
SANTO TERESITO RAMO GONZÁLEZ Y LOS COYOTES
AP

THE BOILER
WINTER 2018

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

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

Cover Photo: Santo Toribio Romo Gonzalez y Los Coyotes by J. Leigh Garcia

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

Distribution. Online

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ALEXANDRA KESSLER

BAD BONES

"I don't think you should do that," Ava says. Jane laughs.

"Why? It's not like it could get more dead." Jane pokes the rabbit's guts with the end of a stick. The rabbit is small and it's fur is an oaky brown, about a hundred shades darker than Jane's platinum hair. She's blonde, but she wasn't born that way.

"Diseases," Ava says, pushing her sister's arm away from the animal. Jane swerves and holds the stick over Ava's head. Jane is sixteen, and Ava is fourteen. Ava knows there's no stopping her.

"Rabies," Ava says.

"*Rabies*," Jane says, eyes squinted. Ava imagines those eyeballs ejected from her sister's head and sliding slick into the sea, rolling outta this town like Springsteen. Fragile and gooey, coated in sand and dirt, bobbing with the current.

The rabbit's belly has swollen, bloodless slits down it's middle. The soft parts, clean pink sacks leaking white, spill onto the lawn. The hind legs are mangled and strung off of the body, hanging by glistening tendon threads.

The rabbit lays stinking at the foot of their back deck. It's the third dead one they've found this week. The rabbit's head and front legs are perfectly intact, the fuzzy face peaceful, like the porcelain figurines that their mother keeps in a glass cabinet.

When Ava and Jane found the first dead rabbit, they buried it and didn't feel too bad. They have a public school understanding of food-chain mechanics, they know that nature is a dangerous place for small animals.

When they found the second carcass, identically slaughtered, Ava cried while Jane buried it. Do you think it's life was so great, anyway, being that small? Jane said. What a waste to be born a rabbit when you coulda been a big-boned Grizzly or a humongously-dicked stallion.

The appearance of the third rabbit has increased Jane's curiosity and Ava's fear that a predator is lurking. Their mother would say that twice is a coincidence and three times is fate. But they know she only uses this line to justify asking a small yellowing man, who had thrice been behind her on line at the liquor store, on a date. Their mother and that man, Ken, are now a couple.

Jane doesn't want to bury this rabbit. She wants to keep it, to examine it closely. But there is no time now, their mother will be home soon. Jane says there's a shoebox full of junk in the back of her closet that they can keep the rabbit in. Jane points to the rabbit and says, this is what's important now.

The girls' bedroom has only one closet, which is Jane's. When their mother moved them out of their father's house and into this one, the first thing she did was drive to the Home Depot and buy Ava a free-standing collapsable wardrobe. Their mother shoplifts from the high-end boutiques in town. Ava's collapsable wardrobe is filled with heavily patterned Lily Pulitzer dresses that have holes in the hems where the plastic security tag was MacGyvered out.

The second thing their mother did in the new house was make Jane flush her pet goldfish, Shark, down the toilet. It had been a gift from their father, a fisherman, before the divorce.

"He's just a goldfish," Jane pleaded, Shark flipping in her cupped palms.

"They're all just goldfish," Their mother said. "I'll get you a dog—a good animal with strong bones." Shark was flushed and there has never been another mention of a dog.

Ava holds her breath while she kneels, reaching for the shoebox. Her sister's closet smells like a barn. The shoebox of junk is in the very back. Inside the box is a splint from a years-ago broken finger, four baby teeth, and a handful of used, tied-off condoms. Ava brings the box outside to her sister.

Jane has gotten a snow shovel from the garage and scooped the rabbit carcass onto it. When she sees Ava come out of the house, she calls for her to

hurry; wrists ready to snap. Ava holds the shoebox under the snow shovel, and Jane lets the rabbit slide off into the box. The rabbit is heavier than Ava expected, and wetter. It's toothpick ribcage reaches towards heaven. The bottom of the box sags like a frown, a greasy stain spreads, the cardboard start to pill. Jane takes the box from her sister and slides it under the deck, where there's two feet of dark space between the wood and the ground.

"We'll keep it there till we think of something to do with it," Jane says.

The girls' mother is throwing a barbeque to celebrate her two-month anniversary with Ken. She likes any excuse for a good time. When she gets home from work, she begins to decorate the small yard. She pulls pink tissue-paper streamers from a K- mart bag and throws them over tree branches.

In the kitchen, their mother makes herself a drink. She pours vodka and lemonade into a plastic cup. When Jane takes it from the counter and drinks it down, their mother says nothing, just makes herself another and asks the girls to help decorate the lawn. Ava feels an understanding pass between her mother and her sister, an almost imperceptible filament made of something she can't stand.

Jane rips foot-long sheets of red streamer into tiny pieces, scattering them around the yard like confetti. Ava wraps purple around the ever-damp wooden railings of the deck.

When they're done, the yard is a rainbow stew. Their mother smiles, proud. She sweeps the deck and polishes the small black charcoal grill. She tops off her drink, then Jane's. She sets out silverware and plates on the deck table, using the space between the first joint and the knuckle on her pointer finger to measure the inches between each setting. If there had been more time before the guests were to arrive, Ava thinks, their mother would get on her hands and knees and polish every blade of grass on the lawn.

The girls get dressed for the party. They both wear denim skirts but Jane rolls hers

up at the waist so it's shorter, and their mother watches. Their mother tells Jane that nobody has fun shooting at an east target.

Guests start to trickle through the open back fence, walking lightly across the grass and placing small offerings on the table—bottles of screw-top pinot grigio and yankee candles. The girls greet people on the deck, friends of their mother's with lipstick-smeared boozy mouths who ask them the same things over and over.

Jane pinches her sister and whispers, "look at Grace."

Grace is their neighbor. She is over four hundred pounds. She almost always has to be sitting. She says she has osteoporosis of the knees. Their mother says it's really because all that weight can snap your bones. Grace's plate is piled high with the appetizers their mother had set out: watery potato salad and bacon wrapped clams and toaster oven jalapeño poppers. Grace sits down at the table and begins to eat, the first and only guest to do so. Ava wishes she could spend the whole night watching Grace eat.

"I'd rather be dead than fat enough to snap my own bones," Jane says.

Amongst the other guests are Laura from the Walgreens bakery and her husband, who has brought a Margarita machine. The Margarita machine is a big deal for everyone. They stand around the small blender and sip at cups of green froth. The women watch each other. Nobody wants to finish first.

Beth, their mother's best friend, arrives with her husband, Frank. Everyone is quietly surprised. Frank never comes to these types of things, because he's always busy, and everybody understands—he's the most in-demand roofing contractor on the East End. Beth and Frank's son, Drake, is a senior at the high school that Jane and Ava go to. Drake is well-loved in town: once he jerked off into a bowl at a house party and spoonfed his semen to a drunk girl like soup. He

won their school's community service award for teaching a kid with down syndrome how to skateboard.

There is talk that Frank sleeps in his truck. Jane claims she saw him once, parked in a hidden crevice between the old motel and where the beach's rock ledge begins. He was sleeping, Jane had said, wrapped up in quilts in the bed of his Ford.

"Remember when you saw Frank?" Ava asks her sister, "Remember, in his truck?"

Jane sips her vodka lemonade and doesn't acknowledge the question.

Ava doesn't like Frank. His hair is too solidly black and gel-spiked for a man his age. His wife takes his hand and he pulls away. His white T-shirt is tight across his chest and his hard little nipples make Ava gag, like they've detached from his body and lodged between her tonsils. Snug around his wrist is a thin gold chain bracelet—something Ava has never seen a man wear. She wonders if maybe he's secretly gay, if right now she's uncovering something big. There's something feminine about him that almost demands pity. But Frank catches Ava's eye from across the yard and smiles at her, gives a small wave. She immediately feels guilty that he makes her uncomfortable. He probably doesn't know his shirt is too tight; maybe his wife doesn't get him new clothes. Then Ava is heavy with remorse. She wants to cut Frank a thick piece of cake. Ava is worried about this impulse in her, the nagging need to feed what disgusts her.

"What are you doing?" Jane asks Ava. "You're staring at Frank."

"No I'm not."

"Would you fuck him?"

Ava slaps her sister on the meat of her upper arm. Jane shoves Ava into the sliding door.

The crown of her head knocks against the glass and her neck snaps back. Ava thinks about how babies are born with a soft spot in their skulls, and wonders what kind of retardation would ensue if that spot never hardened. Ava touches the back of her head; she can already feel a lump forming.

"You started it," Jane says.

The girls' mother opens the sliding glass door from inside the house. Ken is standing next to her. Nobody saw him come in. Ava figures her mother must have told him to come around the front of the house instead of the back gate, so they could make an entrance together. She feels a hot anger move through her, imagining her mother planning these details.

Quiet falls over the yard, and everyone looks at the girls' mother and Ken. Their mother's lips are the color of a ripe nectarine and her hair is piled on top of her head. Ken, who is a few inches shorter than their mother, wears khaki slacks with loafers, scuff-y. The girls' mother holds one of his hands, his other is deep in his pocket.

"Thank you all so much for coming," their mother addresses the guests. "Anniversaries are important."

When the sky gets darker, the girls' mother begins to barbeque. She grills chicken breasts and rib racks and fish wrapped in foil. Guests gather around as she grills, chatting with her and offering to help, but she waves them away. The girls sit in chairs off to the side of the deck and watch Ken. He is standing alone by the big tree on the edge of the yard, smoking a cigarette and staring into the woods.

"He's so fucking weird," Jane says, dipping two fingers into her cup. She puts the fingers in her mouth and sucks. She says the alcohol helps heal her bloody cuticles. Ava agrees about Ken. He hasn't spoken to anybody since his entrance with the girls' mother. In the past two months he's been dating their mother, the girls' haven't heard his voice at all. He doesn't enter the house to pick their mother up for dates, just sits in his car in the driveway and waits for her. He has never spent the night, though the girls' mother has been stealing more expensive underwear lately—nets with little bows.

When their mother is finished grilling, guests fill their plates and sit down around the metal table. They toast again, and begin to eat. Ken sits between the

girls' mother and Ava. He is silent, and Ava watches as he cuts his chicken breast into small, identical cubes. He eats by spearing one cube onto his fork at a time, and dipping it into a small pile of mustard in the middle of his plate. While he chews, he puts his fork and knife down and places his hands in his lap. Then he swallows, and starts the process again. Ava can smell his smell, like rubber and mint. Ava wants to go to his house, slip into his bathroom, and then lock the door. She wants to uncap his aftershave and sniff the nozzle, to hold his bar of soap in her hands and feel where it's been rubbed smooth. She wants to look in the mirror of his medicine cabinet and try to see what he sees. Ava tries to catch his eye, but he doesn't look at her. The girls' mother places her hand on top of his, and he leaves it for a moment, before shaking it off to spear another cube of chicken.

Jane sits next to Frank. On Frank's other side is his wife, Beth. Jane and Frank are both eating ribs, tearing at the meat like wild cats competing. There is a cherry tomato seed on Beth's upper lip.

"Drake's prom is coming up," Beth says, putting down her fork. "He's graduating with perfect grades. We're so proud, aren't we, Frank?" Frank strips a long string of meat off of the rib he's holding and chews.

"There's so much coming up for him, right Frank?" Beth tries again. This time, he nods.

"How exciting," the girls' mother says, and sits up in her seat. She says she can't wait until her daughter's proms. Prom dresses, she says, what an important decision.

A guest asks who Drake's prom date will be, and a smile begins in the corner of Beth's mouth. She waits for quiet before she answers.

