
THE
BOILER
SUMMER 2016

THE BOILER

SUMMER 2016

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. Sebasian H. Paramo

THE BOILER JOURNAL is published independently through its editors and generous funding from its supporters.

Distribution. Online

For inquiries email theboilerjournal@gmail.com

THE BOILER

SUMMER 2016

CONTENTS

ÁNGEL GARCIA....7
STAMPEDE....7
ÁNGEL GARCIA....8
ANTIPODE II....8
HANNAH LEE JONES....9
DAUGHTER OF CAIN....9
ANNA LOWE WEBER....11
HOW DO I BRAID IT INTO MY VERY BEING, CHILD?....11
ANNA LOWE WEBER....12
YOU'VE NOW SPENT THE MORNING....12
CHRISTOPHER CITRO & DUSTIN NIGHTINGALE....13
BRUSH ASIDE THE NOISE WITH LOCKS OF MATTED HAIR....13
CHELSEA DINGMAN....14
OBEDIENCE....14
ASHLAN RUNYAN....15
LA TRISTEZA....15
JOSEPH ALAN HASINGER....20
WELL, I HEARD YOU LOVE ME....20
AMANDA HUYNH....26
Before I was born....26
AMANDA HUYNH....27
WHEN I ASK MY BROTHER ABOUT OUR DAD....27
SOPHIA GALIFIANAKIS....28
THE STAGE....28
SOPHIA GALIFIANAKIS....29
CLEANING....29
E. KRISTIN ANDERSON....30
Between 50 and 64% of rats will self-administer diazepam....30
JACQUELINE BOUCHER....31
PARADELLE FOR GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER....31
KATIE PRINCE....32
elegy for all the times we used to get drunk....32

KATIE PRINCE....33
feeling ill in a novelty restaurant....33
KATIE PRINCE....34
if I were a speeding train (a cyborg love song)....34
KRISTINA MARIE DARLING....35
SAD FILM (WITH FAINT MUSIC)....35
JAMES DULIN....36
the man in the picture on my nightstand....36
N. MICHELLE AUBUCHON....38
ADVANCED PAINTING II: AN ACCOUNT OF THE....38
EXPERIENCE OF LOOKING....38
ELIZABETH JOHNSTON....45
EVERYTHING BITTER....45
ANDREA ENGLAND....52
THAT TIME OF YEAR....52
ANDREA ENGLAND....53
THE HIGHER SHELF....53
KYLE VAUGHN....54
FIREBIRD DREAM....54
KYLE VAUGHN....55
NAÏVE MELODY....55
DARREN C. DEMAREE....56
NUDE MALE WITH ECHO #93....56
JOE MILAZZO....57
MONETARY VELOCITY....57
DANNY JUDGE....59
A SMALL TOWN PASTORAL....59
PHILLIP SCOTT MANDEL....64
I SWALLOWED THE SWORD SHANNARA AND LIVE....64
TO TELL THIS TALE ABOUT IT....64
CONTRIBUTORS....70

ÁNGEL GARCIA

STAMPEDE

You don't know this horse.
That what you love most doesn't
have a name, and runs wild.
Once overcome by your guilt you
slept in an empty field over the hill
naked and hungry, committed the cold to
memory how it bit into your body
one mouthful at a time. That
night all the small animals you'd
buried in a shoebox, came
alive. Told yourself, *don't be afraid.*
I am no longer that man.
Laid your head on the dirt
watching as the grass begin to trill
hearing for the first time
the beating in your chest—the
wild animal beginning to gallop.

ÁNGEL GARCIA

ANTIPODE II

Miles from here, in a field of cane there hangs
a scarecrow

that resembles so closely a man that man could be
mistaken

for your father. Or no one. Just the river crosser who
for pesos

takes you, asking always, "*why have you come back*?"
In the field,

beside the river, one summer, your father macheted
through the stalks

to place on your tongue the first sweet thing
you remember tasting.

The river so still now it looks as though the world
is upside down.

You've come here because what you've dragged
on that tow rope

with no where to anchor, thinking you were
a better man

than him—house to house, city to city
—is a fiery ember,

that finally, in a field of cane, will blaze into dawn.

HANNAH LEE JONES

DAUGHTER OF CAIN

As sons and songs go some precede
the others like a major chord,

barbed as they are with the mercies
of an inheritance. The winter I lost my skin

to my cousins in a cedar hollow, my father's spade
silver in my ear, a wolf's head

found me in a field of downed
hemlock, took my left hand

when I couldn't reunite it with its body.
I know it seems like surrender

that I knelt to its wake.
It would seem like surrender that I gave my right

hand to its cold flame as it swept the meadows
like a thin hunter.

It was nothing. Except it was silver.
It steals through the blood when the north wind

returns to claim what I lack, and I kneel once more.
I kneel once more:

heaven knows what hell
moved his offering to another war.

Trees stopped crying as they were cut
and whispered as they fell –

here into the drawn breath
of another morning, once-phantom moons

sprouting from the old stumps like a second coming,
surely a god somewhere.

O god somewhere: find me
in some bramble among the crows, sealed in prayer.

Find me in these woods
where we die and rise again.

ANNA LOWE WEBER

HOW DO I BRAID IT INTO MY VERY BEING, CHILD?

Mornings, your hair in wild ropes.
Your sweet colt limbs, the way they
wrap and tangle, seek warmth
in my own arms and legs which always seem
too clumsy, too pale by comparison. My
stodgy adult body, and you, brown berry child,
pressed into it. What is the countdown
for how long this will last? Another year?
A week? Time is always ripping you away
from me like the old cliche— a bandaid pulled
so slowly that at first, it might seem insignificant.
But here are the bits of skin and hair that
lift away with the bandage. Here I twinge,
grit my teeth. One morning you stop
asking me, "rub my belly." Your body
is yours, and I know, I know— it always
has been. Whatever ownership I felt
was wrong, even when you housed yourself
in me, your tadpole speck eyes, poppy-seeds
learning to blink. Be Mine— I penned
valentines to you. But you weren't—
not really. Now your voice rises in impatience
some mornings. Demands are made for
breakfast, a show about ponies. You sit
on the couch, a foot taller overnight.
And when I stare, you are three going on
thirty. What? you ask. I sit too.
Your body, burning. Buzzing
with growth even as I shrink away
to nothing. To a withered seed, some day
you'll bury.

ANNA LOWE WEBER

YOU'VE NOW SPENT THE MORNING

Writing and deleting the same first five lines
of a poem that will never, you can tell, declare itself.
It was about your daughter's beauty,
or the decision to try for a second child.
At one point it was about a chipmunk,
the way the cat carried it into the house
with such satisfaction, such pride that
you felt bad shaking it from her jaw,
a low-pitched half-growl rising from her throat or yours
or the critter's— it was hard to tell as you gave
the poor guy another go at the whole thing—
its small, useless life. Released it back outside
where October's leaves plastered the sidewalk
like tiny yellow slickers or post-it notes
dropped from the sky, greeting cards welcoming
a seasonal change you'd been ignoring for months.
But who writes a poem about that? The cat
was sulking when you returned inside,
her morning ruined by your goodwill.
Why not allow her the plaything anyway?
Like your heart is such a good Samaritan.
Like your heart isn't doling out tiny cruelties
and missiles of spite and jealousy daily.
But at least the chipmunk lived to see another hour—
tell yourself that and settle in to write that poem
about beauty— the way your daughter's hair
has a sheen to it not unlike that of a grackle.
The way when a stranger stops you on the street
to comment on it— her prettiness, that is—
your sick heart sings with gratitude, as if
her loveliness is something you might claim
as your own.

CHRISTOPHER CITRO & DUSTIN NIGHTINGALE

BRUSH ASIDE THE NOISE WITH LOCKS OF MATTED HAIR

On this planet of people who nip at me, I managed to find you. And now you're gone. I don't remember what day it is but the rain keeps draining in from the sea and spits on the cliffs. I'm tired as the rain that falls in the sea. There is a field of dachshunds running towards the dirty sock of the sun setting. Blood cells falling over themselves to make it to the ends of my veins where it thins out and tries to swim back. They try so hard it's pretty and sometimes they make it. Did I say *they*? I meant *we*. I meant I want to hire you to take photos of shadows on walls. I want to name them all *Sick Horse*. I want to care for them, hold water in my cupped hands for them, pick windfall apples from the wet grass to lift to those enormous teeth. I hear a window open in a room below. I hope it's you, breaking in, with a brick.

CHELSEA DINGMAN

OBEDIENCE

In a previous carnation,
I knew fresh snow on the sills
as I grabbed my ankles
& asked you to be gentle
moving in & out
of the room as you collected
your things, heat rising
from vents in the floor, the thud
of the thermostat kicking
in. I couldn't watch
another man leave
as my father left, fresh snow
on the sills. Though your leaving was
only temporary, I was left
grabbing my ankles, face
pressed to dust & hair on the hardwood
in some shitty apartment
I can't remember the name of
now. This morning, I wake
& mistake air conditioning
thrumming from the ceiling for winter
in your voice. You whisper,
bend over, as you leave yourself
somewhere I can't name
& again I'm left with my hands
at my ankles, waiting for you
to leave the way snow leaves
when I try to catch it
on my tongue.

ASHLAN RUNYAN

LA TRISTEZA

When I am twenty years old my mom asks me to teach her to speak Spanish. There's nothing left of us, we've made it. She asks why I care so much that we're Mexican. I don't know how to tell her so sometimes I cry and I say, "I am so lonely." (This is easier than saying that it's hard to mourn when you don't know where they're buried. That you cannot read the maps that will take you there. That you barely know the words to ask for directions). I don't think she understands but she let's me hug her for too long and calls to make sure that I'm taking all my medicine even though I'm afraid of it.

"His ears always move when he's lying. That's how you can tell." That's what people are always saying about my uncle, he's fifteen. I am so scared to know that I don't want to look at his face when he speaks to me. He hid these things as best he could. In his socks, in his shoes too big for him, in some places in his body, in his blood. These are not good hiding places. On the phone three weeks ago, twelve years later my mom says, "You don't have to forgive him if you don't want to but you have to put it aside for now."

I'm hollowed out to make room for them in case they decide to come back. (They are my family and I wish very much to be haunted by them, to hear them moving in my hallway, to feel them when I fall into bed). I try lighting candles. I try giving up. I forget the words to prayers. I sleep too much or not enough. I am losing something I cannot name.

After choir practice when I am four years old, I think I see the Virgin Mary in the chapel praying. She has on a blue veil but looks older than the oldest woman at our Church who lives to be 104. I stare and stare and want to talk to her, or maybe just hold her hand. I walk over to her and I know that I didn't stop looking while I walked. When I get there, she's gone. I tell my grandma when she finishes talking with the priest. I say, "Did you see her? Did you see her?" "Who, mija, who?" I tell her. My grandma spends the rest of her life thinking that I had a vision, that I'm especially blessed.

I am broken into parts. I wonder if any of them belong to me at all. I start giving them names. (This is the part that is scared, this is the part that is Mexican, this is the part that is white, this is the part they are calling bipolar, this is the part they call "woman," this is the part that can still speak Spanish, this is the part that is scared.) Some people tell me this is important, healing, that I am very self–aware. Some people tell me this isn't the place for me. I say, "Oh. That's alright I guess" and try to stay very quiet. I don't know what else there is.

When I move to Colorado, my grandpa sends me postcards from California and I'm asked to read them out loud in the kitchen. He addresses them to a misspelled version of my name. I am different this far from home. At my new school where I transfer into a first grade class three weeks late, everyone looks more like me. Their skin is white, their eyes are light shades of green and blue. But their houses are bigger than the apartment we live in and they make food I hate the taste of so I always say I'm sick and have to go home before dinner at sleepovers. I start telling people I'm Irish on my dad's side. Never mind that I've never met him; never mind that my last name is Lopez. I get the lead in the school play four years in a row. Everyone applauds and brings me flowers.

I'm not sure how to speak of this.

In second grade, a new girl named Janet moves to my apartment complex. She transfers into my class, too. Her family just moved to Colorado from Mexico and I don't realize what that means. I go to her apartment after school one day and it smells like a market and everyone is speaking fast and loud Spanish and it reminds me of the cousins that we only saw at funerals in California. I don't go over again and when she asks me to walk home with her I tell her that I'm busy. Choir practice. I don't like looking at her. My teacher asks me to help her with reading because I can speak Spanish too, right? When my friend Hunter and I start our game of pretending we can talk to ghosts, Janet always believes us.

Lo siento, lo siento, lo siento.

My great-grandmother's skin hangs loose on her. It's so soft that I worry it will peel right off when I hold her hands. It's translucent grey-blue and I wonder when all the color drained out of it. It no longer springs back into place when you move it. It's like clay now; it's like clay again. I cry at her funeral back home in California when I am nine years old because other people are crying. I don't know how to deal with death. I don't know how to deal with these people. They feel foreign to me and I'm afraid of that feeling. I don't like this part of myself (which part of myself?). I look through old pictures and walk around with my headphones in, I swim in the pool. I feel guilty for all the times she fell asleep watching telenovelas in her recliner and I snuck up behind with my safety scissors to cut her hair.

This year, I get into the habit of swallowing hard and saying, "things will change" until I fall asleep.

. . .

