



THE BOILER

SPRING 2017

THE BOILER JOURNAL is a literary journal that publishes four times a year online at www.theboilerjournal.com

THE BOILER accepts submissions online via its submission manager year round. Poetry should be 3–5 poems and prose under 3,500 words. Full guidelines and dates for upcoming issues are available on our website.

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THE BOILER

SPRING 2017

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PAUL TRAN

ELEGY WITH MY MOTHER'S LIPSTICK

I climb down to the beach facing the Pacific Ocean.
Torrents of rain shirr the sand. On the other side,
my grandmother sleeps soundlessly in her bed.
Her áo dài of the whitest silk. My mother knew
her mother died long before the telephone rang
like bells announcing the last American helicopter
leaving Sài Gòn. An arrow shot back to its bow,
a long-distance missile, she'd leap into the sky
to fly home if she could. She works overtime
instead. She curls her hair with hot rollers, rouges
her cheeks like Gong Li in *Raise the Red Lantern*,
and I'm her understudy. Hiding in the doorways
between her grief and mine, I apply her foundation
to my face. I conceal the parts of me she conceals,
puckering my lips as though dangerously kissing
a man that loves me the way I want to be loved.
I speak their bewitching names aloud: *Twisted Rose*,
Fuchsia in Paris, *Irreverence*. I choose the lipstick
she least approves. My mouth a pomegranate split
open, a grenade with its loose pin. In the kitchen,
I wrap a white sheet around my waist and dance
for hours, checking my reflection in a charred skillet.
I laugh her laugh, the way my grandmother laughed
as she taught me to pray the Chú Đại Bi. I remember
braiding her hair in unbearable heat. My tiny fingers
weaving silver strands into a fishtail, a French twist.
Each knot a child she never got to name, buried
in the soil of her, the barren plot where she keeps
the relentless odor of communist soldiers locking
her only surviving children away. I'm sorry, mother
of my mother, bodhisattva with your thousand hands.
No child in our family stays a child their mother can love.
When I knew the body assigned to me wasn't my body,
when I heard the murmuring in my heart, I followed it
across oceans wider than the distance now between us.
I found myself on a shoreline, a shell glinting in the tide.
I pressed it to my ear. It was you, still laughing, chewing
a fist of betel root. Your teeth black as the unlit dawn.

PAUL TRAN

BORDER FIELD STATE PARK

Crossing the salt marsh, flies laying their eggs
in the belly of a gutted seal, its head yards away,
its massive blue tongue jutting out, speechless,
as though taunting its corpse, studying the slow
decay, the living making the dead useful again,
you press your palm against my back, your pulse
jolting through me, through my heart, so hard,
like waves refusing to haul away the body, to give
the beast a burial, proper or improper, I can't tell
if it's mine or yours, if what remains taunts itself
or us, teenagers cursed with being teenagers,
secrets we can't tell in fear of being *sent back*,
of there being no *back* to be *sent* to. I face you,
your face ambered by volcanic sunbeams, your lips
pinched to the right, hooked by a thin silk thread,
or because in the rush to assemble the rest of you,
your hands pushing me into the hot sand, your god
forgot to imagine your entire smile, the bright music
that escapes from it like a boy sneaking over the border
with his mother under a sky shot with stars, a detail
we must now live without. Because of you, I wonder
what else we must live without, what else our gods,
in their towering kingdoms, elegant and vicious,
deliberate and absent-minded, forgot in our making?
What else did they leave to chance or circumstance?
Because of you, the closest I'd ever come to beauty,
the closest I'd ever come to confession, to appealing
for a spot in Heaven, where we can both be citizens
and not refugees running from the law, from *la migra*,
from all I'm too much of a coward to admit, I gulp
every *what if* hammering its steel nail into my throat
like larva bursting from my stomach, demanding
blood and wings, afraid of the shame I know telling
will cause me, the shame that blooms like maggots
under my skin because I know you can never *love me*
that way, because I know that, despite the borders
we surmounted, there's a border we can't, a border
taller and wider and more dangerous than the border
we finally approach, patrolled and man-made, snaking

into an ocean that, like the countries we left, the future
I made hopeless with my silence, will never claim us.

EMMA BOLDEN

MY OWN SWEETNESS, ASSASSIN,

I could not remember in any direction
when had my body become a country

whose borders I mapped as a path
to betrayal. I treasoned & traitored.

I robed myself black, I walked over
the signature of the bridge I saw

under the outline of my own hood.
I blackened & blanked, I arranged

my own face to face-down the platform
under the guillotine, its prize

& sparkle. I would not wake. I would
not stand up startled, I would not

walk away as if it wasn't my own
gun nuzzling the start of my spine.

EMMA BOLDEN

THE SUMMER I WONDERED WHY DRESSES EXIST

There were always colors. He wore his war
wound secret as a kindness, as a jewel

that I could never define. Perhaps peridot.
Perhaps the way a diamond feels against

a mirror. The way a pearl feels against
two teeth. The way two teeth feel

to the ear between them. There were two
sentences I kept confusing: *I fall away from*

you/I finally found a you. There were such beautiful
excuses. I could identify as jewelry wrought

by love's harshest geometry, a chain on which
one hangs the lock that hides itself as a key.

LEAH SCHNELBACH

FIRE ESCAPE

Shane's leaving is right there in his name, like a genetic disease waiting to manifest in a child. So why did finding his note tear through me so bad?

His name was no mistake or anomaly. His dad loves Westerns, his mom submitted to her husband, and so three children: Shane, elder by six years, and twin babies Wyatt and Annie. We heard them living their lives above us, but we didn't know them until they'd been up there a month.

School had just started. Shane was getting his butt kicked by some of the kids from the basketball court when my older brother Bobby stepped in and stopped it. Bobby brought Shane home, sat him down on the floor next to me, in front of *Batman*. He squeezed his shoulder like he did mine when I was upset.

I looked up and raised my eyebrows.

"It was the uniform," Bobby said.

Shane was wearing a red and grey uniform for a private school up near Yonkers. He was trying not to snuffle. I would have made fun of him, too, usually, but I wasn't risking Bobby coming after me. I just pretended not to notice all the snot and caught him up on Two-Face's nefarious plan. I got a look at him during the commercials. A scrape where his chin hit the concrete, a puffy right eye that turned purple by the time Mom got home to fuss over him, blood in the snot on his upper lip. Not too bad.

The next day he and I walked to the train together. He was in normal clothes this time. I waited for him outside the Metro-North station's vile bathroom while he changed into the uniform. He did his best not to make any eye contact with me, but halfway up the stairs to the platform he waved to me a little, and suddenly we were friends. We walked to school together most days because we had a lot to talk about, and it wasn't too much out of my way. He spent as much time as he could at my place to stay out of his mom's way. He started leaving his stuff in my room—otherwise he'd come home to gnawed books and toys basted in baby drool.

By 10th grade life had solidified around us. Shane was fully a freak now. He spent the ride up to Yonkers tracing his eyes with liner. He had other friends, and compared me with them unfavorably. For my part I spent most days down at the Cube ignoring my GPA. At night we'd meet on the fire escape, where I'd switch to cigarettes and I could talk to Shane's voice without having to reckon with his makeup. For as long as our cigarettes lasted, we were friends again.

When he told me he was gay, I think he could only say it because he could talk through the smoke, looking at a prick of light in the dark instead

of a person.

I was the only one who knew for a while, but after his mom kicked him out, it was Bobby again who found him downtown and brought him back. Our parents let him stay. With no one to pay his tuition, he switched to the local school with me, and worked in the afternoons. His parents played a game where their son was just a neighbor they didn't know. When he climbed out my window to smoke, mom-at-home = window shut tight, but dad-at-home = Wyatt and Annie's little faces poking above us like owls. They still wanted to talk to him. Their dad allowed it.

Once Bobby went up to school in Binghamton, Shane moved into his room. First day of senior year, we walked to the train behind Annie and Wyatt, starting first grade in their own uniforms. Shane held himself just like Bobby, same walk, same tilt to his head. No makeup. Each time somebody looked at his little brother and sister, he held their eyes until we went past.

Graduation came, and the first day of our last summer break. I woke up sour from the party. I didn't have to read the note on my desk to know what it said. He wouldn't live under them any more.

If it makes me dumb then I'll *be* dumb.

School's starting up again. I make up reasons to trail Wyatt and Annie to the train. I sit on the fire escape late into the night, blowing smoke, trying to hear Shane's half of the conversation in my head.

CONOR BURKE

FLIGHT

Though they did not believe he could, my brother
Pulled free the brakes and flew and was a bird.
His arms outspread, he was a sparrow held,
By the flutter of its wings, still, above
The ground. Of course, I did not see him fly,
For I had turned my back to climb the steps
That led into the bus's dark design,
And by the time I'd found a seat, the steps
In front of him had led him down again
Face first into the concrete walk below.
The blood was everywhere, the wheelchair strapped
Onto his back had pinned him, mouth agape,
Small against the leaden earth. And though
I tried, I could not, cannot, make my way back.

CONOR BURKE

WEARING NOTHING

These days, my brother finds he has little use for clothes.
Whenever I'm at home, after he has slept in till

noon or one o'clock, and waking with a need to piss
he passes through the living room wearing nothing

but a pair of loose briefs, it's always his legs I notice first,
how they won't straighten, how skinny they are,

how angular. And then the forward tilt of his torso
as it extends up from his hips: his spine & its long

silvery scar (where they went in to cut the tangled net of
nerves they knew his brain would never learn to read) curved

like the darkened inner edge of a thumbnail moon:
each of his arms raised as if he were being held

at gunpoint, but instead of opening his palms in surrender
he's balled them into two tight fists & uses them

to keep an unsteady, rocking balance. He pauses
at the doorway, leans for a moment against the jamb.

He turns his head a little to the side & I know
I'll never know exactly what it is that now passes

through his mind. Going in he leaves wide the bathroom door.
All that work he'd have to do to make himself a little more

presentable, all that effort to close awkwardly the door
he will only, just now, need to force back open again.

JESSICA LEE

SUDDEN SPRING

all overdone rhododendron poised and petaled all pluming
some toothsome jam jars cracked open and seeded all pushing
and thumping and thawing galoshes all humming and honeyed
fingers all deciduous narcissus and vernal color all
teeming and molten underpinnings dripping all hungry
for licking all tonguing and sapping and ebbing and bedding
all frothing trumpeting release and consuming all
iris and rushing and coming rhododendron all
morphing and skirted azalea all laughter deciduous all clustered
and soured and stinging all sticky and rooted all falling
and sudden preening all swelling and seeding all culminating
budding and ebullition all bedecked openings trilling all
freckled and fertile dewing all hyacinth humming all hungry
and waiting and wanting and coming and falling and coming
all passing unshod and fleeting all molten and stinging
all frothing and coming and falling and wanting and wanting

JESSICA LEE

TRYING TO BAKE A CAKE FROM SAND

All daughters see history differently than their makers
so inevitably she will say it didn't go that way that
I'm trying to bake a cake from sand trying
to paint her evil yet these details real
 as expired yogurt though the reckoning
may be extra-frilled blue mold ringing the corners
of the can ister, sinister retelling of a silver spoon
life metal against metal always made me plug my ears
couldn't put the clean forks into the drawer ever you'll notice
my father isn't here what's left out says as much
as what's written mother this is me saying don't listen to Freud
or me I love Donna Reed on the screen yes and her tight clasp
of a home but I'd never trade you in for pearls

CALEB BRAUN

DEVELOPER

In all the old pictures
I'm a young Puritan.
Like my father, I pose
with my head held down,

my face turned shyly away,
knowing this is piety's posture.
What I miss most about that
faith is the stiffness of the collar:

a simple no for everything
attractive, the blessed angle
of my chin. I didn't yet know
how silence becomes fixed in film.

I didn't yet know my father
would die of his own constraint,
the aperture of his vessels
narrowing to their close.

.
Yet, I still look for him, here
in this darkroom where I find
only this waiting
for my father to burst through

the door in brilliant light,
only this printed face
slowly resolving
in the chemical bath.

CALEB BRAUN

LESSONS

There's a language inside my mother
I've never quite learned,

only bits of children's rhymes
something like *allueta allueta*.

And through the wall in the mornings
sometimes I would hear her reading

her bible with her *give me this day*
as though she were whispering

to the open palms of god.
And in the evenings as the sun

raked the grass at the edge
of the world, she'd take

her bike through the trees and up
the hill and say *au revoir, skyline*,

until one night it rained.
For years it rained.

