THE BOILER

FALL 2017

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Cover Photo: Dying of the Already Dead by Gloria Ceren

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JENNIFER POPA

THE CURRENT

I.

When, in a flush of sweat, the neighbor boy began the task of dying, the whole neighborhood turned up—a congregation of down-turned, worried faces. I only recognized him by the port wine birthmark stretching from his brow to his collarbone. On his warm body it was now dull, muted. He was the only altar boy at Mass that I could pick out each Sunday. He usually delivered the chalice to the Priest. I used to do the same when I was an altar boy many decades ago, long before brick laying ravaged my knees. Though we'd only exchanged polite nods after Mass, I felt compelled to visit his mother as he declined. She smiled when I turned up, though she didn't pretend to know my name.

The current had arrived for the child a few days earlier accompanying the storm that pulsed at our homes' gutters. At the time I hadn't known it was the current; the two of us were strangers then. Still I saw her coursing through him, felt her percolating below his bloomed skin and sensed her briny breath upon me whenever I sat near the child. Perhaps she'd found him through a spark of static buzzing in a doorknob, or perhaps he'd ridden his bike home in the rain, absorbing her then. She didn't seem happy to be there, a bit bored if I'm being honest, but she clutched to his small body without flinching. The boy's bed had been moved to the living room: a tiny brass frame tarnished with pocks of age. We layered wet terry cloth on his forehead and the mother rubbed the arches of his feet.

"To draw the fever down from his head," his mother nodded, animating the chubby foot until it looked like it was pumping a pedal. Though the foot flapped, his little body was still, consumed by the vapors inside his caged lungs, the bubbles where the current thrummed in his veins. The mother prayed aloud, asking God why, but the current was unmoved. The whole ordeal felt a bit routine. The current surged on, oblivious to our attempts. She would take him soon, as she'd undoubtedly taken many before. I'd seen death before, on the blood-tinged axe at the chicken's throat, the spider-webbed crack of a windshield, but the current had not been there in either case.

I lit candles for him at Mass, and prayed three days for his little life, but when I saw him on the mattress, dampening his sheets with that dumb look on his face, I knew he was very nearly gone. The current wouldn't be dammed by our

trifling efforts, and so with the moon lodged between her teeth and cheek she lapped him up.

Sometime in the night his mother's wails confirmed the child's turn. Kitchen lights flipped on, and lit boxes of helpless worry illuminated our block. The storm had passed, as well as the current with the child in her keep.

II.

When I saw the current again it was many years later, just after my diagnosis. I found myself wanting for everything and nothing. I'd taken out the sailboat with no intention to return, because if I was going to die it would be at my own hand, not while waiting around to be snuffed out. The boat's engine sputtered, gave a cough and whined like a bumblebee turned inside-out. I set out without destination, and steered my vessel toward the dark until the shore was a faint fissure of light. Lying down with my back on the boat's deck I searched for stars between the clouds to little success.

The barefaced current approached in silence. I felt her draw the boat to the south. Tugging with such force I suspected a whale was spinning me. I sat up. When I squinted toward her crest at the stern, attempting to discern her curves, it was as if I were moving in to kiss her, or look up her skirt—and with a small splash she bit me. It wasn't so much that she was mad, but however benign the violence was, it made her eyes flicker.

Had she wanted to level me, to tip my vessel or submerge me she could have, but instead she came aboard, slipping from water to mist before finally becoming air. She raked her metallic fingernails through my hair, and her breath was cool on my skin. She told me she'd migrated great distances, skirted entire continents, plotted with the moon and the sun. Water was her medium of choice; she could manipulate it—the tides, waves, direction, force—it had all been her. She puffed when mentioning how she'd known malleable liquid morphed from crystallized flakes at the North Pole, and sighed over some drops she'd known who were mere degrees from a gaseous dissolution. She placed her head in my lap. She said other days she preferred to waft along as a breeze, sometimes she sought out diodes and other semi-conductors so that she might flow to predetermined destinations. She was electric when she didn't want to think. For her it was boarding a train which traced the same path again and again; these were the days when she only went through the motions. Even then, depressed myself, she seemed quite sad.

She whispered that many looked to her for absolution, to trickle on the foreheads of infants in baptismal gowns. I realized she was flirting. She slithered over me, into my ears, along my brow and her silky tongue probed the gaps between toes. Parting my lips she teased and sucked my breath from me, but never

the whole lot. She was careful to leave just enough.

I told her to stop, pushed her from my waist, but she whistled and only pressed further. She clung to me, wrapped my wrists with a grip so tight I thought she had rope. Then she told me of the men she'd swallowed, the suicidal jumpers thudding in her straits. She had a taste for the ones who fought it, who thrashed and clawed at her swells. She became excited. The current said there was water water everywhere, in every fiber of tissue, in the lazy eye of the tarot card reader, the damp cries of the sirens luring sailors beyond the stern. Once she conspired with the moon and snatched a whole village in one swig. Though when I asked her where these villages go all she could say was that they're sent to the belly of the earth, somewhere beneath the mantle, near to the core.

I was weeping by then. After a string of wet hiccups clicked in my throat I asked her to swallow me up and stuff me toward the core. I stood and moved toward the bow of the boat, preparing to jump. But she rolled her eyes, slipped into the water, and shoved my boat back toward the marina. I suppose she realized that like the others I sought an end, and not her. The who of it mattered very little to me.

III.

Tonight, my lungs fill with fluid, and my breath is labored, punctuated with a sporadic gurgle. It's peculiar how a man can drown within his own body, miles from the sea.

The current has returned, but she's now at the foot of my bed. With a flick of her hair in my periphery she ignores me, avoiding my gaze and pretending we've never met. A spurned woman is the least of my worries tonight. I want to tell her that many times I looked for her whorls along the sandbars, squinted, hoping I might find her tapping a weather vane, and one time I thought I recognized her murmur in the humming telephone lines. Apologizing for my rebuff would be useless now. I cannot abate her loneliness with false apologies. It won't change the isolation of her duty.

The boy with the port wine birthmark sits beside her thumbing through old magazines. He wears his altar boy robes from Sunday mass. My eyes struggle to focus while battling the morphine. In lucid moments, I can see her squared metallic fingernails, her swirling hair so thick—I remember its coolness slinking across my shoulders in the boat. Tonight her bare feet are tucked beneath her in the chair.

When I focus too hard, straining, the nurse asks me about these hallucinations. I tell her nothing. Now I am swimming upwards. There's a deafening compression on my lungs, and I can feel the current palpitating within me. While my eyes throb, and my nostrils burn with bubbles, she is my bedside

companion. She spared me once, but again she is indifferent to my state and files her nails. I suppose even drowning can be tedious.

MELISSA HALL

MY FATHER, IN HOUSES

The house on Apple Drive is a small, three-bedroom starter home, with neighbors directly next door and across the street, and up the street and down the street. It is a neighborhood of young military families and thousands of children. My dad has decided that this house will become our palace. This house will be the castle in the neighborhood full of overgrown lawns and molding roofs.

He starts by planting holly bushes alongside the driveway. Slick, waxy leaves with needles at the end of each point. They draw blood when my neighbor's basketball lands in a patch of broken limbs within the row of green bushes.

"You kids better keep that ball out of my bushes!" he shouts. But we're in elementary school and our motor skills aren't the best. The ball bee-lines for the same spot every time, and our hands and arms get bloodier and bloodier, and my dad gets angrier and angrier until he decides to expand the driveway because *we need to be able to park both cars,* and the holly bushes are gone.

Instead, rocks will border the palace. Giant rocks. Rocks that need to be placed around the perimeter of our front yard, marking the boundaries between our yard and the neighbor's unkempt jungle. They will be regal. They will define our house from the others.

He mentions Colorado and how there are rocks everywhere, how wilderness blends with suburbia. Rocks with lawn. My mom and I don't know what he's talking about.

When my mom and I wonder where the rocks for this project will come from, he waves his hand like *what-a-dumb-question.* "There are big rocks everywhere," he says.

Except there aren't. We check the most logical place near our house—a sand pit with giant compact white-sugar hills that I skin my knee on if I run down the steep hills too fast and fall.

There are no rocks here. Or at least none large enough.

We check construction sites, thinking that maybe while bulldozers are bulldozing the trees and making way for a cement foundation there will be giant rocks. No rocks.

My dad doesn't give up. He surveys the town, drives down dirt roads, drives through unfinished neighborhoods, and somehow discovers that these rocks, these perfect giant rocks, are housed in a drainage ditch behind the

construction site for a Lowe's. When my mom and I ask if the rocks are available for the taking, he waves his hand again. "Whose rocks are these?" he says. "No one's. Ours." However, he keeps looking over his shoulder as the three of us haul rocks up a hill and load them into his SUV. Up the hill we go, all of us tumbling over our feet and holes in the steep hill, sweating in the Florida heat, my dad directing us to the vehicle. Down we go for another rock, this one bigger than the last. Another round, and we have three giant rocks in the vehicle.

My mom and I exhausted, we huff at my dad's smile—he can hardly contain his excitement as he discusses where the rocks will go. He has a plan for each.

At home, my dad pulls out a measuring tape, stands in our neighbor's yard, moves to the other side of the street, gauges where these rocks will go, which direction each particular rock should face. My mom and I roll the rocks and position them, roll them over again, reposition, and when they are finally in their right places, my dad nods. "It really makes the yard look nice," he says.

Actually, they look ridiculous, and neighbors walk by our house whispering and pointing. I can hear their thoughts: *what was he thinking? This neighborhood?*

They look out of place when the neighborhood *goes under*, according to my dad. We move away a few years or so later when he decides we need a better house—a bigger palace.

*

One of my dad's favorite pastimes is driving around and looking at houses. He likes to go inside and comment on the size of the rooms, the countertops in the bathrooms and kitchens, the space in the garage, the size of the lot. About each, he says, "If I were building this house I would have done it this way…" or "they could have saved more money doing it this way…" or "I don't know what the hell they were thinking by making the room face this direction…"

We're always looking at houses, even when we aren't looking for a house. What can be done with this particular house? What are the possibilities?

I'm brought along because my wrists are small enough to fit into the door handle hole and unlock the deadbolt from the inside. We commit crime after crime.

My dad and I drive around Old Bethel Road and somehow end up at a lake. "It would be nice to live near a lake," he says. "There's so much water in Colorado. Natural lakes. Beautiful." I just shrug. The beach is less than an hour away with see-through waters and clean white sand. Lakes are murky and slimy and contain mysterious creatures beneath their surfaces. Why live near a lake?

He spots a house on Tranquility Drive, at the end of what will become a

cul-de-sac but for now is grass and trees. Trees that separate the house from the houses behind it. Trees that are old enough to have been around before the house was built. My dad is in love with the trees, but more in love with the house once we step inside after I've finagled my arm into the door.

We gasp. "This is the house," my dad exclaims and I nod in agreement. The living room is a nice square-shape. The dining room is huge. The kitchen has an island smack dab in the middle of it. The walk-in pantry is big enough for a twin-sized bed. The light fixtures are brushed-nickel. There are ceiling fans in all the rooms. The neighborhood is quiet, and there's that lake nearby, and it looks like a respectable house. A house that you could be proud to say was your own. A palace.

*

My dad hates the idea of moving out of the Tranquility Drive house.

But he lost his job at the convenient store warehouse. Something about talking too much. Something about disclosing how much he was getting paid to other employees. Something about how boring the job is. Something about his bosses thinking he's an overall pain in the ass.

He hates moving into the rental house on Secretariat Drive, hates the idea of renting when we could *fix up an older house without them stealing our money*, but mostly hates the neighborhood. "We moved off of Apple Drive to avoid this," he says, motioning around to the neighbor's houses. The house is behind the hospital and it's a typical subdivision—houses on small plots of land, mere feet from each other. Neighbors park their cars on the road next to their yellow-green front yards. No rocks to be found anywhere.

He brings up Cripple Creek, Colorado. "It's just beautiful there," he says. "The trees and wildlife. Not so busy." Even though he's never been to Cripple Creek, even though he's never even been to Colorado. He brings it up occasionally, more so lately, and how much he'd like to live there, in the woods. With the wildlife. Whenever he brings it up, he mentions that *he'll* move there someday. No us, not his family, his wife and daughter, but him. He'll be there.

He complains about the Secretariat house. Its four small rooms. None of them with ceiling fans. The window in the room next door to me is impossible to fit blinds or curtains over, so it bakes in the Florida sun. The house is hot and stuffy, so the AC constantly runs, which my mom and I never hear the end of whenever my dad is in the house.

He doesn't take into account that the house is conveniently located near Wal-Mart, or that when the power goes out in Crestview the Secretariat house doesn't because it's on the same grid as the hospital. Those details don't matter to him.

Inviting my dad's family to come to Florida for Christmas this year—

rather than us having to drive to Indiana again—was a good idea when we still lived on Tranquility Drive. The spacious living room, the comfortably air-conditioned rooms, the trees mere feet from our back door. It would have all been very nice. Very festive and impressive.

Instead, we're forced to host gift-opening in a living room full of too-big furniture and squeezed-together sisters and brothers. Limited seating takes on a new meaning that Christmas.

*

Fortune strikes: my dad lands a good job at a local water plant, once again, in the warehouse. It promises good hours and even better pay, enough to purchase a piece of land outside of town, away from the sound and noise pollution of the city, in the wilderness. The perfect location for my dad's dream house.

He talks about the dream house nonstop. How he'd design it. How he'd build it with his own hands, and with his own people. How it would make more structural sense than those split-level houses with one bedroom on one side of the living room and two others on the opposite side—because who really wants to sleep on the same wall as the living room?

Does my dad have blue prints for his dream house? Does he have a notebook full of sketches? Does it contain colors for the walls or sample of carpet? Measurements? Pictures? Does he know what type of light fixtures would be in the house? Does he want brushed-nickel or dark chrome color? I don't know, but I'm sure he has all the answers.

My dad will have a wooden plaque made in honor of his dream house: *Hall Family est. 2005.* But does he know that his dream house will have an unfinished backyard that you can't navigate through, a gigantic burn pile full of old boards and nails and construction equipment that will never get burned, a slab of concrete accompanied by a load of untouched bricks for a shed that will never get built? Does he know that the arch in the living room leading into the hallway won't be round and precise, that in fact none of the arches will be and that the one in the kitchen will resemble a penis? Does he know that his restlessness will reach its peak and that he'll say he hates the people he works with, then quit his job? Start talking about how much he hates Florida, hot weather, and the close-minded, conservative Bible-thumping Republicans who just want to shove their beliefs down his throat? Start talking about how far away this dream house is from his family in Indiana even though he moved to Florida to get away from them? Start talking about how much he hates my mom's constant nagging at him to get a job? Does he know that he'll take a solo trip to Indiana—he'll say it's to see his mother—and then return a week or two later, and then go back to Indiana for even longer? Does he know that his wooden plaque should

say *Hall Family until Dad decides to quit his job and then leave for Indiana for weeks at a time and then come back when there's family only to ask for a divorce a year and half into living in the dream house*?

I don't know.

I just know that one day we're living in a rental house behind the hospital and the next day we're staring at the red dirt that my dad claims will be the place for his dream house. The land he purchases affordable. Near a shooting range. Across the street from a railroad track. Located in the middle of nowhere, twenty minutes from my high school, my friends, Wal–Mart and completely surrounded by Florida wilderness. Wolf spiders sneak across the leaves. Mosquitoes breed in the damp woods. Dogs run wild because there's no one to control them. Cars speed down the road going 60 miles per hour. I'm not impressed.

