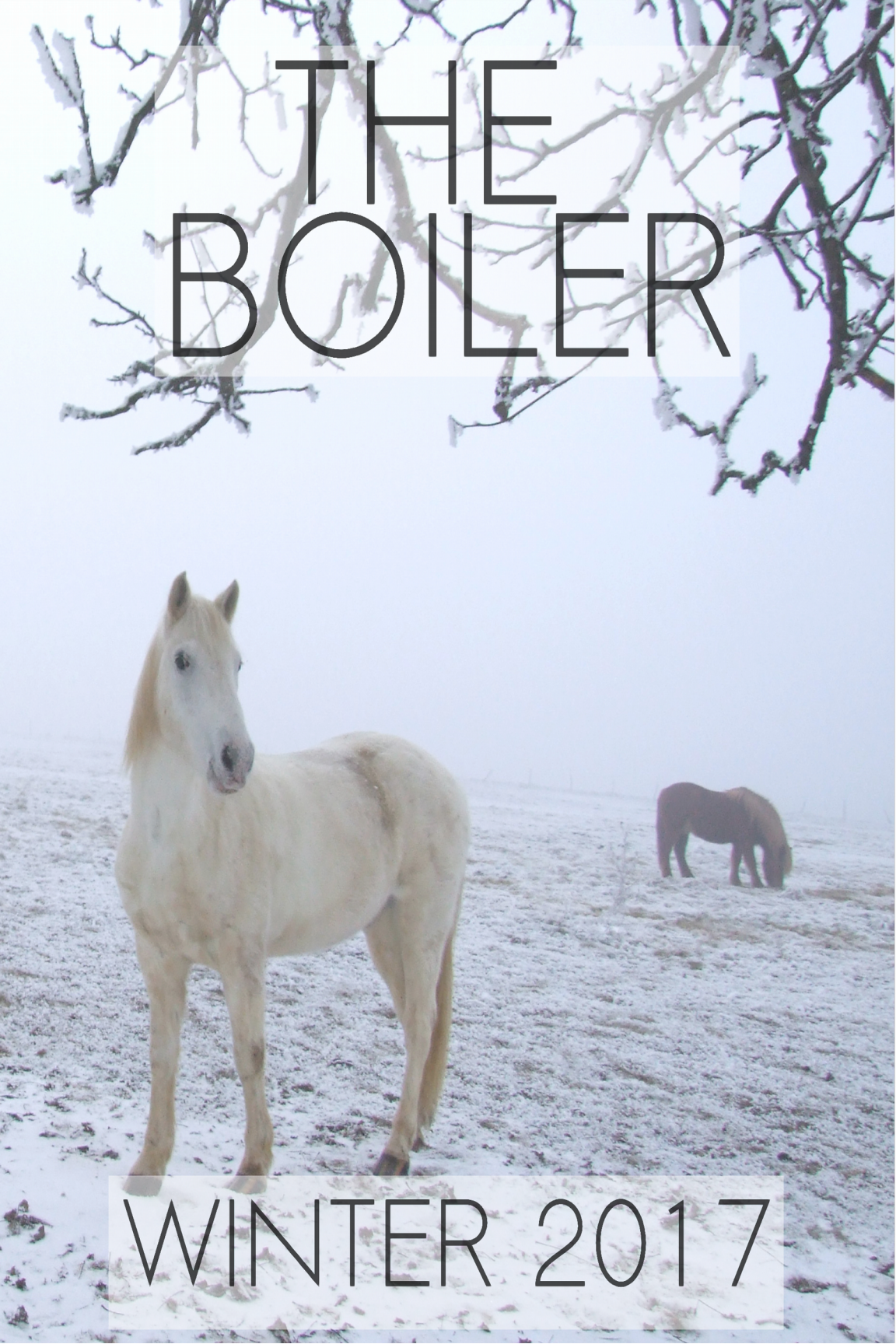
THE BOILER



WINTER 2017

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

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

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DARA-LYN SHRAGER

INCANTATION

The voice on the line wants me to know
that we're not alone—the same rib made her
as made me. There are other operators
in the room; I hear them pricing minivans.
Now she is asking me to pray. What I want
to say: just today, I watched a thousand
dandelion flowers brush sideways across
the flattest, greenest leaves I've ever seen.
Irene.
Irene.

DARA-LYN SHRAGER

SHELTER IN PLACE

They did. All day. In the basement where the janitor sips
coffee in a metal cage, where buttons blink red and mops
stand like flamingos, where grey machines hum breath
into this building. Some of the girls sit cross-legged
on the cement floor, tapping at phones with no service,
asking each other questions. Their voices are high and thin.
When it's over, they pack their books, shrug racquet bags
onto their shoulders and make their way to the fields.
Under this weight, their bodies hunch forward and tip
to one side. Parked where I watch the procession, scanning
for the one face that translates to meaning for me, I notice,
on just this day, how thin the skin on my boy's face looks,
how much like the shell of an egg, and how open
it can suddenly become. By bullet, by bomb, by hand.

DARA-LYN SHRAGER

GRASP

My body is a ship housing three hammocks
in a swaying cabin: one for the heart, one
for the womb, one for the head. The middle
cradle has come untethered, hangs limply
from just one salt-sprayed hook. I dreamt
the baby a hundred times before we buried her
body next to Circuit City. We use a map
to find her: row 21, plot 63. Without a home,
sorrow bangs up against the heart hammock.
The baby left through the pierce in my ear,
the only place I could not hold her in.

JENNIFER JACKSON BERRY

you write about a girl

& how cold she is
you fill lines w/ images & snow
the cold is quiet & the cold is
your best friend

you ask the girl
how does it feel
to be everything he hoped you'd be?
you write at the desk
in the corner of the yellow
& green room
mostly you imagine
how you'll be this
why do your arms
still feel empty?
how you'll do this
how does he love you
even when you can't make him
what he hoped he'd be?

& because there are
no answers *you*
become cold you
find it difficult to kiss
when you shiver
& shivers become the music
of every day
& because every day ends
every day ends
you write about a girl
& her shadow
you fill pages w/ exposition & candy
the shadow is quiet
& only shows up in the sun

in the happy
the shadow is your best friend

when it is dark
& when you are sad
& when you can't be alone
anymore you write
the shadow back

you can be yourself
you can be yourself
you can be yourself

& it is good for you

but when it is warm
& when you are warm
& when you can't sweat
anymore you write
the cold back

STEVIE EDWARDS

LUSH LIFE

Voyaging nights—whiskey leading me around a faculty party, a little like its wife,
hushing the patio as I tell the story with my uncle and the gun or my uncle
and hepatitis or my uncle and gambling or my uncle and too many strokes
to sing and play guitar at the same time. My uncles are always good stories.
Sometimes I forget where to begin, wake in bed broke for magic, a funeral
dirge between my temples. I wreck myself reaching like a thin-stalked daisy.
The sun, a skinned knee spreading through the dark. I can feel it. Like everything,
it's mad at me for how I've slipped in and out of a weekend bender's smelly clothes.
The bender says, *If you don't want me anymore, why take my calls?* We hear so much
about romance. O botched alchemy— tonight the thunderstorm has calmed,
and I want to drink your heat beneath the faint eyes of stars. Worm food. I know

that's what you'll make of me. It's impossible to want to dizzy myself mindless in your gross glow. But I do. I want the dry heaving, the death breath, the tumbling, the big terrible after. I want to hold you in my mouth and swish before I swallow.

SAMUEL PICCONE

SOMETIMES YOU LOOK AT ME

LIKE I'M ONLY A STACK OF PAPERS

What I mean to say is depth can be illusory.
If you wore red–cyan 3D glasses
and leafed through me like a flipbook,
you'd see there's more to me than cartoon drunkenness.
Before coming home late without my clothes on
and stumbling bare–assed to the fridge for one more beer,
I spent hours wandering drunk and naked
through a cornfield for you.
I plastered my body in mudhusk
and tried to blend with the dead stalks,
swearing if I could see the lambent bronze dome
of Pozzo's trompe–l'oeil at Sant'ignazio
hidden in all that corn,
I could fix the parallax of us
and understand why making love
feels more like drawing phantograms.
But you've got to look past my penis,
past the boozy moonlight and the flatness
of soil on my skin. There is pulp in me
deep down. Cup me like a mound of earth,
press me into a ball, roll me out between
your palms, make me into anything
you'll always want to hold.