Two weeks before my twenty-first birthday, I fly home because my grandpa is dying. They say, it's not the cancer that will kill him, it's the kidney failure. (The cancer is the size of a baseball on his liver, but even then, it's the cans of beers piled high in a landfill somewhere that will do him in). My family calls

to say get on a plane in three hours, pack your bags. I'm hung–over and half–asleep in the room that I share with my friend. On the phone I just say, "Okay. Okay." I sound more irritated than sad. (Lately, I've been getting my emotions mixed up so my doctor's have been telling me to check in more regularly in conversations with people to ask them how they think I'm feeling. I refuse to do this). Without speaking, my roommate gets out of bed and silently cooks me breakfast. I go onto the back porch to cry loudly without worrying my other housemates who are drinking black coffee and doing their homework. I throw up in the bushes. I send someone text messages that tell him he has no sympathy for me and never has. I want to be mad at him so I don't have to be anything else. It doesn't make sense. My taxi driver to the airport says, "Have fun in Colorado" and helps me with my bags.

In the summertime my grandpa grows lemons in the far back of our yard. The grove is behind a wooden fence and he tells me not to go there. There is a neighbor maybe who's there sometimes, watering them. I'm not allowed to talk to him, I only ever see the top of his head. This is where we keep our dog who gets rabies; he runs back and forth behind the fence and right near the end he starts to break through it. I am so afraid of everything behind that fence. I think my grandpa is such a brave man for going back there. He eats the lemons like they're oranges and I wonder if his hands have any cuts on them.

When I land in the Denver airport, I don't feel sad or tired or anything at all. I listen to the same song four times as I walk from my gate, to the train, to my parents. They're standing with my cousin who is now almost as tall as I am even though he's only eight years old. I say, "Hey kid, can I hold your hand?" and he lets me without complaining. I say nothing in the car for the hour and a half it takes us to get to the hospital.

My grandpa moves to Colorado to be with the rest of us (meaning his wife and children and me) when I am nine years old. He lives in an apartment separate from ours for a while and I don't understand. I can't remember if I ask any questions. We all get together at my aunt's house where her husband lives in the basement for dinner once a week. While the women clean up, the men go downstairs to play poker and smoke cigarettes and drink. I'm allowed to go downstairs and play one hand with them. Sometimes I take their drink orders like a waitress before I go back upstairs. Eventually, I'm given an apron and a notepad. Once they're all drunk, the men remember they don't actually like each other at all and the alcohol makes them stop pretending. They yell and the women cry and yell to make them stop and I run to the front door and hide all of the car keys in my pockets. I want to be a part of it so I scream "Stop it!" to everyone.

In the hallway leading to my grandpa's room I feel like I can't breathe. I start crying and biting my lip hard and pressing my nails into my palms to stop. My mom has her arm around me. I'm thirteen again and my mom is walking me to my uncle's hospital room after he drives too high and crashes his car on

the way to our house. I know this isn't true. I know that I am old enough to pay my own rent and forget to buy groceries. I know that I am walking to see the room where my grandpa's body is dying. My grandma comes outside before we go in and gives me a hug, "Thank you for coming." I don't say anything. I walk into the room, my grandpa's in the bathroom. In the corner is my uncle in his wheelchair. I haven't spoken to him in two years. I give him a hug and he cries and cries and he is seventeen again and he is catching me peeking into his bedroom as he puts small plastic bags of drugs into his socks. I sit down and wait. I still don't think I've said anything.

"Pull in here, this is the new library." This is what my grandpa tells me when he teaches me to drive a car. He only ever directs me to the library or the grocery store. "They have lots of CDs here I can't find anywhere else." This summer he is educating me on Jim Croce and Crosby, Stills, and Nash though we both agree we prefer them with Young. I'm nervous to drive with anyone other than him. With my grandpa, we just listen to "Judy Blue Eyes" and talk about Steinbeck. "Learn to play this one" he tells me. He's just bought me a new guitar. "Play it on tour. Let's go on tour. I'll be your manager." He's incredibly proud that I'm remotely talented in any way.

My grandpa asks the first night that I see him to bring my guitar when I come visit him next. I can't stop crying so I just hold his hand and nod. "Okay." He is so small and so pale and so thin. He looks like his body is already decaying which I guess it is because that's what dying is. He tells me he loves me so much about twenty times. That night I go home and try to play my guitar, to practice some of his favorite songs, but my guitar won't stop buzzing. I try for hours to fix it but I don't know how. (I think that I haven't learned anything, that he paid for all those music lessons when I was a kid but I still know nothing. I think about how the guitar is broken like I am broken and how that is a lazy metaphor so maybe I'm not even a good writer. I think about the medicine I left on my kitchen counter in Seattle. I think about how a depressive episode can get worse with stress.) I go to sleep.

When I am seven years old, I'm home alone in our apartment because my uncle told me he has errands to run, grandpa will be here soon. I get angry and throw a snow globe that everyone lies to me about against the wall (they tell me my father bought it for me; I think that my grandma did). As soon as it happens and all the shards of glass and bits of glitter are scattered on the ground, I panic. I hide under a pile of blankets on my bed. When my grandpa gets there he calls my name and I don't answer. I stay very still. He gets to my room and sees the pile of blankets on the bed. He grabs the blanket right where my nose is and pinches hard. I start to cry, "Why did you do that?" He replies angrily, "I didn't know where you were, you were scaring me! Where's Joseph?" I shake my head back and forth quickly, "I don't know. I don't know." I don't think that my ears move when I'm lying but I cover them with my hands just in case.

Five days into all of this in the kitchen I tell my mom, "I'm way down here" and point to the floor. I don't say much else because I don't want to scare her or have anyone worry about me. I hide in the bathroom of the apartment that my grandpa is dying in. I tell them it's because my stomach hurts. No one believes me. (I think, great, my grandpa is going to die thinking that I'm crazy). He asks me to read for him and I try but I can't get many words out. I hold his hand instead. The next day I am filling out a form to renew my passport and I mess up and yell at my mom, I keep yelling and yelling about everything. I can't remember what I say. Hours into it I am on the floor screaming "I'm sorry" at the top of my lungs. My mom tells me to get off the floor, we have to be at grandpa's in an hour. I can't I can't.

"Honey, grandpa's in the hospital. You need to call him when you get the chance." This is the voicemail I get from my mom as I'm walking to work in clothes too thin for the weather. It's slow that night so I go out back and call him, shivering in my jean jacket. I know he can tell I'm crying but I say, "How are you?" He tells me, "Oh, I'm fine. I'm just tired of the food. I think I can go home next week." I don't believe him but I try to laugh for him. "I hear you're doing better, mija. That's good."

JOSEPH ALAN HASINGER

WELL, I HEARD YOU LOVE ME

On the way to dinner at the Adams's house I kill one of their peacocks. Traci and I have been at it the whole ride over. She's just said the word *divorce*, which makes twice in one week. I look at her, try to read her face in the country dusk, but she turns away, stares out the window, her fist to her lips. When I put my eyes back on the road the son-of-a-bitch just waddles out from the tree line and steps in front of us. There's nothing I can do.

If it is not against the law to kill a peacock in Virginia, then it should be. They are magnificent birds. One can tell this even in the fraction of a second that the peacock is sliding up the hood of your Hyundai, past and over your windshield.

When we hit, feathers go everywhere. I press the brake hard, the tires and the bird make nearly the same funny squawk, and the car skates to a stop near the edge of the road. Feathers filter down through the beams of the headlights. I watch them, like strips of patterned fabric, until Traci says,

"What was it?" and I hear fear in her voice.

"A bird," I say.

"A *bird*?" she asks.

"A peacock," I say.

"A *peacock?*" she asks.

"Yes," I say. "A peacock. A big *damn* peacock."

"Oh," she says. "I've never seen one."

I unfasten my seatbelt and turn the engine off. Sink back, exhale. "They're fucking beautiful," I say.

I go around the front of the car to inspect it. Traci gets out too, walks toward the body of the bird, left about fifty yards behind us.

"Not much damage," I say. "A few dings." I pick a long feather from the grill of the car, let it fall slowly to the asphalt. I look back at Traci and see she's still hovering over the peacock.

She says, "You *killed* it."

"It killed itself," I say, but I can't help but feel guilty.

"It's *dead*," she says.

I start toward her. "Of course it's *dead*," I say. "It got hit with a car."

"Dusty has peacocks," she says.

"What?" I say.

She lifts her eyes, stares past the Hyundai, down through the black of the road in front of us. She bites her bottom lip. "Don't tell him," she says.

I'm beside her now. I put my hand on her shoulder. She moves away. "This is Dusty's peacock?" I ask.

She shrugs, still staring. "Maybe," she says. "He talks about his peacocks all the time."

"It was an accident," I say.

"Damn it, Ted," she says. She turns to me and says, "Just don't tell him." Traci starts back to the car and I follow her. She closes the door hard behind her.

Dusty Adams is some kind of mountain hippy, yuppie—I don't know. Runs these little holistic grocery stores spread across southwest Virginia. Traci works at one as a cashier, but she's supposed to get promoted to manager. That's what this dinner's about, and why Traci is scared to tell Dusty about his peacock. And I can understand that, I guess, but she likes Dusty a little too much, I think, and I can't get why we had to drive out to this farm in who-the-fuck-where for dinner.

Traci thinks Dusty's some kind of genius, a practical saint. She goes on and on over what good he's done for the community, for the *children*, for turning them onto natural, wholesome foods. I've seen Traci polish off an entire bag of Hot Fries in a single take, a whole pint of rocky road, so I'm lost on where the admiration comes from. And besides, Dusty Adams is no saint. I've known Dusty for years, back before he was an entrepreneur. We came up together, but we're not friends. Dusty sells me cocaine. I'm not sure how wholesome his coke is, but it burns like fire and sales seem just fine, and I'd bet it's *that* money that keeps those damn grocery stores afloat, keeps his little farm paid for.

Of course, Traci doesn't know I use again—and for a long time I hadn't—and so I listen to what an angel Dusty is and let him keep his secret for the sake of my own.

Once we turn from the main road into the Adams's driveway I'm pretty sure the bird was his. The yard around his house, closed in by a little log fence that seems too short to be of much use, is full of peacocks, wandering dumbly this way or that, feathered in brown and green or green and blue like some kind of royalty. They sound like a new litter of kittens, mewing, mulling about the yard. We park just outside the gate, and I can see Dusty and Maureen, his wife, waiting for us on the porch, waving us in.

When we get out and open the gate, walk up the path to the house, the birds hush in a wave and turn to stare, follows us with their eyes.

Maureen shakes our hands and says hello, then lifts two metal buckets of food from the porch and heads out into the peacocks, who have returned to their mulling about. "I'll be a minute," she says, and she sinks into the birds and begins to squawk.

Dusty shakes my hand, too, and winks. He turns to Traci, rests his arm around her shoulder, and leads her inside. "Who wants drinks?" Dusty says.

I look down at my hand. Dusty has slipped a bag of cocaine into my palm. I head after them into the living room. Traci takes a seat on a long white sectional and fluffs the pillows and Dusty starts pouring drinks at a little bar. When right away he starts in on high-fructose corn syrup I turn and head down the hall. "Bathroom?" I say.

* * *

When I come out, Traci and Dusty are sitting beside each other on the couch. I don't know what they're talking about and don't care. Dusty is leaning in, talking with his hands. Traci is nodding and smiling. I'm afraid I've been gone too long, but no one seems to notice.

The windows and doors are all open, and the breeze is nice but it's still hot. It was hot in the bathroom too, and I stayed in there, with no windows at all, doing cocaine off the end of my car key until half the bag was gone.

I take a seat next to Traci, but not too close. Maureen comes in. "Hen got out," she says.

"Pardon me?" I say, too loud, and she gives me a funny look and turns to Dusty.

"You hear?" she says.

Dusty waves her off. "She'll be okay," he says.

Maureen stands there for a minute, just waiting, kind of glaring at Dusty, but Dusty starts back into whatever conversation he was having and ignores her. Maureen looks old for Dusty. Looks like she could be a waitress at a roadside diner. Her hair is graying, the skin on her face and arms weathered. Plain-looking. But Dusty has to be getting up there himself. He's five years older than me, at least, which means he's pushing forty. But he's *so cool*, or thinks he is, and that's the difference between them. Dusty has an earring. Dusty has a ponytail. Dusty is hanging on, in a sad way, to the kind of life Maureen has long stopped caring about.

Maureen moves along into the kitchen. "Dinner in twenty," she says.

I'm anxious. My heart is pounding. Foot tapping. I keep running my fingers through my hair, massaging the skin of my face. Once I think one of them is talking to me, asking a question, but I don't bother to respond. I can't really hear them, just a word here or there. *Organic*. *Profits*. *Expansion*. *Peacock*. And then I'm thinking of that peacock, and I can't stop. I can't shake the image of its limp body against my windshield, or the sound it made when I hit it.

I look at Dusty, smiling at my wife, laughing, probably telling jokes, the gold of his earring catching the overhead light, and I am filled with a desire to run *him* over with my car. I can't stop picturing this now. And it's not the same feeling as the bird. I don't feel bad at all. I'm laughing when his face slides by, a trail of blood smeared behind it. I almost laugh out loud, maybe I do. Then I hear Traci shriek, "Is that a piano?" and I get up and walk out the front door.

The air's cooled down outside and I'm sweating and cold, feverish even. I peek back toward the door and take the cocaine and my car keys from my pocket. I do a little more coke off the end of a key, then put it all back again.

My hands are shaking.

I stand there and watch the birds—there must be a dozen of them, peacocks—waddle around the yard. It's dark now, and in the soft glow of the porch light and moon I can only make out their shapes. They're less impressive in the dark, clumsy shadows stumbling, and every so often, fluttering a few feet off the ground and then down again.

And for whatever reason I begin to cry and I close my eyes and listen to the funny sounds the birds make and to the other sounds of the farm at night, crickets or other birds or toads, or a truck rumbling down the road up past the end of the driveway.