If my mom has any doubts, she doesn't say. Maybe she just wants him to be happy. Maybe she appreciates how clearly my dad can envision his dream house, how it will have trees in the front to shield it from the dirty road. Surely, she didn't imagine that my dad's dream house was the last house we'll ever live in together as a family, that she'll be stuck taking care of my dad's dream house on her own, that this plot of land will become part of the wilderness again.

ILIANA ROCHA

MARFA LIGHTS

There they are—our fears, animated. Highway 90's wide shoulder, into it, we cry. The scary thing about fear is that it hovers, remains stationary as it pulses on & off. A roadside sign here says *Crunch* instead of *Church*, despite the persistent steeple, & like the sun, everything has slowed to a crawl in West Texas except in the way we name things: *will-o'-the-wisp*, *bad hombre*, *small fires*. In the way language fails at documenting our corruptions, the lights appear as a lesson in amplitude. Who moved the backbone of Texas? Was it the Spanish, or was it the U.S.? Did Mexico have a say? Who carved *Fuck this* into the desk I used in junior high school history class? I'd love to meet them, ask them why their crude artwork looked so much like an abandoned asylum wall. Saltwater seeped into the bones of Galveston trees, killed 40,000 of them, & they're calling it an ecological disaster. I want to know what this feeling is in my bones, if it's saltwater killing me, or if it's something else, & if this something else has a name that lessens its intensity like *domestic violence*. How he moved my smile as if it were a Texas backbone. Ask me if I had a say in which rivers separated one state from another. The town where my mother was born, which had the largest sulfur deposits, now depleted & left *ghost*. The Lone Star has always gambled on disorientation, & it usually wins.

ILIANA ROCHA

HOUSTON

I woke up with another migraine today because I suppose I should be in love. Did you know that the freeways begin with dirt packed on top of itself? Then goes the asphalt, then the concrete, then the little symbol of patriotism. The roaches I leave behind jump into unsuspecting handbags, & naked, I examine my body for places to pick it apart. I float above the roses the Mexican landscapers plant like the woman in the Chagall painting looking for a way out of his dream. *Up*, the only exit. I discipline Texas, just like our forefathers would have wanted, stealing the gallop from a horse while I strangle it with a lasso. How much my dad is a mirror to those men on bulldozers making a city for us, but somehow, he defied gravity by holding spinning police sirens in his hands like drunken planets. *Alarm bells went off*, the white officer says. My grandfather left a couple of his fingers in Normandy, & I have the telegram that officially discharged him framed in gold because I like tragedies still & where I can see them.

VICTORIA LYNNE MCCOY

DUMB LUCK

The car crashed. You were in it. You weren't in it. Two died. The car crashed. No one was injured but you. There were soldiers on the side of the road. You were alone. You spent so long trying to unwrite your body but it's the body that you're left with. Until it isn't. Your friends are gone. Your friends are called bodies. Until they aren't. You were lucky. The car crashed. Two died. You weren't in it that time. You don't believe in luck. You share a bed with each coin's flip side. You flipped the car and crawled out of the morning. No one died. The car crashed and you decided to stay home that night. You hate how obituaries say *survived by* like it's lucky. The car spun upside down and you counted the clouds until the grass caught you. The car crashed and that glass wasn't for you. You don't believe in luck but what else are you left with? There were days you wished to disappear and didn't. You choke on the luck of it. The car crashed. You slept through it. They died. You drove away and crashed into your life. You walked away from the crash site but the rest of it you're stuck with. The car crashed. You keep waking up and every time they die. You crash and crash against the dumb luck of your body until you're not sure how many crashes there actually were. The world spins and you keep counting the cracks in the windshield wondering what will catch you next, what it will try to break your lucky, dumb bones against.

VICTORIA LYNN MCCOY

REGENERATION

I gnaw my limbs off, one
by one. I am

scared and unstoppable.
The wet pavement smells of salt and creature

no matter how far I am from a body
of water. At Seaside Elementary,

the rain came as an invitation—
hundreds of earthworms would swarm

the gutters, squirm under the nails
of boys, reckless

with curiosity. If you slice a Planarian in two,
each half will bloom

into a separate, new body.
And isn't this how we learn

to love, by seeing how close we can get
to destruction?

The only part of a shark
with this ability are the teeth.

I bite hard enough
for the marks to live in a man

until morning. I want to lose
a piece of me in the gamble

of his skin. I want to give
only what I can also keep.

The starfish can't stop giving
its arms to the sea. Can't stop

making itself new again. I want to swathe
myself in the limbs of the man

I came too close to not leaving.
Sometimes an arm sprouts from the crater

of a lonely shoulder.
Others, an entire animal grows

from the arm alone
to return the body it's missing.

CAITLIN NEELY

SIDESHOW

Every direction treeless. Every house
I've lived in stacked up like
milk bottles. They're watching me

from the windows, lined up
to catch a glimpse of *the girl*
who doesn't feel, who

doesn't cry when the boys
tug at my skirt, pull barrettes
from my long hair. If this

was a dream the field would be
water already, my body naked.
The curtains in the windows

something I could float on,
froth of white. But there
is no sea here, no quiet.

My mouth is a pinned butterfly.
I cut a stone out of the air.
How pretty she is, they say,

their noses singeing the glass.

CAITLIN NEELY

GOD OF FORGETTING

My mother teaches me
how to rinse parsley.

Dirt ripens the drain.
Her ring rests by the sink.

Gardens caught
in our mouths. The moon

outside: an accident,
a dog sifting bones.

It's dinner, early fall.
Ella on the radio. I snap

my fingers, my crumpled jeans
the color of river

after a storm. The sound
of chopping, pots boiling,

dry pasta torn in half,
everything forgetting itself.

In my picture books,
the Styx ferried bodies

to the beyond. Every grave
green shoots.

JACKSON BURGESS

LAST FULL MOON IN IOWA

Sirens in the east, moving towards some tragedy, and
who would commit a murder under a moon like this?
Who would break anything, a window, a skull, knowing
she was watching from above? I have bronchitis
again—too many smokes and nights not knowing
what color socks you're wearing, whether
you remember my smell. Hours wheezing, wondering
what bad jokes I've been mumbling in my sleep.
Do dogs howl at the moon or to each other?
Did you know how much I love you is why
I wash my hands? Someday when I'm better
I'll read you a list of things you became to me:
runway, poltergeist, mourning dove, splint, in hopes
you'll kiss my sternum, crack the same ribs as before.

KATHRYN SMITH

CREATION MYTH

And the Lord said let ants be fed
from the egg-caps of walking stick
insects that hatch disguised as ants.
Let impostors pass undetected
from a subterranean nest. Let fur-bound
beasts carry exoskeletal beasts from one
hinged continent to another, and let land-
bridges break. Let humans break land
and build bridges from elements dug
from the land. Let rats unhinge ribs
from spines and climb through pipes
invented by humans to keep our
shit and nakedness away from
the shit and nakedness of rats.
Let humans set poisoned traps.
And thus I tell you: an erroneous vision
of heaven and hell shall come to you
in books, and this will divide you.
Some will say it's possible
for a child to die and come back
from death having seen the realm
of God. But some will say what
does it matter when earth is a lonely
chasm where children die unnoticed as
we sharpen our knives and whiten
our teeth and tighten our skin and
implore our screens to refresh.

KATHRYN SMITH

CRACKING THE EGG

I scramble the egg
until it does not resemble
egg—no longer the globe

a body bore into
the world for a purpose
entirely other. First I scraped

the blood-knot
from the albumen—trace
of its potential, of what

reminds me of me,
life force hidden
in the viscous clot.

When the speckled hen
grew listless and drew her head
to her puffed chest,

I quarantined her
in a crate lined with soft
clean shavings

where she could suffer alone.
Two days later, when I entered
the dark garage,

her carcass, as she stiffened,
had pushed through the crate's
makeshift door

as though she'd tried for escape.
Her eyelids made a final
translucent seal.

It was like
scooping a dead wasp
from a windowsill, or

freeing a bloodied mouse
from a sprung trap
as I lifted her body

into a plastic garbage sack
and placed it
in the trash: *So much*

for that one. Not loss
exactly, but more notice
than I give the ova that slip

unceremoniously from
my body when the moon
shifts from sliver

to smudge, simply
doing away
with what there's nothing

to be done with. I
have seen the self's
raw resemblance

wriggling with need
in dreams
where she's

a misplaced parcel,
wrapped and left
in a bureau drawer.

She's large-headed
and adult-voiced,
and when

I wake, it's with
such relief to be
alone with morning, which

demands enough,
the way it
repeats itself, its hunger.

WYNNE HUNGERFORD

APPETITES

Marie Leclerc, the owner of Little Switzerland, said that whoever sold the twenty-five pound chocolate Santa Claus would get a Christmas bonus. I wanted the money to put toward a black knee-length coat that I'd seen in a neighboring boutique. Layla, the single mom who was hired for the holiday season, wanted the money to help pay for her son's presents. The part-time college kids who worked evenings probably just wanted the money to buy pot. In the end, it didn't matter how bad we wanted the bonus or what we were going to do with it, because the day the big chocolate Santa was unveiled was the day the Channel 4 meteorologist wrung his hands as a giant storm system washed over Greenville, South Carolina, without any sign of letting up soon. The holiday shoppers didn't want to dart from store to store on Main Street, where water surged in the gutters and traffic sprayed puddles. Instead, they went to the mall.

The only people who stopped in Little Switzerland were businessmen ordering hot chocolate in between meetings. One Thursday, for example, I steamed whole milk with shaved chocolate, stirring until the thermometer reached 140º, then topped off a drink with whipped cream. The final touch was a pinch of chocolate shavings, sprinkled like sawdust onto the peaked dollop of cream. I handed the drink to a businessman, maybe a lawyer, and rang him up at the good register – the one that didn't buzz. I watched him lick the whipped cream, taking a bit of it onto his tongue, his face relaxing at the sweetness. Then he sipped what I knew was the lightest, richest, and smoothest thing he had ever tasted. His once-stiff shoulders slumped a little. Moments like that made my life bearable. I drank them in, those little pleasures.

Layla, the holiday help, killed the vibe. She batted spidery eyelashes and tried to sell him the chocolate Santa Claus, even though the poor guy just wanted to enjoy his drink in the dry, peaceful indoors without being hassled. That was part of being a good saleswoman—knowing what the customer wanted, even if the customer didn't know what he wanted. She said, "It could be a gift for a client. Now wouldn't that be thoughtful?"

If she was trying to flirt, it wasn't working. Layla was a severely pear-shaped woman in her mid-fifties. Sun spots covered the backs of her hands and under the fluorescent lights, her dyed hair was a glimmering orange.

"How much?" he asked, sighing, a little annoyed. I could smell the

chocolate on his breath: the slightest equatorial spice, smooth finish, 48% cocoa.

"When you consider the craftsmanship that went into making it," she said, "three hundred dollars is really a steal."

He said, "Thanks, anyway," and opened his umbrella.

Layla said, "That's bad luck, you know."

He said, "I don't believe in luck," and went into the raging weather.

Layla said, "Well, I blew it."

I could have offered some encouraging words but that would have felt weird, since she was older than me, so I just said, "It takes practice."

She said, "The frustrating thing is when you get to be my age, you don't have the *time*." She looked at her shoes, a pair of ankle-boots lined with fake fur. "I have this picture in my head of the person I want to be," she said, trailing off, her eyes focused on something that I could not see.

To fight boredom, we cleaned the shoebox we called a store. I scrubbed dried bits of chocolate from the back counter and as Layla wiped down the glass display cases, she painted a pretty bleak picture of her life. She was a former Delta flight attendant and her ex-husband was a Delta pilot. She thought they spent eight years together until finally her husband admitted that he was miserable and couldn't handle having a disabled child, and so he moved up to New Jersey and took international flights out of Newark. Layla's eighteen-year-old son had Down's syndrome and lived at home with her. He worked five days a week at a community center where he also took classes in drama and improvisation.

"My husband said I was asking for it because I was almost forty when I had Benji. What do you say to that? I love my son."

I said, "Wow."

She asked, "What's it like to be you?"

Me? I thought. I'm twenty-five and live in a garage apartment in the Hampton-Pinckney Historic District downtown, a fifteen minute walk from the shop. I keep a wine glass on the little backgammon table beside my bed to catch a small leak, which *plinks* all through the night as I'm trying to sleep, and every morning I pour the rainwater down the sink. I make my own candied walnuts with sugar and butter and keep them in a dish on my coffee table. I try to read before bed every night but I almost always put the book down and look through the window to see what mood the moon is in, the shy moon, the absent moon, the heavy moon baring it all. I would like to be seen as the full moon by someone like maybe the deli man across the street. I watch him working sometimes, preparing sandwiches and fishing pickles from the barrel.

Layla was only temporary and I didn't want to get too personal. I just

said, "Sometimes I wish I was a real chocolatier in the real Switzerland."

Layla said, "We don't make this chocolate?"

"It comes on a truck every Tuesday," I said. "Weren't you here for the delivery?"

She said, "I must have been in the bathroom."

Layla spent the first fifteen minutes of every shift French-braiding her hair in the bathroom and tying the back of her apron into a perfect bow. Mine was crudely knotted.

She set the bottle of window cleaner on the counter and looked at the twenty-five pound chocolate Santa Claus, which stood over two-feet tall and was wrapped in clear cellophane with a red ribbon at the top. The shell was an inch thick. Santa's hair and beard curled in chocolate ripples. His cheeks shined and so did the end of his button-nose. His hands rested on the bulge of his stomach as if he were about to lean back and laugh into the frigid North Pole air. Layla put her hands on her hips, those enormous hips, and didn't break eye contact with Santa. It was as if she saw some flicker of life in there.

She said, "I flew over the Alps a number of times, but I'll probably never see them again."

The rain continued into mid-December and Marie Leclerc, the owner, began to worry. I'd worked at Little Switzerland for three years and my previous holiday seasons had been hectic. We had sold out of peppermint bark, candy canes, Champagne truffles, chocolate coins, and, for the evangelical crowd, white chocolate crosses filled with peanut butter. I leaned in the doorway of Marie's office. She scrolled through sales charts on her computer and shook her head. She was wearing jeans and a YWCA sweatshirt. There was a small refrigerator in her office, too, and she took out two plastic mini bottles of Smirnoff and handed me one.

She raised the little bottle and said, "Ho ho ho."

We drank.

Marie and I got along well. I knew that she was still paying off a three-hundred thousand dollar loan and worried about meeting sales goals each month. Sometimes she left pictures of her family up on her computer, pictures of her husband and toddler at the beach. The little girl, Grace, was fair-skinned and in the photos there were white stripes running across her chest and down her arm where she'd been stung by a jellyfish.

Marie said, "This rain is a bitch."

On the nightly news, there were segments of young correspondents going to flooded intersections and trying to report on the damage. Bridges had been washed away, along with a staggering number of dog houses, sandboxes, and barbecues.

Marie said, "I shouldn't have hired Layla after all. Tomorrow I'll have to

give her the boot."

I felt the alcohol in my shoulders, relaxing into my arms, and said, "I've gotten used to her but I won't necessarily miss her."

Marie said, "That's retail for you."

Layla didn't show up for her shift the next morning. After counting the drawers—we'd only made $10.25 the previous day—and filling out the deposit slip and turning on the lights and sweeping the floor, I leaned against the back counter and looked through the glass storefront at the street. Some people ran by with newspapers over their heads and others walked slowly under golf umbrellas. In the hanging gray weight of their faces, cold-eyed, dog-headed, misery could be seen. They kicked through puddles reflecting pink and ice-blue neon. The rain shifted colors with the traffic lights. I saw a row of women getting their hair washed in the salon across the street and, next door, the deli man spooning sides onto platters for the refrigerated case. Not as many people were going into the deli lately, but the delivery boy had been busier than ever.

Marie brought out two cups of coffee from her office. She handed me one with milk and sugar. Hers was black.

