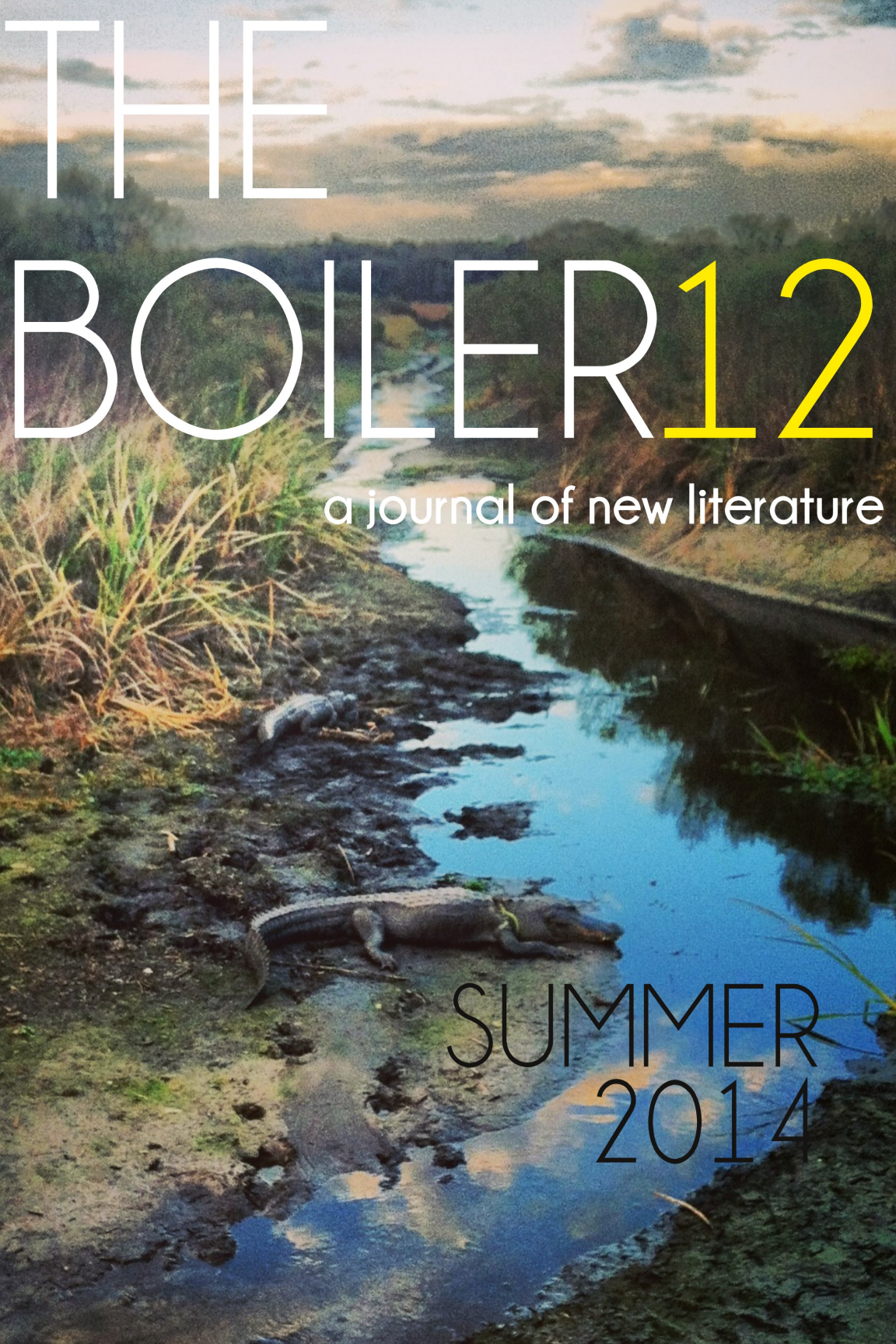
THE
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a journal of new literature
SUMMER
2014

THE BOILER

SUMMER 2014

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THE BOILER

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KRISTEN KECKLER

HERE WE ARE

On the third anniversary of my grandmother's death, after grief turned the corner to longing, my mom and I traveled to the "old country." My gram was born in Italy—Sicily, actually. (Gramps too—she'd outlived him by fourteen years.) We both missed the old gal, difficult as she'd been. Even as I write this, I raise my eyes to the ceiling and say, "Sorry, Gram." Let's reword that. My grandmother was the family matriarch, a tough, loyal soul who wore her heart pinned inside her mink coat—safe, but still accessible. She'd sailed to New York as a girl of ten, after the mafia murdered her father—he'd refused to pay protection money. She'd spent her teens working in textile factories, became a precise seamstress and talented embroiderer: the only one in the family who worked through the Great Depression. Later, she was the main employer for her extended family when she bought a dress factory in the Bronx. She was a hard-nosed haggler with a scissor-sharp tongue, and always spoke the truth even if it wasn't helpful or kind. She was the kind of person that you wanted in your corner—I recall as a child literally hiding behind the ox of a woman when my mother was mad at me. Gram had lived with us for fifteen years, and I'd come to learn that she was as needy as she was independent, a contradiction I'd somehow learned to reconcile.

So in the summer of '97, I'd said to my mother, "I want to find my roots." At that point, any mention of the old country was enough to get my mother all misty-eyed.

My mother doesn't travel. Or fly. She'd been to Italy once, with my grandparents when she was nineteen, and they'd gone by boat—this would've been 1964. The last time Mom had been on a plane was twenty years earlier, when I was three—to Florida. Mom's always been a workaholic homebody, a bit neurotic. Plus with my grandmother upstairs, it had always been easier not to travel than to explain where you were going or have her tag along.

On the plane—she'd insisted treating us to first class for her first flight in decades—Mom was a bit spastic, closing her eyes, clutching my arm, and dramatically mumbling "Oh God!" during takeoff, turbulence, and landing.

But when we met up with our tour group, she was all, "wonderful flight, piece of cake."

We looked for signs of Grandma in inky lagoons, among locals and tourists, daily churchgoers and grotesque gargoyles, between flying buttresses and in tiny espresso cups. We didn't really know what we were looking for, exactly. Sometimes we'd be standing on the steps of some elaborate cathedral, and Mom would randomly call out, "So, Ma, we're here. You happy? You want me to light a candle to St. Anthony or what?"

Though my grandmother hadn't been particularly religious, she had been known to bribe her favorite saint from time to time: a fat check to his namesake orphanage in exchange for a successful bypass surgery or a good day at the Atlantic City slots.

*

Within a day or so, Mom quickly made it clear her view that most Italians are hustlers. They want to charge you for water, for bread, to change a tablecloth for Christ sake! She inquired about prices in her nasally New York yenta voice. We walked around converting lire to dollars in our heads, Mom pulling out a calculator from time to time to double check.

Off the Piazza della Signora, in Florence, we perused the street stalls, leather purses hanging like assorted meats at an old Bronx deli. My mother fingered a cheap knock-off. "You like Gucci?" the vendor asked, to which she snorted, "Yeah—real ones." The vendor feigned ignorance.

"I want black market Gucci. Capice?" My petite, raven-haired, Roman-nosed mother waved her hands like an agitated little bird.

So the vendor said, "Wait. I bring-a someone." A few minutes later, returned with a well-dressed man, smoking a cigarette, who gestured us down a street, an alley—Mom was pumped, a sparkle in those onyx eyes—into the back door of a building, up two flights, small apartment, door locked behind us.

Mom whispered, "Shit!" Her eyes panned over satchels and hobos, clutches and totes.

"I hope I brought enough cash."

She examined the soft leather, the shade of linings, placement of zippers and stitches, the luster of hardware—all the various ways to discern the real thing from an imitation.

She listed friends she'd promised souvenirs, asking me if I like this one for so and so. I was in my hippie no-bra Birkenstock phase, carried a fabric pouch in Rastafarian colors, could care less about labels, but tried to be helpful. She bought four.

On the way back to the hotel, we passed Neptune, his huge stone head cocked to the left, eyeing us, our packages.

*

The tour group: a dozen plump retired couples, all Tommy Bahama and camcorders; a pair of guido newlyweds from Jersey; a grandmother with her teenage grandson; a teacher with her quiet mustached husband; and a single Cougar cha-cha—"Bar-bar-a." The bus driver was a twenty-five-year-old gorgeous, ponytailed Fabio—I had a boyfriend back home but I couldn't help looking—though it embarrassed me when Mom and Bar-bar-a openly swooned.

From Florence to Verona, Mom bickered with the tour operator, Roberto—tufts of curly gray hair sprang from the neckline of his shirt—about his inflexible schedule, six a.m. wake-up calls, extra "excursions" with hidden fees. The schedule was intense, sure—eight cities in ten days—but I didn't mind that someone else was making all the arrangements, even grew to anticipate when Roberto would say, upon our arrival in a new place, in the half-bored, mellifluous baritone that only an Italian could perfect: "*Ecco ci qua*!" Here we are.

But it was his tone that bothered Mom, his brusque, pompous little Gestapo threats (about leaving tardy tourists like Mom behind) that made the vein on her temple bulge. Mom liked to tell Bar-ba-ra that he talked down to us because we were women traveling alone, (she *had* a husband, after all—Dad was home with my teenage sister). Mom recalled how when she was in Italy when she was nineteen, my grandfather had had to walk behind her to keep the men from pinching her ass.

So outside the bus, Mom was telling Roberto we would not be taking the extra tour to Pisa, and Roberto said, "You stay behind, okay, you still have to pay for the whole package if you want Pompeii."

Mom upped the ante, said something along the lines of: "I want to talk to the person in charge!" To which he said, "*I* am in charge," rolling his eyes.

She had started it, for sure, but I felt a protective instinct towards her rise up inside me. At the same time, as I steered her back onto the bus, I was already weary of the petty drama, just wanted her to have a good time, relax.

But something about her couldn't, and her nostrils flared when she told Roberto, over her shoulder, that she, too, was Italian. *Sicilian.* Emphasis hers.

*

In Saint Mark's Square, birdseed hawkers wore pigeons on their heads. The birds rose and fell like notes on sheet music. Nearby, a child tossed seeds and the birds converged, fluttering in a mottled cloud. Mom covered her face, shrieking, "Eeeyyy, Ohhhh." Mom has always been afraid of birds, a phobia somehow linked to a bloody pheasant her father brought home from a hunting trip when she was three.

As Mom backed away, karate chopping the air, I couldn't help but giggle, and she started laughing, too, as I snapped photos.

That night, in Venice, I went off with the nineteen-year-old kid from our tour—a college student, and the only person remotely in my age range, beside the bus driver. We'd had some wine, were a little tipsy—at our group dinner, we polished off a bottle left behind on another table. Joern and I sat by a bridge, talking about bands we liked while watching the gondolas glide by like medieval kayaks, the canal black as oil.

When we returned to the hotel, my mother was frantic. She hadn't heard me when I told her I was going for a walk with Joern.

Of course she'd assumed I must've fallen into the lagoon!

*

Italian siesta put a screw in Mom's shopping agenda. Don't these people want to make money? she'd ask, glaring at the aluminum shutters pulled down over storefronts. After the Sistine Chapel, we'd skipped the

extra tour of the catacombs to walk around, soak in Rome on our own. We climbed the Spanish steps, tossed pennies in the Trevi fountain, grabbed slices of pizza—thin, crisp crust—when we got hungry.

Drinking cappuccinos in a café near our hotel, an old man approached, spoke some English, asked my mother if she was Italian. "My parents were," she explained. He was clearly enamored with my mother, told us he was a painter, invited us to his apartment to show us his work.

"Not too far," he said, pointing across the street. He was warm, sweet, and for a moment, I saw my mother let her guard down—she looked at me expectantly, wanting me to make the call. So I nodded. He seemed harmless—wouldn't be able to take us both down.

His tiny apartment was wall-to-wall paintings: canvasses covered every inch, even in the kitchen. Abstract and impressionistic, oils and watercolors. Flowers and fishes, fruit and women, bridges and buildings. Who needs another museum, right? I joked. He made us coffee, put cookies on a dish. He dug out a big art textbook, flipped to a page, pointed down to a painting, and then pointed to it on his wall; to the name printed in the text, to himself. He was a professor, he explained, but never married.

"Art is like… jealous mistress," he shrugged. "Chased the good ones away."

*

In Sorrento, we stayed in a luxurious hotel—room service, balconies, and fluffy yellow robes provided on hangers. Mom was ecstatic. We wore the robes down to the pool, then realized we were the only sunbathing canaries. (Robes were for room use only.)

Late afternoon, we stepped onto our room's private balcony for cigarettes. Neither of us had ever smoked openly in front of my grandmother, but in the few years since her death, it had become a common vice. We puffed away, soaking in views of the sea, the bobbing white sails, felt like rebels for skipping Roberto's "excursion."

"Who needs to sit for three hours on that god-forsaken bus to see some crooked building when you have views like this," Mom said—she'd been to Pisa with my grandparents, nothing special.

Only when we tried to go back in the room did we realize the

door had locked behind us. We were trapped on the balcony, four stories up. The sun was setting, the air growing chilly, and we were in bathing suits.

So I climbed over the three-foot walls that separated the long row of balconies, made my way to the very end, feeling like a bugler, all adrenaline, thinking maybe I could climb down.

But there was no way down. And no one around. So I went back, and after a while, we spotted a couple leaving the pool, called down to them.

They spoke English! Sent a bellboy to release us.

For the rest of the trip, Mom and I were suspicious of balconies.

*

Red-tiled roofs. Brooding Vesuvius. Stoops blooming with potted plants. A Colosseum full of napping cats. Nuns selling rosaries. Gelato in cones. Golden domes. Fist-sized lemons. Stained- glass windows. Crumbling archways. Pastas in shapes you'd only dream of. I understood why Grandma, a proud, naturalized American, always insisted, pumping her fist, that Italy was the best country in the world!

When the tour ended in Naples, my mother and I flew to Sicily —little plane, coach—to look up her family. She'd booked the Mondello Palace, where she'd stayed during that visit when she was nineteen. "Oh, it's exquisite! The chandeliers! The staircase!" My grandmother, she said, though a penny-pincher in old age, had never spared any expense when it came to hotels.

But when we got there, it was mold, weeds, and rattling ACs, busted furniture and stained, threadbare carpets. Mom was confused. Upset. Indignant. Could this be the same place? Did she get the name wrong? Should we try to book a different hotel?