HEATHER GEMMEN WILSON

DIVINE TANTRUMS

As I travel the long stretch of highway, I listen to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. There must be fields of blotched cows outside my windows, and semi-trucks and minivans; there must be whole cities I'm passing through. But I see only the yellow line that leads me home. *When he, whoever of the gods it was, had thus arranged in order and resolved that chaotic mass, and reduced it, thus resolved, to cosmic parts, he first moulded the Earth into the form of a mighty ball so that it might be of like form on every side.*

I'm heading home today, and not tomorrow as planned, because my seventeen-year-old daughter is missing. Again. The myth that chaos can be resolved comforts me, and, even as I rush forward, I want to linger in this promise. In a rare space of silence and solitude, in a place between here and there, I want to wrap the confinement of my car around me like a blanket. I increase the volume of the car stereo, and the disembodied voice booms around me.

The gods of ancient Greece, indomitable in their legends, don't provide comfort for long. They were capricious, vain, and violent—like the park named after them where I used to take my family when we lived in Colorado: The Garden of the Gods. We would stare up at the slab of red rock tilted upright from the earth at ninety degrees and be chastened by our smallness. "You wind among rocks of every conceivable and inconceivable shape and size," Helen Hunt Jackson writes of this place, "all bright red, all motionless and silent, with a strange look of having been just stopped and held back in the very climax of some supernatural catastrophe." The park was named for its beauty, as if to imply that this was the one place on earth worthy to host the divine. But I wonder if the surveyors of the park also pictured it as the backyard of Zeus and Apollo, where three hundred million years ago their mighty temper tantrums splintered the earth.

Rachael's tantrums, when we were first discovering her personality disorder, forced my own emotions and beliefs to pivot, tilt—as layers seemed to break through my flesh and jut out at sharp angles. Now, as I huddle in my hurtling car, with no idea how to resolve the chaos of Rachael's life, I am strangely unmoved. I'm responding but not feeling. My layers have settled into new positions and no longer wait to burst out. *That's good*, I tell myself. *This is progress.*

At the Garden of the Gods, as my four children played on mounds of rock below the formations we would hear laughter ring out from professional climbers conquering the routes above. The danger, it seemed, had passed. The epic battles, whether divine or geological, were over.

One of the most famous formations at the park is Balanced Rock.

This rock is five or six times the height of an adult and as wide as the base of a water tower—except where it roots itself into the ground. In that spot it narrows and appears to be just barely holding on. A newspaper article in the *Colorado Springs Gazette* once challenged readers to guess the date the rock will become unbalanced. My guess is a thousand years from now, or a thousand thousand years—a time beyond imagination. It doesn't seem possible that movement of any kind can occur in this rocky, desert wasteland.

A year from now, after my daughter graduates from high school, I will happen upon an old photograph of myself standing beneath Balanced Rock, reaching up to touch the place where it seems most likely to wobble, pretending to single-handedly support the weight of this massive stalwart. A year from now, I will feel that weight. I will wonder if the composure of the Garden is more brittle than strong. I will imagine that rock becoming unbalanced and rolling free. And something will break in me. I will want to live again—even if that creates new layers, even if the brutal pain of those ruptures makes me gasp. A year from now, I'll quit huddling.

But now, as the stories of the ancients wrap around me, I see only the yellow line that leads me home.

MARLIN M. JENKINS

PSALM REGARDING THE YOUNG MAN'S HANDS

LORD to be honest I am not certain
you know the story: the young man
sat, back against the wall, with the boy
in front of him. He reached the hand
forward, down to the boy's
groin, then gripped as the boy
watched out the room's door, down the hall,
to a glass door where snow fell
outside. O LORD, did you see
this as it happened in your temple—
what teachers and pastors do not
see? Did you hear the young man
before as he spoke to the boy
in the bathroom? O we have learned
love from how you've let us
feel it. The two sat against that wall
like friends on sled—you set
the sled in motion down the hill
and turned away as they descended
down, down, crashed into tree, perhaps
so far down that you failed
to hear the boy scream.

MARLIN M. JENKINS

OVERRUN BY FISH

Imagine the lake floods
and fish overtake the house.
They enter through the broken
windows and rub silver scales
against computer screen,
stretch their mouths in the reflection
of television, flick business cards
with their tails. They swim

between the bars of the crib
still in the nursery,
never used. Gills reflect
on genderless walls, illuminate
the ultrasounds taped up:
grey, formless images.

Catfish and carp start
in the basement, but soon populate
every room; they move
in un-named patterns, suck
up the last of everything:
houseplants, appliances,
golf clubs, steak knives. They attach
themselves to bed frame and headboard.
They lay eggs in the sheets.

GEULA GEURTS

LAST NIGHT*

after Marie Howe

Last night, the man in my bed asked
if he could fold his arm around my shoulder,

hold me, as we lay like two spoons
lightly touching in a kitchen drawer. So proper,

I whispered, my face turned the other way,
voice shaking. I want to be respectful, he said.

I imagine his eyes were closed, like mine.
I could hear the clock, the hand that marks the seconds,

a mosquito buzzing past my ear. I thought about
all the men who hadn't asked, the time passed

since I last saw my father, how he tried
to hold on, and how I turned away.

A fan whirred through hot air into the direction
of my bed, strands of the man's hair blowing across my face.

He held my hand till his breathing became deep
and he let go—fell asleep.

And soon after that, I too must've let go and fallen asleep.

*"Last Night" appears in the mini-chapbook *Like Any Good Daughter* from Platypus Press.

PHILIP BRUNETTI

GRIEVING CATS

1.

There were grieving cats in the courtyard. He could look down upon them from his window across the way. He counted the cats—four, five, six, seven. There were seven cats of varying size and color but all the cats were dirty and battle-scarred. They'd lived in the streets too long—their whole lives. Later in life they'd come to find this courtyard, an outdoor space opposite the front door of the Old Woman. The Old Woman had fed them daily at midday for the past five or six years. Before these cats there'd been others...but over time they'd died off or drifted away and new cats appeared. These cats. These were the cats that would somehow save the world in their natural *catness*. These were the cats that'd perform miracles...as long as the Old Woman was alive.

2.

The Old Woman had died. What was the point if the Old Woman had died? The cats came around. They pressed their noses to the pavement and sniffed their way to the Old Woman's front door. They sniffed along the threshold and even scratched and clawed at the doorjambs. Several of the cats started meowing and rubbing their noses against the base of the Old Woman's door. I was watching from my window while they did this. I was telling myself that my heart wasn't breaking...I knew the cats had come to depend on the Old Woman. They'd grown old with her and no longer had the strength and ferocity to hunt in the sad streets. They'd probably have to hunt again anyway unless someone did something about it. I could do something about it. I could prepare a bowl of cat food and carry it out to the courtyard. I could allow the cats to rejoice—or at least satisfy their hunger. I might do this in fact. I just wasn't sure yet. There was only one thing I was sure of: The cats were grieving. The cats were sensing the loss and feeling the absence of the Old Woman, the comfort of the courtyard, feeding time...

3.

I dressed as the Old Woman. I don't know why I did this. I felt the cats had become despondent. I felt the cats needed more than just their missed-courtyard feeding. I felt they missed the Old Woman as well. They wanted to see her—be near her, in her presence. I was going to feed them and I was going to dress as the Old Woman in the process. I went shopping. When I

got home I put on a long black dress that I'd purchased at Minetta's thrift store. I put on women's monk-strap shoes and a gray wig. I also wore granny glasses and carried a cane. I was the spitting image of the Old Woman. She'd been an ancient bird. She'd been the kind of old woman that used to walk the town squares of old European towns. She'd been from Italy or Greece—somewhere where there was once the promise of the old black dress for old women. Generally widowed women...I didn't know if this old woman had been a widow or not. I didn't even know her name and had only spoken to her a handful of times, nodding hellos. We were nobody to each other. Her courtyard was adjacent to my menial residence. My miniscule second-floor studio. It's in this studio that I'd dressed as the Old Woman, that I'd pulled on black-seamed stockings and donned the black dress and shoes. I gripped the cane and carried the bowl of food. I went down the stairs, wobbly, and then through the entryway, turned and headed for the courtyard. It was lunchtime and the cats were still grieving. I'd decided I would perform a kind of miracle. A miracle of the absurd. I slogged along in the low-heel black shoes that were too tight and pinching. I leaned on the cane and carried the food bowl in my freehand. The cats announced me. They came around me and started yowling and rubbing their muzzles along my stocking legs. They put their pert noses in the air and smelled the cheap dry cat food I was delivering. I said something. I said something to the cats that the Old Woman had said daily: "*Mangia i gatti. Mangia, mangia.*" The cats were Italian-speaking cats. The Old Woman had seen to that. But now I was the Old Woman. I'd have to trace the trajectory of their grief. I'd have to gauge how long it would last and how long I could keep up this masquerade. I was confident that I could keep it up for days and days. Maybe weeks and weeks, months and months, years and years even.

