and red except for the perfect, white shape of his absence.♦

# Goodbye, Freddy

*fiction by Clayton Truscott*

They're putting Freddy down. Eleven, tomorrow morning.

My Freddy.

"That's a very specific time," I say to Mom via Skype.

"I'll be home by then," Dad chimes in from a conference room in Johannesburg. "We should both be here."

What he isn't saying is that I should be there too.

"Who made the call?" I ask. "Was it the vet or the psychic?"

"Telepathist," Dad says, cutting Mom off before she can tell me that her guy speaks to all animals.

"Fine. Who made the call?"

"We did," Mom says, squinting into her iPad. "The people who feed and bathe her every day because she can't anymore."

That's not how I remember Freddy. She was still a happy cat when I visited four months ago. Lumpy, toothless, confined to horrendous knitted sweaters. Old.

The telepathist bothers me. Not as a person, just professionally.

My parents first hired him to work with Rambo, their newly-adopted Jack Russell who scratched on the back door and peed on the chickens.

"Don't you remember how he picked up on Rambo's past trauma?" Dad asks.

"You adopted him from a kill shelter. I could have told you that he has a history of trauma."

"Don't be so close-minded," Mom snaps.

It's not that I'm close-minded. It's just that this guy also claims to speak with the dead, to have seen his own past lives, and to read energy fields. Desperate people seek him out to answer the unanswerable. And it kills me to see my parents like that.

"What did the guy say about Freddy?"

"Freddy is upset." Dad presents this as fact.

Freddy has been a member of our family for twenty-one years. I've seen her tackle an ibis the size of a small child, survive a hit-and-run, and decapitate a mongoose. She's not easily upset.

"What about?"

"She's upset with you."

"What did I do?" This sounds more offended than I feel.

"You didn't say goodbye when you visited," Dad reveals.

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it?" Mom asks, using her serious voice.

"I'm pretty sure I did."

They sigh and stammer. Judgment pending. "You need to speak with her and make this right."

"That's even more ridiculous."

Mom sighs. "He says it's critical."

This is what grates me about the telepathist: Without having met me, he can convince my parents that I have wronged the family.

"Freddy doesn't need my apology."

"Well," Mom gathers herself to make a point, "I think it wouldn't hurt to say something."

Typical Mom and Dad: They've decided what needs to happen to make things right with the universe. I'm playing their game. So is Freddy, no doubt.

"Just thank her," Dad says, choking up. "Start there."

I had just turned fourteen when Dad surprised me with a cat for my birthday. Not a kitten. A hardened tabby with a mashed-in nose and two missing fingers. Or toes. Whatever the hell you call the digits on a cat's paw.

Her name was not yet Freddy.

Socks, the name given to her at the shelter, wouldn't do in our household. It was too plain. Something made-up for a pet, not a family member. Mom told me to think hard about renaming her. Your name matters. Consider it a gift. It must be spoken with dignity.

I thought hard about the cat's qualities. The broken face. The compulsive slashing. The cruel past. I named her after Freddy Krueger.

"She's your cat. Call her what you think is right," Mom said when I explained my reasoning to her, a lifetime ago.

When I went back to my room and found Freddy kneading holes in my pillow, I decided that the name fit perfectly.

"Are we doing this?" Dad asks. "Are you saying goodbye to Freddy?"

"Yes," Mom answers for me. She escorts me through the home I grew up in. A house that I can smell from ten thousand miles away, navigate blindfolded, and think about constantly. It's been six years since I left the country.

My family of people love relentlessly, embrace the ugliness within, and hold one another accountable. They hire psychic telepathists to speak with their sick animals. They treat their pets like any other family member. The years added up quickly.

A time will come when the amount of time I've lived away from South Africa will equal the time that I lived there. By then, who knows how many goodbyes I'll have said. Freddy is the only living animal from my childhood. She is all I have left from that time. And I hate to admit this: I didn't say anything to Freddy when I left.

The telepathist is not wrong.

Mom props up the iPad, putting me face-to-face with Freddy. She scrunches up her nose, looks at me, yowls.

It feels like the bloody rapture in my soul.

"We'll give you some time together," Mom says. She and Dad leave me with Freddy.

I take a deep breath, look my cat in the eye, and prepare to have the type of conversation that I'll continue to have as long as I'm a part of this family.♦

# An Ocean Away

*nonfiction by Marilyn Duarte*

I almost drowned once when I was a teenager. In the Caribbean Sea off the coast of Mexico.

Bright white crystals sparkled on the surface of the tranquil, baby blue water. To keep afloat, I repeated a figure eight motion with my hands and cycled with my legs; I soaked in the water's sun-blanketed warmth above and its sheltered cool below.

I heard parents warn their children to stay where they could see them.

Figure eight with my hands, cycle with my legs.

Faint cackles of laughter reached me.

Figure eight with my hands, cycle with my legs.

My own quick and labored breath became the only thing I could hear.

Figure eight with my hands, cycle with my legs.

I slipped under then propelled myself up and gasped for air. I slipped under, then fought my way back up. I slipped under.

My aching legs kicked slowly; my heavy hands circled too low.

I pushed myself back up once more and made quick-popping bubbles with my mouth against the surface of the water. I swallowed bright white crystals. Fighting the current was futile. Better to float and let the rough waters pass until they released me. But knowing and doing are two different things.

I tried to call for help. Maybe some sounds came out of me. A yell? A cry? A whimper?

Figure eight with my hands, cycle with my legs.

I knew I was in trouble.

Many near-drowning victims have said they thought they were in control, and before they knew it, everything became a blur. Their reality unfolded in slow motion; their desperate attempts at fighting the suffocating water were in vain: the strength and magnitude of the water overpowering, their demise seemingly a breath away.

Figure eight with my hands, cycle with my legs.

A crushing wave collapsed on me, pushing me underwater. I bobbed back up and gasped for air, barely catching my breath before another wave crashed down. Once more, I broke through the water's surface. I remember the sun on my face for a quick second before another wave crashed down.

Figure eight with my hands, cycle with my legs.

I lay on the sandy shore in Mexico in front of the resorts, trembling and coughing. I coughed so hard that the muscles around my ribs began to spasm. It hurt to breathe. Hair stuck to the sides of my face. My eyes remained wide in disbelief. The waves that had been slowly killing me somehow spit me out. Someone had pulled me out of the water.

Subject: Hey
It was so great meeting you at the BBQ yesterday.
C

I shouldn't have been there on that quiet, still, Sunday afternoon, nearing the end of summer six years ago. You shouldn't have been there either. I had been asked by a friend to help with a fundraiser. You had just moved to the big city and owed someone a favor. You came up from

behind me and walked in front of my line of vision, where I caught my first look at you. For a moment, I felt myself stop breathing. The familiar feeling of being overpowered when I was in the Caribbean Sea fifteen years earlier came flooding back.

I knew I was in trouble.

Subject: Dinner
That was the most fun I've had in a long time. Dinner again this weekend?
C

Subject: I'm Crazy About You
I'm crazy about you. I'm crazy about you. I'm crazy about you. I'm crazy about you.
C

It didn't make sense. We were so different. I had been out in the world, you had just left school. Yet, I felt what I felt. You said you felt it too.

9:00 p.m.

9:05 p.m.

9:15 p.m.

Time dragged on. Every moment without you, excruciating. We made plans for every weekend. But then next weekend became next month. Then another month. Then another.

Subject: Hey
I think about you constantly.
C

I wanted to believe you, so I did.
Then you moved away.

Subject: I Miss You
I really do, and I miss that city. I wish I lived there. I'd love to have the freedom again that I had in that city, and the accessibility I had to you. How does December 13th sound? I'll go there or you come here.
C

Subject: Hey
I thought about you in the shower the other day.
C

You were brazen. How much would I tolerate? Could you push me further? What would be too much for me?

My reality consisted of caring for terminally ill family members. There had been one, then two, now there were three. I was used to panicked trips to the hospital, knew how to brace myself for bad news, and understood that the furrowed brows and weak smiles that formed on the faces of medical interns were how they sympathized with me in my unraveling world.

It was all too much for me.

I grew satisfied with so little.

I remained hooked. Then for weeks on end, silence. To help explain your disappearances, a million scenarios swam through my mind. What had I said to push you away? What hadn't I said?

I made errors on report cards. I forgot appointments. I lost my appetite. I developed a skin rash that became infected because I couldn't summon the energy nor the concentration to go see a doctor. By the time my sister drove me to a walk-in clinic, I was limping in pain.

I drank too much red wine.

I went over every nuance I thought I'd heard in your voice the last time we spoke and deciphered every sentence, looking for hidden meanings I desperately wanted to be true. I bent reality to suit my desired

outcome.

I don't know if it was worse to try and manipulate my own thoughts or to be manipulated by you. Both were exhausting.

Subject: Thinking of You
I called you today.
C

Subject: Don't Be Mad
Please don't be mad at me. Work has been crazy busy. I promise I'll come see you soon. I want nothing more than to be with you. I'm hoping December 13th still works for you.
C

Subject: Thinking of You
Don't ignore me.
C

I was intoxicated. Addicted. Highs too impossible to maintain, and lows so painful that I'd swear I'd stay away from you for good next time.

Subject: Last Night
It was so good talking to you last night. I woke up, and the first thing I thought of was you, so here I am sending you a quick note.
I can't wait to see you.
C

Subject: December 13th
It's settled then. I'll pick you up from the airport on the 13th. I'm more than excited to see you.
C

A snowstorm was expected to hit both our cities. People were advised to stay home. I headed to the airport. My plane was the last one to take off for the night. I landed in an unfamiliar city, eagerly anticipated your familiar face. Your blue eyes. I waited.

Was I at the right gate?

It was the right gate.

The forecast called for twenty centimeters of snow. From where I stood, I guessed there was not yet ten. Outside of the sliding automatic airport doors, bright white snowflakes raced down. There must have been more than twenty centimeters.

Back home, I carved out a fire pit in my backyard. The fire burned wide and high and melted the surrounding snow. I emptied my suitcase of the outfits I had so carefully picked out then tossed them into the amber flames, which grew taller and popped louder. My once-beautiful clothes turned to ashes.

"I forgive you," I heard myself say into the phone six months later. But were you even sorry?

I thought it would be good to distract myself from you, so I went overseas for the summer to care for my ailing father and attend a writer's conference. You asked me not to go. Didn't I know that things would be different now? Why did I have to leave and ruin everything?