The world pooled itself. The artificial
light of a hospital which never sets.

And I mean it was sudden
as rain and she never

rode her bike again
and hardly spoke.

DANIELLE ZACCAGNINO

PORTRAIT OF THE WOMAN AS PRESSURE PHOSPHENE

Press eyes for flashing lights. Portrait of the woman
as a trance. As the twinge of recognition—
it gets really comfortable in there. As the holding of breath. As puncturing
a casing, ribs like grassy cliffs. She's ghost sick. Portrait
as hands strengthened by dirt. As solitary animal. As the slip
in a chorus line. Wind-up deer. She never gets caught
in headlights. Sets herself going—as arcade
claw machine. As hazardess. Thunder cover band.
Portrait of the woman as a revelation. I didn't hear what she said
but it convinced me. A portrait at all—
there's nothing left to sway. Portrait of the woman
as paradise world, as kelp, as marble on marble countertop.
As full moon. As falling? As nebulae, bottled, and bursting, as motion.

KELLY GRACE THOMAS

THE MOST BONES

Tonight I walk in an orchard
of low gods.
Prayers rot just beyond
fingertip preach.

I climb the trees bowheaded
in hush. I sweat silent
Scripturewant.

I want this body
to do what history oathed.

After the bloodwork,
I church my voice.
I altar my lips.

Force faith to be the only alphabet
I vowel.

Lately every please
I pocket
has lungs

tinier than mine.

KELLY GRACE THOMAS

STORM WARNING

She told me: *pain needs a witness*
knowing, once or twice, the fruit of me
has been peeled.

Under this dress: eggs and arms.
A one-eyed doll: births
and breaks.

I live under shell cracked sky
sleep with undecided bones.

Female: a storm I first noticed
in the clouds.
It has taken all
of me

to rain
this hard.

ALYSSA JEWELL

FRIDA KAHLO DEPARTS FROM HER MUSE

after her smallest self-portrait

1.

The light dies in a crease of smog over the November plain:
lacrimosa, I leave you. I knew you in some other life--
I will know you again. When the wool cut from spring sheep
is dyed steel blue under a pale sky, there I will bleed oil.
There the macaque monkey will perch above clusters of tangerine
and lemon growing in tall, stretching trees. Its claw will grasp
the handle of the crescent moon. It will swing its body among the stars.

2.

This Quantum Entanglement: I shudder with you, mourn with you,
sing under the electric clouds by your notes alone. I heard your voice
once scattered in the roots of earth dying out, leading nowhere.
You heard me as a racket and flute slurring high above your head in pools
of cadmium yellow tinged with vermillion-- a Midwestern gloam filtered
through the golden field poking at our backs, stalks laced around our gaping bodies.
O *Magnum Mysterium*: why should the clouds mirror one another, curl, then split?

3.

I bind you as the sun to my forehead, as thorns around my neck,
all of my days. Most of all, I will suffer your stare, the memory of it: bright
rotting fruit and cactus needles glowing over my ankles, knifing through
to meet my metatarsals already bent of an unforgiving wreckage.
Blessings of the earth on you, cause of my sorrows that swim to every surface.
Blessings of the earth on you, my joy grown green out of a deluge now settled
into the blue lakes and blue haze, into bruised fingernails and burning planets--

Feet, what do I need you for when I have wings to fly?

ALYSSA JEWELL

A CROSSING AT THE RIO GRANDE

They stretch in a show of all that matters: the riders' arms and hands long
across the river's face as if to touch cotton lint voices the sound of home.

This is how we become sligher:

out of the sky's green summer darkness

a body rolls onto a different shore, waves turned back
as a scroll, ink-drenched with trying to write new life.

Did I ever know about hunger, the way it burrows into the heart?

In my own city, I saw wanting cracked open: a purple shell, soft
and held to the light like a child offering up his first painting

in an act of trust,

new alphabets traced in smudged pencil, blackened fingers pointing

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homeward on a map.

I stood, knees yielding under cross currents, looked to see
if someone else was watching too, wanted another to take account
of the horses' constant forward through the flood and slag, to remember
the way they vanished like copper needles into the trees.

MEGHAN LAMB

THE WIDOWER

The old man knows he is—or was—at some point—married. He remembers traces of their marriage, reoccurring moments.

Pink sunlight through the curtains of their kitchen.

Sipping coffee.

Gray-blue moonlight through the curtains of their bedroom.

Getting into bed.

Above all, he recalls her shape—the imprint of her shape—the space she occupied in bed, the mark that she was there.

He can remember what she smelled like, though he cannot name it, but sometimes he catches a reminder in something he passes by.

A breath of fresh-cut flowers.

Open windows.

Dew from recent rain.

Tea leaves dipped down into the steam he stirs.

The ghostly trails they leave.

He can't remember what her face looked like, though sometimes he recalls her mouth, her nose, her eyes, but always individually. Not a face, but features floating on some pale tide of recognition. When he stirs them, they drift down to darkness, out of reach.

—

He squints into the pink light and he turns in bed. A thin twin, for one person. Cold. He coughs. He reaches for his watch. He puts it on. It feels hard against the raised vein of his wrist. He coughs. He eases slowly toward the edges of his bed.

He slips his feet into his slippers, ties his robe. Rough terry. Tender skin.

He pads into the bathroom. Stands before the sink. He puckers at the gray-white face. He lets the water run over his hands. The skin is loose. Ripples of mounds, like hills of wax.

He shakes the hills until they're dry depressions, dries them, reaches for the glass that holds the teeth.

He looks into the tumbler at the teeth. A cloudy puddle, gray against the pink, a pool in its gums.

He shakes the teeth. They clatter, softly, in his hand. He puts them in his mouth. He shifts his lips against their slick, tart, strangeness.

He makes a frail stream of piss.
Steam rises and he thinks of tea.
He thinks of coffee.
Thinks about his wife.
Tries to imagine her.
Tries to imagine morning, with her.
Coffee. Tea.
Steam fades.
A tinge of pain.
He thinks, he can't.
He flushes.

—

He glances at his calendar. It's Wednesday. Laundry morning. So, he shuffles to the bed. He peels back the pastel sheets. He thinks they look like something that a woman would pick out. He can't remember purchasing or picking out these sheets.

He bundles them into a ball. He holds the ball against his chest. The ball feels vaguely damp. The ball smells bad. He drops it in the hamper and he shuts the lid. Old man, he thinks. You smelly, dirty, sad old sack of man.

He tugs the hamper, but it feels too heavy to be lifted. He stoops down and drags the hamper from the bed frame to the door. It leaves a line of long, deep grooves inside the freshly vacuumed carpet.

When the hamper butts against the door, he clasps his hands against his knees, exhales dry, charred sounds, like burning leaves. He cracks the door. He peers into the empty, quiet hall. He can just barely hear the clink of distant silver, tables being set.

He slides the hamper out into the hall, before the door.

He squints. He hears a woman's laughter rising through the silver sound.

It is a warm laugh. A familiar laugh. A laugh he knows but cannot put a name to.

—

A knock. A woman's voice. Good morning, dear.

Good morning, he calls back. He smiles as the voice opens the door.

It's Ms. Tanya. He knows her name because she wears a name tag. A pink uniform. She has a gap between her teeth.

She smiles. Sit down, dear, she says.

He sits. She straps the cuff around his thin white skin. She pumps the tube. It hisses. She writes down some numbers on the chart.

He coughs. What's that? The day I'm gonna die?

She laughs. You're funny, honey.
Yeah, he says. But looks aren't everything.

You're looking good, she says. She edges up the velcro of the cuff. She tears it very slowly so she doesn't hurt him.

His skin pricks, not from pain, but from the effort. Sad old man, he thinks. He glances at the gap between her teeth.

Thank you, Ms. Tanya, he says.

My pleasure. Her tooth gap whistles. She walks toward the window, and she stands there.

Her silhouette against the curtain makes him think about his wife. It's something in the way she holds her shoulders.

He watches as she shrugs, stretches her back, pinches a strand of hair, and sighs, pushing it back behind her ear.

It's such a pretty day, she says. Light breeze. Low 70s.

He smiles. Good. I hope that you get to enjoy it.

—

After Ms. Tanya helps him choose his clothes—tan pants, a rust-brown checkered shirt that feels like the fabric of an old couch—he stands, slouches in his walker, pushes himself down the hall. He listens as the gentle, clinking silver sound grows closer, louder.

He sees another woman in pink uniform pushing another resident who sits, sunk down, into his wheelchair.

The resident is wrapped inside a blue fleece blanket.

Like a baby, he thinks, silently relieved that he is still—at least—a man.

—

His walker rounds the curve into the dining room. The silver sound builds from a tinny echo to a symphony of scraping knives. A table full of men with plates—all wearing checkered shirts—looks up across the room and nods and waves for him to join them.

Top of the mornin' to you, says one.

Light breeze. 70s, another says.

They give his back a friendly pat as he sits in his chair.

Sleep well? They ask.

He clears his throat, which means both yes and no.

Not me, says one of them. Terrible dreams again. The war.

They all nod.

A young girl carries his tray to the table. He looks at the tendril curls of hair escaping from her net. He thinks, that's nice. She sets his tray in front

of him. A tattoo, on her wrist. A skull with roses. He thinks, well, now, that is not so nice.

Breakfast appears to be three pale palm-sized pancakes, two small links of shiny sausage, a sulfuric-smelling yellow scoop of scramble, and the ever-present teacup filled with coffee, which he reaches for, dismayed by the slight tremble of his hands.

The table of his friends sits, sipping, silent, mostly.

Coughing.

Sipping.

Someone reads the paper, turns the page.

Somebody clears his throat. Good news in there?

Nope, says the paper-holder. War, there. Everywhere. Out there, he sighs.

They all nod, knowingly.

—

Out there, a small brown finch is hopping on the lawn. He watches from the window as the brown finch flits along a patch of high grass.

The finch jumps, catches at the grass, and grabs a bit of grain. A long strand bounces back and forth. The bird keeps jumping, catching, grabbing.

Then, another finch flies down to join the first.

They jump.

They catch.

They nibble at the air.

Another bird flies down.

Another.

And another.

Soon, the lawn is filled with hopping, jumping finches, strands of light grass gently quivering amid their movements.

—

A memory begins to quiver in his brain.

Something about the window.

Watching something through the window, at home, with his wife.

He can remember her back, silhouetted, shadowed.

Coming up behind her.

Circling his arms around her waist.

Leaning to kiss her cheek.

Her tendril curls of hair.

Catching a strand between his fingertips.

Pushing the strand behind her ear.

The smell of her perfume.

The way she smelled...like what?

Lilac?
Or violet?
His thoughts contract.
The moment stirs.
Its thin strands split.
It slips away.

—

The silver scrapes, then stutters to a stop. The old men yawn. The small brown finches fly away. The tattooed girl comes by to take their trays. The rose skull circles round the table, darting in and out until it hovers—white-gray, flecked with red—in front of him.

He frowns. What made you want to get that tattoo, there? He says.

She sighs. I was so young, then.

He says, you are still so young.

He laughs.

She laughs.

He says, someday, you'll be a good wife to someone.

She says, haha.

She does not laugh.

He says, you should remove it.

She says, sure.

—

The women in pink uniforms drift through the room and down the hall. The building softens to the long hush of the afternoon. Every now and then, a short alarm goes off. The pink suits scatter. Mostly, though, the men sit, silent, shuffling their cards.

They mumble, scratch.

Mhm. Mhm.

They flip their cards onto the table.

Rummy! One declares.

God damn it, no. We're playing Hearts.

They whisper, shuffle.

In the far back corner of the room, a fish tank bubbles. Flashes of fins dart through the tank's dim, violet glow.

He thinks, violet.

Lilac.

Gin!

God damn it, no.

He thinks of pink light.

Thinks of shadows, thinks he was once married. Once. He must have been.

—

The sun's light swells into the shade he's thinking of, which makes the room feel like a scene he's conjured from a dream. He hears an eerie resonance amid the low hum of the fish tank, thinks the whispered, shuffled cards sound like the wisps of wings.

An old woman enters the room. She passes by the table carrying a pad of a paper and a box of paint. She wears her white-gray hair pinned in a thick curl with an indentation at its center, like a little nest. She wears a filmy scarf, a button blouse, a long skirt filled with flowers in the same pastel shades as his pale pastel sheets.