"I've never been happy," I said to the cats.

All seven of them had their faces buried in the food bowl. It was a big wide plastic bowl. I'd barely been able to maneuver it with one hand. But I had. And the cats were grateful—and feasting. And I was the Old Woman. I'd come around the courtyard to be the Old Woman for them. And it was all right. The cats seemed to think it was all right.

VALERIE WALLACE

from FRIDA'S WALLS THAT VIBRATE

3. Two Fridas

Kahlo & Woolf cento

Pain is inarticulate In this small world, where shall I turn my eyes? There isn't enough time, there isn't enough nothing There is only reality My doubt is how far it will enclose my human heart Why life is so tragic I look down & feel giddy I wonder how I am to walk to the end but the heart passion humor everything bright as fire Never dreams, only my reality In the mist I am old I am ugly I am repeating things But what is to become of all these diaries I asked myself yesterday Are you leaving

No, broken wings sounds in the corners color of poison But I still see

the enormous spine, basis of all human structure always tied to ancient existence

Your fruits already give scent your flowers give color blooming in the joy of wind & flower

like the blood that runs when they kill a deer

5. Self Portrait with Vines and Animals

Drunk eyes, sorrow eyes, eyes like lungs
Spine scaffolded by thorns & hummingbird
Whose beak at your throat points up

To the wingspan of your eyebrow, alchemy country
Of your eyes, hair corded with lavender ribbons
We've watched your naked heart travel

Outside your body, held your wounded breasts
With our eyes like mirrors, seen
You give birth to horrors. We are intimate

In your bed of orange & blue, smell
Your acrid paints & sweet hairy fruits
Of your still lifes. Behind your head, palmettos

Pronounce their thick green fan of themselves, open
& listening to you & sky, & sugary moths & damselflies
who would rather linger in your coiled hair.

On your left shoulder you've placed your monkey
Who inspects a bramble in his hand at your neck
& from your right shoulder, your little black cat's

yellow eyes regard out & back in, which is how we enter
& cannot look away from you, you being Frida in this light,
light of a room with window & face a mirror to see inside it.

ALYSE BENSEL

DEAR DISTANCE

I'm a smaller woman than I used to be
smaller-minded, too
and generous with myself pouring coffee
licking banana bread batter
staining my hands with graphite

I cherish carbon-on-carbon
the kind of action you'd like to see
shedding cells mixed
with mite dust and pollen

my castoff life is
leftovers I forget
to slough off in the mornings
I'm trying to reabsorb the world

take on mass and give my flesh
a thrill from the inside out—
those gaps where you're still there

digging in, dirty fingernails and all
that suppleness attempting
to push away and down

ALYSE BENSEL

DO NOT CONSUME RAW

At Target I browse the seasonal produce, eyeing
the warning label on the shrink-wrapped rhubarb.

I think about tearing open the package right there
and chewing the stalks like a cow with her favorite cud.

Those precautions signal the kind of rage in me
that ends with me screaming in my car. Sometimes

I let the man I'm seeing in there with the sound
to see if he'll stick around. They all have—it's usually

something, or someone else. I always have another
lined up next, like I'm playing pinball and have

50 cents handy for each silver ball.
A thousand quarters, that many scoreless turns.

I push the button as many times as I can. I poke holes
in the plastic. I want the rhubarb to age, the balls to keep

moving. I'm tired of trying to pause time. One of these
days I'll stop with the night cream, face masks,

hemp lotion, argan oil, BB and CC and SPF. I need
exposure to speed up the process. Rinse. Repeat.

JUAN J. MORALES

TO SASQUATCH

You could crunch me into bones and meat
and I would still rather track you
across the continent
than live in a city with nights broken of stars.

I can't help searching
the mud and snow for your footprints, scat,
and tufts of mystery hair
under lonely stretches of timber.

I've been patient but your lurking silhouette
still doesn't skulk between the shadows
that should be there. The only smell
is the fresh kill I carry to lure you

out in the dankest forest,
crashing through underbrush, bellowing out
your calls, and knocking against the trees
to tell you I'm losing faith.

Only the coyotes reply. I'm asking you
please silence the crickets, snap a tree in half,
and tell me I am just like you,
part of a bustling that no one believes in.

LUCIAN MATTISON

PAPER SKIRTS

What if I painted
nudes—visions
of women, pale and dark
haired: one hunched
over her laptop
on the coffee table,
asleep on a black couch
swallowing her whole,
or belly up in bed
surrounded by unpacked
boxes—would you search
each face for another,
feel the acid of ex-lovers
like a peach pit
rooted in the lining
of your stomach? I say
the image of a woman
is just that, image,
whether whispered
over a pillow or caked
in layers of acrylic.
I tell you people
from our past are just paper
skirts casting shadows
across the soil
of our heads.
You know who we are
today couldn't be
without the cascade
behind us, months foaming
at a river's mouth, our eyes
two wet stones
looking out at the world
from sweet water.

I record years
for the sake of meaning,
but for you each old thought
of mine is paper
thin, a cut between
the fingers, meaningless
hurt, inescapably present.
You tell me this
in the car, seatbelts on,
the idle breathing beneath us.
We lean to kiss
in the darkness of the garage,
against the harness
strapping us to our places,
necks outstretched
toward forgiveness.

WILLIE VERSTEEG

POEM IN WHICH I CONCEDE A POINT TO SHERYL CROW

In the store, I crack wise
about the stock decor,
the dozens of *Live, Laugh, Love* posters
with butterflies alighting
on each splayed serif,
and in this moment a woman
pulls up and loads one
into her cart and I'm the one
left feeling embarrassed,
maybe even envious,
in the same way I envy
that Austrian scientist
who promotes booger-eating
for a strong immune system—
I would have kept
that finding to myself,
but on he goes, presumably
practicing what he's preached,
a few gold-digging acolytes
following in rank. I know
I can't expect to like
every tacky trinket
inside this store—the ceramic
cats raising one paw—
but for once
I'd like to be the one
who makes the news
for his gaudy bomb shelter
stocked with pickled anything,
or to sit in a lawn chair throne
as I ascend beneath
a weather balloon bouquet.
The department store anthem
blares over the speakers—

It's not having what you want,
it's wanting what you've got—
and though I loathe
admitting it, Sheryl Crow
might be right on this one,
even in autumn,
with only so much sun
left to soak, because
when that half-light
sweeps across the parking lot
it's not the novelty of it that I love,
but how it comes in
like an old friend
who needs no greeting.

SARAH ARONSON

SEPARATE

Meanwhile, the Vietnamese man in the red driver cap who fries pork spring rolls from a closet in Nugget Mall to be served at my father's fish hatchery second wedding reception is also my soccer coach & will one day be the man playing ping pong in the driveway on my step-father's table during the only other dry day in April. All this one hundred years after Soapy Smith put a man down at the wharf with a gunshot to the groin, we laugh, my brother & I mishear Johnny Horton croon Russia's own. Eighty years after the Treadwell Mine caved-in shoreward from where the Glory Hole's wet pit of a mouth spat up gold into the wheeling pans of sourdoughs. Little San Francisco ghost artists hammer driftwood into dinosaur skeletons on the single sea level drive ending out the road making in-effect an island of a town with one escalator but half a dozen poured concrete corrugated-roof echo chambers for outdoor play because it is always raining & since our suits are already wet I beg Jeannie to go inlet-swimming because it is static daylight at 9pm & cloud cartridges of rain unload only making the ocean seem warmer.

EMMA KRUSE

ON FIRST LOOKING INTO THE PACIFIC OCEAN

I imagined it like Homer in Keats:
  bottomless, brash, planetary.
  In the pools of Cortez's eyes, a scary
wild surmise brought on by serene peace.
I'd seen drawings in books – creased
  pages dripping from shelves at the library –
  crystalline blue, not like algal Huron, airy
surf swallowing up sand and everything east.
The Pacific was none of this.
  Instead, it was all glass houses, caged
cliff rocks, balcony crammed crevices,
  rowdy beaches, and dull, bruised beige.
The waves were tamed by breathless
  panic streaming down the PCH.

EMMA KRAUSE

CARTOGRAPHY

Magellan only saw cerulean
and his boat saw no blue at all.

I'm learning colors in bits, like
subway station mosaics

streaking slowly, then all at once.
I ask him to circumnavigate me

and he names me cello
calls me winter melon and marvels
in the candelabra freckles on my back.

I ask him why he picked
the globe. Why not Saturn
or Alpha Centauri? I want to
understand the trench Mariana,

commune with the spotcheck
stargazer. Microbes
deserve attention.