I was still traveling when you called to tell me that you were more emotionally invested in the new girl. Couldn't I just let it go? You demanded to know why I cared so much. All I could manage to say was, "You cared too."

"Not that much," you said too easily, before slamming down the phone.

For the longest time, I couldn't move from the shock of your stone-cold words, but eventually walked to the nearby coastline. That afternoon, I stood alone, in a near-abandoned beach town in a foreign country, and I wailed as loudly as did the seagulls circling above me.

I spent days looking out over the sea of terracotta rooftops. I wished to be anybody in any one of those homes. I started to imagine myself selling fish out of a cart on a cobblestone road in a nearby village. Surely, I could be happy doing that. The days carried on.

Not that much, not that much, not that much.

I barely spoke to my dying father. I barely spoke to anyone at the writer's conference. I barely spoke at all.

I crossed the ocean once more and headed back home. I spent a lot of time sitting still, looking out into the distance. It physically hurt to move. I imagined myself sliding into the ocean trenches. A perfect place to hide.

"You're a shell of a person," my sister said. "Look at what he's done to you."

I craved some relief. Some freedom from the heaviness that consumed me.

I drank too much red wine.

"You fell in love," a friend of mine said. "There's no harm in that."

Only that I wanted to die.

Not that much, not that much, not that much.

A year later, I looked you up online. You stood next to a different brunette. Do you love this one more than the last one? Will you torment and betray her? Are you happy? Will you get a dog? I picture the two of you with a golden Labrador retriever. Maybe you'll name him Cuddles. Or Charlie.

I taught because I needed to, I wrote because it made me feel better, and I forced myself to see my friends so I'd appear more together than I was. I think I fooled a handful of them. Random smiles from strangers, comforting words from friends, long silences with family members. Interactions that saved me.

How do you jump back into the water after it's nearly killed you?

Subject: Long Time
Hi,
Long time, no talk. How have you been? I hope all is well. I was thinking of you lately and thought I'd check in, regardless of everything. Hope to talk soon.
C

Subject: How Are You?
Hi,
How have you been? I've been thinking of you lately. Let me know you're doing well.
C

Subject: Seriously?
You won't even speak to me? Can you at least acknowledge me?
Hope to hear from you soon.
C

Not that much, not that much, not that much.

I like to think that it was curiosity that got the best of me, but it wasn't.

You kept writing and writing and calling and calling. I answered once. I wanted to know who she was.

Subject: Let's Talk
Before we argue about anything, ever again, can you not assume things? I'm guessing you're basing this off a profile picture?
C

You proposed to her a week later. As she walked down the aisle in a cloudless Mexican sky, she beamed. She exuded happiness.

Subject: Can't Quit
I know you have no desire to talk to me. Perhaps somewhere there's a part of you that does, or that at least wants to see me

face-to-face, even if it's just to tell me what an ass I am.

It's hard to explain where my mind and actions have taken me throughout the years, and why I've acted in a way that I have. Sometimes, when I seem to get close, a part of me freaks out. I don't know, it's hard to explain, but it hasn't ever been intentionally manipulative or hurtful or deceitful, whether or not you believe that to be true. All I want is the opportunity to go have a coffee, have a talk, a drink, go for a walk, something … just to talk face-to-face.
C

Not that much, not that much, not that much.

In a picture, she stands tall and wears a pink, ruffled dress. You're both smiling, standing in front of Luxembourg Gardens. I imagine you got down on bended knee and proposed in front of some light pink rose bushes in the famous park. A crowd must have gathered to ooh and ahh at your romantic gesture.

Was it while at your celebratory dinner that night when you messaged me again?

I've never been to Paris.

Can you feel me an ocean away?♦

*Pepper Study 1* by Darryl Wawa

# Drought Notes, 2018

*poetry by Bob Brussack*

They'll have something to say later about these parched weeks, about the heat, and much more to say if the potatoes die of it. But the chill of a welcome early breeze lifts the hair of my old arms, and I've no crop or garden under threat as I make my way down the hill, passing without comment the bleak gray walls of the shuttered convent where the nuns once did what they must have thought God wanted and where now the pigeons live in unruly spaces beyond panes broken by who knows what—winter storms or naughty boys or other free things.

# Degrees of Counseling

*poetry by Janet M. Duffy*

I've spent over three hundred thousand dollars to earn
degrees that are supposed to enlighten me, only

I find myself learning nothing other than I can't
find myself and examining my hypocrisy I can't

reconcile, like owning my hypochondriac tendencies
but still smoking and drinking too much at times;

perhaps being sick is less terrifying than being
bored to death—

I too, am afraid—
as the metallic taste of growing old scrapes my brain

cradled in a plastic headrest feeling the sticking pluck of
cavities even though I floss on waking, I always return

to bed curling up with an electric blanket and a cup of
Starbucks, hot enough to give me second degree burns

trembling over things that haven't happened yet

# Tips for Women Guests of Inmates

*poetry by Stacy Pendergrast*

This isn't prison, ladies,
you can wear your underwire bra.
Put your purse in a hard-to-reach locker—
they're the only ones that work.
Give your softest "yes ma'am" to the clerk.
Maybe she'll let you in early.

As you file down the long,
white hall of cells, use only peripheral vision.
When you find him in his cubicle behind glass,
don't say this feels as creepy as a confessional.
He won't understand it's *your* guilt.

Avoid small-talk topics
such as last Sunday's uplifting *60 Minutes* story
and how chicken-fried steak ain't chicken.
Mention titles of books you will donate with him in mind.
He should look for messages on dog-eared pages
before his cell mate burns them and mixes the soot
with Vaseline for tattoo ink.

# F-I-N-E Fine

*fiction by Jenn Hall*

I need to get this computer off me, she says. I can't tell if I'm sick or depressed.

Depressed is sick, I tell her, but she says there's a difference. She would know. Her mom, and her mom's mom, and the moms before them, all swirled out into that inaccessible distance.

One killed herself.

One got committed and clothed in a buttermilk dress.

The rest toiled on amid children and husbands, saying everything's F-I-N-E fine.

They repeat it like a mantra.

They wield it like a shield and a curse.

I hear it when I push fingertips deep into my ears, the waxy confines warm, coating my fingernails. I hear it when I leave the house, the echo hanging on an invisible line between the door and me.

Fine.

They hold the word on swollen tongues and let it roll in wet, red mouths. They laugh at strange moments and go paper pale, like if you tried to touch them, your hand would go straight through.

All of them have that photocopied look, the women arranged in order by generation.

It's only a matter of time, she says, staring. I know better than to ask for what. In the end, entropy and failure amount to the same thing.

Divorce rolled down the block like a virus this year, and we pulled our translucent curtains tight. We played thrift-store records on repeat. Patsy and Hank and some one-offs. The lonely ones you get for a buck. The scratches grew familiar as a dull ache, skip wobble skip.

The last ones to fall lived just across the alley, our lives separated by a failure of cotton and glass. We could see them with their curtains thrown open. We narrowed our eyes, so it didn't seem like we were watching.

Yet there it was. A mirror world.

It was an unseeing sight, figures in motion without narrative. Yet sometimes they were still, and we could focus on them. At the table scooping pasta. Arranged on the couch watching the weather pass.

One night it got loud and that was that. You could hear the weight of quiet when they left.

Sometimes, I think if I came up with the right words it would unlock her, but so far nothing's worked.

I push.

I pull.

I twist sentences into patterns, then tuck my voice away.

Faye says I should cut my losses; I should have another beer.

I do, the bar sticky beneath our arms. I think Faye just wants someone to drink with. Still, the beer is cold against my throat.

Every day, she says she's waiting, though she never says for what. So, I wait too.

On a Monday, she wakes up when the moon's out, naked skin traced in pale light.

On a Tuesday, she doesn't sleep.

On a Wednesday, she tries to listen, but instead stares at the TV until the static comes on, soft thunder.

On a Thursday, she sleeps. She sleeps like dead people and children do. She sleeps like sleep is life, dreaming of floods and capsizing ships and slamming doors. She sleeps and dreams that strangers are the only ones who can save her. When I shake her, say her name, she rolls away and dreams.

On a Friday, she's almost herself.

On a Saturday, she forgets.

On a Sunday, she quits saying everything's F-I-N-E fine.

Come winter, our windows creak when the wind blows. She says it's all she hears, pacing. She says the floors are going to buckle one day and swallow her whole. She sees it each time she descends the stairs.

I see it too. She's in a circle of split floorboards, stilled and quiet.

People here don't take their air conditioners out of the windows when it's cold, and the gusts push through, wheezing. I carve my palms into waiting scars, moving ours while she stares. She says she doesn't much care one way or the other about the cold, but then she locks eyes and thinks to thank me.

If nothing else, she thinks of that.

I pile the units in the attic. After, I sit for a long time with my hands stacked on my knees, sore. Burnt dust gets in my skin.

Eventually, I begin to hide things in that dusty space, just in case. A toothbrush. A sweater. Mom's old address book with her slanted writing that runs off the page. Half the people in there are gone now, but I still thumb through it sometimes, trying to pull old faces into focus.

When I get home on a Friday and she's not there, I picture her floating in the Cooper River. I picture her riding shotgun on a road headed south. Her hands are in her pockets and her eyes watch the landscape change.

I picture her, and picture her, and picture her, but it turns out she's just at her sister's. They're sitting on the porch, comparing traumas.

She says to her sister, You know someone loves you if they stand by while you collapse inward. She should find someone to watch and wait like I do.

Her sister traces scars on her arms like tea leaves and sits and listens and nods. She has the same bright green eyes that go vacant without warning.

When I find her there, she won't look up, and I fold her into the car. She puts her head against the window, watches the shifting pictures as I drive.

Isn't it something, she says, how these lives glide past you in the windows, just out of reach? Isn't it the simplest, greatest thing?♦

# “Come See the Coral Christ!”

*fiction by Zak Salih*

Whenever someone asked Wyeth and Allen how they met, Allen would say, “Craigslist.” Then they’d wait for it. Sometimes a squint in the eye. Sometimes a slight recoil. Always, however, an awkward silence—which they’d draw out until it became unbearable and Wyeth would finally say to their audience, with a smile, “But it wasn’t like that.”