He sniffs, picks up a strain of her perfume. That smell. Those flowers. He looks up above the hands, the murmured sounds, his fan of cards. He watches her sit down, spread out her paper and her paint. He plays a diamond, takes the round. He sweeps the cards into his stack.

She dips her brush into a glass of water, picks a color. Dips her brush into the glass. The water streams with blue.

Somebody says, the thing about the war...not just our town...the country...an entire country...an entire generation lost.

Somebody says, the field...

Someone else says, in the forest...mud...the rain...

He wonders if they're thinking of the same war.

He looks up again.

The water's stained with deep blue, violet, gray.

She stirs. The water turns a shade of milky lilac blue.

The war...the thing about the war...

Hell, someone murmurs. War is hell.

He thinks, that color is the color of the scent he cannot name.

He pardons himself from the table when the game is finished, starts to make his way toward the woman's corner of the room.

Going to see about a lady? Ask the men.

He chuckles drily in response.

—

She looks up, startled, as his walker butts into the table's edge.

Seat taken? He asks.

She says, I suppose not.

He sits down. Nice day, he says. Light breeze. 70s.

Yes, so they say, she says. She looks back down and contemplates her painting.

He watches for awhile as she nods above her painting, pushes back the tails of her scarf, which drift down, once again. He watches her

expression, twitching corners of her mouth. The empty indentation of her coiled nest of hair.

Your perfume. What's that scent? He asks.

She dabs. It's lavender, she says.

Ah, lavender, he says. I like it very much.

I used to grow it in my garden, when I had a garden. She smiles lightly, stirs the water, which then turns a deep, bright blue.

He tries to picture his backyard, which had a garden. He does not remember what was growing in it. He spent mornings on the front lawn, trimming long, green grooves that spiraled from the yard's periphery into its fresh mown heart.

He says, a garden is a good thing. Good place for a woman.

I do miss the garden, she says. All the birds and butterflies. But that was long ago. She makes an odd sound, like she's sipping from the air. For one breath of a moment, she sounds like a little girl.

She looks at him. He looks at her. There's something so familiar, yet so unfamiliar in her face. Her skin is full of lines, so many pathways to get lost in. He tries to look through them, searching for something he recognizes.

Do I know you? She says, suddenly.

He sips the air. He sounds old.

He says, possibly. I think, maybe, you do.

They lock eyes, once again. Her smile broadens.

She says, maybe. Lightly, as though brushing at the edges of some secret they might share.

They sit there, looking at each other, for another moment.

Then, Ms. Tanya comes up to the table, nods down at the painting.

Is it finished, dear?

I think so.

Let me take the glass.

Ms. Tanya carries off her little tumbler of bright blue.

—

That evening, he stands, looking at himself inside the mirror. He thinks, smelly, dirty, sad old sack of man. He makes himself laugh at this thought. He laughs at himself laughing. Then, he watches how his face goes slack when he removes the teeth.

He pours a spot of Listerine into his glass.

The same bright blue.

His teeth sit, like a fossil in some fish-less sea.

He looks intently at the glass, the shade of blue. His mind strains at his eyes. He feels his veins begin to ache.

He shuffles back into the bedroom. Gray-blue light seeps through the curtains and some frail sense of recognition starts to filter through.

A knock, then, interrupts his thoughts. It is Ms. Tanya. She brings in his laundry hamper filled with clean, warm, floral-scented sheets.

He thinks they look like something that a woman would pick out. He

can't remember purchasing or picking out these sheets.

She helps him make the bed. She tugs and smooths its surface. Then, she stretches by the window, yawns, and tucks her hair back into place.

The gray-blue light surrounds her, silhouettes her frame.

Is everything okay with you, tonight? Ms. Tanya asks.

He says, I don't think so. I cannot find my wife.

Ms. Tanya smiles, but her smile has an odd look to it.

She leans down and she opens his top drawer.

She lays his bed clothes out over the sheets.

Laid out this way, he thinks that they look like a shapeless man.

Let's get some rest, she says. I'll help you find your wife tomorrow.

—

He squints into the morning light. He slips his feet into his slippers, ties his robe. He pads into the bathroom, to the toilet.

This morning is a stronger, strangely pinkish stream of piss.

He thinks about the light.

About his wife.

He flushes.

—

A knock. Ms. Tanya enters, carrying a package.

Today is your birthday, she says. Happy Birthday, dear.

How old am I, today? He asks.

She says, older than me.

He chuckles. Pretty old then, huh?

Her tooth gap whistles.

Ms. Tanya opens and unpacks the box. She hands him every item as she takes it out. The box contains a pack of undershirts, a new hand towel, and a small rectangle box of brand name chocolates.

He holds the objects in his hands. He turns them over, looks at them. They all have no significance to him.

Can't eat those with my teeth, he gestures at the chocolates.

It's the thought that counts, I guess, she shrugs apologetically.

—

He sits down with the table of his men. A pink suit carries him a tray with coffee, brown toast, thin grits, and a dish of fruit cocktail with tiny specks of pink, but mostly filled with whole, white, peeled, vulnerable grapes.

Top of the mornin' to you, says one.

High of 67. Chance of showers in the afternoon, another says.

He pictures showers in the afternoon. Small drops of memory begin to trickle through the gray-blue of his mind.

Today's my birthday, he announces.

Happy Birthday, they congratulate him. Why, you old son of a gun.

They all nod, knowingly. They look back down into their breakfast.

The grits taste like quicksand. The toast, like ordinary sand.

One of the men begins to cough. They all ignore it, for a moment, but the cough grows louder and much more insistent. A pink suit flutters from across the room. She pats the man's back firmly til he gags a wet pink fleck of cherry.

The man looks down until she leaves. He shakes his head. I don't know what came over me, just now, he says. I'm so embarrassed.

One of them nods with understanding. One time, I was so embarrassed.

The men lean in to hear him tell the story.

We all were riding on the bus, you know, he says, somewhere in Italy. The hills were steep, you know. The bus was curling, right along the edge. The hills were high, not much to keep us almost from the edge. So, anyhow. The driver, I don't think he knew what he was doing. So, he gets pulled over, so, he stops, and then the door just opens. All these men, the police—we were all in Italy—they had these great big guns, you know, these just enormous guns over their shoulders, and well, there we were. They had these great big guns, in Italy.

Today's your birthday, huh. The men look back toward him.

I suppose so.

They all sing together: Happy Birthday, Happy Birthday to you.

One of their voices cracks in his attempt to sing the harmony.

They all look down as though they were the culprit.

—

The sky darkens from gray-blue into deeper gray. The rain begins to fall. It falls hard, fogging up the windows. Through the windows, he can see the soft, blurred shapes of trees, the softly glowing globe lamps, haloed all around the building.

An old woman with white-gray hair pinned in a thick curl walks into the room, holding a pad of a paper and a pack of paint. She glances toward him as she passes by the table, and the men grin.

Looks like you had better follow her.

He sits across from her as she sets up her paper and her paint.

He breathes in.

Lilac.

Violet.

No, lavender.

Your lavender perfume, he nods.

She nods. That's right. My garden, when I had one.

Yes, your garden. He remembers, now. For now.

She dabs her paintbrush, dips into the glass. A spot of tea-green sheds its pale strands.

She stirs. The strands dissolve.

The wind begins to blow the rain in sheets, which hit the glass, then splatter streams of gray-blue-gleaming water.

The spring is bittersweet, she says. The rain.

Don't much get out no more, in rain nor shine, he chuckles airily.

I mean the way the rain reminds me of my garden, looking at it from the window, waiting to get out, she says.

She dabs her brush. She dips. The water streams with reddish-brown, the shade of things in disrepair, the shade of rusting tools. Then, she stirs. The water turns a murky puddle-brown. He thinks of oil, thinks of sawdust, thinks of afternoons in his garage.

When I look out the window in the rain, she says, sometimes I think the garden will be there, just waiting, when the rain clears.

He says, that's a nice thought. A garden is a good thing. Good place for a woman.

While it lasts, she sighs. She stirs the paint.

Somewhere off down the hall, somebody fingers at an old piano. A few hesitant keys, then a set of scales. First, descending. Then, ascending, with an air of distant optimism. The piano lingers, echoing above the highest note.

It plays some breezy melody, all brightly flitting pecks of keys and warm chords.

She sighs, shakes her head, and dabs her brush. She paints. She stirs.

The song ends. A small group of unseen hands claps, slightly.

A new song begins. He trains his ears. This one, he thinks that he might know.

He strains his thoughts toward the movements of the keys, into anticipation of the verse.

He starts to sing. The voice that comes out of his mouth is strangely frail. He has never heard this voice before:

*Today, while the blossoms still cling to the vine.
I'll taste your sweet berries, I'll drink your sweet wine.
A million tomorrows will all pass away.
Ere I forget all the joy that is mine.
Today.*

They laugh together, at his voice, and at the song.

Your voice is lovely, she exclaims.

Come now, he coughs.

It is though. Lovely.

He looks at her eyes and at their gentle shining folds, a bit like petals from a wilted rose.

They linger, speechless, in the kind of cloudy feeling that piano adaptations of familiar music always brings. His ears continue scanning

melodies for bits he knows. He watches her keep dabbing, stirring, dabbing, stirring, smearing paint.

The water in the glass does not evoke the sense of recognition that it did, though, when it turned bright blue before. It just turns brown, then brown, then darker-brown, then dark-brown, then dark-dark-brown, then dark-darker-brown, then gray-dark-brown, then black.

What are you painting, there? He asks.

She turns the picture upright, so the bits of wet paint drizzle weakly down the page.

I'm trying, she says, but I can't...

The teary stems, the bright, smudged orbs, look like the painting of a child, nothing like a garden.

Then, the piano starts to play a flat, chordless rendition of the Happy Birthday song. Strange distant voices chorus, Happy Birthday, Happy Birthday, and Ms. Tanya scurries in, holding a cupcake with a candle.

Happy Birthday! Says Ms. Tanya.

Happy Birthday! Says the older woman.

Happy Birthday! Sing the voices of the strangers he can't see.

He leans in, takes a deep breath, and blows out the candle.

Distant hands clap for him.

Smoke drifts over everything.

—

He dreams in flickers. Flashes. Gray-blue. Coffee. Shadows. Lace. A smile. Hair tucked back. A silhouette. Blue flowers in a blue vase. Thin bones. Thin, thin, brittle. False teeth. Outlines in the bed. A dream about an old dream. Cold fog. Dreams about the war, the war, the war. Always the war. Cold fog. Brown puddles. Yellow gas. Blue flowers. Yellow-brown. Thin bones, exposed. The weight of them. The dreamlike movements. Cold fog. Thin, thin, brittle, never able to move fast enough. Gray-blue. The sense that something—waiting to consume you—lives beneath the air.

—

He peers into the light. A haze of white-gray, shivering with dust. He aches. He slips feet into slippers, shoulders into robe.

His chest hurts and he coughs.

He has to still himself against the door frame.

He tears up, involuntarily.

He pisses puddle brown.

—

He waits for her amid the shuffled whispers of the cards.
The murmured expletives: God damn it, no. Sonofabitch.
The muffled coughs.
Bad rain all week, and thunderstorms. Low 60s.
Coffee tastes like piss.
The war, the war.
The thing about the war...

—

He waits for her amid the movements of the light, the weather,
hoping her shape will materialize with the slightest change.
But she does not materialize.
Nothing ever changes.
He just moves throughout the day, as usual, perceiving flickers in the
air.

—

He dreams in flickers. Pink light. Gray-blue drifts. Flakes of dust. Flakes of
ashes, falling. Sawdust. Shavings. Smell of sulfur. Smell of paint. Smell of
the coffee, brewing through the day. The smell of an eternal morning.
Shadows moving. Nothing ever changes.

—

Until: one morning, he wakes up, and he can smell his own breath.
It is terrible.
The fibers of his robe feel like fine needles, sewn together.
When he stands, he nearly falls.
When he leans down to piss, he nearly falls.
A bad piss.
Red.
He shivers deeply in his bones.

—

He dreams long lace shadows like the lattice of his veins. Hair
blowing. Silhouettes he follows, but he cannot reach. Cold. Thin bones.
Empty bed. Cold fog. The war the war the war the war the war the word, the
word war, wife, the word wife, wife, the missing wife.