"He's taking Lila Gorsik."

The girls' mother slaps a hand over her heart and looks at Beth like she wants to climb inside her. The other guests coo and smile with softly cocked heads. Jane rolls her eyes.

Lila Gorsik used to be the best swimmer in the county. She made the varsity swim team as a freshman and was captain as a sophomore, which won her a profile in the newspaper. Her butterfly stroke was a miracle, everyone said. A fish born in a girl body.

During her junior year Lila was promised a full scholarship to Stanford, and everybody knew about it. Lila's parents, neither of whom had gone to college, threw a block party to celebrate. Last summer, Lila and some friends took her father's fishing boat out for a party on the water. After drinking six beers and snorting a Xanax, Lila uncharacteristically crashed the boat into the pier at full speed and was thrown from the vessel, hitting her head and snapping her neck in the process. Everyone talks about the way her head jutted sideways, like it couldn't fit, like her body was rejecting it. Though she wasn't there, Ava imagines Lila looked like Shark the goldfish before he hit the toilet water, twisted and desperate to be back where he could take a new breath. Lila survived her ordeal, but now she has a motorized wheelchair that she controls with a straw that goes into her mouth. The wheelchair moves depending on her patterns of inhales or exhales. Lila has a nurse on hand at all times to weave thick tubes through her. Ava knows that Lila's nurse will have to accompany her and Drake the prom. Ava can't imagine how awkward that will be, to bring your nurse on a date.

"What an amazing son you have," the girls' mother tells Beth. She calls him a saint. She shakes her head, amazed.

"It was Drake's idea," Beth says. "And of course, he had other options." Beth looks up at the guests through thinning ginger eyelashes.

"Of course he did," the girls' mother says, gaining momentum, "he's such a handsome boy. He could have his pick of the litter. But you raised him so well. You really did."

"We're a very close family." Beth touches Frank's bicep. Frank drops a now-clean rib onto his plate.

By the time the guests start to finish up their dinner, the sun has set. The only light comes from the candles scattered around the deck, and the stars. It is the time of night when the mosquitos hunt.

The guests sit around and talk and drink more until one of them says they have to get going, and then they all do. They bring their plates into the kitchen, and help the girls' mother wrap leftovers in foil and scrape serving platters clean into the garbage. They drink more while they're cleaning.

Jane disappears, but Ava stays outside, where it's quiet. The lawn is dark, and Ava slides her sandals off to feel the grass under her feet. It's downy and damp and she glides across it like an ice skater. She almost glides through a small, dark, heap at the edge of the yard and she stops herself short, falling onto her hands and knees in front of the thing. She sees it—the dark wet tubes, the phantom tissue of a long ear, the glint of pearl bone. Ava is almost face to face with it. She gets up, fast, and goes to find Jane.

Her sister is not in the kitchen with the rest of the guests. Beth—who is finishing the last inch of red wine from a bottle and knotting garbage bags—stops Ava and takes her hand.

"You are such a pretty girl," she says. Ava thanks her.

Jane is not in her bedroom or in the bathroom. Ava even checks the outdoor shower. She walks around to the front of the house, to the driveway where the guest's cars are parked in a neat line, waiting. Ava catches a small movement near the cluster of trees and tall bushes on the side of the front yard, and moves closer towards it.

Jane and Frank are almost naked in a small patch of flattened beach grass. He has Jane pinned up against a tree. She is wearing her bra, and Frank is wearing his socks and shirt, and the rest of their clothes are twisted around their feet. Ava stands at a distance, silent, holding the bushes open like a curtain. Frank's hand is wrapped around Jane's throat and he's squeezing hard. Light glints off the gold bracelet straining around his thick wrist. Jane gurgles softly and keeps telling him *harder, harder*. Ava can't believe how close they are to the

house, to all the people inside. She can't believe that the proximity isn't enough to keep things safe.

Ava goes back to the deck, where she sits until she hears her mother wish everybody a safe drive home, until she hears the cars pull out, one by one.

Jane comes through the gate, and sits next to Ava.

"I found another dead rabbit," Ava tells her.

"Guess what," Jane says, "I know something important. It was all lies. Frank told me that Drake wanted to take someone else to prom. Beth made him ask Lila."

Jane nudges Ava, waiting, but Ava says nothing. Jane stretches her arms out in front of her and cracks her knuckles. The little gold bracelet is on her wrist now. It slides down her arm, almost to the elbow.

"Beth told Drake that if he took brokeback Lila to prom, she'd buy him a new truck." Jane yawns and says she's tired and going to bed. She stands up, wobbling.

Ava is relieved that nobody wants to touch her, but she also wants to be told important things.

A moment later, the girls' mother comes out onto the deck, Ken behind her.

Her mother touches her fingers to her temples and says she's had too much wine. She asks Ava and Ken if they can clean up the yard. She hands Ken an electric lantern and kisses his flaky cheek.

"Go around and pick up trash," she says, and then goes inside. Ken looks at Ava for real for the first time. He shrugs.

The two of them work silently, picking up damp streamers and old napkins. Ava is thankful that Ken doesn't talk, doesn't ask her questions. The moon is milky in the sky tonight, like vomit on velvet.

After a while, Ava hears a low growl, and sees a quick, shadow-movement, punctuated by squeals that scrape her eardrums. She hears a throaty call. Ava drops her garbage into the grass.

When she looks up, Ken is standing over her, the lantern up by his face. Ava points to the movement and the noise, and Ken sees it too.

"Stay back," he says, and walks up to the shadow, the lantern out in front of him. He gets close enough, and then they both see it.

It's a feral cat, skinny and grey with white paws. Its eyes burn wildly yellow in the lantern light. The cat's teeth are deep in a rabbit's neck, but the small animal is still alive, paws flailing, joints popping and straining.

"Stop it," Ken yells at the cat, swinging the lantern at it. The cat starts shaking the rabbit back and forth, faster and faster.

Ken lifts the lantern up and pulls it down through the air, hard. It connects with the cat's head, and there's a crack like the earth breaking apart, like volcanoes and cliffs, like a dropped plate. The cat collapses on the lawn. The rabbit, barely alive, drags itself away with its front legs, back into the woods.

Ava sits down in the grass and starts to cry. She cries for the cat's bones, for how easily they broke.

Ken goes to her and crouches down. He presses his fingers lightly against her spine.

"Don't cry," he says. "Come on, Don't cry."

Ava looks at him.

"It's sad," Ken says. "I know it's sad. But what else could I do?"

LISA KNOPP

FREE SAMPLES

I pull into the U-Stop Convenience Shop, the last place to get gas on North 27th before you cross or merge into Interstate-80. I sort of know what I'm looking for. The four photographs I've seen of him reveal that he's tall, wears wire-rimmed glasses, and has short light hair. Yet none of the photos offer a clear, close shot of his face. Just minutes earlier on the telephone, he told me that he drives a white Malibu with customized license plates bearing the shortened version of his last name, which I recognize as his username on the internet match-making site where we "met." It's what everyone calls him, he says. I wonder if I'll call him that, too, someday.

Twenty minutes together is all we have. He drove into the city this morning for shopping. He wanted to meet me for lunch, but I had a brunch to attend in the late morning and a memorial service in the afternoon. A brief interview for a date is what this is. Within twenty minutes, we will determine if we merit a full weekend evening of each other's time. From my experiences with other men I've met on the match-making website, I can usually determine that within 20 seconds and usually, my answer is either "probably not" or "absolutely not." In recent years, each of the men that I've kept company with for more than a few dates were ones that I met the old-fashioned and rather random way — while giving a reading at a coffee house; while waiting too long for service at the Verizon store; while washing clothes at a laundromat during that brief window of time between the breakdown of my old washer and my purchase of a new one; while rallying at the state capitol in opposition to the TransCanada pipeline.

What I'm looking for. I sort of know what that is at this point in life: deep friendship and a little romance. What I don't know is if I'm willing, yet again, to invest the time, energy, and love that it takes to really get to know and

feel comfortable enough with a man that we can treasure, worry over, and receive solace and joy from each other.

A man sits on a bench outside the double doors of the U-Stop Convenience Shop, his long legs stretched out in front of him. I recognize the glasses but the hair that I saw in his photos is gone. "Candidate for a Date" ("C.D.") rises from the bench and watches me pull in next to his Malibu. He is smiling. I wave him over to my car and point to the passenger seat. I shove the seat in my little Honda Civic as far back as it will go. As C.D. eases himself into the seat and folds each long leg into a high, sharp angle, he tells me that it's better for us to sit in my car than on the bench because the wind was messing with the hair on his shaved head. The joke could have been amusing, but it goes on too long. Then he explains it. But of course, it really doesn't matter what we are saying because what we're after is a good look at each other's faces — especially the eyes and the mouth, especially the eyes. His face is pleasant and his eyes are blue and attentive.

We chat about real estate. He tells me about the century-old farmhouse that he bought, lifted, and moved several miles to the little Nebraska town where he's lived the past couple of decades. He refurbished every inch of it, doing all the work himself, including removing the asbestos-filled slate siding and replacing it with vinyl. I tell him I moved far north so I'd be closer to the interstate and so, closer to my job in Omaha. Yet four years later, I still don't feel at home in this part of Lincoln. I long to return to one of the old, friendly, walkable neighborhoods nearer the geographical center of the city. But because of the lowered property values in recent years, I can't sell my house without paying at least $12,000 to cover the realtor's fee and the difference between what I owe on the house and what it's now worth. Before I can sell my house, I have to paint or side it, but because the house was built in the late 60s, back when they still used lead paint..."

C.D. puts his hand on my arm and I stop talking. I suppose that I was going on and on and now I'm mildly embarrassed. "There's a dog in traffic," he

says. The cars and trucks in the two northbound lanes of North 27th have stopped. "I bet he jumped out of the car when his owner stopped for gas or something." C.D. pauses. "Look! He's coming this way."

"I'll go get him," I say. I step out of the car and run toward the stopped vehicles. Some dogs are so rattled around traffic. They run erratically, zigzagging like squirrels, confusing everyone. There . . . there it's coming toward me. It's tiny, with a tight, barrel-shaped body, and stumpy little legs. I don't like that type of dog with its fast, mincing, ridiculous-looking steps. I prefer the more confident, graceful stride of a taller, longer-legged dog. Even so, I don't want to see this little one with the bright black eyes spattered on the pavement or hear its piercing, final yaps.

"Here, puppy," I say, as I bend down and extend a hand. It's so tiny and pure white, an older dog, an older dog with a collar. If it will let me, I'll scoop it up in my arms, take it back to the car, call animal control, and wait. In that impulsive moment, I don't consider the possible outcomes of this act: that it might take so long for someone from Animal Control to come for the dog that I'll miss the funeral of the old acquaintance, a woman who was younger than me and with a daughter still in high school; that no one comes for the dog *ever*, and I'm stuck with it; and the least likely scenario, that the dog moves my heart and I can't let it go, even though another dog is pretty much the last thing that I want or need. But when the dog sees me, it veers and heads toward the Cracker Barrel Old Country Store and Restaurant. I give up.

As I walk back to my car, I realize that I've just given C.D. quite a bit of information about me – that, depending on his interpretation, I'm the type of woman who has such compassion for a dog in harm's way that she attempts to rescue it or that I'm the type of woman who acts rashly, leaving a stranger in her car with her purse and keys; how I move when I run; how I look from behind, specifically, my hair and my butt. Or maybe he had his eyes on the dog the whole time. If so, I want to know that.

"Gone," I say, as I slide into my seat. I pull my cell phone out of my purse and call Animal Control.