They loved to put on this brief performance. But tonight, in the bar of this small beachfront hotel in what Allen referred to—with less mirth than bitterness—as the dick tip of Florida, it pained Wyeth to go through the motions. Their opening act had lost its charm, its humor, its sweetness. The awkward silence, however, remained.

“And?” Allen said. He nudged Wyeth with one of his sharp elbows. “Tell him the rest.”

Wyeth looked at the strange man sitting opposite them, mid-thirties as well, handsome in his floral swim shorts and loosely buttoned linen shirt. Just the sort of predictably good-looking man Allen would chat up at a bar. Allen was always talking to someone, anyone willing to listen.

The man’s hands—no ring, Wyeth noticed—opened in expectation of Wyeth’s next line.

“You tell him,” Wyeth said.

Allen sighed with the exasperation that had colored their conversations in recent months, the same exasperation that was coloring their long weekend away from a blustery DC winter. “So I’d just moved into a new apartment,” he said. “It had this balcony, right? I go looking online for some affordable outdoor furniture. Wyeth here’s on Craigslist selling a wrought-iron table, so I go over to his house to check it out. All the way across town, to Brookland. Near Catholic University. Far away from everything. Anyway, I go over to his place and his measurements in the ad were off. Of course.”

“You said under forty-eight inches,” Wyeth said from behind his beer.

“Under *forty* inches. Anyway. His table was forty-six inches. Way too big. Even still, we’re standing there on Wyeth’s back patio and I’m feeling something. I mean, look at all his thick black hair. Look at his brown skin. How could you not?”

Wyeth blushed despite himself.

“So,” Allen continued, “I think: Well, I’m not leaving with a table. Maybe I can leave with a date. I go back home, text Wyeth to tell him the table’s a no-go, then I ask him out for drinks. And here we are now.”

Usually during this part of the performance, Allen would look over dreamily at Wyeth. Tonight, he just stared into the ruby hills of his frozen drink. Yes, Wyeth thought, draining the rest of his beer. Here we are now.

“How many years?” the man asked.

Allen made a peace sign. The man laughed.

Wyeth settled back against the wood bench. Exhausted from a day spent kayaking (and arguing) through a maze of mangroves and shopping (and arguing) for outlet bargains, he wasn’t keen on starting a conversation at a quarter to midnight. He’d been intent to sit in the cooling dark and listen to the lap of waves against the dock of the bar, reading his Burton while Allen played on his phone. He’d imagined, after a few drinks, asking Allen if he wanted to go back to the room and try to make love. He’d been about to

make this very suggestion when Allen had gotten up for another round of drinks and returned from the thatch-roofed bar with Wyeth's beer, a goblet of frozen strawberry daiquiri, and this man whom he'd chatted up while waiting.

"I'm sorry," Wyeth said. "What's your name again?"

"Robert," the man said.

"Not Bob?" Allen asked from behind his straw.

"Nah."

"Bobby?"

"Never."

"I dated a Bobby once."

"I never knew that," Wyeth said.

"Yes, you did. The photographer. The one who did that series of male statues on federal buildings."

"The photograph in the living room? I didn't know you dated him."

Robert smiled at the two of them. Wyeth thought about smashing his empty beer bottle over Robert's bald head. Or over Allen's ginger curls. He couldn't decide.

"Well here's my date for the evening," Robert said. He raised his right hand, waved it in the air. Allen laughed, a raucous sound knotted with a giggle Wyeth had never heard before.

"So why are you here?" Wyeth said.

"Taking a couple days to myself after a conference up in Miami. Then back to Chicago."

"Robert's in pharmaceuticals," Allen said to Wyeth.

"Happy pills and boner pills," Robert said.

Allen turned and looked at Wyeth. Wyeth felt the two men, his boyfriend and this stranger, stare at him with calculating eyes. He'd deliberately gone off his medication two weeks ago in the hope that sex would bring him and Allen closer together over this long weekend—a retreat from their lives in more ways than one. He wondered if Allen had said anything to this man he'd just met.

Allen and Robert carried on a conversation while Wyeth sat there, looking dumb and dislocated from reality. Robert said something, and Allen laughed again. Then Wyeth reached over, took Allen's goblet, and sucked as long and hard as he could until he felt frozen fingers pinch the space between his eyes and he had to stop.

"Hey," Allen said.

"Thirsty, huh?" Robert said.

"Gah," Wyeth said. He rubbed his forehead violently. "Brain freeze. I think I'm going to go lie down. Excuse me."

An hour later, Allen came back to the room, collapsed on the bed, and took out his phone. Wyeth was sitting in the room's stiff armchair, reading his dog-eared copy of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* by the light of a lamp crusted in seashells.

"Odds of that," Allen said. "Another gay man our age, here, at the tip of Florida's dick."

"We're everywhere now," Wyeth said without looking up.

"Everywhere in Key West, maybe. Not this wilderness."

"We said somewhere secluded."

"I didn't think here."

"We said something different."

"Away from the scene, you mean."

"You know I can't stand that. The music, the people. It's an assault on the senses."

"You mean it's fun."

"It's not romantic."

"And this is?" Allen made a violent gesture that encompassed the small hotel room Wyeth had gotten at a discounted rate and paid for himself (because he paid for everything). "And you over there with your book."

"And you over there with your phone."

"Reading about how everyone else is

getting laid." Allen sat up. "Should I text Robert and see if he can share a few pills with you?"

Without another word, Wyeth got up and went out to the small screened-in porch attached to their room. He pulled the curtain behind him. Sitting in a weak wicker chair, he read the same sentence over and over: "Who made so soft and peaceable a creature, born to love, mercy, meekness, so to rave, rage like beasts, and run on to their own destruction?" He could barely make sense of the text and avoided thinking about how to teach it in his Great English Thinkers Seminar this spring.

Inside the room, Allen laughed at something on his phone. Wyeth put his Burton down and stared at the front cover in his lap, with its perfect alignment of hourglass and human skull. He thought about the familiar pills he'd brought with him as insurance, the ones for his head, not his penis. Outside, something heavy rushed through the mangroves and crashed into the water.

They saw Robert the next morning, standing in the small hotel lobby as if he'd been lying in wait. He wore the same tropical swim shorts as last night, along with a fresh linen shirt unbuttoned down to his furry navel. Dark sunglasses covered eyes whose shape and color Wyeth couldn't recall. A towel clung to one shoulder like a massive slug.

"Sure this is cool?" Robert asked Allen.

"Of course," Allen said. He went in for a hug. All Wyeth could manage, his hands full with a beach chair and a messenger bag with towels and sun cream, was a stiff nod.

"What's going on?" Wyeth asked.

"Robert and I were talking last night. He said he was just going to bum around the pool today, so I invited him out to the park with us."

"Allen," Wyeth said.

"What?"

Robert looked at Wyeth. "I mean," he said.

"Don't be silly," Allen said. "You're coming."

Because Wyeth had paid for the rental, he was the one who drove them several miles north, past seashell emporiums and vacant motels, past a two-story swim shop and an adult boutique, until they reached a sign announcing the entrance to Kennecamp State Park, where they turned and followed a winding dirt road through Florida scrub. Allen and Robert were on their phones. A minute later, Wyeth pulled into a wide asphalt parking lot, beyond which he saw a slice of beach dotted with mid-morning visitors.

Allen demanded they sit far away from the crowds—the "hetero hordes," he called them—and picked out a far corner of the beach where it brushed up against the tree line. Wyeth unfolded his beach chair and planted it, flag-firm, between Allen and Robert's beach towels. He sat down, took a satisfying breath of salt air, and watched kayakers paddle in the middle distance. He counted the clouds like tire treads in the blue sky. Somewhere on the opposite end of the beach, a child screamed. Next to him, Robert dropped his trunks to reveal a smaller, lime-green Speedo that clung dangerously low on his hips and dangerously high up his furry thighs.

Allen lathered sun cream on his arms, shoulders, and legs. After several attempts to cover his own back, he said, "Wyeth? A hand here."

Wyeth squeezed the cream into his palms and playfully slapped them on Allen's back in a series of greasy handprints. He rubbed vigorously, watching Allen watch Robert from behind red-rimmed sunglasses. He checked Allen's red trunks for any sign of movement.

"Okay," Allen said. "That's good. Wyeth. That's good. You're going to push

me over into the sand." Allen wormed over onto his belly, turned his head away from Wyeth. "Remind me to turn over every ten minutes. I can't burn before next week's show."

"You on TV?" Robert asked over Wyeth's lap.

Allen turned his head and spoke to Robert through the space between Wyeth's chair. "No. Drag show. Big dinner event next week."

"What's your stage name?"

"Madame Pamplemousse. She's a French courtesan rescued from the guillotine by a handsome general."

"I don't get it."

"Ask Wyeth."

"Because of the wig," Wyeth said. "The first time I saw Allen wearing it, he looked like he had a giant pile of grapefruit on his head."

"What sort of money you make from a typical show?" Robert asked.

"Not enough," Allen said.

Wyeth took out his brick-sized paperback and dropped it in his lap to announce his imminent departure from the rest of the conversation.

A while later, Allen snoring on his belly and crisping under the strengthening sun, Robert rolled onto his stomach and looked at Wyeth. Pretending not to notice, Wyeth turned another barely-comprehensible page. Down by the shore, several kids in snorkel masks dashed into the water.

"How's the book?" Robert asked.

"Difficult," Allen said.

"Any good?"

"No. But that's my students' problem."

"Right. Allen said you were a teacher."

"When did he say that?"

"Last night, after you left the bar."

Wyeth took his pen and underlined a random paragraph, scribbled several question marks in the margins.

"What's it about?"

Wyeth looked down at Robert, keeping his eyes away from the pastel humps of the man's buttocks. "Melancholy," he said.

"Yeah, I got that much." Robert extended a hand. Wyeth stuck his pen in the book and handed it over. Robert didn't bother to flip through the pages, just stared at the *vanitas* on the front cover. He tossed the book in his hand as if it were a softball.

"Heavy," he said.

Einstein, Wyeth thought. He turned away and watched snorkelers in the distance commingle around a buoy.

"To think," Robert said, "we have pills for all this now. This entire book is useless. It can be replaced with 60 milligrams once a day. Allen mentioned you were on Prozac. It's a classic, for sure. But there's a bunch of new stuff now with a lot less side effects. Less mood swings, less dry mouth. Less erectile problems."

Unbelievable, Wyeth thought.

