

# THE BOILER

SUMMER 2017

THE BOILER JOURNAL is a literary journal that publishes four times a year online at [www.theboilerjournal.com](http://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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For inquiries email [theboilerjournal@gmail.com](mailto:theboilerjournal@gmail.com)

# THE BOILER

SUMMER 2017

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ESTEBAN RODRIGUEZ

## PRAYER

Praise be

every mattress that held our savings;  
every clerk that counted our Ziploc bags  
of coupons, pennies; every scratch card  
my parents fetched from their purse and pockets,  
so eager to scrape off their latex-coated boxes.  
Praise their attention to the fine print, instructions,  
to how quickly they dug up change from the cup holders,  
glovebox, counsel. Praise the wins of five, ten,  
fifteen dollars. Praise that rare twenty that filled  
our tank, or that my mother stuffed in the piggy bank  
of her bra, or that compelled my father, intent  
to redefine and test his chances, to walk back  
into the store, return to the car with a *Break  
the Bank*, a *Mega Cash*, a *Cash Spectacular*,  
or the hundreds of other cards I'd check over,  
make sure the top row matched with the bottom.  
And if any did, if there was a number, symbol  
or word his bricklayer eyes had missed,  
I'd hand it back to him, imagine if his lips  
were to move beyond their silence, he'd say  
to my mother and me, *You gotta spend money  
to make it*, or some other cliché that again  
would make us believe luck – regardless  
of circumstances, conditions – was something  
that could always be repeated.

ESTEBAN RODRIGUEZ

## MOTH

Like an old acrobat, the sun teeters its last performance along the mirage-ridden plains, resigning its encore beneath the underpass and into the Quik Stop parking lot, where nightfall begins to douse itself on a band of tumbleweeds too fatigued to migrate back into their symbolism, and uninspired by the breeze stirring the scent of gasoline further into insomnia. Inside, the fridges glow like see-through tombs filled with ice cream, milk, with fogged shelves of blue 24-ounce cans my father, past the age of hesitation, roams his way toward, while his steel toes shed a trail of dry cement I try to follow, but veer off of when I round the corner, and lured by cravings beyond acknowledgment, feel the shiny sound of a chocolate bar in my hands, the way satisfaction is produced and wrapped, and how despite the convenience, there's at least a sense of honesty in not denying what the body feels, in cocooning from one mindset to the next, as my father, already less my father, nudges me from my stillness, and guides us incoherently back to the counter, where in the slanted mirror overhead, his face warps into the impression of a smile, and his distorted figure remains as patient as a moth's, unaware that when we return tomorrow, he'll still be pressed against the cold convex of glass.

N.T. ARÉVALO

## THE INTERSTELLAR PROMISE

We arrived in the orbit of Proxima Centauri two years ago today. It is now apparent to us that this hope for a new source—our new Sun—was misplaced. Centauri is bright and soon going to blow, like its sister, our Sun.

As this was our last *good* idea—the bunches of us that built those ships years ago, or paid our way for a stand-up-strapped-in-folded-atop-each-other seat—and as our last scientist has perished (suicide they say, but I know better than to add comment), we're running out of ways to distract ourselves.

Anna has taken to singing but the children cannot stand the old songs.

"Vygis," they whine at me. They call me my by first name, though I have asked them to stop.

The last scientist was their father. They call Anna "Mama," though she started as mine—*not* the scientist's—and is no relation, whatsoever, to those kids.

The Russians, as usual, are in their shared corner, one darting an eye, forgetting that though they sought in the last decades of the Diminishment of Earth to conquer Lithuania and have another pass to the Baltic, we all agreed this place would be without country or war. With the land, sea, and history of our births erased, everyone hoped we could also lose the least pleasurable parts, habits, and tendencies. Let time and space be our superiors.

I can see that the Russians are not having that.

With time condensed, you'd think there would be more love making, show the children what they will be missing. Yet most of us (Anna, particularly) have put on extra layers, a deterrent to contact, sending out an unexpected truth at the end of our humanity: we'd rather be left alone.

◦

The scientist's corpse was boiled to save space. It was my job to distract Anna and the kids. They slept longer and heavier the evening we boiled him, with no idea that the entity that birthed them (or, in the case of Anna, fondled them) was being destroyed. I guarded the door. My eyes grew wide and refused to blink for so long that the captain kindly spit in my direction and, moist, I dozed.

\*

Anna and I met before I knew couples got priority on the ships headed to red dwarf stars like Proxima Centauri. She was younger than me and so skinny my father looked at me sideways when I brought her home. My mother would place her hands on Anna's hips, which, because she was 19, had yet to appear. Anna, an orphan like many already were, fell in love with me so fast, I should have been



wiser.

“You are the perfect man,” she said.

I have buckteeth, thinning hair, and pocked skin. This was the first time I’d been told that I resembled perfection in the species. Like my dying planet, most people didn’t want to stick around me. I was growing older too, nearing my mid forties and few of my generation made it to fifty. But still Anna clung.

When my folks died (older folks took the Diminishment of Earth harder) and a spot for a couple opened up on the ship *Interstellar Hope*, Anna insisted we marry. The blowjob she gave that night left me no doubt. She was mine.

We took off on Tuesday. Anna pinned the marriage license to her chest.

\*

Those were not times for secrets or shame. No one had patience for that kind of nonsense anymore. It made people blunt, bluntness understood as our people’s last kindness and the best anyone could do for anyone—given the circumstances.

This is why, when we met the scientist, he explained that his wife had divorced him the year before. He told us this before he even gave us his name.

She left him for his brother who was headed on *Interstellar Promise*, the most favored ship on the planet. She also left him the kids: Georges, 6; Slovar, 3; and Liliana, 2. The wife claimed they needed their father most in these kinds of times and that they were ungrateful for her gifts. The kids—I’m told—burned a stick in effigy before leaving the planet. In their minds, anyway, though still at their father’s prompting. For using fire like that, like a luxury for hexes or celebration, was illegal.

I doubt the children even knew what a fire or an effigy looked like. Though, knowing the scientist, I’m sure he found a way to precisely paint the image of their mother’s skin unwrapping from her bones.

o

Anna started as their baby-sitter, watching the kids while the scientist helped the ship captain. She taught them *Boo the Russkies* but changed the name to Martians—our versions of angels, our excuse for postponing the fixing of everything for so long. At least, during my generation. Once we realized the Martians had hidden elsewhere in the universe or never existed, our angels, our saviors, soon turned back into our devils and curses, which was fine. Everyone was so tired of cursing God. And Martians resumed their place as mythical space creatures for these kids.

Georges would run around his toddler sister holding his fingers to stretch his face away from his eyes, pop them out to get her to scream.

“Ah-nuh!” little Liliana screamed.

The ship captain would pace back to the dining cabin where most of us hung during what used to be called day, and gave a look to each child, each of whom would pause—Liliana in mid scream, mouth stretched so that we all heard her tiny jaw pop; Slovar gripping Anna’s hand; Georges reaching his palm to his

mouth to begin a fart. The captain would do an about face. We'd listen for the steps to quit their echo and got right back to our play, me holding Anna a little bit tighter.

"Boo-boo-boo-boo!" Slovar used to shout in glee into the face of each passenger when the captain left. Anna had to block the exit to the cabin, pretend to be ordering us all around so Slovar wouldn't give us away every time to the scientist and captain. He'd bring himself forward with his tiny hands on my knees, up my lap, to blow a spit bubble boo into my face.

◦

I admit there were moments when I'd squeeze Slovar to my chest, maybe giving away that I had love to give, so much stored up and Anna not taking it lately. Until Liliana would dawdle over and smack my hands off the boy. "Boo, boo, boo, boo," she cried until I let go, took her up instead.

How I loved Anna's laugh at this. Though by the end, often enough she'd scowl.

◦

We'd set up bedtimes, rotating, though no surprise who got the favored Earth clock, the one our ancestors had: the scientist, one of the Russians related to a former President, and Anna. Aside from the scientist, no one could really explain the reasoning to me. I slept during the children's schedule because the thinking was

(a) they were too young to have missed good sleep so we all might as well take advantage of that;

(b) the scientist and his former wife had always kept them sleeping erratically, they said, to prepare for this. But it seemed more likely it was him using the past to reason the present or vengeance for the lack of sleep the infants caused him;

(c) they thought one man, beside the captain who could be on call any moment, should be near the children so

(c1.) they wouldn't miss their father,

(c2.) they'd be protected in case of . . .

We often used that saying "in case of," though none of us, not even the captain or scientist filled in that blank. The way it was used on the Diminishment of Earth was really about one thing—ultimate destruction—though it seemed, in space, it could all be much, much worse.

In which case—the case of now—there is nothing one man, nothing I, can do about it.

◦

Somehow we shared meal times. We ate on the feast-famine system: Two weeks stocking ourselves up, clogging the toilets, farting up a storm; two weeks drinking black tea mostly. We'd play games with the children, say we were hiding the food. That it had only been a day, really.

"Really?" Georges got more accusatory in his tone as time went on.

"Yes, really." Anna would smack the back of his head and I spotted the scientist's back rise, a little smile coming on his face.

°

I caught them in the anti-gravity capsule. The children were asleep and I, bored, horny, needed Anna. I tried tugging myself but with the children I had very little oomph. They each slept in a row, lengthwise, their little feet across my side. I slunk my arms and torso to the edge of our shared bed. I rolled up and stood to face the door. I could hear their breath, the snot that rolled with Georges' outbreaths, the caw of Slovar, Liliana's *murr*. I felt for the handle and slid the door, light beaming into our cabin. I slid the door quickly leaving only two inches. I waited to hear the snot, the caw, the *murr* over the buzz of the lights in the ship. When I was sure they would sleep without me, that there was no in-case-of, I tiptoed to the hull where the captain slept.

"She's not here," the captain grumbled, not even bothering to turn over, see who I was.

The President's Son—who I caught dividing up the shares in the dining room and swearing he'd not taken a thing—also did not know.

I peeked into the cabins. The Russians' room was filled with light and I heard the banter, peered in, and ducked away when I saw the three shirtless men tossing arms and cards into the air.

The toilet vestibule was empty. There was only one room left, dim but not dark. I walked down the long white glaze of hall to the powered on yet quiet anti-gravity capsule we kept. "For practice," the captain said, though no one practiced anything. When I lifted the switch with my palm to illuminate the screen, observe the room from the outside—somehow knowing to avoid peering through the tiny glass—I saw Anna: naked, spinning, arms and legs in a swinging dance. And the scientist, he tugged. He tugged and tugged until she dove to him.

°

At bedtime, the scientist had been singing us a song. "Us" because the children wanted me thereat every bedtime. During the Diminishment of Earth, though it wasn't outlawed, people had took more to humming. It was hard to breathe, to get a whole song out, but on the ship the scientist seemed fine.

His song was an old Russian ballad:

*Long live the winters in my heart  
Long live my family if its smart*

*Wake up tomorrow  
Wake up to sun  
You'll miss not your mother, not miss anyone*

(and here the kids would join in)

*I love my papa, I love the moon  
I love the place I am going to soon.*

By a few weeks in, once I was already keeping the secret of what I knew, I joined in the chorus as well, tearing up toward the end, at how Slovar couldn't pronounce "moon" so well. And at how good my Russian had become, realizing that we were all now speaking, now defaulting to the scientist's language.

°

Anna never joined us for these. It was her morning—actual morning—really. She'd follow the President's son, sort the supplies, she said.

°

Our story will be: *we bobbed along on ships our parents and grandparents put together, dying in the process but launching us with hope.* I'm glad my parents are not around to see Anna and me, or the whole big idea of saving humanity go bust, though I don't remember them thinking much of hope.

°

The scientist was screaming; this I remember. It was a day where I didn't hate him and that was largely because Anna had touched my hand on her way to the toilet. To remind me to watch those kids, sure, but still: it was a touch.

"Liliana, watch them," I said to the confused girl, motioning to her older brothers, before I stepped out of the dining cabin and strained my ears over the buzz of *Hope's* engines.

"I told them," the scientist screamed, from the hull, breathless. His words carried, weighed, like a lie.

I jogged, then stopped at the hull's entryway—in time to see the captain's hand wrestle open a metal locker.

"When? When did you say?" The captain shouted, his head in the locker, his shout a trapped and trembling boom.

The scientist caught my leering from the hull door. "Vygis! Out!"

The captain slapped shut the locker, the device he wanted on hand.

I tried to help the scientist. I do not know why. "The children need you," I said, speaking over the captain's body, to their father.

The captain laughed, cupping a hand over his face.

The scientist's neck flushed red. "I'll go then."

The captain dropped a rod across his body, his back to me, blocking the thin exit of *Hope's* hull.

The scientist did not move. He looked past the captain to me. "Come here, Vygis. I will tell you something. I will tell you about the *Hope*."

The captain turned to face me, dropped the rod to block my entry. I saw the spear at its end. I raised my hands and stepped back. Slovar ran into my knees, giggling. I turned to scoop the boy into my chest.

"Take him," the captain said. Spit flew from his mouth to my neck.

Anna exited the toilet from the end of the hall. She began to pick up her step toward us. I met her, handed her the child. She looked past me, as she'd been doing of late. Behind us, the scientist dropped the metal locker. We heard it spill. I heard more spears, their tin hit our tin. The captain continued his fight with the scientist.

"It's just an argument," I whispered to her. I gave a small shrug.

Slovar swung himself off Anna's arm, dragging her shoulder down. What skin and bones she was. She kept looking past my shoulder. I kept trying to bend for her eyes—to send her my message without words.

"The children are *alone*," I said.

She shushed Slovar, angled for my eyes. "*You are —*"

"They shouldn't have to watch," I said, raising my voice so it, too, hit the tin of the walls. It startled her enough to jerk away. She pulled Slovar down the hall as he giggled, giggled and she shushed,shushed.

"Let them keep their innocence!" I called after her. The laughter from the Russians' cabin stalled.

When I returned to the hull, I pushed the captain in. He had turned the rod not sideways to block the angle of the door but pointing, on guard. At an angle facing the chest of the scientist. If I check my mind, I cannot see it: that my return will plunge it forward.

◦

We did the boiling, the captain and I, and went on with it. Until one of the Russians found the last scientist's letter. He read it to us, how it would all end, passing out extra provisions.

"The food isn't hiding?" Slovar asked.

No one answered.

Slovar looked at me: "Is Papa?"

◦

I don't care where the children are. They've stopped sleeping with me, in these final days realizing that we big ones are of little use. They went to huddle together, elsewhere on the ship. The captain said, "Leave them," though no one really cares about the captain anymore, much less the captain himself.

Anna sings the most beautiful song on this, our last night. Not the songs of papas but something I think she is making up. I hear strings erupt in her

throat; everything feels like it is in A minor. I take it as apology.

I stop watching the rivers of her hair long enough to spot an eruption like I remember, when our First Sun brightened to chase us away. To buy us time. That First Sun drained the oceans, sharpened on our skin. It erased the ice, over decades—centuries even—by inches before we finally noticed it, swallowing the horizon as the horizon had long been swallowed by it.

That's the thing about revenge, about the sun—both of which we think only give. But they also take everything you've got.

Here we are, at the end again, and this time it is a dive. We are falling into nothingness and expanse at once. She has my hand and that is enough. I pretend her song will at least be allowed to fade into a hum, as the sound of space arrives first to blast my ears—before my eyes ignite with nothing but star.



SARA LUPITA OLIVARES

## MIGRATORY SOUND

it may have been a bone stuck in the throat  
a painting of a meadow dead animals on  
the road begin to change the way color  
dims you from a place language practiced  
without a terrain to think abstractly of one's  
body tracing north to south and back again

SARA LUPITA OLIVARES

MOMENT TO MOMENT

a dark stain on the ceiling  
    appears in a way that the perceiver  
too becomes a symbol  
    its presence colors out  
where violet weeds grow near an underpass  
    I watch my daughter by the road  
with a different sense  
of violence  
    the way a cloud when depicted  
on the television appears small in its detachment  
    from reality to want in that space  
to know a figure  
    in its harmless entirety

KATE DEBOLT

## DESERT LANDSCAPE

*Descending, with turbulence*

O how New Mexico  
gilds every thing:  
the dead tawny  
edges of its ditches,  
green pools shining  
mirror-bright.  
Feathergrass &  
butcherpaper  
mountains all  
the way down.  
We go down  
headfirst, argue  
about color:  
it's not quite  
brown. Isn't gold.  
It licks at the edge  
of winter like a  
flame. It doesn't  
flare before it goes.