"You have Animal Control on speed dial?" he asks.

I nod. I realize that C.D. might think that I call Animal Control with frequency because I'm a real dog lover. But actually, I've listed that phone number as one of my "favorites" because on too many of my daily rambles in city parks and neighborhoods, I've been threatened by dogs at large. Once, I was even run down, attacked and bitten by a boxer. The puncture wounds on my leg healed long before the nightmares about the attack faded. In truth, I am the type of woman that reports dangerous dogs and files complaints against their negligent owners, and I rescue dogs in traffic. When I get off the phone, I tell C.D. that apparently others have called about the dog, too, since the woman who answered asked me if the dog I was seeing was "a little white one with a collar." Someone from Animal Control will be here soon, I tell him. We wish the dog well.

C.D. says that he's sorry that my job has been so stressful lately, something I shared with him in an email message earlier in the week. I'm touched that he remembers that. We talk about work place politics and how much we both dislike meetings and those folks who won't let the meeting end until they've said everything they have to say at least three times. Then, we both see it at the same time: a bird whose form is familiar to me but whose plumage is like nothing I've ever seen. "I think it's a blackbird," C.D. says.

"It's shaped like a blackbird but that's not blackbird plumage," I say. The feathers are light brown and highlighted with the oranges and pinks of a sunrise or of orange and raspberry sherbet. "It would be beautiful if it weren't so weird," I say. We watch the bird stride past the car toward the front doors of the U-Stop.

"Weird," he says, as he slowly nods. Then the bird flies away. Runaway dogs and bizarre but beautiful birds. I feel like I'm watching a parable, with all of its familiar yet strange, ordinary yet extraordinary imagery unfurling before me. If I can tease out the meaning beyond the immediate and the apparent, perhaps

these parables will tell me something essential about this man or my own intentions.

I wonder if C.D. is the kind of guy that can see the parabolic potential in seemingly random, everyday events. I'm about to ask him something along that line when he nonchalantly announces that he has bats in his attic. I'm not sure if he's being straight with me or if he's making another joke, with an explanation to follow. So I wait.

"You know how you usually have flies in your house this time of year and you don't know where they came from?" He slowly shakes his head from side to side. "I don't have any, so you know there's something wrong.

"I took a lawn chair out in the yard the other evening and sat there and watched the attic. There they came. The bats. It can't be good to have bats in your attic. It's not hygienic," he says, scrunching up his nose.

"No, it's not," I agree. "They're up there defecating, urinating, shedding, and who knows what else." I don't say anything about rabies because I've heard that contrary to what most people think, the incidence of that disease in bats is no higher than that of any other wild mammal. Besides, I like bats. They use echolocation to locate and capture their prey; the females raise their young in nursery colonies of dozens or hundreds; and as a summer evening edges toward night, these flying leaves straight out of the Eocene Epoch dart and veer overhead and suddenly drop out of sight. I would never spread erroneous and potentially injurious information about bats. But neither do I want one anywhere near me, unless I've been forewarned of its presence.

"There are only two kinds of bats that these can be in Nebraska. Big Brown Bats or Little Brown Bats." C.D.'s "b's" are slightly bombastic. "A Little Brown Bat is about the size of a mouse when it's like this." He crosses his arms over his chest and hunches his back like a sleeping bat. His shoulders almost touch his knees. Then, he sits up straight again. "They're only this big," he says as he spreads his thumb and second finger a few inches. His nails are clean and

nicely clipped. "But the bats that I have are a lot bigger." He nods for emphasis. "They're Big Brown Bats.

"I got on the internet and found a humane way to evict them. You make a valve tube out of a two-inch diameter plastic pipe or caulk tube. You cut it so it's about six to eight inches long." He shows me these distances by spreading his thumb and second finger. "You take a piece of plastic netting – you don't want the mesh more than a sixth of an inch – and tape it to one side of the exterior opening on the pipe. Then you thread the tube through the opening in the roof where you saw the bats coming out. The bats can get out through the tube, but they say that because of the netting, they can't get back in. Well, I think they can't climb back in because their claws can't get a grip on the hard plastic surface in the tube. Once you see that there aren't any more bats coming out of your attic, you seal off the entry points." C.D. has been looking over the top of his glasses at North 27th as he delivers this tutorial, but now, he turns and looks at me. His eyes are quite blue and sincere. "But I'm not evicting them just yet. It can still get pretty cold at night in April. I don't want them to suffer."

"That's a good plan," I say. "And you only have to wait a few more weeks until it's warm enough that you can give them the boot."

This man is gainfully employed, kind, politically progressive, not unattractive, and on cordial yet detached terms with his ex-wife and so, he meets my minimum standards. There is nothing particularly wrong with him, though his imitation of the sleeping bat was a little weird, but neither is there anything particularly right about him, though I was touched by his remark about his unwillingness to make Big Brown Bats suffer from the cold. Because of that remark, I move him from the "definitely not," past the "probably not," and into the "perhaps we'll get together again" category.

I tell C.D. that I need to leave for the memorial service and that I have a big pile of student essays to grade this weekend. He tells me that he needs to get some chores done at home because Sunday morning, he's heading out for an epic

bike ride from the small town where he lives all the way to a little speck of a town near the Nebraska–Kansas border.

At this moment, it's not Candidate for a Date in a nylon Lycra full body suit leaning into a turn that I'm imagining, but the produce aisle at the grocery store. I picture the free sample lady, the one with the big, coal black hair–do, red lips, and big, jingly, often holiday–themed earrings, placing a corn chip on each of the napkins that she's laid out. Customers can take a chip and dip it in one of the three bowls of salsa, each filled with a different and new–fangled flavor, say, peach–mango, pomegranate, or tequila. Nearby in a clear plastic globe are wedges of blood oranges that you serve yourself on a toothpick. On a typical Saturday morning, the walk past the meat counter is a bit of an obstacle course, because of the various stations where you can sample Little Smokies sausage, shaved hickory–smoked ham on a snack cracker, and if you wait just a minute, a tiny chunk of the beef hissing and popping in an electric frying pan. In the bakery, a woman fills tiny plastic pill cups with dabs of pineapple or blueberry cheesecake. "Go on," she says to me with a wink. "You can take one of each."

There's an etiquette that you should follow when sampling. You should feign interest in the product even if you don't like it or if all you really want is a bite of free food. If the free sample lady is passing out coupons, you should take one, look it over and ask a question or nod your head to show your approval. You can throw the coupon away later. And always, thank her for giving you the opportunity to try something you'd never buy or something that you never knew you wanted until now.

At this moment in the parking lot outside the U–Stop Convenience Shop on North 27th Street in Lincoln, Nebraska, what I wish for are free samples, tiny dollops of the quotidian scooped from a typical day ten years hence, served in pill cups with tiny plastic spoons. In the first free sample, I see myself rising from my bed to close the window because the temperature falls so fast on an April night. Before I let the curtain fall back in place, I turn and see a single pillow positioned in the center of the head of my empty bed. But in the second sample, when I turn

from the window, I see this man's sleeping face illuminated by a slat of moonlight and framed by the pillow on his side of the bed. In both scenarios, what I most want to see is the unguarded look on my face when I turn from the window and see my empty or occupied bed. Is it contentment? Wonder? Dismay? Desire? Contempt? Ambivalence? Gratitude? If I could see my expression, I would know what to do and say in this parting moment before I take my leave of this man who is considerate of bats.

Before he gets out of my car, C.D. and I shake hands. I thank him for the opportunity to meet. "We'll be in touch," he says. I nod. And if we aren't, I say to myself, it has far more to do with me than you.

LAURA VILLAREAL

If I invited you to love me

I'd tell you I'm a four-way intersection
in a town made for shooting movies
& yes, the traffic light still works.

I'd tell you my burial ground planted a home
& everything I own fits in my tear ducts.

I'd tell you even after long-term collapse
black holes go undetected.

I'd tell you my Netflix queue is trash
because some nights elongate
& I trick myself into thinking
a romcom will bore me to sleep
but I watch the whole damn movie
until, crying, I fall asleep
every. single. time.

I'd tell you I don't think ideal love
looks anything like a romcom.

I'd tell you most people don't know
rollie pollies are crustaceans
& ask what else people misidentify.

I'd tell you I've gone to museums 52 times this year,
but I only go when I'm lonely.

I'd tell you I'm not always sure
being alone is worse than

allowing someone to splinter me.
I'd tell you I've never
seen a relationship that wasn't barter
or been in one that wasn't out right robbery,
but vicarious living isn't enough anymore.

CAMERON ALEXANDER LAWRENCE

THE WEIGHT

No one ever told me to be a man

is to become a plum tree in the city, hushing himself
above the smoke and horns. I had to discover on my own

the meaning of childhood, years when I was first
a collection of minerals blown in on a storm,

deposited, a microscope's dazzling. I grew

into a shoot within the sounds of traffic, and my mother hailed me
as a miracle, passing in her robe on the way to the television.

Side-eyed, she watched me, blown back and bent toward
a history, a language, not even my grandparents spoke anymore.

As a boy, I looked up to my father,

on whose white under wings I counted each feather,
him always studying me from a tree with a mouse in his beak.

I was not what my parents believed, nothing resembling
the orchards they imagined, no magic in my body except

the way my skin held the rain. All these years,

I have been filled with a deepening dream of sugar
descended from the sun. I don't resent anyone, don't

fault them for not knowing how to tell a young boy
the way to become what he will be,

but there's still a part of me waiting for someone to come along

and sit here in the late hours of this purpling world,
to tell me how I might know the moment

my darkness has grown too heavy for me, the moment
I can let the abundance of this fruit fall away.

CHRISSY MARTIN

WINNER'S CIRCLE

When Ron drove us to the track to spend
the day watching races, my mother and I spent

cup holders full of change mesmerized by the glow
of claw games. If you weren't in charge of the

joystick, you pressed your forehead to the side
of the glass, guiding the other like surgery. Between

wins, we huddled over fold-out tables in the stale,
gray cafeteria, trying to keep the grease of racetrack

hot dogs from dripping onto our jeans, listening
for shouts of our horse's name or any others

that meant we could go home. We began
to wear tall, thin jackets to wrap our stuffed

animal winnings in when the hug of our arms
wasn't enough—knotted the sleeves together and

slung them over our shoulders, proud as designer
purses. Once, after nearly clearing out the entire

machine, we heard *Trixie Sue by a head!* Found
ourselves in a winning circle snapshot, coatbags

under our arms, tops of plush heads poking out,
pairs of beaded eyes reflecting the camera's flash.