Robert handed the book back, now slick with sun cream. Wyeth thought of taking it and smacking it against Robert's gleaming head. It was heavy enough to do some damage. Instead, he stood up and dropped the book into the seat of his beach chair. "I'll be back," he said. "If Sleeping Beauty wakes up, remind him to turn over."

Wyeth stalked up the beach toward the public restrooms. Inside, he waited while a father helped his young son, swim trunks down to his ankles, aim into a urinal. Outside, a wooden ramp led up to the park's information center and gift shop. Inside, coral trinkets crowded the glass shelves: bracelets, necklaces, tree ornaments, small statues. There were several racks of t-shirts and hoodies that read KENNECAMP STATE PARK. Over by a pair of large windows looking out onto the water and the mangroves beyond, Wyeth saw a booth for snorkel and kayak rentals. Next to the woman working the register was a hand-painted

sign on planks of an old dock that read "Come See the Coral Christ!"

At the desk, Wyeth asked for a snorkel and mask.

"Five dollars for flippers," the woman said.

"Just the mask and snorkel, please."

The woman went into a small back room. Wyeth flipped through a small laminated booklet about the park's famous Coral Christ: a long-submerged statue from the shipwreck of a nineteenth-century Spanish galleon. The wreck itself was several miles out along the coral reefs, but the statue had been removed and brought closer to shore in what struck Wyeth as a sad, unethical attempt to salvage tourist dollars from people unwilling to commit to day-long snorkel excursions.

The woman reemerged and handed Wyeth his snorkel and mask, both lime green.

"He's out by the buoy," she said.

"Who?"

The woman tapped on a laminated photograph of the submerged Christ, arms raised as if waiting like a baby to be lifted to the surface.

Wyeth walked through the crowds toward the water, negotiating the plastic straps of his snorkel mask, casting an occasional glance at the far corner of the beach where Madame Pamplemousse had turned over and was resting on her elbows and talking to Robert, who sat in Wyeth's beach chair. The sight was enough to make Wyeth forget the slight chill of the ocean, to walk without stopping until the water was up to his shins, his thighs, the swell of his belly, and finally he had no choice but to dive forward into the blue-green, where he immediately sucked seawater into his snorkel and had to come back up for air.

Adjusting his mask, Wyeth sighted the buoy in the distance, bobbing tenderly on the water's surface. Slowly, he paddled with his arms and legs away from the beach. Facedown in the water, he saw a bleak landscape of sand and rocks, suspended branches of seaweed, flashes from the fins of frightened fish. The screams and laughter of children, the conversations of their parents—it was all blessedly on mute. Wyeth could focus only on the delicious sounds of his limbs moving through salt water, the thick burble of undersea noise that had been around since time immemorial.

Gradually, the seafloor gave way to a deep shelf beyond which the water became bluer, hazier. Taking a breath through his snorkel, Wyeth dropped down and followed the paths of individual fish until they disappeared from view. Above and ahead, people circled the buoy like sharks. Wyeth came up for air, then continued forward on the surface toward the other snorkelers.

His thoughts turned toward Allen and Robert back on shore, about their conversation last night, about Allen's drunken betrayals of personal secrets, and so he didn't see the statue until he bumped into someone's flipper and looked down. It was right underneath him. At the bottom of the ocean floor, cradled by sea rock, the statue looked not majestic but abandoned, forgotten. Aside from a mauve branch poking out from the folds of a sleeve, the coral covering the statue was drab and sickly, a haphazard collection of mustard yellows and seasick greens. The fans of anemones on the statue's arms and back moved like motors in the underwater current, as if trying to propel the statue toward the surface. Massive bolts secured the statue to its three-tiered plinth.

A girl dropped in front of Wyeth, pushing her arms up in an attempt to get eye level with the statue. She gave up and rushed to the surface in a chaos of bubbles. No one else followed her lead. They were content, as was Wyeth, to float high above the statue, swerving along the surface. He tried to decipher the emotion

on the carved face, wondered what the statue had looked like as it was first conceived from stone, before it had been lost at sea, before it had been eroded by salt water, before it had been unceremoniously dragged closer to shore for the curious twenty-first-century tourists. Perhaps glory still remained, even here at the bottom of the sea. If so, Wyeth couldn't see it. All he saw was quiet sadness. He imagined the statue long after he and the other snorkelers had paddled away, long after the park had shut down for the night. He imagined the stone figure in the dark, arms open, head tilted back, ready to fly away were it not for the weight keeping it down.

That evening, the three of them ate blackened fish sandwiches in the hotel restaurant then moved over to the bar, where they split a bucket of beers and listened to a band sing cover songs about cheeseburgers and margaritas and barefoot children. Allen sat across from Wyeth, next to Robert. He kept shifting his back against the booth.

"Jesus," he said. "Yep. I can feel it. It's going to be bad tomorrow."

"Maybe your dress will cover up the burn," Robert said.

"Oh, no. Madame Pamplemousse never covers her back. How gauche."

Wyeth went up to the bar to get another bucket of beers. When he came back, Allen was asking Robert about Chicago winters.

"As bad as they say," Robert said. "Summer's a better time to visit. Been to Boystown?"

"Never," Allen said. "Always wanted to. Wyeth isn't big on stuff like that."

"Oh," Robert said. He smiled at Wyeth. "You're one of those gays."

"It's not that," Wyeth said. "It's just too many people packed into a small space. There's nowhere to breathe."

"They have pills for that too," Robert said.

"Fuck you," Wyeth said.

"Hey," Allen said.

"Whoa there," Robert said.

Wyeth pushed himself out of the booth and stood up. He gripped the neck of his beer and glared at Allen and Robert. Then he drained the bottle, put it down, and extended his hand to Robert. "It was a pleasure," he said. "Have a safe flight tomorrow."

Then, to Allen: "I'll be upstairs."

Wyeth took the bucket with its three remaining beers and went back to the room. He sat in the screened-in porch and drank all three beers in quick succession. Then he went inside, stretched out on the bed, and violently cracked open the spine of his Burton. He got three sentences in when the Latin stopped him. With the book spine-up on his belly, he glared at the popcorn ceiling and listened to the polite lap of water against mangrove roots. He thought of the Coral Christ out there in the dark. Then he pitched the book at the front door.

Wyeth woke to the sound of Allen tripping over the book. The alarm clock on the nightstand read 3:55. Allen slithered on top of the duvet cover, dropped his face into the pillow, groaned, took Wyeth's hand. Wyeth smelled coconut shampoo in Allen's hair, a strange cologne hovering in the hollow of his neck.

Wyeth tried to move his hand, but Allen held it tighter. He felt Allen's eyes on him in the near dark. He imagined the fan blades, shaped like palm fronds, slowly rotating above him. He imagined the rooms above the fan, and the rooms above those rooms, and the rooms above those. He imagined the roof of the hotel and, beyond it, the night sky with its drifting clouds, its steady moon and stars.

Wyeth pulled his hand away as if

ripping free of a rusty bolt and rolled onto his side, away from Allen. Then came another of Allen's exasperated sighs, but the sound was already faint, left behind on the pale seafloor of their vacation. Wyeth couldn't be bothered to listen to it. He was too busy floating up, slowly, gracefully, into sleep.♦

*Wrought Iron Wall* by William C. Crawford

# Relativity

*poetry by C.W. Emerson*

How fortunate to live
by a lake, wide and deep,
or at the nape of a mountain,

close to a body more imposing
than one's own. It puts things in
new perspective, sizes them right—

the layers of sediment, leagues
of filtered light, rockfalls deep
as the hollows of the moon,

geologies that gather and hew
to life. How did the small,
scaled things that we are

acquire the delicate swing of a wrist?—
Ask the anemone, smallest star,
her reflection caught in the slick

of a bubble. She will tell you,
the world is vast in its variety
and more than sufficient to hold us.

# What Was Needed

*poetry by Karla Van Vliet*

When we talk about the river we should talk about the heron whose long wings lay
shadow across the sandy bank, how the bird's hefty body rides air above
the water. How like grief, wings spread.

What hope is it to bury bodies cradled in a swan's wing? What did the bereaved imagine
six-thousand years ago when they laid out the infant and mother?
A chariot of feathers to lift their spirits? Or for the wing to fold the dead ones close?

I came to this river like I was coming home. And the river sat with me all day
and night. Isn't it true that each of our hearts is broken in its own way? Mine needed the
water's flow, the bird's fine feather and hollow bone.

# Boone, North Carolina: Tick Tock

*poetry by Kathryn Z. Birgel*

I am better company for plants these days.

I say good morning to my dish garden
with love felt for few creatures on two legs.

I connect with the trees outside my window better than the telephone caller.
My dogs are another story. They take me as I am.

My period arrived yesterday.
I am now menstruating
every fifteen days.

Why am I called at the altar of an empty womb twice monthly?
What message must I accept?

I'd prefer a letter, handwritten, stamped, sent via the postman. A job all too quickly fading away, like this dream of carrying a child through pregnancy.

I tell myself:
Take in the starving babies.
Please, drop off a newborn, foreign or domestic at my door.
Ring the bell and run. I need a delivery.
Now.

Hey you up there, out there, in there, all around, do you hear me?

I have named my plants & animals & fully committed my
Self to this
Love of my Life.

*Back Wall Piping* by William C. Crawford

# The Dos and Don'ts of Traveling with Your Tinder Date

*nonfiction by Georgia Knapp*

**Do** have your small flip knife in your purse when you and your Tinder date, S., arrive in Charleston. This is your fourth date with S., but he's still a stranger and this is your first trip together. Bring the knife that your ex gave you for your second anniversary.

**Do** turn off your Tinder notifications. Ignore the familiar *you have a match!* ding on S.'s phone.

**Do** take a tour, where you and S. are the youngest couple. When you board the bus, an older woman will say, "Are you the _____s?" This is awkward because S. isn't divorced yet.

**Don't** think about your ex during the tour. You were supposed to go to Charleston (the seventh "Most Romantic City in the World" according to *Travel + Leisure* magazine) with your ex last year. You had planned the romantic getaway for your sixth anniversary. On the day you were supposed to arrive, Charleston evacuated for a hurricane. You spent your anniversary in your graduate school apartment with your cat, your ex, your evacuated mother, your mother's dog, and your recently, unexpectedly-deceased father's ashes.