Inside, I can hear the piano going and Dusty's best Bowie singing "Ziggy Stardust," and my hands are shaking, I can feel them shaking, and my heart's beating fast, too fast, and I know I'll have to leave soon or I might just go in there and strangle Dusty to death. *I've already killed your goddamned bird, Dusty!* I think. And I know, I'm almost certain, I'll kill him too if I don't run soon. Choke the sound from his throat so he can never tell stories or sing songs or talk about his stupid peacocks again.

And then I hear this sound, the shuffle of feet in the dust, and I open my eyes quick, afraid someone's seen me carrying on like this, crying, but it's just a bird. A peacock, a big fucker, standing before the porch steps with his plumage all fanned out. Dozens of freaky feather-eyes catching the porch light and staring up at me, and he's staring too, with his own eyes, cocking his head from one side to the other, trying to figure me out.

"What do *you* want?" I say, and he does a little dance, cocks his head, shakes his tail. I can't help but smile then, and I look away, off toward the barn and the moon just behind it, and wipe the tears from my eyes with the back of my hand.

"Don't be sad," he says, and I think for a moment that my heart has stopped.

I look down at him. He backs up slowly, just a step or two, his eyes still on me. I glance up at the sky, to heaven—*don't fuck with me now*—and then back down at him.

The peacock speaks again. "She's always doing it," he says. "Only a matter of time." His voice is like an old man's. He sounds like my grandfather.

I slip my hand into my pocket and press the bag of drugs into my palm. "*Who?*" I say, and his neck cranes back, quick, and he squawks, like he's surprised to hear *me* answer *him*.

"Esther," he says after a moment. "The hen that ran off. It's not your fault, man. She knew better."

"How'd you know?" I say, surprised.

"Word gets around," he says.

"Her name was *Esther*?" I say.

He does something like a nod. "So don't be sad," he says, and turns, as if he might walk away. "She had it coming," he says. He says, "Always running."

"That's not really it," I say. The peacock turns back and bobbles toward me. "I mean, I'm sad about the bird—Esther—too. You know, she was beautiful. But that's just not really it."

"Well," he says, turning back to me. What is *it*?"

"What's your name?" I ask. I inch closer to the edge of the stairs. His head is just above my waste.

"My name?" he asks. "My name is Ted."

I laugh. "Wait," I say, "*my* name is Ted."

"No kidding," the peacock says. "Small world." Then he says, "So, what's the problem, Ted?"

I look out into the yard. I fidget with the bag inside my pocket. "My wife's leaving me," I say, turning back to Ted.

The peacock makes another squawk. "That's too bad," he says. He's shaking his head. He's laid his feathers back down again. So much smaller now. I take my hand from my pocket, stroke my beard with my fingers.

"You have a wife?" I ask.

He shakes a little. "Not really our thing," he says.

"Oh," I say.

"But I understand the allure," he adds. "Sure. I get where you're coming from. So tell me, Ted, why's she leaving?" he asks. "What's the problem here?"

I put my head in my hands. "I don't know," I say. "We fight."

"Who doesn't?" he says.

"We *really* fight though, and something's just not there, you know? It's not how it's supposed to be."

"Can't you fix it?" he says.

"I don't know. I'm not sure she wants to fix it. I don't know if there's something left to fix. I mean, I *love* her. I just—."

I look up and the peacock is gone. "Ted?" I say, knowing how crazy I must sound, but I only see the shadowy figures of the birds in the yard now, out beyond the circle of porch light.

Then I hear another "Ted?" as if my echo has come back to me, only this time it's Traci's voice and not mine, and when I turn toward it I see she's come out onto the porch, a drink in her hand. She lets the screen door close behind her. The piano and singing has stopped.

"Hello," I say.

"What are you doing out here?" she asks. She comes closer. "Dinner's ready."

I look back out over the yard, past the spot Ted had just stood.

"Nothing," I say.

Traci is standing beside me now. Her elbow is touching mine. "You talking to yourself?" she says.

I shrug, embarrassed. "Yeah," I say. "I guess I was."
She laughs.
I look at her and she looks up at the sky, swirls the ice in her drink.
"What did you hear?" I ask.
"What?" she says.
"You heard me talking," I say. "What'd you hear?"
"Well," she says. "I heard you love me."

Out beside the barn, in a pale patch of moonlight, one of the peacocks—maybe it's Ted, I can't tell—flutters its wings and perches a fence post, its feathers, in full bloom, silhouetted against the faint glow of sky. Traci points. "Would you look at that," she says. "Isn't that something?"

AMANDA HUYNH

Before I was born

my dad died in an
accident except it
wasn't an accident at
least that's what my
brother says he was
twelve at the time but
he said my dad was
shot in the fields
while working maybe
over drugs or
something but they
shot him then they
turned his tractor on
let it run over his
body brother said
there were a lot of
gashes on my dad's
face too you could see
them at the funeral
service that's what he
says I wasn't there I
wasn't born yet but
there are nights I
dream those gashes
feel like the field
I work in every day

AMANDA HUYNH

WHEN I ASK MY BROTHER ABOUT OUR DAD

Like I told you

I don't remember
much. Our dad
was just a mean man.
If he wasn't working,
he was drinking. The cerveza
bottle became his left hand.

One time I tripped over his boots
as I stood up he hit me
against the wall,
brushed his boots
off.
I lost my first tooth then.

When mom found out he had another
family—
she kicked him
out
and when he asked if I wanted to go
with him
or stay,

I stayed.

SOPHIA GALIFIANAKIS

THE STAGE

I knew nothing, bent above the river
I'd stepped in again and again, but never
to get wet. A fallen cause of crimson,
this dawn, too, was a tragedy of light over

the crook of a day that arrived, knowing
nothing. It appeared as I did, donning
a script of gestures grander than its sight,
compelled by a stage for its showing,

I suppose. It painted itself a new sky,
featuring a cast of glimpses that denied
existence, a cloud of angels divided.
My perspective: vertical blinds of light.

I swung into my lines like a sailor—
drunk and seeking the favor of a lover
I'd met on a corner. I whined. The heavens
applauded and cried with the laughter

of those who know the story, who delight
in the knowing. Then dawn gave a sign,
exited bowing. And I waved and threw
kisses as if across a crowd of smiles.

And I'll tell you, despite all the beaming
and heartfelt feigned goodbyes. Despite
the curtain call, flowers, ovation of night,
I never noticed this river was dry.

SOPHIA GALIFIANAKIS

CLEANING

You know the metaphor too well: dishes
stacked in yesterday's jam, hardened bread,
eggs smudged on the counter, waiting. Your son's
clothes forever unseamed, holes in the laundry,
holes folded into holes that open and shut closed.

Your daughter yawns events at you, too tired
to yawn back, to gape at the same picture
that stays at the same table that changes plates
and scents and textures and never strays
from where it grows. You know how you nod

when people talk, think *I should know*
what I've heard, but the phrases are lost souls
in a yawn of vowels. You nod *I understand*, and
someone asks,*are you even listening?* I am.

E. KRISTIN ANDERSON

Between 50 and 64% of rats will self-administer diazepam

So I have to imagine a rat on valium
and how she might lap up that nectar, roll over,
breathe, and find a modicum of peace in home.

How home is more habit than locale—a ritual
with scheduled meals and a nurse calling you *honey*.

I am also belly-up. My vein is open. And the rat waits.
Wails. And I wait. Our breaths slow and suck at beige.
Gloved hands reach in to touch.

Look, how her eyelids droop, some dream a tremor
in her feet. I avoid the mirror, wait for a friend
to promise there is color in my cheeks again.

No, the IV. Always the IV. It burns;
take your hand and push. My sister rat and I
have had enough of hunger and shallow headboards.

JACQUELINE BOUCHER

PARADELLE FOR GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER

Not quite wing or cage wrought like wringing hand.
Not quite wing or cage wrought like wringing hand.
But venom lung, piano wire neck and hiss.
But venom lung, piano wire neck and hiss.
Like wing and lung, wringing neck or venom
cage. Not quite piano, but hand–wrought hiss.

This oak of my ankle unstable with marrow rot.
This oak of my ankle unstable with marrow rot.
Shrink. Make holy in my guts through mantra and rain.
Shrink. Make holy in my guts through mantra and rain.
With marrow and mantra, make rot in this rain.
Unstable my guts through holy oak, shrink of my ankle.

Today, my mirror sketches a jagged circle of me.
Today, my mirror sketches a jagged circle of me.
Maybe someday, rounded corners, all pretty and calm.
Maybe someday, rounded corners, all pretty and calm.
Pretty sketches and calm corners circle a jagged
mirror, someday rounded. Today, maybe all of me.

All my pretty guts, holy with venom, rain and hiss.
Mantra: shrink. Make mirror, cage this marrow
and lung wrought like corners of jagged oak
and ankle. But someday sketches of not quite calm
wire through me, unstable neck or rounded wing.
Today: my hand. This circle a wringing rot in piano.

KATIE PRINCE

elegy for all the times we used to get drunk

in the church where his memorial service
is being held. a game of marked cards jenga a falling block

& no one ever won but we were never done arguing—

say, *who is better at this game, or if there are twenty-eight crosses*
in this room does that mean god can see us fucking

one summer the rain wouldn't stop & his windshield wipers
were not fast enough to clear the water & the parking lots

outside were a bluish blur & we laid in the back soaked
& wrapped up in ourselves & it was the first time

I saw a car as an island, or a home—us

buzzed in the mustang because we never wanted to live
anywhere else. a texas september is a window down, & I can't close

my eyes without wondering how it felt. if he saw it
coming. in the past we were always underwater—now I am

outside I am touching his name it is sunny & dry & I am talking
to the ashes I am saying—*remember how we never knew how to change*

how texas felt like a flood & I loved you once

KATIE PRINCE

feeling ill in a novelty restaurant

the scene: yellow walls and too much eye contact.
an uncertainty nobody feels or nobody wants to.
betty boop winks from the wall. the word *hate*
doesn't fit the tone but gets said anyway.
all this wide-eyed uncomfortable silence,
all this white noise. a beer gone. a struck-out stack
of stale chips. some mild salsa. this stone broke
feast. this trash on the floor. all the directionless
anger neither needs express. both a skipping
record, *I don't know why I do things like this.*
this cold, wet taco. a wilted shred of brown
lettuce. the bitter thick of breath. neither needs
to sit in this booth tonight. nobody is willing to leave.

KATIE PRINCE

if I were a speeding train (a cyborg love song)

in a field of bluebonnets I am winding—
a clock, my past—I am blue, wearing a bonnet.

or I am the sky: composed of loose parts. I cannot
hold me anymore. how much of us can be

replaced with iron—a kneecap, a hip, a heart?

let us fit ourselves with gears.
let us wheel ourselves nearer.

if I could I would cart you across
oceans, tucked away as precious cargo

in my robot chest. but I have no door,
no key, no bloodless steel cavity. no—

I'll never be this speeding train: the long stitch
across the belly of the country,

the struck pendulum, the prison.

KRISTINA MARIE DARLING

SAD FILM (WITH FAINT MUSIC)

The final scene wasn't the pastoral embrace they had all been hoping for. The field was just a field, its flowers gone white with waiting. Enter the other bride, her elaborate dress already three shades darker. A flash of light in the trees, and a rifle fires in the distance

Tell me which is more sentimental, the lace at the hem or the idea that I was the only wife all along. Somewhere else, the decent women are practicing their scales. But really, there is no judge, no jury, and the church bell still sleeps alone in the tower. The nights here are pitch dark, but long enough to hike back to the meadow. It goes without saying the dead sit quietly in their little chairs. Each morning, I turn up the heat. I wait for the summons to be slipped under my door—

JAMES DULIN

the man in the picture on my nightstand

i don't remember anything my grandfather said
or the sound of him.

i remember praying over his picture at night,
back when i prayed.

i remember the night my parents called my brother and i
into their bedroom to tell us he died.

i don't remember what words they used
only the taste stale air.

i remember going to the grocery store with him
to get donuts. he let me pick out a cupcake instead.

i remember loving the idea of a man i never really knew
outside my mother's stories and a blurry image of him playing cards.

i remember the car ride home from nowhere important
when my mother confessed he committed suicide.

i never blamed the lie, nothing a seven year-old can do
with the shotgun hole in his grandfather's chest.

i remember asking what gun he used
and where he shot himself.

i remember finding out he disowned my aunt
for marrying a black man.

i remember being told he took her back after todd
was born and how that was supposed to absolve him.

i remember crying
because it didn't

he left me his neckties or that was something nice
my grandmother said to placate a curious child.

how do I reconcile his blood that is mine?
sift through his ashes and unearth the man in the picture on my nightstand.

parse out the space between who he was
and what he did and maybe there is no difference.

sometimes i think that it's better he died,
me hoping to bury his racism in the same grave.

i'm named after him.
i need to know i am not my grandfather.

it scares me, when i picture him
he is still the quiet man standing by the river on my nightstand.

and if my grandfather was a river bank
shaped by the rushing water

i am the bank around the bend
awaiting the same. i don't want to become him.

i don't remember every racist thing i've said
or done. i never will.

i remember some of the ugly ones.
if i'm honest, i wish i didn't.

i remember my mother reminiscing over her father.
she loved him and his worn hands.

i remember learning he built houses
and it killed him when the pain pills weren't enough.

i remember assuming racism was simple.
it looked like a burning cross and blackface.

now it looks like my grandfather. a man who loved my mother,
taught her to ride a motorcycle.

i wonder what was he contemplating in that picture, staring over the river
i want to believe he changed before the shotgun emptied him.