MAG GABBERT

SNOW GLOBE

Age six I broke
My dad's girlfriend's
Snow globe even though
I had begged to hold it

Inside the sphere a fairy sat
With pink wrists and sculpted hair
Of course Neverlands vary or so
I'd been told *John lived*
In a boat I lived like *Wendy*
In a house of leaves in a sphere
Of under-grown trees

What was the appeal of that
World those cheap figurines
Encased in glittery overturned
Bowls why was it so satisfying
To see each confetti-light
Snowflake fall on fake leaves

The girlfriend was pregnant
With dad's baby
Her belly all round and bright
Skin backlit white like the snow
In the globe though it broke
Me to think that inside her
Another pink figure
Was turning

There's a frozen static to it
The castle always
In the bubble the princess
Kept safe untouchable
Like the tick of a song repeating
White noise the snow
Blankets what it is covering

Then it slipped from my hands
In dad's kitchen and glass
Scattered nearly invisible
Across the white tile while
Water pooled the kingdom grew
Burstable impossible to hold
Like the Easter Bunny

Or Neverland *when*
The first baby laughed its laugh
Went skipping but the baby
Wasn't dad's anyway not my brother
Like dad had taught me to say
If you just shut your eyes dad had
Lied *you may see* so I squeezed
Them tight saw a baby hair curly
And blond though I wasn't
Allowed to hold him I believe
I never

Asked to I only
Watched him waving toward me
His puffy fist opening closing beside
Two blue blurry eyes did I think
They could see the shadow
Hovering the mobile turning
Pale colors coral caves

Suspended reefs trees how each
Leaf seemed to fall from me

KARLA CORDERO

HIJA DE LA COSECHA

spoiled child of root. green leaf. & fruitful. child of mouthful–*harvest*. mouth full of cherry tomato blistering by the day's shower of light. full on lemon juice made to pucker. then sliced into kindness by sugar cubes. here vines run feral. the green-sheened jalapeno trick an army of teeth to burn. the birds tower the city on tops of sunflower faces. here the carrots offer their silent bodies & resurrect when mouths go hungry. here i savor the wild blueberry. swirl the sweetness after each navy pebble pops between teeth. *i remember* i was once the child of broken earth. mouth full on wind flavored by a mother's *immigrant dream*. coated in lifeless rock. i crayoned the seeds & stems of things i had yet to savor. i was fed what was given.

KARLA CORDERO

DEITY

the vast summer harvest blessed our
mouths. wild onion—their green leaves

like claws bathing in the breath of the world.
tomato stems beasting a tallness no one

foresaw would bare such sweet
balloons of red sugar. & nothing here

floats on their own. the branches knew this
& felt purposeful. dusk made itself known.

& snails hovered taking the lives
grounded by root. peeled the sweet onion without

mercy. then took its neighbor & the children.
swallowed the cherry tomatoes—a broken

string of lights on a christmas tree & no glow
remain. & the branches lost purpose.

overcame by the smallest violence
i plucked each shell-holding-body.

rubber beings clinging to leaf & i plucked
with even more given strength. retreating into

the only home given to them by birth—a prison-weight
on their backs. still i felt nothing. lined one-by-one

across the faded wooden edge of the garden box.

a green village surrounding the guilty. both judge &

executioner i was. raised a brick & let go. their
brittle shells cracking was how my ears understood

the dead. their bodies taken by an evaporating
sky. the ruins of homes remain. but to hold life

then remove it from soil is to costume myself
a deity—a skin not my own & still i acted with an itch—

how often i hear of war & the world itching in someone else's
skin—feeling nothing but a raised brick at their hands.

ANNALISE MABE

LITTLE DEATHS

My parents were ex-pats in 1993, taking my sister and me to Prague where dust came from the bodies of men, old as meshed chain, armor and silver swords. The city, the churches were filled to the brim with bones.

I was three, the air swimming around me, smelling sweet of goulash and knedliky, or pilsners from the pub. My father took a job at an English language newspaper, *The Prognosis*, while my mother gave guided tours to other ex-pats visiting the city. At night I curled up between my parents, my sister tucked in close on the couch around the small T.V. watching *Jonny Quest,* a show about a young boy following his scientist-father around on adventures. Sometimes I fell asleep while watching, the static of the T.V. lulling me, a soft sea of voices rushing in and out before my parents carried me to bed, kissing my forehead or tucking my hair behind my ear. I'd like to think this was when they were still in love. This, in Prague, was when we were still together.

*

Before my mother was my mother, she was long and thin-limbed in thrift shop clothes, in hand-me-downs, walking across a Florida college campus. Her friends called her Ally, or Ally Cat, short for Allison. Before my father was my father, he was Logan, and more of what you'd call a mod—a 60s term for a young person of a certain subculture who wore skinny ties, rode scooters, and liked all things alt. In freshman composition he got her number.

On hot summer evenings they cracked the windows wide open before falling asleep between the sheets. They called their parents not to ask, but to tell them they were moving in together. Months later, Allison moved to study abroad in France and Logan wrote her every day. Allison tied a string to a coin, dropping it in the slot, saving money to call Logan long distance. I'm sure they said "I miss you" over a hundred times, but in French, *I miss you* doesn't translate neatly. It translates to *you are missing from me*, or, *I am not whole*

without you. Logan told his parents he would sell all of his records for a plane ticket to see her. They flew him over.

On New Year's Eve, Allison and Logan sat on a Parisian rooftop, swigging down champagne from the green glass bottle before kissing, before throwing it down into the street.

*

The first thing I loved was a stuffed animal rabbit.

My parents gave me the rabbit when I was fifteen months old and I named him B. Bunny. I slept on him every night, his fluff rolling soft between my neck and shoulder, absorbing the sheen of my baby sweat. He smelled like the only home I'd ever known.

One winter while we were living in Prague, his white ear fell off somewhere on our walk home. I didn't know where we lost it. Months passed, the sun melting the snow, when my mother crouched down, picking up the lone ear sticking out of the snow in a parking lot. At home, she took off her coat, stitched him back together, whole and anew.

*

I am the second-born daughter to Allison and Logan.

I was small when I was born, conceived in January of 1990, after the New Year. After falling confetti and resolutions, after turmoil and arguments. I imagine I was a last try of sorts, a resolution myself, the consequence of their attempt to pick up the pieces, to put themselves back together again.

Allison was pregnant with me in France at an Opera House, flipping through the program when she saw the name she'd give me, a ballerina's, a credit in ink: *Annalise*. The name means graced with God's bounty, but I don't think my parents believed in such a thing.

*

La petite mort, or *the little death,* is the brief loss or weakening of consciousness, and sometimes, the sensation of orgasm. It was first used in 1882

to relay a post-orgasmic state of unconsciousness that some people have after sex. When the eyes roll back, when they close and you see bursts of bright light. When you transcend your body, escaping the physical confines of skin, the shrapnel of what feels like war on the field of your sheets. This is what it means when you say *I love you to death*.

*

A few years after Prague, we moved to Florida to be close to family. I was five or six in my parents' shared apartment when my sister and I climbed out of our bunk beds one night past our bedtime. Like little sleuths, we crept on hands and knees across the carpeted floor of the hallway, following the noise, the shouting.

Throwing words across the table, my parents broke like the glass cup I once dropped on the tile floor, my mother telling me not to move a muscle. The door swung open while I watched my mother leave the apartment, the rush of cold night air greeting my face.

*

The Tibetan Book of the Dead is the Western title for Tibet's *bardo thos grol,* where the word *bardo* refers to an intermediate state between lives and *thos grol* refers to liberation, awakening, or nirvana. Some have likened the act of sex and the experience of orgasm to nirvana, which overlaps with *sidpa bardo*, the bardo of rebirth, said to result in hallucinations of women and men fiercely entangled, of lovers entwined.

Is this what the vow means, till death do us part? Does it mean then that divorce is a death, a rebirth, or something entirely of its own? And what, then, of those born of it, from the in-between?

Sometimes I've felt like the product of my parents' limbo. Of their standing in the middle of reconciliation, or their agreement of another try. My creation, my body, has come from their willingness, their attempt to seal up the cracks. To lacquer the lines of the breaks. Sometimes I wonder what that makes me, then, knowing I wasn't, knowing I couldn't be the fix they were looking for.

*

I had B. Bunny for a few more years before I lost him for good one day. I was six and sick about it, hot tears rolling down my cheeks into the pillowcase. My mother tried to tell me it was just like *The Velveteen Rabbit,* that B. Bunny was okay, and wandered off into the woods to be with real rabbits. That he wasn't dead or trampled on or rained on. But I knew that wasn't the case. I knew that I had dropped him in the parking lot of the grocery store, that he was out there somewhere, collecting dirt.

Losing B. Bunny was not a worthy case for psychoanalytical prodding, but years later while reading *The Shell and The Kernel*, Karl Abraham's work rang out and I thought of the stuffed rabbit in reading: "The illness of mourning does not result, as might appear, from the affliction caused by the objectal loss itself, but rather from the feeling of an irreparable crime." I had known then, at six, that it was my fault.

*

A small part of me died. It wasn't when my parents sat my sister and me down in our shared bedroom to tell us they were separating and it wasn't when my father moved into his own apartment, reeking of freshly painted walls, a white too clean, too sterile. I don't know if it was a Tuesday, or if it was early afternoon, or late at night in my bed, when I realized that there was no going back.

There wasn't one reason for my parents' divorc. It seemed more like a small grocery list of moments that tumbled together into being too much. I can't know fully why it happened because the truth is that a myriad of things happened, all too mild, too plain and dull to suffice as a good reason.

*

I stood small, sweating in the parking lot, looking up at my mother's new boyfriend outside her white Volkswagen we called Astrid shortly after losing B. Bunny. He handed me a new stuffed rabbit with green silky ears, a consolation for my lost beloved.

The new rabbit my mother's boyfriend gave me was neat with his matching green bowtie and small pink nose. In bed at night, I slept with my head on him, smelling his fake fur, looking for the scent of home, only finding what smelled like a department store.

I came to terms with loss, lying in my lower bunk bed. I knew then that the things you carry at your chest, the raggedy and torn, are fleeting, short-lived, or left for dead in gravel parking lots, for the eventual rain, or the melting of the snow.

*

I watched my father break silently. It was in the quietness of our breakfasts at the coffee table, watching T.V. It was in the car ride home from school, when he picked us up from after care, when the sun was starting to set and we still had to cook dinner. It was in my neatly folded clothes and the ponytail he helped me tie up tight by himself.

We all broke into tiny pieces and talked little about it, my sister taking to her friends, my mother to her new boyfriend. I waited for it to get better, for things to be fixed, for the glue to set and take hold.

*

After college, I found letters from my father to my mother while looking for an old art project in a box at her house. I unfolded the pages of yellow lined paper, his wide, familiar script inked in black.

He wrote pages to her about the times when he loved her most: *Was it when you walked into the room at the cocktail party and everyone stopped to look, to hold a second of you? Was it when you slipped out of bed in the night, your silhouette in the doorframe, to nurse our first daughter?*

I couldn't help but cry, holding the aged paper in my hands. I couldn't help but look around my childhood bedroom and feel like I had been transported, had been somewhere else.

Roland Barthes spoke of *petite mort* when regarding reading. He said it was a feeling one should get when they experience an exceptional piece of writing.

That if the piece is good, you are there with the character, living the words, and when it's finished, you, in a sense, are finished.

*

As I grew up, I liked to pretend that everything was fine, that the divorce was really no big deal. I don't care, I said.

I believed I didn't care, but I searched for love, for wholeness, in every boyfriend. I believed that Bryan or David or Paul was "the one," as if there was a "one." I believed in promise rings and yearly anniversaries, cards, and lockets and ticket stubs. Boxes of letters, of folded, lined paper scrawled with ink, stuffed animals I took with me on trips, tuckered under my chin before sleep. I counted on these things, these tangible pieces of proof that said I was loved.

*

I find myself wanting to believe. I take to yoga as a coping mechanism, an exercise and practice that yields a physical release of energy that leaves me lighter upon leaving the old wooden house, grateful for the warmth of the day settling on my skin.

At the beginning and end of class we share an Om, a resounding vibration that fills the room. I take comfort in the symbol itself that sees death, that sees dying or loss as not so bad, not so scary, but a return to something bigger, where the individual unites with a divine collective. Where the individual is no longer alone.

A part of the Om symbol illustrates the illusion that we are separate, and another part, the diamond sitting at the top, represents nirvana, or a break from the limbos, from feeling like someone, something, is missing.