My explorer, he slept
with spices, he probed
celestial clouds for direction.

En route to Ascension Island he
forgets me, I'm learning to be Atlantic.

MEHRNOOSH TORBATNEJAD

O

Drinks from the stream every toxic thing, every
clear drop bouncing with the venom of being,

it receives. Sips broken skin, pools the poison
between its lips. Holds in its folds the residue

of abuse, the crystal beads of inherited disease. Within
the meaty grasp, pulls apart spheres of hurt, purges,

faithful devoted piece, rinses the entire bodyweight
clean of its contaminants. On the right side always, selects

bites nutritious, offers all of it to the rest of this. Stores
in its pockets packets of fuel, supplies quickly each

burst for a dispirited human. In its shelves, keeps
more supplements if you need them. Among its few

hundred functions, assembles the units that rush to seal
gashes. And if itself turns blemished or damaged,

regenerates then its own tissue, rebuilds to original, this
blushing purple muscle with a shade similar to heart.

This is why we Iroonis liken our most precious to it,
why an adored companion is swiftly nicknamed with it,

a darling who accepts our pathogens for the purpose
of ridding them, who delivers to us a handful of fire

when we can no longer bear the tedium, who becomes
the vessel that weaves wounds left open, who comes

born already with a mechanism for self-restoration.
A firm band of unwavering cells spongier than bone.

Just look what happens to liver when you remove the I and
replace with an O. Replace with O. Replace with O. *Oh.*

SARA KACHELMAN

BABY

1

It appeared in the middle of Sunday market, leveling a crate of lemons with a massive left foot. Its outstretched palm smashed a stand of encyclopedias. Its elbow quartered a map of the Red Sea. At its crown hung two torn linen tents, which swung from its forehead like a veil. Spoiled sweets and broken ceramics littered its clean white feet. Matter replaced matter. The townspeople scattered. Some argued that the baby had fallen from the sky, while some insisted it had risen from the earth. Possibly it had materialized from the air itself. No one had looked during the crucial moment.

It was clear from its first moment of thinghood that the baby asserted permanence on the desert colony. Minutes passed before any help arrived. The townspeople waited, squinting in the shade. West of the city gates, the sandy hills eroded unto each other, changing course with the wind. But the baby was immune to time or weather. It would never lose its reflective glare or the dumb protrusion of its thumbs. Its exterior, bone-white and gleaming, possessed the marbled austerity of a Greek god. No marks indicated an origin or material. Its monolithic size could hide a tugboat or a time machine. Speculating, the market people idled near the balconies and shop fronts until the bomb squad arrived to detonate it.

Engulfed in green ventilation suits, the team first poked the baby with a long stick. Its surface was reported to be hard and offered no residue. When the stick yielded no response, they approached in a group of three, each from a different angle. Lieutenant Sergeant Juds held a megaphone.

"WHY HAVE YOU COME HERE," he said in a neutral voice. He took great care to emphasize his diction in case the baby was new to their language. The city waited. A desert bird circled the baby in sweeping oblongs.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT," he asked, but again the baby was silent under the shop tents. Like a man walking on the moon, the Lieutenant drew closer. After an unreturned display of secret gestures, military codes, and peace offerings, he gave his crew the signal.

"WE ARE NOW GOING TO UNDRESS YOU," he announced. The people on the balconies hid their faces with fright. The men in the suits set their jaws in hard lines. Raising two mechanical claws, the squad snatched the tents from the baby's face. They fell like drop cloths from a painting.

2

A high, alien sound pervaded the city. It was the collective voices of the mothers. They were bickering over the baby. Maria Louisa climbed a turret and testified to the people assembled below that the baby was in fact her Dario, lost to bird flu last January. Her husband set up a phonograph next to the baby's foot that played young Dario's favorite piece of music in former life, Wagner's "**Die Walküre.**" Henrietta Whitehurst, however, claimed that the baby was currently in her womb, and that it had erected a prenatal monument to announce its sacred arrival.

"Feel it," she demanded, brandishing her midsection. "It is buzzing with the life-force." A queue formed behind her, one palm after another.

Across the square, Maria Louisa had instructed her husband to fetch every existing photograph they had of young Dario, pre- and post-mortem. These were put behind glass for public viewing near the baby. The colonists looked from photograph to baby, scrutinizing the curve of the eyebrows and the broad, cherubic forehead. While they did not openly reject Maria's theory, most allowed that the baby resembled someone else they knew. Helena Cleary said it looked just like her great-great grandfather Elhan, who had died in the Franco-Prussian War. Shania Tombigbee said it favored her own baby pictures. The mothers congregated in the square with locks of hair and daguerreotypes. They were beginning to form factions. Several exhibited violent aggressions with wooden spoons and hairpins. At the end of the first day the young chancellor appeared on the royal balcony to deliver an official statement:

"THE PERCEIVED MONUMENT IS NOT OF LIVING ORIGIN. IT APPEARS TO BE MADE OF A NON-HARMFUL MINERAL SUBSTANCE. WE ARE CURRENTLY WORKING WITH OUR CORRESPONDENTS ON THE MATTER. THAT IS ALL."

3

A chill overtook the desert colony that night. The wind howled through the empty streets, ushering along milk bottles and pieces of ribbon. Entire dunes were leveled outside the city gates, only to emerge miles away. The desolation of the clean green city, its prepackaged presence in a desert the size of an ocean, settled on its inhabitants. They had come from overcrowded cities all over the world to form a modern community with no common history or religion. But pre-settlement traces had been recovered in domesticated locations. The long tooth of a mososaur disinterred from a cellar wall. A piece of yellow pottery in the shell of a new swimming pool. Three skulls and a spoon dug up in a vegetable garden. These artifacts were hurriedly stowed by their discoverers in attics and storage closets without interpretation.

The city was designed to look seven hundred years old but was constructed with modern technology in seven weeks. The architecture, people, and culture were all imported. The brochures told the immigrants that they would settle a new-found land, the last place on earth man had never been before. But things had appeared within the gates that existed beyond their interference. The artifacts, and now the baby, threatened the city's intelligence. The land pushed up from the cobblestones, unknowable to the townspeople.

The intellectuals scoured their books for signs and symbols to explain the baby's presence. A gang of university students identified the baby as Bambino after the Italian Renaissance on account of its broad forehead and mannish body. Its right hand was extended, as if the baby were poised at a lectern. An extremist or a god must have erected it. A religious monument had no license to teach anything to their new city, the students proclaimed in their moldy dugout. It could be teaching anything, and that was the problem.

"Religion enslaves!" shouted a bald man, bouncing up and down on a derelict sofa.

"Down with the cherub!" The committee yelled back.

They crept into the square after the last bar had closed. All of them wore black face masks. First they tried to push the baby on its side, but it was firmly affixed to the cobblestones. They took sledge hammers and hacked at the baby's arms in the name of the Individual and the Mind. But the baby could have been made of solid diamond. Even the heftiest of the philosophy majors was unable to make a dent. As a last resort, a shy, nasally dropout pulled out a can of spray paint.

"You do it," he told a girl whose face gave the impression of a hard, straight line.

When she reached for the can, the wind blew her hood from her neck, exposing the raised red welts. The students gasped. The effect of knotted scars on young pale skin. She was undergoing bodily scarification, like the punk models back in Europe. Everyone knew it was an ancient process, but like most things they adopted, the origin was unclear or forgotten. Now it meant ownership over beauty, over virginity, and the girl's authority silenced her companions as she replaced her hood, leaving an alien feeling, as if they had been hushed by a mother. The students held the library ladder as she ascended on level with the baby's head. The wind tunneled through the alleys and stirred the trash from the gutters, bright bits of aluminum animated like things charmed. Three quick strokes blacked out the baby's eyes and made a stroke through the full lips. She stood back, admiring the vulgar transformation. Staring blindly back at them, the baby smiled.

4

The next morning, the art community gathered in the glass-fronted museum. Across the square, the baby's 100-watt grin gleamed in the sun.

"I'm sensing an inorganic representation here," snapped Dr. Bandicoot, a performance artist in a robe of solid white. He peeled an orange with murderous fingers.

"The body as a stage. The body as *defacement.* These are the themes," he said. Fleshy chunks of fruit showed in his mouth. "The *figure* is a *vessel* for the essential unreality of the mind. It combines medieval imagery with the tensions of contemporary midlife subculture. To make a statement or not make a statement? We have no choice. The statement has been made. I say we leave it." The Board wrote this down on their clipboards.

