

THE BOILER



FALL 2015

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

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

Credits.

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THE BOILER

FALL 2015

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MONIQUE MCINTOSH

BUG

It felt like nothing, Cooper says. A pinch. A scratch he pecked at idly.

He says he had asked Gillian, the fellow entomologist he used to fuck before me, to check his scalp.

While he talks, I imagine Gillian climbing up on the top bunk bed in the shack they shared, her brown legs tucked under her, her hands prying Cooper's hair apart with a fine-toothed comb. She would be fresh from the shower, hair still dripping down her shoulders.

In my mind, she is always damp. Cooper says the showers in the rainforest research outpost opened up to the sky. Four panels of galvanized zinc and cool green air above, a constant static of insects with names Cooper tells me diligently, but I can never pronounce. Some without names at all.

Gillian did not need a comb. By then the worm had curdled into a pea-sized lump under his skin, pushing apart his hair follicles. A small air tube poked through, flopping around. A little tube nudging through the flesh lump so the botfly larva living under his scalp could breathe.

"Like the tiniest blue box macaroni you'd ever see," he says.

I ask him what it was still doing inside him.

"For experiments," he says. To gestate his own generation of Costa Rican botflies.

He takes off his baseball cap. He fingers find the lump and rub around the rim. He sits on the couch, but from across the room I see the fleshy bump rising through his black hair.

I'm standing by the glass doors, looking out at his unswept patio. Cooper has been gone for a year. His floor's thick with termite bodies. A stray, lacquered palmetto bug lies bellied up.

Before I met Cooper I would kill them. Slide off my shoe and slap them into a pulpy smear. I would not nurse them into spare jam jars scattered around my apartment for such purposes. I would not rescue them, free them back into the yard. I would not stay crouched, watching their hard bodies furrow through the grass.

"Come here," Cooper says. "I missed you."

I do not want to but I come. I stand over him, his arms around my waist. He feels thinner. His old T-shirt drapes across his shoulder blades. He buries his new, hairy face in my belly. He feels strange, not the Cooper that promised to come back. That promised I would move in with him.

I want to peel him off me. I am sick of strange men.

The worm buried in his head stares back at me. Or his macaroni air tube does. Wiggles around. Breathes me in. Hello. Under the hair Cooper's scalp is red and inflamed.

I ask Cooper how the worm can survive under there. Though I

already know the answer, that this worm is eating bits of Cooper. Eating up the fleshly pulp outside his skull.

If the worm stays there long enough it will be more Cooper than anything else.

Removal Method 1

Slap a slab of fresh red meat over the burrowed larva. Meat will suffocate protruding air hole. In desperation, the slug will crawl through the meat, towards where he thinks the surface waits for him. He will emerge, complete. Buried in the meat. Clean exit.

The other entomologists are coming over for a welcome back get-together. Just some beer, says Cooper. They're bringing over turkey subs and guacamole and baked brie. My stuff is still in boxes, so we shove them in the spare bedroom already filled with Cooper's things.

I only have a few boxes. We pile them in the center, far from the empty glass tanks, the battered, broken lab microscopes, the collection of bug bodies pinned to cardboards in frames on the wall. The room smells because he never throws away his things.

"Just take out what you need," says Cooper. "I'll help you unpack tomorrow."

I nod. I had packed quickly, blindly. I have no idea what's in them.

"Look at this one," he says, pointing to a frame. A dried-out dragonfly with cracked honey wings. "This one's my first one. See?" He taps the pencil scrawl below, the Latin name, the date. "My dad labeled it cause my handwriting was still shit."

"Of course." Cooper looks at the bug and his face grows broad and open I can see all his joy, and I look at him and wonder what it would be like to love something for so long.

We clean the apartment. I sweep and mop. I want to bleach everything, but Cooper doesn't like the harsh smells. He wipes the bathroom down with his own mixture of vinegar and baking soda, and scrubs hard so his hands are raw from it. He smells like salt and vinegar chips. This has not changed.

Bathing, says Cooper, is still tricky. The worm does not like to be submerged. When the shower hits his scalp the worm thinks it is drowning and flails under his skin. Instead Cooper wipes a soap-logged rag around his head and dabs the suds away.

I catch Cooper examining himself in the mirror, head tilted to see as much of the thing he is carrying around. His fingers prod softly around the lump.

"How does it look?" He smiles at me through the mirror.

I shake my head. I stay in the doorway and watch him.

"Come on," he says. "It won't bite."

I leave him and Cooper chases me, head first, air tube wiggling. I think I should squeal, that it would be good, so I do. Across the living room.

He catches me in the patio, drags me in. We collapse on the freshly made bed. I think I should laugh so I do. I let him crawl over me. Pull apart my cleaning house clothes, the bleach splattered shirt and stretched-out sweats.

I always loved Cooper for his hands. Bug-finding hands. Bony, thickly jointed at the knuckles. Neat, efficient. Like tweezers picking something out of formaldehyde. So I stay still, shut my eyes so he's nothing but his knobby hands down my belly through my cunt.

I do not look at him when he kisses me. He doesn't ask me to look at him. Maybe his eyes are shut too. Maybe we both cannot look at each other. Not because if I had my Cooper back, I would have pulled my fingers across his head but can't because his scalp is ocupado, so my hands just lie there at my sides, not sure what to do. But because I do not want to see him take off my clothes. I do not want to see on his face how much he does not know me.

He feels sticky from spit. I hear him licking, trying again, slipping between me. Spare thumb wish-wash across my nipple. I will not be able to go through with this.

The fan creaks over us, swooshes of air.

I imagine Cooper is not back home. He is back in Costa Rica, in a rain-soaked place I can't remember the name of. I imagine we are in that bunk bed, in that hut. Roughhewed, brightly embroidered blanket under us. Hiking gear scattered on the floor. Spare collecting jars around. The fan creaking is some insect buzzing above us.

And here in this place my body is brown and tight like Gillian and wet under him. My body is no longer mine. I imagine my feet, sore from the hiking boots. My worm picking hands grabbing him.

I do not think about all the others I fucked when Cooper was gone.

Here in this place my Cooper can be the one fucking someone else. He deserves as much. We can be somewhere else. I can manage this way. I can come.

Shit, he says. He rolls off and I look at him. His faced scrunches into itself and he's clenching his head. Cooper laughs.

"I think the worm liked that too much," he says. He smiles. He rubs his head, and I see the pale little air tube wiggle, curling around Cooper's fingers.

Removal Method 2

For the indigenous remedy, apply a pomade of tree sap from the matatorsalo, native to Costa Rica. The tar will poison the worm. The worm will die safely. He will stay safely dead and buried under the skin.

Cooper sits cross-legged in the middle of the floor as the entomologists surround him. The lump is growing, already the size of a fat olive. The macaroni tube wags harder, like it's heard its name. A few jump back. Shit. Bloody Marys spilling on the floor. I do not clean up. I stand by the doorway to the kitchen, near the drinks, watching them.

Both Sajjad and Schwarz stand around Cooper too, peering down at

the worm's tube. They are two of the men I slept with in the Natural Sciences Department.

I had recognized them both from their files when they came to me for some paperwork. I already knew their middle names, their social security numbers, their student loan debt before I fucked them. Still now, sometimes at work I go through the database I'm not suppose to know the password for, and I click through them, the faces I've fucked. Hoping someone will catch me.

I am surprised Sajjad has come. He is quiet in the huddle, sipping his drink, not looking at anyone. He is the kind of person who would come because not coming would mean something. Schwarz is laughing the loudest, pulling at Cooper's hair.

"Have you named it?" Gillian asks. She comes from behind and stops beside me, offering me a spare Bloody Mary glass. I take it.

"No. We're waiting for it to come. See what the little fella is like."

"Of course."

I tell her Cooper promised once that he'd name something after me.

Gillian watches the crowd around Cooper. She is still warmly brown, petite. Tightly wound under her t-shirt. Small head coated with slick black hair. The trip has not changed her.

"I would hold out for something better," Gillian says. "Florescent."

"Sure."

Gillian smiles. She is always smiling with her crooked incisors. She leaves me, joins the knot around Cooper, who's grinning, hot-faced drunk and jolly.

I imagine the worm eating up all that giddiness, that adoration. Flopping around even harder.

"What you gonna do when it comes?" Gillian asks Cooper.

"Oh, we're ready," he says. He points to the jar of sanitized sand on the end table. There is one in every room and one in his knapsack at all times. When the worm comes we will plop it in the warm, aeriated sand, where Cooper says he'll have the best chance of survival, though it makes no sense to me. A worm who spent his days buried, furrowing again into dirt.

Cooper tells everyone that his doctors were salivating over his bug. The main doc had called the whole clinic staff into the tiny exam room, and they had crowded over him, taking pictures, pulling hairs from his head with tweezers to get a better look. Some nurse stayed by the computer googling extraction methods and hollering out each step while the rest debated with each other about the best way to get the worm out intact, not listening to Cooper, who just wanted some ointment to make the worm happy.

The other entomologists laugh. They crowd over him, those that went into the rainforest too. Those that bathed in the open air, got bit in unspeakable places. They have all gone. Some one month, others a whole year like Cooper. Even now, so far away from that place, they hum and buzz around each other, each one with that same look Cooper gets when he rescues a palmetto bug, holding it in his hands, toppling it into a jar.

Schwarz looks up from the huddle at me. His glass is empty. He nods

at me, lifting the clear glass bottom, mouthing any more left? I nod. I leave them, walk back into the kitchen and open the freezer, knocking loose more ice cubes. I know that tonight or some other night when I can I will take Schwarz back into the second bedroom with my boxes. I'll let Schwarz touch Cooper's things, let him tell me the names of each insect in each frame. I will not let him put his dick in. I can at least do that.

And I think about when Cooper first spoke to me. When he found me standing over a butterfly dead in the middle of the Ecology parking lot. Wings still attached, but the pale yellow at the corners smudged away like chalk dust. I had stopped there, staring at it. Administration files slipping through my arms.

Cooper had come up beside me. Stood there awhile. Without a word he had squatted down and pinched its middle. Asked me for a spare sheet. Slipped the body into paper folds.

He had said if I wanted, he could pin her down in a shadow box. And I had wanted nothing more. To spread her apart. Needles through the chalk dust wings. Yellow smeared on my fingers if I was not careful.

Removal Method 3

Paste a piece of adhesive tape over the breathing hole. Worm may inch his way outwards, tentative, suspicious. Grab his tail out with a pair of tweezers. Do not tear the body in two. What is left of the body will stay there. Fester. Toxic shock in the host may occur.

We can't really fuck anymore. Cooper says the larva hurts too much when we get going. When he is in me the worm thrashes. He can feel the worm throbbing all the way down the nape of his neck.

We try. I climb on top, Cooper on his back, propped up on pillows. We try as long as he can, until I see Cooper's face crumble into himself. Even when I know he's had enough, I work at it a moment more. Close my eyes. Imagine someone else is under me. It doesn't matter who. Cooper doesn't stop me, and I don't stop until I can see the macaroni air tube flicking at me from the worm's lime-sized crown. I roll off him then and we lie there, Cooper's eyes shut, rubbing the lump. I can hear him humming a soft, gauzy song to the worm.