In class on a Thursday night, the instructor tells us that yoga is preparation for death. I lay on my back in corpse pose with eyes closed, palms face up, open to the sky for what I may receive. My breathing slows, chest unmoving, and for a moment I am cleansed by the wash of cars rushing past outside, rolling in and out like heavy waves. I am wiped free of the day's dirt, the thoughts that crowd the front of my head, free of my body, weightless like water, like swimming far out. The salt, the sea on my upper lip.

For a moment I unravel. I am simply undone, letting my eyes wet at the edges in a room full of people. We are alone and together all at once, preparing. For a moment, it overcomes me, the release of held energy. The world in the wooden room at a standstill, waking together at the ring of a singing bowl.

MIKE SOTO

FUE EL ESTADO

In the beginning there was murder, & out
of murder shadows & barking ran up
to read ciphers on walls, cold-blooded

creatures plotted their revenge behind
smoke. Under pointy brims names
crossed out from grocery lists, fates

determined by the jeweled hands
of a father who landed his first born
into a pair of alligator boots

by the age of five. Birds reassembled
on the first lines between poles after
shots were fired into a Mercury Topaz.

In that silence that's always been the silence
most alive. Mindless bodies, armless minds,
tattooed Marys over scarred wrists,

R.I.P. murals for miles. A shopping cart
full of prayer candles for students not
killed, but handed over, not disappeared,

but missing still. Gossip tangled up with
truth from the start. Turf wars over which
version of time would survive, mothers

bleeding from blown out windows,
sons deaf now for life. Revenge invented
because justice was not. The first day

a table filled with half-empty cups,
set up to be snatched by streets
of desperate runners even then.

ANTHONY CODY

no te quedes

No. Do not stay here. Along this on-ramp.
This hill. This earbone of blood, a puddled

cochlea. No. A tectonic. No. An erupting contraption
rugiendo until the manufactured labyrinth of trenzas

and nerves buckle and bridge. Somehow
las raíces florecen, the quiet exhale of soil

resting from rain: la tierra nunca abandons, remains
out of breath from farewells. Despedidas and patience

from a guidance of stars. No. Do not stay
here. Unleaf each tree. Deberry each bush.

Satchel the ancestral and lagrimas. And board. Or walk.
O mantienes. Or by holding your breath in such silence

that the deaf are startled. Until landing. Until
crossing. Hasta que puedes desaparacer between

pasture and escalator. Until all and none know
your people. Until you find yourself preparing

to merge onto a grey highway. Cement comes
from imploding the core. This is how they build

from nothing: vaciando todo. But know everything
remains: an unknown pile of repurposed meaning.

Beneath: a mastodon que se rindío. A split sequoia.
A shuttered village. A volcano of home que se aguarda.

Que resuena. That counts the hairs en su tobillo. Notice
the light is green. No. No te quedes. Go and know nebulas.

ANTHONY CODY

NOPALES, A MEXICAN LYNCHING, No. 39

"Mexicans have no business in this country. I don't believe in them. The men were made to be shot at, and the women were made for our purposes. I'm a white man— I am! A Mexican is pretty near black. I hate all Mexicans."

– April 6, 1850, Stockton Times Op-Ed

.a nopal could be weeping
but who examines
las espinas
closely
as the blossoms .a fire
quema todo
pero salva
los que cubren
la llama

.a nopal could be quiet
but who plunges
each thorn
into the drum
and swallows .the rust
no es
una cortina
para parar
el torrente.

.a nopal could be asleep
but who kicks
the hibernating

until sunrise
shows they are countless
.the drought
is rooted
in birth

en una paciencia de ríos

GINA KEICHER

from OCCASIONAL CHAINSAWS IN THE VALLEY OF ETERNAL SORRY

In a burnt-down bar lot, popcorn kernels grow full stalks from the debris. A bad fire burns elsewhere. I climb on the roof in a nightshirt—sit on the cooling black tiles, cigarette in hand, a home decor magazine flat on my thighs—watch each house face tire. I am tired of advice to paint original wood trim white to brighten a room, freshen a space. What if the interior darkness has something to tell me like the cat in the window at the hardware store where the lights are left on all night—moving her mouth like she is lonely or knows something. When a truck drives by, this whole house shakes.

ALYSSE KATHLEEN MCCANNA

HEAT

That summer, I stood naked in front of the window air conditioner,
all shame of my awkward body slicked away like so many drops of sweat.
The blue carpet of our first apartment was rough but I loved the lines it left
on my husband's thighs, and I loved drinking beer and holding the glass
against my cheek, then his. I cradled young visions of joy in the offing,
before he went off to war and stayed, before armies took their stand
inside me.

After the divorce, I stood before hotel room windows and surveyed
each new city's distorted lights, the air conditioner's steady stream
against my knees. The man I'd chosen instead sometimes combed
and braided my hair, sometimes pressed me against the glass.
His temper was tropical but I loved the lines it left
on my back, and I loved taking the grief of his ravaged life
and holding it against my cheek. I harbored hope thin and strong
as spiderweb, before he went off to another's bed and stayed,
before my armies laid down their weapons,
weeping.

This summer,
August seems just so much feverish tenderness,
a suspicious hallucination full of eyelashes and fingertips,
this large night impersonating oven as I lie on sweat–soaked sheets
and feel alive on an ocean, surprised that I'm awake and the man
beside me brings ice and wildflowers, so much true and undeserved
sweetness, and I take it—drink like a starving convict, as fast
as I can bear, in case it runs dry.

ALYSSE KATHLEEN MCCANNA

SUCCESS THAT IS PARTLY THE RESULT OF CHANCE; OR, AN UNCERTAIN COURSE OF EVENTS

Lying in the hotel bed, I form faces out of the ceiling's imperfections.
His face I know by heart, nose wide and flat, small chip
in the front tooth, parallel scars on the left cheekbone.

We order room service: steak, fruit, wine. We are good
at pretending. He tests my poker face, blows smoke.
I have been practicing in front of the mirror.

At the table, I watch the cowboy. I forget the dream
of the farm, the children lined up by height for a photo
I'll never take. I arrange my chips by color, laugh loud

with my head back, teeth bared. Knock-off Christmas music
begins its slow death march over the casino speakers.
We drift through smoke, share a bed as easily as a cigarette.

Out the window, I watch the traffic. I forget the dream
of growing old, the wrap-around porch. Tomorrow,
he will travel to a new lover's bed, and I will drive

across the country to my empty house, a road I know
by heart. He doesn't know I stole his penny, horseshoe, clover—
the good luck right from his pocket. He doesn't know

I'll fold first, my heart too raw to hold another
failed home, another fallen husband.
I'll never show my cards.

CAITLIN THOMSON

AFTERMATH OF GLORIOUS*

I know the life I had is soaked –
like a book puffed by water, no longer honey,
nothing that has been sung
about before. To think I used to be swollen
with pride about an appearance I had nothing to do with,
reckless with friends as if any stranger could be one. Till I was pinned
by my own loneliness in this box of glass, pressed against
a photo of myself that was no longer myself, because of time.

* golden shovel poem after "if you knew" by Ellen Bass

CAITLIN THOMSON

THE ROOT OF EVERYTHING IS

The land of longing has a name, I keep it in my suitcase
even though I no longer live there. Still I have the raw strength of it,
a quiet breath between storms. Still there is wind
wrapping the walls of our house with noise and sway.
Still there are men somewhere examining the bathrooms

of women and declaring them sinners. I sin every morning,
according to their laws. I set an alarm for it. I swallow
it with water, and right now it is free, but soon I will have
to pay, not for the sin, but for the option to bleed less.

They don't really have a problem with that, a friend said,
it is the killing of something that is already inside you
that is the problem, the tadpole, not the possibility of life,
unwatered. But they keep trying to take away the tools
that keep everything dry. I believe in the father, the son,
the holy ghost, and I don't think they would believe in this.

My body keeps me up at night with a stomach
that hasn't worked since childhood, with a tailbone
that my daughter gladly broke during her exodus.

My body doesn't belong to me, it keeps different hours,
and now even the small territory of control I have sought
for myself, strangers can take away, strangers
that will never meet me, that cannot smile at my child
as she counts to three, who cannot scoop her up to release
the anguish she feels of a new tooth blooming.

CHRIS VANJONACK

TELL IT LIKE A MURDER MYSTERY

So the whole thing kicks off with this dude lying dead on the floor of a gas station bathroom.

His name was Jordan Baker and he struggled with obesity. For a while he rode around town on a scooter like he was an old person. It was slow moving, but then so was he, and so it scooted along about as fast as it would have taken him to walk, anyway. For three years he got around on the thing but it was not until the final weeks of his life that he renounced it. "I'm 34," he told a friend shortly before his death. "I don't want to be getting around on that scooter like I'm 84."

The friend, a woman named Heather who waited tables at the local Perkins, smiled at this. They had been friends since grade school, and so when Jordan announced that he was giving up his scooter, Heather could not have been more relieved.[1] Maybe, she thought, he wouldn't die in his forties, wouldn't fall dead of a heart attack or a blood clot. Maybe he would live as long as the 84-year-olds who those scooters were made for in the first place.

He didn't make it to 84, of course.

Kylie, the chick who found him, was a grungy looking girl who fell in with the Goth scene her junior year of high school. She had a lip ring and a nose ring and a ring piercing her clitoris. Her hair was dyed black and she still dressed like she was trying to piss off her parents. Kylie was not in high school anymore; she was 22. Kylie worked and Jordan died at the Lucky's Gas Station on the outskirts of Black Haven, Colorado.[2]

The police arrived within the hour in the form of Captain Benson and his deputy, who, for the purposes of this story, will be referred to primarily as Deputy Skeptical.[3]

"I don't know about this," Deputy Skeptical said as they walked into Lucky's Gas Station. "Sounds like he just died of a heart attack."

Captain Benson shrugged as he opened the door. "It's a slow day," he said, a little bell going off as they stepped inside.

From behind the counter, Kylie looked up and asked, "Are you here about the body?" and immediately, Captain Benson was stricken. This girl—this gas station cashier—was beautiful, unlike anything he had ever seen before, any creature of heaven or of Earth. Everything about her—her metallic earrings, her dark bangs, her pissed-off expression—was heavenly. The sight of her took the breath from his lungs and when she spoke he heard only the trumpets of angels. "Yes ma'am," he said, holding his hat mournfully to his chest. "We're here about the body."

Kylie led them to the men's room. "He's in there," shethe said.

The men's room door was half-opened and there was a hole bashed in just above the doorknob. "What happened here?" Captain Benson asked, touching a splinter with his index finger. "Some kind of scuffle?"

Kylie explained that she bashed the hole in with a hammer after Jordan Baker had been locked away in the bathroom and unresponsive for over an hour.

Captain Benson nodded as he wrote the description into his 3 x 5 college-ruled notepad. He always had a notepad on him. He bought them in bulk from the internet and in them he claimed to write every detail of every case he ever worked.[4] "Good thinking," he said, fondly.

Deputy Skeptical shrugged. "It was all right," he conceded. "It was all right thinking."

They pushed the men's room door open. Jordan Baker was face down on the floor, pants and underwear wrapped around his ankles and his mutilated ass aimed at the ceiling. Blood was everywhere. Even the toilet was smashed, a soaking copy of *Men's Health* discarded on the floor, blood and toilet water seeping through the binding. A trail of slime led to the back wall, where a hole the size of a small animal had been smashed through the brick.

So yeah, Jordan Baker was dead all right.

Captain Benson looked to Kylie. "We're going to need a statement out of you," he said.