The flickers turn to flames which turn to nightmares. Gray-blue
caverns that he wanders through, into a black-blue maw. He falls. He falls

into a forest, which he realizes is a graveyard, which he realizes is a clay trench, filled with fallen forms.

He wakes and stares into the curtains, terrified to fall asleep. He lies, looking up at the ceiling, at the circle of the light, which looks back, humming, lidless, like a peeled eye. He sweats and sweats and sweats and shivers, staring as hard as he can.

—

Ms. Tanya comes into his room holding a cup of tea.

Good morning, dear.

What's good about it? He says.

Yeah, well, she agrees.

She sets the cup of tea beside his bed. She sits beside his bed, carefully folds the strip around his arm, and gently pumps.

It feels like the air is being sucked out of his skin. He makes a hissing sound, like sipping from the air. The sound reminds him of his wife. My wife. What happened to my wife? He asks Ms. Tanya.

She looks out the window.

I'm sorry, but she's gone, she says, after a moment.

Gone?

She nods.

Do you know where? He says.

She says, no. I am sorry.

He says, don't be, and looks where she is looking through the window. He sees a sliver of a tree. An empty parking lot.

He looks into his tea. He stirs the trails from the leaves.

They flow like fingers through the water, in a sort of warm wave.

He holds the cup between his hands.

He breathes in, sips.

He stirs.

He smiles, his hands tingling.

Hello.

SOPHIA TERAZAWA

SOMEWHERE NEARBY

*Somewhere nearby a frog
begs a snake.*

—Yusef Komunyakaa, “Monsoon Season”

A fog had draped her hair
around the Chase Tower in Dallas
the morning you returned.

Was it twenty years or more
since we last spoke?

Our orange tree had died
then came anew the night that Bowie
dropped *Blackstar* behind.

Remember how your stillbirth felt
a rhythm in its passing.

Somewhere nearby a boy
prays a flood.

Somewhere nearby a thigh
parts a knife.

I had flinched.

In the bedroom you protected
me from racial epithets like _____,
_____ and _____.

Broke our vows,

made moonlight out of panting,
licked our roses in the jungle

you had called me yours.

Nearby unmarried
stags in hunting

stop to look.

SOPHIA TERAZAWA

A LIST OF PREDICTIONS FOR THE NEW ECONOMY

*They are dumping animal blood into the sea
to bring up the sharks.*

—Adrienne Rich, “Waking in the Dark”

Harbinger of blue jays
bathing at the crack of spring,

windows open to a world unknown—
man smoking his cigarette below
a furnace
out-of-service since
the revolution failed us.
Please send

Help. The capital
is shutting down for good—

Hub of human nature.
Hub of ordinance

stopping all communication—
nobody gets in, and nobody leaves.

The post office in ruins
carries cadence through our letters,
most likely unanswered,
most likely used as kindling.

Hostile acts of silence,
city after city after city—
this montage
our only message out of

Here. To utter like the willows
among lifeboats, among thieves,

Heavy bursts of flight,
Heavy jewels crown Orion's belt
Hanging in a northern sky
that we may never reach

is prelude at the helm
or something weaker than ourselves.

In Houston I cup lilies in the water,
dip my toes entwined with plastic ties,
forget about the blue jays bathing every spring.

In New York pit bulls bare their teeth.

I comb my dreams in search of tangerines,
but find, instead, pale faces stop and frisk
the passengers beside me on their way to work.

Who can cry out.
Who can deny.
Who keeps *dumping blood into the sea*.

Across the North Pacific, women gather
on the edge of coasts; these would-be pelicans
are dropping from their sea cliffs in the thousands.

In New Orleans willows cease to chant.

After Katrina, Senate, Nation, Trump,
I witness the night. Witness the waking
thunder.

SOPHIA TERAZAWA

THE WAITING ROOM

Remember,
this was supposed to hurt. I mean,

remember what we carried over
from war into these bones, silver stones

or swallows who swoop for cover, here,
this flesh, a waiting room for sonnets

open-winged. Metal loses luster
when it sings. The table, just a bulb

upon a body, is just the light
within its eardrum fading, rather,

legs that hold the woman up tonight,
a flicker, no, the motor speeding

through it like a carpenter who sands
the forest down until we both see

its blackened gums, the saplings who claim
space among a mountain's scale. Some call

this mother nature as they stumble
up her spine but never reach asylum.

Will you wait for me there, too, my love?
I'm tired and may never make the climb.

My knees are conifers. They murmur,
only witnessing the other fall:

Some call this machine *buffalo*,
poke her belly with a stick, wonder,

quietly, if this beast was pregnant
when they shot her down this morning, or,

maybe she was lost already, so
maybe she was blinded, and no one

chose to stun her, rather, make a point.
Instead, they build a room around her,

rest their guns outside it. When she wakes,
two hundred women will be staring

at a swallow on the gurney, and she
will shield her eyes, ashamed of this bird

passing through her thighs, a bullet lodged
inside its throat.

dezir   a. brown

record 10316.

no. this is not about

the crimson spilt – it is after.

once, I dreamed

my spine cradled

Venida’s battered

body across this field

of glass, her hair

black oil swimming

in my shoulders.

I held her tomb

of breath

in my iris: dry,

burnt blue,

crumbled stone.

there are too many

names now,

not enough earth

to swallow them whole.

where is Kalief?

I thumb  d his blood

from her swollen cheek.

where is my

baby boy?

dezir   a. brown

record 12758.

The sun drops its teeth
into a canyon.

I brew them with aloe
and vermillion

until horses crowd
the flame –

a nepenthe for tattered
nerve, ribbon

thin flesh. Carved tails
into the underbelly

of the earth. This is how
I find you in the underworld.

This is the trip every black

NILLA LARSEN

ECLIPSED

I pack myself into pink, candy-striped short shorts, snap low-angle candid, and send them to him. I imagine his *be right back* behind the ramen shop counter, and he heads for the restroom. Leaning over the can, he strokes himself with one hand, the other pressed against the cold, jaundiced tile. His phone on the tank cover. My dazzlebutt on the screen. He spots the gray, soggy mop in the trolley bucket. Its frilly strings spill over the edges like the feelers of a caught sea creature. He's reminded of *Joy*. Jennifer Lawrence. But no. He knows she's from Kentucky and mugs with lips askew like his mother when she's put off. So he calls up the flurry of his favorite shots. Body parts mush against each other, trying to merge or gobble. He quickens to a close up: solar eclipse. Red, raw streaks from swollen corona. His payoff swirls in the pool.

This isn't where I wanted my fantasy to end up. I got vague just there because I don't watch porn. Still, I catch on. Cocks covered in toppings disappear inside mouths. *Slut, cunt* chink like dimes pitched down a dry well. Never *No*. I'm scared my lust is soft as sponge cake. Not bruised or transgressive enough. I fear no man has made love to me. When we fuck, he burrows into my neck. Is he afraid to show his come face? Is my body the dummy for bodies he hasn't entered? Should we smother our thoughts like stowaways? Would it be safe? If he looked at me, would he feel trapped against the glass case of my desire? Tonight, I'll ask him to make love to me. Eventually, I'll slap his paddings and he'll lick the holes he wants, but that's not where we start. We begin slow, Jello-shaky, and we don't look away. Like kids staring at the sun, we gaze until it hurts. We close our eyes and see only the other's image pulse and repeat.

CHARLOTTE COVEY

things my boyfriends taught me

i. you are nothing
more than a mouth, made
to swallow. to breathe
through your nose, gagging.

ii. you were made to plead.
every gesture has a price, every loving
word is bought (you have a body
for a reason).

iii. you are worth hurting. the other girls,
they don't get held
in place. don't get haunting whispers, same as
shouts, dangled in their ears (he took her
to the beach, put you in choke-
hold). *you*, darling, were made for
beating.

iv. how to hide blood,
drips drying on his
favorite razor. how to clean
sheets with him still
sleeping, how to carry every
cursed word in your wrist.

v. how to love is to be
violent. to smack back,
to throttle. to wipe your salt
and yell, 'til maybe *he* covers
his ears— then you are
satisfied, just for a minute.

vi. how to take up space. how to curl
your fists. how to grow
red, how to struggle
mottled knuckles. how to scream
for the neighbors when he gets
too close. how to feel breath
coat your lungs when he leaves.

NICHOLAS LEPRE

BIRD

It was summertime and you walked around Misquamicut and ate lobster rolls or fried scallops, your straightened hair blowing in your face as the sun embraced you, like it knew your name. You liked him—really you did. His patience and his strength. The coarse hair on his long arms. The way he smelled, like cedar and cinnamon. You had agreed to take it slow from the get-go, so slow that six weeks had passed, and things never got serious, so slow that you convinced yourself it wouldn't hurt when you got scared and ran away. You always did.

It was about that time. August was running out of days, and though Jerry seemed sturdy and patient, you couldn't let him in. You felt guilty, leaving him. You were his first new *friend* after his wife passed. His words. Some friend.

He walked you to where your car was parked. He talked about his basketball team, the young men he coached, because it was easier than silence. He was proud of them, he was saying. Honored to know them. So maybe he knew you wouldn't be back. Maybe he had seen through you the entire time. You watched his feet kiss the pavement. He wore the same yogurt-white Nikes every week, the same sneakers he probably wore to practice.

You said goodbye and pretended you'd see him again, and for a second, you tried to think of what you'd tell your daughter when she asked what happened this time. You'd blame it on his sneakers, or you'd blame the distance between Kingston and New London. And then, out of nowhere a bright green spot zipped by and landed near your back tire—a canary.

"That doesn't belong here," Jerry said.

"Must be someone's pet."

It hopped around the asphalt, like it was searching for a contact lens, and then Jerry said it was going to die outside. He got on his knees to pick it up.

"What if it bites?" you asked.

"It's so little." He handed it to you, and you cupped your sticky palms the way you once did to receive Eucharist. It felt soft in your hands and weighed about as much as a car key. You had never held a bird before. He said you had to take it somewhere, animal control or a pet store. Maybe they could help. Its wings fluttered, and you worried you would drop it. You gave it back to Jerry.

Animal control was closed, and your phone said the closest pet store was twenty minutes deeper into Rhode Island. You wanted to go home, because you thought the more time you spent with him, the worse it would

feel to never see him again. He held the bird while you drove. If you were alone, you wouldn't have picked it up or taken it with you. You were a coward—you would feel guilty when you thought of it later, but you would have left it to die. Because what if you took it home and it survived a day or two? What if you built your life once more around something temporary? Of course Jerry picked up the bird—he had courage and principles. That's how you knew he'd never quit, even when things got hard. That he'd never abandon you.

The shopkeeper didn't want the bird. It was male, he confirmed, and it was probably sick. He told you to get out before it infected his animals.

"Do you know anyone who could take him?" Jerry asked.

"You wish," he said, with the impatience of a toddler. "You can take him to a clinic, but he'll probably die before morning anyway."

So Jerry asked you to take him to his place in Kingston.

"What about your car?"

"Aaron can give me a ride to Westerly tomorrow," he said. He bought a plastic cage for \$27 and you drove to his place, while he read a \$16 book about caring for birds.

"We can put a sheet over his cage tonight when he goes to sleep."

"I'm just gonna drop you off," you said.

He read aloud from the book. Facts and information. He said that canaries like music.

"What kind of music?"

"Collaborative songwriting. The Eagles, The Yardbirds, stuff like that."

"Collaborative songwriting," you said and shook your head.

When you got to his house, he invited you in for a cup of coffee. You wondered if he knew he was making it harder for both of you, if part of him was so numb that he wanted to test what he could still feel. But that wasn't him—he just wanted you to stay. One cup, you said, and you got out of the car.

You didn't consider what it would feel like to walk into his home for the first time, because you never thought you would. It smelled like him, and was as immaculate as his sneakers. Every room was clean, every pillow in place. You asked if he had a housekeeper and he asked, what for? So you knew he did it all by himself now, without his wife. It didn't feel lived in. It was an extension of her, maybe, and it felt like he was keeping it just how she'd left it, hoping she'd return. Part of you felt out of place, like you didn't belong in her house, but you knew how badly he wanted you. How beautiful you were in his eyes. He said as much every time you met, he'd go on about a bracelet you were wearing or your dress or the color on your fingernails.

"What should we name him?" he asked.