He looks at me. "Don't tell anyone," he says.

I lean over. Kiss him. I hum along too, until Cooper's jaws unclench. Until the air tube collapses on its sides.

I stay out of the house as often as I can. I do not bring anyone over. Instead, when Cooper works late I sneak into the café on campus. Drink black coffee until it's time for Cooper to come home. I lay out paperwork around me, but I don't work. Instead I watch drinkers come and go. I watch them sip the cream and foam, streaks of residue left around their mouths.

Cooper says botfly larva taste like milk. Creamy, slippery. In hard winters the Inuit ate them when they found a line of maggots buried in the furry seam of a deer.

This is what I'm thinking about when I'm sipping my coffee. When Gillian see me, a fresh cup in her hands.

She sits down at my table.

"Hi, am I bothering you?" She asks.

"No, not at all." I clear my files to the side to make space for her. She pries off the lid and the milky foam of her coffee leaks. She wipes it away.

"How's the bug?"

"Fine," I tell her. "How's Cooper. Still in the lab?"

"Yes," she says. "I just saw him. He's stuck there for a while."

"How's work for you?" She glimpses over at the files in my hands. "Do you keep dirt on us there? Who gets the grant? Who's fucking around with undergrads?"

"No. The real dirt's all digital now."

"Of course," she says. She stares at me then. Unflinching. I realize now that Gillian never really looks me straight in the eye when we are together with the others. But a pre-class rush has come in, a line of knapsacks and skin crushed against us. We are crowded in. No one watches us. She leans in, brown sinewy arm reaching across the table.

"I wonder what's your dirt?" She says. Someone brushes by. I look up, but he's someone I don't know.

"Well, I'm not fucking the students."

"No, you wouldn't," she says. "You'd never."

A girl behind Gillian comes in, catches my eye. Waves tentatively. Mouths hello. I remember her face is a passport picture on a file. I nod.

"I have to head out now, Gillian. See you later?"

"We didn't fuck, you know. When we were over there. You can't use that as an excuse."

Gillian watches me. She shuffles the files near her, adds them to the pile in my hands. I know she is waiting for me so say something. To explain.

I am not sure what I do next. I know I leave Gillian there at the table sticky with her foam, the line of drinkers closing around her. Files slipping from my arms.

Removal Method 4

Let him stay. He will crawl out on his own, fully fed. And following the laws of evolution, the emersion will be painless, so the host will not claw at the wound and rip the worm apart. The host will not even feel when the worms slips out. The host will live.

When Cooper comes he is hungry. He cannot wait. He rustles through the pantry, digs out the blue box macaroni. Want some, he asks? Sure. I watch him stir, sprinkling in the yellow powder into the pot.

Over the stove, his soft round belly rises slightly through his T-shirt. He has gained back some of the weight. There is the same old hairy belly he clenches tight when I poke at it. But the beard has stayed, thicken. Around his head is a halo of thick hair, a throbbing lump of flesh plopped on top.

There is no hiding the worm. Its fleshy sack bulges out of his crown, poking through all the baseball caps Cooper uses to conceal him.

It has been stressful for him, coming back here. He has not said so, in so many words.

He pours the yellow muck in bowls, spare cheese dust scattering on the stove top. He hands me a bowl, hardly looking at what he's doing. I stop him, take away the bowls.

"Eat later," I tell him. "I need you for something."

"The worm," he says. "The worm hurts like fuck today."

"I'll be quick."

I lie him down, prop the pillows behind his head, enough so the worm has air. The milky air tube flops over his sack. Slack, content. I want to blow on it. See if it will move. I blow across the lump. The worm stays still.

I will never fucking eat macaroni again.

"That's nice," Cooper says. "Do that again." His eyes are closed. I peel back his work shirt. Press my face in his soft, hairy belly. Tongue in his belly button. He smells of vinegar and the chemical trace of something else. Something you keep dead things floating in.

Here now, with my face in the metallic tang of him, I will not pretend. I will not close my eyes. I will not fuck someone else. I will not be someone else. I look up for air. Cooper's chin pokes out, slack, restless. Eyes still shut.

"Cooper. I should tell you something."

"No," he says. His Adam's apple bobs up down his throat. "You don't."

"I think I do." I watch him. His face crumbles into himself, eyelids crinkled tight, mouth pinched, pained. He rubs his hands across his face. I sit up, hover over him.

"You really fucking don't," he says through his hands. "You really fucking don't."

"Ok," I say. "I won't."

And I watch his hands fall back, his face soften. Under the beard somewhere is my Cooper. Under his skin, his skull, his play dough folds. I run my finger down his nose and somehow I want to keep going. I want to slip my finger under his eyelids, through his eye socket. Go down as far as I can go until I understand. Until I know exactly how he can love me.

I call his name. I want him to say my name out loud. Say it.

But Cooper is so still. Mouth open, waiting. The lump is swelling. The air hole plops out. Ridges of pulpy white. Black hairs along its shaft. A fine, milky finger is coming.

JESSICA MOREY-COLLINS

INTERVAL

For a wasp trapped between a window and a screen
two worlds, in tandem, taunt. *Nothing I understand*
haunts me, Ruefle writes. It's the instant
of transmutation that laughs from the dark.

Once, my eyes slid open from a lake bottom.
I called and called to myself but heard no answer.
While vast pre-histories crawled through the water
and clung to intruding root systems,
 each truth of mine gave steadily

way to another. I howled awake, sense
wedged like a seed between my teeth.

Since then, I clatter in the instant between—
ping against glass, screen.

Screen and glass together, taut.
The wasp flings its joints and bones
over and over into both—testing, testing.

JESSICA MOREY-COLLINS

WINE DARK SEA

Before our corneas got so dense, we slept
with basil leaves across our eyelids.

We soaked the leaves, spread them wet
against each eye-lashed seam.

Night dried the basil, scented
our hallways sweet. Sunrise would find
that moon had sucked the basil dry.

*

Our eyes were supple, prone
to dust—immune to blue
but little else: sense

an armor's cleft where light seeped.
Visual information, rain collected: continuous
drips fixed all in-routes

through crenels, settled data in the lowest
depressions. Clues were fluid

enough to haunt
our hollow spaces,

then, our skull's many basins
and conduits pooled with color.
Dark was no ruin, for us.

*

Every morning, the leaves crackled away.
Only centuries would reveal
the wounded blue of sea.

ELIJAH BURRELL

WILDFIRE FEET

Seven aching months of feet,
wildfire beneath the soles, preamble
pang for waking. My feet made it hard
to stand and walk. Her scraping sickness
woke her, but kept her from rising at all.

What a mysterious machine,
the body. *Bobby Dylan once said,*
'I'm determined to stand whether God will deliver
me or not' she told me one night.
That's a brave thing to say, I said.

But machine and Deliverer both stilled her.
The pain traveled from my feet for a bit
after she left—my feet felt fine.
It tramped around my chest and head
and stomach and hands before it returned.

Sour and wet, it moved to my eyes,
so red like flesh prisoned in a grapefruit.

ELIJAH BURRELL

SINISTER GROWTH

A fearsome something bides its time in the woods
behind our house. My neighbor called a meeting
because he lost his dog last week. It barked
and barked where the lawn meets the trees,
then yelped and disappeared.

Experts came to explore the woods, track it,
And trap it. They emerged with surprise
in their eyes. *Something has changed*, they said.

You're not the same since the thing began
to snarl at night, since the living green
of leaves and limbs went brown.

Now I can feel it, you tell me.

We sprayed the woods with poison, to no avail.
You wince when I touch your hips or shoulders.

I want to numb and ease your sore bones' ache.
Behind our house, the fearsome something waits.

APRIL MICHELLE BRATTEN

WHERE WE LIVE

I am the country she can jerk on, I allow her to labor me. Resolve gives birth to rice-snow and dead bees. Where is my thickness?

Where is my body? I am a body but not somebody. I cannot stop thinking on her. I watch her now, colder than before. Her brain

is the place where I gather and mend inside strings of ice-lump. I am her promises I promise but never promise through. I am anything

she has ever held too tightly. Her soft boots. Her raw mouth and cherries. Her body is trouble. Is my beating muscle of dirt. I think

on it. I collapse open and through her. I want to kiss that jelly of potential. Stunned, she opens her eyes, says she cannot be filled. My ears

break off and bury in my drifts. My fingernails freeze on my own air--halfway toward her thigh. If this was summer, I could really show her

something. Gold lights to quiver her night. Warm excuses. A body.

APRIL MICHELLE BRATTEN

DROOP

Mother is right:

We learn by her breasts' weight, tumble our small heads
in the buzz of her chest, pull and tug at her soft.
Don't be fooled, she says. These are not set in stone.
We listen. Grow our own intimate skin, find ways to flush
the flat corpse, leave a hard body behind.

*You must,
she warned, must
wear bras to bed,
or your flesh
will flex
and stretch
into the worst
kind of sin.*

Then she takes her giant breasts, folds them
like a sheet, beckons us into the layers.
We listen, our bodies rising to a hum, inflating,
developing into ampler versions of ourselves.

SARAH A. CHAVEZ

DEAR CAROLE, OF COURSE NOW I DO THE DISHES

Just yesterday, my fingers
puckered and layered with soap, rubbing
the cloth round and round the plate,
I couldn't stop thinking
of all the hands that touched
the plate before it got to me.
The hands that mined
the Earth's overburden, that scooped
the clay, sorted out the roots and limestone,
screened it through a sieve,
dried and pressed. Hands that worked
the hammer mill, that kneaded and pugged,
rolled the slabs, ringed the edges,
that carefully chose an autumn red
for the posies that would come
to bloom in its center.
The hands that fired.
The hands that wrapped it in paper,
folding the brown fibers of recycled parchment
carefully, twice. Those hands understood
the plate's fragility, knew that someone
would be rough with it, would forget
that a plate is fundamental
to the very core of civilization.
Without the plate, we're rats
scrounging and twitching our whiskers,
licking the soft pads on our sharp-toed feet.
And now I have this plate.
It's a wonder the red painted posies
don't run right off
with how I've scrubbed and scrubbed.
I know it's not dirty, I just need
something to caress
in your absence.

SARAH A. CHAVEZ

DEAR CAROLE, I WAIT TO STOP FEELING HUNGRY

You once said eating with me
made you nervous:
*I can see you counting calories
when you dish out food.*
But what you really saw
was my mental resistance not to count,
not to see exactly where that food
would end up when I didn't exercise.
It has been exhausting trying
to undo what had been done
for so many years and all
I wanted was to get to the point
where I could just say,
Fuck it and eat.
My mother counted calories,
constantly cycled through new diets,
pinched the fat of her belly,
refusing to look in the mirror.
She drank nothing but chocolate powder
and ice for months, then made nothing
but dry tuna patties and tomato slices.
The tuna water squeezed from the slit
in the broken seal, the pink flesh
plopped on a plate. Her hands soft & facile
making little mounds and placing them
on the dry nonstick frying pan,
my job to smash with a spatula
and turn over.