"It's ok," I said. "We'll make the best of it."

So she called her second cousin, Tedino. He's vice president of a bank. My grandmother always claimed she came from a family of bishops and lawyers, unlike my grandfather, whom she said came from a family of shoemakers. Weeks before to the trip, Mom couldn't find Tedino's phone number. Then, she remembered that Grandma never kept a book, just scrawled numbers on the wall of her pantry.

So Tedino picked us up to take us to Montelepre, the village

where my grandparents were born. (There's a brief mention of the town in *Lonely Planet*, basically that it's only noteworthy for its bandits.) He and Mom hadn't seen each other in a quarter of a century, but he acted as if it were yesterday, gently chastised us for not staying at his house. Packed into his little car with his wife and son, we drove through Palermo—though the beaches were beautiful, the city itself was underwhelming—sooty, shabby-chic, and ordinary, sort of like our hotel. There was something different from the rest of Italy I'd seen, something I couldn't quite place until I saw soldiers cradling machine guns in front of several civic buildings—that was when I felt an eerie prickle, chill. *Mafia.*

Beyond the city, narrow country roads, scrubby hills peppered with vineyards and olive groves; the air was hot and dry, carried the hint of citrus, eucalyptus.

Grandma's village bustled with chickens and skinny dogs, men playing bocce ball, women hanging laundry, mopeds squealing around tight corners. A road sign read: Via D. Pizzurro. Named after my grandfather? Then, in a little apartment off the square, we're presented to cousins twice, thrice removed. Gram's cousins' children. Stout older women with big calves packed in pantyhose like sausages. We sat in a tiny living room crammed with tiny formal couches. They clucked and chattered, all chhs and shhs. They beamed! So happy we came!

They're up close, examining me and Mom, side-by-side, different angles, trying to figure out if any part of me is theirs. My mom apologized, "She looks like her father, the German," but they waved her away. She's only half right—I have my dad's long face, high forehead, but Mom's jawline, mouth, eye-shape. At times, I could look like I belong to neither of them, one or the other, both.

The cousins smiled. Though my mother understands Sicilian dialect, she doesn't speak it. But she tried, shyly. Tedino's son helped translate: who is alive, who has died.

Then Catarina showed me a little room wholly devoted to figs. Dark purple bulbs dry on wood slabs, sills, and shelves. She pointed out the window—across the way, my grandmother's childhood apartment. The shutters were closed; a handwritten sign announced it was for rent.

Though they'd only had a few hours notice of our visit, you can

bet they cooked a feast. We eat, eat, eat. Farfalle with smoked salmon, eggplant caponata, marinated tomatoes, several kinds of salad, crusty bread and olive oil, pillows of fresh mozzarella. (Somehow they'd heard I was a vegetarian.) We'd eaten some outrageously good food in Italy, but this, by far, was the best. For dessert, an ice cream cake from the freezer. Assorted fresh fruit, and, of course, figs.

We left in the dark, back down to the city, Tedino chattering away, asking Mom questions through his son. The road seemed steeper at night, weaved through a series of switchbacks, and suddenly I felt a sharpness at the back of my throat, my cheeks dampen with tears. As if what I found in that village had already begun to slip away, sucked into the stars.

*

The pool at the Mondello Palace was small and cloudy, the lounge chairs plastic and cracked, but it was a beautiful day so Mom and I sat and had coffee, watching the Mediterranean beyond—turquoise, sparkling white crests. A few old men played cards while my mother chatted up the groundskeeper. Finally, someone who remembered *her* Mondello Palace! He confirmed that yes, this was the same hotel. There was a fire back in the 80s. Bad insurance. Never completed the restoration.

Oh, it was so magnificent, she told him. Yes, he shook his head sadly. He knows.

It isn't until much later that I finally understand why my mother was so upset by the Mondello Palace. That she'd been expecting to enter that magnificent lobby, and for a moment, glimpse her parents under that crystal chandelier, checking in.

JUDSON SIMMONS

GRAYING

You find a single gray hair
on my head, standing out
like the tallest boy
in a yearbook photo.

"Hold still" you warn,
and pluck from the weeds
a single, white rose.

You release my hair—
it slips from your fingers,
becomes just another thread
to the fabric of the floor…

I am getting older, as expected,
but nothing announces
the changing of our lives
like the frailty our bodies
concede and expose.

I will mourn this single gray hair.

I will scan the floor
so as not to forget,
yet forgetting is just another piece
of our stories.

Though this gray hair
will not be the last,
I will preface their existence
with only kind words.

And long after I am,
long after I come to rest,
this single hair will remain—
swept aside and forgotten.

ALLEN FORREST

Jack Kerouac

oil on wood, 8x8, 2013

PHILIP SCHAEFER

HYPNOSIS

We close our eyes to arrive in the middle of a field.
A field with holes rifled through aluminum cans
and dogs whose eyes have been mistaken
for cans. We grow up all over again:
the road's gravel in our skin, the drunk sunset
drilling crimson holes down the sky's open throat.
In the distance a coal train crawls across these hills
like a glinting necklace. Grass makes sauce
of last fall's pumpkins and a horse falls to its knees
before the changing season. When we open our eyes
we will surely die, mountains only as large as our thumbs
will allow. We cannot say anything. We are so immense.

PHILIP SCHAEFER

EVENTUALITIES

I've been running a thumb
over my gums all week, tonguing

sugar, curious but not yet
ready to give in to wonder.

Jack bought a sack of powder
and I've never smoked the Christ

out of crystal. It's true,
my zodiac is a razor-fish

and tonight I'm going to shoot
for blue. What happens happened

forever. The bowling ball blow,
nitrous ecstasy. Anything with a hose

that isn't green. Down the street
a pair of shoes dangle like wet

laundry from telephone wire.
A kid without teeth runs

through the bushes, the fence,
pretending his hands are fire

trucks. His mother's eyes
turn to glass each afternoon,

two moons slow to orbit,
and I know when she reaches

for the mail she often forgets
who he is. Don't we all.

PHILIP SCHAEFER

ANOTHER LANGUAGE

Someone once told me
if I could dream it I should
drink it. So I let the word boil
like black, unlit oil in my throat,
waiting for anyone to strike
a match. Tell me you could
hate me. Tell me and I will turn
into a bouquet of white and blue
flames. Last week in Montana
a woman took a cattle brand
to her stomach. The small,
not-quite-body inside her body
pinched out by the red fingers
of hot metal. I have an addiction
to stories like this. I cannot sleep
anymore. My eyes light up
like aquarium fish in the night.
Give me the farmer who slow-bleeds
his pigs, the old professor who cuts
harmonica slits into his wrists.
Let me feed off. Let me hate
and be hated. There are
immeasurable qualities
in the dark. A face without
a hand to trace it. The voice
taken from the mouth, saying
come with me and don't look back.

JESSICA BARKSDALE

LUCK

Her mother's real estate agent Tina planted four bars of Irish Spring soap under the box hedge near the curb, emerald green rectangles barely visible in the mulch. When Zora first spied them, she was sure someone's shopping bag had toppled off a car top or out a pickup bed.

"Not hardly." Her older sister Kat snapped open the front page of an old *San Francisco Chronicle*. "It was on purpose."

"Is Tina crazy?" Zora asked, picking up a crystal butter dish and placing it in the middle of the national news (strikes, fracking, oil spills). They had started in on the china and silver in the dining room. Surrounding them, the smell of sharpie, mildewed paper, bubble wrap. Tomorrow, the POD clanged down in the driveway was being picked up, taking their mother Zelda's things to a storage site until, Zora realized, she died.

"Maybe," Kat said, shrugging. "But she swears by it. 'Luck of the Irish,' she says. Keeps the bars there all the way to the end of escrow. One time she was shamed into digging them up two hours before the close, and the deal folded like a house of cards. So there they'll stay."

Kat rolled up a rose glass vase in newspaper and then bubble wrap. Zora felt the weight of all their mother's belongings in her next inhale, fifty years of things no one used anymore: butter dishes, salt cellars, rose glass pitchers, crystal glasses, candy bowls, sterling silver pie servers. Plates from places like Valley City, North Dakota and Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Who went there and why? Keepsakes from Zelda's mother and grandmother, Delft china plates, porcelain candlestick holders, German creamers and sugar bowls. Zora's own sugar was in the kitchen in the pink and white bag, lumpy and flicked with coffee from dipped–in teaspoons. Her creamer was the milk carton in the fridge. Even when Zora entertained guests, she just thwacked it down on the table.

And it's not just the china, but the sideboards and the hutches

and buffets. The dressers and accent tables and dainty chairs, too small for anyone weighing over one hundred pounds to sit on. Doilies, crocheted tablecloths, tatting from the 17th century. Heavy, wooden frames around faded-out landscapes. Towels and sheets and draperies. Things from before the before and in the years just before right now, hand towels still in Macy's bags, napkin rings from Target with their price stickers stuck tight. A Ziploc bag full of rubber bands.

"Why are we packing all this?" Zora asked. "It doesn't make any sense."

Kat ignored her, taping together a circle of paper around an appetizer plate. "She doesn't want to sell any of it."

"How would she even know unless we tell her?" Zora asked.

Kat continued to work, picking up the first piece of the Christmas china. "She'll know."

"She doesn't even know my name anymore," Zora said. She held up a tiny porcelain girl, her eyes black, her ponytail in a permanent moment of swishing movement. These figurines had a name. Gunnels? Hummel's? Zora shook her head and held up the girl by her hair. "How will she know where this is?"

"I don't want to fight anymore, okay?" Kat looked up, her face determined, grim, the older-sister face Zora had been looking at for almost fifty years. "And when, you know, it's over, we just send an estate guy over there to buy it all."

Zora sighed, licked an index finger, flicked free a sheet of newspaper to shroud the tiny girl.

A whole life, boxed up, ready to sell when the life was over. At least, Zora thought, it will all be organized. At least they won't have to go through it all again.

Later, Zora was in traffic, headed toward her lover, though she hated to use the term *lover*. No word worked, though she was partial to the term *assignation*. But that word was romantic and couldn't hide the fact that she was cheating on Dave. Had been for awhile, almost two years.

The car behind her honked, Zora jerking to attention and accelerating through the Shattuck and Vine intersection, driving toward

a small restaurant, Davinci's, the place they usually met. It used to be that in the week before a date with Henry, her world was bright and clear, her focus on the minute she would see him. She found herself smiling more, trying harder at home with Dave, laughing at his puns (she hated puns and jokes and wisecracks) and going to the movies with him when he asked.

But her skin! Her breath, high up in her chest, almost as if she were panting. She could practically feel her blood moving through her veins, keeping her alive just for that second of touching Henry's hand, kissing his lips, nose, forehead. And best, the part when he looked up at her as she approached, smiled, pushed his glasses back against the bridge of his nose. His eyes, dark brown, blinking, expectant. His eyebrows dark against his pale skin. The freckles on his nose and cheeks, Irish, but his voice is Southern. He says her name, "Zorah," the end of her name more h than a.

And the later part, when he took her to his house and removed her clothing, made love to her just until the point she realized there was an edge and maybe she'd be willing to fall off of it. It wasn't the gyre and heat of her body, really, though she always responded, the prickle of flesh, the rattle of breath, the clutch and moan and relax. Her toes curled, her arms outstretched. Yes, there, fly.

But the other edge, one Zora couldn't really look at. Sometimes, her eyes closed, her face pressed against Henry's chest, his heart and hers a drum section in her ear, she imagined the darkness, the place she could step over, her foot hovering in nothing but space and air. How would it feel, she wondered, to just fall?

An hour later, she'd be driving back home, up the hill, through traffic, Dave in the backyard watering his roses. Later, his martini, the whine of the evening news, the glow of his computer. The whispering buzz of cedar waxwings in the pyracantha bush outside the open kitchen window. The repetitive clicks and turns and taps as he locked the doors and windows before bed. His hand, always and for years, pressed on her ribs as he held her, not knowing that another man had been inside her just hours before. His breath—part snore, part exhale—filled the room around them. His heart, slower and heavier than Henry's, a dull *thump thump* she could see in his throat, even in the

dark.

Henry is from Virginia and speaks as though every word is a ripe fruit, something to savor and linger over, sentences full of taste and fragrance. Zora met him at a literary reading for a West Virginian author coming through town promoting her novel about mountain top removal mining. Henry sat in the in the front row, leaning back in his seat. Zora found herself paying no attention to the author that her book group had gathered to see. No, it was the man with the dark curls and intense gaze. The man who later asked questions, knew the small towns in the story, wondered about the miners, the ecology, the potential for a sequel.

When Zora was ahead of him in line to get her book signed, she worried about the skin of her neck and shoulders, her hair, her clothing (dog hair? Lint? God forbid, dandruff?). Though she was talking with her best friend Rose, she imagined her ears were flicking like a horse's, listening for any excuse to turn around. Finally, he cleared his throat, and she glanced back, smiled.

"Great reading," Zora said.

"Her work is remarkable." He had freckles like the star map she was supposed to memorize in her college astronomy class, each spot separate from the other, distinct. More like planets. Mars. Venus. Both pinned to the night sky.

Zora felt an irrational, idiotic almost–jealousy flare hot at his comment, and then she remembered the author was a lesbian. In fact, her partner was assisting her in the signing, holding out the opened books. Maybe they were married. Twin silver rings glinted in the overhead light.

And it was possible—though she could pick up one dot of vibe, as she usually could with gay men—he liked men. Here he was, at a feminist bookstore, reading a feminist, environmental tract.

"My—" Zora stepped back, indicating Rose, the other women standing in front of them, clutching their novels like hymnals. "Book group. We're all here. We loved it."

She was gushing, so she swallowed back the adjectives and adverbs in her throat. She forced her heart to slow, her blood to clot,

her breath to stop.

The man smiled, his teeth white, his dark stubble dotting his upper lip.

"Maybe now you'll travel east and save mountains."

Zora laughed. "We don't have to go farther than Nevada. Work some magic over the gold mines. They don't take off mountain tops, but they dig in. Pit mining."

The man nodded, his book in one hand. Loosened tie, shirt one-button opened. Lips red.

"True enough," he said.

"Or maybe we should just protest the Google buses and gentrification," Zora said. "Why start with Nevada."

He laughed, and of course, it was gorgeous. He held out his free hand. "Henry."