Kylie did her best to explain what happened and Captain Benson marked every word in his notepad. She said that he came in around 5:00pm and parked in a handicapped spot. At the time of the investigation, the best theory Captain Benson could discern as to the nature of Jordan Baker's disability was his morbid obesity.[5] Jordan had come in and asked for the bathroom key, to which Kylie replied that the bathroom was for paying customers only. At this, Jordan picked up a copy of *Men's Health* from the magazine rack and placed it on the counter. Kylie nearly laughed, assuming that he must have been purchasing it in an ironic act of cheeky self-deprecation.[6] Jordan paid for the magazine and waddled to the bathroom.

"Didn't you hear any grunts or anything?" asked Deputy Skeptical.

"I mean, yeah," said Kylie. "I just figured he was getting himself off. Glory holes are sort of an urban legend around here. Truck drivers come in all the time, waving their dicks around and asking for the glory hole. I tell them there aren't any, and to get out of here, them and their dicks. But then, sometimes, they'll buy a couple dollars' worth of something and ask for the bathroom key. Sometimes they try to dig their own glory holes—I've caught guys drilling into the wall I don't know how many times—but mostly they just masturbate."

"And what do you do with them?" Benson asked, writing as he spoke. "With the glory holes."

Kylie shrugged. "We fill them."

"Who does?" Benson asked, concerned. "You don't, do you?"

"Hell no," said Kylie. "Management hires kids off the street." She did not catch Captain Benson's palpable sigh of relief, or for that matter, the interested, inquisitive face made by Deputy Skeptical, who was running low on cash and thinking about moonlighting somewhere.

After they finished the interview, Benson gathered the remaining evidence by scraping up the slime and sealing it into the ziplock baggie that had housed his peanut butter and jelly sandwich. As he did this, Deputy Skeptical took a series of graphic photographs of Jordan Baker's corpse on his digital camera. They shook their heads one last time at the crime scene and wrapped the men's room in police tape.

On his way out, Benson turned to get one last look at Kylie. She caught his smile but pretended not to, blushing as she looked back down at the lipstick magazine she had been ironically flipping through. Captain Benson and Deputy Skeptical stepped into the parking lot, where two paramedics unloaded a body bag from an ambulance.

"Well," said Deputy Skeptical, thinking that Jordan Baker's death was just a fairly run of the mill—creatively executed—suicide, and not, as his superior was no doubt already imagining, a disturbing and unexplainable mystery that implied something great and fantastic about the world around them.

"Well," said Captain Benson, thinking only of Kylie.

—

Two weeks later, on a Friday night, Kylie showed up at a house party thrown by this guy she used to date.[7] He had already graduated—so had Kylie, with a degree in history—but his house still looked like it belonged to a college sophomore, with movie posters everywhere, empty PBRs on every inch of counter space and Christmas lights wrapped around columns and windows. He greeted Kylie enthusiastically when she came in and towards the back of the living room, a guy named Perry Pullman who she had never met before but who seemed to know everybody gave her a once over. The house was packed with 20-somethings, only a few of whom Kylie had met previously. Among those she recognized: a bickering couple on their way to a bitter, loveless marriage, a cocky bassist from a local punk-rock band called Vaguely Familiar, and this guy they called Gonna-Die-Greg.[8]

Gonna-Die-Greg spent most of the night on the fringes, never quite joining a circle of conversation but never quite shutting himself off either.[9] Girls kept coming up and offering pity sex but he kept turning them off by pointing out that the intrinsic pain and brevity of existence sort of rendered the whole hook-up thing into something of a moot point. At first, Kylie's ex—the guy whose place it was—worried that Gonna-Die-Greg might put a damper on everything, but he ended up adding a weird, anxious, end-of-the-world energy to the proceedings. Everybody who entered his line of orbit suddenly become painfully cognizant of their own mortality and how fucked up it was that they could just die one day in some stupid car crash and they all got into this really weird mood where they were making out with strangers and dancing in the living room and having quiet, unspoken epiphanies that they were still in love with old girlfriends.

Drinking out of a plastic cup in the back of the room, that guy Perry Pullman snickered at Gonna-Die-Greg and his increasingly large congregation of existentially bummed out disciples. The whole anxiety about mortality thing wasn't his style—Perry Pullman lived in the moment. He pushed pixie dust and preached about the power of positive thinking and he kept calling everyone a maniac and a bastard like he was born into the Beat Generation instead of just awkwardly appropriating their style by talking in long, rambling, run-on sentences and going on and on about *Naked Lunch* and getting drunk before midday and taking serious, mind-altering, fuck-you-up narcotics that kept his mind spinning and fingers twitching 36 hours even after ingestion. Perry Pullman swaggered from one person the next, making faux-shy talk with girls whose boyfriends were in the bathroom puking up blood or in the backyard swaying back and forth pissing diluted gin onto half-dead patches of grass when finally his eyes fell onto Kylie.

He approached her, said, "Hey," and nodded towards Gonna-Die-Greg, tapping his feet nervously in the kitchen as he explained to some undergrad girl that everything was meaningless. All smooth-like, Perry Pullman asked, "You ever think about death?"

"All the time," said Kylie. "Some guy dropped dead at work just the other day."

"No shit?"

"Found him in the bathroom, asshole torn to shit like it was put through a meat grinder." She smiled. "And here's the strangest thing: there was green slime all over the floor and a hole the size of my fist through the brick wall—the sun shining in like a spotlight."

Perry Pullman laughed. "Jesus," he said. "How the hell did that happen?"

"Nobody knows," said Kylie. She looked around the room, gave a playful grin, leaned forward and said, "It's a *mystery*," in such a weird, oddball tone that Perry Pullman almost fell in love right then and there for reasons he could not have articulated.

"That's wild," Perry Pullman said, at a loss for anything intelligent to say. "So what the hell happened next?" he asked, and then she spoke at length about the whole ordeal with the police and the paramedics and the pissed-off, improbable way with which her boss treated the whole thing like it was somehow her fault, threatening to dock the bathroom-repair fees from her next paycheck.[10] Specifically, she talked in circles about Captain Benson, who she described as being middle-aged, somewhat overweight and balding, but still sort of handsome if you concentrated really hard on his face. "He was kind," said Kylie, and she went on to say that when he looked at her, it was like he was looking past her skin and face and legs and breasts and at the person really truly inside her, because there was something about the way his eyes widened and his mouth curved into the shape of a smile as he said, "Yes, ma'am, we're here about the body," that made her really, truly feel for the first time in her life that there was someone who loved her for the tiny little pocket inside her chest that housed her soul.

Perry Pullman laughed. "Sounds like he's got a crush on you," he said.

They continued to converse through two rounds of shots, six song changes and three enthusiastic strangers wandering in with 12 packs of beer and

acting like they knew everybody. Their conversation veered wildly back and forth between small talk and big talk, making no real distinction between a debate over the ascending quality of The Hold Steady's discography and larger than life, faux-philosophical topics such as the practical nature of romantic love. An eventual lull in conversation led Perry Pullman to say: "Did you know that the inventor of the Segway died when he drove his Segway off a cliff?[11] Speaking of segues—what do you say we make our way to a bedroom?" He grinned, thinking she'd be so blindsided by the crackerjack nature of his wit that she'd get weak in the knees, wet underneath the panties, and say something like, "Kill me, love me, stuff me in a closet and cut my jugular, do whatever you want to me," but instead she smacked him, turned 180 degrees and stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind her.[12]

Disappointed and deep in the throes of sexual frustration, Perry Pullman rubbed the spot on his face where her palm hit his skin. "Prude," he said, to no one in particular. [13]

This guy hosting the party looked up at him from a bean-bag chair pressed against the wall. "That girl's a hurricane," he said, taking a puff of his joint. He coughed.

"Tropical storm, maybe," said Perry Pullman. He followed Kylie outside and found her smoking underneath the full-moonlight at the end of the driveway. "What crawled up your ass?"

She was fucked-up and lonely and had reached the point in the night where she couldn't walk in a straight line to save her life and she grabbed a handful of his shirt and pulled him close and he immediately slipped the tongue when she kissed him.

—

Their relationship began this way and it would not end until four months later, in October, atop Perry Pullman's tiny mattress in his tiny bedroom in his tiny apartment when he ejaculated onto Kylie's chest. As she wiped off cum with a

used tissue, she caught him checking his text messages and said, "I'm sad when I'm with you." They had just returned to his apartment after a brief sojourn to the Black Haven Halloween Festival.[14] They did not coordinate a couple's costume and he barely said a word in the corn maze.

Perry Pullman put down his phone and ran his hand through his hair. He really had tried with Kylie. Six days earlier she had said, "I really think I could see myself with you for a while. Like, a long while," and he had said, "Cool," and she had said, "What about you?" and he'd said, "I don't know, ok?" and she said, "How could you not know?" and he said, "I really don't, just give me some time." She gave him a week and had been thinking about it ever since. Really stressing over it. Up all night. Talking it over with the guys. Chain smoking behind the bowling alley.

He handed Kylie the loose t-shirt that she had taken off moments earlier. "Here," he said. "Put this on." She pulled the shirt over her naked shoulders and Perry Pullman's mouth hung open like an idiot as he realized what he was doing. It was one of those moments where he could see two roads all laid out before him—one, a life lived with Kylie and another without her—each running in his mind's eye like Super-8 style home movies of potential Christmas future. [15]

Nervously, after a couple false starts, Perry Pullman said: "I don't think we should do this anymore. I'm sorry."

—

In the 180 days between Kylie and Perry Pullman's first kiss and last sad hand job, Perry Pullman had good moments and bad. In his best, he pulled away from the touch of Kylie's lips, brushed the hair from her eyes, smiled and said, "You know I'm stupid for you, right?", and in his worst, he snuck off to the bathroom to pop drowsy, nighttime cold medication when she spent the night because he always had trouble sleeping with his arms wrapped around her. Off-brand cold medication in his stomach, all night long he would have weird, violent, psychosexual fever dreams and occasionally he would wake up and Kylie would

be awake also and they would start fucking without saying anything and the next morning he would be unsure if they really had been fucking or if it had just been another weird, violent, psychosexual fever dream.

In his best moments, though, Perry Pullman was present. [16]

In his best moments, Perry Pullman took stabs at self-improvement.[17]

In his best moments, Perry Pullman stayed up with Kylie and listened to her late-night theories about Captain Benson and the look he had given her on his way out of Lucky's Gas Station. She woke him up some nights just to tell him about it. "Hey," Kylie would say. "Hey, are you up?" and then she would go on and on about Captain Benson, working herself into tears that she could never explain no matter how many times he asked her to. Benson had been on her mind ever since she found the body. "I just keep thinking about it," she would say, half whispering. "I think he really loved me."

"I really love you," Perry Pullman would say, running his hand over her cheek, already unsure of whether or not it was really happening.

—

A few months later, moments after being dumped and just before Halloween, Kylie started shouting at Perry Pullman. She didn't think he was the love of her life or anything, or that she'd marry him, have kids with him or buy twin funeral plots, but she really did think he loved her. And so she was mad as hell, shouting so loudly that the elderly couple living the adjacent apartment called the police.

A bang on Perry Pullman's door interrupted Kylie in the middle of a rant about how much of a coward he was for leaving her. Perry Pullman pulled a pair of jeans over his hips and opened the door. "Yeah?" he asked, zipping his pants.

"We got a call about a domestic disturbance," said Captain Benson, standing triumphant in the dim light of the hallway.[18] He scanned the room and caught glimpse of the girl sitting on the futon in the back, wearing only a ratty band shirt and a pair of unwashed underwear.