Our real diet was inconsistency.
It was who knows what will come today –
Pepsi and candy for breakfast, no more
than one cookie after lunch,
boxed Mac n' Cheese, Hamburger
Helper, canned green beans,
these in any combination for dinner.

And I find myself here again
keeping track, except this time
it's not about calories or pounds,

it's about the consistency
of desire – the desire to stop desiring
all the time. It is distracting.
I sit down to write and every line
is an item from my pantry,
what food might be in walking distance:
peanuts, candy corn, Wheat Thins,
apples, Dove chocolates,
kale chips, left over pizza.

Each new tried food is logged
and cataloged, to determine
which will sustain me the longest,
make my stomach cease its endless
desire to be filled:
Plain bagel with peanut butter – 7:45 a.m.,
Hungry again at 9.
Egg and cheese on English muffin – 8:15 a.m.
Hungry again at 10:45.
Black coffee with breakfast, thirsty again
after each mug drains.

SARAH A. CHAVEZ

DEAR CAROLE, AT THE GALTHOUSE POOL,
LOUISVILLE, KY 2014

First dunk in, my heart stops.
Colder than I thought, my mouth
cracks like a dam and the water
rushes in, my lungs filling
like a creek or a cup . . .

Like the cup we took to the pool
in the mobile home park. You,
me, Christy, and the neighbor boy
took turns holding its silent
lip under the silvery surface
until the last bubble broke,
before ripping through
the water's sheen,
to empty it in someone's face.
Your face cried, the salt and chlorine
like a chemical reaction
producing a scream
so loud and shrill, we all
opened our mouths
to swallow the sound.

I come up sputtering & guttural,
forgetting what year it is,
what pool. I look for you,
but all I see are strangers and this
makes me both happy and sad.
Happy that I am somewhere clean
and bright, somewhere
I have been invited.
Sad, because even then
I don't belong.

MIKKO HARVEY

SWIVEL

When I want to be sweet and light like a blackberry
floating in a bowl of water, instead I am heavy
and awkward. When I want to be strong like a real
sword, I just sit here like a blackberry in a bowl
of yogurt. Once, I saw a suit of new skin floating
in front of me. It was perfect. It was just my size.
Sometimes, I spend the whole morning searching
for the morning. It was perfect. All I had to do
was step inside.

LOGEN CURE

WELL-MANNERED GIRLS

Fine, I'll show you, she said,
extracting a garment bag from her closet.
Inside, a perfectly white
formal dress you recognized
from the portrait of her sister in the hall.
Your closet never contained such a thing.

You really are a debutante, you said.

A belle, she corrected. *Fucking absurd.*
Mother just adores the little
white gloves. You marveled
at her precise articulation of crude syllables,
clarity gained from voice lessons.

You imagined her at the Belle Ball,
on the arm of a black tux. You knew
she'd wish he could be you.
Wouldn't her mother
just *adore* that?

She pulled you to your feet, curtsied,
placed your hand on her waist.
You never waltzed before. *Step.*
Together. Laughing, *Don't lead.*
You focused on your shoes. *Step.*
Together. Look at me. There,
see? Now you got it.

LOGEN CURE

STUDY

Knocking on her door was never easy.
Her mother wasn't sure
what sort of girl you were.
She'd raise her eyebrows, peer over the thin
metal rims of her glasses, touch the cross
hanging at her chest. The dread
that woman would answer sat like
a stone in your mouth, threatened to choke you.

Your friend would fling open the door, hug you
with such lack of hesitation you'd forget to be afraid.

Thursdays you did calculus together,
side-by-side on an oversized couch.
She never asked if she could
slide her cold feet under your leg.
You tried your best to be warm.
She was brilliant and you were bright enough,
curious, at least, to know the how-much of things.
She'd lean so close as she compared your tiny, precise
numbers and symbols to the careful curves of her own.

You usually noticed the smells of fresh baking before
you saw her mother standing there, with a plate of cookies still
too hot to touch, two glasses of milk, a wide, unmoving smile.

ANNALISE MABE

SPACE TAKER

All I thought about the summer after fifth grade was catching minnows with my neighbor in the muddy lake by my house. I wasn't thinking about how to lose my belly fat in two weeks or how to best cover up blemishes. How to hold my shoulders back at a party or apply lipstick without getting any on my teeth. I didn't know there was a proper way to enter a bar so that every head would turn and stop to hold a second of me. These are things I have learned.

I was eleven that summer when the sun stayed up with us until eight, coloring clouds like pools of florescent soft serve. My sinewy limbs let me run back and forth, quick, between water's edge and our spot on the hill. My arms, legs and torso were utilitarian, sunbaked, and brown. We netted and named twenty minnows one night, the blonde down hair on my legs collecting dry, caked mud. I was late for dinner for the first time. When I barged in on my family quietly forking at the dinner table, my older sister said I looked like a bear. I didn't care. I had caught and named twenty swimming, baby fish before sunset. This is what my body let me do.

*

At twenty- four, I tutor Jade, a fourteen-year-old who does Pilates every Saturday with a private trainer, who wears Manolo Blahnik heels for her Confirmation in the photo her mother texts me. Her mother, Vera, enters a security code, opening the door for me on a Wednesday at four.

"Don't you look pretty!" she says.

"Thank you," I say, walking towards our tutoring table. I set my bag down next to the neat pile of college-ruled paper and the row of sharpened pencils.

"You should curl your hair like that every day." Vera's eyes are wide and eager.

"It just takes so long." I adjust and re-adjust the row of pencils waiting for Jade.

Vera vigorously nods her grinning face.

I tuck a curl behind my right ear, considering adding thirty minutes to my morning routine.

*

I coast down the interstate on a Monday when I hear a fifty year old woman on NPR discuss how her sexual desires have dwindled to nothing.

"I don't know why I feel this way," she says.

I turn up the volume knob with one hand on the steering wheel. I

listen to the NPR host explain Sprout Pharmaceuticals, how past drugs for female libido have focused on increasing blood flow to the genitals, but how this one focuses on the brain.

Cindy Whitehead, Sprout's CEO, explains that it's about restoring balance.

The FDA has rejected the drug twice, citing that there wasn't much evidence it works.

Whitehead argues that there is evidence, that it's increased sexual desires in women by fifty-three percent, and that the FDA is holding the drug to a higher standard than the same kinds of drugs made for men.

I turn the volume louder as cars rush past me.

Terry O'Neill explains that we live in a culture that has discounted the importance of sexual pleasure and desire for women, that she fears this cultural attitude where men's sexual health is extremely important but women's sexual health is not.

I pick at my fingernails and crack my neck. My heart rate rises. I imagine the FDA sitting at a conference table debating the female body and what works. I think of how I'm only twenty-four. I think there must be something wrong with me. And of Pam Houston's essay in which someone asks her: Is there some good reason you've convinced the rest of your body that your hips and stomach and pelvis don't even exist?

*

In the fall of seventh grade I decided to "go punk." This meant cutting my jeans with Billie and writing lyrics in permanent marker over almost every inch of them. This meant buying black Converse sneakers from the Journeys at the mall and rolling them in the dirt until the whites were less noticeably new. This meant obsessing over Jesse Lacey and Conor Oberst, men older than me who used a straightener to flat iron their black bangs. Or Chris Carraba with his brooding brows and gelled faux hawk. This meant going to Warped Tour and asking a tall dude with one-inch gauges to lift me up over the crowd and pass me forward so I could surf to the stage. This also meant trying to be okay when I heard the grown men yell "flip her over!" as they passed me up, groping the front of me.

*

My body feels like it's against me most of the time. Whether in the neck or the shoulders, the stomach, or the brain. My fingers dig into muscles, looking to relieve the buried bulbs of pain, the knots that have rolled themselves into existence. I think this digging just makes it worse, but I do it anyway. My temples pound with the weight of bricks. Migraines fog my nights. My boyfriend offers me a massage. But after, when he pulls softly at my hips, I turn.

"I just need sleep. Maybe that will help my head." I roll over on my side, hugging my legs together in a self-preserving ball.

I wait on Jade's doorstep on a Tuesday. Their front yard fountain splashes water into itself. I wear Nike sneakers, exercise pants, and a Ghandi T-shirt. My hair is rolled in a bun and I haven't got a lick of makeup on. Vera's frame approaches, her arm reaching right to enter the security code before she opens the glass patterned door.

"Come on in," she says. "Would you like some coffee? An espresso from the club?" She squints at me, her nose slightly wrinkling. She looks as if she's examining my freckles. "You look tired."

"I'm fine. Just school and work."

I'm not tired. This is how I look without makeup. This is my skin; translucent with blue veins beneath my eyes, with uneven, red tones swimming across my cheeks. These are my eyes; plain like the days when I played kickball on my street, the eyelids that were oiled when Anthony picked Dare and kissed me on the trampoline. These are my lips; flat and cracking from my teeth that bite them, that peel layers off when I'm nervous.

Next time I will wear something different.

Dr. Mulloy sits across from me in a lowly lit office, her reddish brown hair sitting in a blunt cut on her collar bones. I'm here because my boyfriend and I have been fighting, because of a distance that I've created. She lets me choose what we talk about, so I pull out the list of possible topics I've jotted down:

- Student who is giving me trouble in class
- Stress while trying to find a doctor
- My parents' divorce

I go with the doctor issues; this is a safe place to start. I tell Doctor Mulloy about the frequent UTIs, how they often come after sex, how, as a consequence, they make me avoid engaging.

"Are there other reasons you don't want to engage in sex?" she asks.

I'm quiet. My eyes shift to the corners, to the tissues next to me on my left. To the spot past her right shoulder, where her pens are sitting in a cup on her desk.

"Have you ever brought yourself to orgasm?" she asks.

I look out the window into the graying parking lot, noticing the yellow that paints the air like some mustard-gassed war storm. "I've never had a physical relationship with my body," I say.

Dr. Mulloy nods. "Growing up, it's not discussed but then you're expected to one day have this sexual understanding of your body."

The session is an hour long. She asks me questions, trying to steer the conversation to a place of insight that only I can find. I take notes in a lavender notebook.

She tells me to be mindful of my body, to balance the positive thoughts with the negative thoughts. I realize I spend a lot of time listing my ailments like I'm proud of the migraines, the knots in my shoulders, the ulcers

in my stomach, the lesion in my brain. It's as if I'm happy to offer up my symptoms, hoping they'll excuse me from having to deal with the thoughts that caused them, these manifestations I've created out of ignoring the case that holds me. She tells me to be aware of gratitude, to say thank you to the body for letting me write words and think thoughts and walk across campus, to teach others. She tells me to think of what my body lets me do. To start small; it's not about going zero to sixty. It's about recognizing what feels good. Do you like to wrap yourself up in a soft blanket? Do you like hot cups of tea with honey and lemon? Yes. Yes, I do. Does it feel good when your hands rest on your skin?

"A lot of this makes sense," I say. "I get the balancing thing. I should be more positive when I'm looking—"

"No, not looking. This is not visual. This is physical."

*

I stopped kissing my family when I was thirteen. My mother hugged me while I let my limp arms hang by my side. I turned my cheek, wiping any wetness after anyone planted their lips on me. I think this is when I stopped living in my body.