"That's preposterous," announced an egg-tempera painter wearing an iridescent helmet. "This figure challenges the appropriation of metaphysical skeletons in a world of individual pursuit and shared experience. The subject matter of this piece capitalizes on the in-between spaces of our evolutionary timeline. Cognizant of the alchemy between sculpture and space, the figure asserts a powerful conception of purity and chastity in the never-ceasing flux of our postmodern *continuum."* Throughout this speech, the painter's chest began to heave. She was clearly having an asthma attack.

"As citizens of a newly-formed space, branding is a priority. We can afford to leave nothing up to nature," she wheezed.

"So the only way to claim the figure is to deface it further," Dr. Bandicoot said.

"To know something is to destroy it," she gasped, as four unpaid interns lifted her by the limbs and carried her out of the door.

"But what about the smiley face?" asked a fat man with a monocle.

"How could you be so literal," Bandicoot snapped. He took a cocktail from a tray and sipped it delicately. "The preexisting alteration to the figure only suggests that a more effective and stylized adjustment take place." This statement inspired a collective grumbling from all who were assembled. After much simpering, massaging, name-dropping, and drinking, it was agreed that the students' graffiti was not intentional enough.

"We need something representative. Something *universal,"* Bandicoot announced.

That afternoon, under the cover of an enormous black sheet, the artists installed upon the baby's skull a headdress of the solar system with independently moving parts. A banner across its feet read, "Revolutions of Reason." Red Jupiter twirled in the wind.

5

In the desert colony bottles of Pellegrino rained down from the sky. Three daily imports arrived at the helicopter hangar. Giant carp wrapped in butcher paper. Green olives and sashimi. Boxes and boxes of luxury underwear for the desert colonists. Gradually, the market people began to set up their tents around the Solar Baby. They sold organic toothpaste and apple butter, dream-catchers and kiwis. Women strolled by with bulldogs on velvet

leashes. The colony's main export was fashion. The click of a shutter closing behind a streetlamp materialized in the oily pages of foreign magazines. The Solar Baby appeared in brochures throughout the overcrowded metropolises to the east and west, symbolizing "Individualism, Spatial Freedom, and Free Tap Water on a Dying Planet." Everyone abroad wanted a photograph of the Solar Baby. When the wind blew, its stars and comets shimmered. The show was even more splendid at night. Children brought bouquets of moonflowers to lay at the baby's feet.

It was a good time to capitalize on tourism, for the world was running out of rain. The oceans were closing in, and the cities could hardly keep up with the growing need for housing. Old-timers were cashing in and flying out, hoping that they would be less likely to be caught by the heat wave if they were on the move. The desert colony boasted lush, new money, and an antique feel. Travel agencies toted posters with the Solar Baby front and center. The new installation garnered so much attention that the city officials decided to open their gates to sightseers for a specialized fee. A green carpet of AstroTurf led the way through the main street to the square, where it stopped at a cart entitled "INFO BOOTH." For 8 euros a tourist could listen to an audio tour detailing the Solar Baby's history, how it was drug up from the ancient riverbed, restored by an elite artist of cubism, and altered to represent man's knowledge of the infinite. But the tourism scheme failed to amass revenue. The desert was isolated by miles of dunes. A yodel into the distance retrieved no hungry travelers. The Info Booth was repurposed into a gyro stand, and the colonists soon forgot their own accounts of the baby's appearance. They had all heard the audio tour.

6

The young chancellor was finishing his 18-hole round at Legacy Trail just outside the city gates. He positioned his snakeskin cleats at the edge of the sand trap and squinted at the flagstick on the other side of the artificial lake. His collared shirt was slick with sun screen.

"Double bogey," he murmured, taking a few practice strokes. He considered the desert hills to the east, nearly obscured by the green slopes of the course. The red pinprick of the flag. Back and forth to the sugary sand dirtying his new shoes. The more he focused on the flag, the more the dunes behind it lost their shape, contorting into lines that did not exist, an archway, a sphinx, the round dome of an newborn head.

He swung. With a dainty *plunk* the ball landed in the lake. The caddy hurried forward with a washcloth and a lemonade.

The chancellor turned away from the hills as he loaded his clubs onto the cart. The riverbed was dead. He had culled many artifacts and assembled them under glass in his private chamber. He made sure that nothing was left, back in the early days before his wealth, when the colony was a pipedream business plan and a flat, level plain. An infertile landscape cannot produce a

baby, he had told the people from his balcony window. This is not a sign of the end times. But the chancellor sensed that the brand new baby was older than everyone in the colony, and would outlive them, too.

7

One day, two helicopters arrived instead of three. All afternoon the colonists waited in the hangar for their packages of chocolate-covered cashews and Italian leather sandals. They mailed angry letters to foreign service departments, but their mail was returned unopened. News services announced a shortage of gasoline, resulting in a spike in the cost of jet fuel. The colonists dug into their preserves of cellar vegetables. The water towers to the west emptied halfway, then lower, as the helicopters circuited less and less frequently. The colonists checked airfare back home, but found that their old cities had closed immigration due to overpopulation. Disconsolate, they rationed out macaroons and Asian pears on their dining room tables. A few families decided to strike out into the desert hills, but one look at the endless dunes made them turn back. For the first time, the colony began to feel the enormity of their isolation. They drew close to the city center as if for warmth.

The students set up tents in the city square. "FREE THE COLONISTS," they wrote on plywood with black magic marker. "DE-POPULATE OR PERISH." "SHARE THE GOODS." But no one came to photograph them anymore. Only the most crowded areas received the most supplies. The image of the Solar Baby was forgotten by the media, who recorded scenes of devastation in Tokyo, Dubai, and San Francisco.

The artists made their own shrines to relieve anxiety. They busied themselves with meticulous projects. Dr. Bandicoot separated the sand by texture and color. The egg tempera painter constructed a hollow globe of the world with hair and fingernails. Neither of them noticed the disrepair of the Solar Baby installation, whose crown of the heavens drooped to one side, paint flaking in the wind. The baby itself remained blinding white. In a city falling to squalor, it was the only structure that did not degrade in beauty. It appeared more monolithic than ever, especially at night, when its fat, luminescent body towered over the tents of the students.

In their desperation, the colonist demanded that the baby reveal a sign of the holy or supernatural. Rosaries were made from teeth and broken china. People touched its knee or foot and whispered their darkest secrets. They began to bring the baby their best things. People brought it whole turkeys on hand-painted Christmas platters. They brought it mounted moose heads and antique rifles. When material finery lost its value, they brought it sick children and elderly people on four-poster beds.

The virgin daughters of the city began to question the possible advantages of their station. Drawing on Biblical sources, they gathered in damp basements to discuss the possibilities of immaculate conception. If the

baby did not come from the desert, did not come from a god, and did not come from the hands of an artist, perhaps it came from a divine womb. When asked if she possessed a divine womb, all the adolescent girls raised their hands. With utmost secrecy, they made arrangements for their ascensions into heaven.

The scarified virgin waited among lit candles of eucalyptus and thyme, menstruating in a bathtub. Her limp hair, peroxide–dry, fanned out around her like shredded cellophane. To pass the time, she read a movie catalogue from America. She studied clavicles. She studied breasts. From her window she could see the baby, black spray paint peeking out from under the derelict planets, her touch, revealed. Saturn had fallen onto the cobblestones and shattered, revealing a wire skeleton. Venus hung heavy on its fishing line like an overripe fruit. The scarified virgin interrogated the Roman mural on her bathroom ceiling. Fat cherubs taunted man with lyres and wreaths of lilies. Fat cherubs unrolled scrolls. Outside, the baby lectured in a language translated to no living thing. How cheaply it all spoiled in the first assault of wind. First, the water began to quiver around her toes. Then it lashed at the walls of the tub. A crack rent through the back wall of the house as the desert tectonics trembled—she listened for the word of God, and heard only a baby crying.

KYM CUNNINGHAM

WAITING FOR THE FLOOD

Rain hangs silent in a blackened sky; I can see neither the horizon nor the precipitation. They exist just beyond my perception, hallucinations that if I look hard enough, I can barely distinguish before my vision blurs and the drought returns.

The yard of my duplex is un-mowed, ravenous patches of unruly California clover and tall thin weeds that remind me of the Midwest. They assert dominance over the artificially inseminated grass, planted by landlords to resemble uniform suburbs of the American Dream. But grass does not grow in California. It must be rolled in from other places, maintained. It must never look dirty.

My grass is the color of dust, not dirt. Dirt implies nature, implies life, implies California water exists somewhere outside of constructed reservoirs, underground pipes, and business fountains.

"But it's recycled water," patrons and owners—the moneyed—say, programming their elaborate sprinkler systems. Wasted water runs off emerald spines, collecting in oil spots on concrete.