N. MICHELLE AUBUCHON

ADVANCED PAINTING II: AN ACCOUNT OF THE EXPERIENCE OF LOOKING

We are supposed to be painting ourselves, but all I can think is, what is a self? I don't know what my sister would say if you asked her, but I bet she'd say she's had at least two. Selves that is. You see, we used to be different, my sister and I.

I remember the night it all changed. We were having one of our infamous sleepovers and Evangeline, my older sister, was reading aloud from our mother's embalming handbook. She said, "If the body is stiff, massage the legs and arms to relieve rigor mortis." Our friends covered their eyes and stuck out their tongues in disgust.

"Oh, here's a good one," Evangeline said. "The first step in embalming is to check if the person is actually dead."

The thing about living in a funeral home is that everything gets mixed together. Meaning, it's not as though your life is happening in one part of the house, and the funeral home stays neatly contained in another. Rather, it's all happening inside and on top of itself. For example, we saw bodies brought in after soccer games, before school, and as we brushed our teeth before bed. We confused their arrival with pizza delivery boys, missed softball games for late hearse drivers, and watched men slip on ice as they juggled stiff bodies. We went to school humming funeral marches and the smell of flowers mixed with everything.

I asked my sister to read the part about how to close the mouths, but our slumber party guests were spared, because the telephone started ringing. One of our parents picked up on the second ring and Evangeline said, "Let's listen." We all huddled around her as she picked up the black rotary phone in the living room and placed one finger in front of her lips to quiet the crowd.

My sister and I were good at sneaking around. We spent most of our childhood hiding behind a removable vent in the bathroom wall. We'd climb in and peer through the slits of the vent on the other side of the wall, facing the parlor, watching the guests come and go. Through those slits, we felt like God. We watched our father say, "I'm sorry to hear that. How are you feeling today? We will be thinking of you." Crying was something other people did. We brought peanut butter sandwiches inside the wall, made bets on which old ladies would cry first, cracked Coke cans as quietly as possible, and stifled giggles when old men dozed off during the eulogy. Our parents never caught

us. Or if they did, they didn't let on. We'd say, "We're off for a bike ride," or, "Walking downtown to buy some candy." Stuff like that, but instead we'd pop into the upstairs bathroom and enjoy the show.

As expected, Father was making arrangements on the other end of the telephone line. We waited in anticipation for the details. Evangeline hung up the phone, and in the tone our father used to speak to guests in the parlor, she told us that Dahlia and Lakshmi, the Indian sisters from school, were dead. Dahlia was in my class and Lakshmi was in my sister's. Everyone wanted to know what happened. "Didn't say," Evangeline said, "but Emma and I see this stuff all the time. Don't we Emma?"

I said, "Sure do."

Evangeline said, "There are all the easy ones, of course: shot, hung, buried alive." Jaws dropped and mouths were covered. "Or, something a little more interesting, say, cut up in a magic show? Drowned in the City Lake? Bled to death from a thousand paper cuts?"

Evangeline closed her eyes and touched her forehead. "What's that?" she said. "Yes, I think I'm getting something. They were at the amusement park riding that old wooden coaster. They watched the change fall out of their pockets and their hats fall to the ground on a steep curve before their bodies tumbled after."

"It's possible," I cut in, "but I'm pretty sure they were shopping for back to school clothes at the mall. Lakshmi was gnawing on one of those buttery pretzels with too much salt and Dahlia was licking soft serve with rainbow sprinkles. They were riding down the escalator railing when the machinery jarred and they both fell off."

Evangeline dimmed the overhead lights and pointed a flashlight at her face. "They were out for a hike in the woods down at the state park and they saw a baby bear—the cutest little thing—the eyes kind and curious—the fur soft and jet-black. Dahlia picked up the baby bear and put him on her hip. They only heard a rustle of leaves before the mother bear took one deathly bite out of both of them."

It makes me uncomfortable to think about the control we had over our friends. I grabbed the flashlight microphone and continued. "Didn't you hear? They went down to New Orleans on a family vacation, spent the morning getting fattened up on beignets, marched in step with a second-line band, blew a few notes on a tuba, and skipped through the St. Louis Cemetery all before noon. After lunch, they got eaten by an angry croc." I punctuated the word croc with a playful bite on my friend Angie's shoulder. She screamed.

Evangeline said, "You know, they live out in the country, and tonight's the lunar eclipse. They tiptoed through the dark house to gaze at the moon and were bitten by a family of poisonous brown recluses."

And just as I started in on a version with a hot air balloon, we heard someone on the stairs. Evangeline whispered, "Everybody quiet," and we all acted like we were sleeping as Father came down the steps.

I kept my eyes open just enough to see him counting the sleeping bags —making sure we were all there—that we were alive. Underneath his funeral

director mask, he looked anxious and frightened, like a little boy. I guess that's the first time I started thinking about multiple selves.

After Father left, Evangeline said, "Well, there's only one way to find out." Evangeline turned the flashlight back on, casting dramatic shadows across her face, and said, "Bloody Mary."

We took the candle and matches from the coffee table and piled into the bathroom with the lights off. Evangeline lit the candle and said, "Tell us how they died." Then, she started chanting in the usual sort of way, "Bloody Mary, Blood Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary." Slowly, the rest of the girls worked up the courage to join in. We chanted like this for a while before Evangeline got bored and turned on the faucet. That's when Cindy started screaming and pointing at the mirror. "I see her. I see her," she stammered between screams. And then the rest of the girls started saying that they saw her too.

"She's drowning," Cindy said. "She can't get out of the water." Cindy started shivering and gasping for air. Angie screamed, "Make it stop. Make it stop." Evangeline rolled her eyes, blew out the candle, and turned on the light.

My sister and I, we were too self-absorbed to see something like that, but Cindy was different. Cindy was the kind of girl who knew you were sad before you said a word—the kind of girl that once rescued a bird on the side of the road with a broken wing and made a splint out of Popsicle sticks and string. We were the kinds of girls that killed lightening bugs to smear on each other's faces, teased the girls with extra flesh at the gym, and played pranks on the priest.

Sometimes I finger the metal edge of the bathroom mirror in my dorm, think about calling my sister up, asking her to go into her bathroom, light a candle and chant, "Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary" together on the telephone, look at Mary with the eyeballs we've got now, and ask her how we're going to die.

Our parents were more like Cindy. In my first semester of art school, I read that David Hockney did the same thing with his friends that my father did with dead bodies: collaged multiple photos of the same person into a cohesive piece. I wonder if he knew Hockney's work or if it was just a coincidence or if it was shared DNA or if it was a self spread across two selves. At any rate, they were both interested in looking at things from multiple perspectives.

I remember the first time I found him snapping away with his Polaroid in the basement. He looked like an athlete, bobbing up and down, twisting, and snapping every angle of the deceased imaginable. Was my father an artist? I'd say he was as much of an artist as I am. The same goes for my mother. She specialized in restorative art or demi-surgery, which is the process of embalming and fixing up bodies that have suffered severe deaths such as drowning or freezing. She'd go down into the basement and listen to Beethoven for hours: tweaking, pumping, massaging, and looking. People said she was able to access a special part of the deceased's soul. A husband once said, "I haven't seen her look that peaceful since our wedding day." Or the time a woman covered her heart and praised our mother for recreating her

sister's face just as she looked the day she saw the ocean for the first time. I guess you could say that my mother specialized in expressions.

In my second semester of art school, we learned about outsider art. What a bunch of crap. Who decides what is in and what is out? What I do know is that in addition to her bodywork, my mother made the best sweet and savory pies. Half of the pie was something sweet like strawberry rhubarb, lemon meringue, lemon berry, and the other half was something savory like mincemeat chive, beef gorgonzola, or curried chicken. The best piece was half savory and half sweet. I think of my mother when I go to the movies. I drop M&M's into a bucket of popcorn and gorge on the savory-sweet combination until I'm sick to my stomach. My mother spent whole afternoons making perfect crusts and evenings preparing bodies. She used the same hands to mix ice water with dough and form edges into peaks as she did to dab foundation onto faces and adjust mouths with needles. She liked to dance the merengue while she worked.

Both of my parents looked the happiest when they were working. I remember the time I found a picture of my father standing in front of a table of knives. I asked my mother about it. She said they used to live in New York City before we were born. They were performance artists and lived in a loft with a group of activists until Father's dad passed away, and they came back to run the funeral home. The look on my father's face—standing in front of the table of knives—it's the same look he got after being down in the basement, alone with his Polaroid and a new body. I wonder if he thought of it as two selves: Father the funeral director and Father the New York City performance artist? To me it's all him and it's related, but having this feeling about myself, the two selves that is, I imagine he would feel the same way.

All of this is running through my brain as Professor McGowen is walking around the room watching us trying to paint ourselves. She stops behind me and says, "What's this all about?"

"That in the middle is the house I grew up in and that person on the right is the person I am now and that person on the left is the person I used to be," I say. Professor McGowen asks what the house has to do with it. I tell her it's hard to explain. She says I ought to try otherwise I might fail Advanced Painting II.

After Bloody Mary, everyone ran out of the bathroom and Evangeline said, "It sounds like the bodies are here." And she was right, because I could hear Mother's merengue music. It was all part of her process. Usually the body arrived and they'd leave it in the mortuary fridge for a while. Mother had a way of gearing up for the whole embalming thing and it involved the merengue and pies. She'd turn up the music in the kitchen and her hips got to moving. She took breaks from dancing to cut fruit and form crusts, but then her feet would get to pounding the tile floor again as she merengued across the kitchen for a dash of cinnamon or a shaving of clove. Sometimes Father joined in too. His steps were soft and tentative, while Mother's were fierce and staccato. We could hear both of their feet sounds, so we knew the body was in the fridge and that both of the parents were occupied.

Evangeline said, "Do you babies want to play a real game or what?"

And everyone nodded along like, sure. Evangeline looked at Angie and said, "Truth or Dare?"

Angie said, "Truth."

Evangeline said, "Try again."

Angie said, "Dare?"

Evangeline said, "That's right. I want you to go down into the basement, open the mortuary fridge and cut a piece of hair off of one of the bodies."

Angie said, "No way."

Evangeline said, "Fine, Emma and I will do it." And this wasn't a big deal, because we did this kind of stuff all the time. Sometimes we even helped Mother put makeup on the bodies.

When we got down to the basement, Evangeline grabbed the scissors off of Mother's embalming table, and we entered the walk-in fridge. Our nightshirts, sticking to our backs with Midwestern sweat, released as the fridge cooled our bodies. The rest of the house buzzed with merengue, Sousa Marches, and ringing telephones, but the only sound in the mortuary fridge was the drone of the cooling system.

As expected, we saw two bodies laid out on gurneys, underneath sheets. Evangeline pulled back one of the sheets and said, "Guess Cindy was right." And what she meant by this was that Dahlia looked more like a purple, carnival balloon than a girl, that seaweed dotted her hair, and that her mouth was frozen in a permanent articulation of the word 'OH.' When referring to these types of bodies in her embalming journal, our mother would note, "death by misadventure," which is just an ironic way of saying that someone has drowned.

I was aware that I should feel sad, but all I could think about was how long it was going to take Mother to perform the demi-surgery with all of that bloating.

Evangeline took a snip of Dahlia's course, black hair. She turned to face me, the black strand hanging in one hand and the scissors in the other and said, "Braid this into your hair."

I removed my ponytail and wove the lock into a side braid down the front of my shoulder. The way the black hair mixed with my light brown reminded me of the caramel and molasses swirl pies Mother made when she was feeling sad.

That's when the colors in Dahlia's face started looking more beautiful than any painting I've ever seen. I saw the way the blue bled to purple, the purple bled to red, the red bled to brown, and every color had a sound, a personality, and a history. I started to understand what my Father might be up to with that Polaroid camera, capturing the beauty in every angle, every hue. The blues looked bluer, the reds looked redder, and the browns meant something. It may sound strange, but once I understood color, I was open to soul.

Evangeline walked over to Lakshmi's body and cut off a handful of her pubic hair, threw the curls into the air, and said, "Look sis, it's a party." As I looked up, strands of hair fell onto my face and the sensation reminded

me of the time we got caught in the rain in the churchyard one Sunday afternoon after service. Our parents were inside prepping a potluck meal and we were told we could play tag outside until the meal was ready.

We were out in the lawn: me, Dahlia, and about five other kids, when the rain started coming down in sheets. Just out of nowhere, buckets of water came pouring out of the sky accompanied by crashes of thunder and lightening. We ran back to the church for shelter. Dahlia was the last of the kids to reach the church, and I don't know why I did it, but I closed the sliding glass door before she could come in and flipped the metal switch up to lock the door. Dahlia was standing there in that torrential downpour banging on the glass, and I just looked—watched the rain run down her face. In my hand, the lock felt final and precise, like a weapon. I got to thinking about what would have happened if I hadn't flipped that lock. Or, say that I had, but then flipped it back and let her inside, said "I'm sorry," said, "I don't know what I was thinking," got her a towel, asked her what it's been like anyway, moving to a new country, invited her to come to swim class, showed her how to do the crawl, how to tread water, how to slam your hands down against your sides if someone is trying to hold you under, learned a lesson or two from her, really listened, formed a relationship.

I realized that I'd spaced out for a few minutes in the mortuary fridge, and when I came to, I saw that Evangline was also having the experience of looking. Her eyes flicked from side to side as though she was watching a violent scene from inside of a moving car. Eventually, she noticed that I was looking at her, and she said we ought to go back upstairs.

I expected Evangeline to brag about our adventures in the basement, but when we got back to the sleepover, all she said was, "It's time to ride bikes." So we all snuck out of the house, climbed onto our bikes in our pajamas, and road towards the big hill. "No hands," Evangeline said when we crested the hill.