Every Sunday was Switch Day where my sister and I packed our clothes and toiletries back into our suitcases that grew larger every year with additional pairs of shoes and bags of makeup. On Switch Day, we'd migrate back to Mom's or Dad's like pre-pubescent Sherpas. I never put any of my things away. My items lived in the suitcase that I pulled from as needed. This was fine. This was not a big deal. Packing was easy.

I lived with my friends. In their cell phone texts, in their IMS, in their pink bedrooms with white teddy bears, with doors closed. I couldn't be without them, or someone else to make me feel less alone. Then I lived with boyfriends. And as a girl with a pretty face and a full body that came before many other girls', it wasn't hard to find guys who wanted to spend time with me. Who wanted to fill the hole where family was uprooted. Who looked at my body and said *Yes*. Who said *No, I will not leave you*. I saw it as a simple exchange. Make me forget what it's like to grow up shuffled between parents who only politely say hello from the doorway. Make me forget when I was six, when Mom and Dad let me choose Ho Ho's Chinese for dinner, when we sat around the table listening to James Brown. Make me forget that once, we were a family unit, that now we are fragmented in separate cells. Then, you can have me.

By fifteen, my body was not for me. Yes, utilitarian, but for ulterior motives.

*

When Vera opens the door, her back and shoulders are poised. Her shirts are white, her hair subtly highlighted and makeup on full. She wears a red lip while asking what she can grab for me to drink. She wears a William

Sonoma apron as she pulls a roasted chicken from the oven. She asks questions about school: What are you getting your degree in? Will you be able to be a professor after that? The next time I tutor, she asks me the same questions about school because she's forgotten or she didn't care to remember.

What she does remember is how my boyfriend gave me a diamond from Tiffany's. How elegant I look when I show up in new glass frames, clear ones that show more of my eyes.

"Did you do something different?" She gestures a circle around her nose. I think she's trying to ask me if I've had work done.

I tell her three times: "I got new glasses."

*

In eighth grade, Billie and I danced and scream-sang in her bedroom. We blasted *Vindicated* and yelled the emo lyrics across the room with appropriately dramatic hand gestures and jumps. Billie didn't care who saw her forcefully thrusting her hips or whipping her hair. I let go to some extent but was still concerned with how strained my neck might look or what her sister's friends would think if they saw me bouncing like a maniac.

I liked Chris Carraba because he sang about how stupid it was that guys asked other guys if they scored or not.

"He's so different," I said to Billie as we scrolled through photos of him on the Internet, eyes transfixed on his brooding brows and sculpted hair.

*

On a Thursday, Jade opens the door in a green romper that barely covers her butt. She has legs for days and dark brown hair parted in the middle. Her freshly manicured nails are pointed and nude. She doesn't do neon or any color I thought kids were into.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she says before turning her lightly tanned back. She carries her frame and her hands like they're breakables.

"I wasn't out here too long," I say, clicking forward on the marble tiled floors in tan heels. Today I don black ironed dress pants and a crisp, blue blouse.

"I love your outfit," Jade says without looking at me. She struts forward into the kitchen, flipping her long straight hair past her neck.

I can't believe she is fourteen, that her nails are always done. I wonder if they are paper thin underneath the plastic. Where does she get them done? I ask, writing down the name of the place, pretending I can keep up before we start on her History paper.

*

My friend and I walk up to Dos Gatos handing our IDs to the bouncer in a white buttoned down and black vest. He stands with his legs

spread apart, like someone preparing for jumping jacks. He takes my ID, looking down at the pictured face, the name, the birth date. He looks me in the eyes, squinting with fake suspicion. He seeks this mini encounter with two younger girls out of boredom and control, I assume. He nods, giving us the OK to enter. My friend and I strut in heeled boots to the middle of the bar, catching glimpses of head turns from the corner of our eyes. The bar is full of thirty-somethings and it's almost one; we understand we are new faces around here.

After the offered free shot from the man who could be our Dad, we decide to dip. Outside, I scan the front of the bar for the address in order to call the cab. The bouncer is so still he hides beneath the awning's shadow and says:

"123 E Forsyth St."

As I enter the address in the cab-app, he adds: "You've got a great set of legs. Whatever you're doing, keep doing it."

"Thank you," I say, without looking up. I pretend to be consumed by the phone glow.

*

The sun slides down the receding tree line. I keep my eyes ahead with one hand on the wheel. The other hand I let rest on my upper thigh. My thoughts are intentioned: *My thighs are soft. They feel nice. My legs let me stand for hours while I teach. I don't like—No. Reroute. I like how they are soft.*

*

A friend and I chug beers at the venue where my boyfriend's band is playing. Another band plays the same kind of pop punk we were so fond of as angsty teens. We sway our hips and nod with the thick reverb. The heavy vibrations fill my chest, almost making it harder to breathe.

"This is so high school," I say.

"I know, right?" My friend says.

My thoughts are intentioned: *Don't sway your hips for the guys behind you or the pair of black haired girls who have been eyeing you from the edge. They're too scared to dance. It doesn't matter, stop comparing. How do you want to move your hips? What feels good for you?*

Muscles relax. I try not to think of what my stomach looks like from the side or how my butt looks from the back, cropped in these jean shorts. The singer strums a cover of a song I used to know intimately. It's only been ten years, but I can't place the words. I'm surprised I forgot the lyrics or even the name of the song. *Vindicated?* I know every vocal turn, but my tongue can't keep up. My friend knows this one from her youth, too; She sways forward with careless arms and no concern for who is watching. We fumble to yell the parts we remember, though our voices can't be heard over the pulsing shreds coming from the amps.

We scream the sentiments.

We are flawed. But we clean up well.

*

Sometimes in the car, I let the windows down, preferring the Florida heat over the stuffy conditioned air. Sometimes on these rides, I remember when my hair was long and tangled as it blows forward around my face, like those muddy days at the lake, when I caught and named minnows. When the only thing I had to think about was getting home on time. When I wasn't thinking about all of my mirrors who judge my height with quiet eyes, who comment on my alertness based on level of applied makeup, who think they owe me the piece of advice about my haircut. When I wasn't concerned about what the man behind me in the stairs thought of my calves as I climbed. Sometimes I remember summer. When the sun sat fat and melted everything around me. When I ran with rugged legs, when no one knew my body but me.

TIRED

The man cannot help being / tired. Tired of himself. Tired of the distance he puts up / between him and his wife. Tired of his job and tired / of this town which has given them only / proof that they cannot live, cannot be happy / just anywhere. He is tired of applying for a new job, / tired of imagining what life would be in upstate New York / or southwest Missouri, the Florida panhandle or maybe, / just maybe, in his hometown or hers. He is tired of rejection: / the schools he's applied to already, journals and book contests, / how she shrugs away from a hug, a kiss, in the kitchen / while they make dinner or clean up after. Tired of putting the boy / to bed—another job he wishes he didn't have—, laying next to his small frame and staring / at the animal alphabet stickered to the wall, / harder and harder to pass time by making words from letters one space away / from each other on the wall's grid because the sun has set, / and yet the boy still won't sleep. He's tired of writing poems / in his head that don't use the word *miscarriage* / even though that's what they're all about now. Tired / of planning for the future when they still don't know / where they'll be in a few months. Tired of killing / time, doing time, in this house, in this town, this region and state. / Tired of hate and the repetition of feeling / so much of it so closely that it's become / a part of their family. And mostly, he is tired / of sleep and needing it, and how when he wakes in the morning, / sleep hasn't come done any damned thing for him.

MICHAEL LEVAN

TEST OF WILL

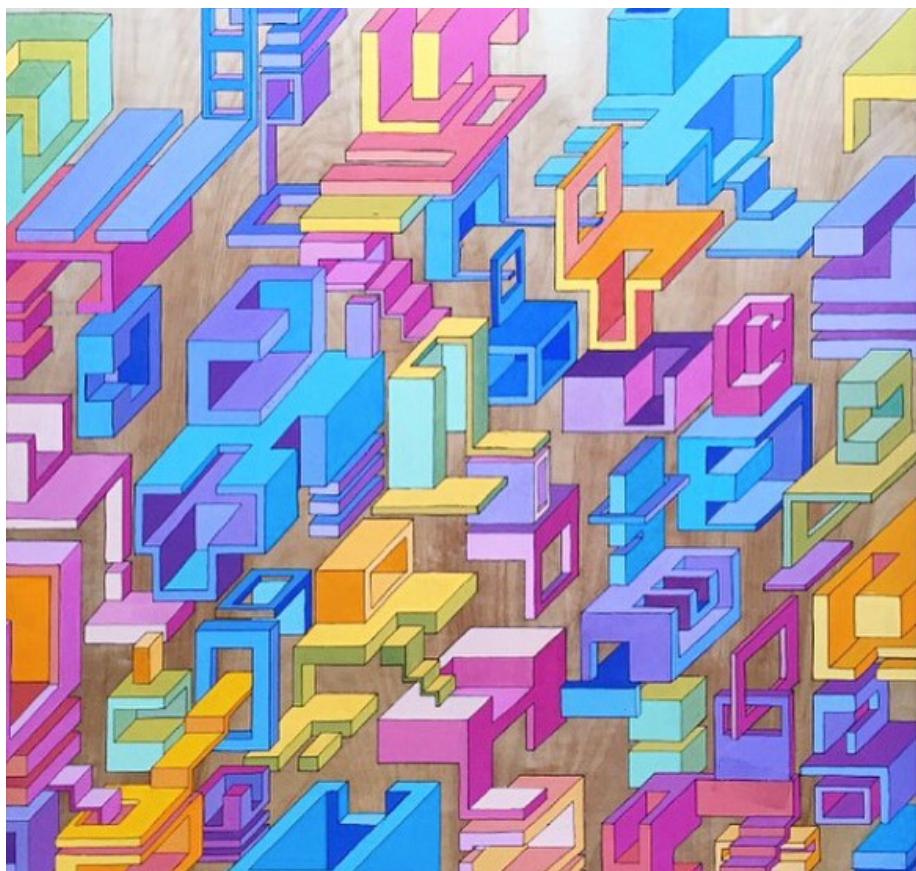
Settled now into their routine, they have little / to excuse
themselves from speaking again / of the future. Or thinking
of it, or hinting at it / with test-balloon observations: *That
baby at the mall, / wasn't she gorgeous? And that dress,
that's the kind I would have...* / Or, *Can you believe all the
kids we saw at Mass?* / Or even in the darkening space
between / putting their boy to sleep and her drifting into
dreams / the man doesn't know, *It felt like a boy. / Did I
ever tell you that?*

MICHAEL LEVAN

OUT THE OTHER SIDE

Try as he might, / her words, off-handed but so damn certain, do their best / to stay with him. They hang over him / not like noose against endless blue sky or guillotine's shined blade / ready to drop and cut off the head of his desire / for another child. More like an umbrella, / if that simile's not too small to capture his predicament, / a shade against day's light, the slight / darkening of the world he moves through.