"He's gonna die. I don't know if you should."

"He needs a name," he said, "he's real and he's here now." His lips trembled, like a boy in a swimming pool.

"Greenie?" you suggested.

"That's awful," he said, gently mocking you, "How about Larry?"

Larry Bird.”

“Of course,” you said, and he wondered about the temperature. It must have been ninety degrees in the house, but he left the air conditioner off for Larry, even though the book said canaries are comfortable at any temperature above 55 degrees.

Jerry laid a quarter page of the ProJo along the bottom of the cage, and pondered how it would be, raising a bird. Caring for it every day.

He got you a coffee and you sat on the sofa and took quick sips that melted the skin inside your mouth. Jerry talked about what it must have felt like to be Larry, to be so small in such a huge world. Larry sat on the uppermost dowel in the cage, barely moving. Had he tasted things he didn’t know existed? Bits of dried bubblegum on asphalt, crumbs of scones and muffins? Had he perched on buildings taller than trees, looking down on everything from a height he’d never known before?

The date should have ended hours earlier—you should have left Jerry at the Haversham and driven back to New London and invented a reason why it never would have worked out anyway. But you didn’t because of the bird. Because of Larry.

“It would give me something to do,” Jerry said. It was the way he said it—as plain as the truth—that made you really look at him. He had a wide forehead and slicked-back salt and pepper hair that covered a tiny bald spot. A face that reminded you of one of the T-Birds, or an amalgamation of all of them. Kenickie at fifty. He cared about basketball, something you’d never given a second thought to. It was his whole life now. And he was so desperate for companionship that he was talking himself into an impossible future with a canary that you both knew would be dead by morning.

But who were you to judge? You were someone who spent two decades dwelling on what she could have done differently to make an awful man love her. Some people never even have a chance at love, you thought, and here was a chance right now, if you wanted it.

“*Wheet-wheet-wheet. Wheet-wheet-wheet. Bht-bht-bht-bht-bht-bht-bht-bht-bht-bht-bht-bht-bht-bht-bht-bht,*” Larry sang.

Jerry played something on the stereo. Something old you’d never heard before with acoustic guitar and a whispery voice. He sat back down beside you on the sofa and you put your empty mug down on the end table. The coffee maker hissed in the kitchen as the living room windows made slanted rectangles of fading, orange sunlight on the hardwood floor. And you’ll never know why it happened then—why you decided to stay, why you grabbed his hand, why the space behind your ears tingled, why there was nothing left to fear. Love is all around, you thought, in the warm air, the soft sofa, and the coffee taste on the back of your tongue. Love is the house he’d kept together for no one but himself. Love is a bird using its final breath to sing.

#

CASSANDRA MORRISON

THE KNOT

I was watching HGTV the other night, because as a twentysomething I spend more time than I'd like to admit watching people discuss the necessity of hardwood floors and the pros and cons of neutral paint colors so that one day I can purchase the perfect "fixer-upper." But in this particular episode, new parents Jen and Jim, were looking to buy their first house in Florida. The older real estate agent was showing them a lovely home with plenty of natural sunlight and windows on most walls. However, when they came to what she suggested could be the nursery, the new mom became horrified as she looked around the room. I could see the look on her face and I knew that she felt The Knot. The nursery would be next to the patio with French doors surrounding it. The young mom said, "I would be so scared that someone would sneak in and steal the baby."

The older woman assured her it was a safe neighborhood.

I would never buy that house either, Jen. But I think it's because Jen and I are both neurotic.

*

I grew up with Stranger Danger and missing kids' pictures on milk cartons. When I was barely walking, we went to the Shoney's Restaurant down the street, which was usually full of grandmothers and day old Jell-O, to be greeted by a life-size Shoney the Bear. He was surrounded by friendly police officers to help guide us through this free, yet terrifying experience of making sure someone had references with which to remember me by if, and more likely when, I was taken. I had my picture taken with Shoney as a keepsake. And then one picture alone, and both my thumbprints rubbed with ink and recorded onto a sheet of paper that was mailed to my parents by the helpful police officers to ensure that I would more easily be found when I was kidnapped. I even got my little laminated I.D. in the mail, too. At the age of three, I put it into my tiny pink purse and carried it everywhere my parents carried me.

The fact that strangers could, and would, drive by and snatch children seemed like an accepted social notion to me. No one wanted their picture on the milk carton, so we learned to turn candy down, turn gifts down, be wary of ice cream trucks, never to talk to strangers, never to pet stranger's dogs, and never to get in a car with a stranger. And if we ever saw a stranger, to tell an adult that wasn't a stranger. And yet, it seemed even with the dressed up teddy bears and the colorful cartoons in the Public Service Announcements, that children kept getting kidnapped and killed. I knew that

this meant that anyone not related to me would eventually kidnap and probably kill me.

*

I was a tiny ballerina once. My mom with her big 90s permed-out hair, took me to the Dancer's Store and bought me the tiny black leotard, the tiny pink tights, and the tiny pink ballet shoes. She tied my fine mousey brown hair up into a bun, looser than most of the other girls' because she's never been good with hairstyles. We had been going to the YMCA for the ballet classes with Miss Babbette for about a month. I liked Miss Babbette. She had fine long hair like mine, but it was gray. She had the same black leotard and pink ballet shoes, too. And everything she said sounded like a song. When she told us to tip ourselves over like a tea pot, I heard, "I'm a little tea pot short and stout, here is my handle..." and pretended Miss Babbette was singing along. The huge room had one wall covered in windows and the other in mirrors, overlooked the outdoor pool. The old oak floors married the old oak handrails somewhere before the mirrors began and sat somewhere vastly above my twenty-four inch stature. It smelled a lot like Thursday's swimming lessons.

On my last day as a ballerina, I learned I was going to be killed. When we all got our assignments for the annual production of *The Nutcracker*, I was handed a little brown mouse nose, which I immediately turned to my mom for help putting on my tiny nose. And then rehearsal began. There were masking tape Xs that me and the other brown mouse noses were to report to. Which I did, happily. We marched around following Miss Babbette as music played, and then Miss Babbette fell to the floor and all the other brown mouse noses did, too. That's when The Knot first surfaced. I felt sick. My entire tiny body seemed tinier. I could feel the big tears welling up in my big blue eyes. I didn't understand. Why were we falling down? Why did Miss Babbette say we had to leave our Xs?

We were dead.

We were all killed.

The other tiny ballerinas with little brown mouse noses simply left the stage to find the snack table with sliced apples and orange juice. As Miss Babbette and my mom used logic to console me, I tried to understand. I tried to stay strong like the other girls. But the tears kept coming. The Knot got bigger. We did another run-through, only this time I ran from my X straight to my mom. She pressed me tightly against her oversized turquoise sweatshirt that smelled more like swimming lessons than laundry. I didn't want to die. I didn't want to be killed. Please Mommy, no.

So we left Miss Babbette instead. My mom told her she was sorry but I wouldn't be able to be a mouse in "The Nutcracker" and she returned the brown mouse nose to Miss Babbette, whom I'm sure, gave it to some other tiny ballerina.

*

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the lord my soul to keep
and if I die before I wake,
I pray the lord my soul to take...
And if someone should take me in the middle of the night,
Lord please let mommy and daddy know where I am and that I love them.*

I remember asking my mom if I could add the last line to my normal nightly prescribed prayer. My mom looked at me horrified, “Well of course you can pray whatever you want, but why would you think you would be taken? Where did you get that idea?” I knew there was no easy way out with that question, I had no idea really. I may have seen it on the news with the Jon Benet Ramsey kidnapping. I didn’t know, but I knew it was a fact.

I loved watching the news reporters talk about the little girl getting kidnapped because they always showed her picture. I was three years older than she was, but we were a lot alike, I decided. She wore brightly colored “Dolly-dresses” like me. We always called them Dolly dresses because we bought them at Dolly Parton stores, or that’s what I thought as a kid, but I realize now it’s probably because they look like dresses dolls would wear. Either way, I loved watching her on T.V. She was pretty, blonde, smiling, kidnapped and killed.

“Don’t be sad, baby. Nothing will happen to you, I promise.”

“It makes me feel sick and then I can’t sleep, so I ask God to help and make sure you know I love you, too.”

“Sick how?”

“Like a knot. “

I thought everyone knew what that felt like, but when describing it to my mom, I had the realization that everyone has at some point: when you learn that something you thought to be universal, is in fact not. As I described the lump in my throat, the way my head pounded and I could feel my eyes getting dry but becoming wet at the same time, the way my stomach hurt inside and outside, the way my skin felt like the nerves hidden underneath were going to fight the mesh covering them until they were outside and the way that my entire chest seemed to be on fire and the air would no longer be enough, she listened and then left the room quickly, absent-mindedly it seemed.

She came back with two orange Zantac tablets.

“It’s just heartburn, baby. Sleep good.”

*

In *Blue Nights*, Joan Didion writes about motherhood and grieving her daughter’s premature death. She also discusses how her daughter at a young age had vivid, reoccurring nightmares about someone she called “Broken Man.” Her daughter told her that after the age of five, she never had those dreams again. Didion says, “The lesson taught by the coverage [of

kidnappings and murders] was clear: childhood is by definition perilous. To be a child is to be small, weak, inexperienced, the dead bottom of the food chain. Every child knows this, or did.” Children are weak. This reality is necessary to protect ourselves, perhaps. But what happens to the fear after the age of five? Maybe it just takes a different form, or for me, maybe it stays the same.

*

The thing about your fears is this: they could actually happen. Everyone I know is afraid of stupid things like birds or sidewalk grates or buttons.

–Buttons?

Yeah. My brother has a crippling fear of buttons.

–What kind of buttons like the buttons that a robot pushes to end our lives in the cartoons? Or the button the President has to declare nuclear war on anyone at any time?

No. Like the buttons on a shirt or a coat.

–Wait but how? How does he have clothes?

He doesn’t have anything with buttons on it that’s for sure.

–But he has three kids, how does he dress them?

They wear pullovers and Velcro things.

–You’re serious?

Yeah. I mailed him a package full of buttons once when I was mad at him. He didn’t speak to me for three weeks.

*

Sigmund Freud believed that all irrational fears were caused by an instinct. A deep-seated issue that taught us to react in a certain way to certain events. Something drives us to react irrationally to something that could be rationally dismissed. Fear, when used rationally, is a self-preservation tactic. Flight or fight. If you see a footprint in the mud behind your house that you live in alone, you are afraid because you know that there could be danger. When a pilot sees storm clouds up ahead, he knows to be alert and check with other pilots ahead, while the plane’s passengers only see the beauty of the oddly formed clouds.

A study from the Department of Justice reported that in 2002, of over 700,000 children that were reportedly abducted, only one hundred and fifteen were taken by a “stranger.”

But with high school came the attack on the World Trade Center on 9/11, and the idea of fight or flight seemed even more relevant. There was no Shoney the Bear to protect us from this Stranger Danger. As I sat in Ms. Hannah’s Honors English class with twenty-five other fourteen year olds, we watched as the images on the screen showed New York City under some sort of attack. We weren’t yet sure what kind. Even Matt Lauer wasn’t sure.

We watched the buildings go down and the terror on the faces on the

screen. Ms. Hannah cried. There were no shrieks of hysteria from me or my classmates. We all sat staring, wondering what it all meant. As freshmen, we knew that there was most likely a thesis, with a narrative arc—conflict, rising action, climax, resolution.

There was none of that as we watched the dust settle on television. The literal ashes of bodies and buildings covering the street. The new fear that taught vigilance, one that suggested that no one and nowhere was safe. My generation began to live with a certain anxiety that no longer would you be safe by saying no to the candy. And no longer would anyone give you the choice to live or die, but rather they would kill you, just because. All of the strangers were once again dangers. As the dust settled over the city of New York, a dust settled into all of our minds that there was no safety in numbers, no safety at all.

The irrational fear that Freud discussed became more rational, in our minds.

*

I live here, or just drop me off here. I just walk down that alley and then that's the back of my building.

—I'm not dropping you off in an alley.

No seriously, it's fine. I walk it every night.

—I can't be the guy who drops you off though, and you get attacked.

Oh so it's not safe here? I know it sounds dumb, but it's kind of nice not knowing when I'm unsafe in the city. I don't know enough to know that it's a bad idea.