She said, "Where's Layla?"

"Hasn't shown up yet."

"Maybe she knew what was coming and decided to stay home."

I said, "I don't think so."

"Maybe she'll call in sick," she said. "We'll just have to wait and see."

Marie worked a half-day. She went into her office, stayed on the computer, and then went home around lunchtime. Layla still hadn't arrived. She seemed like a reliable person who genuinely wanted to do a good job and if something had come up, like her son getting sick or her car breaking down, I knew that she would have called to explain the situation. One of the part-time college kids, Eric, came in for the closing shift at five o'clock. I asked, "How do you handle the boring nights?"

He pulled out a four-pack of caffeine pills from the front pocket of his cargo pants and said, "I get these cheap off the internet."

As I zipped up my rain jacket and threw the hood over my head, he stood attention and saluted. I said, "At ease, Eric," and he said, "Adios."

I walked home, shouldering past smoking crowds outside of bars during Happy Hour. I headed south on Main Street, cut right on West Washington, and right again onto Hampton Avenue. I went upstairs to my garage apartment and hung up my rain jacket. No point in having that black knee-length coat in this weather. I mixed up a walnut and green apple salad, and sat in front of the little

flat-screen TV. I'd missed the beginning of the five o'clock news and joined in with a story about a local gun & knife show cancelled because of flooding. If I had stopped to reflect on my evening ritual, supper in front of the TV, I would have been overwhelmed with sadness.

The phone rang. I answered.

"Are you watching the news? I can't believe it. This is a nightmare. Jesus fucking Christ."

"Marie?"

"Layla's dead." "Are you joking?"

"It happened last night."

"Are you drunk?"

"She got stuck in floodwaters, decided to get out of her car, and was swept into a storm drain. Her body, it was wedged down there, like, plugged. This was by Cleveland Park. I take my kid to Cleveland Park all the time. No more."

I dropped my fork into the salad bowl and pushed it away. I leaned over, propping my elbows on my knees, and looked at the hardwood floor, all scuffed and worn with age. My hands shook a little and without thinking, I said, "Her hips."

"Her hips were so goddamn wide!"

I couldn't believe it.

I rubbed my eyes, feeling like trash. She had been dead the entire day and we didn't have a clue. I'm not sure what I would have done differently if I'd known that she was dead, but it felt horrible going on like everything was fine when, in reality, she was no longer breathing. I wished I had known. Maybe I would have spoken to her in my head and said that I was sorry, sorry that she had died underground and sorry that I had said I wouldn't miss her.

Marie said, "We'll have to go to the visitation. I'll close the store for now and put a sign up or something. What'll it say? 'Our dearly departed.'"

I hung up the phone and turned off the TV. I didn't want to see the segment replayed later in the night. I didn't want to hear the news anchors talking about Layla's death, the discovery of her body, the son she left behind.

On the afternoon of the visitation, Marie picked me up. The sky looked like a layer of mold, soft and grayish-green, and the trees were stripped bare. I asked if we could stop by the store on the way because there was something I wanted to pick up. She shrugged and turned onto Main Street, pulling into a loading zone beside Little Switzerland. The rain fell cold and angry as I unlocked the front door with my key. A sign reading SUDDEN LOSS was taped to the glass door. Inside, the twenty-five pound chocolate Santa Claus sat on the counter in the lonely

dark, the eyes flat and lifeless. I picked him up, hugging the full weight against my chest, and carried him back to the idling car, where I strapped him into Marie's daughter's car seat.

I said, "I think we should give it to Benji. Whatever you paid wholesale for it, that's what I'll give you. I'll pay, I don't care."

It made logical sense to me that Benji should get the Santa Claus. It was an object connected to his mother, something she had wanted to sell to make him proud, to earn extra money and make Christmas bigger and better, and I thought he would like to have it more than any random person who might buy it at Little Switzerland, although the chance of that happening was pretty slim.

Marie said, "I paid one-fifty."

"Okay," I said. "One-fifty."

We arrived at the visitation, which was held about fifteen minutes outside of Greenville at Layla's sister's house. An inflatable snowman stood in the yard, streaked with rain. There wasn't a paved walkway to the front door, so someone had stretched planks of plywood across the spongy grass. When I walked the path, hugging the chocolate Santa tight, the plywood sunk into the soft ground and bubbles rose to the surface. Marie walked behind me, scarf wound around her neck, and oversized sunglasses blocking her eyes. I told her that if anyone was allowed to wear sunglasses, it was Layla's family members and not her temporary employer, but Marie said, "I'll grieve in my own way." I thought that maybe Layla's death was an excuse to be upset about her own life.

We went inside and met Layla's sister, Marge. She was younger, maybe forty-something, and was less severely pear-shaped. There were dark circles under her eyes but I thought that was probably from the sudden tragedy and under normal circumstances she would have a pleasant face. She saw the enormous Santa Claus and said, "The refreshments table is over there."

Bouquets of white roses were scattered throughout the living room. Perched on top of the upright piano was a framed photograph of Layla in her Delta flight attendant uniform, head cocked, eyes shining.

I said, "Where's Benji?"

"He isn't feeling up to a crowd right now."

"Where will he go?"

"Go?" she asked. "He'll stay with me."

I realized how crazy I must have looked, showing up at the visitation of a coworker whom I really hadn't known that long, only a few weeks, with a thirty-year-old boss who had, within five minutes of arrival, already poured wine into a Dixie cup, finished it, and gotten a refill. On top of all that, I was carrying the largest milk chocolate Santa Claus that any of these people had ever seen in their lives. The cellophane wrapper crinkled as I adjusted my grip and said, "I have something to give him."

Marge said, "I don't think he wants to speak with strangers at a time like this." She smiled weakly and said, "Excuse me, the meatballs are ready."

I faced the living room crowd. Marie held at least a half dozen cubes of cheddar cheese in one hand, Dixie cup in the other. Tears slid down her cheeks, although I couldn't see her eyes behind those huge Beverly Hills sunglasses. She asked, "Will it be like this after I die?"

I pointed to an empty seat by the Christmas tree in the corner of the room, a five-foot spruce covered in cheap purple and green fiberglass ornaments. There were already a few presents under the tree wrapped in cheap-looking paper. I said, "Sit over there. I'll find you when I'm finished."

I slipped down a hall decorated with watercolor paintings of palmetto trees. I shifted the Santa Claus to one side, so that I held him against my hip like a tall, rigid baby, and opened the first door. Closet. The second door revealed an elderly man sitting on the edge of a king-sized bed, crying, with his hearing aids placed on a TV tray beside the bed. I closed the door and moved on. There was a smaller bedroom, with a white chest of drawers and matching white desk and chair. A fake plastic palmetto tree sat in the corner of the room in a terracotta pot. A twin bed was pushed against the wall and Benji was nestled under a quilt stitched with star patterns. A set of flannel pajamas was draped over the back of the desk chair but he still wore his day clothes, a white button-down shirt and a clip-on bowtie. His small head appeared even smaller because of a buzz cut. His lips were very pink and chapped.

He said, "Who're you?"

"I'm Ashley," I said. "I worked with your mom."

He sunk further into the bed, saying, "Butthole."

The real-life Benji wasn't as soft and passive as the Benji in my head. The real-life Benji smelled like cologne and wouldn't even look at me.

"Do you mind if I set this down?"

"I don't care."

I put it on the desktop and sat in the white chair. I said, "This Santa Claus is from the chocolate shop where your mom worked. I thought you might like to have it."

"I'm not supposed to eat sweets much."

"You could eat a little at a time."

"People have been giving me a lot of things," he said. "It's not even Christmas yet but I got an illustrated *Hamlet*."

"Your mom told me that you took theater classes."

He pushed his wire-rim glasses up the bridge of his nose. He began to speak and every so often, he stopped to lick his lips. He said, "My favorite is improv. The point is to make the scene go forward, even though you don't know what anybody's going to do next." He put his right hand over his heart. "Trust is

a decision you make inside yourself."

He looked at the Santa Claus sitting on the desk.

"Do you want to see it?"

He nodded.

I picked up the chocolate Santa Claus and handed it to Benji. He took the weight easily, though, and peered at the milk chocolate face. He squinted and said, "I can't see him." He untied the ribbon, opened up the cellophane, and pulled out the huge figure. The chocolate shell was smooth and shiny as wax. Benji looked at it for a second and then put it under the covers with him. When Benji's breath hit Santa's cheek, the chocolate warmed up and shifted to a lighter shade of brown. Benji stuck out his large, wide tongue. Licking turned into kissing. I didn't look away. I stared for about five whole seconds without realizing that I was staring. Here was this eighteen-year-old boy—no, man—and he was acting on his desire in a way that I had not. Something like envy sprang up inside of me, envy that other people could do exactly what they wanted without second-guessing themselves.

I asked, "Do you want the light off?"

He said, "Uh huh."

I turned off the desk lamp so the light fell softly in the room. His lips smacked on the chocolate. His hands caressed Santa Claus beneath the quilt. Chocolate had a powerful effect on people and seeing the effect on Benji made me tremble, the way his hips began to move under the quilt, those hips. Just when I realized that I was wet, felt it in my underwear, there was a knock at the door.

Marge said, "Benji?"

I stood up from the desk chair. Marge opened the door. She looked at me, then at Benji, who was grinding on Santa Claus under the covers. Marge said, "What is going on in here?"

She tried to block the doorway, but I pushed her out of the way and ran down the hall, knowing how strange it must have looked. I emerged in the living room and slipped through the crowd, somber and smelling of crockpot meatballs, that had gathered around the piano to sing "Amazing Grace," and I found Marie asleep in the chair by the Christmas tree. I said, "Get up, come on, let's go," and realizing that words did not properly communicate the urgency of the situation, I slapped her face. She startled awake and I led her through the crowd and out the front door before she even knew what was happening.

Marie and I were crossing the plywood path across the soggy front yard when I heard Marge shouting, behind us, "You!"

Just then, Marie slipped on the plywood, feet flying out from under her, and landed flat on her back. I turned and saw the wrinkled expression of pain and shock on her face. The sunglasses had flown into a brown puddle. The rain was on us, attacking us, pummeling us.

The front door to the house was open and the entrance was packed with an onlooking crowd, along with umbrellas on the floor and big piles of jackets hanging from hooks on the wall. Marge stood front and center in the doorway, rain blowing on the front of her dress and onto her face. Dead leaves streaked through the air. She had a wide, domineering stance and said, "I don't know who you people are but I want you out of here this instant. If I find out that you were filming my nephew or taking pictures, I'll come after you with a vengeance."

She pointed that stiff finger at me and said, "Take a look everyone. If you ever see this face again, reach for your pepper spray. This is the face of the modern American pervert."

Then she slammed the door shut.

At that point, Marie managed to stand up. Her clothes were soaked and dirty. She dug her car keys out of her purse, which had gotten water-logged in the fall, and handed them over. Every time we hit a large puddle on the drive, I lifted my foot off the gas and held the wheel steady, and in that way, we hydroplaned back to downtown Greenville in complete silence. The scene ran through my mind over and over. I realized that Benji had been standing in the back of the crowd, his face covered with chocolate melted by body heat.

Marie didn't want to go home. She wanted to sleep on the couch in her office at Little Switzerland. I didn't ask why but I figured that her husband would be upset to know she'd gotten drunk at the visitation, passed out, and busted her ass on plywood. I parked her car in a garage two blocks from the store and we walked the slick, dark sidewalk that was plastered with flyers for a coffeehouse's stand-up comedy night. I went to the open the front door to Little Switzerland and realized that I hadn't locked it after grabbing the chocolate Santa Claus. Leaving the store unlocked was worse than being wrongly accused of chocolate perversion, because I knew Marie and the store mattered to me. Marge might have thought I was some kind of freak but A) that wasn't true and B) my intentions had been good and C) I would hopefully never see her again.

Marie went into the store first to scope out the scene. I followed, cautiously, nervously. Everything was in its place. Truffles, creams, clusters, caramels, chews, barks, and marzipan were all lined up in perfect rows in the dark cases. The registers were untouched but she opened the drawers anyway and saw that all of the money was there. She looked in the safe. Nothing was missing. I leaned against the counter and covered my face with my hands. I couldn't believe it. I had never left the doors unlocked before and was terrified that because of my mistake everything would be destroyed or stolen.

I said, "It will never happen again."

"It's fine, it's fine," Marie mumbled. "Nobody came in, nothing's stolen. It's our *lucky* day." She opened a case and picked out a caramel. She asked, "Did you sleep with Benji?"

I realized that's how it must have looked. I shook my head.

She chewed the caramel, nodding, and then wandered toward her office. I thought I heard her mumble, "Everybody wants to feel good."

I said, "Wait."

"What?"

"Do you want me to pay you for the Santa Claus now?"

"Forget it."

"I can write a check."

"One-fifty is a drop in the bucket. It doesn't matter."

"No," I said. "It *does* matter."

"Not to me," she said. "Not anymore."

She went into the office and shut the door.

If Little Switzerland had been mine, I would have been pissed that someone left the doors unlocked and would have been frantic to see if anything was out of place. If Little Switzerland had been mine and the weather had turned to shit during the holiday season, I wouldn't have moped in my office and waited out the storm. I would have gotten my ass up and put coupons in the local newspaper and advertisements on the radio stations. I would have done something to draw people in, something to keep my business alive. That was the problem, though. There wasn't anything to keep alive. Marie didn't want to do it anymore. She was tired or maybe full of regret. There was no way for me to look inside another person and know what they felt. I could only look inside of myself. So much time had been lost already.

I went outside and made sure to lock the doors behind me. It was only six o'clock but already the sky had down-shifted to a deep industrial shade of gray. I heard the wind and the rain and train sounds. At first, I thought I was going straight home to do research, make arrangements, pack my things, but then I heard a small bell chime through the rain and looked across the
street. The delivery boy stepped out of the Italian deli and jogged down the block with a paper bag of food and a red and white checkered umbrella. I realized how hungry I was. I jogged across the street in my ruined leather flats and went into the store, breathing the smell of cold, salted meat. One case contained platters of sides that you could buy in half or one pound plastic containers—stuffed olives, anchovies, mozzarella salad. Another case contained meats and cheese, the faces of which were pink, red, white, yellow, green, spotted, marbled, pickled, magnificent. A refrigerator held sparkling sodas. There were three little cafe tables inside. I looked at the deli man, who was leaning on top of the meat and cheese case with his hands together, fingers interlaced. He smiled and I followed the wrinkles that went from the curve of each nostril to the corners of his mouth. His eyebrows met in the middle.

"I see you over there," he said, pointing across the street. "Hey, you

wanna sandwich?"

I looked at the chalkboard covered in specials.

I said, "The New Italian."

First, he cut a square ciabatta loaf in half. Then he picked a brick of cheese from the case and put it in the slicer. He sliced once, then, unhappy with the thickness, adjusted the blade and sliced again. I saw the muscles in his back and shoulders through his white T-shirt. While he worked, he asked, "Good day today?"

I couldn't think of anything to say, except the truth. "My coworker died."

He turned and handed me a slice of provolone cheese. He said, "It'll grab you by the balls," and I knew that he meant death, not the cheese. He sliced hard salami, capicola, and ham and added peperoncinis, artichoke spread, and a zig-zag of olive oil from a squirt bottle. He wrapped the sandwich in deli paper, dropped a stack of napkins on top, and handed it to me.

I took the sandwich and asked, "How much is it?"

He hooked his thumbs in the front pocket of his apron. He said, "No charge."

"Thank you." I looked around the store and said, "Well, I better go."

He said, "No, no, no," gesturing toward one of the café tables. "You eat here."