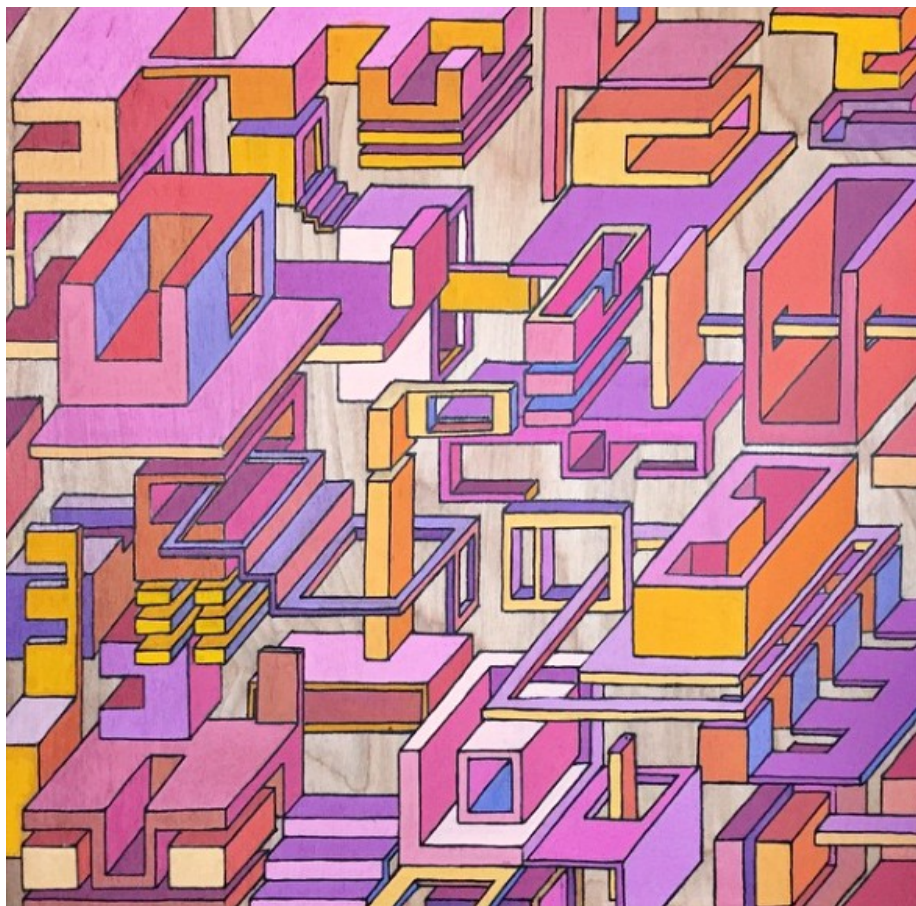
He doesn't care for / the way she's named their loss. From *it* to *boy* / is a much larger distance than one letter. / Try as they might, her words are never so far / they'd be forgotten as the man and his wife work to replace / the hollows in them with a who to care for and love, / who will hold them close together again.



BETSEY GRAVATT

DREAM RECIPE

2015



BETSEY GRAVATT

I FELT WARMTH

2015

JENNIFER HANKS

TRANSFORMATION SEQUENCE WITH BREAD BASKET
& CHERRY SPIT

1.

gar child with a bread basket.

Challah falling off her lips and I've
got a paste made of marsh sweat

her smashed cells. She's onto the rye the pumpernickel
disappearing into her girlfish mouth.

2.

gar child turns inward

like she's her own wardrobe her own shelf of precious twigs.

She's breaking herself in her half-sleep

a moon remembering its phases. It's so pretty gar child
to watch you pull yourself out of the sky.

3.

Unzip yourself gar child

suffer in transformation then possess your new bones.

You're a kite without a string.

Cherry juice dribbles

from your hooked mouth.

JENNIFER HANKS

gar child tells it in first-person

I went looking for my life
in the woods like a bloodhound
you don't know what it is to have a story
wrapped around you so tight
not a collar, not a chain
shimmering in the morning
but a ribbon cutting into
your waist mine's on my wrist
right where the veins meet
like a ghost's anesthetic fingers
around me in the night

you're a doll sopping in the river
but the story's a bracelet
you can't slip off your wrist
like a bloodhound
you smell your own life green like a field
that's bleaching every day

KENZIE ALLEN

LETTERS I DON'T SEND # 1

Let me remind you of who I once was
when we met: my arms with their blood
in its right place, the path of my fingers
unaltered. In the photographs I smile
all the way to my eyebrows. Hadn't
rusted out my own voice box, hadn't lived
on enough floors to really know comfort,
knew nothing, clean as a suburb
with its spiked fences, automatic gate.

KENZIE ALLEN

LETTERS I DON'T SEND #2

She had decided at last to become
the villain. Floor-grasping sequinned
lamé on offer in Joanne's bargain bin,
smoke bombs handy in the basement
where he'd left his stash of pyrotechnics
and an empty plastic whiskey jug,
even the crows seemed cooperative,
now drawn to the shine of her malice.
Her fingernails sharp. Narcissistic
and manipulative, weren't those your
exact words? She becomes her own
reflection. She asks her reflection
what's fair.

KENZIE ALLEN

LETTERS I DON'T SEND #7

How you were doing things
for you now, how for once
in your life it was time to be

selfish, as though you had
never done such a thing
before. How you couldn't

think of anyone but the one
who would carry you as
you would carry you, as if

saving this sapling would
spontaneously engender
a forest. And the forest

grew thick in ugly days,
evolved thorns, all the wrong
enchantments. A forest of

you, every twisted form
a bad memory, and I
become the thistles,

the needled carpet,
the scrap of red plucked
by such hands—such

greedy, sidelong branches—
the castoff, forest leavings,
the lungs and the liver
so taken.

DANIELLE SELLERS

LATE INVENTORY

after Dorianne Laux

Your hot buttered rye on Sunday face.
Face I kissed, nuzzled, bit with lust,
nose like an L,
 pillow lips,
 the dark fern hair
along the wooded footpath of your forehead.
Your cheap polenta meal of a face.
Your cherry blossom,
 violin concerto,
 Madame Butterfly face.
Your flea market face, the friendship bracelet
and afghan blanket of your smile, its loop and knit.
Your red wine teeth,
 hand on my thigh
 under the table lips.
The free rent, let's move in together of your eyes.
Your rocking chair, iced tea, screened porch face.
Your yellow jacket,
 shirtless,
 pond-splashed face.
Face that launched a thousand skiffs,
the Chesapeake's lap and pull. Your two-weeks notice
face whipping by
 the window
 curtained with rain.
Honey and mint, monarch wing and cricket-song
mouth. Maryland summer face.
Your not yet,
 not now,
 it's too late face.
Long evening, wait for fireworks, charred hot dog,
picnic blanket face. Lightning bugs faced in a jar.
Screw the hole—
 punched lid,
 set them free face.

DANIELLE SELLERS

IN THE BERNESE OBERLAND

When we came down from the north face
of the Young Virgin, we arranged to raft
the mighty Lutschine. At the shack,
they assigned us still-damp neoprene suits,
swim shoes floating like koi in buckets.
Our life vests hung from hooks.
On my helmet, YOU was written
across the forehead, BOSS on yours.
Near the river, we crystallized in the Swiss air.

Stepping in the raft while the river raged
ice-and-mountain-muddy beneath us
was not easy. Nothing about this
seemed like a good time, but you
were at the head of the raft.
I mimicked the young American girls in our group,
dug in and held on. Once we shoved off,
we had to ride it to the river's foot,
skimming over slick boulders and rock bed.

When the land plateaued, you jumped in
the cold turquoise of Brienz.
The girls were wild with giggles,
chattering like lake dolphins.
You beckoned but I did not follow, afraid.
Having just left war, you belittled fear.

You needed all of me, in.

DANIELLE SELLERS

BACK WHEN GOODNIGHT TOOK HOURS

wet necks and button-fumble
fogging the windows of your dented Buick
its windshield often an impressionist
painting under rain.

My hips Matisse-Tahitian my apartment
a blowze of curtains open windows
your palm on my thigh.

It didn't matter that you were a Jew I had not
yet overheard your mother say I was a nice girl
you shouldn't marry.

We stole the marbled staircases
of the Walters Art Museum
glass columns housing
thin parchments of Rochester
Bibles the Book of Hours.
Whole afternoons spent
memorizing April's Inventory
Heart's Needle A Locked House.

Our dates were compositions of shared baklava
warm Italian bakeries mugs of dandelion tea
the clatter of almost empty pool halls
me, trying.

ERINN BATYKEFER

APOTEMNOPHILIA

I hate my head and want it cut from me.

In every moment—walking to work or mailing a letter,
washing the sheets—I am on my knees,
begging for something sharp as Emily's poem
to shear me open.

The whole time we talked, I watched
you flicker like an old movie.

Between the frames of you telling stories
on the other side of a butcher block
table, I saw another scene:
your body arcing
through an axe swing.

I could not see
where the blade would come down, but wanted it
on the neck of a sleek white mink hunched
in the bull's eye ring of a stump—

the same way I kneel by my bedside,
imagine the chill kiss of steel on my nape
and wait.

ERINN BATYKEFER

SKULL CORSET

She had scratched through her skull during the night—and all the way into her brain.

"The Itch," *The New Yorker*, June 30th 2008

What is a skull but boning to cinch
the brain, force thoughts
into a wasp-waist bottleneck
where dead things and tea-stained lengths of lace
get caught?

I want to tell you something about water.

The warm, tight smell of chlorine brings back the drowned
shock of swim lessons, the mistake of breathing
at the bottom of the deep.

When you nod, say something
about water slippery with chemicals, I want
to say *I know* but do I?

There are layers of bone separating our brains.
Our heads like anchorage rooms in which we sleep
on our pallets, alone, insensible
to another body inches away.
On the other side of the wall.

Imagine a world in which there is nothing
between us.

Or one in which the wall of bone between our rooms
is the temporal: so thin, your pulse and thoughts
almost pass through.

Press your hands to the cool surface. Tap your nails
on flat paint papery as a sheen of skin.
Begin scratching through.

ERINN BATYKEFER

TOUCHAREXIC

The summer I learned how to hold my breath
and my shoes

as I ascended an unfamiliar staircase
through a blood-warm and perilous dark,

everyone I loved forgot their hungers, obsessed
as they were with magic.

It was a lot like math, the way their bodies disappeared
into white columns of smoke, became asymptotes

edging toward zero.

*

*Skip the third step, the seventh:
let your feet touch no floorboard that will shift or creak:
climb stairs as if floating.*

I mouthed *Ghost, ghost* as I went.

My hand twisted the doorknob by millimeters.
I came into the room like light
under the door

and let the boy there undress me like he was unwinding
bandages, the skin beneath
my gauzy tees febrile and leaping.

I made not one sound.
Not even when he asked me to.

*

Weightless. Soundless. Wantless.
There are many ways to zero. I am trying to be good.
I am trying not to have a body:

mother brought us up to understand the truth
is just the story most people believe,

I climbed back in my window at dawn
and when she asked where I'd been, I believed

I had gone on an early run

the same way my sisters believed they didn't want
anything to eat.

If the boy at the top of the staircase ever spoke
of what he knew, I knew

it would sound like a lie.

*

Come close not too close
and I'll tell you a secret:

like the slick plastic bodies bikinis are knotted to
in cold department stores each spring,

I am not here.