I have done some bad things—some crazy things. Stuck needles into my arm, skinny dipped in strangers' pools, taken ayahuasca until I've puked. Once, I stole a pair of designer shoes and gave them to a homeless woman on the street. I clean my paintbrushes with all the windows and doors shut tight, and let the Turpentine seep into my brain. I guess it's all a way of looking for that moment again—the moment on the hill when I took my hands off the handlebars.

We were a rhythmic child-band on wheels—our plastic spoke beads plunking down on metal rims in syncopated rhythms. The lunar eclipse blocked out the light from the moon, but suddenly, I could see everything: every soul behind every illuminated window in every house as we went speeding down the hill. That's when my sister started screaming out, "Ay-Ay-Ay-Ay." And the rest of us joined in, calling out like hyenas, our arms extended above our heads, our fingers stretched wide, and I swear, in that moment, I could hear the whole world screaming, too.

ELIZABETH JOHNSTON

EVERYTHING BITTER

> *"One who is full loathes honey, but to one who is hungry everything bitter is sweet." —Proverbs 27.7*

Dan must have scrambled for the last parachute a minute too late. Katie imagined the helicopter exploding, those boys like kernels, popping out burnt and blackened, others melting and stretching shapeless to seats, caramelized.

She had been eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich when the knock came. On the front step, an officer from the Buffalo reserve unit and a military chaplain. Of course she knew what they were going to say before they spoke, had watched this exact scene in the movies, so she swung the door wide and called to her mother in the kitchen. Then they stood side by side in front of the officers like awkward partners at a junior-high dance while the officers told them Dan's unit had been lost somewhere southeast of Kabul. Shot down by enemy fire. A missile, perhaps. They couldn't say more. A team had recovered his remains and shipped them to Dover. Her mom and dad could collect him there if they wished.

When her mother collapsed, Katie did not reach for her like a good daughter should. Instead, she fled to the bathroom, knelt at the toilet, and puked. She watched the chunks of her sandwich circle the drain like debris from a shipwreck, saliva forming a rope bridge between her mouth and the water. Since then she'd been unable to eat. Not real food, anyway.

Two mornings later, her parents left to meet with the funeral director. Her mother hadn't wanted to leave her alone, but Katie insisted she needed the quiet and her mother reluctantly acquiesced. Katie watched their car pull from the driveway, then wandered into the kitchen where she opened and closed cupboard doors. She took a box of Cheerios from the pantry, poured it into a bowl, splashed milk over it. But the floating cereal reminded her of life rafts, so she dumped it down the garbage disposal. Through the window over the sink she could see the dilapidated shed her father had been threatening to tear down. Behind it, a row of dense pines and a chain-link fence.

Although still in her pajamas, Katie opened the door to the backyard, crossing the lawn in her bare feet. Turning her head instinctively to make sure no one was watching, she walked around the side of the shed toward the back. The shed was flanked on both sides by lilac bushes; Katie wiggled past the branches to a small clearing between the rear wall and fence. Hidden on all sides, it had been a favorite hideaway when she and Dan were children.

Once they had even run away together there.

Dan was probably eight, Katie five. He had been sent to his room for some typical misdeed—throwing eggs at the cat or pouring flour into the sink to make quicksand. While her parents watched TV, Katie crept to his door and softly pushed it open. He was on his knees next to his toy box cramming Army soldiers and matchbox cars into his book bag. "I'm running away," he had told her, his cheeks wet with indignation. Emboldened by love, she had tiptoed to the kitchen and stolen three Swiss Rolls from the cupboard. She returned, flushed and tingling, and held them out. "Want to go with me?" he had offered, and Katie's heart triple-beat. She had raced to her own room, shook her pillow from its case and replaced it with a bathing suit, pink windbreaker, clean pair of underwear, and her new roller skates. Together they snuck downstairs, pausing at the backdoor to pinkie swear they'd never return. Then they slipped across the backyard, her pillowcase and his backpack slung over their shoulders, their shadows beneath the motion light stretching before them like a pair of cartoon burglars.

At the perimeter of the yard they stopped. "Let's stay behind the shed for tonight," Dan had suggested. "We'll leave when the sun comes up." They set up camp, spreading the blanket he had brought and propping themselves against the shed wall. They unwrapped one Swiss Roll each, peeling the chocolate shells from their spongy middles, eating slowly and deliberately. "It might be awhile before we find food," Dan advised, pointing his flashlight into his book bag at the remaining roll. Katie nodded bravely, and he zipped it closed. Hours seemed to pass. Crickets chirped from the shadows, a cat yowled in the distance, unknown things moved around in the grass and rustled branches. It was still warm, but Katie put on her windbreaker anyway and huddled into it. She thought of how her mother's hair smelled like lilacs. She wondered if her parents would adopt new children; if her mother would name her new little girl "Katie," too. She started to weep, quietly at first, but then in breaking sobs. Dan jumped to his feet. "For Chrissake, you little baby. Let's go back then." He grabbed her pillowcase and his bag and marched across the lawn to the house before she could protest. Inside, the microwave clock blinked; it wasn't even nine. Their parents hadn't noticed their absence. At his bedroom door, Dan dropped her pillowcase and reached into his bag, held up the remaining Swiss Roll. "Next time I'm leaving you behind," he growled, pressing his nose to hers and narrowing his eyes. Then he closed the door between them, Swiss Roll still clutched in his hands.

She and Dan hadn't gone to the shed together in a long time, but for years it had been the place they met to commiserate about their monarchial parents, plot ways to foil school bullies, or plan their slurpee business. It was here she and Dan had cowered when her father was throwing cans from the kitchen cabinet and the police had come. It was here they had devised their secret three-fingered handshake. And it was here they had buried her hamster, Iggy, and, later, his goldfish, Steve.

But by the time Dan entered junior high, a kid sister was more an embarrassment than an ally. Plus Dan had an easy way with people that Katie

never possessed. In high school he had run track, tested into AP classes, was even voted "Most Likely to Succeed." Katie, on the other hand, felt swallowed up in crowds. Her own yearbook pages were blank. She had assumed Dan stopped visiting the shed, though she went there herself several times a week to read or draw. One spring afternoon, the year before Dan graduated and left for boot camp, she had pushed the branches aside and was met with a flash of skin and hurried rustling of clothes. *Get out of here you creep,* Dan had snapped, swatting at her through the brush. Although she was already retreating, Katie glimpsed his girlfriend, Angela, giggling and hiding her face in his shoulder.

Katie had never cared for Angela. Not her doughy, Muppet face. Not the way she said Dan's name, hanging onto it like a kite. Not how she jumped up to help Katie's mom with the dishes-- like she was auditioning for something. Angela had been one of the first to show up at the house after the news, blubbering at the kitchen table, mascara inking down her cheeks, snot bubbling from her nose. As if Dan belonged more to her than to them. When Angela reached for her hand, Katie didn't care if she was being rude; she had waved it away and excused herself to her room.

Now she tried not to think about Angela and Dan's bodies pressed together in this space. Or about Dan in his fatigues when they dropped him at the airport, how clumsily he had hugged Katie, his hand patting her back like he was burping her. Instead, she squinted up into the sun for as long as she could without blinking. When her eyes watered, she lowered them and counted the freckles on her arm. Then she tried counting a line of ants trickling along the fence. When they moved too quickly, she turned to the small, white flowers dotting the grass around her. They reminded her of the candies her mother used to buy in Wegman's baking section that come glued to cardboard sheets. Katie's stomach growled. She hadn't eaten since the peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Gently, she placed a flower on her tongue. It had a slight grassy taste. She chewed and swallowed. She ate another. Then another. When she had eaten all the flowers within reach, she crawled from behind the shed and began to move, methodically, across the lawn--the way a search team files across a field when someone's gone missing—picking flowers and popping them into her mouth. When her parents came home, she told them she was full.

In the hours after the news, Katie's mother had started cooking. She was like Betty Crocker on speed. Like Dan's entire battalion was coming to the wake. She lined up whole Thanksgiving dinners. Peas piled like helmets. Mashed potatoes moated by gravy. She roasted a turkey. A fleshy ham. Three kinds of pies, crusts swollen and bleeding. Katie knew it would all go to waste, rot in Tupperware behind the milk. Leftover, like things unsaid.

There was some comfort in knowing Dan preferred to be cremated. "If something happens to me over there," he had told her after their grandmother's viewing, "don't stuff me in a box like that. I don't want

people seeing me. Or bugs making meals of my eyes." As it turned out, what was left wasn't enough to bury anyway. The officers who turned over his remains told her parents the recovery team had dug at the dirt for days. Katie pictured them like farmers raking soil, plucking and tossing into their buckets fingers like carrots, toes like mushrooms. She imagined one pausing, bending, then dusting from the ash a perfectly preserved, pink Potato Head nose.

Katie was seven and Dan ten when he'd stolen her Mr. Potato Head. She found Dan at the table, napkin stuffed into his collar, knife and fork poised over the doll. Grinning, he snapped off its little pink nose, popped it into his mouth. He didn't mean to swallow, but when Katie lunged, smacked him in the chest, he gulped the nose down whole. Dan was rushed to emergency. He turned out fine, but Mr. Potato Head's nose was a goner. Since then Katie had imagined that nose bobbing around in his stomach like a buoy. When her parents brought home his ashes, Katie had to resist the urge to upend the urn. Part of her was sure she'd find that nose in his charred remains like a crackerjack prize.

Now Katie stood in the archway to the kitchen watching her mother and thinking of a reality show about a woman who ate her husband's cremated ashes, rationing his remains by the teaspoon. Katie wondered what a body's ashes would taste like. Perhaps like burned toast. Her mother's back was turned, head bowed over a mixing bowl, beaters churning, hair streaked with batter. Her shoulders began to shake silently and Katie knew she was weeping. She wanted to go to her mother, hug her, whisper some kind of words. Instead, Katie trudged the stairs to Dan's room, sat next to his bed, ate stuffing from a hole in his mattress.

Sometime in the night, Katie woke. She had been watching *Noah's Ark* before she fell asleep and had dreamed of a sinking boat, zebras and elephants, dogs and parakeets, paddling past her two-by-two, grinning toothy smiles. Suddenly a giant whale had risen out of the churning sea, swallowed her whole, and she had slid down its tongue into its wet belly. In the dark, she beat against the slippery lining of its stomach, water lapping at her ankles, her shins, her knees—then, something grazed her leg; she felt around in the water and brought something small and hard to her face: a pink Potato nose. She woke soaked in sweat.

Unable to return to sleep, Katie crept downstairs to the liquor cabinet. She took a swig of Jack Daniels in the living room, then carried it upstairs to Dan's room. Softly, she closed the door behind her, then opened his closet. The scent of cologne wafted out and she stepped back, blinking hard. Buried at the end of the row of button-downs and slacks was the jacket he had worn to their grandmother's funeral. He had grown taller while he was away —as if boot camp had stretched him-- and the jacket had been too small. He had looked like someone else in it. Not entirely like a stranger. More like someone she'd sit across from on the bus, someone she thought maybe she knew from somewhere.

Katie untangled the jacked from its hanger and laid it across his bed, stretching the arms wide. She picked some lint from its lapel and rolled it

between her thumb and finger. Then she placed it in her mouth. It tickled and she swallowed it. Then she noticed one of the buttons was loose. She tugged it off. In her palm it looked like an M&M. She placed the button in her mouth, pushing it into the pocket of her cheek. She turned to his dresser, began to open each of his drawers. In the bottom drawer, beneath his soccer uniform, Katie found a cigar box. Inside, a stack of letters. She could tell from the fat, loopy handwriting scrawled across the envelopes they were from Angela.

Katie sat on his bed and opened them one at a time, sucking at the button in her mouth. Angela had written them while he was in training. Boring details about chemistry class at the community college or trying to house-train her new puppy. Every now and then some private moment would rise up from the page in glowing words like *flesh* and *soft* and *naked*, and Katie's underarms would grow damp and her belly tighten. She lifted the bottle to her mouth, and with a long swing swallowed the button in her mouth. Then Katie lifted one of the letters to her mouth and nibbled at the edge. It tasted sweet. She tore off a corner, wadded it, popped it into her mouth like gum, and swallowed it with a swig of Jack. She ripped off *Dear Dan,* and ate it, too. She tore off *roller-skating* and *milkshakes.* Piece by piece, she consumed *I miss you, don't forget,* and *Love*. Then she returned the box, put on Dan's jacket, and crawled under his covers.

The next morning Katie woke to her father shaking her. He had the bottle of Jack in his hands. "Up," he was saying, "Get up." Katie groaned, the room spinning. "How much did you drink?" she heard him ask before a wall of nausea swept between them. She pushed past him and ran to the bathroom where she dry heaved, each retching gag an axe splitting her open. When the violence passed, she rested her cheek against the toilet seat, gratefully. She was vaguely aware that her father loomed over her. "It's a good thing your mother is in the shower," he scolded. "You think she needs to see you like this now? Jesus Christ. It's your brother's funeral today. And take that off before you get vomit on it." Katie looked down and realized she was still wearing Dan's jacket. She hoisted herself up from the toilet. "Sorry," she mumbled, her eyes stinging, the room still swaying. But her father was already disappearing down the stairs.

They hadn't been to church in years and Katie thought the new preacher, Pastor Dave, looked too young to be a minister, more like one of those pimply boys from school who made kissy faces at her. Above Pastor Dave's head, Jesus hung on the cross. Crosses always made Katie think of vampires. When she was nine, Dan had paid Katie five dollars to watch *Diary of a Vampire* with him. Afterwards, he hid in the closet and jumped out at her. She had dissolved into hysterics and was plagued by nightmares for months; her parents grounded Dan for a week. "Baby," he spat at her on his way to his room.