The deli man stood at the counter and drank a little bottle of Perrier, politely looking at his hands, the fine black hairs that grew from his knuckles, instead of watching me eat. The peppers made my lips tingle. I kept forgetting what time it was. It felt like the middle of my life, even though it was the beginning.

He nodded toward Little Switzerland, saying, "Maybe I'll come to your place next time."

I imagined myself walking through Zurich in a long black coat, the elegant storefronts lit in spectral light, cases filled with watches and chocolates.
I said, "I won't be there."

He looked confused.

I said, "It was nice to meet you."

He said, "Same here."

The deli meat was so salty that later that night, after I'd gone home and fallen asleep, I woke up dying of thirst and reached for the wine glass on the backgammon table beside my bed, placed there to catch a leak in the ceiling. In one long swallow, I drank the rainwater.

LAUREN HALDEMAN

SELECTIONS FROM *INSTEAD OF DYING*

Instead of dying, we take you in — sick, alone, confused — and start a series of healing regimens. For the first week you drink only water infused with lavender and vinegar. After the new moon, we begin to feed you base elements: cream of tartar, kombucha, filmjölk, carrots. When the visions subside, we start the physical routine. The air is still cold as we start your lake swimming cycles — twice across & back the length. You hear robins like ticker tape through the branches of April. Your mood improves. We cut out bread, cereals, muffins, milk. We cut out gumdrops, taffy, milkshakes, wheat. Your hair calms down, your fingernails are trimmed. Instead of dying, you start jogging, in a zip-up track-suit, early in the morning, sunlight a disco ball across your face, lawn-sprinklers starting up all over the neighborhood.

Instead of dying, you build an elaborate village out of plumbing. Even the plumbing has plumbing. You tell the community that this construct of vital passageways is indicative of microcosms within the geodesic loop. You tell them that space isn't space without unfilled vessels. You explain how the pipes are not the actual substance of the village's construction — it's the air that the tubes go through. *Ignore the pipes*, you *say. The real plumbing is the space in-between*. This is the true disposal system. This was the way the universe is flushed & refilled.

LUIS LOPEZ-MALDONADO

BODIES LIKE *PAN DULCE*

black & beige chairs
hugged our black & brown
skins, smiles galore
      smiles galore
            smiles galore
limp cocks full grown

& you were mine
& I was yours
& heat rose like dough

LUIS LOPEZ-MALDONADO

FROM THE CITY OF SIRENS AND *SALSA*

Sweat drips
Drips into bellybutton and crotch
Forehead glistens like glitter
It's my last week
In Washington Heights
Where men like my father gather
On corners to play *domino*
To play *salsa y bachata*
The kids cooling off
Infront of broken firehydrants
Dipping hands feet faces in bursting water
Adults too
Gallons spilling onto scorching pavement
And teens smoking pot
With nothing better to do, thick thighs glistening under sun,

Sirens in the distance
Put me to sleep

Red and blue flashing at one in the morning
Lovebirds laughing loudly infront
Of apartment buildings
The local bars open seven days a week
And I sleep
Through the city's hustle and bustle
Smiling at broken elevators
And stray
Cats, thinking:
Como me encanta este lugar
And the Dominican moon
Shines above these New Yorkers
Their smiles spilling
Through and through
My mancave pulsing pulsing

legs spread open, waiting for you.

DOROTHY CHAN

ODE TO NURSES, LOVE HOTELS, AND MARILYNS ON THE COVERS OF *PLAYBOY*

I see two nurses kissing at the gay club,
their latex dresses and Florence Nightingale caps
and white heels straight out of my childhood
dreams of being like Hello Nurse
from *Animaniacs*, that blonde bombshell
sex goddess cartoon with cleavage stacked
like bookshelves and red lips even tastier
than the pizza she nibbled on in that scene
when Yakko and Wakko sing about her 160+ IQ
and multiple PhDs, but you know what
they were *really* drooling over,
leaving seven-year-old me to wonder
what place a little Asian girl has in this world
of '90s Marilyn Monroes running in slo-mo
on the beach wearing red swimsuits,
their nipples perking up on primetime,
or fair-skinned sex kittens on the covers of
Playboy, *Hustler*, and whatever men read
"for the articles," girls-next-door
with baby faces and bare bums,

while twenty-five-year-old me thinks
about getting a guy who can "do both,"
because the kissing nurses are two blond pretty
boys with just enough muscle, and oh,
how every time I'm attracted to a guy,
I think about what he'll look like in a dress,
because I refuse to be the only one with
feminine wiles, and it's funny how we're
turned on by the simplest things,
how love hotels in Japan have "Under the Sea"
themed rooms, and what woman wouldn't
want to get fucked dressed as a mermaid
and "In the Space Station," a '70s James Bond
romp in the golden sack, then of course,
the Victorian rooms and the hot tubs
surrounded by Roman pillars, and the red
bird cages for a little midnight dance,

but what if I'd rather play doctor than
nurse, or teacher than schoolgirl,
or fly you rather than ride you? Or why can't
we have a go on the carousel
in the middle of the funhouse, surrounded by
carnival mirrors, because I like you a little scared
riding that horse, wrapped in my arms.

DOROTHY CHAN

ODE TO SEXPOTS AND MY MOTHER'S RED STOCKINGS

All my mother wanted as a little girl was a pair
of red stockings, her childish version of elegance,

the way scarlet would pop against her clothes,
and I think about this when she sends me a package

of fishnets, because I like things a little sexpot,
a little *oh honey, it's not what I did, but what*

I can do to you tonight, and how my mother wanted red
so bad it gave her a fever, because she grew up

with three siblings in a closet-sized Hong Kong apartment,
my grandmother running the pajama stand downstairs,

my grandfather working in HR, bringing life-size dolls
with glass eyes from Europe and watches from Sweden,

but never anything a girl wanted, and I see this image of my mother
at fifteen at the dinner table: she and her sisters rush

through Grandfather's noodles so they can run downstairs
to the candy store before closing time, and let's face it:

my grandfather's never been the best cook, and my mother's stuffing
her face with vegetables when my father walks in—

he's twenty-nine, a friend of my grandparents and that weird age gap
between being too young to be their friends and too old

to date my mom, but I know the way she's looking at him,
the movie star of her apartment, like this could really be

something, but *boy bye*, *I need to buy my chocolates first*
before closing time, and we'll have a year to get together.

DOROTHY CHAN

ODE TO SUSHI, SASHIMI, AND THE EELS IN THE TANK

My father hates sushi,
and that's the Chinese tiger in him talking
at the rotating sushi belt restaurant
in Causeway Bay, Hong Kong,
as I grab a slab of sweet corn nigiri,
my dreams of eating corn on everything
since the day I was born, now coming true,
and Dad sticks to his grilled hamachi,
dumplings, and the sake we're chugging,
wondering why I craze over fatty tuna
belly and scallop and striped bass and sweet
shrimp, because to him, it's just hunks of raw fish
atop rice, made to look pretty,

not to taste good, but if he only understood
chewing a piece of squid forever,
or tasting the sponginess of tamago egg
just as sweet as it is yellow,
or taking a lesson from *The Three Bears*:
sashimi that's *not too thick, not too thin,*
and behold foie gras sushi,
nigiri with mango cubes—
ahhhh to all the wonders of mackerel,
the beauty of the shrimp head,
the chirashi bowl, like a garden of flowers
from Wonderland, complete
with cucumber centerpiece,
and seaweed salad that looks like mermaid's hair,

but when the unagi on rice bed comes,
I'm three again, remembering
the times we visited the wet market together,
looking at the eels in the tanks,
me hiding behind him,
my shield, my knight, the tiger that
growled at the water snakes jetting their heads
out the tanks, as I begged to leave, crying,
wanting ice cream instead of this erotica:
eels necking each other,
trying to neck me in, suck on me,

and Dad would grab my hand,
buy me a strawberry cone, a red bean cone
for him—on the walk home, a cone
in one hand, a bag of lychees and cherries
in the other, he'd stop to buy me
the stuffed gorilla with the big nostrils
I pointed at outside the toy shop window.

FATIMA-AYAN MALIKA HIRSI

DISCUSSION ON DROUGHT

1.
My breasts fresh
with stretchmarks
boast unwarranted pride.

They have no reason to be so heavy
except because they are
so heavy and full

there must be a reason.
Is being woman enough?
Am I allowed to grow

for the fuck of it become more me
like that without small mouth
to put to nipple?

This isn't a question of self-love.
Of course I am allowed
because fuck anyone

who says I'm not. What
about fact: the deepest me
wants to become

the sun for someone else.
Here I am shining
with no one to see.

Yes I see it. Yes
technically that is enough
but

doesn't soil want nothing more
than to mother
seeds?

FATIMA-AYAN MALIKA HIRSI

(A FEW) REASONS WHY

I MIGHT BE STRESSFUL TO WORK WITH

This rage is a place
they say we have no right to visit.
Be silent, still, untrembling.
Unclench fist. Remove
hard glisten from eyes and smile—
look how far you've come.

Look at all the power we have,
in control of our own destinies—
and didn't I go to college?

Aren't I so lucky
things have changed?

If my boss tells me
Look as diverse as possible
and to wrap my head in a scarf
for the presentation
it's because my skin and name
are finally in fashion—
I should embrace the tools I have
for every advantage.

At work I am told
to not be so serious.
My quiet anger is an observation
which draws comment, yet

the vigil for the boy slain
by police just 30 minutes away
is not a conversation for the office—
and when a coworker asks
if I've yet seen Beauty
and the Beast I do not say
I could not be paid to see it.

I do not speak
of the beasts walking among us,
handing out lies like candy,
showing teeth when we don't
want to eat what is offered.

FATIMA-AYAN MALIKA HIRSI

THE BLUES

1.
Blue.
Its walls are said to bring peace.
Go to your dentist or bank and see
how you are made to feel at ease
with periwinkle
cornflower
azure.

2.
When Blue makes music
it is not of peace—
Black snake crawling in my room, feelings of
falling
walking shoes clean off feet

3.
This is called balance.

4.
Blind Lemon Jefferson bought gin
in Deep Ellum
where once was Elm.
Names change according to who speaks.
Lead Belly left space between his but
the world had its way, made it all one word.

5.
When my father says my name it is music.
The world refuses to try, does not care for tongues
to make new shape, adds stress to the wrong place
and says it is strange, exotic.
But where are you really from?
America does not believe she birthed me,
continuously renames me something more palatable,
less percussion beneath full moon,
less blues—

6.
They say it is the most guttural, real
music.
The blues was the first time we were allowed
to show pain: call it entertainment
and let it move you.
Call it
Maltese Cat, Happy New Year, Oil Well, Empty
House, Dynamite, Eagle Eyes.
Sing it until the good Lord brings daylight
and make Lord a woman
and give her skin like cinnamon
instead of milk
for once—
feel your chemistry change.

7.
And the Lorde rejects the master's tools,
says taking down that Big House requires new
models of thinking. *When the tools of racist patriarchy*
are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy
see how water stands
still—
Mammy brought back time and again,
Strange Fruit in new forms
so that there is no current,
just the illusion of waves,
just the illusion of change,
just the lie
that the blues are dead.

ROBERTO CARLOS GARCIA

DRIVE

I'm listening to Vampire Weekend
on my drive home, & I wouldn't know
what a Vampire Weekend is except
that my daughter made me a playlist
for my fortieth birthday; & I'm grateful
we listen to so much music together,
because I can't stop dancing to this track,
track three, & I'm maybe speeding a little
thinking of how fast the years pass & come
up on you at the same time; & then I see
the biggest blackest raven you'd ever want
to see, pecking the red pulpy roadkill
of some poor beast too slow to swim life's
wave & there's nothing left but the strips
of its insides, & the raven's having its fill,
& isn't that the mystery? & if life isn't a road
you speed down, looking periodically
in the rearview as the houses, trees, people
& places whiz by, & if life isn't eating your
red pulpy guts at the same time as you eat
life's indigestible flesh, dancing, singing even
to a song full of sentiment, then we're doing it
wrong, I'm doing it wrong, & please tell me
what is more real than the peck–peck–peck
of devouring this life

ROBERTO CARLOS GARCIA

TRAFFIC

This poem takes place in traffic,
the traffic of bills at a set time every month,
of people, obstacles, & the self inflicted

I went to pick up my little adjunct check,
wove through the traffic of red tape & slack

On my way home I sat in traffic
Stuck under the overpass I saw a pack of men
on the sidewalk blocking people traffic,

back & forth around a cardboard box,
like mall traffic, circulating
A man rose from the box & another took his place

I checked the clock; could I beat traffic to the bank
Everyone's rubbernecking, we see knees & feet,
hiked above the cardboard box & a man squatting,

& then last week's memory of a woman sulking,
(in the same chair)
looking / scanning & now she's on the ground,
under a man who'll stand & walk off into traffic

A father crossed the street with his daughter
to circumvent the traffic made up of clots blocking

us up or laying us down in the guts of a box;
the traffic of set bills at a set time every month

or the rumble of a lack of traffic in our guts,
or the traffic of the next fix,
or just because there's too much traffic
& we want out

DANIEL BIEGELSON

NEIGHBORS (II)

Replace period with break. Plant windbreakers on the prairie. Lilting grass turned under. Replace eye for an eye. Distinguish the hall of photographs from the cemetery. Pack a basket and blanket. Eloquent green lawn. In the windowless breakroom, the hum of the innards. You could be anyone. Inquire after yourself. You are parking. Gentle with the red door. Pulled by stubborn sky. Dropping off kids at daycare. Exchange a dollar for four quarters. Even here you are someone's lover. You take it with you. All love is same love. Replace love with need. Redact need. Need. Is uneven. The need for gratitude. Is absolute. The bread baked on stone does not have time to rise. We wonder. Yesterday you were a neighbor. Replace neighbor with television. Your head gleams in the sunlight. A parade of parents rotates through the circle lot. Pollinators round a Rudbeckia's black eye. We call to each other. Exchange parents with children. We arrive today. We thought we were going home to tomorrow. Redact home. Replace my home with your home. We feel the need to pass people on to each other. Birds too and other animals. It makes more sense in language. As abstract. I want to recoil now. Don't know what to call you commonly. We see but do not see the same thing. We hear but do not hear the perpetual murmur of the wind beyond the trees.

DANIEL BIEGELSON

THE ART OF LYING NEXT TO EACH OTHER

It turns out Americans are making less
love, which make sense since even in
the imaginary privacy of our own bedrooms
we hate what we've become. There is a kind
of truth that's true whether or not you believe
in it and a kind of truth that's true because you
repeat it and one lives without you and the other
needs permission. It turns out the past is its own
country to which you can return again and again
each choral grass blade trembling, sky the color
of sky before the prairie dog enters its rut.
I want to deny you. In negative we see a positive
blue. I love you. This is how lightning strikes
without thunder. This is how you go to bed
and wake up in your neighbor's garage.
The past appears like a candle in a room
and it lights the dark on fire until we see
the GPS map out our internal geography
and a different body sways into view.
I'm still troubled by words that contain
both time and space. I can finally express
what's on the inside, s/he says. 'Everybody
must have been a spy.' It turns out you can
believe the world is flat as a basketball
court as long as you don't run a space agency.
I'm searching for a corollary. I bit my lip eyeing
my neighbor's field, but 'here there are no cows'.
Nobody but us unwilling chickens. We move
in darkness. The gaps in the wall are windows
no one has made but the wind and the rain.
I'm thinking of adding a door, which makes sense
since I'm staring at one, but what's beyond. It turns
out it's closed. The district of the mind where
the rational country persists. So to speak
of a door of light with its religious implications.
I suppose this is the allure of the narrative
of nostalgia. There is no middle way unless
one discerns to be an extremist of love. It turns

out our self-determination matters less
and less every day. It's a paradox. I'm interested in
the way we can turn anything into something
else and back again before night falls with its swell
of unintended opal and finally we're stuck standing
somewhere naked and in awe of each other.