The shape you see is a placeholder. Under my clothes,
there is nothing.

How will you prove otherwise
if I never take them off?

*

The body is consumptive,

a furnace made to burn down
to the infinite zero.

What's left will be white flash,
blast site, every nothing at once—
the nothing I could be

so long as no one believes you

when you say there is a girl-shaped light
burned into your retinas,

that you still see her climbing silently toward you
through the dark.

LAUREN LOFTIS

TREATMENT

And with it, hay weeds fold
over, long stalks thick with
spores. I think back on frost
melt, drip of snow cascading
down the cliff, the slow bodies
of bees circulating close to
ground. It's like a sun, a planet,
a dream of rapture caught by
mice. Everything hurdling down,
through, out the door. Handprint
in the oven. Spit curdled on the
cheek. The question was never
about what I owed. Drive far
enough and you'll find a pond
snake shaking dew from slime
moss, lilies upturned in prayer.
The past, west-facing bark of a
birch. When I reach, the shadows
cool my skin, the soil hollows. I
set the roots on fire, but they do
not spark. Is it enough that I
tried? I know it isn't; I know it is.

MILA NATASHA MENDEZ

MURDER

| I. | II. | III. | IV. | V. | VI. |
|--|--|--|---|--|---|
| I was alone in the woods once. I came upon a band of crows. | You would have liked their choral sighs and rhythmic shrieks that sprout new limbs. | We might have swayed there every night, our teeth to savor their yelping tongues. | In this reasonably priced studio apartment building, where the landlord likes your jean shorts bouncing on the porch, where you lean on the railing to blow him a kiss fulfilling some obvious dream, I'm screaming hoping to wake in the forest, adding my chorus to the black bird song. I want you to come camping with me, but you say there is a buzzing in nature giving you a headache. | Don't tell me I am only a sparrow or that it isn't the sound of caged lovers that shakes the trees. | Or, if it is not, say a raccoon is foraging for pine cones to make a decorative center piece for his table at the local inn. |

MILA NATASHA MENDEZ

IMPROVISATION

The raccoon has been waiting
92 years at his table at the local inn
for his family to join him
for dinner. He has finished
a centerpiece of pine cones.

The centerpiece is actually a pine cone,
92 feet tall, made of pine cones.
He is leasing the center
of the centerpiece of pine cones
to a family of jazz musicians.

The father plays trumpet.
The mother dabbles songs.
The children play
percussion instruments fashioned
from hollow stones.

It's quite a spectacle.

If you come again next week,
there is a rumor
the musicians will give birth
to a baby girl playing bongos
while crows clap with their tongues
and the air dries
to brittleness.

MILA NATASHA MENDEZ

LITTLE LABOR

I. II.

I There was nothing else to do
was except to watch the raccoons
a build their mini-malls.
tree They are always trying something
in new to get the cubs excited about
the *community*. Nothing else has
woods worked as well as this mini-mall.
once. The cubs are painting a mural
I with their tails and noses. I sing
stood in tune with their movements,
and but the sound echoes inside me
stood where there are no ears to hear it.
and Once their tails find a rhythm though,
stood. I hum along and hum and hum and
 hum and hum and hum.

JAMISON CRABTREE

LET'S BREAK EVERYTHING

to see what falls out. all the emptinesses
shielded by jars & crates & pots. let's thrash

the animals & thresh the fields; see
what all it yields. i kiss a man to break

his heart. i misstep to break our dance.
so many feelings come from some unknown

place inside & i wish men were filled with more
than tears. instead, here: let's take a hammer

to our bed & find the springs. to the armless
chair & discover the splinters of someplace

intimate. i want to collect all that's kept inside,
to break you. but you appear & re & appear;

you wear the same body. & i keep trying
to take it off, expecting something new.

JAMISON CRABTREE

AESTHETIC GENDER

--for B

in games, it doesn't matter if you choose
to be a man or a woman. whoever

is supposed to love you, loves you b/c
the story requires it. nothing's risked

if you're a man in a red dress, tiptoeing
along the edge of some old town's bridge:

no one will block your way with their truck,
get out, spit, & ask *what do you think you are.*

no one mentions rape. no one breaks your face
with the stock of a shotgun then steals your

shoes & wallet & dress. whatever harms, harms
equally. not just b/c you're weakpretty

& alone. in games, the conflict's easy. hurt
whatever hurts you (none of this is real).

JAMISON CRABTREE

DIE BY TOUCH

everything you touch breaks, regardless
of your intention: you, midas of delicateness.

walk towards the chair & it falls apart.
step lightly on the cat, accidentally,

& she pops into nothing. this holds true
for everyone. whosoever touches

the other first, survives. & to be touched
is to die-- the short primer for safety.

b/c intimacy leads to pain. asks you to be close
with someone when you're not even very close to yourself.

i don't want to stay safe, to be untouched. jump
on me. break me. just give me some small reprieve

from the world as it is: give me your hand.
i flash for you. move closer. make me flicker.

HELENA CHUNG

MID-MARCH PEACH

Fractioned in this kitchen,
you, unlike my father, are only today
small and fragile. You direct me
to a wall and say, here is a man
who knew when to pluck me right.

Like the unsweet seed I am,
I demand a mountain range
in your pit, a glimmer of
Virginia that I miss so much.

You direct me to a flower,
say, here's a good animal
that can hold all your water for you.

I want you to rip up my plane
tickets, cup your hands over
my mouth and tell me I don't plan
on playing the piano anytime
soon, so I can say no.

I have already descended
your father's mountain.

I would like to remind you how much
of me is water, how much you've asked
to become salt.

HELENA CHUNG

SILVER CROWN

I can make myself into a symphony of horror
without a seaside village mold. My tooth aches
every time I cup my ear, which I guess, makes

me Dracula. Slabs of ocean
step aside for tourists (my mouth too). Then,
I kept ivory in my pockets, polished piano keys

beating against my every step. I am *darling moon*,
I am also *gizzard shad*, it turns out, an O-lipped fish for you
to gut whenever. You say: pick one bullet or bullion.

I say: weekend corpse. This, my tooth doom inevitable.
I can lie still like I'm being X-rayed.

HELENA CHUNG

WHITEBAIT

after Hirokazu Koreeda

The year I meet my sister
she is still pale and learning
to walk herself to school.

That year, we grind flesh
in our palms, and oil, and salt.

We string ourselves as perch
on the fisherman's line.
We watch the ocean expecting
half to see a girl of foam, fully formed,
or else an infinity of eyes, pearled
in the summer heat.

Let me tell you how it is
miraculous, fingerling hanging
from her mouth, crumbs
dusting her gingham dress.
There is all this, father,
all this water I can't control.

LAIKA

There was a race. And we were flying, barely touching anything, as if propelled only by our selves, learning how to go faster and farther. It's dark. But it's a test run, preceded by tests and training and practices. She was a test. Of our ability to survive weightlessness. Even though we are never not under the pressure of gravity. Even though we are always, even if only slightly, weighed down. No matter how far away we get from here. The gravity never doesn't hold us, the hold, the weight, simply continues to diminish to almost nothing though always still there. I want to tell them that what they did was wrong, that she could have been saved: *Can't you see that she, we, will never be weightless.*

We can't be, but we often feel it. I have often felt it. Jumping on that trampoline, it is the moment in the exact middle of ascent and descent, though too short to register. In water, but not even, floating. Freud says we are comforted by the illusion of weightlessness, as it reminds us of the womb. Water, then, holds power over our psyches. We take long warm baths. We enjoy hot tubs. We suspend ourselves. We wrap ourselves into the fetal position. To again be one with our mothers. Neurosis.

And I think about what it must be like for all those people who jump from buildings, not the ones who are pushed or fall, but the ones with intent: If we fall far enough and fast enough, do we get a sense of euphoric weightlessness. But there is a limit to how fast we can fall, though the distance is seemingly limitless. The farthest I've jumped—fallen, really—is from a single story. And I think about what it must be like for all those people who drown themselves: Surrounded by only water, do we feel as if we are floating, weightless, in space. I've never drowned. But I came close once. And I wish I could remember how I felt, but I was so young that my memories from that age are only visual, only recorded, captured, without judgment: legs, white, pale blue, though I convince myself of yellow. I can't speak of weightlessness.

But how often do we weight ourselves to ensure our drowning—how much care do we take in picking the largest and heaviest rocks to place in our pockets or boots, absorbent clothing so we are not merely pressed under our environment but become part of it, swallowed by it. Part of something larger. I'm told not often at all, but there is a certain weight in specifics, in the individual. Metonym.

They'd have prevented her from feeling weightless: they had her strapped, chained. Her harness weighed down on her, as she weighed down on the spacecraft, and together, they weighed 1133lbs. And that is *not* not having weight; that is being weighted, burdened.

Zero-g is an impossibility—and the scientists should know that. But we test

weightlessness. Not the feeling of, not the actual, but what we call just that. And I think about the shock: the doubled heart rate and the quadrupled breathing produced by the *feeling* of having lost all our weight. The sudden shock of being insubstantial.

But they used her to test the effects of zero-g on life. They used her as a stepping stone or a scaffold for their future endeavors, for their dreams. And that certainly burdened her more than the 1120lb. craft to which she was bound.

It could not have been a lack of weight that stressed her so. Traveling 10km/s, then eventually slowing to 7.8. The heat rising to 104□ Fahrenheit. The inability to move. The inability to see further than only a couple of inches in front of her face or to either side. The sounds of which she'd only previously heard simulations. The looming hypodermic.

It was a race, and the craft was planned and built carelessly, in haste. There was no possibility for successful reentry, not intact. That would be her cremation. But not her death. Death was to come by that needle, timed for injection after seven days. Seven days of looking only immediately ahead, eating blue, gelatinous high-nutrition food, licking water from a tube—like a good dog, as she was taught to do—too afraid, too stressed to defecate or urinate, even in the diaper attached to her, covered in iodine and alcohol, waiting to die.

And I like to think that she knew, not because I believe we can foresee our deaths, but that I think we all know the signs of our own ends: She was taken to Vladimir Yazdovsky's home only days before the launch to play with his children in what I imagine to be a yellowing and hardened-brown yard, although it would have been too cold for that—for those colors and to enjoy canine company outdoors—but was likely a small, dark room with grey overstuffed furniture. Something nice was done for her for the first time in the three years of her life. A change always must signal the end. Why else would so many animals hide under porches, under houses, simply flee before death, only to be found days or weeks or never later. They know. They anticipate. They sit, don't move, and wait for it.

They lied and said that she had no more oxygen. Then they lied and said that the needle had been used just before—the timer overrode, so that her suffering might be spared. And then the same science that suggests that we might ever lack weight, have weightlessness, be outside of gravity, said she overheated. They said after four days. They said within hours.

I haven't seen anyone die, not in person, except for a cat, by needle, head in palm, the sudden expansion of pupils and the heaviness. I can imagine most deaths. How they would go. What they would look like. But not overheating. I don't know that that is even outwardly visible. But sometimes I like to think about what deaths would feel like—what it feels like to die in various ways, genres of death. I know that heating causes boiling. And I think of those tiny bubbles and the hissing that come from the bottom of the pot on my stove. And then the bubbles get bigger. And I imagine our insides turning into a cocoa-colored dark rolling boil. I imagine, but of course cannot describe, the pain that would cause.