"Look, a rainbow!" a girl exclaims, pointing at the ground. She's too young to have seen one in the sky.

By June of 2015, California had been dry for four years. In an effort to alleviate the drought, the state water board implemented its first-ever mandatory urban water limitations, requiring each county to work toward a percentage of water conservation tailored to fit its consumption.

In San José, two-day-a-week watering practices were implemented, home car-washing and the filling of private swimming pools was banned. The city was in a state of uproar, with the government pointing at homeowners, homeowners pointing at businesses, and businesses pretending to inspect some very interesting cracks on either the floor or the ceiling. No one was happy, and no one wanted to accept that they were at fault.

My landlords seemed especially concerned that I conserve the water they paid for, so concerned, in fact, that they showed up, unannounced, to make certain I understood the fiscal consequences. The tiny wife, a hawk-nosed Russian nesting doll, jabbed at me with her clawed hand. "We are in drought, so only use water if you need, yeah? You use too much, we will be fined. Okay?"

Her warning came two years after I had moved in, but I nodded enthusiastically nonetheless. "Yeah, I've been trying to be really careful about watering the lawn and washing my clothes."

This was bullshit and I knew it; I was using environmentalism as an excuse for the un-mowed weeds of my otherwise brown lawn and the piles of laundry collecting in heaps on sofas and my bedroom's slatted wooden floors. *The Lorax* or *The Wump World* were no excuse for the dishes piled up in my sink and on my nightstand. I still took thirty-minute showers and had a kill-on-sight policy for spiders.

The wife squinted at me, bagged eyes shaded in eyeliner and foundation that has covered her face for longer than I've been alive. I could see she knew that I was lying, that I, like the rest of my generation, am lazy, that I make us excuses. She could tell I only pretended care.

"Okay, so uh, have a good day." She nodded brusquely, which did nothing to alter the unnatural fan of her hair, and a purse of Grand Canyon lips.

When I first moved to San José, I noticed a poster for water usage reduction at the local climbing gym, one of many in a California-based chain. *CALIFORNIA IS IN A DROUGHT!* it said, with a picture of the state—a blue teardrop in the South, underneath where California's left eye should have been. The poster gave Touchstone Climbing-sponsored ways of promoting water consumption *AT HOME*:

Turn off water when not in use.
Take shorter showers.
Use leftover ice to water pets and plants.
If it's brown, flush it down; if it's yellow, let it mellow.

I had never heard the last phrase until I came to California.

Growing up in the Midwest, it was hard to understand the concept of a drought. The smell I remember most from my childhood was the curl of warm rain as it hit hot cement, the feel of it like taking a warm shower fully-clothed. Water was omni-present in the suburbs outside of St. Louis: it flowed through creeks behind houses, it gurgled down sloped streets into sewers beneath our feet. We shot it at one another in neighborhood Super Soaker fights; we smashed balloons of it against cars, houses, against each other. In the nineties, our feet were always slimy with mud.

Even when I lived in the Arizonian desert in the early 2000s, no one seemed concerned about water consumption. Sure, it only rained once a year in Mesa, but the singular flash flood was enough to close schools. When it rained, we didn't leave the house, afraid we might be swept away by the six-foot swell that rushed through dipped streets, covering roadside yardsticks designed to show water level. Even in the desert, my childhood saturated the earth.

Fast-forward a decade and a half: I am no longer a child, and I live in California. I can see the ocean if I drive thirty miles to Santa Cruz, and yet everywhere—in cafés, on the freeway—I am cautioned: *Save water! We are in a drought!* The signs are as prevalent as adolescent rain, and just as easy to

dismiss. But drive away from the cities, drive into the broken hills and sun-dried valleys, and California's drought becomes impossible to ignore.

Yosemite, the crown jewel of America's National Parks, bakes in the California sun, parched rocks gasping for snow that has long since melted away. Rivers that once swelled barely trickle a foot above the ground. The earth is dust-dry and the grass seems liable to catch fire at any moment. Wood for campfires is easy to find.

This is not the Yosemite my San José born-and-raised partner wants to show me, sensing my doubt as the earth cracks beneath my feet. Growing up, I had woods in my backyard that were more impressive than this, teeming with coyote dens, forests so green they hurt my eyes. Here, the dust makes it hard to see anything other than itself.

He takes me to Yosemite Falls, the park's three-tiered, 2,500-foot major attraction, thinking that this show of nature's thunderous force will turn me into a believer. We park his '94 Toyota pickup in the shade, following signs as brown as the ground itself. I can almost taste his excitement as we walk towards a break in the trees; he is picking up his pace, trying through a sheer force of will to push my plodding faster, *wait and see, wait and see.*

We reach the break, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with a handful of other tourists. There is no thunder, no crash of water plunging into the pool at the rock-cliff's base. There is nothing but the rock itself. I can feel his disappointment hanging in the air where water should have been. And so I look up, eyes straining through hundreds of gray feet, and I can see it: the sheen of a fine mist over the edge of the cliff.

Ignoring the unenthused grumbles of other tourists around me, I concentrate on the misted undulations. Over and away, over and away, I feel the tug of wind against gravity. In California, even Nature battles itself for water. Staring at the interplay, I begin to notice a tint in the waves; as it leaves the rock, the water evaporates in rainbows. The color spectrum dances faintly in the light. If I blink, I miss it. I have never seen water like this before.

In California, it is the scarcity of water that makes it beautiful, that makes us want to be near it. We encroach upon the water, building our houses closer and closer. We would live on top of it if we could; we would have it surround us, swallow us whole. There is something Biblical about the relationship Californians have with water: there are those who are conscientious of their consumption—the chosen ones, the saved; and then there are the fallen, the wanton, the wasteful.

Driving down I-5 through the Central Valley, we can see the righteous anger of the chosen:

CONGRESS CREATED THE DUSTBOWL
NO WATER = NO JOBS
Is Growing FOOD Wasting Water?
DAMS or TRAINS Build Water Storage NOW

Signs pepper the highway like freckles. They do not fade in the sun but

become stronger, more apparent, the light that blinds passersby to the unilaterally brown fields reflects off otherwise plain-colored poster board. The sun forces us to acknowledge them, forces us to look around at the cracked earth and barren fields for even just a square patch of green.

But the green that we want does not exist in California farmlands anymore. The strawberries and cherries don't taste like they used to, like how we remembered them when we were younger and juicier ourselves.

When we lived in the Midwest, fruit came from California or Chile, places of wonder where oranges and grapes thrived even when we were covered in a foot of snow. Californian Avocados were a delicacy, expensive, not to be frittered away on our daily bread, only to be eaten on special occasions. We didn't know the proper way to cut them—in gridlocked crisscrosses, halves still in the skin—until we came to California.

But now, when we stop at roadside fruit stands, we can taste the lack of water. The cherries and grapes feel dull and fibrous, sponges drying up the backs of our mouths, and the strawberries taste ever so slightly like feet, the same way that blue cheese finishes chalky against our teeth.

As we drive with the dust of fruit in our throats, we can feel the sun leeching nutrients from the earth, from the plants, from the air around us. We can feel it stealing our precious bodily fluids like fluoride. When we drive past Coalinga, we can smell it in the cow shit baking under corrugated metal awnings. When we drive past Soledad, we can sense its prisoners baking in their cells. We start to feel as though we, too, are imprisoned: femurs crunched beneath the steering wheel, spine curled inward so we don't stick to our seats—so thirsty, so thirsty—we become raisins of ourselves. Our hands crack against the steering wheel, even though our faces feel covered with the sheen of oil and exhaust. We don't retain any moisture; there isn't enough lotion in the world to make up for the lack of water.

A year ago, we were promised **El Niño**. "The drought is over!" Meteorologists predicted, divining rods in hand, and the people of California rejoiced. We went back to spraying down sidewalks to get rid of cigarette butts, back to car washes, back to watering our long-dead lawns five times a week. We ran clean water through fountains, got rid of the dry crust coating the surface of our state.

We started buying almonds again, by the pound. Someone had told us, courtesy of Internet-second-hand, that it took over a gallon of water to grow a single almond. We never bothered to double-check the statistics or we would have found the farmers' protestations. "Those figures are misleading," they claimed. "Everything you eat takes water." No one paid attention. We were already almond-shamed.

But then the drought was over, as mysteriously as it had appeared, and we went back to shoving almonds in cakes and chicken salad, in trail mixes and granola, anywhere they might go. "They're so good for you," we congratulated each other with our mouths full. "Cruelty-free protein, the natural way." We couldn't have been prouder of ourselves.