"Zora," she said, watching his eyebrows raise.

"As in?"

"Not even," she said, offering, "My mother's name is Zelda."

"As in?"

"Not even close." Zora said.

"Literary by accident," Henry said.

"Everything by accident," Zora said.

And like a collision, an earthquake, there were aftershocks. Omissions, white lies, total fabrications. There was collateral damage, though two years after that first meeting (he giving her a card, she emailing him), none had yet come to light. At least, not yet. Dave hadn't found out, though he'd asked sometimes about her afternoons, the scent of lilacs (Henry's spring yard, a sprig behind her ear), the receipt on the kitchen floor from Davinci's: asparagus with garlic and horseradish, roasted lamb shoulder, banana cake with caramel frosting. Her new cashmere sweater, the silver bracelet, the glitter on her right cheek after Halloween.

Zora's two children were in college and just-graduated, away, gone from the wreck of the family home, her mother had forgotten everything, and Kat just didn't want to know. But the damage, Zora knew, was waiting.

Because Zora slept with two men, she knew the geography of both their bodies. In Henry's bed, she let her hand follow his arm, her fingers rising up over his shoulder and then slowly on the curve of his neck. Henry slept like a child, motionless on his back, breathing lightly out his nose. He smelled like pepper and cloves and warmth. Sometimes, Zora imagined he smelled like the open pages of a new book.

In her bed at home, she only looked at Dave out of habit and necessity as he was an active sleeper, the terrain temporary, violent with quick, sudden turns and shifts. In his youth, Dave had been strong, buff, muscles pushing up from his bones, visible under clothing, even dress slacks.

But now, fifty, he was sagging in the middle like a stuffed animal loved to puffy softness. He pulled her tight, and she breathed into his smell, clean, something like his office, the air dry and tight and full of ink. Other nights, the garden wafted from the crease in his neck, off his forearms. Sage or lavender if he'd been out pruning in the twilight. Mostly, it was both, the office and dirt; sunlight and moon shadow; herbs, lilies, and printer cartridges.

"Who do you love more?" Rose had asked once, the only person who could ask, the only person who knew about Henry. Zora had never been once tempted to tell Kat, afraid of her sister's silent scorn. At some point, Zora could have told her mother. But Zora would have missed the old angry glances her mother used to shoot like knives.

Are you quite out of your mind, that angry past mother would have said. *Do you have one clue what you are doing?*

So what was the answer? When Rose asked again, sipping her wine, waiting, Henry was right there on the tip of Zora's tongue. Of course, Henry. He was the one she imagined walking down every sidewalk. His was the call she wanted to take, settling down in a cozy chair, light spilling on her as he said, "How are you, my love?"

But love was more than a sidewalk and a chair. Henry was not really in her life. He was a digression, an interlude, a fugue state, a dream, a wander through the forest or a slog through a night desert. They had nothing connecting them but their attraction and a few objects. There was only a shimmer of mist holding them together, the

potential to never see him again in every aspect of every second she spent with him.

This could be the last time we have wine, she would think.

This might be our last kiss, she would believe as she held him tight in his doorway.

But no matter if she and Dave separated or divorced, he was the father of her children. He was the man she grew up and then older with. He'd seen her in all her important stages before crone started to set in. He'd watched her stretch marks grow and her breasts swell with milk and then sag. He'd followed her schooling and then career. He'd held her when her father died. She'd been with him, too, when his mother and father died. When he was struggling at work, when he was promoted. They'd fought in every place they'd ever gone to together. Made love, too. They neither of them could stop talking about what graduate school Zach should apply to or when and if Mariah should marry Justin before or after her graduation from physical therapy school. They'd both hated Zach's girlfriend Lily, thrilled when Zach solemnly announced Lily had moved to New Jersey for school.

If love was an excavation project, an archeological dig, a museum, she had to admit, one hundred percent, she loved Dave.

Henry was almost done with his novel. He'd been in the midst of his first draft the night he and Zora had met, heading out to the bookstore for inspiration or a reality check. "I thought I should throw in the towel," he said. "Taking a year off! Who did I think I was, anyway?"

The author with her mountain tops (and meeting Zora, he admitted much later) had made him continue onward with his story about a World War II veteran and his daughter, pages of which he had read aloud to Zora. With a pang, Zora knew the story was good, enough to take him out of the house and on the road, just like the mountain top author. Finally, he was almost, certainly, just about done, his writing group handing over the last notes just the month before. After he finished these final revisions, he was going to start searching for an agent. He was lucky; a friend of a friend, a local San Francisco agent, had already shown some interest. And now, as she walked past

his desk on her way toward the front door, she saw the stack of manuscript pages, circles and x's on the top page. A big *Change* written in his loopy script.

She turned back to where Henry sat at the dining room table reading the paper, her lips still feeling his forehead where she'd kissed him. He was doze–y from bed, hair mussed, glasses on the end of his nose. He looked up, winked, and she turned and left his house, walking under a bower of wisteria into the sunlight.

Zelda had only been in the nursing home three weeks when she threw a pillow at a nurse. Kat had to drive down to mollify everyone, including Zelda. But the pillow was only the first flung object. Now Zelda had been moved to the Harmony building for constant supervision. The good news was that Tina called the same day of the pillow throw to tell Zora the house had five offers.

"Like magic!" Tina said. "You and Kat need to meet me at the office to decide. But you will both be thrilled!"

The woman talked like a bird, all up notes and shrieks. Zora imagined her holding out her wings and high stepping in a semi–circle mating–dance ritual.

"What about the soap?" Zora asked.

"Don't you dare touch it!" Tina actually shrieked and then calmly, "later. For now, leave it."

Zora and Kat took the second to best offer (all cash, 15–day close, a cute .jpg of the happy couple), and then went back to the house with Tina to go over some final fix–its.

"Before the inspections," Tina said. "You know, save us some sorrows."

As Zora followed her and Kat through the rooms in which she'd spent her entire childhood, she wondered if it was possible to save yourself from sorrows. If sorrows were out there, she thought, they'd eventually find a way home.

"But there's nothing wrong with the house," Kat said. "They already bought it, right? They know what's wrong, don't they?"

"Living room carpet," Tina said. "They don't want it. Let's have it ripped up. Work those French drains outside. More gravel. Rake.

Mow. Picture perfect. A better looking house always gets a better inspection. So one more go over, and *voila*! No one will ever guess a thing."

Later that week, after all the final cosmetic work was done, Zora came by the house before visiting her mother. Tina had called to say the first inspection was impeccable. "Just like I told you!" And there wasn't going to be much to get in the way of the house sailing through to close.

Zora stood next to her car parked in front of the house. Someone had already come by and put up a SOLD sign. The front lawn was clipped to a sheen. Wind wafting with overwrought jasmine. Sycamore leaves the size of giant's palms flapping vibrant green. How many times had she played on this lawn? Climbed this tree, the bark peel-y and brittle and slightly dangerous, her sneakers barely able to find traction as she clung on. Once this house was gone, there was only her and Dave's house to count on. After that, no landmarks.

Zora sighed and turned to open the car door, noticing one of the packages of Irish Spring sprung free from the mulch, the box weathered, waterlogged, and crinkled.

She remembered this soap, the commercials from the 70's, the lusty couple or maybe lusty man taking a shower outside, at least one of them talking in a fake Irish accent. Both dark-eyed, light-skinned, glistening.

Walking to the curb, Zora bent down and picked up the squishy box. She brought it to her nose. It smelled as it used to, sharp and green and soapy. Standing up, she clutched the box and looked at the house. Sold. The sign said so. The inspections had cleared. In a week, the house would officially belong to another family, signed and sealed, another whole world of lives going on inside. People fighting and growing up and making dinner. They would tear down walls and paint others. They would lay a new carpet. They would dig up the concrete patio and plant lavender and bunch grasses. There would be parties and celebrations and wakes. The sun would rise and set and everything would go on for so long and with such predictability that Zelda and Zora and Kat would fade from this house's memory. Other children

would one day sell it for their parents, some other now aging adult standing on this same curb under this same tree wondering what building would ever mean as much.

Zora squeezed the box in her hand.

Dave wasn't home when Zora returned from the nursing home, and she was glad. An hour after leaving her, Zora couldn't stop seeing her mother's blank face.

"Do you know my name?" Zora asked.

"Do you know your name?" she tried again.

"Where are you?"

"What do you want?"

For a second when the television went on, Zelda looked up sharply, that cutting glance Zora knew so well. At that flash of presence, Zora wanted to leap in, push it wide, tell her mother everything. She would admit to her affair. She would tell Zelda how sad it was to sell the house. She would complain about Dave. And Henry. How he'd never promised her anything. Not even the next time they'd see each other. Every single meeting was a surprise, unplanned until just hours before. How she purposefully kept seeing someone who didn't like her enough to love her. Her job, the kids, her life. All her hopes, and dreams, and fears, the things Zelda had known about since Zora was little.

In that second of *What can you possibly tell me?* Zora felt loved and relieved and safe. Her mother was back.

And then she wasn't.

Now, the house empty, Zora flicked on the kitchen lights, breathing in the air that was stale from shut doors, unfettered with cut herbs or wafts of dirt from the open back door. There was no whine of computer or television, no whoosh of shower or dishwasher, no hum of dryer or oven.

"Dave?"

Zora walked back to the counter and dug her phone out of her purse. No message. No text.

She wandered the rooms, turning on more lights as she passed them, outside slowly shimmering to twilight.

"Dave?"

She came back into the kitchen and picked up her phone, suddenly smelling something green and fragrant, a freshly cut herb from the garden, a cutting from the local park's botanical garden, Dave belonging to a club that met weekly there. She looked up, sure that Dave must have walked in with a basket of greens. But it wasn't arugula or thyme or sage. It wasn't the limb from a rare bush he would later graft. It was the soap in her purse, wet and redolent, Irish only in name and totally out of luck. She picked it up, her breath in her throat, the empty house all around her.

TARA BETTS

DONALD GOINES' TYPEWRITER

The last ink we shared was blood
running down, through my keys
meandering between bits of brain

and skull, even I never saw the killer
who left my writing partner like
a wasted ellipsis...

sprawled across my splattered
last page. I only heard a click.
The safety off. His hand punch-
ing the letter "P" on white paper
rolled over the platen, round as
the "O" of a last gasp he stifled,
resolute as a sharp "P" he struck

before he thudded a numb heavy
mass against me. I only heard
the clacking as if it was me
magnified to thunderclap.

TARA BETTS

PHILLUMENY

Oversized glass candy jar, lid intact.
Matchboxes and matchbooks inside,
embossed with colors and cities, varied
as stray nights in restaurants and bars.

You—a box to open, a cover to flick
between my fingers. Confident spark,
you speak wattage and Fahrenheit without
noticing. I'd collect boxes of you at hotels,

off counters, from fishbowls, if I could.
You strip of combusting grit, whose
press and drag jumps, dips me in red
phosphorus, flashes me to a charred

wooden bone that needs more than latent
flares displayed on a high shelf, tart
covers like candy hinting at sugary heat.
The tails of smoke waver, incomplete.

JULIE BROOKS BARBOUR

YOUR GAME

At a ball game, I asked a coach the rules of baseball
and the colors of his team. Bored, you put on lipstick.
The coach explained every move while yelling at his players.
You adjusted the shoulders of your jacket. The coach and I
exchanged phone numbers. You pulled me away, towards
downtown, where we visited your friends at a dance studio.
While they practiced, you recited the names of ballet
movements, some of which I knew. You looked pleased
to teach me something and asked if I planned to call that coach.
You said you would never date a jock and mentioned
you knew some artists who were single, painters
and writers, men who created important pieces of art
with their hands. What about a carpenter or an architect,
I asked, but you didn't know any. What about a mechanic
or plumber, I asked, since they repair important objects
with their hands. You frowned. You wanted someone
specific for me. You thought you knew what I needed.
I didn't mind dating a coach, I said, even if
all he talked about was baseball, even if that was all
he lived for. There would be passion and practice
involved in the living and the telling.

JULIE BROOKS BARBOUR

YOUR DOMESTIC

While I stayed at your house, I never saw you
emerge from the bathroom fresh from a shower
or from your bedroom, your hair wild with sleep.
I never saw you cook or eat in the kitchen.
One evening I came back in time
to see you brush your teeth beside your son.
I told you about a poet's house I'd visited
where poems were written on ceiling tiles
and walls, words covering every white space.
I looked at the walls of your living room
and imagined aloud what you could write
but you wanted to leave them untouched.
You preferred poems in your head
and on the page where they belonged.
You wanted nothing in your life
that wasn't fully formed or in its place.
I thought of graffiti on city walls and bus stops
but wouldn't mention them. I went back to the room
where I slept and didn't see you the next morning
when I left for good. You left no note saying goodbye,
no words outside your head or mouth.

ALLEN FORREST

Woman On Table

oil on canvas, 24x18, 2012

M. ELLEN WENDT

SUGAR BABY

Sitting shotgun in Crystal's tiny Datsun 210, I shift my legs and ass around subtly, trying hard not to make blatant my discomfort, but five or six empty Mt. Dew two-liters under my feet make it impossible. I try to put on my seatbelt but it's broken. An empty Twizzler's bag, a Milky Way wrapper, and a bag half-full of Tootsie Pops stuffed between the front seats crinkle with every shift. Crystal opens a grape Tootsie Pop and sucks on it while she drives. Gabby, Crystal's three-year-old, sits in the back seat, her bobbing red curls hanging in her face as she focuses intently on trying to get the wrapper off her own Tootsie Pop. She looks up at me and smiles. I smile back. I shiver inside. Her mouthful of rotten old man's teeth throws me every time. We're on our way to get them all pulled. As we ride the swerving river road past corn fields dripping with dew and acres of shimmering elm, with no sound but the sucking of sugar, I suddenly want the window open. I need freshness.

We get to the clinic late so we have to wait extra long. The waiting room perimeter alternates grown up chairs and those little orange scooped-out ones I remember from Sunday school, which are all filled, and the overflow of children sit dwarfed in the big black chairs or scattered around on the floor. There are no men in the waiting room, only women and children, and I imagine the world exactly like this during war, with nothing but women and children and candy and rotten teeth. They have Gabby drink a cup of a slippery Valium potion, and we go back to the waiting room to wait for it to take effect. Gabby slowly tips over in her chair, and we upright her. She speaks with a slow drawling lisp: "Maawwmaaww. Iaee waahhna reeeeaaad thith thtooorreee." Everyone giggles and shifts. Finally she walks as though someone has removed all the bones of her little legs. It's time.