And I associate overheating with fire. I oftentimes imagine it as combustion, though I know that is inaccurate. I like to think of it as burning hair. I like to think of it as cracking, peeling, then erupting then erupting flesh. The boil is only caused by the flame under the metal. But there is heat without fire. And that is what I cannot properly imagine. Laika's overheating.

But there was fire—fire that I can easily imagine. Though it may only be imagined. I may actually be thinking of heat being made visible, a sort of Schlieren vision. She reentered. Her corpse. Five months later, after 2570 orbits of a dead body around our earth, after the onset of decomposition, she reentered. More than 3000° Fahrenheit, more than enough to cremate our dead. And I imagine the heat sparking. Then the peeling away of nose—cone and foil and hair and flesh and insulation and muscle and metal and bone—breaking and breaking and breaking smaller and smaller until only marrow, until only dust. But maybe not even that.

She never reached the ground. Never fell. Just disappeared.

Her fluids and her drinking water would have been vaporized. But her muscle, her teeth, her hair, her harness, the heat shields, all that metal, her bone, her flesh, the curved tissue of her ears would have sublimated. Would have gotten so hot that it turned immediately to gas. In one swift process. No melting. She turned into air. And slowly, thinly spread herself, divided herself amongst all that which we've inhaled since. Always breathing canine and shuttle.

JESSICA K. BAER

KILL/SWITCH

When we were in orbit when we were
accelerating consistency planes under
water chain corral gone thru
the interstitiary of polyps living &
dead the top lights skeleton
sliding back inside
the lobed mouth which
words run out
my hard riding horses their
own is a counterfeit

self / my spaceship mundus
borders at nominal working green
teemed animals, trots beams & trot it
replicated by slants, which we were
entrancing at base
camp of tetraktys, my maternal
mirror referent or the resonant frequency of a
surfaces nonfigurative right
side up thru corpse field
fenceposts a life horse sized
grave a lea – inapperceptable
where I could rest in cognitions

wheels of the contracted
pronouns are you
riveting studs as he / she tear
ducts opening back a garden
that lattices unexitable
& the ponies of
cowboys starve on lucidity
glitter here
figures of a desert
scraping human at the frothed
bit axis mundi, crackles on
the radio receiver
instantaneous recalled to state

that show me horses there
is no red

marker & as singularity skins
knees ducking as the voice
goes in the ground, I do
equivocal w you: terra/aqueous
performs, as we in analog & in
ducts disengaged each
way

JESSICA K. BAER

“WORKING TITLE” LITTLE NEW JERSEY
DESIRING-MACHINES: AN EXEGETICAL TEXT
“WORK HORSE TITLE”

& my mother is still
dead lay them ponies to
rest

apex a self averting
prism

abalone eternal ear
ring collapse super structured
virulently circle godlets

a molluskular architect
wheregenital, orb thresh
holds absence
delirium ideo-motorized
feedback loop: objects in
cessation imago
chrysalid stumbled non-linguaged
as hoof re-iterates to nail

a gestural co-ordinative
wet excursus inter
mundia: roan stop
gap, what animal parts,
lopes green, I elopes
green, as-in occults
cargo relays, desperately
non-superimposable
womb w o sides scrapes
at itself, reticent
sites them the rodeo
breaks – enters in to him
lossless / ore conduit
imperatively over
determined

that factory horse
–shoes wear down
rewiring caracole half
turns alive half in
determinate field death & the
pasture thru
composed chords
no where instance playing
back the king
fisher nests
ripped out the

coralspine reanimated—as
arcs rearrive their
notches were—given behind
of ocean almosttones
re: currency, tide
breaks the alpha
betting horses



BETSEY GRAVATT

WE MOVED AWAY II



BETSEY GRAVATT

Sleep Spell

2015

CORTNEY LAMAR CHARLESTON

SERENADE WITH A HAPPENING OF THUNDER

Not a moment after lightning shears the black cloth above us in two, something comes exposed: a curving backbone I skim with a touch like silk, sweet intentioned. From the opening – a fissure of white light – I pull a phantom made of thunder with my teeth, then pass it through your lips. From then on, everything within your name jostles into music when any person mentions the slightest chance of rain; you become an umbrella, opened and turned upside down. If not that, a key knotted to a kite tail: a kind of yearn. I brought this on by some voodoo, but there are happenings I would never call on with my charms; I would never, say, play notes of a rain song in reverse, or wish for Southern California for you and me, not in these parched times. Without the water between us we bond at the molecule, we would die. We would thin to air or less than nothing, multiplied by silence.

JEOPARDY!

It was part of the job. Near the end of her shift at the Buy-for-Less, Tina locked down her till, picked up a yellow plastic shopping basket filled with items customers had abandoned before checkout, and went out into the aisles to put them back where they belonged. She took a box of condoms that a teenage boy had left among the tabloids on the magazine stand back to the pharmacy. A pack of sixty watt lightbulbs that had been tossed on a pile of frozen pizzas went back on the shelf Hardware. What were they thinking when they cast these things aside? That sitting in the dark wouldn't be so bad? That pulling out would have to do? She worked her way through the aisles and put back a bottle of soy sauce, two cans of tuna fish, and a jar of maraschino cherries. The last thing left in the basket was a bag of baby carrots that an old man had handed her at the register and said, I don't even like these. You take them. She headed to the produce department, wondering why he'd bothered to pick them up in the first place.

When she got to produce, piped in thunder began to rumble over the PA. The lights that hung above the vegetables throbbed and little sprinklers unleashed a soft mist. No matter how many times she'd seen them, the artificial thunderstorms that rained over the vegetables always amused her.

You sure do like that rain.

She turned, surprised to see her supervisor, Sam, beside her. He was a bald, hard-bellied man, and he had an unnerving ability to move without making much noise. One second he wouldn't be there, and then he would.

Earlier that week, he'd ambushed her at the courtesy desk and asked her to bring her husband, Brian, over for dinner. He dropped his hand on her shoulder and said, Me and Val will make something. We'll watch some tv and have wine. You can meet the kid. He traced tiny circles on her shoulder with his thumb and said, It'll be fun, which somehow made it seem like it wouldn't.

The storm passed in the produce department. I understand the sprinklers, Tina said, but what's with the fake thunder and lightning.

Sam told her, It's for the kids. All that sound and flashing light makes a trip to the grocery store seem a lot more exciting than it really is.

She said that that made sense and told him how her class had taken a field trip to the IGA when she was in elementary school. I liked the way the scanner beeped when it read UPC codes, she said. When I got home, I told my mom I wanted to be a checkout girl when I grew up.

And here you are, Sam said. That's funny.

Tina smiled and said, Yep, but she was starting to wish she had wanted more.

She was heading back to the register when he asked if they were still on for dinner that night.

We wouldn't miss it, she said.

The automatic doors slid closed behind her when she left the store. Dark came early that time of year: a low sun left the sky bruised and lit the clouds cotton candy pink. Without her apron and nametag, she felt like she could be just about anyone, but she couldn't imagine who else she would be. She walked down a row, flanked by taillights and license plates, and headed for Java Jacks, a shitty coffee shop on the opposite end of the lot.

Other than a few people sitting at tables, tapping free wifi and pecking away on their laptops and phones, the only person inside the coffee shop was the barista, a young woman around Tina's age with a bull ring hanging from her nose and an electric blue streak running through her hair. She leaned against the counter, paging through a magazine.

Tina ordered a café au lait and the barista went to work behind the counter. The magazine she'd been reading was open to an article about New Orleans titled, America's Most Haunted City. On one page, there was a picture of a mansion glowing in the dusk, surrounded by ancient live oaks, limbs wrapped with resurrection fern and dripping with Spanish moss. On the opposite page was a shot of an old cemetery jammed with crumbling stone tombs that sat above ground. No wonder the city is haunted, Tina thought. The trees look like ghosts and the dead don't go in the ground.

The barista poured milk into a steel pitcher.

Have you ever been to New Orleans? Tina asked.

I haven't, the barista said, but I'd like to someday. She sunk the frothing wand into the pitcher of milk and turned a nob.

It's one of my favorite cities, Tina said.

The steamer hissed.

What was she talking about? The only traveling she'd ever seen was the summer before seventh grade, when her second step-daddy snuck her off to Eureka Springs for the weekend. She hadn't given much thought to going anywhere else since. She'd certainly never made it to New Orleans.

The barista set the café au lait on the counter, and Tina slipped a single into the tip jar. Before she left, she pointed to the picture of the mansion in the magazine and told the barista, If you ever have the chance, you should go.

When she got back to the apartment, Brian was on the couch in front of the television, using his controller to wander through the rubble of some video game war zone. Judging by the coffee table—cluttered with crumpled

hamburger wrappers, stale French fries scattered around shallow pools of ketchup, a freezer bag filled with bubble gum kush, and a glass pipe with a close-to-cashed bowl—she figured he'd been sitting there for the better part of the afternoon. He mashed buttons, and the pop of gunfire and concussive explosions rang through the speakers. Tina picked up the pipe and burned up what was left in the bowl. Did you see what happened to that guy? he asked, pointing to a fallen soldier on the screen. His head popped off just like R. Budd Dwyer's.

Who was that? She didn't know and she didn't bother asking. Brian was partial to esoteric information like that; it had been one of the things that had first drawn her to him. He would sit in the school parking lot, reading Trivial Pursuit cards in his pickup. One day, she walked up to his window and asked what he was doing. Trying to learn something, he said. He flipped over a card, read the answer, and flung it into a pile of other cards on the floorboard. She stood and watched while he worked his way through the deck. Did you want something? he asked. She fished a few folded twenties from her pocket, handed them over, and said, An eighth of Indica if you've got it.

Not long after that, they started spending time together. When the last bell rang, she would come out of the high school and climb into his pickup. They would drive around, winding through neighborhoods, circling the city, not heading anywhere in particular, but enjoying how it felt to be in motion. While they drove, she would ask him to tell her the things that he knew. He'd say *the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog* contains every letter in the alphabet, the eye of an ostrich is bigger than its brain, the heart works harder than any other muscle. He grazed her arms lightly with his fingertips and told her he knew he loved her.

An explosion lit the screen. Brian set the controller on the coffee table and said, I'm dead.

Tina set down the pipe and told him they needed to get ready for dinner.

All right, he said and picked up the controller. Just let me have one more life.

When she first told him she'd made plans, he said, Why? It wasn't uncommon for a boss to ask an employee over for dinner, she said. Hadn't he seen it on tv shows, too? Besides, she told him, Sam wasn't that bad, and didn't he want to see how other people lived? Not really, he said, but if you want me to go with you I will.

She stripped off her shirt, bra, and slacks and hung them on the coat rack in the corner of their bedroom. Other than a suitcase full of clothes and a few framed photos, the coat rack was the only thing she'd brought with her when she and Brian got married and moved into the apartment together. Her mother had told her that her real daddy made it in his high school shop class before the auto wreck. She'd seen him only in old photos, toothy and rawboned, dressed in band shirts and blue jeans, and though she sometimes imagined that high school boy building the coat rack—shaping the center rod on the lathe, sanding, and staining—she couldn't shake the suspicion that the

whole thing was just a story her mother had told her to make a man she'd never met seem more real.