But with our mouths stuffed with almonds, we neglected to notice that our shins were still dusty, our mouths as dry as before. The rains had not yet come.

"Soon," the meteorologists promised, now sweating ever so slightly. They glanced at one another, found strength in the conviction of others. "El Niño will be here soon."

When the sky darkened, tumescent with clouds, we would point towards the heavens and nod solemnly. "El Niño," we said, by way of greeting. We moved our cars from garages, uncovered them, thinking the rain would finally wash away two years of dust. Outside, our children stood beside us, faces upturned, ready for baptism, ready to receive the gift of faith. The world began in a flood; we thought that it'd end in one too—the ice caps melting, the Pacific reaching up to swallow us whole, the new beachfront properties of Las Vegas, then Boulder, until only Kansas City is left.

Too late, we realized Noah's prophesy came from voices arguing in his head, the boat that had taken him years to build was just several pieces of sheet metal and cardboard duct-taped together. We'd been stuffing ourselves full of hydrogenated fats and silicon, coating our bodies in tar and California Standard Oil. Our flood insurance promised we would survive El Niño, if only the rains would come.

But the heavens sneered, spitting on us. *Here*, they said, *this is what you deserve,* saliva evaporating in vindictive laughter before it touched the ground. We would have wept but could not find any tears.

And so we wait, pretending, in true California fashion, that everything is fine. We man-make oases that should not exist—desert golf tournaments, outdoor swimming pools—believing we can have the American Dream without winter. After all, this is California where dreams are made. All anyone has to do is ask.

But we are not playing Legos; we are not building castles in towns of make-believe. Rather, we build Porter Ranches on highly-flammable methane deposits, then complain when the smell leaks into our foyers. We are a state of spoiled children, of adults who never grew up. We are not used to hearing the word *no*. We are realizing, too late, that water can't be spun from Hollywood gold, that money and oil are not the ends, but the means, fuel for the inevitable fire.

Down the I-5, Santa Ana's blazes have already begun. They are early this year, an additional sentence from the angered heavens. On July 1, 2016, headlines read: *Firefighters Contain 45-Acre Brush Fire*. Another fire erupts a little over two weeks later—July 16th—then ten days—July 26th—then less than a week—August 1st. Even up north, four hundred miles away, we can feel the temperatures rising, the dryness catching in the back of our throats, the air that chokes us when we step outside. By August 10th, firefighters are battling 3 major wildfires. We know it's just a matter of time before the flames snake up freeways, jump across concrete, burn California to the ground. Canyons will be engulfed; fire will spew from the mouth of Yosemite Falls as we choke on the Armageddon we created. We will be baptized, not in the sanctity of water

but in hell-fire; we will drown in sulfuric smoke, dehydrated ruins that crumble to the earth as penance for our sins.

I can see the fire on the horizon, next to the hallucination of rain. It's the same orange as the electronic billboards that blink with ETAs and phone numbers for reporting drunk drivers.

There's a billboard off the 710, outside Long Beach, informing passersby that the drought is not over, that we must still work at conservation, that we must limit outside watering. It explains this to us in pixels, digital information the only way it thinks that we can understand. We have been in cars too long to see past highways; we have been in air-conditioning too long to feel the doom in the air.

We have been too comfortable in this stolen state. It is only a matter of time before our apathy allows Nature to reclaim it.

LEA PAGE

HEARTBEATS AND HURRICANES

My father claimed that each of us is allotted a certain number of heartbeats at birth, and, therefore, if we were wise, we would not use them up too quickly. Even as a child, I suspected he was joking, but it was true: he didn't exercise. That wasn't a thing yet, back in the 1960s when I was a kid, although I remember my mother watching Jack Lalane do calisthenics on TV. I knew my father's bad knees had kept him out of Vietnam. Whenever he played a pickup game of touch football, my mother, watching from the sidelines, would make a crack about the injury she expected him to sustain and another, her laughter tailing off, about the burden this would put on her. Even as a child, I suspected she wasn't joking.

Despite my father being tall and rangy with broad shoulders and long-fingered hands that spoke of physical confidence, I never thought of him as athletic, and I wonder if those few stories shaped my perception, despite the conflicting evidence of my experience. He could deliver my sisters and me safely to the bottom of a rutted, tree-scattered sled hill. All we had to do was stretch out on top of his long back—my older sister first, then me, then my younger sister on top—and hold on as he guided the Flexible Flyer around the worst of the obstacles and over the rest. At the local pool, even if he was just fooling around, he would dive in from the edge like a racer, his long body stretching after the arc of his hands, a last-minute pike move keeping his body close to the surface of the water, which he would slice through with clean strokes and a satisfying base-note of froth at his feet. Bad knees or not, he was an excellent swimmer.

One summer, when we were vacationing at a beach in North Carolina, a school of porpoises came to romp just beyond the breaking waves. My parents interrupted our body surfing and hauled us out—not because they were afraid but because they didn't want us to miss the sight. The next day, the porpoises returned, but they stayed much farther out. After the first cry from another beach-goer, my father glanced in the direction of the man's outstretched arm, grabbed one of our inflatable rafts and ran into the churn of the surf. The red raft bobbed over and disappeared below the crests of the waves. A second man followed my father out, also on an inflatable raft. His was blue. When the colored specks finally converged, it was hard to tell if the porpoises were still out there. The two men stayed out for an interminable amount of time—much longer than the half hour my sisters and I were required to take every day at lunchtime to choke down a sandwich and a Dixie cup full of lukewarm milk.

I got bored waiting for my father to come back and returned to my own agenda of trying to replicate that one perfect ride, the one where the wave didn't just propel me along but lifted me. Where it didn't just drop me from its full height and then elbow me up along the coarse sand with no thought to where my head was in relation to the rest of my body but, instead, gentled me to shore, transferring me to the cradle of earth so softly that I didn't know the wave had receded until I felt my own weight once more.

One of those waves—I have no recollection whether it was a kind one or indifferent—brought my father and his raft in. He washed sideways up the dark sand and stayed there, resting on his elbows. After the water pulled back, little pockets of air bubbled up and popped in the sand, leaving tiny holes, like a cooked pancake. Another wave broke and rushed in. The water caught my dad's legs and swung the raft around, but the wave's strength was spent by then, and it sighed itself back out. My father heaved himself up onto his feet, tucked the raft under his arm and jogged over to where we had our towels laid out. He hadn't been exhausted, lying there. He'd been lost in thought. He had still been with the porpoises.

He tossed the raft to the side and flopped down on his towel. My mother closed her magazine and put it in her lap—she was sitting on a low folding chair. My sisters and I squatted in the sand, dripping, not wanting to commit to our towels, waiting to hear what he would say. He was up on his elbows again. With one thumb, he swiped across the palm of his other hand repeatedly, as if he were paging through a book.

"That's what _____ (the guy who followed my dad out) was doing when he got out there," my father said. "He was pretending to look through a guidebook, saying, 'Porpoises. Porpoises.'" My dad laughed at the memory of it, his stomach lifting off the towel.

"But why?" one of us asked—my younger sister, Brooke, most likely. Dana, my older sister, about ten years old then, would have gotten the joke. She always did—or maybe she just pretended that she always did. Older sisters: they're clever that way. I, eight years old, didn't get the joke, but I would have been too embarrassed to admit it. No one expected my younger sister, Brooke, about to turn six, to get anything, a situation that, later, would infuriate her.

"Because," my father explained, still chuckling, "if they were sharks, we were in big trouble."

"What were the porpoises like?" That would have been me, but I'm not sure if I said it or only wondered it. I'm not sure if I already had a tendency to keep my thoughts to myself. I have an image of the porpoises—several—in my mind, so he must have described them.

He *had* been scared. The porpoises had swum farther and farther out, and my father kept paddling, determined to catch up with them. Finally, he had to admit that he had lost them, that he had, on looking over his shoulder, gone way farther out than was, strictly, a good idea. The water was languid. The ocean breathed. Each swell lifted my father and his little raft. Except, the waves didn't lift *him*. The ocean confirms, if nothing else, how

inconsequential we are, how we are not, in fact, the direct objects we consider ourselves to be. We are there, and things happen.

The waves lifted themselves. Sunlight tripped across the water's surface, and shadows. Dozens of shadows. Porpoises. Each one sped towards my father's raft, diving and flying. My father knew they were playing, he said, but they seemed a *lot* bigger up close. He was acutely aware of the roughness of their skin, and he wondered how the vinyl of his raft would hold up to continued sandpapering. It was a long way to shore.