SALLY BURNETTE

VIEW. MAGIC MOUNTAIN, VALENCIA, CALIFORNIA

Joe Deal, 1977

what you can't readily see:
a man in a white shirt on the right
underneath the roller coaster's main drop
facing away from the camera
fucking someone wearing
a barbie head ball gag

SALLY BURNETTE

WE'RE REALLY HAPPY. OUR KIDS ARE HEALTHY, WE EAT GOOD FOOD AND WE HAVE A REALLY NICE HOME.

Bill Owens, 1972

i meant to say *cats* not *kids*
we only have the one
kid i mean we have twenty
cats & they're all in great shape
i worry about the kid though
he always makes this fist
& only eats creamed corn
he's quiet never cries or blinks
it's honestly unsettling but
look at those eyes it's not so bad
i guess would you like a grape
i'm just kidding these are fake
but don't they look so real
don't you want to feel them
in your mouth don't you want to
taste the dust sometimes i stand
at that window facing the field
of electric pylons & pretend
i'm in some kind of sci-fi movie

i hear ice clinking
feel the sweat from jim's
old fashioned glass soaking
skin through my sweater
i hold my breath & brace myself
& one of the cats starts hacking
& he tells me clean the puke
before it stains the carpet & i do
the kid watches from the counter
never cries did i tell you that already
we're so lucky
really happy

ALAN CHAZARO

PSYCHOANALYSIS OF A PIÑATA

The fault line between me runs north
from south, a zag

splitting my skull and bursting
my edges. These ribs are ridges
rubbing dangerous—

friction
to make worlds

shake with color.

There is movement
within me,

earthquakes
as my therapy. I make sweetness
out of dark, make fire

out of teeth,
my shape

an ash-bound phoenix. Tonight

I live to be undone—

DIANNELY ANTIGUA

PORTRAIT OF EL JEFE

after Robin Coste Lewis

You were supposed to be only a photograph
on a wall. You were supposed to stay

in the frame until someone called your name, *El Jefe*,
until someone wrote the date

en La Era de Trujillo, summoned you
from a textbook or grave, chiseled out the bullets in your chest.

You are not art.
You reigned for 31 years, your face

in every living room above the mantle,
or watching families eat dinner, their faces

in bowls of rice. They didn't meet your eyes
as they chewed, throats

already bruised from the inside out.
To say history is to name the flavor

of rust, the sound of *perejil*
on a Haitian tongue, the border

between teeth and tip.
I wasn't born.

I was somewhere in my mother,
her 7-year-old body, my egg-face

hidden in the inner folds of skin. I was somewhere
in her hand, when she stitched together

a hole in the white tablecloth,
my grandmother's back turned to your face.

I was somewhere in a finger prick,
when my mother rested the needle

on your wooden frame, thread
landing in air. I was her mouth, when she sucked

the blood, a tang of oatmeal and iron.
History was that she liked the taste, savor of a fat

hand. History was my grandmother,
when she saw the needle left behind. History

was the slap on my mother's thigh. I was not
her tears when she heard you were killed.

I was not the bandaged
finger she used to wipe her eyes. I was not

the ground that refused your blood,
soil swallowing ipecac to vomit you out.

KATE MILLAR

KIMBERLY

Two days into backpacking across Southeast Asia, Boyfriend Unit was clubbed over the head by a thief on a motorbike. When he came to, his wallet was gone. Two days after that, we registered for a tour package called *Pearls of the East: Cambodia by Bus.*

"It's for your protection," Boyfriend Unit said, rubbing the welt on his head as evidence. I nodded. We both knew this wasn't the real reason. But if I kept my eyes on the glossy itinerary brochure in my hand, I wouldn't have to make eye contact and acknowledge that we both knew this.

"It's safer this way," I agreed.

"It'll take all the stress out of planning," Boyfriend Unit continued. "It's not exactly what we imagined, but now we'll have more time to focus on each other. That's what this trip is all about, right?"

"Exactly," I affirmed again. Maybe that's what love was – finding someone equally willing to go along with the lies you tell yourself.

The irony was that our families had offered to buy us one of those all-inclusive deals as a wedding present. We had politely said no, that it wasn't quite what we had in mind. "Something a little more off the beaten track," we had told them. As our tour guide herded us back onto our bus, neither of us were willing admit the disappointment and – dare I say – *relief* at how orderly things had ended up.

"Bye-bye! See you when I'm looking at your face!" called out the souvenir shop owner as we pulled out of the parking lot.

Our tour bus was by far the sleekest, most modern vehicle on the road. One of those noiseless oversized affairs. "Hybrid bus," observed Boyfriend Unit with a nod. This put him in a good mood since he liked saving the environment. I stared out the window, watching the dilapidated local buses and tuk-tuks painted a motley palette of vibrants. They were altogether less concerned with driving at the slow and sensible speed of our driver, swerving around us along the potholed dirt roads in ecstatic

clatter until they were no more than dust smudging at the horizon.

The couple in front of us turned around to strike up a conversation. I forgot their names the moment I heard them, so Tamera America and Bland Mark were the names I assigned them in my mind. They both shouted out cries of elation upon discovering that Boyfriend Unit and I were on our honeymoon, as if we were all victors of an exceptionally rare and profound accomplishment. Tamera America asked to see my ring, which didn't exist because I never wore jewelry. She gave me an odd look and I could tell I had let her down in some unspoken code of sisterhood. She quickly lost interest in talking to me.

"So what was up with that temple thing?" Bland Mark asked with a conspiratorial nudge to Boyfriend Unit, as if the two guys were in on a joke together. He wore dad sneakers and had a haircut that reminded me of bank tellers. "I mean, it's supposed to be beer o'clock at the pool, not a friggin' field trip."

Boyfriend Unit squeezed my hand – our silent agreement to incorporate "beer o'clock" into as many conversations as possible for the rest of the trip.

They raved about our resort, Tamera America and Bland Mark did. A good place to make a baby or two, they cajoled with a wink. I turned my attention back to the window.

Cambodian roads were encoded with the same route-markers over and over again in varying sequence: rice paddy, lean-to hut, palm trees, palm trees, palm trees, lean-to hut. We drove through a village, indistinguishable from the last village save for a group of children playing in a pile of garbage along the roadside. The children were naked and happy. Everyone on that side of the bus reached for their phones and began snapping photos.

"That's what this country is all about," said one elderly woman wistfully, "the people."

Boyfriend Unit screwed his mouth up into a little ball, which was what he did whenever he disagreed about something. I remember him doing that years ago, when we were just co-workers. I had told him that the colour of his eyes was dishwater gray, but not in a gross way. His mouth had made that little crumple of dissatisfaction. We became friends after that.

He had been dating Kimberly at the time, which always made me think of the Patti Smith song. The line about little sisters and falling skies. I would sing it in my head whenever she was brought up in conversation. Just that one line over and over. I never met Kimberly in person but had thought about her enough to make a meeting seem irrelevant. My version of Kimberly wore oversized men's blazers and ran into a different best friend wherever she went. Her mouth was an insinuating mouth with lips that curled to smile at a secret for every occasion. She danced without reservation at house parties. She reverberated with a quiet,

scrunched-up kind of wildness that made everyone around her broken with longing. I was convinced that's who Kimberly was. I didn't want to meet her. I wasn't sure what scared me more – the prospect that she wouldn't live up to my idea of her, or having her live up to it to a devastating degree.

When Boyfriend Unit announced to me at a coworker's party that he and Kimberly had broken up, I didn't know what to say.

And when he kissed me, as if the Kimberly Break-up Announcement was all an orchestrated preface leading up to that moment – I was dumbfounded.

It was the night Boyfriend Unit became Boyfriend Unit.

I dated Boyfriend Unit for a year and a half. Eight days ago I married him. I supposed that meant Boyfriend Unit wasn't Boyfriend Unit anymore. But Husband Unit didn't have nearly the same panache.

The bus excreted us out into another parking lot and, following our guide, we skirted a pathway through a patch of dull arid brush and entered a system of caves on the edge of a jungle. As we descended, there grew a cool mineral tang to the air. The narrow stone corridor opened into an immense yawning cavern – cliffs above us, and a turquoise pool below. The rock of the cave was golden and shafts of sunlight sieved downward in perfect parallel with misting falls and tumbled yellow vines. The formations were all backlit with spotlights in shades of green, amber, and cyan. Boyfriend Unit said it felt like being on a theme park ride. But to me, the ribbons of rock were more like cascading curtains at an opera house. Boyfriend Unit liked this.

Tamera America wanted a picture of the four of us standing at the precipice of the cliff. We put our arms around each other awkwardly.

"The trip of a lifetime," Bland Mark said through the teeth of his smile.

The tour guide told us that if we were wearing our bathing suits, we could jump down into the pool. Except, he called it a water well. I immediately imagined the cave as a black gouged-out eye socket, the pool below as tears and crusting pus and infection. Welling up.

We jumped, one by one. Boyfriend Unit let out a whoop, wild-west style. Even Tamera America jumped, plugging her nose the whole way down. I went next, embarrassed to find my reflexes scrambling wildly in the air, pawing for something where there was nothing. I hit the pool. The water was unexpectedly warm.

At the bottom, Boyfriend Unit and I swam to a small pocket away from the others. For a moment, I could pretend it was

just the two of us, backpacking unbeaten paths the way we had intended. I wrapped my arms and legs around him and murmured in his ear how much I wished we were alone so we could fuck. We kissed and then the others noticed and made cooing noises because we were newlyweds. I was self-conscious of our audience, not knowing if I should let go of Boyfriend Unit or stay straddled.

Everyone decided to jump a second time.

"Go ahead, I'm going to stay in the water," I told Boyfriend Unit.

"You sure?" he asked.

"Mm hm."

Boyfriend Unit splashed me and crawled out of the pool along with Tamera America and Bland Mark. They disappeared behind the rock face, climbing back to the top. Boyfriend Unit was always more boisterous about those kind of things than I was, but seeing Tamera America and Bland Mark eager to jump again was a surprise. I felt suddenly lame in comparison, treading water at the bottom alone.

The same dread washed over me that had been happening every time I was alone since the trip began. There was movement in the pool beside me and I felt a coldness in my stomach. I swam to the edge and gripped the wet rock face, knowing what came next. And just as I'd expected, Kimberly appeared, treading water next to me.

Kimberly – she had been with me in quiet moments on the hotel beach, in the resort buffet queue, in the honeymoon suite when Boyfriend Unit was showering in the next room. I didn't understand why. Boyfriend Unit never mentioned her anymore.

The swimmer version of Kimberly had long dark hair that stuck in wet tangled strands to her neck. Black string bikini, tattoos. Legs covered in scrapes – each one a relic of some past adventure. She was falling apart to an annoyingly exquisite degree. I realized that I resented her – Kimberly, like a child who had died, and I, the one who had outgrown her simply by surviving. My marriage with Boyfriend Unit would succeed or perhaps not succeed, but Kimberly got to stay the same age, beautifully suspended in memory, a star, a ghost of a person. An unbeaten path.

I could feel Kimberly's manic energy electric in the water. She gently took my hand. "Like sisters," I thought. Kimberly told me with her eyes that I needed to get out of there. I knew she said this because sisters could read each other's minds. I didn't actually have a sister, but I was pretty sure this was one of the things sisters could do.

We drifted to a stone ledge where the backlights had gone magenta. Kimberly took the small of my back. The tiny hairs on

my skin were erect under her fingers. She kissed me, and her mouth was warm and tart like blackberries in the sun. Her tongue, metallic. Infinite minerals were feeding into my tongue from hers.

I pulled away, struck with a jolt of nausea. My stomach was its own well. A gulch of black bile.

Back in college, I began sneaking out of parties without saying goodbye. It wasn't as if I disliked parties. I guess I just had a limited threshold for them. I had fun until I wasn't having fun anymore. And the moment it wasn't fun anymore, it became incredibly important for me to leave instantly. Sometimes, I would run all the way home.

Boyfriend Unit thought this was crazy when I told him.

"I love you but sometimes you make no sense at all," he had told me.

Boyfriend Unit, Tamera America and Bland Mark were still out of sight, climbing up behind the cavern walls. I looked back to see if Kimberly thought I was crazy too, but she was gone.

I got out of the water and toweled off. At the entrance to the cave I retrieved my sundress, sandals and daypack from metal storage lockers bolted ludicrously into the cave walls. I slipped out the way we came in. I didn't tell anyone.

A wall of deafening heat hit me as I crossed the parking lot. I passed the bus, the gift shops, and a noodle cart. "*Hellomadamwhereyoufrombuysomething,*" the vendors called out to me in one long flat breath.

The light was a late afternoon ochre. The air smelled of diesel, cinders, and sunbaked earth. Beyond the parking lot lay a mangled expanse of jungle – endless but for a clay brown path funneling deep into the foliage. I checked my daypack – phone, wallet, an unused Khmer phrasebook, and a half-eaten bag of banana chips.

I began walking, I must have continued fifteen minutes or longer. The jungle path eventually opened out onto a clearing, similar to so many I had seen from the noiseless hybrid bus. All about me, a dry red earth so fine it was almost sand, and long brown grasses parched from the sunlight. I kept along the path into the sunlight. The trail led to a large ornate gate, its stone broken and falling apart. Though in ruin, the gate would still command the attention of anyone who came upon it. And yet, the grand villa to which it must have once led was nowhere in sight. Where an estate would have stood, there was nothing more than bramble, yellowed fronds, and more dry red earth. Or maybe it was the gate that was lost, not the villa, wandered off into parts unknown. I didn't know whether to feel sad about it or not.

There was movement in the wilderness behind the gate. I steeled myself for Kimberly.

But it wasn't Kimberly.

A Khmer woman moved into the middle of the path. Dressed in woven indigo resplendence and adorned with hoops and beads and flowers, she moved with simplicity, as elegantly as a shoot of bamboo. She should have been beheld and adored by thousands. But she wasn't. She was as solitary as me. I stopped moving, not knowing where to look.

As a matter of deference, I kept my eyes downcast, trained on my chest as if to catch my heart thumping. I slipped off the path to pass around her. The Khmer woman also stepped off the path, blocking my way. I could feel her eyes boring into me, even without looking at her. I moved to the other side. She blocked me again.

From the folds of her skirt, I caught sight of a long piece of lumber that she was holding. Brandishing. Was I imagining it?

She yanked my left arm. Her hand was cold. Bony. Strong. She swung with the lumber and there was a bludgeoning thwomp across the back of my head. I fell to my knees and touched the back of my head. A sticky crust surrounded warm wetness.

The woman grabbed me again. Her breath was rank, like mothballs and tooth decay. For all the leanness of her face – the gaunt eye sockets and hollowed-out cheeks – her eyes were surprisingly soft and malleable, and I realized that she was younger than I had first thought. Her ears were pierced and I found myself wondering who had pierced them for her. Standing in front of me, holding the ragged plank, she looked scared.

We were both scared.

There was movement in the brush again. The Khmer woman looked at me for another second longer with cold, careless indifference. Bizarrely, I felt hurt that she didn't acknowledge the way we were connected, standing together in a clearing in the jungle. It was probably a stupid thing to feel hurt about.

And then she was gone.

I touched my head again, but couldn't find the sticky wetness again. A twig snapped. Boyfriend Unit.

"HI?" he said. The most obvious question in the world. "Hi," I said.

He was with one of the shop vendors. I recognized her because she was wearing a faded Pink Floyd t-shirt.

"This is Chenda, she helped me find you when I realized you were gone," Boyfriend Unit explained, with an unmistakable whiff of accusation.