KATE DEBOLT

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF DARKNESS

*Deming, NM*

Starlight doesn't suffice;  
here, light powers light  
& fields of wind  
turn the planet.  
Red eyes blink the dusk  
that falls all around the blue  
of the shell of the egg of this car.  
It's home  
for our love as long as  
we're here. Split the atom,  
it doesn't matter. The dead  
thrum with the turbines  
in rows of ten; it isn't  
a mournful sound. Only  
a keeping  
of accounts.

ANNE CHAMPION

## SAINT QUITERIA

*Patron Saint of rabies*

No woman wants to be your average bitch—  
like my mother, spouting out nine girls at once  
like a common sow. She ordered us drowned,  
her nuisance litter of kittens, and we learned

how easy it is for a girl to transform to damsel.  
Forget what you know about rescue: in the village,  
our cribs were lined with straw and we figured out  
how to resist pricks, we measured time in infant howls

that bladed silent loneliness. We wrenched  
out blunted teeth and grew fangs, we held our breath  
under water until anger turned to foam,  
bubbling from our lips and eclipsing our beauty,

until the water split like a shell, and we emerged,  
anew, hysteric glittering. Why am I a saint?  
Because I died a virgin? Because rabid dogs  
fell into a hypnosis listening to my sighs?

I want to be remembered for my sisters:  
we knew that sisterhood banded together  
can trounce an entire empire. We caught  
our heads in our hands when they cleaved

them from our bodies. We reincarnated  
as sea monsters. We're the only protection  
you need from wild beasts—  
just tell us we'll finally get what we demand.

ANNE CHAMPION

## SAINT CHRISTINA THE ASTONISHING

*Patron Saint of Millers, those suffering from mental illness, and mental health workers*

Christina embodied everything she witnessed, how leaves  
turned riotous and kaleidoscopic in the fall, how they heaved

themselves from the arthritic clutch of branches, abandoning  
the bark, so that it stands exposed and ruinous in winter.

Christina presented her first astonishment  
like a magician's assistant, sawed in half and miraculously

standing whole, only Christina died  
and came back, levitating up to the rafters

of the cathedral, pleading, *God, my senses  
can't cope with the stench of so much rotting sin.*

Every seizure was a pipeline to the mystical,  
and Christina saw nothing but suffering,

so she made a purgatory of her stay on earth,  
tossing herself into furnaces, heaving herself

into the vortex of frozen man-made currents  
churned by mills. *Penance*, she preached,

*you must suffer your contrition.* Christina knew  
what every woman knows but can't say:

at her birth, there was a theft,  
and the world is worse with every girl that's delivered

into it—we can never apologize enough  
for what we've done in doing nothing at all.



SARAH SGRO

IF WASTE IS INDEED A REVIVAL

the body is effective                      when interred                      a fly  
unloads 300 eggs                      inside the corpse                      the larvae sprout  
the soil is fed                      simmering with appetite                      we burn  
the skin instead                      my father                      gone I am  
my mother's awkward bride                      I kiss her breasts                      unsexed  
to my two hands                      though as a girl I entered                      from the kitchen  
to my father's tongue inside                      my mother is a hooded  
organ I have                      gathered spit                      to wet the shriveled circuitry  
my dad was energized                      by productivity                      sweating  
early miles one morning                      when my mother entered

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from the kitchen door      sweated-over body      horizontal glazed  
*she found him on the floor*      i write it down a thousand times  
while on the plane      this is my new refrain      my mother's  
so forthcoming when she's high      she talks about old sex  
with exes & my father      who is different than an ex      i never  
heard them fuck      eardrum to the bedroom wall      i never  
masturbated as a child      or circuitous adult      don't you  
know my father's dead      i likely weep at night      or find a body  
to forget      my dark place      is so transparent  
it's humiliating      just to write a poem      when i know  
you're waiting for      my father      to emerge & i will  
give you him in soil      & i will give you me      in bed erect  
& likely so alone      whatever else i need to write      for now      i won't

SARAH SGRO

[Whatever information women possess]

from *Without Them I Am Still A Mother*

(f)

*Whatever information women possess of their own bodies.*<sup>1</sup>

I hold J's body to my body & there is no revelation. For J's body is no copy of my body. For we are borderlands with disparate anatomies.

(f)

*The clitoral body & the desires of the chaste friend.*

I'm depressed so I take Xanax 2mg & you're depressed so you do not want sex. We watch TV because an image moving is a generative act. We watch a plot unfold & then rebuild after the screen goes black. My clit hangs like a grandpa clock. My pussy smooth but for this ample clot.

(f)

*The figure of the tribade is represented as the outgrowth of a monstrous bodily morphology, insofar as she functions more generally as a metaphor for excessive and unruly female desire.*

When we are at the party making out against my kitchen wall, I am a jock unfurling my impressive musculature unto J. I have unhitched the bra of J beneath a v-neck blouse in public space. When we are driving home, I don a hat & walk J to J's door. I am a cowboy demonstrating celebrated valor. I drape my cape across J's shoulders.

J says *that's some gay shit* & she's right. Behold the macroclitoride! The tommie! Female husband tomy female bride! My clit balloons. My clit grows like a mushroom patch, baby clits germinating on my thighs.

(f)

*What it means to be a lesbian, of course, depends on what it means to make love.*

Your clit is tiny waiting to be found. Your clit the classical pursuit of pearl inside its shell. This doesn't mean you're delicate; it's just the way you're made. I slide a finger back & forth inside you as to penetrate. My clit a micro-dick erect. My clit

an oaf who cannot hide. The shame of rubbing is you cannot give me what I want until I beg.

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<sup>1</sup> Italicized language from Valerie Traub's book *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*.

MEGAN DENTON RAY

## JEWEL TEA

Heaven is a kitchen full of jadeite dishes. It's here,  
inside our little brick house on Grigsby Chapel Road.  
Here, I am wearing my overalls, the ones made of  
buttercream corduroy. I am four. I am standing  
beside my mother, on a stool at the stove, still  
I am barely tall enough to peer into the big, deep pot—  
its waters gurgling, its copper bottom blazing. Yes,  
heaven is here, and I am unwrapping the five or six  
Kraft cheese slices from their plastic sheaths, carefully  
folding them into tiny squares for my mother's macaroni.  
I put my squares into exquisite piles, while my mother  
stirs and stirs with her long wooden spoon, a hand  
at her other hip, massaging. I wait for her to pour in  
the milk. I wait for her to tell me *it's time*. And then  
it is, and I drop them in, two by two—courageous.  
I watch my squares start to melt and turn into strings.  
My mother adds salt. My mother adds pepper. She stirs,  
so the only sound is the sound of sloshing. The only light  
is the warm yellow one above the stove, igniting the tops  
of our heads. We are illuminated. We are hungry.  
We take our jadeite bowls down from the cabinet.  
They are empty and cold, glass planets in our hands.  
They are the color of eucalyptus and French limes  
and dollar bills. My mother used to call them *jewel tea*.

MEGAN DENTON RAY

## GOODBYE WINTER

And so it was the consensus: elbows on the cleared  
kitchen table. Should I take myself out

for a lemonade? No—I'll think of the plumeria,  
of fahrenheit, of lemon trees blown up

against the hillside. Dishes in the rack  
need putting away. The oven needs

scrubbing. I consider sending postcards  
or fuschia blossoms in the mail. I consider

a bowl of iced green grapes. I consider snaking  
across the lawn in bare feet, spongy dawn

with a skillet for breakfast foods. I smell of  
soap—all greasy with lemon, calling out

*I am, I am, I am.* I feel hung up on a wire machine  
and electrified. Here, God holds his candle

to my candle, makes plums of my thin-skinned  
gutters. Look up: he smiles from great heights.

If even just for now, his face is mine. I remember  
myself as a little girl, stopping to uproot

a purple wildflower for him. I remember  
the long sigh of the screen door to a stop. I watch

the sun with a squint. I hear him underground, scratching  
with a nail. A sudden voice calls my name,

and I do not cry. I do not go to the window  
to address the lingering frost. I remember myself

as a little girl, cross-legged—feeding God dandelions  
in exchange for a plastic ring with a secret whistle.



MEGAN DENTON RAY

## LAYLA

In 1988, I was three pounds. In 1992, I was jealous  
as I traced my fingers along an album's edge—  
my drunk daddy's love for Eric Clapton.

I was wild and negligible, like the honeysuckle.  
I stretched my sweet, leafy fingers  
through the chain link fence, somewhere

in Tennessee, off the side of Grigsby Chapel Road.  
I remember the brick house, the grey putter, the pain  
beating at the back of my throat as I stood at the door

and waited for my father to come outside and play.  
He was in love with *Layla*. I'd sit for hours  
on the big stone by the garden, longing to travel,

stem by stem, to places only the sun can sift through.  
I used to pick the okra and eat it raw. I used to dream  
of being a tiny stray spark, the stacked kindling

at my father's hearth. All the while, *Layla* blasted  
from the inside out. I was just the yellow-green,  
the nuisance flower, growing and curling my way

around a cold, metal spine. I only wanted to be loved  
like *Layla*. Or, I wanted to be *Layla*, or to know *Layla*.  
I wanted her to give me ginger ale. I wanted to swish it

from cheek to cheek. I wanted her to feed me berries,  
to spread them out on the big stone by the garden,  
to offer them each to me, one by one. I wanted her

to tell me it was okay to eat raw okra. I wanted to show her  
that there were ferns growing inside my trusting, upturned  
wrists, and for this splendor be unzipped and entered.

*This I know for certain: I was muddy, but I was lovable.  
I wanted someone to patch me up. I wanted someone  
to lean down and kiss the bandages of my body.*

KATE ARDEN MCMULLEN

## PATTERSON FIELD

Leffe passed his keys from one hand to the other, stopping only to check the time, eight eighteen, eight twenty-one. He would miss the breakfast Bishop's wife offered to serve them before they headed together to the Patterson field. Jones said they had to be on the road by eight forty-five. It took thirty minutes to get there and another forty, give or take, to prepare, to load the rifles, to mark the paces, to sit the man in the chair twenty-five feet from the ends of their barrels. They made a promise, Jim Jones said, to the state and the man on the other end of the field that ten o'clock would be the time. Jones had done this five times before, the most of all of them. They lived in one of two states where an inmate could request death by firing squad. Dean, the man who would die today, had been waiting to die for twenty years.

Searching for the babysitter's number in the mounds of paper on the kitchen table, Leffe found the letter that told him his name had come up on the waitlist for an upcoming execution. Would he kindly respond to claim a position at the following address or phone number. That letter had come a month ago, and he realized only last week that he would need to find someone to watch the baby.

•

The Bishop's first-floor powder room smelled like roses and cupcakes. Bishop locked the door and took a nip from the flask lining his back pocket, leaning against the clean white sink. He needed at least half of what was inside to keep his aim steady. His first time, fifteen years ago, the CO had loaded the single live round in one of the five rifles, and whoever had it missed. He could not remember the sound that came from his own gun, did not have the ability then to listen and feel the kickback that could tell him whether or not his weapon held the fatal shot, whether or not he had been the one to miss entirely.

To the right of the toilet a magazine caddy held a foot high stack of outdated issues of *Southern Living*. Bishop turned and opened the mirrored medicine cabinet. It yielded little of interest. He hardly ever went in this room. His wife knew better than to keep secrets in a guest bathroom.

Bishop had the nicest house and the shittiest gun. The rifles of course were essentially the same, but Bishop didn't take care of his near as well as he

took care of his house. He hardly used it but for the two times he had gotten the firing squad slot. Bishop glugged back another tug on the flask. He rode the burn in his jaw back out into the kitchen to mask the smell with the rest of his biscuits and gravy. “Where the hell is Leffe?” he asked as he sat back down.

•

On Hannah’s first date with Travis he took her to see *The Goonies* and her daddy sat two rows back. She held her breath when Travis put his arm around her shoulders, but her daddy left them alone and even let Travis kiss her goodnight. On the cheek, but she counted it. It was 1985 and she was seventeen.

By their fourth date they could be alone. He bought her a milkshake and fries at Coole’s and she showed him about dipping the salty fries into the sweet strawberry shake, and he told her it was the best idea anyone ever had.

She took him in her mouth in his car two blocks from her house. That made her more nervous than anything. She did what her friends told her to do. It didn’t hurt. She didn’t throw up. He let her spit in an old Dairy Queen cup. Was it okay, she wanted to know, and he told her she did good.

•

The babysitter arrived in her mother’s Honda at eight thirty-three. Leffe had to choose now whether to speed through the instructions to care for his child and make it to Bishop’s on time or to take his time here and be late, risk having to drive to the Patterson field alone. At first a firing squad carpool seemed ridiculous, but now Leffe dreaded the alternative, and as the girl came up the concrete stoop, he chose the first option.

“You’re late,” he said, opening the door before she could ring the broken doorbell.

“Sorry?” she answered. “Mom wouldn’t give me the car.”

“Jesus. Okay, in here.” He let the girl walk in and didn’t offer to take her purse or anything nice like that. She followed him back to the living room where the kid sat fat and happy in the swing thing he bought last month. “Here she is. She’s pretty easy. She gets a bottle at eleven. I’ll be back, well, actually I don’t know when. Afternoon.”

“I charge double after six hours.”

“Double what?”

“Fifteen.”

“Jesus,” he said again. Would it take him that long? She had experience, though, so he guessed she could charge what she liked. The lady at church gave her a glowing recommendation. She had used the phrase *glowing recommendation*. “Okay. Come here.”

When they entered the kitchen, Leffe finally felt embarrassed. The house was a mess, the papers on the counter, dishes undone, baby smell everywhere. The only things on the counter were his detailed instructions, written with help from the church moms, emergency numbers on an index card, an extra key, and to the left of that stuff the toaster and the George Foreman, the only ways he knew how to cook apart from the microwave he didn't have. When she opened the fridge, she'd find formula, a loaf of white bread, lunchmeat and condiments in the crisper.

"All the instructions are right there. They tell you were everything's at. If you need anything, call, but try to wait until after ten."

"What if something happens before ten?"

"Well, call, obviously, but try to avoid it unless it's life threatening." Leffe patted his pocket for his keys, didn't find them, spun around, found them on the counter beside the index card. "Just don't fuck up before ten."

"Excuse me?"

"I have to go." Leffe jogged back into the living room, kissed the kid on the top of her head, said something like have fun be good I'll be back, and sprinted out the door.

•

They shot Dean at ten in the morning. The five men drove in two cars to the Patterson field. Jones took Leffe. Bishop drove the other two in his Ford. The cars spat dust. When they arrived at the Patterson field they found it uncommon dry as their own, as the rest of the town.

Bishop and Jones pulled up beside the patrolmen's cruiser and the long white van that had brought Dean to the field from the prison at the west end of the county. They each let the patrolmen and correctional officer pat them down. Each handed off their rifles, .30 caliber Winchesters.

Bishop wiped at his hairline and whistled low. "Damn hot," he said. No one answered. They could make out down the field Dean's shape already in the wooden chair.

The sun shone hot. Bishop wore his church shirt with the pressed collar. He felt the back of his neck reddening.

By nine thirty they stood in a clump and smoked near the house while the correctional officer loaded the Winchesters at the opposite end of the field. Only one rifle carried a live round. The rest held blanks and it was a courtesy done to them that they did not see the guns loaded.

Leffe and the others shared a cigarette a yard or so away in the shade of the old farmhouse. One of them kicked rocks and looked impatient and sweaty. Only Jones watched the CO across the field, and Bishop watched Jones. The man had to be in his seventies but it didn't show. Five times on the squad meant he'd

have started volunteering young, as young as eighteen. It meant he'd been on almost every scheduled execution since then.

Bishop wished he hadn't eaten the second helping at breakfast. It felt strange to be so uncomfortably full before shooting a man.

Even at this distance, he could hear Leffe's stomach growl. He'd offered the kid something before they left, but Leffe declined.

Bishop sidled up to Jones. "You know how many times you got the shot?" he asked.

Jones did not look at him. "Three," he said. "Could be four."

•

Hannah didn't know why she told the neighbor boy. She liked that he wasn't shy about it. He nodded and even asked questions. He wanted to know, did she feel different. She said yes, but not in the way she thought she'd feel.