—Well, it is always unsafe. The last time I got attacked it was by high school boys and I knew it was going to happen, I could just sense it. And then they ran up to me and shoved a burrito on my head and took my wallet.

Whoa. Around here?

—Yeah. Two blocks, next to the Chipotle. The worst part was that I was on my way to see my ex. It was not a good time in my life.

See now I won't even feel safe in my own alley.

—You shouldn't.

*

Freud also believed that all fear is from one of two places: inherited by parents or from a traumatic event in the formative years. I'm not sure though because I don't know what my parents are afraid of, and I had a relatively trauma-free childhood. I can agree, however, when he says that a child is purposefully taught to be afraid of certain things because they are small and helpless. As a child we were taught to be scared of Stranger Danger because we were not yet capable of determining who was dangerous and who was not. "In reality," he says, "the child at first overestimates his powers and behaves fearlessly because he does not recognize dangers. He will run to the

water's edge, mount the windowsill, play with fire or with sharp utensils, in short, he will do everything that would harm him and alarm his guardians. The awakening of real fear is the result of education, since we may not permit him to pass through the instructive experience himself."

But as we grow into adulthood, how are we supposed to couple this learned distrust for the world around us with the knowledge that we have to go out into the world and navigate for ourselves? We must live through these "instructive experiences" ourselves after a certain age. And we're trusted to.

*

One of the next defining moments of *The Knot* was when I was twenty-two-years old. I was no longer tiny, but I still tied my hair up in a bun, loose like my mom did because I am also not good with hair. It was no longer mousey brown, but platinum blonde. I had the same big blue eyes, and once again I was sure I was going to be killed.

The room smelled like bourbon and cigarettes. I find comfort in the taste of vanilla and cedar that seeps through every sip of bourbon. No matter whether it is a cheap imitation or an expensive barrel-aged bottle, it tastes like life is going to be okay. Justin's parents had enough money so that we drank the nicer bottles usually, in large quantities. The walls were hard to see because of the black out curtain I kept on the one window in the room. I loved to sleep all day and rued the moment the sun tried to ruin this for me, so the black out curtain was my saving grace. I knew the walls were white at night because they always were in my dreams. I often had dreams about spiders crawling over them. I would wake Justin up in the middle of the night to kill them all.

Spiders in dreams means that you feel trapped or entangled in a sticky situation or relationship.

It was Memphis and it was hot. This summer was one of the hottest on record. The heat would've probably killed those spiders, had they been real. The humidity made the air feel like a wool blanket that you can't kick free from. The apartment didn't have central heating or air so nighttime was one of the few times you could even think about touching another human being for any reason. I was dating Justin, who was twenty-seven, 6'5" and weighed close to 235 pounds. After I woke him up to kill the spiders, he laughed and told me I was crazy, but stayed awake and we took advantage of the night air. After all the bourbon we had consumed earlier, it should've been no surprise to me that he passed out. Yet it was. His prickly beard pressed hard against my face and his hands went limp underneath my black lace bra, the smell of bourbon flooded my nostrils and he was snoring peacefully on top of me.

The Knot in my stomach came back, and once again my body felt tinier than ever before.

I was going to die.

I was going to be crushed to death.

In my full bed, with my white Egyptian cotton sheets that naturally

stayed cool, with my black lace bra and matching panties, I could not move. The tears welled up in my eyes once again as I listened to each of his uneven breaths, and felt my own breaths becoming shallower with every exhalation. I tried to use what breath I had left to yell his name, simultaneously trying to somehow push the behemoth that he had become off of what seemed like my now tiny body. His long limbs suffocated my tiny ones. I lay there shouting his name, silently crying, knowing I was going to die.

Until finally, with a jerk of his head, he woke up and rolled off of me, confused as to why I was upset. I continued letting the huge tears find their way down my face. Between hiccupping tears, I begged, please, no, Justin, please don't kill me. He promised me that he would never kill me. He held me tightly and let me cry. He laughed and told me I was crazy, again. But he still let me sleep facing away from the wall so that I could breathe in all the cool that one small fan could oscillate.

*

Freud talks about the “death drive,” or Thanatos, leading to the ultimate fear of abandonment. The death drive is something I can get behind, something that makes the most sense to me because it relies on self-destruction. It's the idea that we are pulled to the pleasure we find in the pain and self-destructive tendencies that eventually lead to death. But this death drive leads to the ultimate fear of abandonment. I've never been afraid of being alone. I live alone, I move to cities alone, I travel alone, I see movies alone, I drink alone, I dine alone. I am alone a lot of the time. But abandonment and being alone are too very different things. Abandoning means there was another factor: a choice, that someone made to never return. Death, of course, is the ultimate abandonment.

I had never really considered death, outside of the context of kidnapping, until my grandmother died when I was twenty-four and I found myself unable to leave the gravesite. Unable to leave her. To abandon her. After she had been lowered into the grave and the other mourners had gone, I stood there staring, wondering what the next step was. Not really for my grandmother, but for me. How do I leave? Once we leave her here, she is completely alone. I am abandoning her. And in that moment I was hysterical and inconsolable.

I don't worry about death as a deeply theoretical topic. I worry about being abandoned, kidnapped, killed because in every one of these scenarios, someone made a choice to leave me, to hurt me.

*

From 865-607-4365

I'm starting to get so weird, I should probably seek professional help —it's like I'm scared for Michael to go out without me like I'm afraid he'll be out and die and I won't be there for him when he dies...and I hate when I know the maintenance people will be at the house when I'm not here because

I'm afraid they'll let a cat out and then a cat will be gone and I won't be able to keep them safe and they'll get run over...I just want all things safe and no one to ever die or go away. Getting out of bed is getting more difficult each day and I want to die before anyone else so I don't have to deal with their death.

Received 8:05 pm.

From 865-705-1808

I don't think this is that strange. I feel this way at least every other day. Doesn't everyone?

Sent 8:10 pm.

*

Isaac Newton's Third Law taught us that forces exist in pairs—every action has an equal, opposite reaction. And this applies to instincts, too, as with Eros and Thanatos. Eros is the drive for life, love, happiness. Thanatos is the death drive, for hate, anger, self destruction. Freud says that life is a constant battle to balance the two, or a decision to serve one and not the other. In Greek mythology, the poet Hesiod claims that Thanatos was the son of Nyx, night, and Erebus, darkness—and a twin to Hypnos, sleep. This description is most interesting to me because these three qualities are what I crave most in my life when I feel The Knot: night, dark, and sleep.

I wonder if the self destruction that our death drive encourages is in direct opposition or supposition to trying to find some control in the chaos. There are very real dangers in the world, things that I should be afraid of. But alas, I choose to be terrified of dangers that don't really warrant the fear I give them. Is this my personal balance between my Eros and Thanatos? To put it simply: I choose not to acknowledge how terrifying the world truly is because it is too much for me to handle, but instead I fear unlikely events because I can indulge these fears, or read statistics that make me realize they are unlikely. I can be laughed at and called crazy. I can, like Jen, choose a different house based on my unlikely fears. These neurotic fears are manageable. The fears that aren't neurotic are not so manageable.

In *Blue Nights*, Didion writes of her own fears, "Once she was born I was never not afraid. ...The source of the fear was obvious: it was the harm that could come to her."

I'm afraid of the harm that can come to me, too.

KAILEE MARIE PEDERSEN

THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO MATRICIDE

I

After a certain age, killing your mother becomes *passé*: you must do it while you are still young and handsome (or beautiful). Otherwise it is an ugly thing done by ugly people. When I killed my mother, my hair still smelled of lit gasoline. Back then I was suffocated by savage arrogance, and I cauterized my wounds with apathy. A young woman is a terror to behold.

Now I am an ugly person, but not because I killed my mother. I am ugly because I sing off-key in the shower, because I leave cookie crumbs in my bed sheets, because I cannot translate French while drunk. I am ugly because in second grade a girl with perfect blonde hair asked me why my eyes were so slanty and I could have killed her.

I do not remember much of what I was like as a child otherwise, or even what I was like a few years ago, except that I quit smoking cigars to take singing lessons and was madly in love with Friedrich Dürrenmatt. I suppose I was melancholy when I was young, but I remember this in the way I remember seeing a Mozart opera with an attractive man sitting next to me—which is to say not very well at all.

My Japanese professor, ever eager to practice new grammar, once asked if high school was difficult for me. I said, Yes, I wasn't very pretty. But I conjugated it wrong and accidentally said, Yes, I am not very pretty. Yes.

II

My childhood is defined by the suicide of history. When I was quite young, I lived in a Chinese orphanage that had a ninety-percent death rate. In the 1990s the orphanage in Nanning had “dying rooms”, where they would leave the sick babies to die alone. When I read about this, I first thought that perhaps there was another Nanning in another country that had eaten its progeny. But there is only one Nanning, and there is only one orphanage with one unfortunate girl who looks very much like me but is not quite so perfectly vicious. Thus I tell myself that this little doppelganger cannot be me, a woman who has incinerated her younger self with cigars and profanities, who has never read Barthes but still quotes him with lachrymose condescension.

I do not know why I survived. This is the arcane tragedy of my birth: what remains of me grew up in the shadow of an unfinished murder. And ever since, I have been searching for my would-be assassin, the woman who could not finish the job. The woman who exists only as a reflection, shattering across the surface of the Yangtze.

When the sun is low in the sky, I imagine her singing to herself in the rice field. Her back is always turned; she could be as dazzling as one of the Great Beauties. She could be as ugly as I am.

The past is a foreign country: they speak Mandarin there. But I am doomed to speak only one language and to watch Rome burn, incandescent, gorging myself on betrayal. And though I cannot build boats, I will drown my mother, or she will drown me first in the Zuo River, before I learn how to speak Japanese and before I learn how to swim.

III

In honeybees, supersedure naturally occurs near the end of the summer. Beekeepers may hasten this process by clipping off the leg of the reigning queen bee. Her workers will detect that she is no longer suitable, and prepare a queen cell for the impending regime change. Eventually, a virgin queen bee will emerge from the new cell.

During supersedure, the worker bees will surround the old queen in a procedure known as “balling”. They will sting her until she dies. The virgin queen will watch, her antennae high.

Bees do not feel emotions as humans do. This is true. But the bees of Virgil’s *Georgics* must sing their threnodies in beautiful Latin, must write their epics in honey and the second declension.

Supersedure and *matricide* are both derived from Latin roots.

Worker bees can only sting once before they die. But the queen’s stinger is not barbed, so she can kill as many times as she desires. A virgin queen will use her stinger to kill her sisters, the pretenders to the throne.

IV

There is a reason why certain young women are called “queen bees”.

V

I have no sisters.

VI

I did not become a woman gently, with a cotillion or an ill-fated betrothal. I think sometimes that I have not become a woman at all, but a palimpsest, a corrupted text desperately in need of emendation. At nineteen I had a greyhound body and wrote mediocre poems about mediocre things. On a few occasions, I crawled out of bed and studied Ancient Greek. On even fewer occasions, I crawled into bed and studied Japanese.

With impending womanhood came an unbearable sadness. Once I turned twenty, I could no longer be a teenage girl in the technical sense, the kind of girl who knew everything (or at least pretended to). I have failed in many respects as a young girl, and am continuing to fail as a young woman.

So far, I have not managed to murder my birth mother. Though sometimes I dream of it, with fire and sword and hatred. I am the snake that Clytemnestra birthed, with coiling black hair and a smile like a knife wound.

My friend shares a birthday with me, leading us to argue incessantly about which mythical siblings we might have been in another life. After deciding that Romulus and Remus were too obvious and that neither of us knew archery and thus could not be Apollo and Artemis, we settled upon Oedipus and Polynices. The two sons of Oedipus, they are fated to kill each other as they contest the city of Thebes, their joint inheritance. Oedipus drives Polynices from the city, who returns with six friends and attacks the seven Theban gates. Thus Aeschylus has his *Seven Against Thebes*; thus Statius has his *Thebaid*.

My dearest Polynices' parents, unlike mine, are Chinese.

In the end, it is as it should be: he is Orestes. I am a lacuna.

VII

You must kill your mother in the aorist tense. You must kill your mother before the finale of the symphony, before you are no longer a young woman and have instead found yourself obliterated by age. You must kill her before she buys a *labrys* at the hardware store and reels in your father with a fishing rod. If you do not do this, she will kill you first. Or perhaps she will make your father do it with an ancient sword, ten fists long. Perhaps she will speak to your father in the language of Murasaki Shikibu. Perhaps she might even cry.