Three blue-clad doctors lay Gabby on a small cushioned table and tell her they are going to "tuck her in tightly like at night when it's really cold." Gabby says that's when she sleeps with Mommy and

Daddy. Crystal asks no questions and says okay no matter what they say or do. They cover Gabby's tiny body in a blue sheet and belt her in across her legs, her hips, and her chest like a criminal; the only thing left unwrapped is her freckled face and her thick auburn curls. She fights her sleepy eyes and the straps like a puppy trapped in a pillowcase and when she loses, she aims heavy wails directly toward her helpless mother.

Crystal cries for 45 minutes, silent wetness and an occasional snivel while the dentist shoves his large hands into Gabby's tiny mouth. Small and crumbling, her teeth are difficult to grip. Three nurses stand around the table, their mouths masked, their eyes toughened like black marbles, the need to disconnect forcing them into unnatural hardness. I imagine endless children here, sobbing for comfort and safety while strangers torture them and their parents look on, not rescuing them. Crystal grabs my hand, tears rolling onto the kitty on her lavender sweatshirt. Above her breasts are dark, wet spots. "I am the worst mother in the world," she whispers and walks outside. I start to follow her. "One of you has to stay" the nurse says, so I stay. I can do nothing for either one.

I stand there and think about my mom staying with me after my first baby was born. That baby cried every time I laid her in her crib, even if she had been asleep in my arms. I was exhausted from always holding the baby. "She's spoiled," my mom said, but it was so much easier to pick her up than to listen to her cry. She made me leave her in her crib every four hours, wailing, for five minutes, then ten, weaning the baby from my weary arms. Every sob and gasp and scream of that baby broke something in me. I could feel crackling inside, something splintering to shards, like I was nothing more than eggshells and someone with heavy boots was trampling me. We played cribbage and turned up the radio. Eventually the baby would sleep, exhausted from the fight. Each night she cried less. At last she didn't cry at all. I look at Gabby, finally asleep with her mouth wide open, three hands inside, bloody cotton stuffed in her cheeks, and a small tray beside the doctor sprinkled with rotten black tooth stumps the size of young corn. Her eyes are swollen and dry. We spoil our children out of love and convenience, hating their cries, never dreaming they'll suffer because we

hold them or give them Jujubes.

After the operation, Gabby sits quietly for half an hour in her mother's arms. Crystal gently rocks her, lightly humming a tune I don't recognize, their heads tilted together like wilting tulips. While we wait for the go–ahead, I don't know what to do with my hands or my eyes, so I keep fiddling with the pages of the book I'm pretending to read. But my words have dried up and all I can do is notice, notice that all these waiting women have dull hair, no matter what the style, cut or color, the sun would not bounce off this hair and it would barely move no matter how hefty their headshakes and that sad hair matched their sad muted voices and I really hated the gloom, the reality of consequences, the despondency I couldn't shake. Together, Crystal and Gabby have quit crying. I look over at them, swaying like a breeze, and click my healthy teeth together.

We get permission to leave, having waited the prescribed amount of time with no side effects. Gabby sleeps in the back seat, her head resting on a grubby heart pillow with Happy Valentine's Day on it in gray letters. She kicks around empty Doritos bags and a few McDonald's cups till her feet are comfy. Crystal turns down the radio and asks me for directions home. "Maybe you'd like me to drive," I say. "You look tired." She says yes and we switch. She closes her eyes and the sun through the windshield falls on her dull hair. Her hands are clenched in fists. I want to reach over and unclench her fingers. I know she needs touch and some words to make her feel better about what her daughter has just been through, but I am inadequate. All I can think of is tossing all that sugar out the window. Instead, I help myself to a red Tootsie Roll pop.

RACHEL MARIE PATTERSON

THE SEAL-WIFE

I wept for my home–skerry,
for the seabirds who dove there
naked as frost, for my sisters

who thrashed lithe and dripping
on the quay to swallow herrings
whole, for the sea's pitch and ding

as a squall headed for headland.
Thirteen skinless summers I combed
the machair for the key my husband

buried while he hauled his heavy
creel up from the sea, and when
he slunk home I sometime begged

ochone on his whiskey–plugged
ears. Until one night, finally,
I unfastened the barley–kist

in the dead of evening and found
my stolen speckled pelt. I changed
as quick and bright as a storm.

I paddled back into the pretty belly
of my stream. It's an evil man
who calls the hunt, a fisted heart

that wishes violence and chokes
the slender fishes with blood. That
husband butchered my sisters one by one,

and I watched as their hides washed up
on the moorland. There's no ocean
now could hold my grief, no moon

round enough: I won't stop until
the salt glows red—until men's
split bones ring this island.

RACHEL MARIE PATTERSON

METAIRIE (4)

No matter how often it's run, the ceiling fan
collects dust. Mother calls twice a week
and reminds me to drag out the garbage,
to vacuum the good rug. I drive back and forth
to the pharmacy, the grocery store, the gas station,
to a neighbor's house where we eat slack vegetables
off plastic trays by an empty swimming pool.
Sometimes I remember nothing about the ride—
the yards, the trees—can't remember whether
I used my turn signal, whether I fed the dogs.
Someone emptied my drawer full of pens last night.
Someone left all the blinds clicked open.

RACHEL MARIE PATTERSON

THE MIRROR

I told Father about the scratching
inside the curtains. The ghost is taller
than you, I said, and stronger.
While we are sleeping, it chews
our hair. First he said *a light*
and I had to tell him that the ghost
isn't afraid of the light or the dark,
or even the rain. It steals our combs
and clip-on earrings. Then he said
a song, but I refused: The ghost
collects our fingernail clippings
from the carpet— And then he cried
Enough! (and the whole house
trembled like a feather then)
There is no ghost! But I have seen
it in the mirror when you hold us
over the sink to brush our teeth.

KATHY RUDIN

Untitled, (OPEN, with blue bench,)

M. SHAHID ALAM

APRIL

Again, the dogwoods, silver bells, magnolias and cherries
dash to life and light in a florid swirl of colors: red,
white and magenta twirls. It is the urge to procreate
so long suppressed that propels this playful excess.

In leaves,
the sober greens will speak
when April turns to May.

M. SHAHID ALAM

FOUR SCENES

A swathe of periwinkle blue thriving
in April: this won't last till May.

A quartet of summer birds roosts
on the cornice: they are real not painted.

Once-green, rain-sodden leaves hug
the streets: scenes from an autumn massacre.

The light from distant galaxies varnishes
the winter sky: it is brighter than ochre.

TATIANA RYCKMAN

CLEVELAND

In Cleveland it is slush nine times out of ten. If home is the place you go for holidays that feel progressively more and more arbitrary, then home is slush nine times out of ten.

But that may just be when I see it from the third story apartments of elementary school friends— the ones I'd promised while buckled safely in the back seat of a parents' car that I'd get that apartment with them. The slush was knee-high then, the snow a thing to maneuver into fortresses or homes, ammo or a second refrigerator when too many bodies descended on the home and demanded more food than would fit in the fridge.

In Cleveland it is sweat and sunshine and a piercing glare off the lake one time out of ten. The beach is dead zebra clams and plastic tampon applicators. The hot young things I hoped to grow into have become teenagers with acne, uncomfortable in their mysterious new bodies, depressing even when the sun shines on their greasy pocked skin while they try to attract one another like the crippled seagulls flocking to the trash of family picnics. I want to cover the girls in their sandy towels, I want them to read a book or take up jogging in safe, well-lit areas; Learn an instrument or a language, I stop myself from saying to them, Anything but what I did. What you'll do.

At age five Cleveland was the Stop-n-Shop, a two-story Raggedy Ann doll and rock sugar candy. Cleveland was the wrong women I'd attach myself to on shopping trips with my mother, looking up finally in a complete expression of horror at the stranger beside me and running to hide in forts of shoulder padded dress suits. It was the Nutcracker (the best in the world, in my world) and sledding from the Shoreway toward the water, frozen in perpetual waves of car exhaust waiting to melt for teenagers. I could see grown people then, but I could never imagine what they did with their lives--for love or for money. Could that many people have love or money?

The answer was no. There was not enough in that town to go around.

Today Cleveland is The Great Lakes Brewing Company and the house my friend bought, the popularization of urban farms and bicycles and food trucks like every other town I've moved to. Cleveland is the drive-in movie theater and organic restaurant on the street that I used to be scared to walk down. I pass Kiddy Park if I take the long way from my dad's house to my mom's. It is a parking lot as big as it ever was, littered with a handful of rusting mental sculptures calling themselves "Farris Wheel," "Roller Coaster," "Carousel."

Caitlin has her own apartment for the first time ever. She's on the East side of town with no roommates. It's two bedrooms and a kitchen with an alcove made of windows. The table fits perfectly. She has an office. She has a full time job and makes plays and we share Bulleit Rye in shot glasses she's purchased on vacations. Mine says Delaware, hers says Paris.

We say let's write a play together. We say I know people say that, but I mean it.

I know, we say, I mean it too.

We also say how it was for the best: the poet moving on to another woman, or that lazy fuck who never paid rent. We neglect to marvel that these are different men.

We pet the cats, we pile the couch into a fortress of blankets and pillows, we hope the cats will sleep with me.

On my head, I say.

Goodnight, she says.

Caitlin is doing well, now. The last time I had found my way to her apartment from my dad's house one of those interchangeable men was still there, and a fear of unemployment, and there had been the suicide—conversations always life-changing and impossible to navigate. But today she looks put together. Makes looking put together look easy. We share a mutual birthday breakfast and her cup of coffee. We groan off the whiskey. We say it was so good to see you and your

star is rising—your skin has never looked so good and your hair is so long.

Your moving up, we say.

You're growing up, we mean.

Caitlin goes back across the street and up three flights of stairs to her apartment. I get in my sister's car and drive it to my dad's house. I take a shower and pick through boxes of crackers and jars of condiments in hopes of satisfying some hunger that is growing inside me like the mold I find in the cheese drawer. I dig first through my old dresser, then the snow piled in the driveway.

I dig through fifteen years of mail covering the dining room table we can't use any more: I am looking for a good word. The reply to a letter, a sign that it is good to see me and that my star is rising. That my skin has never looked so good. That my hair is so long.

That I am growing up.

CAYLIN CAPRA-THOMAS

INTERIOR LANDSCAPE

A diminishing presence
of god & god–figures. Weak

sun. After dusk, the porch light,
only. All the reaching

creatures, limbed & rooted
or crawling, clawing

up the porch steps. Snuffling,
searching for scraps. Fur
matted with unknown

blood. Holes
torn into ears. A knocking

of spoons against tin cups,
Come, little ones, & be fed.
An island of breathing

in the purring dark. Hunger
& hunger & nightshade

& bloom.

CAYLIN CAPRA-THOMAS

THE MINE FIRE SPEAKS

Centralia, Pennsylvania

I was born a castoff
desire: what goes up

must be devoured.

I heard the mothers
call me trash. Beyond

me lay some other
me: a supine body

in the summer heat.
My daddy

was a coal miner: lamp
stink & black
lung & Momma

was a matchstick redhead
from Sulphur, Louisiana.

I became, I was struck

like gold or an insolent
cheek. I licked

into the maze & now
my tongue

burns & my tongue burns
& my tongue

burns every hour, every
day. Hungry,

I open my mouth.

CAYLIN CAPRA-THOMAS

VALENTINE'S DAY, 1981

Centralia, Pennsylvania

All I know about love
is the small opening

in my stomach
when Molly Maguire

applies her chapstick
during Sunday school

or mops orange grease
from her lips

at Sweet Pizzz's Pizza.
The pies there come out

hotter that hell.
I ask Gran why I can't

have a few extra bucks
to get a slice & she

tells me I'm lucky to live
above the ground.

Was a time boys younger
than you went down

those mines with nothing
but a canary for company

& guess what happened
to the canaries?

In Sunday school they said
the world would end in fire.

Today in Gran's backyard
the trees are birdless.

LUCIAN MATTISON

AFTER CLOSING SHIFT

Wring out the rag
of my body, relieve me,
strip by strip,

of my clothes,
every frayed bit obscuring
me, this tired garment

twisting in your grip.
Hold me
above your mouth.

Let me drip
onto your tongue,
winding me

like a tension spring,
my limbs pulled flush
against ribs. Drink

all of me in, my body
unraveled muslin sheets.
Climb my abdomen,

onto the pomanders
of my parted lips. Close
your eyes with me.

SARA BIGGS CHANEY

GIRLS, BEASTS
RUSSIAN PHOTOGRAPHER TAKES STUNNING PORTRAITS WITH REAL ANIMALS[1]

II. Brown Bear

Come to me, terrible body.
Let the camera cure.

To your blood sap
I give my soft part.

I smell my death on your belly
and I do not flinch.

Your face a cannon
on the hinge of my neck

still I hold the pose, the play
of light against our earthly circumstances:

How we move, seamless
as a razor slices silk.

1 These poems are inspired by the photography of Katerina Plotnikova. [http://500px.com/katerina_plotnikova] The poems are inspired by her photos and their symbolic association with the famous Cluny tapestries.

III. Snake

Could we be flames
the color of warning?

You with your molten way
like a river walking

my child's face swimming
in red vapor

Who will strike first?

LISA MARIE BASILE

i tell of this part because

i tell of this part because
this is a part of forgiveness,

see:

the smooth round edge of table
the cool tan color of skin on white sands,
mouthcoral, how lips swell in youth

as if all were finally sedated & set & sucking.
as if all things were extraordinary &
ordinary

or becoming the version of ourselves which
we had never dreamed of:

the me that is me, the me that is human.

a grieving arm draped over velveteen armrest:
just a girl, disarming.
crème satin & vapor of desire,

the reconciliation of the aesthetics of pain
& art.

the me that separates happiness
from other things.

**

a life should not be enough to kill you,
or keep you from beauty,

from the wool of those things that graze in the night.
some things are just night.

other things are day. find:

a finding of day.