They spoke over the fence in the back corner of their yards. It looked like he had been weeding the garden, but with the weeds were several daffodils, roots and all.

Did she look different, she asked him. He looked her square in the face, squinting so hard she laughed. Then his face grew serious. Yes, he said, I think so.

•

They took up their rifles and moved down the field, where the sheriff and another correctional officer had secured Dean to the chair, hooded and marked over the heart with a circle of white cloth. Here Bishop always wondered how much they told these men about what would happen. Did they go through it blind or was there a manual, some kind of orientation, here is how you will die.

They lined up. Jones, Bishop, then the two others and Leffe, the youngest. They took aim and fired. Dean kicked a little and slumped. They felt it, the thing they had done together.

They held the line while a CO strode across the field toward Dean. He bent at the waist and found the entry wound, centered in the white cloth, a clean through and through to the heart. He searched Dean's limp wrist for a pulse. At twenty-five feet, they could see how still the body became, a body now. The man straightened and raised a hand, and it was finished.

Leffe turned first. Jones followed. They peeled off one by one. Behind them the body removed from the chair, packed away. Bishop, the last to leave, tried to remember what Dean had done.

•

Leffe thought of his wife as dead because that was easiest. She had no obituary listing, no wake or funeral. He had paid none of those expenses, inherited nothing from her, but her disappearance had been so swift and complete it almost felt like he had done all those things and forgotten. The kid stayed, as she had no choice. Being left was something that had happened to her, and one thing she had in common with her father.

Leffe thought of her less and he imagined he would, of the kid less while he aimed and fired. Back in Jones's truck he found his phone vibrating in the cab, the babysitter's number in pixelated white on the small front screen. "Shit." He fumbled with the thing, answered, "What's wrong?"

"She won't stop crying."

"She's a goddamn baby."

"She's screaming."

"Let her cry." He hung up.

Bishop still stood on the line. The others walked ahead of him. Jones stood closest, shaking the patrolmen's hand. Leffe balled a fist and punched the truck door, then climbed up and sat sideways, boots on the step pad, elbows on his knees. A scraggly piece of grass below reminded him of the kid's hair, how it had grown in stick straight in one clump.

"You okay?" Jones barked at him.

Leffe lifted a hand. Jones and Bishop reached the truck at the same time. Leffe checked his watch. Ten eleven.

•

Hannah did it again homecoming night, under the bleachers, her idea. The fear of getting caught stood the little hairs on her neck up. She didn't need any Dairy Queen cup.

He walked her home, a short cut he knew between the high school and their neighborhood through an undeveloped swath of pine. She let herself feel lost, let him lead her by the hand. They stopped and kissed against the thick trunks. He wiggled his hand down the front of her jeans.

Is this okay, he wanted to know.

She knew where they were now, heard the deep part of the river to their right, remembered a mossy place near its edge where she played as a child.

Yes, she said, that's okay.

•

The babysitter still had not seen him. Leffe stood in the kitchen door, watching the girl bounce the kid in her arms, turning in circles and wiggling a finger in her face. A triangle of sweat stuck Leffe's shirt front and back to his skin. The hair around his ears, sweat-slick, stuck out in curled strands. His wife had called them whiskers, which made no sense. The girl sang little bits of a pop song at the kid's contorted face. The lyrics talked about being young and single. The babysitter replaced some of the words with pleads for the kid to stop crying.

Leffe imagined coming home to this scene everyday. Only the girl was his girl, and the kid was laughing, not crying her new brand of crying, more a scream than anything else. He imagined kissing his girl on the cheek and helping cook dinner, something that involved the oven. After they put the kid to bed he would turn to her in the dark and explain how he knew by the sound the shot made and how it felt in his hands and the timing of Dean's spasm that the live round had been in his rifle. Jones had explained what to listen and feel for when Leffe called him after he'd had gotten the bid for a spot on the firing squad. She would hold his hand while he looked for her eyes in the dark.

The babysitter still hadn't noticed him. He thought about turning around and leaving.



After, she lay still and let the moss tickle her palms. She tried to feel nothing but the moment around her, and when she had finished committing it all to memory, she noticed Travis no longer stood by the river.

She waited crisscross-applesauce for him to come back, even spoke his name to the dark. Her daddy would be angry with her for how late it had gotten. Nervous, she stood and walked along the river, turning over reasons why he might have left her alone.

This would be why when a hand gripped her arm she would not be alarmed. Why when in the dark she tumbled to the ground she would assume Travis held her. It would take too long to realize her last mistake, and by then the neighbor boy would have her pinned to the ground, his hands feeling her windpipe working under them and then nothing. She would have no choice but to be still for him. She would have then no way to stop him from removing her sweater and skirt, peeling her thin socks and placing them inside her shoes, arranging her hair. She would not see him wade with the clothes into the river and let them go. They would sink a little and then the current would take them out of the swath of pines and on south past the Patterson field.

Z.G. TOMASZEWSKI

## MIGRATION

Somebody leans back and the sofa's weathered fabric let's out a stale breath of cigarette smoke as the man passing by on the sidewalk catches wind of it through the cracked window and thinks of the basement of his grandma's house, the whole house, moving through room by room, remembering it all in a yellow hue, how memory sepias, bringing contrast to various shapes: a touch-lamp on the nightstand beside a worn leather chair, amber spilling and then fading into dawn, and a book telling its story, about how for so long a woman lived alone, until one day her late love Jill moved in and nothing seemed to change, then within a year they were gone, moved south,—but the man continues: recalls the pool table with ashtrays beside each corner pocket, the green felt under his hand, an Elvis poster next to the window where outside countless horizons flare up and everything with wings has its own vanishing point.



Z.G. TOMASZEWSKI

## COYOTES ON BARE KNEE HILL

*It comes to this: the meadowlark's vocal chords  
split, the power*

*lines vibrating and under their hum a roadrunner  
acknowledges its name and acts on it.*

I'm speaking into a tape recorder  
during a long drive

west, more than 2000 miles from Michigan  
to Montana, murders of crow, countless

cattle, dozens of horses whose tails, like  
frayed rope, lash the thousands of flies and

the thousands more I will not see.  
I keep track of my life in these blurry days

by counting, it's the illusion  
of order that keeps chaos at bay.

What I'm looking for is the plural to be  
singular. Like the coyote

on Bare Knee Hill, their clan bark  
coming from a shared center  
reaching back toward the valley.

I'm followed by dreams  
and rain clouds above those dreams.

*After a few days the ragged  
sky rings out and*

I stitch my sight along the uneven  
seam and feel the past flatten.

*I find myself at the hem.  
So, it comes to this—*

jessie knoles

## LOVE SONG

i wanted to write a poem  
but then i got drunk  
and then i forgot  
to take the asparagus out of the oven  
and then i forgot  
you wanted to play trivia  
and then i forgot  
how greasy my hair was,  
how in need of a shower i was,  
how the dog needs to go out  
every six hours, the moon is a  
waxing crescent, we can see orion  
in the south, the days are  
getting longer, my grandmother's  
letter arrived today, my uncle  
is still dying of cancer,  
it's been one month since  
my last funeral, i need to water  
the cactus that is on the heater,  
olive oil smells good when it  
is scorched in the oven at 400  
degrees, did you know mexico  
city is the westernmost national  
capital in the americas? it isn't  
santiago and it definitely wasn't  
buenos aires because at first i  
mixed up east and west. i wanted  
to write a poem for you but instead  
i got drunk and burnt our dinner

ALFREDO AGUILAR

## I WOKE UP IN THE DESERT

& could not tell what time it was. i walked  
beside you in the dark & you became

a white owl, you flew onto a mesquite branch, turned  
your head, opened your small noble beak,

looked into me, & flew away. i picked up  
a fallen feather & let it dangle from my ear. i ate

a cactus fruit, spat out a thimble of silver. the saguaro  
told me *you can learn to live on the smallest giving—*

*to hold a palm full of water & make it last a season.*  
i looked up & the clouds on the moon shivered.

i spoke with a coyote. he told me how the world  
was born. *in the beginning*, he said *an ocean*.

he licked my palms clean. told me *i only howl*  
*to try & call back everything that has left me.*

LUTHER HUGHES

## I WANT TO TALK ABOUT WATER

Though it might lead to drowning. I hardly remember the sound. The gulp my throat made. Tell me your throat is similar. The soft walls expanding then resting, then. It was okay. I had enough room from never being whole. Was that good enough reason? There are many reasons for wanting to die. A white spider in the kitchen corner, I flooded, poured down the drain. A white butterfly muttering above, smashed with my hand, flushed. I was the type of blackness who knew his power, so I owned it. When I seen a dove floating in a pond, I wrenched it further. When a white boy asked me to fuck him in the bathtub, I swelled. Inside him, he hurt. His expression filled. A year later, I thirsted for that. I drank wine in old bathwater and heard the rain seeping beneath the earth's thick coat like a fever. I let go under the weight, gave in, gave legs to fullness, imagined a blue ocean. That formless thing so wide, so needed. And so a home in that wet. But I came back. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't you get out the tub, run outside into the rain screaming mine?

REBECCA REYNOLDS

## THIS IS HOW WE SPEAK

For the third time this spring, Fonto calls to tell me she is dying. “Quinnie,” she says, her mouth too close to the black cordless phone that I know she has stolen off the staff desk at the residential facility where she lives. I picture her quilted blue bathrobe, her prosthetic eyes glinting like marbles. “My belly hurts. Carrots are not my favorite. Nana Hickey is worried.”

“Oh, Fonto,” I whisper. It is after midnight and I am in bed, though I haven’t slept. I rarely do, anymore. I sit up slowly so the mattress won’t creak, a pointless habit. “Everything is fine.”

“Can you come, Quinnie? I’m scared.”

“You know I can’t,” I say. Beside me, Grant’s half of the bed is tucked in. I go to the bathroom, turn on the light.

“Quinnie’s having a baby,” she says.

I shift the phone to my other hand and comb my hair with my fingers. My eyelids are puffy and a pillow crease runs across my cheek like an old scar; I tuck a streak of gray behind my ear. Fonto and I are the same age, forty-two, though she could pass for twenty-five, with her thick hair and unlined face and strong square teeth. We were neighbors growing up. My mother, who could not bear suffering of any kind, who cried the day a finch flew into the kitchen window and fell dead into her daffodils, made me walk Fonto home from school each day, and it embarrassed me—the way Fonto reached for my hand at intersections, walked with her shoulder touching my arm—but I did it. I took the longer route along the river where the other kids wouldn’t see us to save both of us the teasing. “What color is ketchup,” Fonto would ask in her raspy, low voice that should have belonged to anyone but her. “Blue?”

“Nope. Red.”

“What happens if I eat too much ketchup?”

“You’ll get a belly ache.”

“Nana Hickey wears a Bam Bam up-do.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I don’t care for ketchup, do I, Quinnie.”

“You prefer mustard.”

“Can I have some mustard right now?”

“I’m fresh out, Fonto.”

It was the same conversation every day. Sometimes I'd say the wrong thing to mess with her. "Sure, ketchup is blue," I'd say, and she'd go silent for several minutes, swaying her head nervously so her hair fell over her face. We'd walk a block before she would speak again. "It's red," she'd say, finally, her voice flat with disappointment.

"What's wrong with her eyeballs?" the girls at the pool would ask me, summers when Nana Hickey gave me ten dollars to take Fonto swimming for the day, though they knew, as everyone in town knew, that Fonto had Down Syndrome and was born prematurely, that the oxygen in the incubator shank her eyes to milky films in the back of her sockets. They knew Fonto's mother had left her in the hospital when she was born to go drinking at the Blue Coyote and that she didn't come back, not the next day or any day after. They knew Fonto's Nana Hickey was the one raising her, and that if Nana Hickey were present, she would whack the back of their knees with her pocketbook for saying one word to Fonto.

Just as they knew I would do nothing.

"Eyeballs? I'm fresh out," Fonto would say with a grin, revealing her unexpectedly perfect teeth. "Right Quinnie?"

I pull down my sweatpants with one hand and sit on the toilet.

"I have to work in the morning," I say. I allow a small amount of urine to pass.

"You're tinkling," she says.

I sigh, and release myself noisily.

"Nana Hickey says to wipe front to back."

"Got it," I say. I lower the toilet lid without flushing. "Where's the staff, Fonto?"

"I don't know."

"Can you give the phone back, please? I'll visit you on Friday, like always." I've been doing it for twenty years, through my marriage to Grant, first because my mother insisted, and then because I didn't know how to stop. It's always the same thing. We get mushroom pizza at Emma's and then drive around and listen to the radio until the streetlights come on. Sometimes we turn the music up so loud it hums in my ribs, and when the song ends I feel cleaned out.

"Nana Hickey says I'm dying, Quinnie," she says. She begins to cry, which sounds like a wet clicking in her throat. I know her lips are making a big, silent O, which always reminds me of a fish out of water, sucking breaths of air.

"Stop it, Fonto. Seriously."

"Oh," she whispers, her voice shaky. "It's gonna take a lot to drag me away from you." She's singing.

"I know that's Toto," I say. "You hate that song."

"Toto makes me cry, Quinnie."

"Then cut it out. Go to bed. Get some rest." Just saying the word *rest*

makes me realize how tired I am.

“I don’t care for Toto.”

“I know, Fonto.” I wet a facecloth with cold water and hold it over one eye, hearing the chorus of “Africa” repeat in my head. The conversations I have with Fonto do the same, her phrases ringing in my ears as I sit at a red light, or boil water for rice. *Toto makes me cry, Nana Hickey wears a Bam Bam up-do, carrots are not my favorite.* Occasionally her repertoire expands, like how she asks me about the baby, now. By the time she starts singing, it means she is past the point of being talked down.

“Nana,” she cries. Though Fonto’s eyes are undeveloped, her lachrymal glands function normally, producing tears. If she cries without her prosthetics in, tears pool in the empty sockets and flow out in waves.

“Alright. Okay,” I say, knowing I will not be able to sleep even if I try. “I’m coming, Fonto.” But her voice is gone, and the phone hangs up.

It’s one of two truths I have never admitted to anyone: Elizabeth Fontoni is my only friend. Like aging, it didn’t happen overnight—for years she was an embarrassment, and then an obligation—but one day you look in the mirror and see a stranger and you realize: this is who I always was. Sometimes I think I should adopt her, become her legal guardian and take her out of the state run home, known as House 2, where she’s been since she was twenty-three and Nana Hickey had a stroke and died. Move her into the empty second bedroom. My ex-husband, Grant, hated the idea, though his reasoning was sound enough, or at least I thought so at the time. He said we needed to focus on having our own children—he had already waited so long for me to be ready—and it’s not like we were rich, Grant being a middle school teacher and me at the bookstore that was always threatening to go out of business. Fonto was happy at the home, he said.

“How do you know?” I said, once, during the time I now look back on as the beginning of the end, just before we found out I was pregnant. I rarely questioned Grant. He had a way of arguing that tangled up my words and made me feel foolish for not being able to straighten them back out. “What makes you so sure she’s happy?” I had just learned that Fonto had been put on a new medication, an antidepressant; not something I was supposed to know as I was not Fonto’s guardian and therefore not involved in her medical care, but the staff gave me her eight o’clock meds when I took her to Emma’s, and as I poured them out onto a napkin, I recognized the green one as Prozac because I was on it, too.

“Honestly, Quinn,” Grant said. “I just meant that she’s taken care of there.” He raised his eyebrows in an effort to show he was only being logical. “That you don’t need to worry about her.” It was two years ago, March, the baby an undetected bean inside me. We were in the kitchen, which we had recently

updated on a budget, Grant spending all of his February vacation painting the old oak cabinets white. The room still held the faint, hopeful scent of paint. I was chopping salad for dinner while Grant stood at the slider and gazed at our muddy stamp of lawn. He put a hand on the glass and turned to me. “She spends her life listening to her Walkman and making crafts at the day program. I mean, would she even know the difference?”