"Kylie Heselden," he said. "So good to see you." He smiled and Deputy Skeptical could not help but to smirk at the coincidental nature of their reunion.

—

After calming things down, Captain Benson offered Kylie a ride back to her apartment. His voice was so sincere that even Deputy Skeptical could not have shot down the suggestion.

As Captain Benson drove, he kept both hands on the wheel and made gentle small talk about the weather and The Rockies and kept asking polite questions like, "Where do you live?" and "How old are you, exactly?" and "What are your favorite things to eat?" Turning to examine the backseat, Deputy Skeptical realized that Kylie was smiling.

Captain Benson parked in front of Kylie's apartment. "Walk you to your door?" he asked, and she blushed. She said, "Thank you," and shoved her hands in the pocket of her hoodie as they walked the long stretch of concrete to her door. "You look terrible," she said, and she meant it. He looked sleep deprived.

Captain Benson laughed, sort of. "It's been a long week," he said. "Are you all right?"

Kylie almost laughed. "Everything is so fucked, all the time," she said.

Being 20 years older, infinitely wiser and often kind, Benson gave a weak smile and crouched to sit on her doorstep. As Kylie sat to join him, he said, "Everything is fucked until it isn't," a statement Kylie interpreted to mean that she would continue to be heartbroken by the wrong guys until she finally found the right one. Benson smiled the way he did when they first met, like he loved her not for her body but for the untouchable, unphysical, intangible nature of her soul, and Kylie, being deep down underneath all the dark clothing and dark makeup and vaginal piercings something of a soft-bellied romantic, kissed Captain Benson on the cheek.

Benson took a moment, smiled nervously, and leaned in to kiss her again. He put one hand on her waist and groped her right breast with the other, slipping the tongue as their lips mashed together. Kylie pressed one hand against his chest, pulled away and said, "Benson," in this throaty, desperate whisper like she was in

the last act of a romantic comedy.[19] She rubbed her fingers against his hand and pretended not to notice the band on his ring finger. "You should come inside," she said.

Captain Benson managed to articulate an "OK," and nodded enthusiastically. All summer, most of fall, ever since they met he had been imagining what she looked like naked. He'd fantasized about it, dreamt about it, and sketched doodle after doodle of her naked body in the margins of his notepad—tits perky, vagina hairless and her name written invariably just past the margins, a little heart dotting the "i".

Kylie took Captain Benson's hand in her own and opened the front door to her apartment. "Come on," she said, leading him inside. "You can do whatever you want to me."

—

A little over four months earlier, back in June, as paramedics loaded Jordan Baker's corpse into a body bag, Captain Benson and Deputy Skeptical retired to the local Perkins. While waiting for their order, Captain Benson picked up the digital camera and flipped through the pictures that Deputy Skeptical had taken of the bathroom. "What did you think of the girl?" he asked.

"Who—the waitress?" asked Deputy Skeptical.

"No, the one from the gas station," said Captain Benson. "Kylie."

"Oh. She seemed all right. A little shaken." Deputy Skeptical cleared his throat. "So what do you think happened? Suicide, right?"

"That doesn't make sense," said Captain Benson. "What about the hole in the wall? What about his asshole?"

Deputy Skeptical shrugged. "Maybe a squirrel did it."[20]

"A squirrel?"

"Sure," said Deputy Skeptical. "What do you think?"

"I don't know," said Captain Benson. "I'm not sure yet." He looked back to the camera and paused when he came to a photo that spanned the entire canvass of the crime scene—Jordan's dead body, the busted toilet, etc.

"You know, it's like my mom always used to tell me," said Deputy Skeptical, deadpan. "Life is like a box of chocolates." He took a slow, measured sip from his mug. "Doesn't last long for fat people."

Captain Benson couldn't help but snicker. "Jesus," he said, setting the camera back on the table. "Jordan Baker."

At that moment, their waitress, Heather, returned to their table with Captain Benson's pancakes and Deputy Skeptical's French toast. She smiled upon hearing her friend's name. "How do you know Jordan?" she asked, placing their food in front of them.

Both men froze. Captain Benson removed his cap. "Ma'am," he said.

Heather's eyes fell to the table, where an image of Jordan Baker's bloodied, half-naked body was still displayed on the screen of the digital camera. She made a horrible whimpering noise, bent over and was sick. She cried very hard and they tipped very well.

—

In July, Captain Benson and Deputy Skeptical sat across from each other in their usual booth at Perkins, neither saying much about their personal lives or innermost thoughts. Deputy Skeptical almost never made small talk, would speak up so rarely that his voice would sometimes surprise even Captain Benson. Deputy Skeptical was very professional in that regard but also sometimes unintentionally hurtful. Finally Captain Benson offered up the words, "I can't stop thinking about it," as he pushed the final bite of a pancake back and forth across his plate with the blades of his fork.

"The investigation or Kylie?" Deputy Skeptical asked.

"Both."

The investigation into Jordan Baker's death had stalled. They had no leads, no motive, no suspect, no anything. Captain Benson brought Kylie up in conversation whenever possible though, going so far as to call her into the station for an additional round of unnecessary questioning. The interrogation offered very little in the way of answers. All Captain Benson got out of the exchange was some stolen moments with his beloved and a few parenthetical asides about how things had been at Lucky's Gas Station in the wake of Jordan Baker's death.[21]

"What are you thinking?" asked Deputy Skeptical.

"I think that there has to be more to this case than meets the eye," said Captain Benson. "I think that there has to be an angle that we haven't tried yet, or some detail we're overlooking. I don't think Jordan Baker killed himself. I think this case is bigger than both of us." He hooked the last piece of pancake with his fork and brought it to his mouth. "And I think I should call Kylie," he said, chewing.

One booth over, Heather poured coffee into a patron's mug, arm shaking as she listened.

—

In August, the investigation into the death of Jordan Baker was officially closed by the Black Haven Police Department. The campaign to close the case was spearheaded by Deputy Skeptical, who claimed to have run the slime through a lab examination. "It's just mucus," he told everybody, "nothing to see here," and the Chief of Police closed the case.[22]

"You can't be serious," Captain Benson said, stopping the Chief of Police in the hallway. "*Something* happened to Jordan Baker in that bathroom. We can't just let this one go. There could be something really big happening here."

The Chief of Police shrugged. "Either way," he said, turning his attention to an email, drafting a response. "You read the deputy's report."

Captain Benson cursed. As he paced back to his cubicle, muttering profanity, he passed by Deputy Skeptical, drinking from a Dixie cup and standing

near the water cooler. Captain Benson stopped and asked, "Just what the hell is wrong with you, anyways?"[23]

When they got breakfast at Perkins the next morning, neither said anything about the closing of the investigation. They had new, small-scale cases to deal with—some punk had stuck up a liquor store and escaped on bike, a woman had maxed out her unpaid parking tickets and they had received an anonymous, likely false tip that a pint-sized prostitution ring was being run out of the local pinball joint.

"I guess we better start pulling over bikers," said Deputy Skeptical, quietly.

"Yeah," said Captain Benson.

"We should probably check the security footage."

"Yeah."

Both men sat, eating in silence. Suddenly Captain Benson slammed his fork and put both hands onto the table. "It's bullshit that we never talk," he said. "That girl, Kylie—I'm in love with her."

Deputy Skeptical gave a weak, pitying smile. "No such thing," he said. "You're crazy—what about Josephine? What about the kids?" When Captain Benson didn't reply, Deputy Skeptical just shook his head. "She probably doesn't even know your name," he said.

—

One morning in September, Heather approached Captain Benson at his usual booth.

"Can I sit?" she asked. Deputy Skeptical had just excused himself to use the bathroom.

Captain Benson nodded. "The investigation is closed." he said. "It was a suicide."

Heather hadn't been sleeping much. The best part of her day was in the morning before she remembered that Jordan was dead and the worst part was

when she fucked guys behind the pinball place and let out an involuntary, broken moan upon imagining his face onto that of her patron. She refused to believe that Jordan had killed himself. It just wasn't like him. He had been trying. He had been eating well. He was being better to his mother. He was taking a stab at actually writing the mystery novel he'd always talked about writing instead of just consuming cheap paperbacks on the daily. And so Heather had to believe instead that Jordan had been murdered, or that something otherwise fantastic or strange or worthy of him had taken him out of this life. That he hadn't killed himself or shit himself to death.[24]

"You don't really think it was suicide, do you?" she asked.

"No," said Captain Benson. "I really don't." He bit his lip and then promised—off the record—that he would find out what really happened to Jordan Baker. As he finished his sentence, Deputy Skeptical returned, locked eyes with Benson and neither had to say anything.

—

Captain Benson and Deputy Skeptical crossed paths just before Halloween at the Black Haven Halloween Festival, both on duty but neither in attendance on police business. Deputy Skeptical had picked up a security shift and Captain Benson was there to meet Heather. They had arranged to meet earlier that day; he was going to tell her what happened to Jordan.

"Um," said Deputy Skeptical, stopping as he passed Captain Benson, perched on a park bench, tapping his fingers nervously and ignoring the half-drunk residents of Black Haven stumbling past him dressed as movie monsters.

Captain Benson stood. "All right, Deputy," he said. "Cards on the table." His eyes were bloodshot. His hair was disheveled. He hadn't been sleeping much. "I'm here to meet Heather—the waitress. I've been doing some under-the-table investigative work into what happened to Jordan. I found something; I really need you to listen. I'm going to need your help with this."

Just as Captain Benson began to explain, some girl dressed as a clown started vomiting into the bushes behind him. The grim obligation of part-time security weighing heavy on his heart, Deputy Skeptical knelt down to help her, holding the girl's hair back and telling her it was OK, all while trying his hardest to listen in on Captain Benson's rambling, rapid-fire explanation of his off-duty, off-the-record, off-kilter investigation into the death of Jordan Baker.[25]

Deputy Skeptical pointed the woman in the direction of the bathroom and called in the custodial team on his walkie-talkie. He turned to Captain Benson, incredulous. "So what the hell are you saying?"

Captain Benson took a moment to compose himself and said, with just a hint of self-awareness, "Deputy, I believe it was monsters."

Tired, beaten-up, tossed around, forced into submission by the wide breadth of the universe and covered in the stains of wretched excess from a woman who might have alcohol poisoning, Deputy Skeptical just sneered. "No such thing as monsters," he said.

—

Later that night—after a lengthy debate with Captain Benson, an emotionally taxing meeting with Heather, a call from dispatch regarding a domestic disturbance on the far side of town, a coincidental reunion with Kylie, and a somewhat uncomfortable car ride—Deputy Skeptical will watch from the squad car as Captain Benson kisses Kylie on the porch of her apartment, the whole scene playing out like a silent movie.

He will smile, say, "Well, my God," move over to the driver's seat and turn the key. As Kylie takes Captain Benson's hand and leads him through her front door, Deputy Skeptical will buckle his seatbelt and drive off, overwhelmed suddenly with tremendous hope, not only for his friend but also for everything.

He will think, nervously at first, that if Captain Benson could get Kylie to love him then maybe he can believe in things again. Maybe God is real. Maybe

love is real. Maybe something extraordinary really did happen to an obese man in a gas station bathroom. Maybe everyone would start calling him Deputy Believer.

He will dial the Chief of Police. "It's Andrew," he will say to the answering machine. "I'm reopening the Jordan Baker case. Call me." He will toss the phone behind him and accelerate past a stop sign, past Perkins, past Lucky's Gas Station, past the run-down dive bar where he drinks alone most nights. He will howl. Laugh. Smack the roof in fits of adrenaline. Look wild-eyed out the window like everything is new and sweet and otherworldly—unbridled love bursting from the soul of every nameless pedestrian and untapped, innumerable mysteries lurking underneath each familiar storefront.