LISA MARIE BASILE

i couldn't call to you

i couldn't call to you to tell you the truth is that in Miami we made love in the jacuzzi. in me there was a tigergirl and in me there was the morning & in me was the police rope. in me the water was poisoned, wasn't it. you did this, you gave this to me like a handful of salt from child to beggar, & in me it is good for nothing in the end.

i stood with my hair wicked, and when they caught us I pretended my wrists were your wrists so i would feel no pain at all, not even shame, dehumanized inside me with bikini-grin and empty. & in me the stars, they were watching, o they watched, and are ever-watching so, learn my love, learn the things I do when you're not looking to make you look. learn to look in me.

pile my being beside the palm trees.
the virgin bedight in the distance, someone's prayers come at me like the shot at the end of the dirty film, but I am afraid I am not savable, like when the girl's already taken it in.

MAARI CARTER

MONDAY NIGHT RAW

By the time The Undertaker slams the Baby-
Face's head against the top buckle
we're countless

beers deep, not talking
about shit we drink not to talk about.
For me, it's an aborted

storyline in Jackson,
any number of previous contentions, and the fact
I use to watch matches with my stepfather.

He would say *people spend years*
learning how to fake
and make it seem real.

This was before I knew
about canned heat
pumped into arena sound systems,

audience plants or sold blows;
when violence was spectacle, not the sting
of a switch or the muffled

collision of bodies behind a closed
laundry room door; before I hated him
for making every man a lesson

in fluffing. I've never told you
any of that. And when the Face climbs
the ropes and readies for a dive, we wait

until impact to qualify the damage.
But didn't you forget, just for a second, it was
scripted; see his body hesitate

mid-air? An absolute
in the hope spot, between all
those static flashes.

MAARI CARTER

HOW WE KNOW EVERLASTING

The dog's neck is raw

from that tow

chain, Daddy."

He gleeks

dip juice into a Crisco can kept next to the deep fridge says,

"Lesser creatures

are made to suffer,

lets them know

their place

in the world."

But a dog don't know anything

of an old 18-wheeler tire

except its weight not

the distance before it's bald or how it could end up anchoring

him

to our yard

patched

with deadgrass

haloes.

I watch

people in their shiny

economy

cut across the cotton

horizon headed

for clean gutters

alarm codes

and sprinkler systems.

Here is skeeter hawks

failing

in copper

summer thickness

a skirt disappearing between blank pages hanging on a

clothesline

and a dog

long nails

split in two

clawing

at red dirt

hurling himself

toward some bit of world

more forgiving.

OLIVER ZARANDI

THE OAKS

I found a list of things Walker said he wouldn't do until his son was found alive and well.

He wrote: talk, smile, fuck.

Walker's son had been taken. Walker was delirious. He said: my son is a beef patty. I said stop it. I slapped Walker. He shut up.

He said where is my son.

I said, beats me.

His wife wasn't sad about this because she died during childbirth. That was eighteen years ago. Her vagina bled a lot, Walker said.

He could be quite unfeeling, sometimes.

He showed me a picture of her once. She had these big red lips and curly hair. Her face didn't look human. There was no togetherness to the features. I thought she looked like a Mister Potato Head. Her one eye was higher than the other.

I didn't tell Walker this because he told me she'd bled to death.

It made me ill to look at the picture, so I told him to burn it and he did.

All pictures of women are banned here.

Walker raised Louis alone here at The Oaks. It's a place that houses single fathers with only male children.

I just clean the gardens and apartments. It pays well enough. I live with my wife and her mother. Her mother pisses herself a lot and I change her nappies every day.

Sometimes I wish I'd focused at school instead of drawing dicks in the margin.

The Oaks. It's at the top of this winding road, steep enough to be called a hill. The path to the house is a long one, dotted with signs saying 'keep off the grass' and 'Let Fathers be Mothers' and 'Together We Are Not A Tragedy'.

Women are not allowed in here. The president of the Father Society was Glenn Tully Styron. He told me that 'women could upset the whole equilibrium of The Oaks'.

Styron is fat and covered in polyps. He's afraid of women.

They all are.

Walker raised Louis without a mother but did, with the help of The Oaks, make sure that Louis had at least 25 other fathers. Every weekend the Fathers would have a Father & Son barbeque.

The Sons would chat, miserably. They'd perform pranks without any heart. The Fathers wept but some said they still had hope for this thing we call Life.

I remember one of the Fathers had a belly that looked like a pustule that was begging to be stabbed.

All the men here are united by tragedy. Walker's neighbour, Albert, his wife died at a piano factory. Albert didn't give me any more details than that.

I have to clean the bedrooms here, too. Styron pays me extra for this.

Albert's wicker basket is always filled with tissues.

He'll cry a bucket if it wasn't for the Church Service Styron gives every evening that reassures the Fathers that Life is worth living.

Instead of Gideon Bibles, each apartment is filled with naughty VHS tapes. Walker told me these videos were of women. Their faces were covered with plastic bags, used as objects. I'm pretty sure they were corpses.

One of the women is thrown down a lubed-corridor like a bowling ball. She strikes 10 women who are sellotape together like bowling pins. He told me this is to remind us that life without women isn't so bad.

I told Walker I'd die without women. He told me that's a pretty lie.

He could talk your head off, Walker.

But he just clammed up. Stopped speaking to everybody. Styron didn't want the police involved. Said they would only bring more bad press.

A week passed and there was no word from Louis. He wasn't the kind of kid who would go missing. He'd never left The Oaks before. He was 18.

I remember asking Louis if he ever thought about women. He said no, but he was interested in some crazy things.

He told me he'd use the Internet to research celebrity deaths. He said he was interested in serial killers. He said his favourite was Eddie Leonski who strangled women to hear their voices go high pitched.

I said that was unhealthy.

But nobody expected Louis to send a letter to Walker. On the 216th day he'd been missing, a letter turned up in Walker's letterbox. Walker

ripped open the letter. It was written in pencil. None of the letters were joined up. Like a child's writing. Walker read the letter to me.

Dear Dad,

> *Fuck you. I am alive and not well. I've just realised I have a cock. It fits in my hand. I measured it against somebody's head last night. Cool. Dad why didn't you tell me about the World? I don't love you Dad. But maybe I am in love with you? Who knows. I am far from home. I got a job in a bowling alley. Because of that pornography tape. Influenced me. I am really bad at my job. I might get fired. I had sex too. I had to learn the hard way about sex. I met a girl. She was old enough. She's pregnant now. She's full of me. I'm going to be a Father now. I think I hate women. I think life is difficult. I think Cheeto dust on my fingers is better than the Cheeto itself. I am alone in the world. I never want to be inside a woman again. Only two times a man should be inside a woman: birth and to procreate, once. Every man deserves the chance to be a father. If you want to find me, you won't. I don't want to be found. I sleep in a car. Tell everybody at The Oaks they're jerks. You're all in danger.*

Yours (mine now),
Louis

I think we all understood Louis wasn't coming back. Nobody could understand the last line, though:

You're all in danger.

Did that include me? Was I in danger?

I am just a gardener and cleaner, I told Walker. Why should I be included with all you Fathers? I trim grass and boil wash towels. My life isn't supposed to, you know, be endangered.

Time passed. It always does, unfortunately.

Walker helped me water the plants. He started giving lectures on weekends, too. About being a Father Without A Son and the vulnerability of each and every Father here at The Oaks. Were we man enough to look after ourselves? Had we failed?

I sat in on these lectures. Interesting stuff. Walker, a hell of a talker. He'd stand there at the pulpit, his eyes all sunken and face like a lemon skeleton, finger pointing.

Had Walker gone mad? Probably.

None of the Fathers really cared. They listened because they had nothing else to listen to.

But all the while, sitting there in those lectures, I felt like somebody was watching us. Watching the Fathers at work. Watching me, the Cleaner of the Fathers.

We got a note one day and it said this:

Next time you wake up, you're all going to melt.

Styron filed it away with all the other threats.

Walker told me he was scared, so I stayed with him that night. When we woke up, nobody had melted.

Walker told me he wasn't a good man. That he did things to Louis. I asked what kind of things. He just said things. I don't know what things means I said. He said, well, have a think about things.

I had a think about things. I still didn't get it.

And Styron asked me, how's Walker. I said he's okay, but he's feeling sore about things because he did some things to Louis. Styron said that's only natural; all Fathers do *things* to their sons.

I said, isn't that a bit general.

He said no. All Fathers do things to their sons at The Oaks.

I think I get it now.

Walker had stopped doing his lectures. Instead, this one weekend, he turned up to the Father & Son barbeque. I was helping to cook the sausages. Obviously, he was without a son. But he was dressed like a child. I can't explain it, but his beard was gone. He looked like he'd completely waxed himself. And he didn't talk to the Fathers. He only spoke to the Sons.

The Sons treated him just like a child, which is exactly what they were. One Son, his name was Willy, he shot a water pistol in Walker's eye.

Walker cried and pissed himself by the pool. He fell to the floor. One of the Fathers, I think it was Bob – big fat asshole – came running over and cradled Walker.

There, there, Bob said. Walker nestled his head in Bob's armpit. I think he said: I'm *scared* Daddy.

Bob kissed Walker on the neck. And then the other Fathers came over and offered to hold Walker.

Yes.

Styron called me over and asked me to clear out Walker's room immediately. I asked where Walker was going to stay. Styron said he was going to move in with Bob and his sixteen sons in the Palace Suite.

Walker was a Son now. He started wetting the bed. The Fathers gave him a bell and pad. Treated him.

I didn't see him a lot anymore. Styron gave me time off. I spent more time at home. I changed nappies a lot.

The Oaks still received letters from Louis. Idle threats, Styron said. Nobody cared what Louis said. He was out there in the world. He was so far gone that he'd send us excerpts from the United States foreign relations archives. He sent us words he'd learnt.

Words like pseudopseudohypoparathyroidism.

I watched Walker from afar. He played with balloons and didn't talk much anymore. Didn't do anything anymore. Just played by himself. Those Father & Son barbeques, Walker'd just stare at the world outside. The cars moving, heads moving just above the fence.

When I asked Walker how he was, he said he was fine. I asked what he did last night and he said he was with the Fathers. What did you do with the Fathers, I asked. He turned away.

Things, he said. Happy things with my Fathers.

ADAM DAY

Frank's All Right

Below a white balcony
a second cousin

strokes my hand. Locked
in his pickup. Stashed

eyes. Ski-masked. Just
try – aim between

the eyes. His ratcheted
hand apes a trigger pull.

ADAM DAY

CYNANTHROPY

The citizen's daughter
sleepwalked

into his room. Thinking
her his wife

come back
and pleased to see

the spirit
of improvisation

alive and well
he gave himself

to her. Soft hand
under a hen. Next

morning they
could be heard

saying
to one another

"What are you
laughing at?"

TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN

HERE. HE DRESSES SCHIELE

Wei Dong. It drizzles. He wipes his tears.
Bread is greased on blood. My scarecrow has his

ears cut in the night, during the day he has
malignant eyes. He eats peaches. He leans

on his arms. While sleeping he vomits, while sailing
he bloodclimbs. He's stuck at the seventeenth

floor, in the elevator. He can't get out. New York is
the devil. It flies round the sky. He breaks

the habit of animals to lie down. He has a white
ass, spruces fall in water. One dog jumps

and wants the prattler. Another dog takes it
from his snout. His eyelashes are white

like a swimming whale. Will it go through paper?
Will he at least propel his head through it?

Translated from the Slovenian by **Michael Thomas Taren** *and the author*

TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN
IN CENTRAL EUROPE

In Central Europe, walking on grass, you see mountains,
huts in the Alps and the breaking of light.
Roe deers in the long rainy days eat from the hand
near macadam roads.

Priests, logs and carnations,
emigrants enter,
children with heavy rucksacks throw apple
stones through the train windows.

In the Central Europe the people are pinned with wires,
August is always over,
you still feel anger toward the dancers, Velden,
Bled.

You are like a plate, Bolinas, poisonous green
Sacramento,
full of oil, Yosemite, suffocating vapors,
when bamboo grows,
when bamboo grows to sipapuni,
when every little hoop grows to sipapuni,
the door.

Translated from the Slovenian by ***Michael Thomas Taren*** *and the author*

ELLYN LICHVAR

Forgetting the Words

The discarded bandage reveals
something far longer than expected

and I do want to say something. I do.
The IV bags hang near my mother's head

filling her up. Down the hall babies
enter elevators, strapped tight,

seats hanging from father's forearms.
This entire hospital smells so empty.

When my son was three days old the tubes
leaving his body looked like noodles

on a tiny pink plate. *Take a picture,*
she'd said, *he may want to see it*, and now

I can't stop. Her swollen body is so weak
she won't remember much at all.

It was like this when she saw me seeing
him; she forgot to speak like a mother.

I sat covered in tears and afterbirth
and she just left the room.

But once she rubbed my feet for two
long hours and so now I do hers. The skin

on her legs is not skin anymore, thick,
sloughed between my damp fingers,

and her eyes aren't even open.
Down the hall babies, too, lay flat on their backs.

What month will it be when we finally remember
what we were in the middle of saying?

There are so many questions
I'm too afraid to answer. Not like when babies

cry and we just know how to stop it.
I can't explain it any more than that.

ELLYN LICHVAR

Three and a Half

Today in the yard, he says
he wants me to go back inside.
He'd like to place the damp
gray stones he found
on our walk, the leaves,
the seedpods cracked open
wide like bird mouths, along
the side of the house by himself.
It's important. Hands overflowing,
he opens the back gate
and he does it. Purposeful
line, riches resting in their places,
protection. He looks
at me through the window
to say he's finished and I am
a wine bottle from last night's
dinner, a nap after sex,
an eyes-closed exhalation, finally
emptied, as all mothers empty.

PADMA PRASAD

A CLOSE CUT

Afterwards, Kira blamed the beige shirt she was wearing. That color had just wandered off from the shirt and got into everything, words, dishes, food, the children, and most of all, Sam.

He was quite open about it. No, Kira did not have to discover hidden letters, agonize over the possible truth of his explanations, sift through his pockets or his appointments, sleuth through stains and word slips, nothing of that sort.

That whole May month, he had been coming home late. One evening, he came home later than usual. And after dinner, when the children slept, he said, "I have to tell you something, might as well do it now. It's nothing because of you, I could not have asked for a better wife…"

Kira listened as if it was the neighbor's life he was talking about, as if the neighbor had opened her windows, and Kira could look inside and listen to the dialogs, and match gestures, and facial expressions. Of course, she had been waiting for him to say these exact words, right from the very first day of their marriage. Most surprising, he had not, and they had lasted, what, almost eleven years and two children, and finally now, she could use her imagination somewhere else.