I shivered with emotion. The only time I brought Grant with me to visit Fonto at House 2, a year into our marriage, he stuck so close to me I worried he might try to follow when I took Fonto into the bathroom to help her shower. Afterwards, he said it wasn’t Fonto, but the place, itself, that had made him uncomfortable. It was the smell, which I had gotten used to—the scent of bleach and urine and, often, feces, though the staff did their best to keep the large house clean and inviting, putting seasonal placemats on the table and photo collages of the residents on poster board in the hall. It was the heat, set at a medicinal eighty. It was the residents. There were five, not including Fonto, and some had lived there as long as she had, becoming a familiar backdrop to my visits. I knew Phil would ask about the condition of my car, and that when Larry said “chocolate éclair” it meant he wanted to hit someone. Grant explained that it was unnerving for him, not being familiar with everyone, not knowing what to say. He seemed to find Fonto and the other residents inscrutable, regarding them with an expression of amusement and pity, as if they were speaking a language he didn’t know and couldn’t possibly be expected to understand.

“I know you mean well, Quinn” Grant said, that day in the kitchen, walking to the island where I was slicing olives. I stared at the fingerprints he’d left on the glass. “But Fonto’s not your responsibility.”

Of course she is, I didn’t say.

Every time I left House 2, part of me believed I’d never go back, that I could walk away for good. But each Friday, I went back. That was something I could not make Grant see—the duty we have to each other, whether we want it or not. When my ultrasound, and subsequent blood tests, showed massive abnormalities, Grant begged me to follow the doctor’s recommendation and terminate. He said we could try again, and I think he believed it, though we both knew I was forty, and that in my case, these abnormalities had a low, but definite probability of occurring in subsequent pregnancies. For years I had been afraid of having a child who would need too much from me, the way Fonto did, and now that it was happening I felt under the weight of a boulder, and I wanted to run away from my own body.

I was eighteen weeks along at the procedure. The baby was a girl. Coming home, I could not speak, and Grant turned the radio to NPR, letting someone else’s words fill up the space. He preferred we not tell friends and family, had called the bookstore for me and said I had the stomach flu. But I had already



told Fonto of the pregnancy—at first I had been surprised at how excited I felt—and after it was over she continued to talk of it. The words hurt, and then they didn't, the way pain can turn to pleasure when you stop fighting it. *Quinnie is having a baby*, she would say, and I'd say *yes, a girl*. I wanted to hear it out loud, though I knew it wasn't right, that I should try harder to make Fonto understand the baby was gone. But, she was saying the words I could not say. Grant refused to speak of what we had done. "It's unhealthy," he said, frustrated that I would not consider becoming pregnant again, despite the doctor's warning I was running out of time. "You need to move on," he said. Grant did move on. He moved away from me a little each day until he was gone.

The other truth I've never told is this: I did not cry for Grant. But that baby broke my heart into pieces.

I drive down over two speedbumps, onto the campus of large ranch-style homes, each brown, nondescript, and numbered. It is two a.m. when I park in the muddy back lot of House 2 and walk to the door, the spring night wet on my face. I do not knock. Inside, the residents are asleep and the house is dim and warm, nightlights dotting the hallway. I smell the citrus air freshener, hear the dryers churning in the laundry room. In the light of the small fluorescent lamp by the staff desk, I see the phone is back where it belongs.

"I thought you'd come," a woman says, appearing around a corner. It is Marcie, one of the younger ones, putting in her time at the home until she finishes her psychology degree. She is plump, and has a heart tattoo on the inside of her wrist. "Sorry about this," she adds.

I take off my coat and fold it over my arm. I am suddenly drowsy from the heat. Even if I went home now and slept, I would be exhausted in the morning. "Is Fonto okay?" I ask, trying not to sound irritated.

Marcie sighs. "I gave her something to help her sleep." "This has been happening a lot," I say. "Is something going on?" I recall how upset Fonto was when her favorite staff quit a few years back. How she refused to go to day program last fall when her summer clothes had been packed away without her knowing.

Marcie turns down the hall toward Fonto's room, and I follow. Her clogs smack the bottoms of her feet as she walks. At Fonto's closed door with the bells on the knob and the cardboard heart with glitter blobs she made for Valentine's Day, Marcie stops, crosses her arms over her breasts.

"So, I'm not supposed to say anything to you," she says, a whisper. Her new look of sympathy confuses me. "But the doctor thinks this is dementia. Starting."

"What? Why?" It's all I can say. I know as well as Marcie that Downs are

prone to early Alzheimer's, and that the prognosis is worse than in the normal population. Less of a slow decline; more of a walk off a cliff. When Fonto moved in, she took the room of another Downs resident at the home who had died of it, the death so fresh the other residents confused Fonto with the dead one for the first few weeks. My mind makes the desperate, irrational connection between the room and the disease, the same way I connected, at first, the baby's issues to my own, thinking the radiologist had made a mistake and it was my body on the ultrasound screen and not the fetus. I have the same feeling of heaviness I had then, of the suffocating weight. My mouth is dry and I begin to sweat.

Marcie smiles, uncrosses her arms and puts a hand on my shoulder. She is speaking quietly, and I can tell the words are meant to be kind, but I hear nothing except the pulsing of blood in my ears. She lets me into Fonto's room. For a moment I stagger forward, lightheaded; it is completely dark in there, as it always is for Fonto. I switch on the light, see Fonto under the covers in her white daybed, her black hair sprayed over the pillow. Her acrylic eyes are open, quivering. They are a beautiful amber color, which Nana Hickey picked out to match Fonto's olive skin.

"Hi Quinnie," she says, recognizing me immediately.

"Hi Fonto. Are you feeling better?" I sit on the side of her bed against her legs and breathe deeply, trying to stop the spinning. The staff is supposed to take her eyes out at night and clean them with baby shampoo, but they forget. More than once they've put them in upside down which gives Fonto a froggish, questioning look.

Fonto shifts over. "Nana Hickey wears a Bam Bam up-do," she says. Her voice is slurring and raspy. I picture Nana Hickey with the fat bun on top of her head, held in place with chopsticks. I never knew where Fonto got the term, and yet it seemed to fit.

"Yes, she does."

"What color are carrots? Purple?"

The door is half open, and I can hear Marcie's clogs smacking toward the desk. I wonder if I could walk past without her noticing, slip out the side door. I imagine rolling the windows down and turning the radio on, hitting the speedbumps too fast, driving until the sky lightens and I'm too far away to return. "They're orange," I say.

"I'm not afraid anymore," she says. "But Toto makes me cry. Doesn't it, Quinnie."

I smell her musky body odor and the fruitiness of her shampoo. The dizziness is passing. "You don't care for Toto," I say.

"Lie down," she says.

The weight settles on me. Down the hall, Marcie is typing something into the computer, and I can hear kittens meowing on the screen. I lie back, keeping

my legs on the floor.

“What do I like Quinnie?”

“You like Paul Simon, and mustard.” I say.

“Yes, and what else.”

“Horses,” I say. “Swimming. Orange tea.” The bed is softer than my own, warm with Fonto’s small heat. I feel her body relax next to me; her leg twitches and stills. Her eyes close. I pause, waiting for her to ask for more, but she is asleep. I could leave and she wouldn’t know. I could go to work in the morning and cancel on Friday and wait for the day Fonto forgets who I am and there is nothing left to weigh me down. Without her, I will be so light. I will lift on the wind and float away.

I go on, listing all I can think of: flannel sheets, Wheel of Fortune, sweatshirts, hot chocolate, Stevie B, pineapple, Burger King French fries. This is how we speak. Fonto’s breaths are drawing in and out of her slack mouth. Still, I am not finished. Scrambled eggs, velvet chairs, coconut suntan lotion, bubble wrap. Babies, friends. Love. I will say the things that hold us here. For her, I will say them again, and again, and again.

CHEYENNE NIMES

## PULLING OFF 252.

*For people who want their straight lines to be straight, life itself is the problem. –  
Natalia Ilyin*

When light changes speed, it changes direction and when summer began edging toward another part of the world, when wind changes and starts coming from the south, lowering the muscle of summer, and the back of the leaves turn against the wind, when Elvis has “expired” the day before, something finally starts or something finally ends.

The numbers hurt as August ticks by. Landscape getting seared, and hours you lay in wait. But the universe is about to make a correction. Thinnest edges of a trip to still sustain you, a girl who was resolutely connected to water, the Origin, the Sea. Gathering things as if for a hunt on the way out the house for the Morris Minor, flight risk, deployed, squealing on the way out. *Vamoose, baby.*

Our car some silver on the wind, And at latitude 40.02508 and longitude 75.22706 the Minor moves on the Schuylkill expressway with three blood-related inhabitants: mother, brother, yourself. Executing a great escape. Sound hovers off the top of the road from cars driving east to the Atlantic, snatches of the King out dashboards, WFILfm– It’s Now Or Never...– Sometimes drivers, they cry into a Kleenex. Or you think maybe they do. Or that someone somewhere must be. The world was and is and people were and are. The brother does several crude drawings of holy men en route to nowhere. Flint tools. The mother you see moves out of her old skin and leaves it behind when past the Jersey state line. And more sun is predicted. You smell the sea. And as if fallen through an opening in space & time, suddenly there.

Everything salt litter: entire roadways, fences, up the sides of motels, windshields. All of humanity is here. Sweating & seething, teething & toning. Something speeds faster than the three of us: Ours was a giant shadow you could not see but knew was there, us washing in. Let the sun evaporate it. A wraparound light that envelops and you hope it’s enough, so shiny even more like

the water than the water itself. The light that fills the world. Daylight on the skin and only there to go, basted in salt spray. Coppertone, Sun-In, Tastee Freeze and two vanilla cones in one day! Thirst. Instant tan. The brother and you body surfing the waves all the way out, lifting up and down, hitting the sand hard the way back in. There's no past apart from right now. It's painful to be without form and then shaped for a moment but you're getting to like the highest rogue waves. The original blueprint. It floats by, bobbed up & down, hurled to the surface again & again. How rare for a message in a bottle to arrive safely somewhere. Something they have to find their way to. Words no one knows but the sky when it's miles out at sea. We will arrive where we should be. It rises back up again with a force but you can't pull it in. The sky handing back a base of salt, seeds of light, white awakening. In the bloodstream. Soaked and dried and burned out again. Salt on your lips, red cheeks, wharf rat hair. Becoming the sun yourself. The image merges with the original. At last.

Shells. Tiny pink conch. Too small to hear anything out of. You bend down, grab it up to your eyes. Whirls and smooth spirally circles which have no straight sides & no angles. Hot sun & burning shells, shells on fire. Flames enclosing the whole. Perfect cowlick swirl no one can take away. Shell: where everything makes sense inside of itself. This shell found you, so you can't be so bad. It's tiny, but it's there, and real, and in your hand now. It's the best one you've ever seen. It is a *find*.

Soon, too soon, no sun: you're trying to get a little shadow under a white sky, the sky: a giant white blood cell. Time to go. Reality returns. Intervention of reality. Something drifting from somewhere else now nearer than before. Truth of the way things are. How cold the sky is, this color too of your mouth opening up toward it, a black hole, a cave entered so thoroughly no one ever came back. And in what light there is almost everything is taken away but the white sky we have turned into.

Day you leave. Delay factor. At the last breath, the last second. Pack, unpack. Extra day or leave now. The day a cut line. Retrenched, prehensile... A sense something is running across its own path. First there's a fixed moment— a second or two you might stay awhile more... but worn down to a uniform gradient, you've abandoned the world to the devil. There's no place left to run. The world pulls down. The universe is pulling away from you. Even low tide lays down and waits for reality. Beginning to seep back, already late for what can't appear. You are stock characters caught in stock dramatic situations constantly chased away from one town to the next. With only the most basic of hard facts: She compresses a lifetime into a few sentences: *We have to go back. You know. A*

wire mother. People are lining up & never coming back. Herding them in an orderly procession.

You picture Elvis, demons. Think of your 6'4 father. Dark hair of a man swinging on stage to his demons, shouting him on from behind and sometimes all around. Only time had passed in the dream. In the car now, the brother coloring in the lines a vague airstrip to somewhere-. He knows where everything is for an instant but not what to do with it. Caterpillar trucks whoosh by rocking the car shell – *All you need is love* and the Beatles sing it & when you're supposed to believe them you don't. You can't. You did once, but that's over. The fullness of dusk hits you in your belly. Paths cross. 1,000 mph is the speed of the shadow of the moon moving during a solar eclipse, 150 miles across the width of that shadow's path & 150 the miles your house is from the water edge, too. The trail returns to where it began, T-minus one mile. The final approach.

Then something happens.

At the 252 Exit she didn't slow. That round beetle was going to slake past like a close pass-by of an asteroid, keep going to get away, no 252, and at the last possible second veered right onto that ramp then off the side of the road to a complete halt. As if a map stopped here & this is off it. Near the edge of the observable universe. A cellophane standstill. How the hands are splayed across the steering wheel, gripping them as if she's hit upon some truth in the turn-off. It stands off by itself blinking, the 252 sign, agitated electrons, & when seen from side to side or up & down it sifts straight into the atmosphere and tells the colors, an appearance held together by its opposite: blinking light: dark, light, dark, light. Trance. Declaring its independence beyond the highway signs, from the metal green mile markers to guide us there, "Home." How many things hold so little. I have the shell in my pocket, that's right, it burns. I have the shell in my pocket, that's right, it burns.

The whole world collides. Phlegm streams down her face like a bad 70's blue flick. How anyone can tell their entire story without saying a word. She screamed the street down. The birds howl out. The sky is falling in Philly. When you have enough, you've had enough. The layers & years that accumulate. Someone weeping in a corner, into the endlessness that's there, yet I can't tell who, what. But then she shook it off. Her mouth pinched to a sharp point. Wherever you happen to be, the world is organized outward from that. Mother, training ground. You look back toward Jersey, the road light, the part of the sky the ground holds up at the horizon, then see the dark, the road to the housing developments, horse shows, rotary club smugness, and it's as if the four directions take leave of each

other. Once that exact moment passes, the smidgen of hope, escape for good, you start going up Upper Gulph Road slowly, pulling gravity against its will.

The slo-mo skid into the driveway, your stomach contracts, may as well be a roller coaster at the beginning of first drop. Things we can't name but have come back for. Wheels sing by under you, the white picket post fence metastasizing the lie rolling by. Strange-weed, pollens of weeds, house sparrows, pyrex, crème cookies, night's edge of nowhere. Things that can tell you the whole story in a single glance. More dark is predicted. Overpowering the ambient light. And suddenly you are still, skin of your house a looming morass & porchlight blasts on but it's still what's called a sniper's moon were it Vietnam, on the news inside with the father passed out, obtunded, about to pass on. Your incisors all shining with radiance under a sniper's moon. The mother- sacrifice, martyrdom- sits, smoking, watching blue smoke rings slide up the air. The biggest difference is the predator kills its prey, while the parasite leaves its host alive. It's night, and the dark gets darker. Everything here is stalled. We sit at the precipice of the world in a kind of veering, a silence that could scream us off a ledge. Thing we have never spoken of. All you want is to say what is. Dark matter, thought to account for 85% of all the mass in the universe, seems to attract itself through some unknown force. Your shells burn & make their own light. You can change the direction of light, but maybe not here. Collapse light into earth under your house & make the foundation real.

You close your eyes and try to imagine what it looks like when time goes by a lot faster: Walking in, edging around the corners of ming vases, tripping across senile oriental rugs. Statue, marble, male & broken. At once tall & afraid. What had been supported will cave in. The fresh cut flowers sprouting fangs as they're walked in the house. The remains of four dismembered bodies in tomorrow's paper. You believe if you hold still here, in this driveway, a solar eclipse will come, because any given spot on earth plays host to one every 300 years. Or you could get out the car into the resuming darkness. No one moves. More time for pictures: your father getting skeletonized, underground. Maggots lifting his body off marrow with their jagged-toothed mouths. There's only one way to walk out into the night. The Dark Side. Sign Up Now. Even in not knowing, we know. He is not long for this world. It's the same theory as a black hole in space. No one can see it, but by watching the environment and reaction to things around it, you know it's there. *Blood is thicker than water. A man's home is his castle.* Or, *Vertical*, he'd say, as he balances into a room. I'm *vertical*. Your years of it all, first memories, switchblade dreams, wanting nothing more than to march out to this same driveway and smash a J&B scotch bottle, to make it all just disappear, tiny marks the size of a child's fingers and no one, not even the smallest child can

disturb them and their trajectory. When they tip that bottle back to their mouth, it's a choice, not a disease. Swishing it around in the mouth, a small sea forming there. You don't know what he thought he couldn't come back from. Saturated.