VIII

When people ask what city I am from, I say I was born in Nanning. But sometimes I feel as though I am talking about a Lagrangian point near Jupiter, a single speck in the vast ocean of space. Asteroids at Lagrangian points between the Sun and Jupiter are named after characters from the *Iliad*. I read the *Iliad* for the first time in the ninth grade.

I did not understand it. What thirteen-year-old girl would understand the weeping of Achilles in his tent, or Agamemnon's spite? The narrator asks the Muse to sing of Achilles' terrible wrath, that brought so much grief to the Achaeans—the closest thing to true rage I had experienced by then was the murderous anger at my birth parents, which I had meticulously redirected to a frenzied, undisciplined writing style.

My freshman year of college, my poetry professor said he enjoyed how “wild” my poetry was. I was told my writing was “baroque” by other students, and in one case, “too Chinese”. I do not scatter references throughout my work to prove how intelligent I am—my ceaseless arrogance already tells me what I want to hear—but because this is the only way I know how to write about myself, through a glass darkly, with Greek and Latin and Japanese and classical narcissism. My desire to write is obsessive beyond comprehension, just as is the desire to kill what is left of my history.

There is no other way to describe the woman who has gouged herself into me. Only with Rococo chairs and bright sea windows, and Electra's bitter rage. I have translated parts of the *Iliad*, though I still do not understand all of it. But when Hector sees Astyanax on the wall of Troy and weeps: I *know*.

IX

André Breton says beauty is an infinite train that is always exiting the Gare de Lyon but can never truly leave. "Beauty will convulsive, or it will not be at all," he writes at the end of *Nadja*, which is less about Surrealism than it is about an extramarital affair. I read it one summer spent in New York City translating Ancient Greek, and some of the lipstick I was wearing rubbed off on my thumb and then onto the pages of the book. Then I wrote my friend a several-paragraphs-long email complaining about Breton's treatment of women, which he received with good humor.

When I say that I want to kill my mother, I am only expressing a primal desire toward abjection. If I kill my mother, she cannot have any more children. The train will never exit the Gare de Lyon; it will stay suspended forever on the last paragraph of *Nadja*. She will never replace me. This is all I have ever wanted.

When I say that I find Breton's writing about gender subpar, I am really saying: I would let you be André Breton if you wanted, if you asked, and we could wait for a train that will never come at the Gare de Lyon together, me with my collection of pretentious books, you with your razorblade distaste.

I returned *Nadja* to the library. I am sure it still has my lipstick stains on it. This is how I write history, littered with disfigured books.

When we fought, I told André Breton that my mother left me and so I have come to understand that I will always miss the train at the Gare de Lyon. I expected nothing better nor worse from him. Our stories are like all of the other stories—this is the glory of intertextuality.

André Breton and I have since reconciled. I will not be his Nadja, although perhaps it is best never to be anyone's Nadja at all, and to make other women your Nadjas instead. And each will be like all of the other Nadjas, hungry and convulsive, a rather limp afterthought to *The Magnetic Fields*.

Parting will be convulsive, or it will not be at all. When I cannot sleep, I think of the moment the 1 train pulls into the 125th Street station, and you can see the edge of the sun.

X

The narrative of matricide is really about self-immolation. If Deianira dies, then so do you. I have come to know this after reading Sophocles and Tacitus, who taught me nothing about the real world except that I would be very pleased if I were never forced to read Latin again. The death of Nero's

mother was *nefas*, not because it was evil but because it was inelegant. Kagutsuchi did it the best of all: setting himself aflame in the birth canal, how clever. History is unkind to amateurs.

I think about the technicalities of murder while absentminded in class. I do not care about my father very much, beyond hoping that he too has also died. Once I dreamt about his death, which was satisfying in a melodramatic way. I do not know how he died except that he paid Charon two obols and fell out of the boat. Cheap Athenian revenge is the sole purview of undergraduates—Ph.D. candidates have the distinct luxury of nailing Cicero's hands to the Rostra.

I slept excessively when I read Cicero in the original language, just as I slept very little when plotting the murder of my mother. I cannot afford a flight to Nanning—she may be living elsewhere. She may be poor or rich, married to my father, a widow, have more children, have no children besides an ill-fated daughter. Perhaps she bought herself a high, high tower and eats wild peaches dipped in honey. Perhaps she lives in a small house by a river, and if she had turned back I could have married a village boy and died hopelessly young.

I will never have children. Matricide runs in the family, I'm afraid.

XI

What did Alcmaeon say when he unsheathed his sword?
What did Kagutsuchi say to his father's whistling blade?
What did Medea tell her children, with her bloodied hands?

XII

November is National Adoption Awareness Month. The only thing I remember about National Adoption Awareness Month is that I was translating *The Women of Trachis* for my Ancient Greek exam and writing a paper involving Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*. The paper received a B+ for a mediocre analysis of classical reading, hastily welded together and salted generously with Bourdieu.

I know more about Cicero than I do about my birth mother. He married Terentia and then divorced her, and his daughter Tullia died in childbirth. He wrote a treatise about friendship, and so we know of his closest friend, Atticus. Mark Antony had him killed in 43 BC.

I have been told you can find out everything you need in the world from books. I have read multiple tragedies in Ancient Greek, several hundred dull lines of Ovid, and a few asinine picture books about the joys of forgiveness. But I know that there is no joy in forgiveness. There is only the slow satisfaction of watching Agrippina drown. Not even all the water in the Pacific could satisfy me; not until my history has become marginalia, my mother apocrypha.

When Tullia died, Cicero was consumed by grief. He wrote his *Consolatio* for her, which has since been lost.

When I kill my mother, I do not think I will be consumed by grief. Perhaps it is better to be vengeful than grieving, especially when you are a young woman. You can still cling to the afterthought of your beauty. You can still sprout wings and join the Furies.

All roads lead to Nanning. They have paved over the ones to Rome.

XIII

I have lied to you, terribly. I apologize. I cannot write a guide to matricide, because I have not yet killed my own mother. I am too much of a coward to face her. I will be a coward until I die.

Sixteen days after my twentieth birthday, it was announced that China was planning to repeal the one-child policy.

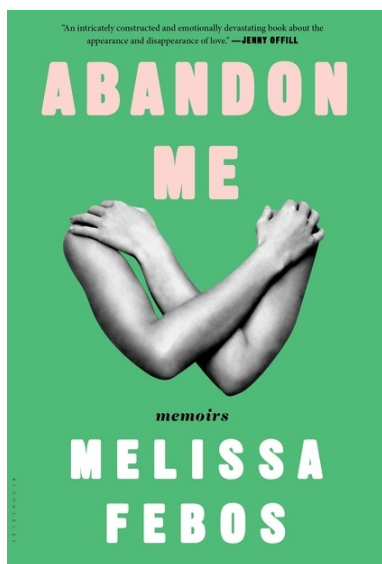
The best part of me died twenty years ago in Guangxi Province. And I will live with that knowledge for the rest of my life.

XIV

To find your mother, you must go to the forest and buy a bell from the prince of foxes. It will cost one eye; you must cut it out yourself. Then you must ring the bell and throw it in front of you. The road will rise up through the earth to greet you. You must ride a white charger east until you find a glass tower, and then you must climb up a dead girl's hair to see your mother speaking to a silver mirror and eating wild peaches dipped in honey. You cannot look her in the eye. She will turn you to stone. Or you must hold her down as she transforms from a lion to a harpy to a bear and back again, until you realize that all the fairytales were written by the hands that strangled the king and turned his daughters into swans.

And you have lived through this story before, hundreds of times, but you utter the same words and you carry the same blade and you ride the same horse. And over and over again at the base of the tall, tall tower next to the red, red tree you will see a beautiful dead girl with beautiful dead hair, and you will hear your mother singing in the same mutilated language. You will want to say, Your child has come to fulfill the prophecy spoken by the winds and the moon. I must kill you now in this tall, tall tower with the glass door and the red tree.

But all you will be able to say is, It's me. Goddamn you, it's me.



Abandon Me by Melissa Febos

Bloomsbury, 2017; 308 pp,

Reviewed by Gardiner Brown

If you'd like to pick up a memoir this week, let it be *Abandon Me* by Melissa Febos. This striking and masterfully crafted book is built of eight essays ranging from twelve pages to nearly two hundred. Each is satisfying on its own, but they make up something more evocative as a collection. Though I have not yet read Febos' first memoir, *Whip Smart*, which tells the story of her time as a professional dominatrix in New York City, I will have to now that I've read *Abandon Me*. Even as I finished this book, I wanted to be reading more of Febos' clever, moving, and highly intelligent voice. I wanted to see what other surprising narrative leaps she could guide me through with skillful precision. *Abandon Me* is the sort of memoir where, as I read the last lines, I sighed in intense satisfaction.

In her memoir, Melissa Febos explores what it means to be abandoned, to abandon oneself to something else, and to abandon a loved one. In one essay, Febos writes about her childhood as a sea captain's daughter, the insecurity of having a father who is always coming and going for months at a time and a mother who is never any less heartbroken over his absence. In another, we are given an intimate description of Febos' tattoos, in

particular one of Billie Holiday; it is a copy of a photograph of Holiday in a time period when she had given herself up to heroin, a feeling Febos knows. In *Abandon Me*, the subject of abandonment itself inhabits the sort of layered interpretability of a tarot card: Abandon can mean loss or heartbreak, but it can also mean collapse, surrender, revival, or relief.

At one point in the final essay, Febos meets her half-sister and compares the two of them to the child's game "exquisite corpse." She and this estranged woman each contain the unseen part of the other made seen by their meeting. The essays in this collection fulfill a similar function, each piece unfolds, revealing another facet of the others. At nearly two-hundred pages, the collection's final essay, "Abandon Me," could be a book on its own, but by being alongside so many other essays addressing the same subjects, it takes on a greater affective power. The reader enters "Abandon Me" already knowing many of its characters and familiar with the conversations Febos is having with herself.

Febos' psychotherapist mother, her married lover, her sea-captain father all appear throughout the collection, but are seen at different angles from one essay to the next. These changing portraits are part of Febos' sleight-of-hand: she uses her format to do the work of revealing each person in many dimensions. The essays are beautiful stand-alones and the characters well-developed, but the collection offers greater depth. The effect is similar to that of the Wunderkammer or "cabinet of curiosities" that Febos' lover gives her: a chest built of small compartments, each with its own strange, little object inside.

Febos takes notice of the ways that our early relationships inform our actions and reactions later in life while at the same time resisting pathologization of herself or others. She sees her failures and those of her loved ones not as symptomatic but as causal: different choices could have been made, but Febos makes sense of the choices that were. She strikes the delicate balance between acknowledging personal responsibility and understanding how one action begets another, one abandonment making way for the next. "Pathology comforts in its reductiveness, but it is no true authority, just a bunch of words invented by men" she writes in "Labyrinths," an essay that focuses on her addiction as well as her younger brother's bipolar diagnosis. "Labyrinths" was one of the essays I found most personally moving in the collection: though her brother appears less frequently in the rest of the work than any of the other supporting characters, in this essay her deep tenderness for him is so moving and so apparent.

Abandon Me is a compelling read not only for its subject matter and characters, but for the joy of reading Febos' lively non-fiction. Every shift in setting or subject feels more like a poetic leap than a narrative turn. The connections she draws feel natural in unexpected ways. She lingers on the sound and feel of words, playing with the musicality of language. Her metaphors are startling in their lyricism and still somehow exact. She inspects herself so deeply and so unflinchingly that she makes her raw self-analysis feel sensible and even necessary to the craft. Her honesty is so unyielding that reading her work can feel dangerous, as though the reader shares this

experience of dissection with her, as though by bearing witness to her darkest parts we might awaken those parts within ourselves.

Febos lays much of herself bare in this collection. She tells stories that illustrate her own capacity to hurt or abandon those around her, such as her father, The Captain, for whom the book is dedicated and who she reveals was deeply hurt by the stories she told in her first memoir. She explores her history of addiction and voracity in various forms. It's plain in the writing that Febos' goal here isn't to make a voyeur of her reader but to find understanding.