Her name was Sumi, he said. His best work, his most inspired work happened when she posed for him. "Something beyond my understanding, something I simply am unable to account for…" He had discovered dimensions within himself that were unthinkable before. He hovered over his statements, almost expecting approval from her, approval that he who was a conscientious husband could no longer be responsible as these were extraterrestrial feelings.

She waited then, even wanted for him to say the marriage was over. That never happened. Nor did he act like he expected her to say it. Not even when he stayed out all night and came home happy and

crumpled. He did not take the trouble to hide his excitement, his sudden disappearances, her fragrance on his clothes; cheating must be some kind of marital right, a way to substantiate the credibility of their marriage. And always in her mind, her mother's words to her sister during the first year of her sister's marriage, "Does he hit you? Any cursing or shouting? Does he hurt you in any way? No? What are you complaining about then?"

So, she condensed herself into a hard set of routines, feeding the children, helping with their homework, shopping for groceries, working part time as a medical receptionist.

On the day when Sam sat on the couch reading the newspaper after brushing his teeth – something he had not done for the past four months – Kira knew the episode was over. She could not bear to call it an affair. He confirmed it after breakfast, when he took his plate into the kitchen and washed it up in a thoughtful way. "Where do you keep the plates?" he asked her after he dried it. She silently opened the shelf above the oven and he looked inside as if there was a hypnotic pattern there.

The silence crept into their apartment like an extra piece of furniture they both needed. It was in every room, visible, stretching in between the cupboards, by the dresser, across the bed; it blanketed the children and hung onto their playtime; for Kira, it was the same beige color, the color of her shirt on the day he first told her.

Occasionally, she thought of disappearing somewhere, to cause at least a momentary inconvenience; or, break something, like the fine china set that his sister had given for the wedding; or, kill the philodendron that grew with thoughtless fecundity across the kitchen window. It was then she understood that she was more capable of inaction than she had thought possible. She did go to an expensive hair studio. "Yes, chop it all off," she said to the Korean stylist, who looked terribly concerned.

"But what will your husband say?"

"He doesn't mind such things, not a bit. He's very good, that way. I can do whatever I want."

Still the stylist started cautiously at first. "Such a long hair! You Indian?" and as Kira nodded, she continued, "You Indian women, y'all

have such thick, long hair, no? Are you sure, your husband not mind?"

"Yes, yes, I'm not an …" Kira stopped, not sure what she wanted to say. "It's okay, I've lived here long enough. Here, that's not enough. Take off some more, please, like that picture there."

The stylist took a deep breath. "That much!"

"Yes, do it, don't worry. It'll be fine. Just go for it."

In the end she emerged sleek, elegant, the length of her face accentuated by the close cut. The old lady beside her, who was having her hair colored, watched the transformation with great interest. "Looks beautiful, honey," she commented.

Returning home, Kira stopped at *Safeway* for milk and the woman at the counter said, "Great hair." And the driver on the metro bus pointed to his head: "Suits you." And their neighbor shouted from across the street: "Love the cut."

When she entered the apartment, Sam was rummaging on his desk. He looked at her briefly and went back to his search. She went to the kitchen and put away the milk. Sam came in and stood as if he would have liked to be in some other place. "I knew I had kept it somewhere there," he said. "Meant to give it to you sooner, but kept forgetting." He was holding out a card to her; he was getting an award for his photography; the event was at the Grand Hyatt in DC, the next day.

They took the train as silently as ever. For the first hour, Kira clung to Sam's side; then she wandered around the ballroom hall, studying each of the huge mounted photo prints. One in particular was very striking, the only one in black and white; it was of a young girl; somewhat of a video game heroine, she looked mythic; the background was a metallic blue and grey alien landscape. It's the setting, Kira thought, the surreal landscape, or was it the model herself who carried her figure with such pride, or no, it was the lighting that made this piece so special; or perhaps, it was that expression, captured once in a lifetime.

"Quite something, isn't it? That's Sam for you," a man said from behind her. Kira turned and he introduced himself: "Mike. Mike Alpern, I work with Sam. Not photography, though. I'm an illustrator."

For a moment, they stood side by side, looking again at the

photograph.

"Yes, yes, quite unusual," Kira said. "Very striking. Wonder who it is?" Even as she asked, Kira knew what the answer would be.

Mike nodded at the photograph, "Sumi, that's Sumi. Pity she's gone. Died a couple, no, it must be more than three months ago."

"How," the word creaked out of her throat.

"I'm not quite sure. I believe it was an accident; Sam would know." Mike nodded his head at the photograph again. "Very sad business, such a great loss."

There was a scuffle to the far end of the room, the ceremony was about to begin. Kira watched her husband accept his award. He made a flawless speech, though at one point, she could hear his voice sink beneath the flawlessness.

So, this marriage, at least the formality of it, gets saved by an Act of God, a random act of god, Kira thought as she dumped the coffee grinds, the next morning. She felt wrinkles forming everywhere, in her clothes, her skin, in the wall paper, in the pavement. Still she must cultivate thankfulness, that she did not have to explain to her parents, that the routines of her life formed a hedge around her.

She added a lot of walking to that hedge of routines. More than 15,000 steps. Perhaps that was a reasonable number for thankfulness.

She looked for cues in the objects around her, cues that could point to what's next in such a life. She read every word in the junk mail: the three brochures on hearing loss, the dazzling smile and real estate flyers, the community college catalog of courses. This last seemed the most promising; there was a course on Human Anatomy. She studied the sketch next to the course description; the trick is to find the right point of insertion in all those fibers, ligaments, bones and tendons, the right point where a kitchen knife might do maximum damage, she sighed and closed the catalog. Maybe she would register for the next session.

Some days, when she saw the flower man outside the grocery shop, with his two buckets of roses on a cart, she would buy a dozen roses for ten dollars. Not because they were beautiful, but that they rotted in four or five days and comforted her with their brevity.

She soon became a regular buyer. One day, as she got her roses

she saw the homeless man who had settled himself nearby. He raised his used Styrofoam cup at her. Kira looked away and began separating a dollar from the wad in her hand, when the flower man whispered to her, "There's really no need to do that. You have no idea how much he makes in an hour. Much, much more than me. I've been watching, see, it's an easy life, I can tell. Look at me struggling. What for?"

Kira smiled, "Oh, don't say that. Who knows what troubles he's got? There's your dignity, you know."

Still, that gave her the cue she had been waiting for. She rummaged in her closet for the wig of scraggly white hair, she had worn one Halloween. That and an old jacket, a pair of stained canvas shoes, some plastic bags stuffed with newspaper, that's all she needed. She stood before the full length mirror in the bedroom, in the wig and jacket, and examined this new persona. The wig itself was quite convincing. But her face looked a little too untouched, too homeful. Carefully, she mixed some eye stuff and then some lip stuff and created a muddiness on this canvas; she tried to brush in some wrinkles on her forehead, that didn't work out, too obvious. She went for a general beige smudginess.

Once outside, she found a bench near a park and settled there. It all makes perfect sense, she thought as she watched people pass by, some of them with averted faces, some with pity, some with disgust. When a man dropped a quarter near her, Kira felt a quick thrill. That shining coin seemed to touch off something, it was soon followed by pennies, dimes, more quarters and even a dollar. The flower man was on to something, alright. When she was ready to leave, she counted six dollars and fourteen cents. That was in an hour and forty minutes. She left the money on the bench, and went home as if in a dream.

In the evening, she sat with her son and daughter on either side of her and her son said, "*Amma,* why were you sitting in the park, with your hair all funny and white? I saw you when our bus went by."

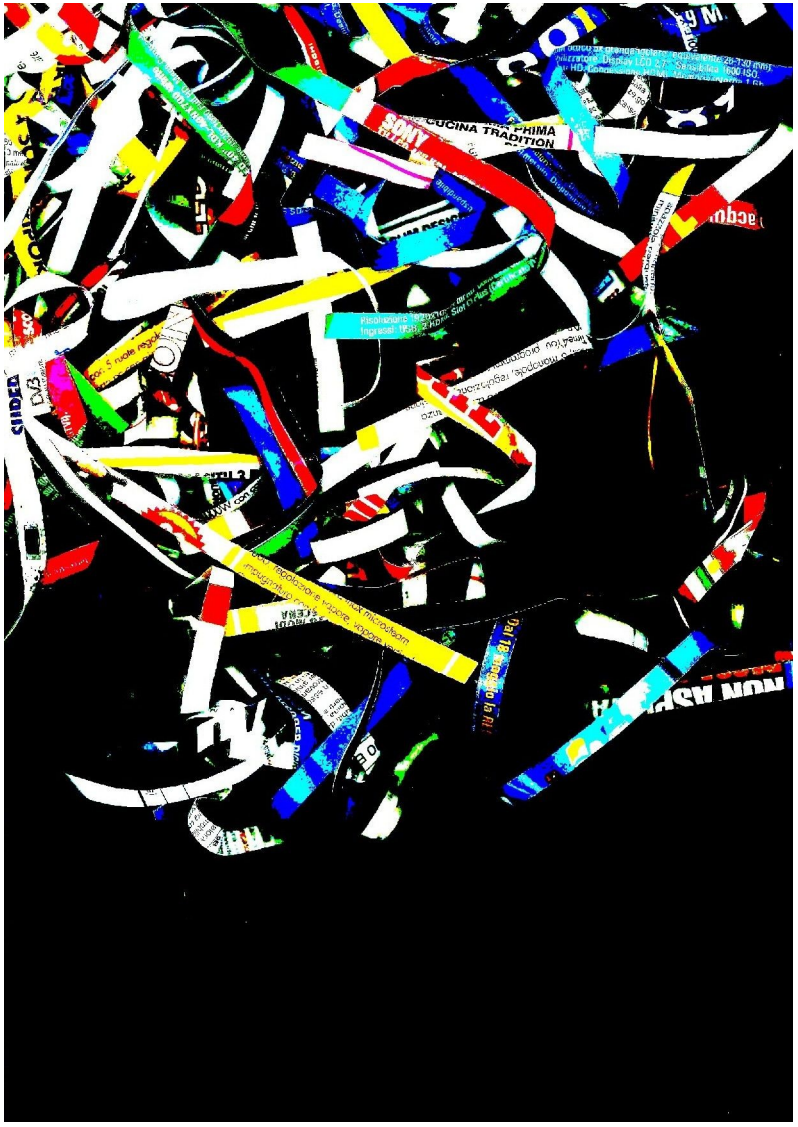
Kira laughed then, the sound of her laughter filling the living room's silence. *Didn't see that coming, did you,* she thought. *That Anatomy class may not be the right thing after all, too, too much planning involved.*

She felt Sam look at her, from across the room, where he sat

with his laptop.

"What a smart boy you are," she said to her son. She ruffled his hair and pulled at his nose. "Maybe it wasn't me, just another version of me," she added, her eyes glowing with mischief.

As she prepared for bed, she promised herself: *Give me five years, or just two, maybe even sooner – and I will say to you, how much you must have suffered, what was it like, to lose your inspiration forever.*



FABIO SASSI | scraps

ALLEN FORREST

Boy and Bike #3

ink on paper, 12x9, 2014

DANIEL T. O'BRIEN

SONNET FOR MIKE WATERS IN *MY OWN PRIVATE IDAHO*

I am a fucked-up face you've never been to
before—: teething concrete to find my way
to you. I will sell myself for your sleep, hold
your head when you're falling

paradoxical—: dream of me when I start
doing things for free, growing wings
to circumnavigate the road in your mouth
—: around, around. You said, "Normal.

Like a mom and a dad and a dog, and shit
like that. Normal. Normal... I feel like
I'm well adjusted." I will adjust to your well-adjustment:

never had a dog or a normal dad, either. I do not feel sorry
for us. I will never leave you in Rome. I will never leave
you. *I love you & you don't have to pay me.*

MICHELLE Y. BURKE

DRIVING ALONE

At Lake Erie, the sky collapsed
in snow. My headlights lit up
a miniature globe before me, a world
too small to navigate.

What does it mean when the only
signs we have of others
are the lights they send out?
I made it somewhere safely.

Or safely made it somewhere.
I can't remember how. Who knows
what we pass unseen.

MICHELLE Y. BURKE

ONLY THE LAKE

The sun drops behind the mountain
like a good orange yolk into a pan.

The final rays bounce off the frozen lake,
goldening our faces. A dozen adults,

a handful of children, we're silenced
by the display. The lake, when frozen,

groans like a heifer left out in the cold.
The white edges of the ice rub up

against one another. Sometimes,
when the tension builds,

something hard and unseen gives way.
That's when the lake bellows.

That's when we find one another
in the rooms of our houses

and confirm for each other
that what we hear is only the lake.

MICHELLE Y. BURKE

CHAIR

My brother owns it now
though once it belonged
to our grandmother.
I took it from her, my brother
from me. It's a good chair,
heavy wooden frame,
stripes with sailboats inside them,
comfortable slab of a cushion.
I remember reading Ovid
in Ohio in this chair.
I remember when the old couple
turned into trees,
leaves sprouting from them,
just enough time to say farewell.
From this chair I could see
the man in the apartment
across the alley
on nights he left his blinds up.
Sometimes he read too,
each of us alone
in our own orb of light.

LEAH GRIESMANN

PACKING

Ron sits across from her at the elevated table at the Tokyo Grill, a Western-themed sushi bar near the corner of Jones and Flamingo. He gulps his white wine as if it was water, and punctuates every other sentence by twisting his torso as if trying to screw himself into a tight space. But it is the smile that unnerves her, long white teeth coming together in a tight point beneath his square nose. He grins as if they were on a boat that would sink if his mouth went slack for more time than it took her to swallow a spicy shrimp roll. "Try the soft shell." He uses chopsticks to break off the tempura-fried legs stretching out of his seaweed cone. "The best soft shell in Vegas."

She had only agreed to meet with Ron after repeated entreaties on his part via the Internet date site she had been on for less than a month. She was put off by their age difference, (56, though in net dating parlance that could mean anywhere from 48 to 69), the fact that he was recently divorced, and his 8-year old son, referred to as the "CENTER OF MY LIFE!!!" in bold caps. But while the two other forty-something men she had been corresponding with stopped returning her e-mails, Ron persisted, even after she'd sent the site's preprogrammed reply, "SMILE. I don't think we're right for each other."