**Do** kiss S. behind the balcony seats of the Dock Street Theatre. One of the reasons your ex dumped you—and it was a long list—was your lack of affection. "I never knew how much you loved me until that night," he'd said, referring to the eve of your graduate school graduation, when he called and said, "I don't want to be with you anymore." You felt blindsided, winded, broken. You think your lack of hand-holding and cuddling is a bullshit reason to end a seven-year relationship. Wasn't your affection obvious when you moved from Chicago to rural Georgia to be nearer to him? Wasn't it obvious when you went to his family reunion in the Georgia mountains? Still, the comment has bothered you for the past two months. You worry future relationships will fail if you're not more affectionate, so you kiss S. behind the balcony seats in the historic theatre.

**Do** have a night out in Charleston. Get drinks at a warehouse-turned-swanky bar. Eat paella, crab-encrusted tilapia, bruschetta-wrapped artichokes, and cheesecake richer than your MFA in creative writing will ever help you be.

**Don't** wait for S. to make the first move when you get back to the hotel room. Remember what your ex said about affection.

**Do** take lots of pictures of Charleston. The city reminds you of Savannah, GA, but prettier. Make sure to post a photo that includes S. You're still Facebook friends with your ex's mother and you hope she tells him that you're seeing someone.

**Do** send a photo of Charleston to your other Tinder date—the young one. You want to convince yourself you don't *like* like him because you don't want to ever *like* like someone again, but there's something about his enthusiasm and his smile that makes it hard not to think about him.

**Don't** get a single drink, not even one. After losing your father and your ex you turned to alcohol, and you drove drunk one too many times. You never got caught

and you never hurt anyone, but the one night when you blacked out while driving scares you.

**Do** tell S. you can't drink alcohol right now because you're on antibiotics. **Don't** tell him it's for a yeast infection, which you got after having sex on the beach with the young one.

**Do** have sex with S. You shouldn't because of the infection, but alcohol and sex are your coping mechanisms—and what the hell, you're on antibiotics already.

**Do** tell S. that you *like* like him, but only after he tells you that he *like* likes you. You don't know if you *like* like him, but this is part of being affectionate, right? You did not say "I love you" enough, but, again, you thought it was obvious when you gave your ex a key to your apartment even though he refused to give you one to his.

**Do** tell S. that you had a great weekend. Say you hope to see him again. S.'s divorce will be finalized soon. He'll move to Texas and you'll move to Thailand. Why keep seeing him if there's no future? Why keep seeing the young one too? You miss being in a relationship. You miss your ex. You're lonely, and S. tells you you're smart and the young one says you're pretty. If they say it enough, maybe it'll drown out your ex saying, "I don't want to be with you anymore."

**Don't** continue to talk to S. when you move to Thailand. **Don't** text him, **don't** Snapchat him, and definitely **don't** ask to Skype. **Don't** wish he'd text more or ask *you* to Skype for once. **Don't** ask if he's dating anyone. You won't get the answer you want.

**Don't** sleep with other guys just to forget about S. and the young one, the way you slept with S. and the young one to forget about your ex. **Don't** delete or block S.'s number. Or maybe, **do**? Delete and block the young one's too. Forget about them just like you want to forget your grief. Grief over your father, your relationship—grief over your former life.

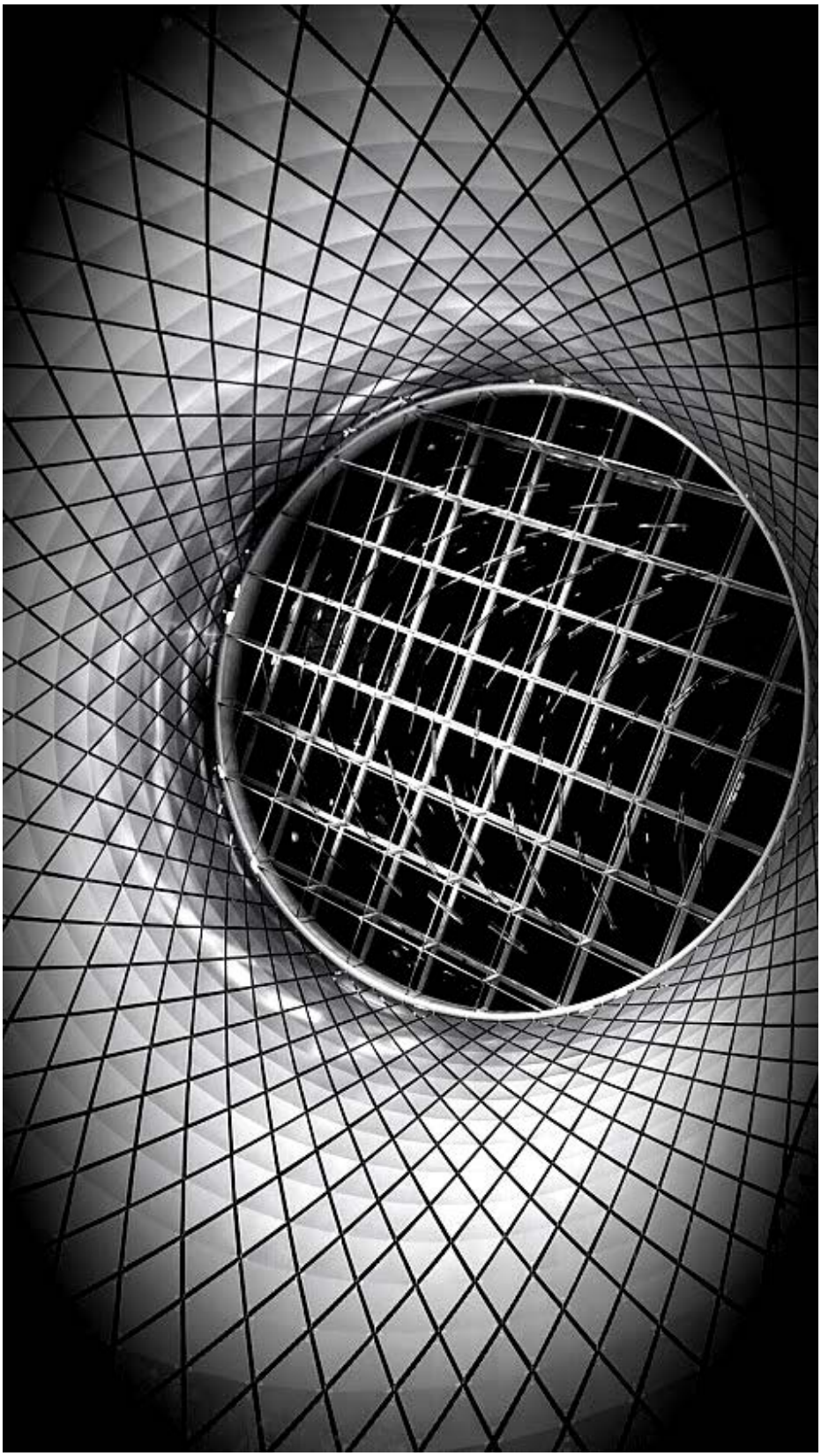
**Do** delete Tinder.

**Do** enjoy Thailand: explore temples, relax on beaches, enjoy a massage. **Do** wander around Wat Pho like you did Charleston's Waterfront Park. **Do** keep your small flip knife in your purse. **Don't** keep alcohol in your apartment (though you **do**).

**Do** date yourself. Take yourself to dinner, buy yourself jewelry, give yourself orgasms. What's that your mother says? ***Don't*** *be afraid of your own company.* **Don't** sleep with just anyone.

**Don't** hate yourself when you **don't** listen to your own advice. Date people who understand your lack of hand-holding. Date people who **don't** make lists.

**Do** tell yourself that you're smart and pretty. Believe it. Grieve. Embrace loss. After all, that's what this is all about, isn't it?♦



*Fulton Street Metro* by Sanjida Yasmin

# And You Too

*poetry by Denton Loving*

*after Agnar Artúvertin*

And you too shall be full,
you who devour the meat of the mountain.

And you too shall be honored,
you who wash out your underwear in motel bathrooms.

And you too shall know comfort,
you who crawl under cold sheets each night alone.

And you too shall be rich,
you who abandon what you most love.

# Outside San Miguel

*poetry by Denton Loving*

Highland breezes blew through your new backyard
outside San Miguel de las Montañas. The coolest
August evening either of us could remember,
but we lost our clothes, submersed ourselves
in the distortion of underwater light and shadow.

You didn't mind the cold, but I shivered
as the water closed over our heads.
Afterwards,
driving north on the interstate long after midnight,
searching for a reported blue moon
through drifting fog, I carried with me the memory
of my teeth on the slope of that contour
you confirmed was your clavicle—
how I loved that word and still do,
how I still dream of that slight ridge
rising from the topography of your body.

The moon never revealed itself through the mist.
No roads wound back to those mountains.

My letter returned in the mail
with no forwarding address—
further evidence of your myth,
a lost continent the water closed over.

*Pelham Bay Leaves* by Sanjida Yasmin

# Contributors

**Kevin Bi** (fiction) is a Chinese-American Kundiman Fellow from Worcester County, Massachusetts. He lives in Boston and works as a researcher in the field of cancer immunology.

**Kathryn Z. Birgel** (poetry) is a writer of YA literature. Check out her novel, *Facing the Green Monster*. She also writes fiction and poetry and her work has appeared in such fine journals as *Reflections on the New River, Kakalak, The Main Street Rag, Luna Negra, Compass Rose,* and *Shiny New Books*. She is a senior lecturer at Appalachian State University and lives in Boone, North Carolina with her husband and dogs.

**Mirande Bissell** (poetry) earned her MFA in poetry from Bennington College in 2019, and her work has appeared in *Salamander* and *Voix du Vieux*. She lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

**Justin L. Blessinger** (poetry) was raised in northeastern Montana on the Fort Peck Sioux and Assiniboine Reservation. His writing draws upon the strange tension between the remoteness and ferocity of ranch life and the temptations and challenges of life in the rough-and-tumble reservation town of Wolf Point. Winner of the Doug Fir Fiction Award, he publishes fiction and poetry, and his work has recently appeared in *Humanities: The Magazine of the National Endowment*, *Mulberry Fork Review,* and *Up the Staircase Quarterly*. He lives in Madison, South Dakota with his wife, Christina, and their two dangerously inquisitive daughters.

**Shevaun Brannigan**'s (poetry) work is forthcoming in *AGNI* and has appeared in *Best New Poets* and *Slice*. She is a recipient of a Barbara Deming Memorial Fund grant and holds an MFA from Bennington College.