Someone makes a move to open a door. Then retracts the move. You sit & wish something would break. Would hit. A large body that twirls through the solar system every x number of years. And blast this all apart. Everything please burst. Sometimes leaving a soul behind on the earth is the best thing a body can do. The spirit is so unsafe in the body that it leaves. Dead. In three years. Flat-lined. And you keep repeating it just how it sounds: deaddeaddead. *Thank you and good night.* Laying in the bright fun baby blue plaid Vegas blazer, his fingers steepled, five burned out candles in the casket light, orange stained hands, lucky strikes. Shaken but not stirred.



SAMANTHA LÊ

## MAKING LOVE ON THE ROOF

I told him, they named me Ruby, the color of coagulated blood; but the unsmiling man didn't smile. His tongue tasted of sour artichoke soup; the smell of vinegar and anise.

His hands slipped off my hips. He couldn't find where I hold my grief. Under the ash-soft skyline of a French girl's childhood dream, he entered me like he would a room full of old shoes.

In poetry class he had read a poem about Ruth. He sang her name as if it were written with an infinite number of vowels. Ruth. Ruth. Ruth. There were slats of light, and there was Ruth.

What had happened to that passion? Jets painted white veins across the sky. The walnut trees whispered about draught. Mocked turtle stew with ground turmeric and periwinkle meat simmered

on the stove, but it was the shadow of a white owl on the rise that caught me like the disturbance of brocaded carp swimming below the pond's surface. Something new to replace this life.

DAVID KIRBY

## YOU FOUND THAT THING YOU LOST

The planner with all your dates in it, your ring, even something of no importance at all: your favorite pen, say, though you can buy a dozen at the corner drug store, or the list of things you want to do today, even though you remember writing nothing more than “call George” and “buy coffee.” You didn’t need to do that: you’ll know to buy coffee when you run out. And which George? You know three Georges. If you can’t remember which one to call, maybe you don’t need to call any of them. What do you need? If you were a doomsday prepper, it would make sense to have beer and wine. It would make more sense to have a book that told you how to make beer and wine, and, by the same token, if not guns, at least friends with guns. Penicillin, bleach, solar panels: you’d need all that, and an acoustical instrument so you could while away the hours. Paranoia, self-righteousness. . . . Oh, and a copy of *Ulysses*—you’ll be able to get through it this time. Comic books, board games, chewing tobacco, a fishing line and hooks, duct tape, aluminum foil, Vaseline: all that less one thing, the one you want to lose. There’s something you’ll regret bringing with you into your cave, that should have stayed outside on the treeless earth with its ceaseless winds and that light that never changes. What is it?

MALCOLM FRIEND

BECAUSE MOM DOESN'T SING

EVERY SONG BY THE TEMPTATIONS

*Must be something bad in his blood.  
Did you feel it—  
his hands tugging at my scalp  
when Derek put you on the phone?  
Did your neck rubberband—  
snap like mine when he called you  
Rion's boy?*

*I told you how I cut my hair  
the day after he grabbed it.  
How I imagined the flat-ironed strands  
that fell to the floor as dirt  
covering his coffin.*

*Did you dead-eye  
your Uncle Derek like I did  
your grandfather  
after he noticed that haircut?*

*I hope you did.  
He had no right  
putting you on the phone  
with that man.  
You ain't his kid, after all.  
The nerve of him.  
And on Thanksgiving, no less.*

*Like Derek doesn't remember  
the Thanksgiving he locked us out  
in the Chicago cold, wind  
a snake coiling around us,  
venom that broke the blood  
of his marriage.*

*Do you understand now  
how your grandfather  
has always been a rollin' stone?  
Something bad in his blood.  
Same thing makes you tap your foot  
to "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone"  
no matter how still  
I sit, like you can't tell I still  
taste his venom  
crowding my spit  
when the grit and gravel  
of Dennis Edward's voice  
falls into those horns.*

*Don't know I tried to suck  
that venom out you and your siblings.  
Bit into each of you  
the day you were born,  
hoped the poison  
would flow out your veins.*

*Tell me, Mal,  
Did it work?*

DOROTHY CHAN

CHINESE GIRL VIDEOTAPE LEAKED

I want to be sex on legs,  
your thinking man's porn star  
in a home video  
that'll never get leaked,  
because I refuse to turn  
into a rich blonde girl  
in a velour tracksuit and fuzzy top  
asking for five minutes  
to take a call from a rhinestone  
cell phone blinged out,  
and you're not getting me  
in a cheongsam or kimono  
or chopsticks in my hair  
or a silk dragonfly blanket  
wrapped around our naked bodies,  
bamboo door exposing our shadows,  
your Asian-fantasy-Manifest-Destiny-  
'70s-Roger-Moore-Bond-era-  
yellow-fever-piece-of-crap-  
ending in a hot, hotter, hottest  
tub scene, but not all East Asia's  
the same, and it's a no go  
if you can't get to a woman's heart,  
or know when she eats mooncake,  
and not puke at merely the mention  
of durian, or learn what provinces  
her parents came from,  
why they came to America,  
why her skin's so soft  
and her eyes so black,  
or why she's always craving  
a sampler of dim sum for breakfast  
and some Cantonese duck for dinner,  
because unlike you,  
not everything's handed to her on a platter.

DOROTHY CHAN

## REVENGE OF THE ASIAN WOMAN

If I played roller derby, my name would be Yellow Fever,  
    knocking out all those white boys from college  
        who used to whisper sweet nothings to me

in Mandarin, trying to seduce through the pure poetry  
    of simplified Chinese on hand-delivered letters,  
        and come on, this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century,

and I'm not here to make friends or be your 4<sup>th</sup> grade pen pal  
    just because you're lonely after watching tentacle porn  
        for the first time, and you don't understand real art:

how to sit during tea ceremonies or where to watch  
    the best Chinese opera, and how buying a kimono  
        at EPCOT doesn't qualify for a pass

to Tokyo Fashion Week, and you expect praise, idolatry,  
    applause from the entire Chinese population  
        for your summers in Shanghai selling real estate,

working for Daddy, and oh, white boy, how you think every form  
    of Asian food is a dumpling, because they're all  
        so "cute and small," just like your type of girl

with dark hair and red lips that you want to display as trophies,  
    as "Gotta Catch 'Em All" Japanese collectibles,  
        as vintage dolls from the mainland,

and they're all interchangeable, and all of this is too good for you,  
    so don't you dare tell me how to pronounce "nigiri"  
        when you can't even chug sake like a CEO

or tell me where to get the best Hong Kong buffet  
    when you can't stomach red bean and oyster sauce  
        and don't know the difference between teas

and I don't have time to help you pick out a soy sauce,  
    so just accept the fact that I look great in gold short shorts  
        and will never take you back to my homeland.

DOROTHY CHAN

IN SOHO, HONG KONG, A KOREAN

GOLD DIGGER BUYS EVERYTHING

My aunt is picking out blouses and I can't help but stare:  
the woman in fishnets and silver heels tries on cocktail outfits:  
floral teacup dresses, lace shirts, floor-length skirts  
golden, dramatic, matching the length of her glued-on lashes  
and cheekbones higher than the Victoria Peak.  
Her beau, an Australian Sugar, dandies himself,  
taking a top hat off the mannequin, adding in a cane,  
playing dress-up: he's now a flaming-haired flâneur  
from Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*—  
the all-black outfit, hand over chin, pondering,  
lying back while the woman's the bold one.

The gold digger keeps asking about prices,  
though she's not the one with the wallet. I look at necklaces,  
wondering how much money she plans on spending—  
*maybe after the next couple thousand, she'll flee this man*  
and pick up a new one who's hanging around an overpriced pub:  
greasy fingers, mid-life crisis, loser back home,  
ready to score big in Asia.  
My aunt whispers, "It's all happy shopping for now."  
I look at this woman, remembering all those Australian  
and British men in Singapore night clubs who wanted to wine and  
dine me, or that businessman from yesterday's happy hour  
who offered to buy me a red dress,  
fly me to an Ivy League ball in Tokyo.  
It's a weird life. But who really holds the power?  
Should I have gone off with that man,  
taken the dress, seduced him on the dance floor,  
make him buy me double shots of whiskey?  
No, but I'll take the weirdness and the power,  
and I think back to Manet, how the nude woman  
acts so unabashed, like she's laughing at the viewer,  
as my aunt is too busy buying tight sweaters plus a watch for me,  
as we're leaving and the Korean woman tries on  
a top hat headband as her dandy admires her head of hair,

both their hats in tow like we're in Paris at the turn of the century.  
Is this the couple of the ages? Who are we anyway?



KIMBERLY ANN SOUTHWICK

*homunculus*

in this wood-floored room empty of furniture,  
lying on the slightly deflated but mostly still firm  
air mattress, I touch myself,        staring at the pocked ceiling  
& you materialize before me as so many buzzing hummingbirds,  
bursts of frantic colored light fracturing  
into an even hungrier emptiness inside me  
that I sometimes fear will never be filled  
with the orbiting moons being a woman  
                promises.                  wax hard gibbous,  
a deep sigh. wane sharp and crescent, a high-  
pitched, piercing moan. if you see me in a selfie  
from the chest up, know my fingers are deep  
inside, trying to pull from nothing the loudest noise  
I can find because it won't escape my mouth,  
so quiet in its need for all these feathers.

KIMBERLY ANN SOUTHWICK

## ODE TO THE SILCOCK

ode to the petcock, ode to the stopcock, ode to your butterfly handle & utility. ode to the threaded valve, to the gross regulation of tap water, to the on-off switch in all your fine binary wonder. ode to not knowing the names of all the things you touch every day, every cock, canoe, clam, every orifice, every piece meant to plumb the depths of every tube & hole, every metaphor not lost on etymology & every metaphor lost. brass, frost-proof, diamond-series, anti-siphon, chemical- and/or vandal-resistant, push-fit. ode to the silcock, rusted cylinder of time, broken but replicable basin of space, ode to the fall, the galvanized nipple, the tree, the apple, the snake.

STEPHANIE MCCARLEY DUGGER

## DIVISION

Let's begin with the heart,

compact and chambered

as though there are rooms

dedicated to one thing,

then another. I want to be the course

of your body-bound veins, to burn

around you. I want to climb

the great gears of clouds up

and up, let the sun grind me back

down— powder and light.

I hardly know

how to change. You said

at least one of us should be sound.

Yesterday when I cut

the snake in two with the mower,

there was surprise, then

regret. *What do we do*

*with a cleaved body?* I asked.

Although you didn't know either,

you suggested birds.

STEPHANIE MCCARLEY DUGGER

## REDEMPTION

Tread the green water

in the rock quarry.      Hand over

the timeline for running out,

the measure for slowing things down.

Moving on is everything I expected.

Give me the handbook

for astonishment,      for waking

to the elk's trumpet.

I would have done everything the same.

What led us here was not wistfulness,

or the long last desires

for warmth in our tent.      It was stumbling

through the root system,      cutting our way

through overgrowth.

No, not that either.

It was all yielding—let loose

at the top of this beetle-bark marked

mountain.      The first gestures

of daylight approach,      and you're beside me.

The water, waiting.

MELANIE UNRUH

## TRIAGE

*The Female Body has many uses. It's been used a door-knocker, a bottle-opener, as a clock with a ticking belly, as something to hold up lampshades, as a nutcracker, just squeeze the brass legs together and out comes your nut. It bears torches, lifts victorious wreathes, grows copper wings and raises aloft a ring of neon stars; whole buildings rest on its marble heads.*

—Margaret Atwood, “The Female Body”

I am sure I don't need another exam, but when they finally have a room for me in triage and the nurse instructs me to put on a scratchy blue and white hospital gown, I obey because I can't bear to explain again why I am here. Logically, I understand there are legal issues and other patients take priority, but spending two hours alone in a waiting room and another hour alone in a drafty room in a flimsy gown, waiting to chipmunk four pills that will take 30 minutes to dissolve in my mouth, seems excessive.

There is no good reason to go to OB triage, the emergency room for pregnant women, where I have been numerous times as a non-pregnant woman. The last time, I was hemorrhaging, passing massive blood clots that, the day before Thanksgiving, resembled horrific servings of cranberry sauce. No one understood what was happening to me the first time I checked in, a week before that, with inexplicable bleeding. They sent me home, saying that sometimes “blood just pools in a woman's body”. But on this second occasion, the exam room was crowded with doctors and nurses, all trying to stop the blood escaping from my body. The woman who hooked up my IV whispered to me, “I answered the phone when you called. I'm so glad you came in.” That day I lost 1/5 of the blood I normally carry because three weeks after delivering my son, my uterus was still trying to expel some lingering piece of tissue.

Two years later I am back at triage, waiting. No blood or fanfare this time. The paperwork—a single sheet, really—sits in an envelope beside me. I keep it within arm's reach, in case the next person who pops into the room doesn't know why I'm here and I'm again struck dumb and unable to name the dead thing inside me.

“No fetal heart tones detected at today's visit,” it reads. In a way, I'm grateful for the typo because it gives me something concrete to fixate my anger on.

\*\*\*

### The blame game

Drank too much tea  
Went to Zumba  
Got too close to cat litter  
Used antiperspirant  
Moved crib to catch spider  
Was too sedentary at work  
Accidentally ate feta cheese (twice)  
Used non-organic face soap  
Got a flu shot  
Stressed over election results

\*\*\*

I am trying not to have a meltdown at the mall. It's almost Christmas, so I probably just blend in with all of the craziness: people wrangling unruly children; suave-looking Middle Eastern men at kiosks trying to catch your eye to get you to buy skin cream, hair straighteners, and cell phones; and a woman at J.C. Penney who obnoxiously drawls, "Cómo estás, ya'll?". I'm carrying my two-year-old son, searching for a bathroom where I can change his reeking diaper. My dad, who is visiting from back East, is pushing the empty stroller. He gestures to the sweater, toddler shoes, and purple scarf on the seat and says, "I feel like I'm pushing a phantom baby. Look," he says to my son. "Do you see the baby? Do you see it?"

He has no idea what's happened to me or why it's the worst possible thing he could say right now, today, nine days before Christmas, two weeks into the most miserable menstrual period of my life. But I'm just looking for the bathroom and hoping nothing clicks in my son's head and he remembers that, wait a minute, there *was* supposed to be a baby.

\*\*\*

The bills have started coming in—the ultrasound, the triage visit, the bloodwork, the pills. All told, it cost about \$550 to lose a pregnancy. I guess I should be thankful that I have insurance, at least.

\*\*\*

Anger is not an emotion I am comfortable with. When I was growing up, my family repressed rage until we were at a full boil. Then spatulas, stereos, and

remotes were hurled across the room; dolls and books were beheaded and torn; coffee tables were upended. I wish I could say that I rejected this model, that I can process my emotions in a healthier way. I've made progress, but in many ways, I am still a product of that environment.

What do I do with my anger over this loss? Who do I take it out on? Myself? My body? My genes? My husband? God? Society? The newly minted president? Do I just chalk it up to a fluke, bad timing, or statistical inevitability? Maybe I'll start running again, listening to '90s female angst rock, like Garbage and Kittie. Maybe I'll write impassioned letters to Congress, urging for better support of women, minorities, and the poor. Maybe I'll help my son build massive Lego towers so that we can tear them down together. Maybe I'll channel Tony Soprano and yell at my therapist. Or my other therapist. Maybe I will withhold all sympathy from my students when they email me, hysterical about their stolen cars, their deathbed grandmas, their pinkeye, their unavoidable weeklong trips without Internet access during midterms. Maybe I'll write an essay about the men who have called my female narrators "bitchy and bitter" or have referred to my writing about broken families and rape as "another banal walk through suburbia". Maybe I will go for a drive in the desert, roll the windows down, and scream.

\*\*\*

While I wait for the ultrasound tech to bring me the paperwork to take to triage, I ask the nurses at the front desk if they can please cancel my next pre-natal care appointment. They tell me I don't have to wait, that they already know my name. I still get the reminder phone call a week later.

\*\*\*

### Melanie writes notes to herself

My son is a miracle.

I feel old.

My husband is being so supportive.

Everyone who knew now knows. Thank God I never told my parents.

So many people have it worse.

Happy Thanksgiving: what I was most thankful for was already dead inside me.

It's quiet uptown.

\*\*\*

"Will we be able to hear the heartbeat today?" I ask the ultrasound tech, too excited to care that the stirrups are cutting off circulation to my feet.

"Not at seven weeks," she says, her eyes straining at the screen.