When Brian came into the bedroom, she was putting on a dress.

What am I supposed to wear? he asked.

Zip me up, she said, and I'll help you figure it out.

When they arrived, Sam and Val were getting wet-brained on boxed wine. Come in, Come in, they said and ushered them inside. They traded hugs and handshakes and went to the kitchen where the stemware was waiting. Sam asked, Red or white? and poured their drinks. They all said, Cheers, clinked their glasses, and sipped.

You're just as pretty as Sam told me you were, Val said, and what a handsome husband, too. Her hair was nearly bleached white, and she wore it in a perm with loose curls. She took a long sip and said, We made lasagna. It just needs some more minutes in the over. There's no point in just standing here watching it cook. She turned the spigot, topped off her glass, and led them into the living room.

The television was on, and in front of it, a little girl lay belly down on the carpet with a box of crayons and a coloring book open to a picture of Jesus. He smiled as he stood before the cross. A lamb rested at his feet.

That's Becky, Val said. Say hello, Becky.

The kid rolled onto her back and waved.

Val said, She doesn't talk too much yet.

Sam said, Thank God.

He and Val sat on the sofa. Brian took an armchair, and Tina perched on the ottoman in front of it.

A block of commercials for car dealerships, anti-cavity toothpaste, and headache medicine ran on the television. Then Alex Trebek appeared on the screen and introduced the categories for double jeopardy. Historic Objects, he said. Novels, Before & After, TV, and Help!

Sam watches this show all the time, Val said, but he isn't much good at it.

I'm fair, he said.

No, you're not.

One of the contestants requested Historic Objects for \$400. Alex said, Archeologist Heinrich Schliemann discovered the gold mask of this King of Mycenae in 1876.

Sam said, I bet it's one of those Egyptians.

Brian said, It's Agamemnon.

The contestant who rang in echoed Brian, and Alex said, Correct.

Look at that, Val said. You've got some competition.

Sam hunched over, elbows on his knees, ready to play. The contestants worked their way down the board. Sam hazarded guesses, but he couldn't keep up with Brian. Who is Judith Light? he said. What is Don Quixote? Who is Babe Ruth Bader Ginsberg? What is I Can't Help Myself?

Val laughed and said, It's a runaway.

As the clues disappeared, the little girl closed her coloring book and boxed her crayons. She walked over to Tina, stood on her toes, and cupped her hands over her ear. She said, This is what a whisper sounds like, then she stood back and nodded her head. Tina didn't know what she was talking about, but that was what a whisper sounded like. She nodded in agreement, somehow soothed by that simple declaration in a room where all the other words being spoken were coming out in the form of questions.

They played and Sam got desperate, shouting out incomplete or flat-out incorrect answers. Who is the guy who wrote the book about the kid on the raft with that black guy? he said. Who is Julia Ceasar? What is... Awe, shit. I knew that.

Once the contestants had cleared the board, Alex introduced the category for Final Jeopardy. Space Exploration, he said, and the program cut to commercial.

How much would you bet? Sam asked.

Brian shrugged.

Sam finished his glass of wine in a gulp and said, I'd bet it all.

Before the final clue could be revealed, the timer went off in the kitchen. Val looked at Sam and said, The lasagna is done. He said, We're not.

When the show resumed, Alex revealed the clue. He said, She would have been the first teacher to travel to space, had the Challenger not exploded shortly after its launch in 1986.

Was it before or after the field trip to the IGA? All Tina could remember was that she'd been standing in the auditorium with all of the kids in her elementary school, their eyes trained a television that had been wheeled out so they could watch the launch. They listened to the countdown, the teachers smiling, proud to have one of their own headed into space. The engines fired and the rocket rose. They cheered its ascent, but then the shuttle began to break apart. One of the teachers made her way toward the television and turned it off, but they'd already learned how quickly things could change from one thing to another.

Brian stayed quiet while the music played. Tina figured that he could see that Sam was soused and agitated and didn't like to lose, even when he was playing a game he wasn't all that good at, even when there was nothing to win or lose.

The music stopped.

Sam asked, Do you know it?

They drove home, and the moon sat high above them, a waning crescent, thin as a fingernail clipping. They'd just pulled out of the subdivision when Brian said, It could've been worse. She knew he was just trying to be kind about having been dragged along, but she couldn't keep herself from crying. Hey, he asked, what's wrong?

The dinner had been calm. They complimented the food and discussed the weather and talked about movies they wanted to see but hadn't

had the chance to watch. When they finished eating, Val took the little girl upstairs to bed and Tina offered to clear the table. She collected the dishes and flatware and carried them into the kitchen. She was scraping them clean at the sink when she felt Sam standing beside her. He set down a pair of wine glasses. Then he caged her against the counter with his arms. He pressed his hips firmly against her, and craned his neck like he would kiss her if he thought she would let him. She froze. He stood there for a moment, his breath flicking her cheek, then he pulled away, and said, Don't worry about the dishes.

She hated that she was crying about it now. God, she thought. She would have to see him at work. She'd go back to running the register and putting back the things that people didn't know they needed or decided they didn't want. If Sam said anything about that moment in the kitchen, he'd simply say he'd drank too much.

Brian asked if she was all right, and she nodded and said she was sorry.

Brian said, You didn't do anything.

She said, I know, and it sounded as soft as the little girl's whisper, but it felt like a scream trapped in her throat. She hadn't had to do anything; that was the problem. For all the things he knew, there were things he wouldn't ever completely understand. She dug her toes into the fading trivial pursuit cards scattered on the floor board and asked Brian why he hadn't answered the last question.

He said, I wasn't sure I knew what it was until I heard you say it.

The headlights lit the road ahead of them. Soon they'd be back home, and when they got there, she would shed her dress and hang it on the coat rack that her daddy might not have made. She would shut off the lights, and it would be dark, and in the dark, she would see how the clothes that hung on the coat rack in the corner looked like the Spanish moss that hung from the trees in a haunted city where the dead are laid to rest among the living.

SARAH ANN WINN

HAUNTING THE LAST HOUSE ON HOLLAND ISLAND,
FALLEN INTO THE BAY, A GHOST CENTO

*The last house on the northern end of Holland Island
has fallen into the Chesapeake Bay.*

Kim Hairston, "Chesapeake Bay Island Vanishes."
Baltimore Sun October 21, 2010

And were you lost, I would be
among the stones and the red seaweed,
chairs and red leaves
where I fail to fit in (and I'm not trying) or

not-yet-dead, not yet-lost, not-yet-taken
into the mirror—can I take it from you, what would it take?
When does a moment end?

In this season of salt
within, without, I'd repeat the prayer,
til the rooms, blurred like water, like blood,
dance the length of the old wreck,
a path in the dark wood, where the trees,
diffuse, push boundaries.

So you are with me far into the past.
I've looked over the photographs and they all are of you,
the oysters that hid in the bloody coral.
Now I've broken my ties with the world of red dust.
Is it true you have no fear?

An oyster opens his mouth to swallow one drop, now there's a pearl.
Find pleasure in the woods beside the path
of an object toward the light.

Sources: Emily Dickinson, Pablo Neruda, Karen An-Hwei Lee, Marina Tsvetaeva trans. by Elaine Feinstein, Jane Hirschfield, Jorie Graham, Rae Armantrout, Linda Pastan, Sharon Olds, Naomi Shihab Nye, Charles Simic, Sally Ball, Heid E. Erdrich, Robert Bly, Michael Palmer, Edward Hirsch, Han Shan, trans. by Burton Watson, Margaret Atwood, Rumi, trans. by Coleman Barks, Mark Doty, Elizabeth Bishop

SARAH ANN WINN

REVISING THE LAST HOUSE

The walls were already white
washed, stripped clean of tint
and accent. I lineated each
into grade school paper, tilted across
a desk larger than the house, margins
invisible in the drifting sea, still three
hole punched, one space conveniently
positioned already, above an outlet

where someone's fist may have landed.
When I finished ruling the rooms,
I started the letter I'd never
written. Jellyfish drifting like thoughts,
schools of silver read along,
while sharks curved near
an accusation, near a plea,
the weakest parts, already broken.

Then I painted fault lines, some
stretching from corners, some mid-way
across, some creeping up from
baseboards. It was easy
to find where the shade might
fit, where a rend might happen,
where, if Poseidon's hand seized
in anger, every memory written
in that house might crumple.

S.J. DUNNING

LET'S PUT ON *KATHY KELLY* WITH MUSIC

for Kristen, who knows what I mean when I say I used to be a ballerina

"Let's put on *Kathy Kelly* with music" is what Ryan says, nights like these.

It's raining, and we're drinking, and my friend Kristen is over.

She hasn't seen it yet—VHS footage of my childhood home.

Eventually, *Kathy Kelly* with music sounds better than an exquisite corpse or a shot of tequila in a prom dress, so I drag the camcorder from the closet I left it in last, and Ryan hooks it up to the receiver, projector, computer, an elaborate chain of cords he understands better than I do. There is no audio—the film was Super 8, originally, transferred later to a black tape labeled with my mother's maiden name. We make do with the machine that made it (VCRs obsolete) and a soundtrack we overlap.

There is no date on the tape, but it's 1986, let's say.

I'm four years old, my sister six, and we are dancing in the living room.

White leotards sag around our torsos. Blue tutus rest crooked upon what will become our hips, the tulle wrinkled in places, tattered from so much use. Floppy net hats fall over our eyes. The hats have long white veils that billow as we spin.

The door behind us is splintering—we are half as tall.

Our pet deer is eating the fern in the corner.

The light is poor, casting shadows over our faces, which look the same as our faces now, just smaller, everyone agrees.

The color, also, is off, for lack of a better word.

But we don't know that in *Kathy Kelly*.

There, we are spinning. We are spinning like the ballerinas inside our matching music boxes. We are spinning like the ballerinas painted on the vinyl totes that hold our slippers when we aren't wearing them.

There, we live in a house at the end of a long gravel road.

There, our mother's last name is the same as ours.

There, we are ballerinas.

Ryan kneels before the computer, ready to switch i-Tunes from The Cinematic Orchestra to the saddest song he knows by Sigor Ros.

He has the transition timed perfectly, bless him, nostalgia's DJ.

Kristen is crying, really crying, by now, a tall PBR, half-empty, in her hand.

"What's wrong?" I say, knowing the answer but not how to put it into words.

Kristen is not my sister, but she also is my sister.

My pet deer was not her pet deer, but she knows it vanished.

"I don't want this to end," she says—about *Kathy Kelly*, about the song by The Cinematic Orchestra, about grad school, about her PBR, about this moment on this blue couch in this living room in this house in Idaho we call The Ark, where the moment is not yet a memory, it's happening, my pet deer eating the fern in the corner right before our eyes.

What if *Kathy Kelly* didn't exist?

Would I know Ryan or Kristen?

Would I know what an exquisite corpse was, or the word surreal?

CONTRIBUTORS

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