Now that she is actually sitting across from him, and not scanning his profile or pondering his three sport fishing photos, she categorizes their experience within the first five minutes: free dinner.

"I was married for nine years." His spiky gray bangs spill over his desert-bronzed forehead, and he can talk with his mouth full without seeming rude. "My wife had an affair with the accountant who worked at her office. He's an ugly little man. They just got married in June. What really gets me is when they come over

and Dustin is calling him Daddy. I tell him, that's not Daddy, I'm Daddy. Howard is stepdaddy. The only person you can call Daddy is me. He says, 'I'm sorry, Daddy.'" He laughs. "You want to have kids?"

"Some day."

"You gotta." He takes an emphatic bite of maki roll. "You gotta have kids. My wife couldn't have kids naturally. I didn't know that when we got married. We adopted Dustin. You can always adopt."

She has to bend forward over the table to hear him. The restaurant, crowded and clamorous, combines Asian–Pacific and Country Western influences that would appear incongruous anywhere except Vegas. Beneath flags of Texas and Japan, servers in satin kimonos and black slippers tiptoe past bartenders in cowboy hats. Toby Keith, Garth Brooks, and other twangy crooners she has only heard in her car blend with the din of knives meeting cutting boards.

"What is it you do?" he asks.

"I teach high school."

"Oh, yeah?" He feigns a curious grin. "That's right, you mentioned that on your profile."

In fact, she had purposefully left her "occupation" box vague. She finally settled on the open-ended moniker "education," suspecting there was no greater turn-off for any male than a single above-thirty schoolteacher—it smacked too much of institutionalized spinsterhood.

"You know, teachers," he says, pointing his index finger and nodding his head, "are underrated and underpaid. If it were up to me, schoolteachers would be the lawyers and doctors of this world and the lawyers and the accountants would all be the scum."

"Thank you, Ron."

"I'm serious. I feel very passionate about this. Dustin goes to private school. I won't let him near those places." He bites on a crab leg and chews.

"How long have you been using the service?" she asks, changing the subject.

He nods, chewing purposefully. "As long as I can remember. You're my nineteenth."

"Wow."

"I've had some doozies. There was this little blonde number, couldn't have been more than what, twenty–two years old? Tells me we need to meet at this particular restaurant right next to this chapel. Tries to get me all liquored up, then says, come on, let's get married. I had to push her off me with both hands. I met another lady, Donna. She's divorced, three kids. She likes to go bowling. She's a good friend of mine now. Not my type, but we have a good friendship."

"That's nice."

"Then there was this other lady. Trixie. Hot, hot number. She sends me naked—I kid you not, naked photos of herself. I mean this lady looks like, I don't know, Morgan Fairchild. She invites me to dinner. I go to the place and this lady taps me on the shoulder and I turn around and she says, "Are you Ron?" and I say, "Yeah," and she says, "I'm Trixie." I kid you not, this lady was four feet ten and must have weighed three–hundred pounds."

"What did you do?"

"I ate dinner with her. Then afterwards, I said, "You know, you don't look anything like your photos." She says, "I know." I said, "I don't think I can have a relationship that's not built on honesty." I felt bad about it, but then I thought, hey lady, you did it to yourself." He clamps a slice of pickled ginger between his chopsticks. "What about you?"

He says this lightly but she feels herself blush. The fact of her singleness would have been fine had it been a choice, as it was for so many of her freewheeling friends. But the fact was, she had dreamed of a husband, three kids, and a farm in the country since she was five. She didn't quite know how it had happened that those things she wanted had never materialized and those things that she didn't

did. But she knew from casually chatting with people—in stores, in the post office, in bars, and in gas stations—that this was the punch line of life; that so many people became who they didn't want to and didn't become who they did.

"You're my first date from the service."

"Be careful. It's different for women. You gotta watch out for the weirdoes."

"You used to fly planes for the Air Force?" Men's dating profiles tended to go into great detail with their professional history. His listed only his field, his rank, and several sports distinctions he'd won back in college.

"Yep. I work out at Nellis now. Special ops."

"You hang out a lot in Iraq?"

She is joking, but his smile doesn't waver as he swallows another half-glass of wine. "Three times in the past eight months."

He tosses the comment off with embarassed modesty as if admitting he had been both valedictorian and star quarterback in high school. It is his conscious attempt to hide his apparent bravado that pokes at her. She looks at his thick fingers smashing roe between seaweed flaps and imagines his hands must be skilled with both planes and guns.

"What do you do over there?" She is surprised that she is not more appalled by his answer. She has sent emails to Congress protesting the war, and in the box on the dating profile where users described their political persuasion, had marked "Very liberal." Now she finds herself looking at Ron with inquisitive eyes, a polite smile softening her face.

He waves his right hand in dismissal. "I can't talk about what I do."

She reaches for a salmon roll. "That must be hard."

"Not really." He scoops up wasabi with his open seaweed cone. "Not for the money they pay us." He forces the entire roll into his mouth and after a moment of chewing, closes his eyes and covers

his nose with his palm. She watches him fan his face and raise his eyebrows. "Oh, man," he says when the disturbance has passed. "That stuff gets you."

After dinner, Ron invites her outside to look at the sky. On their way through the back of the restaurant they pass a giant aquarium that separates the kitchen from the dining room. The fish, unattractive and large, were apparently chosen not for their beauty, but for their ability to suggest an exotic dinner. A gray one hides behind a fake tunnel, a red one darts in frenetic circles, and two yellow fish swim right towards her, faces pressed to the glass.

She follows Ron through the saloon to the side of the restaurant in front of a dumpster where, above them, the pockmarked moon was nearly full. "So what's an attractive woman like you doing on an Internet date site?"

She knew he didn't really expect her to tell him the story. How there was Bobby for five years in Tulsa, Evan for eight months in Tucson, and no one in Phoenix. How there were promises, fantasies, hopes and lies, and in between was the highway. And how, after four boyfriends and six jobs, two degrees, one abortion and one bankruptcy, she found herself 36, in Las Vegas, surfing the Internet date sites. And everything she had promised herself she would never be, at 22, at 24, and again, at 28, she had become, or rather, had become her and now she didn't know where her revulsion ended and real life began.

"It's a long story," she says, but he has already moved on.

"That's a desert moon," he says proudly, as if showing her something he'd made. "In Iraq, it doesn't really look like that. It looks more waxy. It has this sick yellow glow. But the sky, the night sky in the desert, it's always perfectly clear, whether it's Vegas or Basra."

"It's beautiful," she says. In the distance the casinos illuminate the ruddy mountains surrounding the city. The laser beam from the Luxor shoots up towards the stars, the lights from the Mirage wax and wane, the Paris' Eiffel Tower twinkles. She never

thought she'd like Las Vegas, the flat of the desert, the glittering lights, but she has been jarred by its beauty, the chiaroscuro of neon and glitz against rust–colored mountains.

"I want to show you something," Ron says, putting his hand on the back of his pants and pulling a handgun from a holster under his jacket. He does it so quickly she doesn't have time to be taken aback, and the smile on his face doesn't waver. "Don't worry, it's not loaded. See?" He slides the barrel out to show her, and spends several minutes explaining its parts—the barrel, the bullets, how fast they travel, the impact upon what they hit. "Have you ever fired a gun?"

She shakes her head.

"You should. Everyone needs to know how to shoot. Especially a woman. Here in Vegas you can go to any shooting range on any corner and tell them you just want to practice. Then you can get a permit and get your own gun."

"Why would I want to?"

"Once you start carrying a gun, you realize how many other people are carrying too. I was in the men's room at Caesar's this one time with these rich businessmen, corporate executives, fancy lawyers, bankers. We were all packing. Every one of us. It was like you show me yours, I'll show you mine." He chuckled. "Sometimes when I'm walking down the street I'll play this little game. He's packing. He's not. She's definitely packing. She's not. I'm telling you, it's a whole other world."

"I don't like violence."

"How do you know?" A smile curls his lips as if he has just told a joke. "Hold it."

"I don't want to."

"Hold it." He grabs her arm and places the gun firmly in her palm. "Don't aim it at me."

The weight of the gun is solid and cold in her palm. Her three fingers coil. She bends her index finger and presses the arc of her thumb towards the trigger. She shudders and hands it back.

"You ought to think about it. For your own protection." He returns the gun to its holster.

They go back into the restaurant where she gathers her purse. He gulps down the rest of the wine in his glass. "I'll walk you to your car and then I'll take care of the bill."

As they leave the saloon he slides his arm around her, his palm warm on the small of her back. She pictures the cool sheets of his bed, the comfort of waking up in his big house. The thought occurs to her that for a home, a warm hand, a car that was paid for, perhaps, down the line, her own baby, she might even be willing to clean a few guns.

"See, I wasn't so bad. Now you know what it's about." He gives her a squeeze and a kiss on the cheek. "You'll always remember your first."

"Thanks for a great dinner, Ron."

He smiles his smile that could mean anything: I love you, I'm bored, that was great sushi, I've killed a few times.

"Take care, sweetie." He hands her the box of leftover salmon rolls.

She gets in her car and watches him turn and walk through the night, one hand in his pocket; thick fingers pressed towards his hips.

She drives to the end of the parking lot and then stops, her cold fingers opening and closing around her steering wheel. Her one-bedroom apartment waited for her, in a gated subdivision of buildings so similar that she often found herself driving in circles before finding her door. She still had grading to do, which she would enter into her spreadsheet in the soft glow of the monitor.

She wondered how hard it was to get a gun permit in Las Vegas. Probably even easier than getting married. She could go to The Trigger, a twenty-four hour gun store and video poker club at the end of her block.

She drove towards the highway. In addition to the gun (did

they come in a box or a case?) there would be ammo to buy, bullets, and maybe a holster. There would be paperwork to study and new terms to learn, just like getting a new car or pet.

She had known plenty of people who had changed, it seemed, over night. There was Evan's sister who'd found Jesus after years spent strung out on meth. Her friend Avery, a freewheeling socialist in college who now ran a campaign for a leading Republican Congresswoman. Then there was her Aunt Sally who had worked for decades as a librarian in Indiana, then went back to school to become a nurse in Sierra Leone.

As she drove excitement coursed through her right foot. She rolled her window down slightly, welcoming in the night air. She imagined the curve of the barrel, the ridge of the bullet, the solid weight in her palm. She wondered if, holding her gun, she'd no longer feel naked, no longer feel so stripped down.

And then when that lump seared her insides—at school with the moms and their kids, in her room with the hope chest under the bed, alone on the Internet date site—she would just finger the trigger.

What are you looking at? I'm just like you. I got what I never wanted and didn't get what I did.

GEORGE OVITT

DANCING LESSONS

Right around the third time my mother asked my father to move out, Mom decided that I needed to take dancing lessons. I was just twelve, it was summer, and I had been wasting a lot of time hanging around the house, working just three days a week as an umbrella boy at Loch Arbor Beach, and doing a little boxing on Saturdays at the Boys Club. My father had introduced me to the "sweet science," and while I didn't much care for getting hit, I did enjoy the adrenaline rush of sparring, dodging a punch, and occasionally landing a soft left (we wore twenty-ounce gloves) on the cloth helmet of one of my buddies from the neighborhood.

Pop had done some fighting while in the Army—flyweight—and he taught me footwork, how to jab, and a couple of basic combinations. He was a small man, five-five and maybe one-twenty, but he was tough—he drove a truck for the county road department—and, unfortunately, he was also tough at home. We're an Irish-German family, my mother's mother having been born in Munich; grandma was a large woman, loud and fond of vinegary cabbage, fatty meat, and ice tea. My father's family was Irish, but I never knew his parents. Pop drank too much, but he wasn't a violent drunk—in fact, he'd calm down after a whiskey or two, stretch out on the ratty old couch in our living room, and doze off. But Pop did like other women, and Mom was a tight-fisted, jealous person who was always accusing my father of "spending every last dime on some floozy," which, who knows, he might have been, but now I suspect he didn't do much more than smile at women he thought were attractive and maybe buy one or two a drink at Flanagan's Bar, his favorite place right there on Ocean Avenue.

Our neighborhood was what came to be called "ethnic," meaning all-white, all-Catholic, all-working class. Later on, in the late sixties, a black family moved into a bungalow down the block, and aside from some nasty comments from our next-door neighbor—a legless ex-Marine who hadn't a good word to say about anybody—

everyone felt fine about having the neighborhood "integrated." We reserved our rancor for our "betters," for the rich people who lived on the other side of town, whose lawns I cut in the summer, and onto whose doorsteps I tossed the *Home News* on Thursday afternoons all through my youth. Black people were fine because they were poor; what upset my father was that there were people in our town who had a lot of money but never worked a day in their lives. That was his term of disapproval; "working" meant sweating, being outside in bad weather, and not having soft hands. "That Bill Markel, I bet his hands are *soft as a girl's* was something my father might say at dinner after having a disagreement with a guy at the motor vehicle division. Men in ties and jackets, even if they made a miserable two grand a year, which is what Pop made with the road department, were no good since they dressed like monkeys and sat around an office all day.

My father's resentments were broad and simple, but I don't know if they ran that deep. The truth was he got along with almost everybody—the guy at the bank who lent us the money to replace our roof, the Jewish man who ran the local pharmacy, heavyset Mr. Siliato at whose little pizzeria we ate every Friday night, and the folks in the neighborhood, mostly Irish and Italian, who he might refer to as "dopes" but with whom he would play bocce and drink Rheingold on summer evenings. People whose walks he'd help shovel on snowy days, whose kids attended the same public school as me, with whom I played baseball and basketball, the kids who boxed at the Boys' Club of Asbury Park. This was the world I grew up in, blue collar and full of large passions. My mother didn't like our street; she hoped I'd be different from my father, more sensitive maybe, capable of finding my way to an undefined, but somehow better life. It was these ill-defined hopes of my mother's that led to my taking dancing lessons.

Mr. Musto was a professional dancer. That's what Mom told me, though I had no idea what a professional dancer did, aside, of course, from dancing. Mr. Musto wore pastel-colored slacks and coppery Nehru jackets and always kept a hankie in his top front pocket. He had reddish-brown hair—lots of it—and he wore tap shoes, or at least shoes that made tapping sounds as he moved, quite gracefully,

across the linoleum floor of our finished basement. He wasn't the sort of man you would think my father would like, and yet my father adored Mr. Musto, adored him because he was affordable, a "snazzy dresser," and "sophisticated," meaning he was a good dancer who was willing to come to our run-down row house every Saturday afternoon to give lessons to half a dozen pre-teen boys for an insignificant amount of money.