"You okay?" Chenda asked, "your husband very worried." "I'm fine," I said.

"It's been half an hour, where were you?" Boyfriend Unit asked. His eyes had an edge to them, and I could tell he was even angrier than would let on, because Chenda was with us.

"I just went down the path to look for a place to pee."

Boyfriend Unit's arm flew back behind him, a berserk marionette. "There's restrooms in the parking lot. We used them earlier."

"Yeah, I know," I replied feebly.

He didn't wait for further explanation, which was for the best because I had none. He simply rubbed his brow, which was what he did when he was annoyed, and he sighed.

"Where you from?" asked Chenda. "We're from Canada."

Chenda nodded. "The capital of Canada is Ottawa. They speak English and French.

They use the dollar and they eat maple syrup."

Boyfriend Unit nodded back, mirroring Chenda. "That is all accurate information."

Chenda nodded again. "You come back to my store. Good price." "Sounds like a plan, Chenda."

I took Boyfriend Unit's arm, relieved that he didn't immediately jerk it away. "Let's just sit here. Five more minutes."

He rubbed his brow again. "I think everyone's eating noodles so I guess we're not keeping anyone waiting."

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter. Five more minutes." Boyfriend Unit softened. "Okay," he said.

We found a mound of grass to sit on. The clearing, which I had thought so silent, was actually full of sound. We listened to the dried palm fronds as they roused in the breeze, and to the whir and tick of beetles in the tall grasses. Boyfriend Unit wordlessly handed me his bottle of water and I realized that I was thirsty. I knew I was forgiven, or, at any rate, that I was understood.

He sighed. "It must be getting close to beer o'clock." He gestured to stand. "Should we?"

"Yes. Let's go."

I took my husband's hand. We started walking.

The Khmer woman, Kimberly, and me.

NAOMI WASHER

TENSION AND RELEASE:

DIFFUSING PRESSURE POINTS

IN THE ABNORMAL ADOLESCENT

The hospital: *Here are some pictures of normal kids like you with scoliosis: doing gymnastics, playing sports. You can't even tell! We can fit you in a brace right now, today. Or you can make an appointment for a surgery.*
My mother: *I think we need to think about it.*

§

My spine did not cause me pain. My body never felt wrong until they said it was. The brace forced me inwards, yet pushed me out of my self: an inanimate body forced upon my failed one. Inside it, I could not feel a thing. At twelve, I lay on my back as two friends knelt over me, holding a rubber ball. They wanted to know what I would feel if an object hit the plaster. They dropped the ball. We laughed. I felt nothing.

§

The chiropractor, neurologist, physical therapist, nutritionist: *Sleep on a flat board. Lie on your right side over a plaster block while watching TV—this will elongate the S curve. Wear the brace to ballet class. Only remove it for one hour each day. Take these five supplements. Try to keep your shoulders in proper alignment. Notice how your eyes drift off to one side. No more dairy—from now on, only soy cheese.*

§

Adolescent Idiopathic Scoliosis has no known cause or preventative measure. It is comparable to balding. Once your genes tell you that you are going to be bald, you have no choice but to wait for the time it happens in order to control it. Likewise, in scoliosis, your genes are in control. You have no escape if your genetic construction tells you so.

There are thirty-three living vertebrae in the spinal column—seven cervical, twelve thoracic, five or six lumbar, five sacrum, and three secrets. Bones in the body hold roughly fifteen percent of a person's body weight: a body that weighed one hundred pounds would be harboring fifteen pounds of secrets.

There is no cure for scoliosis. There are forms of physical therapy available as treatment, such as electrical muscle stimulation, in which small pads are attached to the patient's back. These pads have connecting wires that hook up to a machine on which the therapist will choose a level of pressure and a length of time. The adolescent, lying face down, will feel the back muscles clench for as many seconds as the therapist chooses to hold.

The procedure is designed to strengthen back muscles, in hopes that the body will learn to align on its own, but the patient may feel as if the doctor is doing their best to rid the body of an evil spirit.

The medical books: *Scoliosis is an abnormal curve in the spine.*
The chiropractor: *There is no reason to not feel normal.*

§

I learned how to put on socks. They were the final challenge each morning, after buckling the brace and molding clothing on top of it. I became stiff. My torso could not bend over in a comfortable curve to slip socks onto pointed toes. Everything took twice as long. I held socks by the heel and heavily pulled each one over the bottom of my foot. Outside the brace, the entire process of putting on socks takes all of three seconds and zero seconds of planning. It is different every time, but always involves a contraction of the pelvis, and maybe a little

jumping on one foot. Inside this device, I stood upright, praising my ballet balance, and drew my foot slowly upwards from the floor, my ankle sicled in an angle possible for my hands to solidly wrap the cloth around the skin.

§

Him: *It's not that I feel inhibited. It's just that you don't seem fully there.*

§

Taking off the brace at any time was a breach of contract. Anything that could not be done inside it should not be done at all: dancing, eating cheese, having sex.

At nineteen I tried out meditation, searching for my spirit animal. On my back in a field, I found it was a bobcat. Eyes closed, grass prickly beneath my arms, legs and neck. In my imagined forest, in my woods that only exist for me, a bobcat appeared from behind a bush. It did not speak, but it told me plainly: *keep your silence and secrets.*

That was autumn, and by spring I should have known better. On my back on a green hill, in not-quite spring, I should have known.

No one's around, he said. *Let me hear you*, he said. But I didn't speak.

§

A shift occurs after your first adolescent relationships, when the sickening bundle of insincere endearment becomes too difficult to hold. I could never hold another body for too long. When I was fifteen my boyfriend was older; he wanted to lie together in the cool dimness of his basement with our clothes off, feeling the places our skin would touch and form together. Another living body forced upon my own. I could never hold another body for too long.

§

The chiropractor always asked me to hold my breath when he took the x-ray. I never knew if this was a necessary part of the procedure or not. I would take off my necklace, belt, and any other metal on my body. I would press my back against the x-ray wall as he stepped into the next room to flip the switch.

Hold your breath, he'd say. Then we'd wait.

Sometimes, I didn't hold my breath. I let the spine escape through my mouth.

TAMI ANDERSON

YOU WILL REMEMBER THIS

The first time you hear the word "tampon," you will be just barely six years old. Your mother will hold up a thick white stick with cotton oozing out of the top, then swoop her hand down to disappear between her legs as she relaxes against the porcelain, like she is sitting at a table in a four star restaurant instead of on a toilet seat. Your mother does not believe in closed doors.

Years later as you tear at the paper wrapping with Tampax stamped across it in a benign shade of blue, you will check the lock on the bathroom door no less than five times before you penetrate yourself with the cold plastic tip. For extra insurance you will bring in the chair from your new desk set, which was purchased to help improve your study habits, and jam it under the brass doorknob until a small dent is created in the chair's upper slat. Later you will fill it in with the white-out you find in the junk drawer in the kitchen, under the appointment card confirming the visit your mother had scheduled with Dr. Walsh for the previous Thursday.

When your mother tells you that she is sick it will be over hamburgers at the local Denny's. In the same breath she will ask you to please make a better effort to get along with your stepfather. You will study the dab of ketchup at the corner of her mouth and wonder if she understands what getting along really means. After an uncomfortable silence, in which she increases the intensity of her gaze, until it feels like your eyes are inches instead of feet apart, you will look away first, dip your napkin into your water glass, reach across the table and assure her that you will try.

The week your mother begins chemotherapy, well meaning friends and co-workers will fill your refrigerator and pantry with dozens of casseroles and home baked desserts that your mother will delicately pick at while they smile and nod vigorously. After they are gone you will follow your mother into the bathroom and hold her hair back until her retching yields nothing but a faint echo. When

the neighbor with the kind eyes and grown children who never visit knocks on your door and suggests that you might want to exercise her quarter horse a couple of days a week, you will drop your chin to your chest and select one of the apple pies lined up neatly on the kitchen counter, holding it out toward her until she slides her palms under the warped tin and removes its weight from your hands.

Over dinner one night your stepfather will inform you that too much horseback riding can make a girl appear to have lost her virginity. Bits of casserole will leak out the sides of his mouth as he intones words like "hymen," and "vagina" and "friction." When he suggests you light the candles to make the table more festive, you will announce that you have an Algebra test in the morning and toss your napkin onto your untouched plate. Behind the closed door of your room you will promise yourself that his voice, his words, his wretched, filthy mouth, will not taint what you and the horse share. A month will pass before you appear back at your neighbor's front door, self consciously scratching the toe of your riding boot against your calf. As you squeeze your thighs against the horse's muscular flanks you will imagine the vitality buzzing beneath his coat is seeping directly into your skin.

Your stepfather will disappear around the same time that your mother's left breast does. On her nightstand she'll find an envelope, which contains a slip of yellow paper with six sentences printed out in neat, block letters. In the note he will remind her that although he appreciates how awful this must be for her, he hopes she will consider what it has been like for him. His boss has commented negatively on his work performance more than once. The secretaries cannot look at him without sighing and biting their lips. If he had understood what "in sickness" really meant he would never have agreed to it, nor expected her to. In a way he is thankful. She has helped him to discover that he is not the marrying kind. Your mother will refuse to leave her room for three full days and cry until her eyes swell into tiny slits. You will walk from the shower to your bedroom with just a towel on and begin sleeping with the door open.

The first time your mother says the word "euthanasia," it will make you picture a new wave band with stiffly coifed hair, like the one you went to see with the quiet guy from your history class, his arms wrapped tightly around your waist, your head cradled against his shoulder, feeling warm, almost feverish, even though the air was cool that night and you'd forgotten to bring a sweater. While she explains what it means, your mind will fight to hold onto your definition as you stare at her cracked, unadorned lips and discreetly wipe off your frosty pink lipstick with the back of your hand.

In college you will hear the word again, this time at a comedy club. The improv group performing that night will challenge the audience to give them a word, any word, and they'll create an original song on the fly. A guy you recognize from your Abnormal Psych class will shout "euthanasia" all the way from the back of the room. His voice is of such a pitch and resonance that it will be heard above the shouts of "horse shit," and "garden tools," and "tits." When the leader of the group actually chooses your classmate's suggestion, you will yank your fingers from the grip of the boy sitting beside you and dig your nails into the bare skin beneath the hem of your skirt. The emcee's snapping fingers will set the rhythm and the other cast members will join in as they trade riffs back and forth, pairing "get a free ride" with "assisted suicide," and "don't check out alone" with "you can do it in your home." Your date will laugh so hard that orange liquid will start running out of his nose and you will push your own untouched Screwdriver as far away from you as the scratched round table will allow.

When you break curfew for the first time your mother will surprise you with her equanimity. You're sixteen, she'll say, shrugging her shoulders, once broad and muscled from hours of swimming, now delicate as a ballerina's. Later she will come into your bedroom and sit on your daisy print comforter, patting the space next to her until you get up from your desk and join her. She will sandwich one of your hands between her own and pull it to her lap. The silk of her robe will feel cool against your skin. We're going to go somewhere next week, just you and me, she'll tell you and her eyes will light up like your friend Kathy's did when she showed you the new leather jacket her boyfriend had bought her. Your belly will relax against the waistband of your jeans as you envision a day in downtown L.A., visiting the art museum and having lunch in the room that spins slowly atop the Holiday Inn.

We're going to see Dr. Stein, she'll announce, and then go on to wax eloquent about the thrill of your first visit to the gynecologist, as if she is taking you to a matinée showing of a Broadway play instead of delivering you to a stark white room where you will slide your bare feet into cold metal stirrups, which are nothing like the one's that hang against the glossy brown flanks of your horse, and a man with silver hair and a neatly trimmed mustache will place his face inches from an area of your body you have never even seen and poke at you with his stubby, gloved fingers as a nurse with a bored expression watches from the corner of the room.

The important thing is to relax, your mother will tell you, as the nurse reads your name from a clipboard and you put down last December's issue of Seventeen Magazine. You will follow her down the brightly lit hall to the door at

the very end and hope that you drank enough Dr. Pepper at lunch to fill the specimen cup she tosses at you over her left shoulder.

When you try telling your mother to relax after she asks you to go to the pharmacy again for her, the third time in as many days, she'll shout at you to shut up then throw a pillow that lands a few inches from your feet. You'll know that if it had hit its mark the worst damage it would have done is messing up your bangs. Your eyes will well up anyway. She'll remind you that no kid has the freedom, the trust that she's given you at seventeen. You'll cross the room and pluck the car keys from her open palm, avoiding making contact with her skin.

The next morning, freedom will feel like this: a pounding at the back of your head; a tender rawness where your thighs meet; a swelling at your nipples and lips. Your memory will be foggy but certain moments will begin to stand out: the second glass of vodka that made you feel warm and liquid, like you were kissing under water; a thicker, hoarse version of his voice suggesting that you undress; your foot knocking your mother's prescription bottle under the front seat of the car. You'll remember a "stop," but you won't be sure if it was just a thought or a request actually spoken aloud. Squinting at the rumpled piles of clothes and half-finished essays that litter your bedroom floor, it will seem a little late to ask.

Rolling from your bed, you will take the prescription bottle from your backpack, push a pair of sunglasses onto your nose, and cross the hall from your room to your mother's. She will not ask you where you were the previous night and you will no longer expect her to. When you hand her the pills, she will suggest you go back to Dr. Stein so you can get fitted for protection. When it happens you won't know, you'll announce in a flat voice, watching her twist her grip back and forth on the bottle's childproof cap. You'll take off your sunglasses and stare at her boldly, daring her to smell him on you, to sense the new carnal knowledge that must be stamped into the tracks of mascara smeared under your eyes and across your cheeks. Oh I plan to be around long enough for that, she'll respond dryly as you lift the bottle from her hands and release the lid with a pop.

When your mother says I'm ready, you will ask her what she means, buying time by the seconds now. She will sigh and level her eyes at you until you approach the bed, fingers loosely intertwined in front of your crotch. She will have to pat the mattress several times before you finally sit down. The urge to run will pound through your legs so strongly you'll fear any movement at all will trigger flight. Later in the kitchen, you'll pretend that what you're mixing into the glass of ice

tea for your mother is only extra sugar. You'll tap the spoon against one beveled side and watch as the tiny white flecks swirl around in the amber liquid. You'll remember the Bambi snow globe you got at Disneyland when you were five and you'll feel a sudden urge to pull it down from the shelf at the top of the hall closet and smash it against the black and white tile floor.

As the priest extols your mother's virtues to a packed chapel you will stare at the black crepe fabric beneath your pale hands and for a moment picture it as thick orange canvas, your bracelet and watch as handcuffs, shackles instead of leather hugging the backs of your heels. His gaze will come to rest on you and for a few frantic seconds you will not be able to discern if his expression is meant to convey compassion or condemnation. Your great aunt from Minneapolis, who you only met once when you were six months old, will turn her shining eyes toward you and place her withered hand on top of your head as if offering a blessing.

At the wake this touching will continue, relative strangers placing their hands on your hair, your cheeks, your back, squeezing your fingers between theirs, before adding some perishable item to the growing collection on your kitchen counters. When you are finally alone you will stare at the tin-foiled, saran wrapped, Pyrexed mound, then grab a stale package of Corn Flakes and fall asleep on the couch, clutching the box like a lover.

When you are twenty-three you will find a good man entirely by accident and at twenty-eight he will marry you. His family will treat you as if you were their own daughter and for a while you will pretend that you are. You will go skiing in Aspen, learn to scuba dive in the Cayman Islands and fill photo albums with snapshots of you and your husband's family: on sparkling beaches with tanned arms linked, in front of a grove of white dusted firs, arms and legs spread wide in an assembly line of snow angels. The only photos you will ever look at will be these: a teenage version of your mother on a sail boat, head thrown back in laughter, chestnut curls tossed by the wind; you and your mother sitting together on Santa's lap the week after you turned four, the three of your bodies blending into a plush red and white ball, her arms wrapped round you tight.