Now Pastor Dave began to read verses about eternal life, and Katie bent her head so that her hair fell around her face. Her armpits felt sticky and

the backs of her knees were wet. When Katie heard her mom choke back a sob, she glanced up at her through her veil of hair. Her throat was throbbing and exposed, a cross around her neck rising and falling on her breasts. When Katie was a baby, she had bitten her mom while nursing and her mother wound up with mastitis. Her mom used to laugh that Katie was always so hungry, wanting more milk than her mother had to give. Dan, barely three, had been jealous, climbed onto their mother's lap, pushed Katie out of the way. Katie tried to imagine her mother like that, holding babies to her breast. Like she must sometimes hold Katie's father. Perhaps like Angela had held Dan.

The morning's nausea flooded her again. "I need to go," she whispered into her mother's ear, standing and pushing past her. Her father tried to grab her hand, but Katie fled up the church aisle, not caring that Pastor Dave had paused, that everyone's eyes were on her, that somewhere in the room Angela was sniveling in a pew. Katie pushed the doors open into the vestibule where she nearly knocked over the tripod that held Dan's military photo. Quickly, she turned down the hall toward the fellowship room. Inside, the room was dark and the air cool and Katie's nausea settled. Folded metal tables and chairs leaned against the wall. She remembered the Sunday potlucks the church had held once a month when she was little, the Styrofoam plates piled high with fruit salad and iced brownies, how she and Dan and the other kids would play capture the flag on the lawn outside while the adults drank coffee. Across the room was a door that led into the kitchen. She crossed the floor and pushed it open.

Dan was sitting on the floor, his back against the refrigerator. She knew it was him because he was wearing the suit he'd worn to their grandmother's funeral. On his lap he balanced a communion tray of wafers, beside him another filled with thimbles of grape juice. He was tossing handfuls of wafers into his mouth like popcorn. He held out the tray.

She shook her head. "No thanks."

He scooted over and she sat down next to him.

"What are you doing here?" He looked remarkably well. Not even a smudge of soot.

"I was hungry." He tipped the thimble like a shot glass to his lips, then motioned toward the vestibule. "How's it going out there?"

"Singing your praises like always."

That please him. "Angela wearing that short little number she wore to Grandma's funeral?"

"I didn't notice," Katie said, annoyed, but immediately felt guilty knowing he'd never be able to kiss Angela or slide that dress off her again. Suddenly he seemed smaller, his ankles and wrists thin and pale. A pinkish hue rimmed his eyes and nose, like he had been crying or awake too long.

"How are Mom and Dad taking it?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Bickering like usual. Arguing about your ashes. Mom wants to release them at the beach."

Dan chewed thoughtfully. "And Dad?"

"National Cemetery."

Dan nodded.

"I think they should put you behind the shed," Katie offered.

Dan met her gaze. "I don't care where you put me," he said flatly. "I'm dead, dummy."

Katie's cheeks burned. She considered telling him she had eaten his letters. But then she felt guilty, not just because they were gone, but because she was certain he really was shrinking. Where moments before he was a head taller, now he came up just to her shoulder.

"Dan–," she started to say, to warn him. It occurred to her that he might just keep shrinking. "Dan–" she said more urgently. Now he was the size of an urn and struggled beneath the weight of the communion tray.

Katie helped Dan slide out from beneath the tray. Then she put her hand on the floor, palm up, because by then he was so small he could walk right into it. She lifted him to eye level, feeling a little like King Kong. He was completely pink by then, and the size of a Mr. Potato Head nose.

He grinned and she thought if he wasn't so tiny he would probably reach out to tousle her hair. "Ok, you big baby," he said, "let's get this over with."

Katie brought her hand to her mouth. And swallowed hard.

ANDREA ENGLAND

THAT TIME OF YEAR

It begins with orange blossoms:
Their scent so strong it limns
the cough of rush hour traffic,
their petals so virginal, so ripe.

I hang a red tapestry
over my bedroom shades,
let the light redden as the sun startles
the birds and wakes me early.

This is when I smoke.
Cloves numbing my tongue,
patio pink and fading, cats everywhere,
and dogs barking after them.

I want to tell you of the taste.
It is a dimly lit room, where most
will agree the shadow favors them.
I want to tell you these exhalations

of the world: Love, smoke,
traffic coughing, cat-calls,
anything that hides the light of morning.
But it is the oranges I remember most.

When the oranges drop,
when the scent is found
only in the mind and on my fingers,
I buy the whole cloves,

use them for piercing orange-rinds
and hang these by strings in the kitchen.

ANDREA ENGLAND

THE HIGHER SHELF

Watch the donut and not the hole
—Burl Ives

The psychic tells me you are sorry
for not visiting more often, that you
still chant limericks like a crown
chants thorns. Now you know all
my secrets. Without, I've learned
the excess of living. St. Catherine
claimed she lived on prayer alone.
Last night I buried our ram. Last night
a weasel took all the hens' heads. Now
the cat is missing. Your granddaughter
reminds me, *it's the circle of life.*
Where you died for the last time,
is it where you died for the first?

KYLE VAUGHN

FIREBIRD DREAM

I was driving a 78 Pontiac and
had a sore throat.
With my slag halo, I could
rip twilight from a blonde evening.
Cars were harder then—
bone-black body, ashy wheels—
I didn't need to be clean.
I believed in death-bed deliverance and

magic words lit like an arcade.
I insisted on undoing myself, straddling
a blaze like the upholstery burn where
the cherry fell out.

No one meant it, but they all asked if I was ok.
At home, I booby-trapped the
doorknob, stuffed a towel under the door—
especially if it was fatal, every last curl of
pipe smoke was for me.
And the police, holding up papers
to the peephole, didn't like my explanation:
go away—nobody's home.

But falling asleep on a Salvation Army couch,
that flame descended, then rose in fever,
forging a hundred worthless ingots
back into my head.
I always learn the hard way:
immolated, sunburst,
firebird, revival.

KYLE VAUGHN

NAÏVE MELODY

If I concentrated hard enough,
a Triumph motorcycle
could find you and drive you where
I'm crushed inside,
sorted into pieces—malfunctioned to obsolete—
so you can see this tapedeck where
I'm making you a mixtape.

There's nothing like the sound
of the cartoon snow behind my face,
nothing as stunning as
your hair in stormfront wind.

I won't stop the music
as long as I'm fording this deep river
between my long nights
and the hope of
your ink-dark yes.

DARREN C. DEMAREE

NUDE MALE WITH ECHO #93

There's a lake
near my house
near my body

& all three of us
are full of road signs
& the vehicles

that follow road signs.
The guiltless piling
inside the guilty,

that will change
the scenery,
that will ruin

all of the beliefs.
Initially, I was just
incredibly lonely.

JOE MILAZZO

MONETARY VELOCITY

A piece of paper taped to one
of the doors tells you:
"look like a government"
as a shot garbles
again. The building couples
with broken screens. You kneel, a hose

running from that same piece
of paper. Seeing new cities, you start
a problem. Your whole talk of black
helicopters, a gym, the coming
night, the pantry, some
inexplicably longer list of things:

what you might have to do
if the world started. Spectacular things
and legends run on underground.

Up and down the sure summer,
you didn't refuse the hot-
house and the ridiculous.

And this bubble of blindness just
used up its cheap zero. Inexplicably
sugar, inexplicably closed off, the second
part of this crisis isn't that long. Some
boring day-to-day life in the shocking
story that won't work. How
much? Much more. The brands

in total practice. Small change:
you won't be able in the aftermath of any
definitive understanding unfolding like always.
To claim, to get protected, to
protect, you trek, still recovering,
odd. Sometimes a strange accent
strikes its foreign currencies. A long time ago,
you got older. A long time ago, the worst
drank its own wine. A long
time ago, a stash somewhere
vociferously warned. A long time

ago, other walls wouldn't recommend
you. A long time ago, this morning.

Expensive and tight spaces
pump, deciding armies of private
subscribers are still open. You
don't have to be pronounced. That piece
of paper hangs up. Try to tip.
Get a front-row seat. The guff: it's
for people who need a select group to
rattle some weight, to receive

the color and influence of constant
bombarding. The alliance is actually bigger
than all you spent. Most jerry cans tell you
you shouldn't look. The doors, dark, helped

make a rediscovery possible. So you never
expect, and you never lose. Like a virus,
you've come to depend on reckoning.

DANNY JUDGE

A SMALL TOWN PASTORAL

I.

The walkthrough went well until I mentioned my son, at which point her demeanor changed radically. I didn't know what The Insurance Woman knew: she wasn't allowed to deny an applicant solely because they have a child. She feigned disappointment, like I'd just given *her* the bad news. She affected sympathy and explained she didn't rent to folks with kids, that her tenants were older and preferred silence. She tried to coach me into making the decision for her. It worked. I believed her act. I'm sorry you don't want the place, she said, but, of course, your son is more important. The thing is—for a minute—I really believed I was telling *her* no. Well, she added, if anything changes . . .

Wait. What could change?

Downstairs, she told me she couldn't include her "no kids" rule in her classified listings. She seemed to think we'd suddenly become confidants, like she sized me up and thought, in spite of our differences, that I would "get it." Two small-towners like us.

II.

When I first queried about the apartment, she asked me to tell her about myself. I told her: twenty-nine, in college on the G.I. Bill, separating amicably (more or less) from my wife of five years, looking for a quiet place close to campus. I left nothing out—not intentionally. I had no reason to guess she was fishing, and that only by neglecting to mention my son did I even receive a response—I just sent her what I thought best expressed my ability to pay the rent and keep the place clean. "You sound perfect," she'd written.

Apparently, things changed.

That night I told my wife: I'd looked it up. The Insurance Woman broke the law and considered me oblivious—or worse: acquiescent.

"Seriously," she said, incredulous. "Your civil rights. Because you didn't get the apartment you wanted."

"What's that look? How is this ridiculous?"

But maybe it was.

"Never mind," I said.

We were holding it together for the holidays. I told her about The Insurance Woman, and that's when she knew I was looking, that I'd pursued a serious prospect, and that it was all really real. She didn't flinch.

I betrayed no warmth either, no tinge of capitulation. That's not the

way a marriage ends: with one party breaking ranks. These things go down with both captains aboard, standing stiff-necked and resolute.

III.

The next morning I walked past her place, a red-brick building with wide, paneled windows. The Insurance Woman's name was plastered on the window. The university was a short walk from her door. I still loved the location. I walked a lot these days.

In August, I'd been in an accident. *Caused* an accident, was more like it. I failed to yield at a left turn and was broadsided. All my fault. An old man died. Internal bleeding. My son was asleep in his car seat. He wasn't hurt, but it was a less than ideal way to wake up from a nap. I'd been sleeping very little and wasn't as alert as I should have been. My wife was undergoing chemo in week-long stretches. Molar pregnancy. Cancerous. A baby never develops: the cells don't do what they should—they simply multiply, attacking vital organs. It spread to her lungs. No beginning, but there could damn well be an end, if she didn't start treatment. I was dropping my son off for the night at my mother's when we wrecked. I made it back to the hospital, albeit a little later than I'd anticipated.

Every night spent in that hospital, we spent in unspoken fear of what would happen when the cancer was gone, when the hospital was a memory, when we were left again to our own devices. When she recovered, we had to face the fact that we were unable and/or unwilling to continue. The accident—my accidental murder and my pernicious guilt—stress, money, resentment, cancer, the baby, the non-baby.

The baby never existed, medically speaking. But we still had the shared memory of the ultrasound, of trying to interpret the mounting unease the mood of the ultrasound technician, the long moments of oppressive silence where there should have been a heartbeat, pitch black where there should have been life. Finally, flustered, flushed: "I just don't see a baby," she said. "I'm sorry."

They pulled my license after the accident. Now I walked. And I needed a place to live (maybe to hide). Cue The Insurance Woman. Just another thing, nothing symbolic about it. I had a decision to make.

I paused in front of the window. Not open yet. I walked on.

The Insurance Woman came along at a time in my life when I was vulnerable, sleepless, and perpetually tired. She came along and swept me aside. She was a small town deity, and she had the right.

I walked to school, resilient one moment, resigned the next.

IV.

I sent another email. I told her I thought there'd been a misunderstanding. I expressed my concern about the legality of what I was told. I made concessions. My son was quiet; no one would know he was there. I tried to solve it rationally, implying only that I suspected she'd skirted the law. I made

no mention of taking action. I wasn't sure I wanted to. But if I *did* file a complaint, I would need a record of attempted resolution. Most of all, I just wanted her to be decent. I wanted to settle it like adults.

I finished class in the afternoon. No answer. No answer that night. My wife cooked. We sat in a queer suspended animation, fractured yet playing house for the holidays. Corned beef. Cartoons. A bedtime story.

The next morning, still no answer. I seesawed.

Fight it.

Get over it.

Nail her.

Not worth it.

The principle of the thing.

The absurdity of the thing.

The hopelessness of the thing.

What she did was the legal equivalent of turning away an applicant based on race, but was it the common sense equivalent? At once, it was both a principle strong enough to stand on, as well as a ridiculous form of childlike petulance.

The smiling, small town invincibility of The Insurance Woman ate at me. She wasn't life—she wasn't cancer, death, or tragedy . . . she was human. Yet she called the shots, dictating my fortunes with the inanimate impunity of a social condition.

She wasn't a car accident, she wasn't cancer, she wasn't a rotting marriage.

Yet, somehow, she was all those things, or at least the one thing that I thought maybe I could beat—the one thing human enough to be beat.

V.