Looking back , I realize that Mr. Musto was probably one of those down-on-the-heels types who orbited our lives back then—the man who came around with a little cart and sharpened our knives, the black men who came each autumn to the back door to ask my mother if they might, please, rake our leaves for a dollar (she always said yes and gave them two); the grown men who shoveled sidewalks at the houses of the war widows, the tattered house painters and Italian ice salesmen, and a real junkman who bought and sold anything metal from a hand-cart. We lived, my mother and father and sister and I, on the margins—on the edge of town, on the edge of the neighborhood, right where the oldest houses gave way to the woods and the lake, where better-off people might dump tires and batteries and rusted-out appliances; the kind of place where feral dogs chased (and once caught) my mother's cats and then burrowed in our trash for dessert. Mr. Musto seemed to my mother the intimation of something better or at least something less run-down and hopeless than what she had come to expect.

My mother and father had loved to dance. In their better days, before the war, they would take the bus downtown to the Berkeley-Carteret and dance to Tommy Tucker's Orchestra, to Benny Goodman when he came to the Convention Hall, to Duke Ellington's great ensemble at the Casino—a night my mother spoke of with longing. Ellington's big band had been there in Asbury Park, one night only, and my father had borrowed five dollars from his aunt to get in and paid fifty cents—fifty cents!—for two ginger ales to go along with four hours of the Lindy and Foxtrot and Jitterbug. My father was a fine dancer—a nice-looking man, athletic and slender—and my mother was the prettiest woman in the neighborhood. All my friends said so. And yet,

by the time I was old enough to pay attention to my mother's appearance, she and my father had grown apart, had come, at last, to despise one another.

Or did they? They fought, certainly, but what did they say to one another late at night in their narrow bed when my sister and I were asleep? When he would leave, the routine was always the same: he appeared in the living room with his small cardboard suitcase; he would tell me and my sister Margaret that he was going away for a while and that we should be good to one another and to your mother. He'd look contrite, pathetic with his satchel of clothes, an ever-present cigarette perched in the corner of his mouth. He would come over to the couch and give me and my sister a peck on the cheek, a tousle of the hair, and then he was gone. He had to leave the car for Mom, so I don't know what he did, where he stayed, or who took him to work. I know he worked because we never went hungry, even when he was in exile for months at a time. He always took care of us, and I have no idea at what cost to his own happiness.

Even when Pop was gone we'd have our dancing lessons. Mr. Musto came on the bus, which would drop him down the hill from our house. I dreaded dancing, so I'd sit in the window and pray that he wouldn't show up—but he always did, week after week, for almost a full year. When I saw him, I had to run next door to get Billy, whose mother was a war widow and whose son, my best friend, was a sad, bookish boy, my opposite in most ways, but good in just the way my mother wanted me to be, in a way I could never dream of being. And then the two of us walked across the narrow lane to get Stuart, a blind kid who loved music and dancing, and Kenny, a kid we didn't hang out with but whose mom had persuaded my Mom to let him come over to learn the cha-cha and tango and waltz.

We were the only people on the block who had a finished basement—knotty pine walls, drop ceiling, linoleum floors, and a wet bar—and thus the dance lessons were at my house, which was a great burden for my mother and a source of embarrassment for me, especially since I had to explain to my friends that my father was "away on business." I often lied about my parents, saying that my father was in the hospital or visiting his (dead) father in Buffalo. Divorce was unheard

of in the Catholic neighborhoods where I grew up, and Mom told me never to lie, but seemed not to want me to tell the truth either. So I lied. Lying was at first painful, then routine, and at last, after years of spinning fables about my father's long absences, lying became a part of my nature, to the extent that I would lie about my father even on those occasions when he was at home.

So each Saturday afternoon, Mr. Musto would walk up the hill and ring the doorbell. I would let him in, take his coat, and ask if he wanted a Coke or a glass of water. He always said no, and then he would follow me downstairs into the dampness of the basement and greet Kenny, Billy, and Stuart. Mr. Musto was especially kind to Stuart. He would shake our hands, one after another, and then give Stuart a hug. Mom said this was because Mr. Musto knew that blind people like a lot of physical contact—how she knew this, or how Mr. Musto came to have insights into Stuart's needs and desires, was beyond me. Stuart was a quiet and polite boy, whose face was always turned upward and who clicked his tongue constantly, as if were a bat using vibrations to locate himself in the immense and hostile world he lived in.

We never talked about his being blind. I never asked Stuart how he felt about it—he'd gone blind as a baby after a bout of measles—and I never wondered for a moment what it was like for him to navigate the five square blocks of our neighborhood. I wasn't insensitive, but it was impossible for me to allow the thought of blindness to cross my mind. This was in the days before handicapped parking, braille numbers in the elevators, or any other kind of consideration for blindness, or for those who had been crippled by polio. Each summer my mother would warn me in the most solemn terms never to go swimming in the lake for fear that I would "grow up a cripple." Even the word "disabled" was nonexistent. Anyway, I always did swim in the lake—we all did—and many summer nights I would lie in bed feeling my legs grow numb as the disease worked its way up toward my spine. I feared polio and going blind more than ghosts, nuclear bombs, or even communists.

But my legs never grew numb enough so that I couldn't learn

the cha-cha with Mr. Musto. He brought his own records in a black leather case—it looked like a handbag, and Kenny giggled about Mr. Musto having a purse, but what could he do? My parents had a Victrola—a big, white maple box with one small speaker that played 78s and 45s and 33s, but we only owned six records, including the soundtrack to *South Pacific*. Two Glenn Millers, a Tommy Tucker, and a Guy Lombardo rounded out the collection—no cha-chas or tangos or even a decent waltz—so Mr. Musto would unpack his Tito Puente and Ernesto Duarte and Facundo Rivera discs and drop the needle and we'd be off. First, he'd show us the steps on his own—"one, two, *cha-cha-cha*"—and he'd swing his hips and smile and put his right hand on his stomach and hold his left hand up in the air as if Chiquita Rivera were right there dancing with him.

Mr. Musto would take my hand and pull me out into the middle of the room and have me count aloud as I shuffled through the steps like Bela Lugosi—to my mortification—and then Mr. Musto would take my hips in his hands and rock them back and forth all the while counting and saying, "Feel it, Bobby, *feel it* in your body!" My buddies would be smiling ruefully, but their turn would come and pretty soon the four or five of us would be moving around the black, slippery floor, ignoring the music entirely, half enjoying ourselves, half embarrassed by the attention Mr. Musto was paying to our awkward movements, wondering perhaps why we were spending a sunny Saturday pretending to dance when we could have been playing basketball up at the Hurley's or, if it were dead winter, skating on the lake. Mr. Musto never took the time to explain the point of dancing, or to defend what must have appeared even to him to be such a pointless waste of an afternoon. He just danced.

After a half hour or so, the upstairs door would open and my mother, dressed as always in high heels and stockings and a nice house dress, would descend the stairs with a tray full of cookies and a pitcher of lemonade. Her hair was burnished red-brown and she wore just a hint of lipstick. She would smile at Mr. Musto and ask if the boys had worked up an appetite, and we would say that, yes, we had, and be grateful for the opportunity to eat and clown around for a few minutes before the ordeal of the tango began.

One quiet Saturday afternoon in the middle of February, a day or week after my father had once again left us, my mother arrived in the midst of Tito's *El Cayuco* without the tray of cookies or the big, blue ceramic pitcher of hand-squeezed lemonade. Instead she stood at the base of the stairs, one hand on the railing, one hand smoothing back her hair, and watched as Stuart and I moved in half twirls and, to the best of our twelve-year-old ability, swaying our hips in time to the conga drum. She watched and she smiled at me, and then she turned her smile —it was a lovely smile—at Kenny and Billy as they followed behind us, the four of us moving almost in time with the music—*one, two, cha-cha-cha*—and then, from Tito's horn section, a blast of trumpets and his voice rising behind the brass in a staccato cadence, *cha-cha-cha,* the sound, as I imagined it, of warm sun and a white beach like the one on Key West I had visited with my mother and father before Margaret was born. Just then I *did feel* the music; I closed my eyes and put my arm on Stuart's waist—it was odd, but at that moment everything felt right. I was dancing.

When I opened my eyes, I saw my mother dancing with Mr. Musto, not the cha-cha, but some slower dance, one that required Mr. Musto to have his arm around my mother's slender waist in a way, I thought, that looked calm and natural. Mr. Musto was leading my mother, as graceful as ever, in small circles around the edge of our finished basement. The song ended, the needle swung across the empty vinyl and rose with a mechanical whirl back to its resting place. But Mr. Musto and my mother kept moving—dancing—and the only sound was the light tapping of Mr. Musto's shoes and the rustle of my mother's dress.

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Adam Day's *forthcoming collection is Winter Inventory* (Sarabande Books, 2015). He is the recipient of a 2010 Poetry Society of America Chapbook Fellowship fo*r Badger, Apocrypha,* and of a 2011 PEN Emerging Writers Award. His work has appeared in the *Boston Review, Lana Turner, APR, Guernica, Iowa Review, BOMB, AGNI, Kenyon Review* and elsewhere. He also directs the Baltic Writing Residency in Latvia, Scotland, and Bernheim Forest.

Born in Canada and bred in the U.S., Allen Forrest works in many mediums: oil painting, computer graphics, theatre, digital music, film, and video. Allen studied acting at Columbia Pictures in Los Angeles, digital media in art and design at Bellevue College (receiving degrees in Web Multimedia Authoring and Digital Video Production.) He works in the Vancouver, B.C. as a graphic artist and painter.

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Daniel T. O'Brien *is a writer and poet living in Mohegan Lake, NY. His poems have previously appeared in the Susquehanna Review* and *Gandy Dancer*, and his poem "Daughter Nuclide," was named honorable mention for the 2013 Red Hen Press Poetry Award. He has written articles for the *New York Daily News* and the *Geneseo Scene* magazine. He currently works for the Hudson Valley Writers Center and Slapering Hol Press in Sleepy Hollow, NY, and is a poetry intern for *The Believer.* He will be joining the MFA program at the Ohio State University in the fall.

George Ovitt is the author of a collection of stories, The Snowman. He lives in Albuquerque.

Rachel Marie Patterson *is the Co-Editor of Radar Poetry* (www.radarpoetry.com*). S*he holds an M.F.A. from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and is a Ph.D. candidate in English and Creative Writing at the University of Missouri, where she was the recipient of an Academy of American Poets Prize. Her recent poems appear in *Smartish Pace, Parcel, Nashville Review, Thrush Poetry Journal, storySouth*, and others. Her chapbook, *If I Am Burning*, was released by Main Street Rag in 2011.

Padma ***Prasad*** *is a writer and painter. Her fiction has appeared in 'Eclectica', 'The Looseleaf Tea', 'Reading Hour'* and '*ETA Journal'.* She blogs her poem-drawings at padhma.wordpress.com. Her art is mostly figurative and can be viewed at http://fineartamerica.com/profiles/padma-prasad.html. *In her writing, she tries to capture stillness; in her painting, she tries to paint narratives. Padma lives in Northern Virginia and works as a federal contractor in records management.*

Kathy Rudin *is an artist from New York City*

Tatiana Ryckman *has an MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and writes from Austin, Texas. She is the Managing Editor of The Austin Review and her work has been published with Tin House, Keyhole Press, The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review,* and *Music & Literature.* Tatiana leads Creative Writing workshops through The University of Texas at Austin and the Austin Public Library. Tatiana's first Chapbook, *Twenty-Something*, is forthcoming from ELJ Publications.

Tomaž Šalamun *lives in Ljubljana, Slovenia. He taught Spring semester 2011 at Michener Center for Writers at The University of Texas. His recent books translated into English are The Blue Tower* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011) and *On the Tracks of Wild Game.* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012). His *Soy realidad* translated by Michael Thomas Taren is due by Dalkey Archive Press in 2014.

Fabio Sassi *makes acrylics with the stencil technique on board, canvas, or other media. He uses logos, tiny objects and what is considered to have no worth by the mainstream. He still prefers to shoot with an analog camera. Fabio lives and works in Bologna, Italy. His work can be viewed at* www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com

Philip Schaefer *'s poems are out or forthcoming in The National Poetry Review, RHINO, Fourteen Hills, Pacifica, Calliope, Toad, The Chariton Review, Noon* and elsewhere. He is also the recipient of an Academy of American Poets prize. Philip can usually be found tending bar at the local distillery in Missoula, where he is an MFA candidate at the University of Montana. He is haunted by waters.

Judson Simmons *is a graduate of the Sarah Lawrence College Writing Program, and holds a BA in Writing/English from the University of Houston. He recently graduated from the MSEd. program for Higher Education Administration at Baruch College in New York City. His chapbook, The Hallelujah Hour, was published by Amsterdam Press in 2010, and his work has appeared in Pebble Lake Review, Evergreen Review, Folio*—among other journals.

Amanda Gaye Smith is an amateur poet and photographer from Gainesville, Florida. Her photos are usually taken as studies for writing, but sometimes she gets a really good shot.

Michael Thomas Taren's poems have been published in *Colorado Review, HTMLGIANT, The Claudius App,* and *Fence* and are forthcoming in *Bestoned.* He spent nine months in Slovenia on a Fulbright Scholarship (2010–2011). His manuscripts *Puberty* and *Where is Michael*, were finalists for the Fence Modern Poets Series in 2009 and 2010, respectively. His book *Nile* is due by Vagabond Press in Spring 2014.

M. Ellen Wendt writes, teaches, edits and loves to cook. Her nonfiction work has been published in *Central Review, Temonos, A Summer's Reading, Albion Review,* and the *Pine River Anthology*. She teaches various writing courses at Central Michigan University, everything from freshman composition and technical writing to graduate courses in creative nonfiction and alternative rhetoric. She earned her PhD from Michigan State University in Rhetoric and Writing in 2011.

Oliver Zarandi is a writer. His recent publications include *Keep This Bag Away From Children, Hobart, Mad Swirl* and the *Chicago Centre of Literature and Photography*.