At thirty-four, when you have knee surgery you will ask your doctor on three separate occasions if they can just use a local anesthesia. You have a high tolerance for pain, you will tell him. He will smile at the irrelevancy of your statement then pat the back of your hand and direct you to get undressed. When the anesthesiologist looms over you, places the black mask over your nose and

mouth and tells you to start counting backward, you will hear your mother's voice whisper to you to relax and it will comfort and chill you at the same time. Although your knee will feel like the insides have been dug out with a rusty spoon you will refuse all post-operative drugs. The nurse will widen her eyes in a mix of admiration and pity and the doctor will call the next day, and the next, to ask if you are sure. You will tell him yes in a calm voice that has taken most of the day to perfect, then hang up and bite down hard on the corner of your pillow until you pass out from exhaustion.

In the tenth year of your marriage, you will confound your husband with the increasing amount of time you need to spend alone, your brooding silences and tightly wrapped emotions. Don't you ever cry? he'll ask you after you've miscarried for the third time. You will ponder the randomness of motherhood, and it will make your own childhood seem even less probable and more unjust. Your husband will paint the yellow room white again, order custom bookcases and take you on expensive vacations. You will use the video camera he bought the first time you told him you were late to film him in front of the Eiffel Tower, rowing a gondola, and aiming his binoculars at a herd of elephants. Friends paying for piano lessons and saving for college funds will go on about how they envy you. You and your husband will smile brightly in response, always taking particular care that your eyes don't meet.

When you are forty-five you will resort to trying to ingest happiness, using varying combinations of psychotropic drugs that TV ads promise will make you enjoy dinner out again, smile at your husband and sleep peacefully for more than three hour stretches. Your doctor will note the deep creases under each of your eyes, tapping his pencil against his teeth, then drop brochures into your lap filled with pictures of women with brunette chignons and sharp cheekbones wrapped in the arms of men with salt and pepper hair, huddled under a blanket on the beach or twirling on a lacquered dance floor. As you wait for the nurse to bring you the prescription you will carefully blacken every other tooth of the perky blonde actress smiling up at you from the cover of the Ladies Home Journal.

The pharmacist will take his time going over the instructions in raspy, hushed tones as he cautions you to avoid alcohol, driving and operating heavy machinery. Your mouth will trace the words almost before he speaks them, both of your heads bowed over the counter as if in prayer. When he asks you to sign your name on the clipboard next to the sticker he has peeled from the vial, your eyes will meet for an instant and you will wait to hear him speak your name, a tremor of recognition bringing his voice to full volume. He'll offer a pen instead,

a blue Bic with teeth marks in the cap. When you don't take it, he will place it right next to your fingers as if to help you understand the purpose. Scratching out your signature, you'll exchange the pen for a small white bag, the pharmacist's polite, good night m'am, ringing in your ears like a curse. The pills are longer than your thumbnail and half as wide, a cluster of bright neon pink. Later that night you will marvel at how easily they go down as you stare at the ceiling and wait for the dawn light to paint your bedroom walls the color of buttermilk.

Menopause will find you cleaning out the cabinet under your bathroom sink, tossing out tampons and birth control pills and an old box of maxi pads your best friend bought for you after she saw a special about toxic shock syndrome on 20/20. You will slide your thumb over the word Tampax and suddenly you will want to see it in black and white, typed by your own hand.

When you press your finger down on the beige button and hear the soft whir of your computer coming to life, you will feel your heart race as each icon on the desktop is revealed. You will be a girl of six again and twelve and sixteen and eighteen. You will let each take her turn typing, telling her story in her own way, until your stomach growls and your wrists ache and your mouth is so dry you have to swallow rapidly every few moments to work up enough saliva to keep your tongue from closing off your throat. Words will gather on the screen and begin arranging themselves into fractured scenes: the hollow sound of your mother's heels echoing sharply on the polished museum floor as you both took giant steps backward and watched Monet's tiny dots of color transform into renderings of haystacks and sunsets and flower fields; twisted strands of her chestnut hair pasted to the sides of the sink, caught between the couch cushions, wrapped around your toes like Easter grass; the delicate rippling of her throat as she guzzled the glass of ice tea, like an over zealous fraternity pledge at initiation; the wind whistling in your ears, lifting your hair from your neck as the horse ran faster and faster, hooves pounding against packed dirt, feeling as if you were flying, like you were never coming back.

You will let yourself remember because you will finally realize that nothing can ever make you forget. When you fall into bed at 3:00 AM next to your husband, his rhythmic snores sounding in tandem with the slight rise and fall of his chest, your mother's voice will whisper to you again. This time you will be too sound asleep to hear her.

JEFF EWING

SNOWBLIND

"We thought you were dead," Nate says, his voice circling around inside his hood before trailing back to me.

"I've tried to kill him a hundred times," Danny says, striding past us. "Doesn't take."

It's been almost a year since I fell off their map after moving out of the house I'd rented from Danny to be close to my wife and son. Being close, it turned out, didn't help things. Becky's lawyer—Danny, as it happens—told her not to open the door to me. When I knocked, I could see her through the window shooing Stevie back to his room.

"Standard advice," Danny said. "Saves everybody pain and dollars."

The house was far too big for me: four bedrooms, a living room and a family room. I slept on the couch, when I slept at all. The one attraction was the big fireplace in the living room. I remembered it from when we were kids—the house was where Danny grew up, though he had little use for it anymore—the heat blasting out, sparks popping and leaving little craters in the rug all around us. Danny left special instructions for its use and care, enumerated on a laminated sheet of letterhead from his law office. It was the first thing I burned.

The day after the divorce was finalized, I moved out. I wandered back East for a little while, up into Canada. For now I'm staying in a trailer at the back of my cousin's pasture. No one bothers me there, and the sound of horses stomping on the hardpan in the morning or snorting as they drift off to sleep leaning against the trailer at night is comforting. Sometimes the trailer rocks with their breathing, like a ship drifting far out at sea.

One of the horses is missing an eye. He lost it a long time ago, and it's healed over now. When I touch it, he holds still and doesn't seem to mind. I can run my finger over the socket, across the indent where the eye used to be. The skin there is newer than the skin around it, like a colt's, smooth and soft as velvet.

I light a cigarette and let the three of them— Danny, Nate, and Porter—pull ahead until all I can hear is the sound of my own skis and the huff of my scarred lungs. I don't mind being alone, not like this. With the snow and the trees, this postcard I'm in the middle of. But this isn't what alone is really like.

They're waiting for me beside a frozen lake littered with clots of crusted snow. A wide bowl sweeps up above the lake, pecked with small avalanches like

animal tracks.

"That's a nice long fall," I say.

"If you're not up to it," Danny says, clacking his poles together. "We understand."

"Fair enough," I say, clearing the snow from a flat-top boulder. I lay back and tuck my pack under my head, close my eyes. Danny leaves wondering where he missed the wording—we're adults, he can't come out and call me a pussy anymore—following Nate and Porter off toward the base of the ridge, his poles jabbing through the crust with more force than necessary.

About halfway up he stops, and I can see him fishing through the pockets of his coat. He takes his pack off and digs through that, cups his hands and shouts something down to me. His voice is carried away by the wind, but I know what he's saying. I put my hand to my ear and shake my head. Hold my arms out to my sides. He pats his pockets again, kicks his pack, then puts his gloves back on and continues up the ridge.

I pick his sunglasses up from where they've fallen at the edge of the trail, break them in half and drop the pieces into the small crevasse at the base of the rock where the snow's melted back.

#

The attic door in Danny's house was easy to miss, a half-hidden folding stairway cut into the ceiling. I came across it one night while I was wandering the halls unable to sleep. It had been painted over, and took some work to get open. There wasn't much up there—an old bureau, some pieces of asbestos pipe, a rusted Christmas tree stand. Far back, where the roof angled down into a dormer, a stack of boxes was jammed between two studs.

On the top of the stack, the Fry's boot box I'd carried over from my house when we were fourteen slumped under its own weight. The maps were still in there, a dusty collection that Danny and I had assembled through high school, about all we had to show for those four years. We used to lay them out on the floor and trace our future routes with yellow highlighters, taking note of especially odd-sounding towns and calling them out across the room:

"Nacogdoches!"

"Texarkana!"

"Tucumcari!"

"Sault Ste. Marie!"

During the last half of our senior year, Danny worked construction and I took a job bussing tables at a prime rib restaurant, together saving up enough money to buy a half-crippled Dodge van. Becky sewed curtains for it, and a delinquent cousin of Danny's sold us a stereo he'd boosted from a church

warehouse. Sitting in the van with the speakers cranked, we could picture the roads rolling out ahead of us through mountains and deserts and fields of crops that moved in the wind like something alive. When Becky came with us, she'd lie on the little bed over the wheel well singing along with her eyes closed.

The maps were dried out and brittled by the heat in the attic, and caught quickly when I fed them one by one into the fire.

#

The sun glares off the parabola of snow, pure light. Part way down I can see Nate and Porter standing in the shade of a rock outcrop. Nate yells something up at Danny, who's sidestepping hesitantly down the curve of the bowl. Danny waves him off and starts across in an uncertain line, his head tilted like a dog listening for his master's voice. He initiates his turn sitting too far back, then overcorrects, digs in his edges. I can hear the ice layer underneath the veneer of powder screech, and watch as a wave of snow builds under him, scraping the slope clean, the wave churning and shuddering. He might be in his pool doing his evening laps—stroking his arms, kicking his feet—except for the boil of snow and the noise, a low roar like the earth grinding on its axis.

His leg is bruised but not broken when we free it from the cemented snow pack. He stretches it out in front of him, looks up and sighs. It's only then that I notice his eyes, puffy as overripe grapes, swollen nearly closed. Thin arcs of sclera show dull red through the slits. Fluid gleams in the corners, beginning to freeze.

"I lost my sunglasses," he says.

I feel a twinge of something, but it passes.

"Can you see anything?" I ask.

"Not much."

"I should have sent him down," Nate says.

I could take some of the blame myself, of course, but it's tough to portion it out fairly at this point. There was a time I would have given him my own eyes in exchange, plucked them out right there and handed them to him. And Danny, you can bet your ass, would have taken them.

I pull a bandanna out of my pack and roll it up. I step around behind him and tie it over his eyes.

"Cigarette señor?"

#

On the last construable day of our marriage, Becky led Stevie outside to watch me drive away. It was a meanness I didn't know she had in her. I watched him in my rearview mirror, a little five-year-old boy getting smaller and smaller until I

turned off our street and he disappeared. I kept looking for him in the mirror as the green fringe of lawns unrolled, giving way eventually to the weed lots and industrial parks of the west-side outskirts, and finally to farmland and flood plains. The mirror filled with a wash of clouds, and I felt a kind of terror I hadn't felt since I was a kid—the sharp, implacable fear of waking in the middle of the night from something you can't identify, something you haven't encountered in life yet.

I lead Danny out on a pole slung behind me while Nate and Porter ski on ahead to the car. I follow the path of most resistance, leaving the open trail for the thicker trees along the ridge. Branches slap his face, leaving streaks of sap. Half-submerged brush snags his ski tips, sending him face-first into the powder.

"Jesus, Sid. What the fuck?"

"Sorry."

He tugs on the knot in the bandana, adjusts the frozen roll over his eyes.

"What if I don't get it back? What if I'm really blind?"

"You'll get it back."

"How do you know?"

"It's a temporary thing."

"Maybe I'll be the exception. You think of that?"

"Yes."

At one point I lead him out onto a snow bridge with a dark thread of water rippling underneath. He stops in the middle and tilts his head.

"Are we at the creek?"

"No."

"I hear water."

"What are you now, fucking Helen Keller?"

I yank him forward roughly a couple of times, but he makes it across. We don't talk for a while after that. He knows the sound of water when he hears it.

#

The divorce papers were delivered from Danny's firm by courier. I signed them sitting at his parents' dining room table. Afterward I gathered the belongings I didn't feel like carting to one more stranger's house and piled them in the fireplace. I drove to Home Depot and bought two bags of mortar and a pallet of bricks. I was more than a little drunk, and the work came out sloppy and childish looking. I had thought the entombing of all that history might bring some satisfaction, but it didn't. There was no sense of peace or accomplishment, just a fucked-up wall where there hadn't been before.

Danny would be pissed when he saw it, and that cheered me up a little. But I knew he'd just hire someone to knock it down and put it back the way it

was before. As for the things inside—the pictures and letters, the carton of worn cassettes and scraped CDs, our marriage certificate—they didn't feel moved past, just lost. I had the distinct feeling too that I'd left something valuable inside. My keys or my wallet or something else I was going to need.

#

Danny's listening for the road, his head cocked at a comical angle, his chin thrust out, foolish and determined under the crusted bandanna. I lurch forward and start up the side of the last slope.

"The settlement was fair," he says.

"For who?"

"She had grounds, Sid. The drinking, the lack of any foresight on your part. She needed a future."

"So did I."

"I don't know what to tell you. Go make one."

We're crossing beneath an old, twisted cedar. The bark twines around itself, the folds thick and knotted with age. I reach up and bat a drooping branch. Danny does a little dance to shake the snow out of his collar.

"What did you two talk about anyway?" I ask, knowing none of it interests him anymore.

"What?"

"You and Becky. What did you talk about?"

"I don't know what the fuck you're asking me, Sid. What did we talk about?"

"You must have talked sometimes. It couldn't have been all huffing and puffing."

"Jesus. Grow the fuck up."

"I'm just curious."

He lets out a long breath and turns his blind eyes toward me. I move a little to the side and his head follows.

"She talked about Stevie."

"I mean before."

"I know."

"There wasn't any Stevie."

"Yeah, but she still talked about him. What he was going to look like, how he'd be half you and half her. How he was going to make you stay put, keep you here. It was kind of pitiful."

"That's bullshit."

"Yeah, okay Sid. It's bullshit."

To our right, a gentle descent leads to a wide meadow and the highway

beyond. To our left, the creek plunges down a narrow gorge, the water thrashing under ice, a series of brittle, volcanic ledges jutting out like red knuckles in a clenched fist. I turn left.

#

When Becky told me about her and Danny the night before our wedding, she acted like she was giving me a gift. Standing in the middle of our pre-nuptial suite with her wet hair piled on top of her head and a Sheraton robe cinched tight around her. Her face flushed, her feet crossed at the ankles like a dancer.

"It wasn't like us," she said. "It wasn't love."

The next day Danny, my best man, made a moving toast in which he hinted at their mutual betrayal, implying forgiveness on everyone's part. It was a marvel of oratory.

A sliver of rock breaks away as his ski tip glides out over the lip of the cliff.

"Goddammit, Sid. Quit fucking around!"

His hands are straight out in front of him, the pole hanging from his wrist. The wind is blowing hard into him, snapping his pants against his legs.

"This isn't fucking funny!"

He's wrong about that.

A set of rabbit tracks circles around the trunk of a bent fir beside me, crosses over itself once, then angles off toward a clearing on the other side. The tracks end in a faint scribble at the edge of the clearing, with nothing beyond them and no sign that the rabbit had backtracked its trail. I wonder where it went, how it got out. If it got out.

"You gonna kill me, Sid?" He's laughing.

"Life without you in it, it's hard to see the downside."

"Shit, you wouldn't be you if it wasn't for me."

"That's my point exactly."

#

I found another box in Danny's attic, a U-Haul file box housing the accumulated souvenirs of his campaign against me—the first baseman's glove I got kicked off the team for not having, the railroad paperweight my grandfather left me, the afghan Becky spent all one summer knitting with our initials worked into the design. My college applications, all three of them, stamped and sealed and never sent.