Poet and photographer **Ronda Piszk Broatch** (poetry) is the author of *Lake of Fallen Constellations* (MoonPath Press, 2015). Ronda is the recipient of an Artist Trust GAP grant, and her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart prize. Her journal publications include *Blackbird, Prairie Schooner, Fourteen Hills, Sycamore Review*, and KUOW Public Radio's *All Things Considered*.

**Bob Brussack** (poetry) has retired after a career teaching law at the University of Georgia. He now divides his time between Athens, Georgia, and the south coast of Ireland. He grew up in New York and in northeast Georgia. His work has appeared recently in *Naugatuck River Review, Passager Journal*, and *Roanoke Review*.

**Roger Camp** (art) is the author of three photography books including the award-winning *Butterflies in Flight* (Thames & Hudson, 2002) and *Heat, Charta* (Milano, 2008). His work has appeared in numerous journals including *New England Review, New York Quarterly*, and *North American Review*. His work is represented by the Robin Rice Gallery, New York City.

**Monica Joy Claesson** (poetry) holds Bachelors' degrees in English and Spanish from the University of Nebraska Lincoln. When not writing poetry, she spends her time backpacking, rock climbing, and otherwise enjoying the outdoors. Current and forthcoming publications include journals such as *Tampa Review, Cream City Review, Ascent, Pittsburgh Poetry Review, fields, So to Speak, Painted Bride Quarterly, Kestrel,* and *Temenos.*

**William C. Crawford** (art) is a photographer and writer based in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He started in photography as a combat photojournalist in Vietnam. He developed the digital photography technique of Forensic Foraging with his colleague, Sydney poet and lensman, Jim Provencher. *Forensic Foraging: Photography to Unlock the Unseen* soared to number five in January, 2019 on Amazon's photojournalism books best seller list. Find it here: https://www.amazon.com/Forensic-Foraging-Photography-Unlock-Unseen/dp/1730974821 or other stuff: forensicforaging.com.

**J.E. Crum** (art) creates vivid works often inspired by mythologies. Crum creates personal narratives related to thoughts about fate, destiny, and dreams. The artist enjoys making others happy through the power of art. J.E. also enjoys working as an elementary art teacher of nearly 1,000 children a week in central Pennsylvania.

**Annie Diamond** (poetry) is a Connecticut native living presently in Chicago. She has been awarded fellowships by MacDowell Colony, Lighthouse Works, and Boston University, where she completed her MFA in 2017.

**Marilyn Duarte** (creative nonfiction) is a writer from Toronto, Canada. She is currently an MFA candidate in creative writing at the University of Tampa.

**Janet M. Duffy** (poetry) earned an MFA in poetry from Columbia University. In addition, she holds a BA in Psychology from University of Saint Joseph, and an MEd in Psychology from Springfield College. She has practiced as a psychotherapist but now prefers to work with clients at her holistic life coaching practice. She lives in New York City.

**Sara Eddy** (poetry) is a writing instructor at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. Some of her poems have appeared recently in *Sum, One,* and *Zingara Poetry Review,* and are forthcoming in *The Raw Art Review* and *The Dandelion Review*. She lives in Amherst, Massachusetts with a teenager and a black cat and three beehives.

**C.W. Emerson**'s (poetry) 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 2018 New Millennium Award for Poetry (2018, 2019) and 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.

**Sandy Fontana** (poetry) teaches composition, literature, and creative writing at Shawnee Community College. She received her MFA from Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Her poetry has been published in *Atlanta Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Labletter*, and *Nimrod*.

**Jeannette Garrett** (fiction) is a graduate of the University of Texas at Austin with degrees in English and journalism. She has participated in numerous writing workshops at Inprint and Writespace in Houston, Texas, where she resides. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Convergence, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, and *Eclectica Magazine.*

**John Roche Guerra** (fiction) was born in Chicago, Illinois and grew up in Miami, Florida. He lives and works in Kentucky, and he is a co-founder of the Berea Writers Circle and the Berea Book Fest. His fiction has appeared in *Still: The Journal*. He is currently working on his first novel.

**Jenn Hall** (fiction), based in New Jersey, has learned that the best stories are hidden in plain sight. In her nonfiction life, she explores the intersection of food and place for outlets including NPR's *The Salt, Time Out* and *Civil Eats*. In 2018, she won an IACP narrative food-writing award for her series on New Jersey oyster farmers.

**Michele Harris** (poetry) was awarded the 2011 David A. Kennedy Prize and was a finalist for the 2018 New Millennium Award in poetry. Her first book *Blackdamp* will be published by David Robert Books in May 2019. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *New Millennium Writings*, *Anderbo*, *The Prose-Poem Project*, *Dirtflask*, *Cicada*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Escarp*, *Stirring*, and elsewhere. Currently, she works at MIT and holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of Massachusetts Boston, where she teaches literature courses for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute.

**Jules Jacob**'s (poetry) poetry has appeared in *Plume*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Rust + Moth,* and elsewhere. She's the author of *The Glass Sponge* and her poems have been paired with artwork and transformed into pictographs at the Colorado Gallery of the Arts and Le Moulin à Nef. Visit www.julesjacob.com.

**Judy Kaber**'s (poetry) poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *december, Atlanta Review, Spillway*, and *The Comstock Review*. Contest credits include the Maine Postmark Poetry Contest, the Larry Kramer Memorial Chapbook Contest, and second place in the 2016 Muriel Craft Bailey Poetry Contest. She lives in Maine.

**Georgia Knapp** (creative nonfiction) travels the world looking for stories to tell. Her work can be found in *Huffington Post, Gravel,* and *Electric Literature,* among others. She lives in Bangkok, Thailand.

Born in 1965 and inspired by the comedy of Monty Python, Steve Martin, Bob and Ray, **Doug Knight** (art) is a cartoonist, musician and songwriter who loves all things creative. He lives in Orlando, Florida with his wife, Suzanne, and their rescue poodle, Dusty.

**Matthew Landrum** (poetry) is the author of *Berlin Poems* (A Midsummer Night's Press, 2019) and the translator of *Are There Copper Pipes in Heaven—poems from the Faroese of Katrin Ottarsdóttir* (The Operating System, 2019). He lives in Detroit.

**Kay Lin** (fiction) lives in Singapore. Involuntarily intersectional, her influences range from Margaret Atwood, to folk songs of ancient China, Goethe, Liao Yiwu, and gangsta rap. Her poem "claustrophobia" was chosen as a finalist for *december* magazine's 2018 Jeff Marks Memorial Poetry Prize. “night out” is her second attempt at publication.

**Denton Loving** (poetry) is the author of the poetry collection *Crimes Against Birds* (Main Street Rag, 2014) and editor of *Seeking Its Own Level, an anthology of writings about water* (MotesBooks, 2014). His writing has recently appeared in *Cutbank*, *Kenyon Review, The Threepenny Review,* and *The Chattahoochee Review*. Follow him on Twitter: @DentonLoving.

**Liz Matthews** (creative nonfiction) received her MFA in writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her writing has been published at *The Rumpus, Brain Child, Quality Women’s Fiction*, and *Town & Country*. She lives in Connecticut with her family, and teaches fiction writing at Westport Writers’ Workshop.

**Mary Matthews** (art) is a filmmaker and illustrator. She draws every day. You can follow her on Instagram @drawingdailyusa.

**Nate Maxson** (poetry) is a writer and performance artist, and the author of several collections of poetry. He lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

**Kindra McDonald** (poetry) received her MFA from Queens University of Charlotte. She teaches poetry at The Muse Writers Center in Norfolk, Virginia and is an adjunct writing professor and doctoral student. Her work has appeared in various journals to include *Rise Up Review, Plainsongs,* and *New Southerner*. Her first book, *Concealed Weapons,* was published in 2015 and her second, *Elements and Briars,* was published by Red Bird Chapbooks in 2016. Her manuscript *Fossils* is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.

Born in downtown Chicago and raised in Southern California, **Kathleen McNamara** (fiction) now teaches writing at Arizona State University. Her fiction has appeared in *The Carolina Quarterly, Sierra Nevada Review,* and *Border Crossing*. She lives near Sedona with her husband, their newborn son, and a cat named Luna.

**Rachael Mead** (fiction) is a South Australian poet, short story writer, and arts critic. Her previous books of poetry include *The Sixth Creek* (Picaro, 2013) and *The Flaw in the Pattern* (UWAP, 2018). She is currently working on her first collection of stories.

**Rebecca Monroe** (creative nonfiction) lives in a log cabin by a river and has been writing for most of her life. She has published over 100 stories plus a book of short stories, *Reaching Beyond*, published by Bellowing Ark Press. She loves to read and take walks with her dog, Dodge, and volunteer at the animal shelter.

**Laura Moretz**’s (fiction) fiction has been published in *r.kv.r.y quarterly literary journal*, *Cleaver Magazine, Stoneboat, The Forge*, and *Cutthroat: A Journal of the Arts*. Two of her stories have been nominated for Pushcart prizes. She won the Rick DeMarinis Short Fiction Award in 2012. She is an assistant editor for *Boulevard*.

**Matt Morgan** (poetry) lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where he teaches at Western Michigan University.

**Jennifer Newhouse** (poetry) is an assistant professor of creative writing at Chowan University, where she also chairs the Department of English. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Chattahoochee Review, Lake Effect, Patterson Literary Review, The Carolina Quarterly,* and elsewhere. A portfolio of her work can be found at www.jennifernewhouse.com.

**Joel Peckham Jr**. (poetry) has published five collections of poetry and two collections of essays, most recently *God's Bicycle* (FutureCycle, 2015) and *Body Memory* (New Rivers, 2016). Individual poems have appeared in many journals, including *The Southern Review, Prairie Schooner,* and *Rattle*. He is an assistant professor of American literature at Marshall University.

**Stacy Pendergrast** (poetry) holds an MFA from Chatham University in Pittsburgh. She lives in Arkansas, where she volunteers to teach haiku to inmates. This poem is from a collection she is writing about the experiences and struggles of her friend's son, an opiate addict who is currently incarcerated.