I glance at my husband, who is distracted by our son squirming in his lap. We thought I was nine weeks pregnant, but can you really trust a fertility app?

The tech is gone for a few minutes, conferring with the midwife, before I start putting the pieces together. Nothing appeared on the display other than a gray sac she kept referring to as the “fetal pole”. We asked her several times what that meant, and she danced around it to the point that I thought I was crazy, that there was some medical jargon I just didn't understand.

When the midwife finally appears, I know. Though my body delayed for two weeks, turning me into an unwitting grave for a thing that never was, my heart seizes upon the wound before she can name it.

\*\*\*

I have been a fierce pro-choice woman since my early twenties. Part of me thinks that my belief system should make this loss easier. It wasn't really a baby because life doesn't begin at conception, I tell myself. Rationally, I know this. But at the same time, though, the thing my womb held was the promise of a baby I desperately wanted.

I'm reminded of the time I went to a children's writing conference with my YA manuscript about abortion. Honestly, I felt a little ghoulish and reluctant to chat with the picture book writers. Despite this misplaced guilt, as someone who was writing about an important young adult issue, I had every right to be there.

Moments after the midwife broke the news, I said, "Well, at least we don't live in Texas." She and my husband stared at me blankly before I added, "Because then we'd have to have a funeral."

\*\*\*

### My Facebook feed is lousy with pregnancy

"Little girl is showing herself off!"

"I cant wait to see what our little girl is going to look like."

"I used a parking spot for expectant mothers today and only felt slightly guilty about it!"

"38.5 weeks!"

"Everything looked absolutely perfect at our scan today! No anomalies, baby is gorgeous and healthy and definitely a boy!"

"Making it Facebook official"

"The boys are so excited to announce we are having a girl!!!!"

"New year, new adventure!"

\*\*\*



I look up *fetal pole* and find the following: “The fetal pole is a thickening on the margin of the yolk sac of a fetus during pregnancy.” So the amorphous thing we half saw wasn’t a fetus, but a thickening. The only thing that’s thickened is me, though. By now I would have a defined baby bump instead of walking around with what just looks like a sad gut brought on by seasonal affective disorder. I spend the winter indoors eating late night carne asada fries, reading short stories about abuse, and snuggling with an obese, hairy cat that has forgotten how to clean herself.

\*\*\*

Sometimes, I tell myself that none of the big stuff matters: politics, religion, culture, entertainment, the environment, and the rest are pointless because we’re all just sacks of meat that will die one day. A curious thing happens when I reduce myself to a meaningless hunk of flesh, though. Without consideration for my passions or intellect, I simply become a vessel, a woman whose sole biological purpose is to bear children. I am now entering the existential death spiral, wherein I tell myself that I have failed at my primary natural task 50% of the time. I flail for a book, a law, a joke, a prayer, a conversation, anything that can serve as a lifeline to draw me back and show me that I am more than just a uterus with legs. But I come up empty.

\*\*\*

My son wants us to have another baby, but this desire only seems based on his vague understanding of milk returning to my breasts. He thinks he can reclaim one for himself. He grows. He’s starting to use the toilet instead of diapers and his hair is more like hair and less like duck fuzz. My beautiful boy speaks in full sentences now, saying things like, “I love you, Mama” and “I want to use the weed wacker”. This summer, I will sign him up for swim classes with the city. I will hold his little brown body with ease in the aquamarine pool, my own body unencumbered, weightless.



No. 28 from Anscoflex series by PAXTON MARONEY

DAN COLLINS

## WATER TOWER

When I was in middle school  
two other boys and I climbed  
the water tower after dark.  
We did it on a dare. We didn't  
have paint, but we had a beer,  
a pack of Marlboro and a near  
empty matchbox. So, we sat  
smoking cigarette after cigarette  
on the catwalk high above our  
little kingdom, in a moment  
of triumph, lying to ourselves  
about other ways we might fly.



No. 30 from Anscoflex series by PAXTON MARONEY

DAN COLLINS

## LEAVING WEST TEXAS

Water may bless  
this desert someday. Trees may spring  
from this dusty soil; birds  
may shelter in the branches—  
and they will sing sweetly, maybe,  
of terrible choices  
they have made. But right now,  
the only thing that matters  
is this stop light  
and this yellow line in the road.

LESLEY VALDES

At the corner store—

Strawberries alone in an ovoid glass and each  
the same squat size and shape and I thought of hearts  
suspended. In the syrup you could see the berries' pinprick pores.

He took me to fields of strawberries when I was nine. Rows of low-blooming ovals  
perched under green. He must have remembered it was my favorite  
that it blossomed my birthday month. I remember him in another row

calling out to slow down (how often he told me that) leave some for someone else.  
Scratch of earth, mess of knees, gobbling bounty under the sticky Florida sun. Mother scolding  
about the rash to show for the day. Calamine.

A day to ourselves and nothing of what was said father-to-daughter—  
to-father on the long drive home but he wasn't a talker, you felt the words.  
Only once in the car

*When you time's up, it's up*, he said. I must have asked about the war. I was newly married.  
We didn't know he was sick. How calm he was, everything deliberate, a soft adagio,  
except the cancer the quick year that time suspended.

MASON HAMBERLIN

## BEFORE THE CHANGES TO THE DSM-V, CIRCA 2000-2007

*for Diana C.*

1. Age six, soft-shelled, the boy doesn't sleep at night without socks. Toes exposed, every breeze, texture, touch: elastane needles. Like peeling the skin beneath fingernails or the chill of cold, surgical instruments. Otherwise, he doesn't care much. Contentment comes defined by shapes, hours alone with books or Legos.
  - A. Also notable. No:
    - i. Nylon
    - ii. Shorts
    - iii. Nylon shorts
    - iv. Short nails
    - v. Short hair
    - vi. Long stares
2. Marina Beach, CA. Family trip (2002):
  - A. The boy wears neither a swimsuit, nor shorts. The Gap-brand bottoms that parents bought line the boy's closet like mold, mostly asphyxiated by other suburban kid stuff—not that parents have checked. Parents just think they have a particular child.
    - i. *No, you can't take your Legos to the beach, Mother says. Why'd you bring them if I said so at home? And, M, where's your swimsuit?*
  - B. So the boy brings a book instead, tucks socks into sweatpants, undoes umbrella, avoids sun. The Pacific light powders the beach a brick-oven brown in the evenings, from dunes to water, a color not unlike that of passing elderly couples, their skin leathered and sagging. For the boy, this evokes an image of his chicken legs crisping.
    - i. *Why don't you come off the blanket?* Mother says.

*Come roll down the dunes with your sister and I—you can keep your socks on.*

*ii. I want to read,* the boy says.

*iii. M, please.*

- C. Mother standing over the boy with sister, S. The boy shrimps around his book and pretends it'll all go away. How can they not understand? He just can't and, well, what about the seaweed and reeds and jellyfish and flies? And what about the sun—feels like a thumbprint smothered, hot on an electric stove—why is it there? He pushes out the light with the book's spine.

*i. S, three years younger, bowl cut with tater-tot grubbing fingers, throws wet sand and teeters away.*

*ii. (The boy yells.)*

*iii. At distance, Father lofted on the dunes: S, no, stop that. C'mon, why can't these kids get along, dammit?*

3. The boy doesn't like S.

4. Days later, a sort of self-mutilation begins in healing, when Mother tucks him in and connects the freckles on his neck.

A. And says:

*i. If you ever hurt, pray and we'll make you better. You shouldn't ever have to hurt. Don't tell anyone, but you're my favorite.*

5. When they go to Safeway each week, S gets to ride in the shopping cart seat. But S doesn't want to be there and M does, but Mother says otherwise, and M has done enough second grade math to know this doesn't add up.

A. What also doesn't add up:

*i. How S wants to know what you're doing right now.*

*ii. How about now?*

*iii. Now?*

*iv. How often Mother uses the word "socialize" when M cries.*

*v. How Mother and Father always pick up S when she cries, which isn't often and never in public. When they*

do, they say it's because S has a good reason, and not having socks is not a good reason.

6. LOUD // BIRTHDAY PARTY (2003) // NOT HIS BIRTHDAY // SISTER AND CANDLES AND CAKE AND // BALLOONS // OCCASIONAL LANDMINES // *SILLY BOY // DON'T RUIN THIS FOR OTHERS* // ACCIDENTAL POP // CRYING // ENTER: FATHER // *LOOK, IT'S NOT THAT BAD* // CRYING // IDEA // EXIT SIBLINGS // EXIT ROOM WITH BOY // ENTER BALLOONS // POP // BOY SCREAMS // FATHER BARS M'S ARMS BACK // POP // SCREAMS // BOY REDUCED // MOTHER: *ARE YOU SURE THIS IS RIGHT?* // BOY TRYING TO BREATHE // FLOOR TASTES LIKE SWEAT // *SILLY BOY* // POP // POP // SWEAT AND TEARS // PUDDLES // SCREAMING // BOY'S BRUISED WRISTS // SHAPED LIKE A MAN'S HANDS // THOUGHT BUT NOT CONFIRMED (?) // POP // POP // THINGS GO // GRAY // HOW LONG? // LONG ENOUGH // AT NIGHT, THE BOY CAN'T SLEEP // CORRECTION: NOBODY SLEEPS // PRAYERS // CRYING //

7. S's fault. She shouldn't have been born.

a. *Just want to hurt her.*

8. The boy, still a boy, bounds around the suburban backyard, pretending he's a giant, fighting robot who saves the day and decapitates annoying sisters. Defend the neighborhood cul-de-sacs from enemies, potato bugs. In his head, nothing can stop him.

A. Not the neighbor boy, who once stole a swing right off the boy's backyard playset. The neighbor boy who, with holes in his socks, painted their three-bedroom-two-bath with eggs when M couldn't look him in the eye.

B. Not the hushed stories Mother tells. The ones about the apartments behind the house, where a man robbed a single mother of two with a screwdriver. Mother says: *Nothing good can happen in a place surrounded by all those trees.*

9. Unexpected news (2005):

A. Kids, we're moving to France.

i. *Your father got offered a job, Mother says. We've been*

*talking. It'll be different. But good different. It'll be a good experience for us all.*

*ii. Do they have Legos in France?* the boy asks.

B. Mother calculates it: Morgan Hill, CA to Paris—Charles de Gaulle Airport is a thirteen-hour (or \$1,775) flight per person. But Father's new HR job will cover it all. The house, car, school. But the boy? Worries from Mother and Father. They research online to kill time between packing boxes.

C. An APA-approved website demands the following criteria:

*i.* "A total of six (or more) items from (1), (2), and (3), with at least two from (1), and one each from (2) and (3):

1. Qualitative impairment in social interaction...
2. Qualitative impairments in communication...
3. Restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests and activities...

*ii.* Delays or abnormal functioning in at least one of the following areas, with onset prior to age 3 years:

1. Social Interaction
2. Language as used in social communication
3. Symbolic or imaginative play

*iii.* The disturbance is not better accounted for by Rett's Disorder or Childhood Disintegrative Disorder."<sup>1</sup>

D. Other online literature says:

*i.* "The elder of two sons, Hans Asperger had difficulty finding friends and was considered a lonely, remote child...He was interested in the Austrian poet Franz Grillparzer, whose poetry he would frequently quote to his uninterested classmates. He also liked to quote himself and often referred to himself from a third-person



perspective.”<sup>2</sup>

10. *Bienvenue à la Plague* spray-painted on the road sign outside. *Vaucresson* crossed out. New house. New country. All vines and gates and hundred-year-old buildings. From now on, the family buys more antique furniture than humanly necessary. Ungodly amounts.
11. LDS Jesus looks down on the French congregation—brown hair, blue eyes, and canvas smile—hung from the manicured brick wall. Meanwhile, the Mormons sing, and somewhere near the front, a bishop palms the boy’s back and imparts the how-to routine of passing the sacrament.
  - A. The boy (age ten): bent in half and sat in a folding chair. (Quiet? Crying?)
  - B. Adjacent: a twelve-year-old sucks a pacifier. Another sneaks paper slivers of naked women, and whisper about the American basketball, LeBron James.
    - i. *Après l’hymne et la prière*, the bishop says, *tu vas passer le pain et l’eau à ces allées, là-bas.*
    - ii. (He points.)
    - iii. Continues: *M, ta mère me dit que tu fais mal parfois? Eh bien, c’est ici que tu peux guérir. Tout est dans le Premiers Corinthiens 11:24. Lorsque tu touches les cœurs des autres, le toucher du Christ va t’aider.*

## 12. Supper:

- A. In theory, the boy says he sets the table for four. In practice, though, it’s always a puzzle—S set as far from him as possible.
- B. Come time, the soft creaks of feet down stairs notifies the boy that hungry bodies follow. He listens. The carpet—fastened down by brass rods at the root of each step—muffles each step. The old wood beneath, however, expresses pressure, like soft groans stretched between three thin floors.
- C. The family doesn’t sit how the boy imagines (paper nametags ignored), and S, most certainly instigating, sits next to the boy.
  - i. *She’s too close to me*, he says.
  - ii. *She’s your sister*, Father says.
  - iii. The boy swings his hands—in defense—at a smiling S.
  - iv. SMILE INVERTS // WET // AND RED // AND

CRYING // OLDER BOY'S HANDS HITTING  
SMALLER KID RIBS // BABY FAT // DAMMIT, M //  
WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU? // FATHER  
SWINGING HIS OWN HANDS // PINS BOY // ONE  
CHILD VULNERABLE // THE OTHER: TICKING  
LIKE CLOCKWORK //

13. The boy writes a note:

- A. "I am so sad. S makes me so sad and I am sad because I hurt people. I hate hurting people. I wish I could die."
- B. It has drawings of cartoon characters on it.

14. Parents talk.

15. Parents pray.

16. At the office entrance, there's a Turkish toilet—a porcelain hole in the ground. Something he'll never use. Just like the pay-per-use pissiors filled with cigarette butts. The ones next to the Algerian street vendors with beautiful names like Réda and Pafardnam, who whisper to prayer beads and sell knock-off jerseys and watches so they can feed their families overseas.

- A. *Be good and don't talk to strangers*, Mother says before hugging the boy goodbye. More for her comfort than his.
  - i. *Am I broken?* the boy asks.
  - ii. *Of course not, M. But I think that's something only you can decide.*
- B. Upstairs: warm air, soft space, and toys. A particular ten year old's dream.
  - i. *How are you doing?* the therapist asks. *Fidget-y, I see?*
  - ii. *Yeah.* (Eyes aimed at the bookshelf.)
  - iii. *How so? Would you like some coffee or tea while you tell me?*
  - iv. She puts down her pen and paper and reaches for a pair of cups and the boy knits his knuckles and stiffens. Posture noted, she stops.
  - v. *I can't,* says the boy. *My family doesn't drink those.*
  - vi. *Oh, I'm sorry! I forgot—your mother told me. You*

*know, I've never known any Mormons to live this far away from the US. That must be a good community for you?*

*vii. I'm still trying to figure out how it will make me happy.*

17. Flipping through his mother's albums, the boy sees a stained photograph of him and S. In it, he's three years old and dressed as Batman, while she, no more than a few months, plays a bald-headed Robin. They're slumped together, pressed like an infant's fist. Both quiet. Both peaceful. If not for long, then at least that moment. The boy feels like he might hold the last of his baby teeth—something he lost and can never grow back. In the photo, a passed-out Batman puts his arm around Robin while she sleeps as if to say:

*A. This. I'm proud of this, my sidekick.*

18. Father will still anoint the boy's head and pray for blessings of health. The laying on of hands, it is called. The whole congregation joins in each Sunday, the boy, the bishop, and Father elevated on a podium. The congregation, in its itchy pews, watches, prays. Older French women in floral prairie dresses tell the boy he has already shown signs of healing and the boy understands none of this, nothing of why these members of the congregation know his name, nothing of why they talk to him just now. Mother cringes, tells the boy to be polite. They are doing their best to care.

*A. An older woman to the boy:*

- i. Vas-y! she says. Joue au basket avec les autres garçons. Tout ce que tu as besoin sont les Ecritures et des sports.*
- ii. Merci, the boy says.*
- iii. (He never looks up from his dress shoes laces. They're untied.)*

19. When the boy feels ready, he and the therapist take trips out of the office.

*A. All around them, the 7<sup>e</sup> arrondissement de Paris alternates between postcard-worthy storefronts and back alley residencies. Some centuries old, with muted hues, some prewar chichi (think flower-haired cherubs carved above every second window). Others—presumably where tourists won't venture—resemble*

concrete cubes with three-foot wide alleyways where they almost meet.