I once saw essayist Leslie Jamison respond to being asked if she ever worried about writing "just another addiction memoir" by wryly pointing out that this is precisely the point of the recovery journey: your story is not unique because it is a story you share with so many others who are also in recovery. A similar notion is perhaps implicit in Febos' essays where her own story is viewed as just another iteration of one that has passed down through her family, albeit with a different ending. Febos has not written "just another addiction memoir" in that this is not a memoir about addiction; addiction is but a small gear in the elaborate work she has pieced together. Instead, she historicizes this part of herself, makes it a kind of belonging. And it is precisely these questions of belonging and to whom and what we belong that drive Febos' story. So often, it's difficult to neatly tie together all the narrative threads at the end of a memoir in a way that is both satisfying and untrite. Febos manages this masterfully.

ARTIST FEATURE

MARISSA GONZALEZ



MARISSA GONZALEZ

Title: *Spoken Words*, 2017

Medium: Photo Manipulation



MARISSA GONZALEZ

Title: *Audience*, 2017

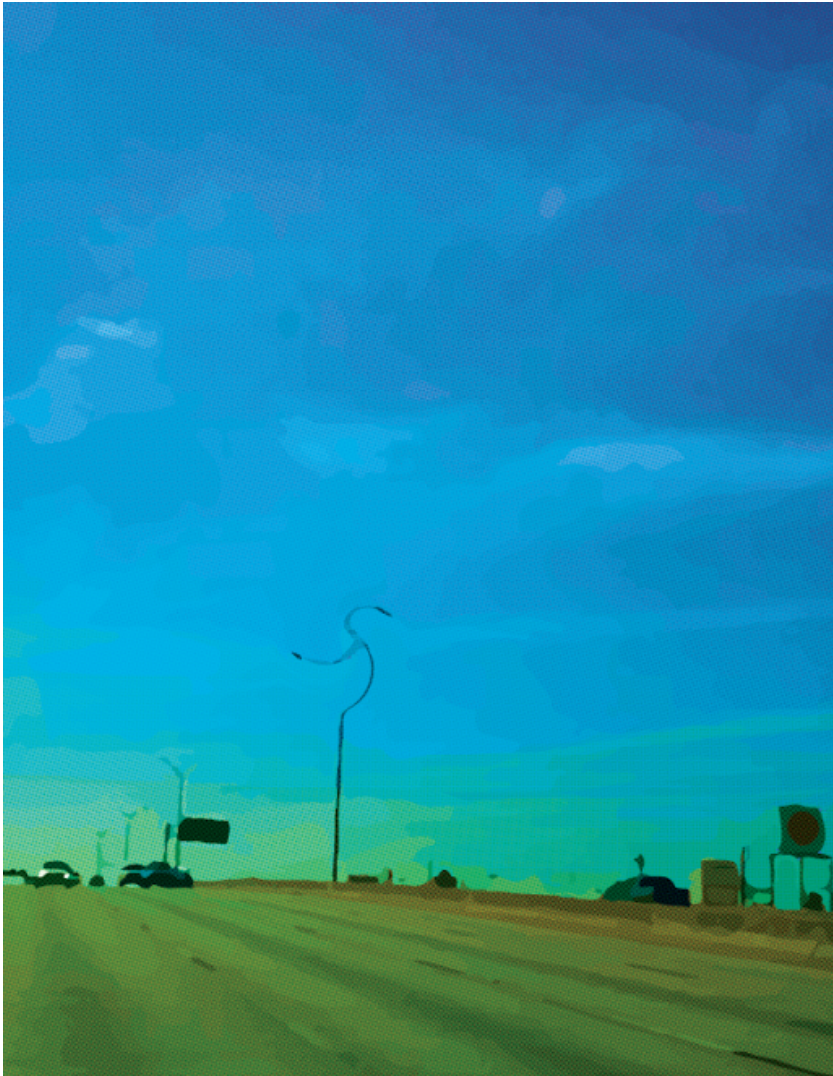
Medium: Photo Manipulation



MARISSA GONZALEZ

Title: *Before Death IV*, 2012/2015

Medium: Photo Manipulation



MARISSA GONZALEZ

Title: *Before Death V*, 2012/2015

Medium: Photo Manipulation

ARTIST STATEMENT

Art is an ever-changing process based upon the necessity of the artist. For me, using photo-editing programs to create art was one of my first mediums besides pencil and paper. MS Paint was used frequently to design shoddy Mary Sue characters for my shoddy copy-and-paste stories. Later, Adobe Photoshop established itself on my dad's computer, and my ability to express myself expanded. Photo-editing programs are a classic to me now, like pencils and pens. Using them allows for the easiest way to express myself.

Before Death IV and *V* are from a series based off shoddy cellphone pictures that I took in the months before my grandma passed away. She was a major influence on my life, and her passing held onto me for years. She did not get to see me, the first of her grandchildren, graduate high school, and she will not see me graduate college. The series was created by putting each picture into Adobe Illustrator years later and distorted to become a surreal, strange world that could still be recognized to viewers. They were created in a time when I finally gained closure over my grandmother's passing, and were meant to signify that step past my previous life.

Spoken Words and *Audience* were made in a completely different part of my life—in a time of certainty. Both were taken during a reading and open mic; settings which have set a ground for which I want my life to lead. These are not as personal as the *Before Death* series, yet they play off of my anxieties on reading in front of an audience, which I have yet to do. I prefer to be in the background; to be part of the system that allows others to show their work. To take photos, too. *Spoken Words* takes out the reader and leaves you with outlines of who they are, while *Audience* emphasizes the audience as the gesso, once again, takes away the reader.

CONTRIBUTORS

Emma Bolden is the author of *medi(t)ations* (Noctuary Press) and *Maleficae* (GenPop Books), as well as four chapbooks. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Best American Poetry*, *Poetry Daily*, and *The Best Small Fictions* as well as journals such as *Gulf Coast*, *StoryQuarterly*, *The Rumpus*, *The Pinch*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Conduit*, and *Copper Nickel*. Her honors include a 2017 Creative Writing Fellowship from the NEA and the Barthelme Prize for Short Prose. She serves as Senior Reviews Editor for *Tupelo Quarterly*.

Caleb Braun is an MA student in poetry and a Teaching Fellow at the University of North Texas. His work has appeared in *Gulf Stream*.

dezirée a. brown is a black queer woman poet, scholar, activist and self-proclaimed “social justice warrior” born in Flint, MI. They are currently a MFA candidate at Northern Michigan University, and often claim to have been born with a poem written across their chest. They are also an Associate Editor for *Passages North* and Poetry Editor for *Heavy Feather Review*. Their work has been recently published in the anthology *Best “New” African Poets 2015*, *Duende*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, *Razor*, *Public Pool*, and *Luna Luna Magazine*. They tweet at @deziree_a_brown.

Gardiner Brown graduated from Hampshire College with a concentration in Creative Writing and Cultural Anthropology. He now lives in his hometown of Austin, Texas.

Conor Burke holds an MFA in poetry from the University of Maryland and is currently a Teaching Fellow and Ph.D. candidate in poetry at the University of North Texas. He has served as Managing Editor and is currently Production Editor at the *American Literary Review*. His work has been supported by scholarships from the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conferences, and has found a home in *Bellevue Literary Review* and *Birmingham Poetry Review*.

Charlotte Covey is from St. Mary's County, Maryland. Currently, she is an MFA candidate in Poetry at the University of Missouri - St. Louis. She has poetry published or forthcoming in journals such as *the minnesota review*, *Salamander Review*, *The Normal School*, *The MacGuffin*, and *Emerson Review*. In 2015, she was nominated for an AWP Intro Journal Award. She is co-editor-in-chief of *Milk Journal*.

Marissa Isabel Gonzalez is a native Houstonian finishing up her studies in creative writing and studio art at the University of Houston. She is a writer and an artist, and has been an editor for *Glass Mountain Literary Journal* since Spring

2014. Currently, Marissa is working on the first drafts of a novel, and a collection of fiber art.

Alyssa Jewell studies poetry at Western Michigan University where she served as assistant editor for New Issues Poetry and Prose and is currently poetry editor for *Third Coast*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Best New Poets 2016*, *Cider Press Review*, *The Columbia Review*, *Fifth Wednesday*, *Grist*, *Meridian*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Pittsburgh Poetry Review*, *Quarterly West*, and *Zone 3*, among other publications. She lives and teaches in Grand Rapids.

Meghan Lamb currently lives in St. Louis and teaches creative writing at Washington University. She has two novellas *Silk Flowers* (Birds of Lace) and *Sacramento* (Solar Luxuriance) and short stories in *The Collagist*, *DIAGRAM*, *Necessary Fiction*, *PANK*, and other places.

Nilla Larsen holds an MFA in poetry from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Her poems are featured in or forthcoming from *Nimrod*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Waccamaw*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, and elsewhere. She received the 2016 Poetry Fellowship to attend Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing. She tweets @nillalarsen.

Jessica Lee is the poetry editor of *Sweet Tree Review* and holds a BA in Creative Writing from Western Washington University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *American Literary Review*, *BOAAT*, *cream city review*, *DIAGRAM*, and *Fugue*, among others.

Nicholas Lepre's stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Threepenny Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Minnesota Review*, and elsewhere. Nicholas was a finalist in the 2015 *Blue Mesa Review* Summer Writing Contest and *The Florida Review's* 2016 Fiction Contest. He recently completed his first book, *Pretend You're Really Here*. He lives outside Boston, Massachusetts with his wife and newborn son.

Cassandra Morrison received her MFA in creative non-fiction from Roosevelt University in Chicago, Illinois. She has just finished a book of hybrid fiction and non-fiction that discusses Southern culture, femininity and social neuroses. Her work has appeared in *Chicago Literati*, *Entropy*, *The Establishment*, *The Stockholm Review* and *LitroNY*. She is from the South, gets lost frequently and is a little bit basic.

Kailee Marie Pedersen is a senior Classics major at Columbia University. She was adopted from Nanning in 1996. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons* and *Identity Theory*, and is forthcoming in *TRACK//FOUR*. She is the recipient of

a 2015 Individual Artist Fellowship in nonfiction from the Nebraska Arts Council. She spends most of her time working on her in-progress essay collection, singing opera, or playing video games. Her favorite Greek tragedian is Euripides.

Leah Schnelbach earned her MFA in Fiction from Sarah Lawrence College in 2012. Her work has been published or is upcoming in *Anamesa*, *Speculative Fiction 2015*, *The Crooked Timber Symposium*, and *Electric Literature*. Her short story, "Bracelet," was awarded an Honorable Mention by George Saunders in *Lumina's* 2013 Fiction Contest. She is a staff writer for *Tor.com*, a pop culture website focusing on science fiction and fantasy, and is one of the founding editors of *No Tokens* journal.

Sophia Terazawa is the author of *I AM NOT A WAR* (Essay Press, 2016).

Kelly Grace Thomas is the winner of the 2017 Neil Postman Award for Metaphor from Rattle and a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee. Kelly was also a 2016 Fellow for the Kenyon Review Young Writers Workshop. Kelly's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in: *Nashville Review*, *The Boiler*, *Sixth Finch*, *Muzzle*, *Rattle*, *PANK* and more. Kelly's chapbook, *Zersetzung*, was a finalist for the 2017 Lorien Prize from Thoughtcrime Press. Kelly works to bring poetry to underserved youth as the Manager of Education and Pedagogy for Get Lit-Words Ignite. She lives in Los Angeles and is working on her debut novel *Only 10,001*. For more of her work, visit www.kellygracethomas.com

Paul Tran is a Pushcart Prize & Best of the Net-nominated poet. Their work appears in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Cortland Review*, *RHINO*, which gave them an Editor's Prize, & elsewhere. Paul received fellowships & residencies from Kundiman, VONA, Poets House, Lambda Literary Foundation, Napa Valley Writers Conference, Home School, Vermont Studio Center, The Conversation, & Palm Beach Poetry Festival. They're the first Asian American in 19 years to represent the Nuyorican Poets Cafe at the National Poetry Slam & Individual World Poetry Slam, where they placed Top 10. Paul lives in Brooklyn, where they serve as Poetry Editor at The Offing & Poet In Residence at Urban Word NYC.

Danielle Zaccagnino is a poetry student at Texas State University. She was the winner of the Sonora Review's 2016 Essay Prize, and her writing also appears in *Word Riot*, *The Pinch*, *The Butter*, *Puerto del Sol*, *SAND*, *weirderary*, *Italian Americana*, and *Rust + Moth*. Danielle is from Queens, New York.