**Rebecca Pyle** (art) lives between the Great Salt Lake and the old mountain mining town where Sundance Film Festival takes place each winter. Her artwork, poetry, and short stories are published by *The Remembered Arts Journal, Cobalt Review, Anomaly, New England Review, Permafrost,* and *Stoneboat;* her first chapbook of poetry, *The Underwater American Songbook,* has just appeared within the art/lit journal *Underwater New York;* her tempera-and-cement-and-chalk-on-Masonite art piece "Mermaids, Violins, Relics" is on the chapbook's cover. See rebeccapyleartist.com.

**S. Craig Renfro Jr**. (art) is an associate professor at Queens University of Charlotte. Also, his work has appeared in *Gravel, McSweeney's Internet Tendency, PANK, Hobart, Barrelhouse,* and elsewhere.

**John Robinson** (creative nonfiction) is a novelist, playwright, essayist, memoirist and short story writer. His work has appeared in many journals including *Ploughshares, The Sewanee Review,* and *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and has been translated into 32 languages. He lives in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

**David Rock** (poetry) has work appearing in *The Carolina Quarterly, The Laurel Review, The Bitter Oleander, The Chattahoochee Review, Posit, Image,* and other journals. He teaches Spanish at Brigham Young University Idaho.

**Erin E. Ruble**'s (creative nonfiction) work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Green Mountains Review*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Ruminate*, and elsewhere. A native of Montana, she now lives in Vermont with her husband and children and the occasional flock of chickens.

**Zak Salih** (fiction) lives in Washington, D.C. His writing has appeared in *The Millions, Los Angeles Review of Books, Richmond Times-Dispatch, Washington City Paper,* and other publications. His debut novel is forthcoming from Algonquin.

**Tonya Sauer** (poetry) is a geriatric nurse. She has published in several magazines, but spends most of her time corralling her toddler. She lives in Elgin, Illinois with her husband and two children.

**Claire Scott** (poetry) is an award-winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has been accepted by the *Atlanta Review, Bellevue Literary Review, New Ohio Review, Enizagam,* and *The Healing Muse* among others. Claire is the author of *Waiting to be Called* and *Until I Couldn't.* She is the co-author of *Unfolding in Light: A Sisters' Journey in Photography and Poetry*.

**Slugnuts** (art) is a creative duo featuring **Mike Jordan** and **Kyle D. Reynolds**. Based in Texas, they are the creators of the political cartoon *The End Times*. Their work was recently featured in Carl Reiner's book *The Downing of Trump* and in the 2018 FL3TCH3R Exhibit of Political Art. More of their work can be seen at slugnuts.com.

**LeRoy N. Sorenson** (poetry) Main Street Rag published his poetry collection, *Forty Miles North of Nowhere*, in 2016. *The Comstock Review* selected his chapbook as a finalist in its 2018 contest. His work has appeared or will appear in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *the Atlanta Review*, *Cider Press Review, Crab Orchard Review*, *Nimrod, The Sow's Ear Poetry Review,* and other journals.

**Mike Sutton** (creative nonfiction) calls the rolling hills of Northwest Arkansas home. He served in the U.S. Air Force as a military police officer and currently practices law. You can find Mike writing in one of Fayetteville's local coffee shops or on the water, fishing pole in hand.

**Rachel Rose Teferet** (art) is an artist, graphic and web designer, writer, blogger, and editor. Her work has been published by *Subprimal, Page & Spine, Black Rabbit Quarterly, Manawaker Studio*, and more. Her play *The Necromancer's Daughter* has been performed at Synthetic Unlimited in Nevada City, California. She has over 3,500 followers on her blog lettersandfeathers.wordpress.com, and over 3,000 followers on Twitter as @art4earthlings.

**Pat Tompkins** (art) is an editor; her poems, photos, and short fiction have appeared in a variety of publications, including *Existere, Confingo*, and *KYSO Flash.*

**Clayton Truscott** (fiction) is a South African writer based in Portland, Oregon. He has an MA in creative writing from the University of Cape Town and has published two collections of short stories.

**Karla Van Vliet** (poetry) is the author of two collections of poems, *From the Book of Remembrance* and *The River From My Mouth,* and a poem-length chapbook, *Fragments: From the Lost Book of the Bird Spirit*. Her poems have appeared in *Acumen, Poet Lore, Green Mountains Review, Crannog Magazine* and others. Karla is a co-founder and editor of *deLuge Journal*. www.vanvlietarts.com

**Darryl Wawa** (art) is a Port-au-Prince born Haitian-American who studied photography and creative writing. Wawa enjoys chocolate and good books. That said, he thinks there are also good photography books, and maybe a movie is a good book as well. He loves to work with images and words and their pairing.

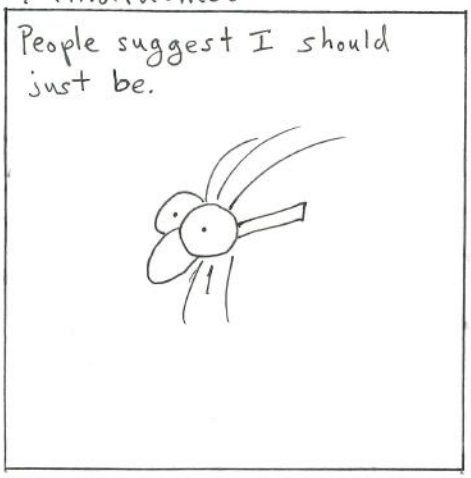
**T. E. Wilderson** (fiction) is a Midwestern writer who also works as a graphic designer and senior prose editor for *Typehouse Literary Magazine*. Wilderson's work has appeared in *Crack the Spine*, *Roanoke Review*, *The Louisville Review*, and *Notre Dame Review*. Wilderson holds an MFA from Spalding University's writing program.

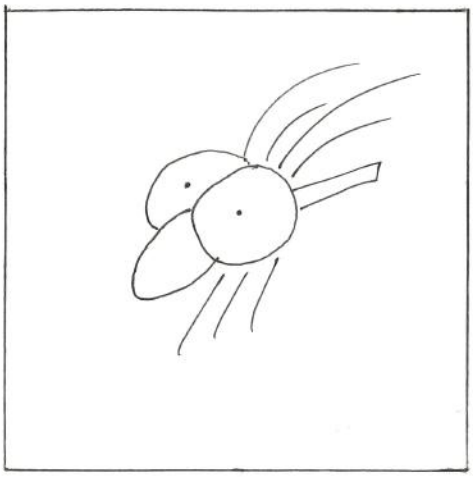
**Thomas Wykes** (art) is a cartoonist and art director from London, England. He recently authored the illustrated book *A Guide to Dating the Dead*.

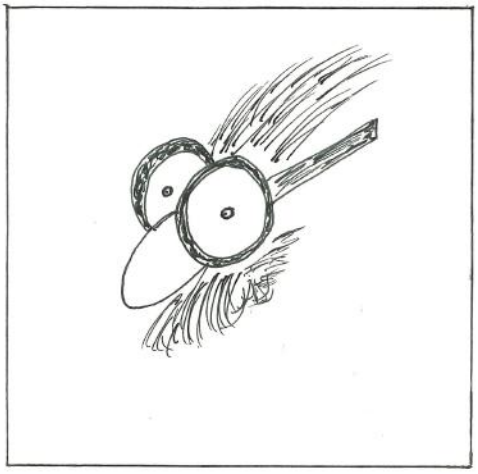
**Sanjida Yasmin** (art) is a creative writer and photographer. She shares a special romance with black and white photography. Yasmin has an MFA in creative writing and has numerous publications in print and online journals and magazines. She lives in New York with her family.

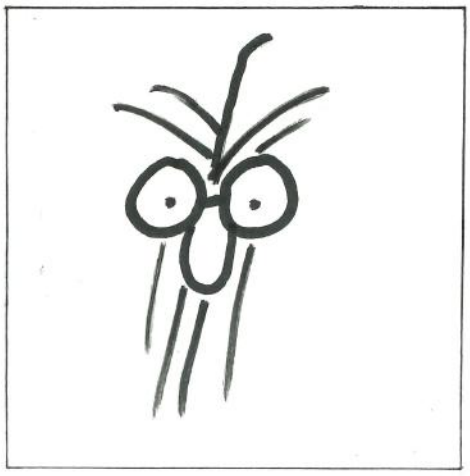
**Rusty Yunusoff** (art) is a cartoonist, animator, writer, and illustrator born and raised in Russia. He currently lives and works in California. His first cartoon was published when he was sixteen. He studied animation at Russian State University of Cinematography in Moscow and worked on numerous animation and TV projects in Russia and the United States, including *Golan the Insatiable* (aired on Fox) and *The Awesomes* (streaming on Hulu). His films were submitted at festivals in Washington, D.C., Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Munich, and Brussels.

Mindfulness







# Staff

**Emma Allmann** (fiction reader) studied creative writing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is a freelance writer and jr. digital publishing associate living and writing out of Chicago, Illinois. She has had fiction published with *Ellipsis Zine* and a play produced at the Marcia Légère Student Play Festival.

**Sheila Arndt** (fiction reader) is a PhD and MFA candidate living in New Orleans. She cares about the modern and postmodern, critical theory, Americana, saltwater, garlic, canines, old blues, and new dreams. Her poetry and prose have been published in *The Tishman Review, Gravel*, and *Literary Orphans*, among other places. Follow her: @_ACokeWithYou.

Much of **Mary Ann Bragg**'s (copy editor) written work can be found scattered all over her kitchen table in Provincetown, Massachusetts. She's pursuing an MA in English at UMASS Boston and worries about the economic health of her hometown in southern West Virginia. Visit maryannbragg.com.

**Matthew David Campbell** (poetry reader) is the author of the poetry collection *Harmonious Anarchy* (Weasel Press, 2016), and the chapbook *The House of Eros* (Red Ferret Press, 2015). His poems have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *Tight, Spires, Forklift Ohio*, and the anthologies *The Brink: Postmodern Poetry from 1965 to the Present, Nuclear Impact: Broken Atoms in Our Hands,* and *How Well You Walk Through Madness*. He holds an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars.

**Elaine Fletcher Chapman** (poetry reader), formerly Elaine Walters McFerron, is the author of a volume of poems, *Hunger for Salt,* published by Saint Julian Press. She worked on staff at The Bennington Writing Seminars for eighteen years. She founded The Writer's Studio where she teaches poetry and nonfiction, provides editing services, and organizes poetry readings and Crossing Over writing retreats on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Her poems have been published in *The Tishman Review, The EcoTheo Review, The Cortland Review, Connotation, The Sun, Calyx, Poet Lore, 5AM, Salamander*, and others. http://www.elainefletcherchapman.com/.