We'd filled them out together, seeing the stack of papers as a dividing line we would look back on some day from the height of our incomparable futures.

When I didn't hear anything back from the colleges I'd applied to, I assumed it was standard practice—they didn't want me, and the less said the better.

Danny got accepted to Berkeley and sold me his half of the van. I drove all the way to Salt Lake City the next day, stopping finally at the feet of the Wabash, exhausted and lost. Becky, of course, stayed behind.

"What did you tell her?"

I'm not sure if he can hear me over the wind and the water.

"I told her you didn't love her," he says finally.

"I did."

"I doubt it. Anyway, what's the difference—all's fair, right?"

"It wasn't a fucking game, Danny."

"Of course it was."

The car horn honks off in the distance behind us. He turns his head toward it.

"Well you won anyway, right?" he says. "You came back and there she was."

"I see my son twice a year."

"All right, so nobody won. Welcome to the world."

"You always win, Danny."

He pushes the bandana up on his forehead. His eyes are crusted and raw looking.

"Fuck you if this is winning."

The snow curling underneath the ledge is almost blue, a wave about to break. Down below the creek thrashes, carving away at the rock and the ice. I picture him falling, his ribs and skull cracking against the granite, the creek swallowing him and washing him away. I see the clock resetting, the dice unrolling, time back on my side again.

He stares out over the precipice waiting for me to make my decision. It's the only choice he's ever given me.

#

We hit a pothole, and the car shudders.

"Take it easy!" Danny hollers at Nate.

"Sorry."

He rubs his eyes and lets out a little moan.

"What's it like?" Porter asks. "Being blind."

"Ask Sid. He's got more experience."

"Fuck you."

"It'll go away," Nate says.

"Probably. But I wonder, you know, what if?"

Ahead of us the lights of town flicker through the first snow of the forecast storm. I can make out a few colored strings of Christmas lights, red and green triangles tracing the lines of the roofs underneath. I remember I don't have anything for Stevie yet. I'm not sure what he would want. He's drifting away from me already, starting a life I'll only hear about later.

Maybe I'll get him some good sunglasses.

I laugh, and Danny's head pivots toward me.

"What's funny?"

"Everything."

Nate turns on the radio. Porter reaches over the seat back and cranks the heat.

"It's fucking freezing back here."

Radio stations cross and mix. Christmas carols twine through scraps of classic rock. O Come All Ye Faithful. Layla.

"Love and peace fall upon us…" a DJ says through the static.

Danny nods without understanding in the artificial warmth filling the car.

ARTIST FEATURE

GLORIA CEREN

ARTIST STATEMENT: Ceren's work investigates the complexities that arise from being in a body that identifies as other. She chooses not to define such a term because to define is to place limitation. Through multidisciplinary projects in painting, video, and more recently performance, Ceren explores her hybridized identity. Embracing a feminist sensibility, she posits the various conditions of her difference with that which encompasses her immediate experienced sphere. The work strives towards freedom of action that is for the individual over collective measures. We are in a time where idiosyncrasy needs to be embraced! We live in an inane moment in our history, so why not extrapolate from such absurdity?

Title: SOCIETYMONS

Title: DYING OF THE ALREADY DEAD

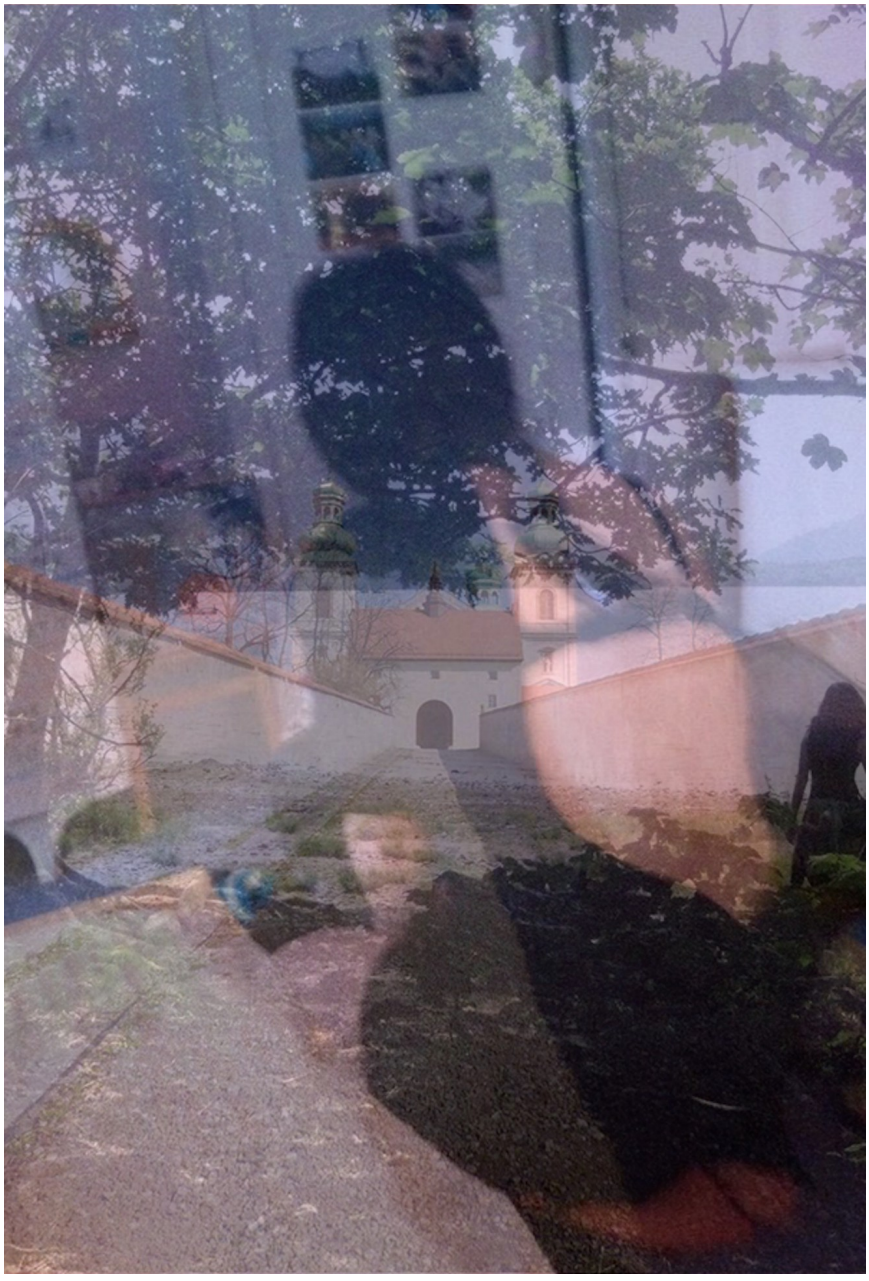
Title: INBRACE YOURSELF

Title: UNTITLED

ARTIST FEATURE

KLARA FEENSTRA

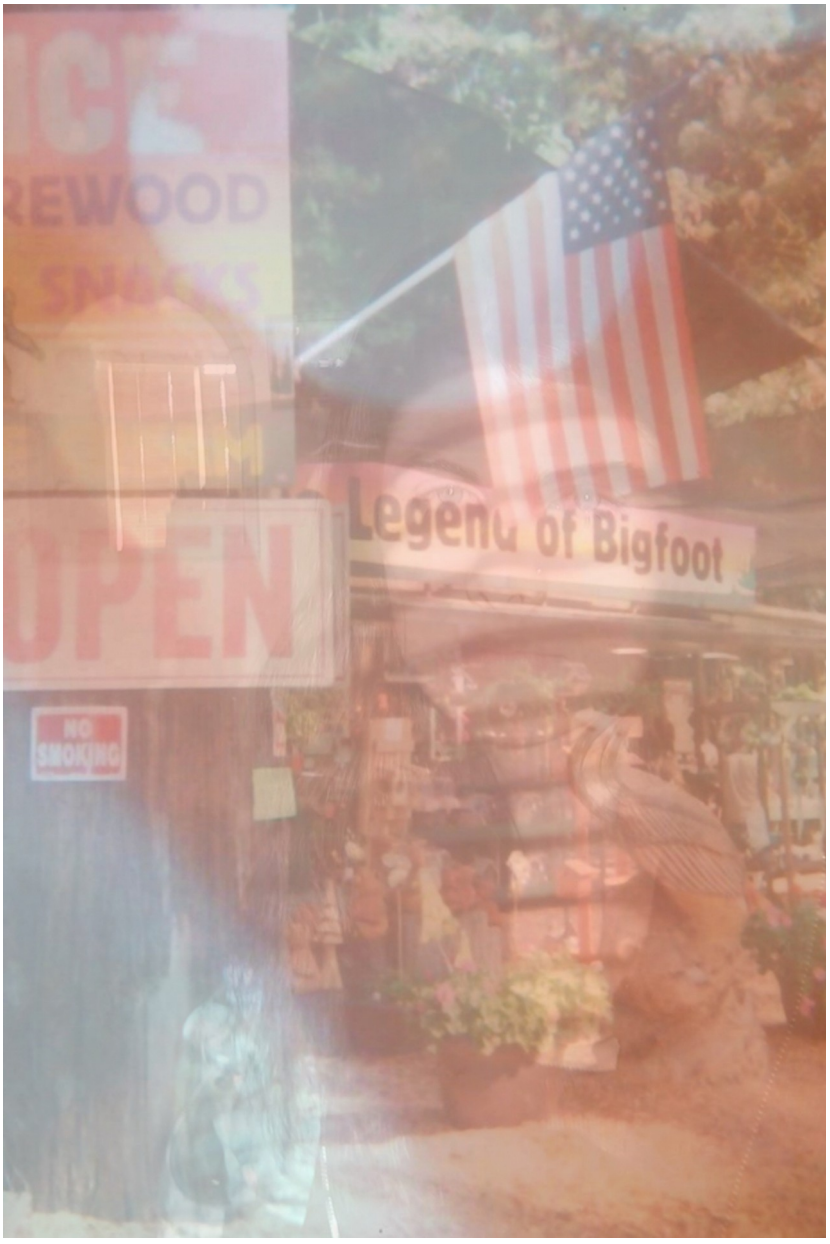
ARTIST STATEMENT: The series is a mixture of film and digital work which attempts to uncover a phenomenological sense of the world. I have recently become interested in overlaying photographs and videos, creating pieces that can be taken as a whole in the formalist sense, or broken down into separate visual layers. The overlaying of these images from London, the Bay Area, Poland, and elsewhere, bleeds time and memory, reflecting space and time as simultaneous and reflexive, muddled with colours and outlines that meet. The images do not exist in one moment but overlap, contrast and complement each other in ways that complicate ideas of linear movement, the overall shapes of the images relying on the interconnecting parts of each photograph.



Title: CAMALDOLESE

Title: SLOPE

Title: MAESTOSO



Title: HEAVY COUNTRY

Title: SOAKING

CONTRIBUTORS

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Jackson Burgess is the author of *Atrophy* (forthcoming, Write Bloody Publishing) and *Pocket Full of Glass* (2017, Tebot Bach), winner of the Clockwise Chapbook Competition. He is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and has placed work in *The Cincinnati Review, The Cimarron Review, Rattle, Colorado Review,* and elsewhere (jacksonburgess.com).

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Gloria Ceren was born and raised in south east Texas, a mecca for all things diverse. She received her undergraduate degree in painting from the University of Houston, in the fall of 2014 and is currently finalizing her MFA at the University of South Florida, Tampa. Ceren has exhibited her work nationally in notable institutions such as: The Warwick Museum of Art in Warwick, The Blaffer Art Museum in Houston, DiverseWorks, Houston, Inman Gallery, Houston, and Tempus Projects in Tampa. Ceren has been the recipient of the Larsen and Palmer Fund, 2016 and received a gold key from the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, 2010. She is an instructor of record for beginning drawing at the University of South Florida. Find her work here: http://www.gloriaceren.

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Alan Chazaro is a high school teacher at the Oakland School for the Arts. Currently, he is pursuing an MFA in Writing as a Lawrence Ferlinghetti Fellow at the University of San Francisco, and is a June Jordan Poetry for the People alum at UC Berkeley. Most recently, he received an AWP Intro Journals Award, which was selected by 2017 Pulitzer Prize winner, Tyehimba Jess. His poems have appeared in various journals including *Huizache, The Cortland Review, Borderlands, Juked, Hotel Amerika*, and *Public Pool*. You can usually find him wearing Bay Area sports apparel and listening to West Coast throwbacks.

Jeff Ewing is a writer from Northern California. His stories, poems, and essays have appeared in *ZYZZYVA, Willow Springs, Crazyhorse, Saint Ann's Review, Sugar House Review, Utne Reader,* and *Southwest Review,* among others. He lives in Sacramento, California with his wife and daughter.

Klara Feenstra is from London, her work is primarily invested with phenomenology, gender, technology, and consciousness. You can find her work in *Metatron, Bottlecap Press, Gatehouse press, Ink, Sweat and Tears,* amongst others. Follow her work here: www.instagram.com/kqueenstra

Roberto Carlos Garcia's book, *Melancolía*, is available from Červená Barva Press. His poems and prose have appeared or are forthcoming in *Academy of American Poets Poem-A-Day, The New Engagement, Public Pool, Stillwater Review, Gawker, Barrelhouse, Tuesday: An Art Project, The Acentos Review, Lunch Ticket,* and many others. He is founder of the cooperative press Get Fresh Books, LLC. A native New Yorker, Roberto holds an MFA in Poetry and Poetry in Translation from Drew University, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His website is http://www.robertocarlosgarcia.com/

Melissa Hall received her MFA in Creative Writing from Minnesota State University, Mankato. She currently lives in Austin, Texas where she tutors English and writing to students with learning disabilities. In her spare time, Melissa volunteers as a grant writer for a local nonprofit (Kids In A New Groove), and attends as many concerts as her budget allows. You can find her work in *ANON Magazine*.

Lauren Haldeman is the author of the poetry collections *Instead of Dying* (winner of the 2017 Colorado Prize for Poetry, forthcoming from Center for Literary Publishing 2017), *Calenday* (Rescue Press 2014) and the artist book *The Eccentricity is Zero* (Digraph Press 2014). Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in T*in House, The Colorado Review, Fence, jubilat, The Iowa Review,* and *The Rumpus*. A comic book artist and poet, she has been a recipient of a Sustainable Arts Foundation Award and fellowships from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. You can find her online at

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Fatima-Ayan Malika Hirsi is the founder of Dark Moon Poetry & Arts, a monthly series which spotlights the creative feminine and non-binary energies of North Texas. She can often be found on sidewalks using her typewriter to birth poems for strangers. She has been published in *Entropy, Anthropology Now!, Bearing the Mask,* and elsewhere. Her work has been featured by WFAA, KERA, the Dallas Morning News, and others. Her chapbook, Moon Woman, is forthcoming from Thoughtcrime Press. Her favorite things outside of poetry are family, cats, and trees.

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Iliana Rocha earned her PhD in English Literature and Creative Writing from Western Michigan University. Her work has been featured in the *Best New Poets 2014* anthology, as well as *The Nation, RHINO, Blackbird,* and *West Branch. Karankawa*, her debut collection, won the 2014 AWP Donald Hall Prize for Poetry and is available through the University of Pittsburgh Press. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Central Oklahoma and lives with her three chihuahuas Nilla, Beans, and Migo.

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Jennifer Popa recently relocated from the interior of Alaska to the South Plains of West Texas where she is in her second year as a PhD student of English and Creative Writing at Texas Tech University. She's currently working on a collection of short stories, some of which can be found at *Grist, Watershed Review, Monkeybicycl*e and *Fiction Southeast.*

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