*i. Let me show you a place, the therapist says.*

B. Plastic and glass paneling slapped onto the Haussmann architecture: The Real McCoy Cafe. The boy and the therapist sit at a table for two, where she points out shelves stocked with American delicacies: Dr Pepper, Pop Tarts, pork rinds, Oreos, and jerky. Then the menu, which reads: AMERICAN BREAKFAST—YOUR CHOICE OF COOKIE CRISP, FROOT LOOPS, OR KELLOGG'S FROSTIES.

*i. Comfort food, she says. They tell you to grow up and then they make places like this.*

*ii. I haven't had a Dr Pepper since we moved, the boy says.*

*iii. It'll be my treat.*

*iv. (The boy cracks a smile.)*

C. Now comfortable, they begin. An exercise:

*i. Close your eyes. Inhale for three seconds. Exhale for four. Repeat.*

*ii. What do you hear?*

*iii. Smell?*

*iv. Taste?*

*v. Touch. What do you feel in contact with your body?*

*vi. Slowly, let me let know, she says. Whenever you're ready.*

D. The boy tries.

*i. Breathe.*

*ii. He hears the hum of bodies and vehicles in the street. Coffee shop klatch. An espresso machine hiss and the steroid-powered purr of a blender. Someone inflates a balloon: a noise like leaning off an edge.*

*1. Good, the therapist says. Now try a little harder.*

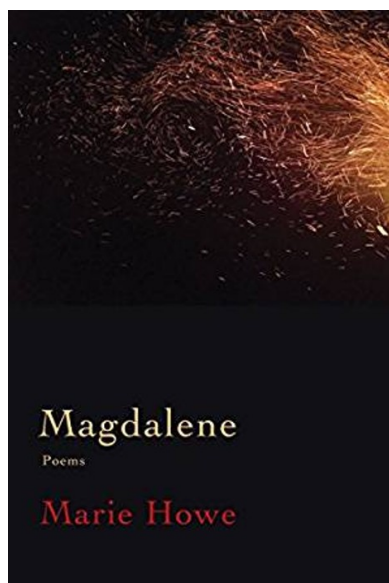
*iii. He notices his own smell: a mother's choice of detergent, clean clothes.*

*iv. He thinks about what he tastes. The acidic sips of Dr*

Pepper that nip and burn even after he swallows. He can't recall what his mouth tastes without it, though. He can't recall a time when he didn't have a taste. Or went hungry. He thinks of the people who provided that security for him.

*1. Now, what do you feel, M?*

- v. The boy feels the table's vinyl skin beneath his palms, like thumbprints, like being hand-to-hand with a hardness, like he'd pour out feathers if cut open, more pillow than flesh and bones and boy. Even this attempt to describe it: a misnomer. He feels the shrill itch in his fingernails. He tells it that he's tired of hurting because he feels too much. He tells it to quiet. He tells it to quiet, and for a few seconds, it listens.



*Magdalene* by Marie Howe

W.W. Norton & Company; 96 pp

Reviewed by Joshua Jones

It's no understatement to say poetry has been possessed by documentary lately—and with good reason. Books like Tyehimba Jess's *Olio*, Jill McDonough's *Reaper*, and many others do the heavy lifting of research to represent the underrepresented and to expose abusive power. Although this way of writing poems has taken center stage, it's necessary to acknowledge other books with similar ethical motivations founded on different methods. *Magdalene*, Marie Howe's fourth book of poems, serves as a good example of such a book that begins from a near absence of source material. It imagines the inner life of a modern day Mary Magdalene, one few will recognize from her scanty biblical portrait. Howe's account of the woman "from whom seven devils had been cast out" revises what we've heard about her and presents a wise, if somewhat erratic, teacher of the perennial lessons of empathy, attention, and love.

Howe's *Magdalene*, unlike her scriptural counterpart, has room to express her vast interiority; in simple but elegant terms she speculates on her own psychology, describes her mystical visions, and ponders the nature of language. The poems follow a chronological arrangement without any hard section breaks.

However, at irregular intervals Howe inserts seven short lyrics in the lower right hand corner of the page in italics. These poems, which one supposes coincide with Mary's seven devils, both establish the pace of the book and reinforce its continuity. Most of the poems in the collection restrict themselves to one or two pages, making the book a quick read and lending a clarity to its narrator's voice.

The story begins before the biblical account, "before I knew I was an I" as Magdalene says, speculating about the sexual violence that might have brought her to the place she appears in the Gospels. What immediately follows stands out as perhaps the best poem of the book, "Magdalene—The Seven Devils," in which she describes her demonic oppressors as a bevy of peculiar and familiar anxieties ranging from "that I was very busy" to "if I touched my right arm I had to touch my left arm, and if I / touched the left arm a little harder than I'd first touched the right then I had / to retouch the left and then touch the right again so it would be even." The poem lists far more than seven devils, one of which is "I could never get to the end of the list," keeping a comical air in the poem that sustains us until we reach the devastating final devil, the recurrent memories of her mother's death.

The first third of *Magdalene* continues this note of trauma, following Mary into her cycle of drug use and sexual exploitation. In these desperate conditions, she discovers her own mystical capacities to enter the minds of others and to reveal the world in greater clarity. In "On Men, Their Bodies," she describes the penis of every man she's slept with, navigating emotions from humor to outrage with precision. But her impressive powers of empathy and perception provide little comfort; she bottoms out: "I thought it was the worst, thought nothing worse would come. / Then nothing did, and no one."

Forty pages in, Howe picks up to the biblical narrative, introducing a Christlike teacher who pulls Mary back from the brink of death. In her bewildering state of freedom she "walked where [she] wanted, free of the pretense of family now, / belonging to no one," but follows him unable to resist the way "whatever room we might be standing in, / assumed an astonishing clarity." Then, as quickly as he entered her life, he dies, leaving her empowered but listless.

The book ends in a delightful, if abrupt, revision of Magdalen's story; she adopts a daughter who becomes Mary's new teacher. These last poems proved some of the most enjoyable and show Mary "pulled... from prayer and desire / from even the memory / the smell and sound of him moaning against me." In her encounter with "the girl" she finally sees herself in another person. They learn from each other and even joke about changing roles in their next lives: "Next time, you be the mother, I said. / No way, Jose, she said, as we turned the last windy corner." In moments like these, in her earnest and simple exchanges, Magdalene will be alright, despite her past and the lingering grief over her teacher, she assures us of the value found in the persistent mystery of the world.

As a collection of good poems, this book shines. I can't find a page in *Magdalene* that doesn't touch me or have some element of plainspoken marvelousness in it. "Magdalene: The Woman Taken in Adultery" and "Magdalene Afterwards" shock me with their brief power each time I read them. However, the more I read it, the book's construction as a story disappoints me. Some of this results from the decision to incorporate autobiographical poems that stray from the *Magdalene* narrative. The many men from the early poems seem to stand in for all men and then, in the book's final movement, one man in particular, obscuring the narrative details in a sea of masculine singular pronouns that resist easy parsing. In "The Teacher" Mary says "Was he my husband, my lover, my teacher? / One book will say one thing. Another book another," and, while I appreciate the attempt to unsettle our traditional assumptions about the relationship between Mary and Christ, this confusion muddled the otherwise clear narrative. But I may be quibbling, because the very reason I dislike the book's construction makes poems like "Magdalene—The Seven Devils" so pleasurable. In that poem, the very lack of specificity and focus becomes the object of critique and makes the poem so relatable. Perhaps I struggle with the book in a way it invites. A life—a real life absent the aggrandizing narratives of traditions like the scripture this *Magdalene* departs from—does not always tell its story by the rules we expect of literature. This is after all what makes so many of the individual poems charming. But *Magdalene* is more than a charming, if slightly flawed, book of poems. It nurtures empathy while making the familiar fresh which could atone for a multitude of sins—sins this *Magdalene* has few of.

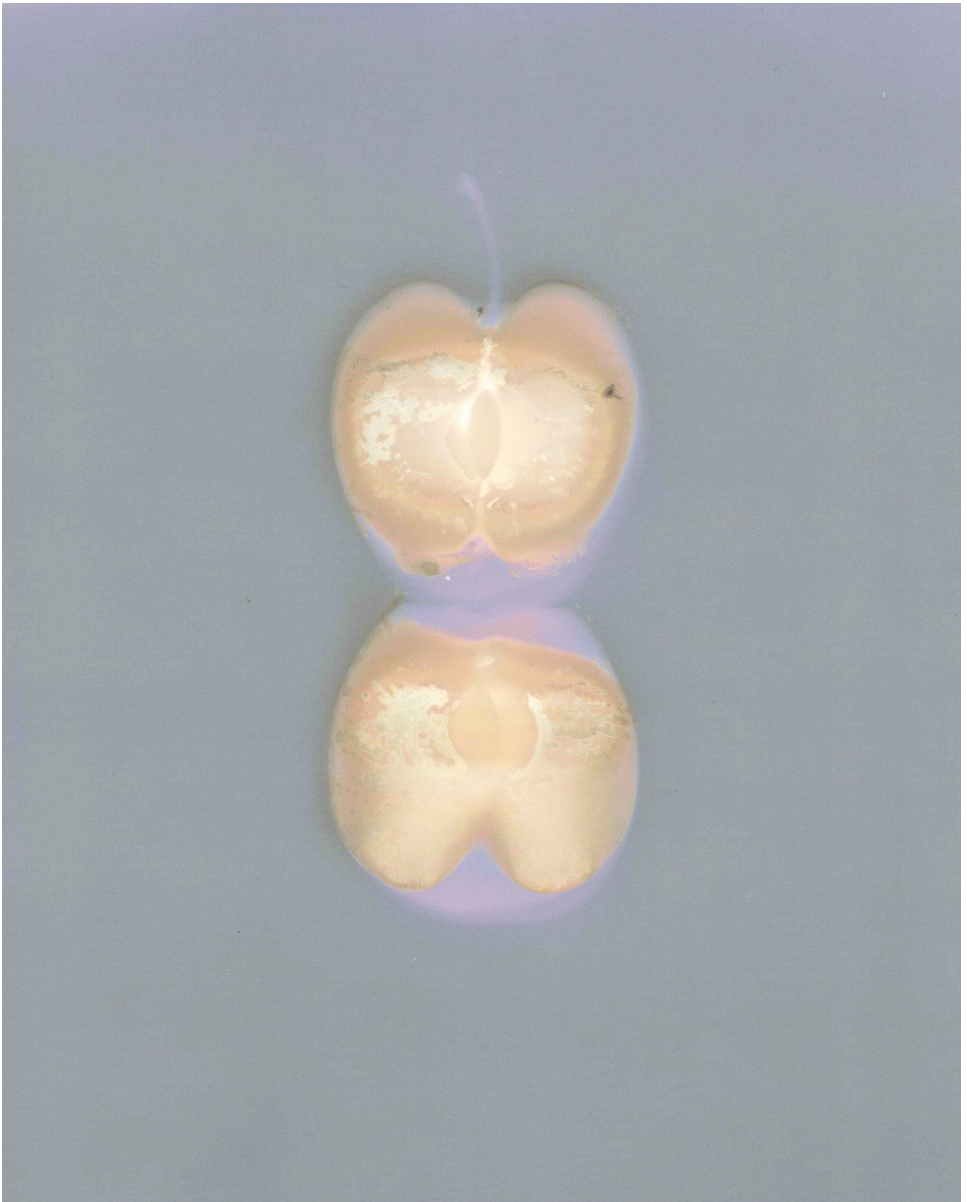


ARTIST FEATURE

TAYLOR TORRES

**ARTIST STATEMENT:** My work within this submission consists of four abstract pieces making up my body of work titled Decompose. The four pieces are 8x10 lumen prints. I created these by laying out fruit on photographic paper, exposing them to the sun for multiple hours, and fixing the prints. The abstract images seen on the scans are a product of the reaction of fruit acid and the silver gelatin of the paper.

My work is a reflection on the food industry and cultural views on food represented by American society. The American food industry has devalued the importance of safe, natural ingredients by continuing to produce toxic foods to keep products cheap, quick, and to prolong shelf-life. The images represent how we, as Americans, have accepted these low food standards and continue to consume products that are not only harmful to us, but also the environment. Decompose seeks to propose topics concerning GMOs, artificial flavors and preservatives, and our blind-eye towards the devastating standards we continue to support in the food industry.