By lunch I decided to try again. Her secretary answered my call.

"Oh, okay. Just a moment. I think I hear her back there." A moment passed. Another. "She's actually in a meeting. Can I have her call you back?"

She didn't call.

That night, my wife sighed: "What if you get the place? She'll kick you out the first chance she gets."

"That's not the point."

"Then what *is* the point?"

Our three-year-old son interrupted. "I tooted!" Cartoons on television, pasta on the stove. Snow outside. Christmas was coming. I needed to hang our lights on the house but couldn't bring myself to do it this year. My wife and I had sex later that night. We'd been doing that a lot since we'd agreed to separate. I couldn't, for the life of me, figure out why.

VI.

The next morning. Friday. I sent a final email. I just wanted her to quit it. I wanted her to know that progress was bigger than her pride—no matter how

many neighbors she knew or to which town council members she sold indemnities. There was something else: I wanted to find out if that was even true.

I told her I'll be filing a report Monday morning. That I still hoped it was all a big misunderstanding. I told her again how quiet my son would be. That "all I want is to reach a mutually beneficial conclusion without taking it further than it needs to go."

She called while I was in class. Her voicemail was terse:

"Hi there, I received your threatening email, and I just wanted to touch base. Just so you know, I can't rent the apartment to you for insurance reasons. (This was new) Those stairs, the liability . . . I can't take on the liability, you know, of a child going up and down those. Aaand, (her voice rising in pitch, that nasally, *I'm just saying . . .* tone) just so you know . . . you didn't tell me about your son when I asked you to tell me about yourself. That's fraudulent, so . . . you should have told me, and we could have avoided this whole thing, so. . . . Anyway, I'd encourage you to just drop this. This isn't best for a small town situation, you know. . . . So. Just move on. Okay? Just let it go. Thank you."

I stared at my phone as if it were playing a trick on me. Did she really just leave a recorded message accusing me of fraud for *not* giving her the information she needed to discriminate against me? For whatever reason, that settled it.

I decided to let it go.

She was oblivious. The severity of the thing escaped her. She'd given me everything I needed to bring suit against her. Gift-wrapped it and dropped it in my voicemail. But she didn't understand the principle behind it. Her "small-town situation" was one of embalmed ignorance, entitlement, of insulation from accusations of discrimination. How could she possibly discriminate? She knew everyone. She *was* the small town.

That's why I dropped it. The Insurance Woman was the town. I just lived in it.

Later, my wife listened to the message, frowned, but remained tactically noncommittal. "Huh."

I didn't bring it up again. We'd had a hell of a year, and I'd lost the only fight I ever had a say in. At least I saw the punch coming.

VII.

A month later we settled in a corner booth at La Casa, this Mexican restaurant in town with phenomenal queso dip. It was four-thirty, and the place was dead. The bartender, a tall Hispanic man in a black collared shirt with a spiky, Wolverine-style haircut, emerged from behind the bar to take our orders. We ordered drinks and the queso. It's four bucks a bowl, and it's worth every cent.

I scanned the menu. I'd seen it all before and always ordered the same thing. My wife closed hers. Her go-to was the chimichangas. She had on her ring finger a brand new, five-year anniversary band—a Christmas present. An

expensive one.

I looked for something new, knowing I'd find nothing, and there she was. An ad on the bottom of the second page. The Insurance Woman. I'd never noticed her. She'd been hiding in plain sight. Now I could see her plainly.

"Jesus. That's her." I pointed. My wife looked at me, then down at the menu. She frowned.

"Who?"

I laughed. "The one who left that message. The one who wouldn't rent me the place because I had a kid."

"*That's* her?" The Insurance Woman, fifty or so, smiling her taut-skinned smile beneath her dry, over-bleached hair.

"Yup. Figures. Told you she's everywhere in this town. Can't even order a burrito without seeing her."

My wife shook her head. "What a bitch."

We ordered, reminding the bartender about the queso. He took the menus—and The Insurance Woman—with him.

Ten minutes passed. Someone from the kitchen brought our food. Our glasses were empty. No queso. No service.

"Where's the bartender?" she asked.

"Up at the bar, playing on his phone."

We waited. We didn't complain. It was odd, the way we waited, somehow content with the injustice of having been forgotten.

PHILLIP SCOTT MANDEL

I SWALLOWED THE SWORD OF SHANNARA AND LIVED TO TELL THIS TALE ABOUT IT

Over the summer at Jonah Yustein's Bar Mitzvah they gave out itchy purple t-shirts that said, "I survived a whale of a time at Jonah Yustein's Bar Mitzvah" and Jess Feingold wore it on the first day of school. We ate shrimp cocktails and danced the Roger Rabbit and the Electric Slide, so our lives were never really at risk, except for maybe dying of boredom. Jonah's bubbe tripped on her way up to light a candle, so maybe *her* life was in danger momentarily, but one of the beefy backup dancers bounded over the cake to catch her before she broke her hip, so even that is an overstatement.

I, however, swallowed The Sword of Shannara and nobody even gives a care.

I love Jess Feingold. Dr. Feingold is my orthodontist and even though he screwed up my teeth, I still get quite a thrill when she teases me about needing extra-girth rubber bands, because it signifies a special bond between us. A bunch of other kids in our grade have braces too, but I don't think she inquires on the status of their orthodontia as much as she does mine.

Just last week during lunch she went out of her way to swing by my table with her friends to check in. "AJ," she sang, "my dad wants to know if you're braces are tight enough."

Her friends all laughed but I know they're just jealous of the attention she was paying tome. Adam and Rob both looked down into their sloppy joes and pretended Jess and the other popular girls weren't standing right in front of us, but I smiled wide and showed off all the metal in my mouth. "Tight as a virgin bride on her wedding night," I said.

Adam and Rob are barely even my friends anymore. I've come to understand they've been playing *Warhammer 40K* in Rob's basement, like, every weekend, without me.

I'm anything but a fool. I know that the only reason I was even invited to Jonah's Bar Mitzvah was because we're in Hebrew School together and his parents were pressured to invite the whole class. That's why Anna Reznikovskaya was there, and she's the poorest person in town and barely even speaks English. She's, like, eight inches taller than everybody and weighs at least seventy pounds more than me, has long, tangly black hair that goes down to her butt, andonyx-colored eyes, which she covers with black eye shadow. One time Anna cornered me in the hall on my way to earth science, my favorite class, and pushed me against a locker. Everyone just kept walking by and she planted a big wet sloppy kiss on me and tried to shove her tongue

into my mouth but I kept my jaw locked tight, though I could feel the sharp wet tip of her tongue probing at my lips, like a slippery little goldfish nipping at the flakes floating at the surface of a bowl.

It took a couple of months before everyone stopped calling me Boris Yeltsin or The Russian Bride, but eventually they did. Anna still looks slyly out of the corner her eyes at me and sometimes makes the most disgusting gesture with her two fingers spread in front of her mouth and her fleshy, fat tongue darting back and forth between them, but I mostly ignore her now. In five years she'll either be a supermodel or a junky, and since I'll be at Princeton or Dartmouth or Yale or Harvard, I don't plan on being around to find out which.

Unlike Anna, Jess Feingold is classically beautiful. Anna is the kind of female that inspires myths like Medusa or Baba Yaga, while Jess has a face that could launch, if not a thousand ships, at least half a dozen. I'd captain a ship around the globe for her, that's for sure. She has a long, freckled nose, unlike my stupid little one ("a cute little button," my mother used to say, of my nose, until one day my father made us go to the doctor for a paternity test which I guess came back negative because after that they both kind of stopped talking to me).

She uses a blue, red, or pink scrunchie to put her long curly brown hair into a ponytail and it smells like, oh, the most wondrous citrus shampoo, strawberry or grapefruit, with a hint of vanilla and tea tree oil (that stays secret though, because I sit behind her in English and I do not think she would appreciate how often I sniff the back of her head). Also, she has tits.

Yes, real, big tits. She one time leaned over my desk to sign up for a field trip and she was wearing a loose, wide-necked low-cut blouse with no bra, and I could see right down the front of her shirt and I could see her tits! It was the first time I ever saw a girl's tits! Well, it's the only time (so far!), but it was awesome.

I want to become a wizard and slay a dragon for her, which is why I practice magic tricks at home all the time. I know it's not the same thing —it's not real magic — but real magic doesn't exist.

So, the Sword of Shannara.

Last Friday in English class Jess and I were assigned to the same group to write a book report. She wanted to write about *The Outsiders*. Tom Lynch, that sweaty tard, and Julio Garcia,he's okay but whatever, both said they don't care what book we do, as long as the fag (they meant me, I assume) does all the work, and I said I'd only do all the work if we did *The Sword of Shannara*, which is one of my favorite books of all time. (I know some people are going to say it's just a rip off of *The Lord of the Rings*, but it's totally not.)

Jess protested and said it wasn't fair that the nerd (meaning me) does all the work, and I said I didn't mind, and then Tom asked Jess if she likes to spit or swallow (apparently the rumor is that she made out with Jonah and gave him a beeje), and she got really embarrassed and turned bright red and then laughed and smacked him on the arm. I swear to god I

would never treat a girl like that. It's like, I don't understand how Jess went from so mad to, like, flirting with him in one second; he's SUCH AN ASSHOLE!!!

So I had an epiphany and after class I asked Jess if she wanted to meet over the weekend at the library in town to work on our report, and she said yes! I couldn't believe it.

It's all I could think about, even while I was watching *The X-Files*. I sat in my bed listening to Boyz II Men (unequivocally my favorite band) and reading *The Hobbit*, but I kept daydreaming about her. Five or ten pages would go by and I would retain none of it, so I'd have to go back and reread it, but then I'd start fantasizing again: making out with Jess, right next to the medical encyclopedias. Also, I kept getting nosebleeds from my allergies.

So this is what happened: on Sunday I asked my dad to drive me to the library to meet up with Jess Feingold and he said he was busy, which I know he wasn't because he was just watching the dumb Giants play the dumb Cowboys with my dumb brothers.

Davey threw the Nerf football at me and it hit me in the head and they all laughed but it actually really hurt. "Why do you want to go to the library anyway, dork?" he said. "The Giants are on."

"I have homework!" I said. And then I called him a butthead and they all laughed again,even my dad. And then my throat got all knotty and I felt like crying but I didn't.

"Mom'll take you," my dad said.

"Mom's at the *store*," I said, a bit too loud.

"Then wait!" he said, even louder.

"But I have to go to the library now!" I screamed.

And then my dad jumped up. "You have no idea what I do for you!" he screamed, right in my face. "NO IDEA!"

And then I ran back upstairs to my room and locked the door and I started crying, but just like, a little. I thought I was going to miss my study date with Jess. But my mom came home eventually and drove me over. I could tell she was pissed, but I wasn't sure if it was at me or my dad.

When I saw Jess I stuck out my hand and, too late, I realized I shouldn't have done it. She grasped it weakly and we pumped hands awkwardly. "I've been practicing my prestidigitation," I said, still holding on to her hand, shaking it up and down. "Card tricks and stuff."

She drew her hand back — out of revulsion, I think — and wiped it on her jeans. "You're late," she said, as we sat down next to each other at adjacent study carrels. I pulled the novel and my dolphin trapper keeper out of my backpack.

"Sorry," I said. "Did you start already?"

"No," she said, sniffing loudly. Her eyes were red and puffy, and I assumed her allergies were acting up. A point of similarity!

"Are you okay?" I asked her. "Do you want a tissue? Is it hay fever?"

"I'm fine," she said.

Then I thought maybe she was crying, so I asked her why she was crying.

"I'm not!" she said.

We kind of stared at each other for a minute, then I blinked my eyes and stuck out my tongue and gave her a Bronx cheer.

She actually laughed, and said, "I'm just sad. Me and Jonah broke up."

I put my hand on her shoulder, and patted it gently. "It's okay," I said. I actually touched her!

She shrugged away from my hand. "I know," she said. "I don't want to talk about it." She was wearing like, seven bracelets on her hand, which seemed like overkill. But she smelled so sweet and fresh, like a young doe prancing through the forest on the morning of a bow hunt.

I hoped my nose wouldn't start bleeding.

"Do you want to see a magic trick?" I said, taking a deck of cards from my pocket.

"AJ," she said, almost wistfully. "Why would I want to see a magic trick?"

"I don't know," I said. I had been banking on charming her with a magickal illusion — I knew how to produce a card out of thin air or find the ace of clubs.

"Let's just do the report," she said. "*90210* is on tonight and I really want to get home in time to watch it."

"Me too," I said.

"You like *90210*?" I nodded.

"Jason Priestley," she said. "Oh my god."

"Yeah, he's a hunk," I said. "Did you see that show *Melrose Place*?" My mom doesn't actually let me watch it, but I didn't want her to know that.

"Uh, yeah of course," she said. "It's the bomb diggity."

"I know," I said. "It's like, my favorite show."

"Cool," she said. Then she opened up her copy of *The Outsiders*, and I started to panic. This was my only chance to have a real conversation with her, and I was losing it.

"Do you know Anna?" I said.

She looked at me. "Anna Reznikovskaya?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, why?" Her eyes grew wide, and she slammed the book back on the desk. "Oh my god. Do you like Anna Reznikovskaya? Do you like, *like* like her?"

"Ew, no!" I said, wrinkling my nose in what I hoped was an obviously disgusted way. This was going all wrong. The *last* thing I wanted was for Jess to think I was the off the market.

"Oh," she said.

"I *did* make out with her, though."

She started to smile. "Really?"

"No doubt."

"When?"

"Like, a few months ago."

"Oh." She smiled again, this time more sinister. "Yeah, I already knew

about that."