**Lauren Davis** (associate poetry editor) is the author of the chapbook *Each Wild Thing's Consent* (Poetry Wolf Press). She holds an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars, and her poetry and essays can be found in publications such as *Prairie Schooner*, *Spillway*, *Empty Mirror*, and *Lunch Ticket*. Davis teaches at The Writers' Workshoppe in Port Townsend, Washington.

**Kate Felix** (fiction reader) is a writer and independent filmmaker from Toronto, Canada. Her work can be found in *Room Magazine*, *Litro Magazine*, and *Reflex Fiction*, among others. She has been shortlisted for many fiction prizes and her award winning screenplays have been produced into several short films. She is currently working on her first collection of short stories and a feature screenplay. Find her at www.katefelix.com or @kitty_flash.

**Aaron Graham** (associate poetry editor) hails from Glenrock, Wyoming, population 1159 and has served as the assistant editor for the *Squaw Valley Review*, is an alumnus of Squaw Valley Writers Workshop and The Ashbury Home School (Hudson). Aaron is a veteran of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq where he served an analyst and linguist.

**Sara Gray** (fiction reader) is a writer and lawyer from Toronto, BC. Her work has appeared in *The Tishman Review, York Literary Review,* and *Sheepshead Review*. You can find her @thisaddledbrain.

**Graham Holmes** (fiction reader) lives and writes in Galesburg, Illinois. He has had fiction published in *Catfish Creek*, *Catch*, and *Cellar Door*. He was the 2016 recipient of the Alexander Reid Prize for creative nonfiction, and a finalist for the 2018 Davenport Fiction Award. Graham's favorite bookstores are generally small, disorganized, and a bit overwhelming.

**Jesse Holth** (assistant poetry editor) is a writer, editor, and poet based in Victoria, BC. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in over a dozen international publications, including *Grain Magazine*, *Sheila-Na-Gig online*, *Eastern Iowa Review*, and others. She received Honorable Mention for the 2018 Christine Prose Poetry Award, and is currently working on two full-length collections. She holds degrees in English Literature and Anthropology from the University of Victoria, and has a not-so-mild obsession with the ocean and all things island.

**Emily Huso** (assistant fiction editor) is pursuing her MA in English with a creative writing emphasis at California State University, Chico. She was a participant in AWP's spring 2017 Writer-to-Writer Mentorship program. When she isn't working on her latest story, she enjoys freelance copywriting, coffee dates with friends, and, of course, reading.

**Tyler Jacobson** (copy editor) holds a BA in English from Walla Walla University. He is primarily a professional circus artist but also enjoys editing copy.

**Tasslyn Magnusson** (poetry and cnf reader) lives in Prescott, Wisconsin, just outside of the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolitan area with her husband, two kids, and two dogs. She has an MFA in Creative Writing for Children and Young Adults from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. She writes poetry for adults and poetry and fiction for children.

**Melissa McInerney** (creative nonfiction reader) earned her MFA in Fiction from Bennington College in 2015 and her BA from the University of Texas Austin in 1981. She has written a series of short stories about growing up in boomtown Houston, blogs about living with Lyme disease at http://lifeandlyme.net/blog/, and is working on a memoir. She has been published at http://www.fiftiness.com/and her work has appeared in *Logophile Magazine* and *Jet Fuel Review*.

**Ashli MacKenzie** (creative nonfiction reader) lives in Washington, DC working as a production editor for academic journals focusing on astrophysics. She earned a BA in English Literary Studies with a minor in Creative Writing from York College of Pennsylvania and has also been a volunteer counter for VIDA: Women in Literary Arts. She loves funky street art, hoppy beer, old books, and traveling the world.

**DW McKinney** (associate creative nonfiction editor) is a writer living in Las Vegas, Nevada. She earned a BS in Biology from Dominican University of California and an MA in Anthropology from Texas State University. She is the 2018 Hellebore Press Scholarship Honoree in Creative Nonfiction. Her essays have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *The Hellebore Press*, *Stoneboat Literary Journal*, *TAYO Literary Magazine*, *Cagibi*, and *Mothers Always Write*. When she is not chasing her children around, she is doting on her orchids. Check out her projects on dwmckinney.com or follow her @thedwmckinney.

**Sherrel McLafferty**'s (assistant fiction editor) fiction can be found in *Black Denim Lit* and *Bartleby Snopes*. Her poetry has been featured in *Prairie Margins*. She is pursuing her MFA in Poetry at Bowling Green State University; meanwhile, she is the Editor in Chief of *Anomaly Literary Journal* and an editor for *Mid-American Review*.

**Colleen Olle** (assistant prose editor) spent her childhood summers climbing trees and reading books and sometimes reading books in trees. At the University of Michigan, she won a Hopwood Award for essay writing and from the Bennington College Writing Seminars she earned an MFA in fiction. She works as a freelance editor and lives with her husband south of San Francisco.

**Cheryl Pappas** (fiction reader) is a writer from Boston. Her work has appeared in *The Bitter Oleander*, *Cleaver Magazine*, *Tin House's Open Bar*, *Ploughshares* blog, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Zizzle Literary Magazine*, and more. She holds an MFA in Fiction from Bennington Writing Seminars.

**Jennifer Porter** (co-founder, prose editor) lives near East Lansing, Michigan. Her writing has appeared in *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *Old Northwest Review*, *The Dos Passos Review, Apeiron Review, drafthorse, The Ocotillo Review, Chagrin River Review, Nightingale & Sparrow*, and other journals and anthologies. Her novella *The World Beyond* can be found in *The Binge-Watching Cure* anthology with Claren Books. She is a graduate of the Bennington Writing Seminars.

**Ginny Rachel** (creative nonfiction reader) teaches at Arkansas State University and travels to her home in West Virginia during breaks. She has an MFA. from WV Wesleyan College in fiction and returned to continue her studies in creative nonfiction. Her work can be found in *West Virginia South,* and forthcoming in the anthology, *Waves: A Confluence of Women's Voices,* published by A Room Of Her Own Foundation.

**Scott Smith** (poetry reader) lives, writes, and balances toddlers in Houston, Texas. He earned an MFA in Poetry from the Bennington Writing Seminars in 2010 and a BA in English from Lynchburg College in 2008. He currently teaches at the Art Institute of Houston and is in a constant state of revision on a collection of poems and a fiction manuscript. He's probably double-fisting kombucha and espresso as we speak.

**Maura Snell** (co-founder, poetry and art editor) lives and works in New England. Her poetry can be found in several literary magazines including *Inside the Dome, Red Paint Hill Quarterly, Brain, Child Magazine*, and *MomEgg Review*, and in anthologies, including the highly acclaimed *Golden Shovel Anthology: New Poems Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks* (University of Arkansas Press, 2017).

**Alison Turner** (associate prose editor) is a PhD student in Literary Studies at the University of Denver. She was born in the mountains of Colorado where she learned to spend large amounts of time outside. When travelling, she insists on visiting public libraries.

**Catherine Weber** (website developer) is an award-winning poet and artist who works with encaustic, photography, paper, and textiles. She was raised in upstate New York, Indiana, and Connecticut and now lives in Massachusetts. She holds a BA in Communications from Emerson College and an MA in Critical and Creative Thinking from the University of Massachusetts.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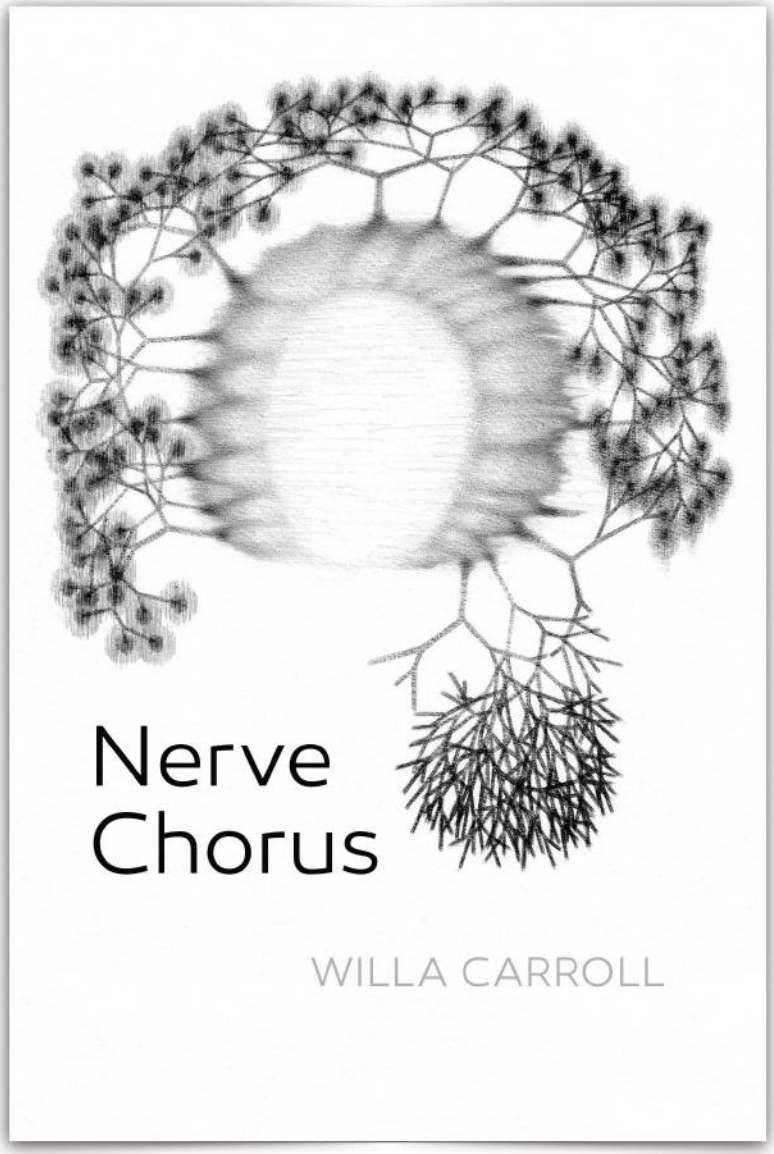


These nimble poems grapple with what it means to belong to a body, a family, a country. With rigor and dark wit, Carroll conjures the exhilarating terror of moving through one's life with nothing but "flesh holding / back disaster."

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