Title: DECOMPOSITION #1

Lumen Print Scans

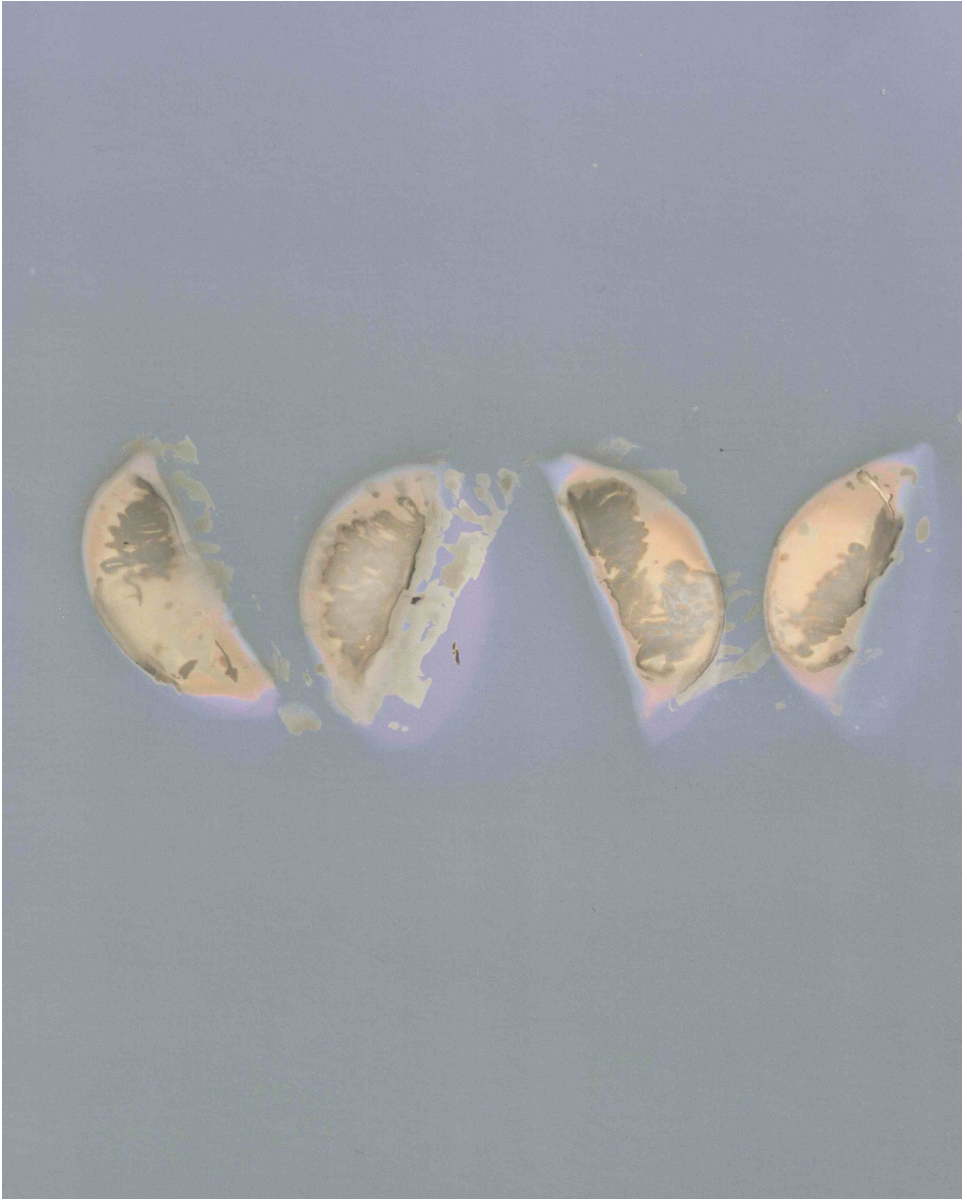
THE BOILER | SUMMER 2017



Title: DECOMPOSITION #2

Lumen Print Scans

THE BOILER | SUMMER 2017

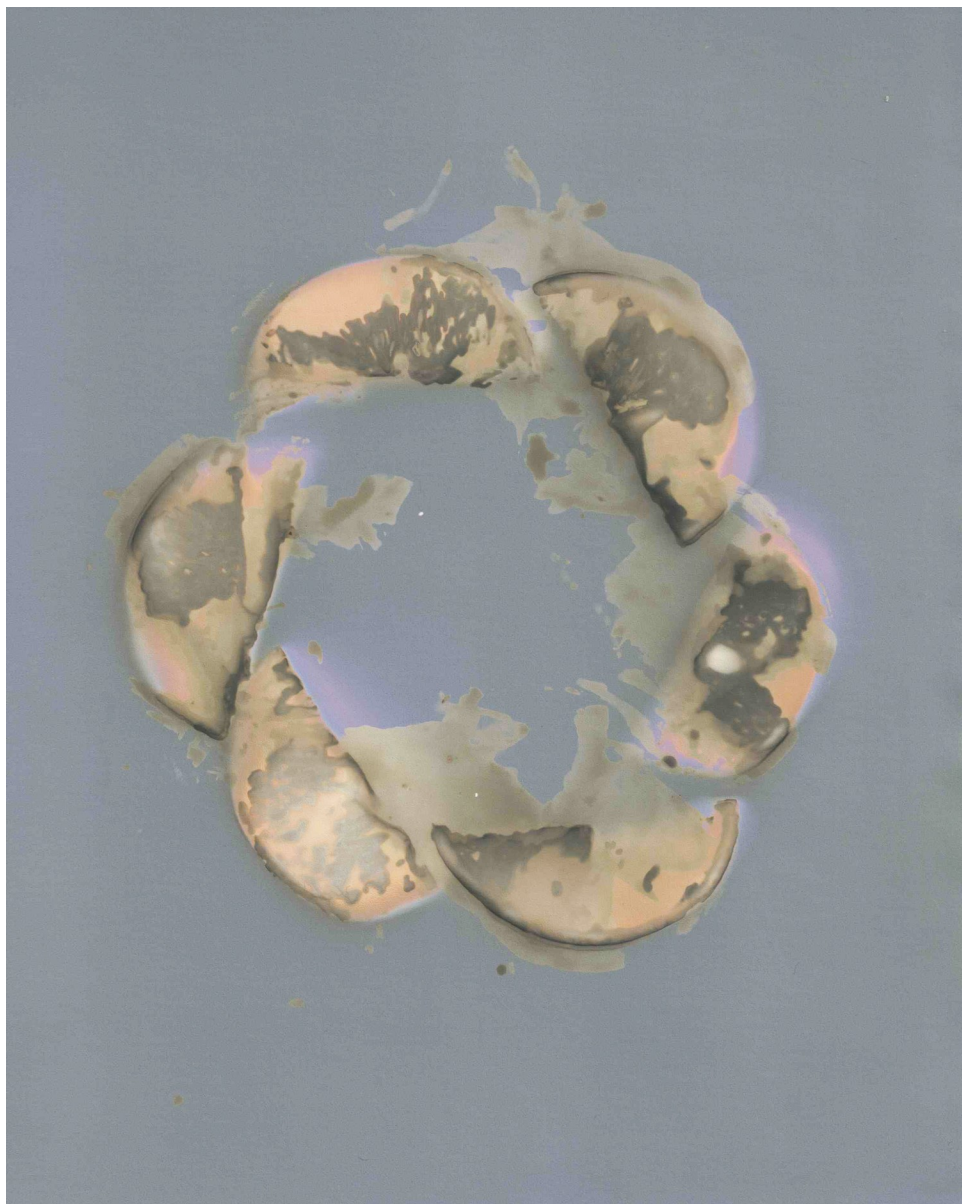


Title: DECOMPOSITION #3

Lumen Print Scans, 2017

THE BOILER | SUMMER 2017





Title: DECOMPOSITION #4

Lumen Print Scans

THE BOILER | SUMMER 2017

ARTIST FEATURE

JOHN FORSE

**ARTIST STATEMENT:** My entire life has been spent on the Gulf Coast and this is visible in my artwork. The images I am submitting are gouache paintings of the views found on Bray's Bayou in southeast Houston. This region maintains an uncomfortable balance between industry, commerce, history, and natural beauty. My neighborhood is now experiencing pre-gentrification growing pains and by making these paintings, I hope to engage in sometimes timeless and larger than myself or the now.





Title: BRAY'S BAYOU

Gouache on board, 2016

THE BOILER | SUMMER 2017



Title: CLOSE TO A TREE  
Gouache on board, 2016



Title: MILFORD HOUSE AND BELL PARK

Gouache on board, 2016



Title: GARBAGE CANS  
Gouache on board, 2016





Title: FOREST PARK CEMETERY

Gouache on board, 2016

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Alfredo Aguilar** is the son of Mexican immigrants. His work has appeared or is currently forthcoming in *Winter Tangerine*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Drunken Boat*, & elsewhere. He lives in North County San Diego.

**N.T. Arévalo**'s stories have most recently appeared in *Shenandoah*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Regarding Arts & Letters*, & *Hawai'i Pacific Review* and received Honorable Mention in the 2014 Bevel Summers Prize Contest. She's been a contributor to Literary Arts, an advocate for human rights and expression, and grateful scholarship participant at the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley and Napa Valley Writers Conference.

**Dorothy Chan** is the author of *Chinatown Sonnets*, which was selected by Douglas Kearney as the winner of *New Delta Review*'s 6th Annual Chapbook Contest. She was a 2014 finalist for the Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Fellowship and a 2017 finalist for the Lena-Miles Wever Todd Prize for Poetry from Pleiades Press. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Blackbird*, *Plume*, *The Journal*, *Spillway*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *The McNeese Review*, and *Salt Hill Journal*. She is the Assistant Editor of *The Southeast Review*. Visit her website at [dorothypoetry.com](http://dorothypoetry.com)

**Dan Collins** is an artist and poet active in the creative community of Dallas. He co-owns and operates Tree House Studio with his wife Rebecca Lansdowne Collins. He was 2015 Winner of both the Writer's Garret People's Choice Award and Juried Haiku Contest. His poetry has been published in the *Blue Mesa Review* (2nd place annual writing contest, issue #32), *Naugatuck River Review* (Semi-finalist 4th Annual Narrative Poetry Contest), The online journals *Entropy* and *[Out of Nothing]*. He is a 'brain trust' member of Pandora's Box Poetry Showcase, a monthly Dallas invitational reading series.

**Anne Champion** is the author of *Reluctant Mistress* (Gold Wake Press, 2013), *The Good Girl is Always a Ghost* (Black Lawrence Press, 2018) and *The Dark Length Home* (Noctuary Press, 2017). Her work appears in *Verse Daily*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Epiphany Magazine*, *Salamander*, *New South*, *Redivider*, *PANK Magazine*, and elsewhere. She was a 2009 Academy of American Poets Prize recipient, a 2016 Best of the Net winner, and a Barbara Deming Memorial Grant recipient. She currently teaches writing and literature in Boston, MA. <http://anne-champion.com>

**Kate DeBolt** holds an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College, and is an Assistant Poetry Editor for *The Four Way Review*. She has work forthcoming in *The High Window*; she has been previously published in *Atlas + Alice*, *Noble / Gas Qtrly*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Dialogist*, *Bluestem*, and *Plain Spoke*, among others.

**Stephanie McCarley Dugger's** first collection of poetry, *Either Way You're Done*, is forthcoming from Sundress Publications. Her chapbook, *Sterling* (Paper Nautilus, 2015), was winner of the 2014 Vella Chapbook contest. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Arts & Letters*, *Cider Press Review*, *Gulf Stream*, *Meridian*, *The Southeast Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Taos Journal of International Poetry and Art*, and other journals. She is an assistant professor at Austin Peay State University, where she teaches writing and literature, and is Assistant Poetry Editor for *Zone 3 Press*.

**John Forse** is a Houston-based artist and watercolor instructor at the University of Houston. His images are gouache paintings of the views found on Bray's Bayou in southeast Houston. From the artist: "This region maintains an uncomfortable balance between industry, commerce, history, and natural beauty. My neighborhood is now experiencing pre-gentrification growing pains and by making these paintings, I hope to engage in sometimes timeless and larger than myself or the now." His illustrations have been featured in *Free Press Houston*, *Glasstire*, and Suplex educational materials.

**Malcolm Friend** is a poet originally from the Rainier Beach neighborhood of Seattle, Washington. He received his BA from Vanderbilt University and his MFA from the University of Pittsburgh. He has received awards and fellowships from organizations including CantoMundo, VONA/Voices of Our Nations, Backbone Press, and the University of Memphis. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in publications including *La Respuesta magazine*, *Vinyl*, *Word Riot*, *The Acentos Review*, and *Pretty Owl Poetry*.

**Joshua Jones** is pursuing a Ph.D. in creative writing at The University of North Texas. He received an MFA in creative writing at The University of Massachusetts Boston. His most recent poems are in *Far Off Places* and *Jelly Bucket*. He's written reviews for the *American Literary Review*, *Breakwater Review*, and *The Live Oak Review*. He and his wife wrangle dachshunds in Hackberry, TX.

**David Kirby's** collection *The House on Boulevard Street: New and Selected Poems* was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2007. Kirby is the author of *Little Richard: The Birth of Rock 'n' Roll*, which the Times Literary Supplement of London called "a hymn of praise to the emancipatory power of nonsense." Kirby's honors include fellowships from the National Endowment of the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. His latest poetry collection is *Get Up, Please*.

**Mason Hamberlin** is an educator, editor, and essayist from Chapel Hill, NC. Most recently, he teaches young writers through Writopia D.C., and hopes to spark discussions about toxic masculinity and stigmas surrounding ASD. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Duende*, *voicemailpoems.org*, and *Thrice Fiction*. He tries to be cute [@definitely\\_not\\_mason](#).

**Luther Hughes** is a Seattle native and author of *Touched* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2018). He is the Founder/Editor-in-Chief of the *Shade Journal* and Associate Poetry Editor for *The Offing*. A *Windy City Times Chicago*: 30 Under 30 Honoree, his work has been published or is forthcoming in *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Vinyl*, *BOAAT*, *Tinderbox*, and others. Luther is currently an MFA candidate in the Writing Program at Washington University in St. Louis. You can follow him on Twitter [@lutherxhughes](https://twitter.com/lutherxhughes). He thinks you are beautiful.

Born in Sadec, Vietnam in the aftermath of war, **Samantha Lê** immigrated to San Francisco when she was nine. She now lives amongst the foothills and vineyards of California's central coast where she paints, hikes and reinvents old, family recipes. A recipient of the James D. Phelan Literary Award and the Donor Circle for the Arts Grant, Lê holds an MFA in Creative Writing from San José State University. Her publications include *Corridors* and *Little Sister Left Behind*. Her poetry has appeared in *Able Muse Review*, *Pampelmousse*, *Reed Magazine*, *Two Thirds North* and other fine literary journals.

**Paxton Maroney** is a Dallas-based conceptual artist predominantly using the medium of photography. You can see her artwork in Bishop Arts District at [Jen Mauldin Gallery](http://JenMauldinGallery.com). Featured works are listed on her website [www.paxtonmaroney.com](http://www.paxtonmaroney.com). The series titled Anscoflex was created in Archer City, TX and was shot digitally through the viewfinder of her Anscoflex camera. One may question why she didn't just use film? Whether it is a single image, her digitally composited work or her mixed media, Paxton is always intentional with her process. As you take a peek through the glass, a sense of presence is allowed.

**Kate Arden McMullen** received her MFA in fiction from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Her work has appeared in *Lady Parts Zine*, *Paper Darts*, is forthcoming from *Foglifter*, and was featured as an honorable mention in the Randall Library Annual Flash Fiction Anthology in 2016 and 2017. Her short story chapbook *The Girls of Indigo Flats and Other Stories* was the 2015 recipient of the Colbert Chapbook Award. She lives in Spartanburg, SC and is the assistant director of Hub City Press.

Living by the Great Salt Lake, **Cheyenne Nimes** is a cross-genre writer currently working on poetry/nonfiction hybrids. Work is forthcoming in *The Shell Game*, an anthology on forms (University of Nebraska). *South Loop Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *DIAGRAM*, *Kenyon Review*, *Jellyfish Review*, etc. are recent homes, and work is forthcoming in *Threadcount* and *Entropy*.

**Sara Lupita Olivares** is the author of the chapbook *Field Things* (dancing girl press). Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Denver Quarterly*, *The Pinch*, *Apogee*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. Currently, she lives in Michigan where she is



a Ph.D. student at Western Michigan University, and a poetry editor for Third Coast Magazine.

**Megan Denton Ray**, a Tennessee native, is currently a poet in the MFA program at Purdue University. She is the recipient of the 2016 National Society of Arts and Literature Chapter Career Award. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Sun*, *Salt Hill Journal*, *Cimarron Review*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *Otis Nebula*, and elsewhere. She is an old-soul, grandmotherly-type young person who is trying to figure out how to be a real adult without losing her sense of childlike jubilation. She's fascinated with taxidermy, exotic plants, and anatomical oddities. She has an identical twin sister, a tiny birthmark that looks like a clover, and lots of Earl Grey tea.

**Rebecca Reynolds** graduated from the MFA program at Emerson College. She lives on the south shore of Boston with her husband, three boys, and assorted pets. Her short fiction has appeared in various literary magazines and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. By day, she works in a group home for adults with disabilities.

**Sarah Sgro** lives in Oxford, Mississippi. Currently, she serves as Poetry Editor for the *Yalobusha Review*, co-hosts the Broken English Reading Series, and reads poetry submissions for *Muzzle*. She is from New York and previously worked as an editorial assistant for *Guernica*. Her poetry appears or is forthcoming in *The Offing*, *DREGINALD*, *Cloud Rodeo*, *Tagvverk*, *Muzzle*, *TYPO*, *glitterMOB*, *Deluge* and other journals. Her chapbook *Without Them I Am Still A Mother* is forthcoming in Summer 2017 from Letter [r] press.

**Kimberly Ann Southwick** is the founder and editor in chief of the literary arts journal *GIGANTIC SEQUINS*. She has two poetry chapbooks, her most recent being *EFS & VEES*, which came out with Hyacinth Girl Press. She lives in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana and is pursuing her PhD in English with a concentration in Creative Writing at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. A poem of hers was a finalist for the 2016 *Yemassee* Poetry Prize. Follow her on twitter [@kimannjosouth](https://twitter.com/kimannjosouth) and visit her at [kimberlyannsouthwick.com](http://kimberlyannsouthwick.com) for more.

**Z.G. Tomaszewski** was born in 1989 in Grand Rapids, Michigan where he works maintenance at the Masonic Temple, is co-director of Lamp Light Musical Festival, and a founding member of Great Lakes Commonwealth of Letters. His debut book, *All Things Dusk*, was selected by Li-Young Lee as the International Poetry Prize winner and published by Hong Kong University Press in December 2015. His chapbook *Mineral Whisper*, composed while living in Ireland, was published by Finishing Line Press in February 2017. These days he can be found in the wake of a canoe, among the sculpting tones of a dusky walk, watching his love pick flowers, or considering how a cat enters the room through steam let off a cup of tea.

**Taylor Torres** is a 21 year old fine art & lifestyle photographer living and working in

Houston, Texas. She is currently studying for her BFA in photography at the University of Houston. Taylor's work focuses on the female body, portraiture, and the ever-changing, developing connection between human nature and culture. Much of her work dives into the challenges women face with body-image, power, and feminism. Coming from a white American background and marrying a first-generation Hispanic, Taylor is fascinated with the fusion of cultures and how they influence our perception and attitude of self and society.

**Melanie Unruh** has an MFA in fiction from the University of New Mexico. Her work has appeared in *New Ohio Review*, *Post Road*, *Sixfold*, *Philadelphia Stories*, and *Cutthroat*, among others. Her nonfiction received notable mention in *Best American Essays 2013*.

**Lesley Valdes** is a graduate of Warren Wilson's MFA for Writers, and the Peabody Conservatory of Music. Her work has been published in *Inverness*, *Pantheon*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Shadowgraph Curator*, *American Poetry Review*, and others. She lives in Philadelphia where she writes with her dog curled nearby.