"You did?"

"*Everybody* knew. Tom, like, gave her a dollar to kiss you in front of everyone."

Tom Lynch, that bastard! I felt the adrenaline surge through my veins, and my face grew hot. I was humiliated all over again, just like the first time around. A dollar? I know Anna is like,super poor and all and she's like, a Russian refugee, but still it felt so crappy. All it took was one measly dollar for her to ruin my reputation.

Jess picked up *The Outsiders* again, and cracked it open to what seemed like a random page. She leaned forward to her notebook and picked up her pencil. I needed better material than Anna. I'd actually brainstormed a list of conversation topics we could cover that morning, but I'd left the paper in my bedroom and I couldn't remember what was on there.

"So did you really blow Jonah Yustein?" I said.

"What?" She turned towards me and her eyes were furious. "What did you say?"

"I—" I lowered my gaze. "I'm sorry," I said.

"You can't say that," she said.

"I'm sorry. That's none of my business."

"You're right," she said. "It *is* none of your business."

She put her book down gently. "This is why you have no friends," she said.

I didn't know what to say to that, so I said nothing. It's weird but it's almost like I felt my heart break at that very instant, even though I know that hearts don't actually break like that.

I just stared at her.

"Why did you even ask me that?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'm sorry. Just forget I said anything." I picked up her pencil and started waving it up and down. "Look," I said. "I made your pencil turn into rubber. It's all bendy."

She grabbed the pencil out of my hand. "Stop it."

"Wait, that's just sleight of hand. Let me pick your card out of a deck," I said.

She started to pack up her stuff into her book bag.

"I can pull a rabbit out of a hat," I said. I didn't have all of my magic props, but I had a few things in my bag, if I could just get her attention again. "I can turn a wand into a bouquet of flowers," I said.

I didn't want her to leave, but she seemed intent on going. Though to be honest, part of me actually felt a little relieved, to like, be alone. "I can spit fire!" I offered, in a last ditch effort.

"Yeah, right," she said, standing up. "I'm out of here, AJ."

"I can swallow a sword." This isn't true, I can't.

"Whatever."

"No, I'll swallow a sword right now. I'll bet you I can."

"What sword?"

"The Sword of Shannara." I took a bronze replica dagger out of my

backpack and showed it to her. It's actually called a "renaissance stiletto" in the catalogue — obviously not a claymore— but it's got shiny fake gems on the hilt so I doubted she would even know the difference. It's pretty phat, actually.

"Holy cow AJ!" she said, in like, a loud whisper. "Put that away!" Her eyes darted back and forth, like we were going to get in trouble. "Where'd you even get that?"

"From an ancient Dwarven smithy," I said. Actually, my mom got it for me for Chanukah, but I didn't think that a necessary detail. A rogue keeps some secrets, after all.

"You are so weird, and so stupid. I'm going home. I'll just tell Mrs. Peterson that we're not working on the project together anymore. I'm going to do *The Outsiders* by myself, and you can work with Julio and Tom alone. Or whatever, I don't care."

I tapped the cold steel blade with my fingernail, like it would impress her. "I'll swallow the Sword of Shannara if you stay."

"That doesn't even make any sense," she said, and walked away.

I watched her, mute, as she tromped down the library stairs into the quiet main atrium,under the tall domed ceiling that had baby angels and the Christian god painted on it, past the old wood reception desk piled high with returns, her ponytail in that pink scrunchee, swishing behind her as she marched towards the automatic double doors and out of my life, forever.

I stared at the lobby for another minute or two, just in case she decided to come back and apologize for being so mean to me, but I knew she wouldn't. She was probably calling her mom from a payphone already and asking to be picked up, and then her mom would tell my mom, and my mom would lecture me and punish me and tell me I had to make more friends and she would ask me if I was taking my Prozac and I'd have to lie to her.

The library's paperback copy of *The Sword of Shannara* was resting on the desk of my study carrel. I'd read the book three times already, and, to be honest, was starting to get sick of it.

To be really honest, I just want to be like everyone else. I want to watch *Melrose Place* and play football with my brothers, and go to the mall, and most of all, I want to get bee–jays from girls like Jess Feingold.

But I'm not. I'm weird. I'm a loner. That's why I was sitting in the library by myself, and I had to do the book report by myself, while everyone else in the world was happy and cool and had a lot of friends.

Very carefully, I tore the cover off of the library book, so slowly it barely made a sound. I ripped a little piece off a corner from the cover and put it in my mouth. The old ink and yellow paper tasted bitter and dry, and I sucked on it for a moment before swallowing. I didn't want it to get stuck in my braces. I ripped off another shred from the cover and put that on my tongue next. My mother wasn't coming back to pick me up for at least another hour, and I wanted to see how many pages I could devour before then.

CONTRIBUTORS

E. Kristin Anderson is the author of seven chapbooks including A GUIDE FOR THE PRACTICAL ABDUCTEE (Red Bird Chapbooks 2014) PRAY, PRAY, PRAY: Poems I wrote to Prince in the middle of the night (Porkbelly Press, 2015), 17 DAYS (ELJ Publications) ACOUSTIC BATTERY LIFE (ELJ 2016), FIRE IN THE SKY (Grey Book Press 2016), and SHE WITNESSES (dancing girl press, 2016). She's currently a poetry editor for *Found Poetry Review* and also edits at Lucky Bastard. Her work has appeared in *Juked, Hotel Amerika, [PANK], Asimov's Science Fiction,*and is forthcoming in *Folio* and *Red Paint Hill*. She grew up in Maine, lives in Austin, Texas, and blogs at EkristinAnderson.com.

N. Michelle AuBuchon holds an MFA in creative writing from Sarah Lawrence College and lives in Brooklyn. Her stories and essays have most recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Minola Review, No Tokens, The Iowa Review, The Collagist, Hobart, BuzzFeed, New Orleans Review, The Weekly Rumpus, Caketrain, Vol.1 Brooklyn, Washington Square,* and *Gawker*. She was a finalist for the 2015 Indiana Review 1/2 K Prize and the 2014 Iowa Review Award in Fiction. She is currently working on a novel told in the form of a memoir.

Jacqueline Boucher is an MFA candidate at Northern Michigan University, where she studies spoken word poetry and its ties to social justice and community organization. She currently serves as Managing Editor of *Passages North*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Superstition Review, Split Lip, The Butter*, and other magazines.

Christopher Citro is the author of *The Maintenance of the Shimmy-Shammy* (Steel Toe Books, 2015), and his poems appear or are forthcoming in *Ploughshares, Best New Poets 2014,* and *Prairie Schooner*. Other poems from this series with **Dustin Nightingale** have been published or will appear shortly in journals such as *Hotel Amerika, Diagram, Zone 3, Another Chicago Magazine, The Chattahoochee Review, Whiskey Island, Hobart*, and elsewhere.

Kristina Marie Darling is the author of over twenty books of poetry. Her awards include two Yaddo residencies, a Hawthornden Castle Fellowship, and a Visiting Artist Fellowship from the American Academy in Rome, as well as grants from the Whiting Foundation and Harvard University's Kittredge Fund. Her poems and essays appear in *The Gettysburg Review, New American Writing, The Mid-American Review, Third Coast, The Columbia Poetry Review, Verse Daily,* and elsewhere. She is currently working toward both a Ph.D. in Literature at S.U.N.Y.-Buffalo and an M.F.A. in Poetry at New York University.

Darren C. Demaree's poems have appeared, or are scheduled to appear in numerous magazines/journals, including the *South Dakota Review, Meridian, New Letters, Diagram,* and the *Colorado Review*. He is the author of five poetry collections, most recently *The Nineteen Steps Between Us* (2016, After the Pause). He is the Managing Editor of the Best of the Net Anthology. He lives and writes in Columbus, Ohio with his wife and children.

Chelsea Dingman is a Canadian citizen who studies poetry and teaches at the University of South Florida in the graduate program. Her poems are forthcoming in *Phoebe, The Normal School, Harpur Palate, The Adroit Journal, Quiddity, Grist: The Journal for Writers, Raleigh Review, The Fourth River, Bellingham Review*, and *Sou'wester*, among others

James Dulin is a poet and educator from Grand Rapids, MI currently living in Boston, MA. He has been a member of the 2012 University of Michigan Slam Team and the 2015 Eclectic Truth Slam Team, winners of the 2015 Red Stick Regional Slam. His work can be found on the *Write About Now poetry channel*, as well as in *FreezeRay Poetry, One Throne,* and *Drunk in a Midnight Choir.*

Andrea England is the author of *Inventory of a Field* (Finishing Line Press). Her work is forthcoming in *Midwestern Gothic, Sonora Review, The 3288 Review* and others. Most recently she had the honor of being a Writer-in-Residence at Firefly Farms (SAFTA). She lives and works in Kalamazoo Michigan, where she teaches English and Creative Writing for various universities and organizations.

Currently, **Sophia Galifianakis** teaches at the University of Michigan, where she received her MFA in poetry. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Plume, The Greensboro Review, Painted Bride Quarterly*, and other journals, and she has received scholarships from West Chester Poetry Conference, Poetry by the Sea, and Vermont Studio Center.

A CantoMundo fellow, **Ángel García's** work has been included in the A*merican Poetry Review, Miramar, Verdad Magazine,* and *The Acentos Review*. He currently lives in Los Angeles, CA and is completing his first collection of poetry.

Joseph Alan Hasinger holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Hollins University. His work can most recently be found in *Jersey Devil Press* and *Citron Review*. He lives and works in Charleston, SC.

Amanda Huynh is a native Texan living in Virginia. She attends the MFA Creative Writing Program at Old Dominion University. She was a finalist for the 2015 Gloria Anzaldúa Poetry Prize and recently was one of eight poets to receive an AWP 2016 Intro Journals Project Award. Her work is published or forthcoming in the following journals: *Tahoma Literary Review, Muzzle Magazine, Huizache, Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, and *As/Us: Women of the World.*

"Everything Bitter" is **Elizabeth Johnston's** first short story. Her essay, "Tackle Box," was one of three finalists for *Lunch Ticket's* 2015 Diana Woods Memorial Prize, her co-authored play, *FourPlay*, received honorable mention in *Cahoodaloodaling's* 2015 In-Cahoots contest, and her poetry and plays have been nominated for two Pushcarts and a "Best of the Net" prize. You can read some of her most recent work in *Excursions, Teaching English at the Two Year College, Veils, Halos, and Shackles: International Poetry on the Oppression and Empowerment of Women,*and *All We Can Hold: Poems of Motherhood.* She is a founding member of Straw Mat Writers and lives in Rochester, NY, where she teaches writing, literature, and gender studies. To read more, please visit her website at http://strawmatwriters.weebly.com/

Hannah Lee Jones's poetry and nonfiction have appeared or are forthcoming in *Superstition Review, Literary Orphans, Apogee, Yes Poetry, decomP, Cider Press Review,* and *Orion.* She edits *Primal School,*a resource for poets pursuing their craft without an MFA, and lives on Whidbey Island in northwest Washington.

Danny Judge's prose has appeared or is forthcoming in many literary journals, including *Litro Magazine, Portland Review, AZURE, Twisted Vine,* and *Lunch Ticket.* He is the founding Editor of *The Indianola Review*, a quarterly print journal, and lives in Iowa with his wife and son.

Phillip Scott Mandel is an MFA candidate in Fiction at Texas State University and the editor of *Front Porch Journal.* He is originally from New York. This is his first published story.

Joe Milazzo is a writer, editor, educator, and designer. He is the author of the novel *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* (Jaded Ibis Press) and *The Habiliments* (Apostrophe Books), a volume of poetry. His writings have appeared in *Black Clock, Black Warrior Review, BOMB, The Collagist, Drunken Boat, Tammy,*and elsewhere. He co-edits the online interdisciplinary arts journal *[out of nothing]*, is a Contributing Editor at *Entropy*, and is also the proprietor of *Imipolex Press.* Joe lives and works in Dallas, TX, and his virtual location is http://www.slowstudies.net/jmilazzo/.

Dustin Nightingale lives in West Hartford, Connecticut. His poetry has been or will be published in journals such as *new ohio review, Margie, Cimarron Review, Portland Review,* and *decomP.* Other poems from this series with **Christopher Citro** have been published or will appear shortly in journals such as *Hotel Amerika, Diagram, Zone 3, Another Chicago Magazine, The Chattahoochee Review, Whiskey Island, Hobart*, and elsewhere.

Katie Prince received her MFA from the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Her poems have been published in or are forthcoming from *Spork, Smoking Glue Gun, the Portland Review,* and *Fugue*, among others.

Despite saying that her only current goals are to skateboard more often and listen to records on the floor of her basement apartment, **Ashlan Runyan** is a Real Adult Writer living in Seattle. This is her first publication though she frequents open mics where she reads occasionally funny (though more often sad) essays to half-drunk Seattleites.

Kyle Vaughn's poems have appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including *Vinyl, Poetry East, Confrontation*, and *The Sentence.* His prose has appeared in *English Journal,* where he won the Paul and Kate Farmer Award for his article "Reading the Literature of War: A Global Perspective on Ethics." His photography has appeared in journals such as *Annalemma* and *Holon*, and his book *A New Light in Kalighat*, featuring photos and stories about the children of sex workers and the children of crematory workers in the Kalighat district of Kolkata (co-photographed and co-authored with Breanna Reynolds), was published in 2013 and featured by Nicholas Kristof's Half the Sky Movement.

Anna Lowe Weber currently lives in Huntsville, Alabama, where she teaches creative writing for the University of Alabama in Huntsville. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Rattle, Ninth Letter, the Iowa Review*, and *Salamander*, among other journals.