At that moment, the other man had paddled up, flipping through his imaginary guide to marine animals, "Porpoises. Porpoises..." A back-up raft took the edge off their fear, and they stayed for as long as the porpoises did. While my sisters and I were being washed, rolled and scraped up the beach—over and over—our bathing suits, our hair, our mouths and noses filled with sand, my father drifted among more graceful creatures whose joy was no more palpable or immeasurable than ours.

There were no porpoises to be seen the day my father took my older sister and me into the ocean during a hurricane. It was another year. I was nine. Dana, eleven. We always visited the same beach in North Carolina and stayed in the same ramshackle motel, always for the last two weeks in August, right before school started, right at the beginning of hurricane season.

That year, a hurricane was expected to make landfall south of us. In the morning, the winds were high and unsteady, ripping beach towels from laundry lines. The plastic grocery bag had not yet come into being, so there were none wrapped around the salt-crusted fence posts and none caught, flapping, on the barbed stalks of the sea grass, but anything that wasn't heavy or well-rooted was on the wing. Except birds. There wasn't a single one in sight. While the rest of the motel occupants hunkered down, playing card games or watching daytime TV, my father decided it would be a good day to go for a swim. I don't recall whether my mother, who stayed at the cottage with my younger sister, protested on our behalf.

When we took a beach vacation, we went for the beach and only the beach. By 7:00 a.m. at the latest, we would lay out our towels on sand still damp from the night air. We would set the cooler down in the long shadow thrown by my mother's beach chair and then swim until lunchtime, when, with sullen faces and long-suffering sighs—"No, my lips *aren't* blue,"—we would come back up onto the by-then hot sand, the breeze raising goose bumps on our skin, and we would sit down for that most tortuous half hour. The cooler would be opened, the sandwiches distributed, the milk poured, and we would wait. And wait. And wait, until—time's up! Our feet would churn the dry sand and then slap the wet sand and then high-step into the breakers' wash, and then, finally, we'd launch a dive into the relative safety beneath the next moving barrel of wave. We might construct sand castles or dig out a bathtub at the high water mark, but the majority of the day was spent in the water. Before dark, we would pack up—always the last family to go—and we'd climb over the dune and walk back to our cottage, where we

would take showers and hang our wet suits and towels on the porch while we waited for supper to be ready. After we ate, we went back to the beach to watch the sunset, the sandpipers, and the teenagers, who came together in mobile groupings and then scattered, much like the birds.

My sisters and I existed as comfortably in the ocean as we did in our bodies. We had experienced our share of rough and tumble. We had come up crying and gasping, sinuses aching from a saltwater power-washing, skin scraped raw on broken shells, and we had always gone back for more—"No, my lips are *NOT* blue!" But the ocean was a different beast on the day of the hurricane. No one else was on the beach. The sand felt colder than the wind. The sea grass shimmied and then bent over flat, as if stunned, before it shuddered back upright. The sky loomed closer than ever. If I expected its heaviness to exert a calming pressure on the ocean, the ocean wasn't having any of it. The waves were black. Hungry. Unfathomable. Perhaps what frightened me most was not their size but their lack of rhythm. There was no pattern of build, break, rush and sigh. If you know anything about swimming in the ocean, you know that timing is everything: gauging when the next wave will come so that you know when to breathe and when not to, when to dive and when to pray.

My breath fluttered inside the curvature of my ribs. The skin along my spine pinched. I knew—my body knew—that the ocean was truly dangerous that day. But I had no language for my fear. I had no way to formulate an actionable thought. No context from which to speak. My father had been my language, my only truth, until then.

Overnight, the heavy seas had carved out a ledge in the sand. We stood on the edge of it, the three of us, the long bones of my father's legs separating my sister and me. I tried to hold my hair, already knotted with salt spray, away from my eyes. I could see no way into the water and no way out. I waited for Dana to say that she didn't want to go, to speak for me, so that all I would have to say was: "Me, too." I looked to her to be brave enough to admit that she was afraid. But maybe she wasn't brave. Maybe she wasn't afraid. Maybe, like me, she didn't want to disappoint our father.

He grasped our hands. We jumped down from the ledge and hurtled toward the wall of black water. The waves didn't curl and tumble but rose, like thick lava at a boil, and then split open, revealing a maw of spit and foam. Those waves were engulfed by others, which came from every which way, from above and from below, as if gravity itself was confused and had lost its grip on the world. I high-stepped into the surge. My father had let go of my hand, and I struggled to keep my balance, knowing that I mustn't fall down or I would be pulled underneath the breaking waves. I knew from experience that once I was caught in their vortex, I would lose all sense of direction. It would be hopeless to try to swim for air because I would have no idea where it was, and I'd have to wait—that's where the praying came in—for the wave to spit me out.

Just as my legs buckled, I saw my father's body arc through the air, his arms and legs stretched to their full length, his torso turned a little to the

side. My eyes followed the birthmark on his stomach as he sliced through the wall of water and disappeared—just as another wall hit me square in the face, knocking me back and, mercifully, pushing me up the beach instead of pulling me under. I struggled to stand. My father rose from the miasma and picked me up by the armpits and set me back on my feet. He took my hand, and we ran again. He held my hand so high that my feet could barely get a purchase on the sand. When it came time to dive—"Now!" he cried—the surface of the Earth had already dropped away, shearing off into some other dimension, so my father dove for the both of us, and the sinews of my shoulder screamed for me. My head broke free, and, immediately, we had to duck down under the next wave. We came up again. The ache of my strained shoulder felt cold. The surface of the water—no, that's not right: there were more than one—the surfaces pitched and heaved.

If a wave broke before us, we dove as deeply as we could beneath it. If a wave hadn't broken, we rode up and over it and slid down into the trough behind. Either way, dive or slide, each wave drew us farther out to sea. In the briefest moment of rest between them, I glanced over at Dana. She was focused on the next wave coming, but she didn't look tight. I felt shrunken and less buoyant in the cold water. My shoulder hurt. My legs were already spent. The temptation to give in to my exhaustion and stop treading water rose up from the depths and wrapped an icy hand around my ankle. I panicked and tried to shout but only managed to swallow water.

"I'm ready to get out," I finally said, coughing and trying not to whimper, but that was not entirely true. I was ready to *be* out. It would take a rush of energy to *get* out, to fight the outgoing tide, to navigate the **mêlee** of crosscurrents, to duck when we needed to duck, to turn back and dive when we needed to dive, and to swim like crazy for the shore when we needed to swim like crazy, but that's what we did. We ducked and dove and swam like crazy.

Then my feet met sand, and my father's hand steadied me once more through the vertiginous foam and slide of the retreating sea. Back up on the ledge, he squatted in front of me, wrapped me in my towel and rubbed vigorously, as if he were toweling off a wet puppy. His shoulders were so broad and his hands were so strong, I felt ashamed for having given up so easily. Dana's teeth chattered at she shivered and laughed, "Ha-ha-v-v-v-v, ha-ha-v-v-v-v." I copied the shape of her mouth, but I couldn't make any sound. My belly clenched with cold and undigested fear. If they found out I had been afraid, would I be left at home, from then on, with my mother and my younger sister?

My father wrapped his towel around his waist and tucked in the end. Dana and I clutched ours under our chins. As we crested the dunes, an older couple in pants and jackets met us coming the other way. Their surprised and then horrified expressions encompassed the empty beach, the dark sky and the darker ocean. Clearly, my father had taken us into that water.

What kind of man does such a dangerous, reckless thing?

I ground my teeth together to stop their chattering and flashed a

frozen-cheeked, possibly blue-lipped smile at the couple as I walked past them, my bare feet leaving small pockets in the sand, my hand, the only part of me that was warm, completely enveloped by my father's. The echo of my heartbeat against my ribs might have answered their unspoken question: "*My* father does that kind of thing. Together. With me."

Some years before, my father had been in an accident on the way home from his office. The car may or may not have come equipped with seatbelts, but in any event, he wasn't wearing one when the vehicle came to rest on its roof. The officers who responded were surprised: my father crawled out of the wreck, stood up, brushed the broken glass off the sleeves and lapels of his tweed jacket and lit up his pipe. I can just imagine him saying, when they asked him to identify himself: "Bond. James Bond."

"Who does that kind of thing?" I ask my husband, nearly fifty years later, but I answer myself: "An idiot. A fucking idiot."

My husband, whose only truly reckless act was, perhaps, marrying me, says, "I believe the word you are looking for is 'awesome!'"

Why did my father take us into the ocean during a hurricane? It *was* reckless. It *was* dangerous. The only answer I have: he thought he could do it, that *I* could do it. He had no doubts, and his confidence was as good as a *fait accompli*. He hadn't used up a single extra heartbeat.

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