END NOTES

1. He loved her and she liked him. She liked him quite a bit actually, but not enough to consider him as a sexual partner. This isn't to say that she was not sexually active. She fucked guys behind the pinball place four nights a week, sometimes loudly and sometimes violently.

2. Black Haven was founded in 1880 by a miner named Gunther Black who struck it rich during the Gold Rush. He intended for Black Haven to be the pride of Colorado. He thought there'd be gold underneath every household; he thought they'd all be plutocrats.

3. During Deputy Skeptical's second week at the Black Haven P.D., the station went on a team building retreat to the barren roads of Wyoming to drink beer and look up at the sky and make UFOs out of airplanes. While everyone else was pointing and laughing, Deputy Skeptical said something to the effect of, "No such thing as aliens," which eventually led into, "No such thing as selflessness," and, following that train of thought to its logical conclusion, "No such thing as love". His co-workers began calling him Deputy Skeptical and made hurtful comparison to Dana Scully from the 1993 FOX television program, *The X-Files*. Deputy Skeptical resented the comparisons. It was Fox Mulder that he most identified with, most felt a kinship to. Deputy Skeptical loved Mulder, cried for him, wanted to believe.

4. Captain Benson was on his 216th particular notepad. Back home, he had devoted an entire cabinet shelf to them, all arranged in chronological order starting from the day he and his family first moved to the town. He called it, "The Archive of Black Haven."

5. "Or maybe he was just an asshole," Deputy Skeptical theorized.

6. The purchase had been made sincerely. Towards the end of his life, Jordan Baker was making an active effort to turn things around. During those final mornings, he woke up before dawn and ran through the suburban sprawl that couched his mother's home. As he ran, he waved at his neighbors, he smiled at the milkman and he ignored the mocking cat calls shouted to him from the backseats of passing school buses. He ran for his health, for his mother, and—tired, exhausted, sweat soaking through his XXL t-shirt and filled to the absolute brim with a quiet, hopeful optimism—he ran for Heather.

7. They didn't date very long, or at not least long enough for it to be some serious thing that they never got over. After three weeks of coffee dates and nervous shy talk, she invited him up to her bedroom. They stripped clothing and pressed their weird lips together and Kylie said, "Come on, stick it in," and he said, "Shh, let me just come on your tits," and without another word from Kylie he arched his back and beat off onto her breasts, an inaugural sexual act so powerful and degrading that Kylie broke things off with him later that night as he ran his fingers lightly up and down her naked backside.

8. Everybody called him Gonna-Die-Greg because in May his girlfriend, Jenny McCreary, hung herself in the basement of her childhood home while a repeat of *The Twilight Zone* played on the television set in front of her and ever since then, all Gonna-Die-Greg ever talked about was death. He would be hanging out with friends and then out of nowhere just tilt his head back and say, "I can't believe we're gonna be dead one day."

9. It was only June, and so guys kept coming up to him and saying, "Shit man, I'm so sorry about Jenny," to which Gonna-Die-Greg would reply, "Shit man, I'm so sorry about all of us."

10. "Oh yeah," said Perry Pullman when Kylie gave a description of Deputy Skeptical. "I know him." A while back, Deputy Skeptical had arrested Perry Pullman after finding him loitering late at night within close proximity to a home invasion. He had not been involved with the crime, but despite his repeated claims of "I didn't do it, you gotta believe me," Deputy Skeptical took him in and threatened to press charges until he was finally exonerated by an anonymous tip. "That guy's an asshole," he told Kylie.

11. Technically, the man Perry Pullman referenced here, one Jimi Heselden, was not the inventor of the Segway but rather the owner of Segway Inc., producer of the Segway personal transportation system.

12. Perry Pullman had first heard this statement—"Kill me, love me, stuff me in a closet and cut my jugular, do whatever you want to me,"—In a anecdote his buddy Henry told him about Jenny McCreary, Gonna-Die-Greg's recently deceased girlfriend.

13. Perry Pullman was way off base—Jimi Heselden, owner of Segway Inc., had been her uncle.

14. The ominous-sounding nature of the name, "Black Haven" had become a kind of inside joke for the residents of the town. This was especially true during the weeks surrounding Halloween, when they went all out on haunted houses and pumpkin patches and half-off horror pictures at the theater on Friday nights.

15. Among the images that played out in Perry Pullman's head as he imagined a life with her: moving out of his shitty apartment, moving in with Kylie, getting clean, going straight, quitting his job at the hookah lounge, getting a job in hospitality, maybe, or retail, purchasing a loosely fitting button-down from the thrift store for his first day of work, fucking on something other than a twin sized mattress in celebration of his first day of work, impregnating Kylie, smiling nervously as he puts his hand over her pregnant stomach, saying, "Hot damn, hot damn, I can feel it kicking," holding his newborn child, wet with placenta and fragile with potential, exchanging vows at City Hall, coming home every night worn out and strung out and exhausted for weeks and months and years on end until finally he can barely recognize the mature complexion of his face in the bathroom mirror, getting pissed at Kylie over nothing, getting pissed at Kylie over everything, shouting back and forth until both of their voices are hoarse, sharing the same bed each night anyway, holding Kylie as she sleeps, arms wrapped around her soft tummy, throwing the ball around with his child, indulging his classist father-in-law, getting into fights with teachers on back-to-school nights, going all out on birthdays, going all out on Christmas, loving his life, loving his child, and being achingly, desperately, hopelessly in love with Kylie for each of his remaining moments.

16. An example: once, in July, while walking hand in hand from the downtown movie theater, Kylie and Perry Pullman heard disturbing, otherworldly moans coming from behind the pinball place. Being very much at his best and very much on the cusp of falling in love, he said, jokingly, "Probably just ghosts," and Kylie smiled and tightened her grip. It was the little things.

17. Another example: after getting blackout drunk at a party one night, he and Kylie really got into it and Perry Pullman—drunk, not himself, the devil inside him—screamed at her, just loud and shitty and forceful enough to scare them both. After an emotional, painful, hung-over next morning, Perry Pullman set aside not only booze but also marijuana, ecstasy and salvia, explaining to confused friends at house parties that he wasn't drinking because, "I want to see what I look like sober," a vague but just charismatic enough explanation to satisfy even his most persistent enablers.

18. Both Captain Benson and Deputy Skeptical had been in attendance at the Black Haven Halloween Festival when they got the call about the domestic disturbance, although neither was technically there on official police business.

19. She did not know his first name.

20. Captain Benson was reminded then, of an old trick that his middle school English teacher had taught him to remember prepositions. "Prepositions," Mr. Ackerman had said, "are things that a squirrel does to a tree." *The squirrel goes up the tree. The squirrel goes down the tree. The squirrel goes into Jordan Baker's asshole.*

21. According to Kylie, the gas station had shut down for two days, they still hadn't fixed the men's room, and a week earlier, a fidgety guy wearing a bow-tie came in to buy a box of cosmic brownies, asked her for her name and said, "You, Kylie Heseldon, have the most important job in the universe." Before she could ask him what the hell he was talking about, two men dressed in black who identified themselves as federal agents walked through the automatic door and arrested him on charges of child pornography. As they dragged him out of the gas station, he started screaming, "Keep the holes closed! Jesus Christ, Kylie, you gotta fill the holes!" Kylie told Captain Benson that she didn't have any idea what he was talking about. "We haven't had any glory holes in weeks," she said.

22. Deputy Skeptical never actually submitted the slime for examination. Rather, the Chief of Police had offered him an incentive to sweep it under the rug. "We don't need any unnecessary attention. You're still pretty new here, but if you scratch my back, I scratch yours, you dig?" the Chief of Police had said. And so of course Deputy Skeptical flushed it. The next morning he found an envelope stuffed with cash in his mailbox. He had to do it. He needed the money. He had even started moonlighting as a security guard.

23. Captain Benson didn't wait for a reply, but if he had, he might have received the following as a detailed explanation of just what the hell was wrong with Deputy Skeptical: when he was five years old his older sister punched him for believing in magic; when he was six his father revealed—drunkenly—that there was no such thing as Santa Claus; when he was eleven his mother told him that he would never be an astronaut; when he was fourteen Sally Simpson asked him out to the homecoming dance as a practical joke; when he was seventeen his favorite English teacher was dismissed for having sexual intercourse with an underage girl; when he was twenty-two his father died of lung cancer after several months of exhaustive chemotherapy; when he was twenty-eight the *Lost* finale disappointed him; when he was twenty-nine his wife had a miscarriage; when he was thirty she left him, saying only: "I just don't love you anymore,"; when he was thirty-one he moved into a Motel 6 because he couldn't afford a place of his own; when he

was thirty-two he moved to a new town and his co-workers gave him the nickname "Deputy Skeptical", even though he had been trying particularly hard to be social and forthcoming and—holy shit—optimistic with a new group of people.

24. She arrived at this epiphany following a conversation with her acquaintance, this guy that everybody called Gonna-Die-Greg, but who she insisted on calling Gregory. They had met a few months earlier at a support group. "We're going to keep each other going," Heather kept telling him, but he never wanted to talk about anything but the inevitability of death. Finally, towards the end of August, he interrupted her as she listed off three things for which she was thankful, a daily ritual she hoped might improve her often-negative mindset. "Your friend, Jordan," Gonna-Die-Greg had said. "I know that it's different, sometimes, but it's weird—that's not how Jenny acted at all towards the end. "

25. Benson's investigation looked like this: immediately following his last conversation with Heather, he started calling shops surrounding Lucky's Gas Station and asking if anything unusual had happened lately. Most of the shop owners had nothing to report, but the manager of the video rental store had a strange story about something breaking through the plumbing in the basement, knocking over the anime rack and smashing through a window. Intrigued, Benson began making house calls and ringing the doorbell of every home within a three mile radius. He eventually came across the small, dilapidated home of Iraq War veteran Samuel McKenna. When asked if he'd come across anything strange lately, McKenna replied, "Oh yeah, I got a doozy in the basement." He led Benson downstairs where he had a small creature the size of a rodent locked in a dog crate. Wings like a bat and all covered in slime. "Jesus Christ," Benson said, taking a step back as it jumped at the bars and growled like a garbage disposal. "Where the hell did you find that thing?" McKenna just laughed and said, "I got a hole in the backyard that you should probably see." He leaned forward. "There's something *underneath* Black Haven."

SARAH TEREZ ROSEBLUM

IMAGINE HOW GOD FEELS

If your name is Jane, chances are you woke up lonely. The name is to blame. It's gotta be. The problem can't be where you live, because at this point, you've lived so many places that before heading home you think, not just, did you take the F train or the Q, but wait, are you leaving behind a car? Did you park before eight and snag the early-in discount? Exchange nods with the attendant at the Figueroa Street entrance? Beneath the Picado banner, he warms his palms above a black and white television set as if by a fire.

And which car did he wave you through to park, way up on the garage-top lot overlooking silver/blue buildings, cardboard box homesteads, and once, a jaunty coyote, slipping between jammed up cars? The Volvo? The Kia? Neither are vehicles you've owned, but both you've driven. The Kia belonged to the Actor. The Volvo to the Secretary. Despite rheumatoid arthritis, and a lifetime in Columbia, Missouri, she remained optimistic, till her son was killed in some peripheral war.

At home, you try several keys before the right one fits your lock. You never asked for one, *not one key*. You never ask for anything but cash upfront, still people hand over their belongings. Just like they tell you their stories, just like they let you into their souls. Getting in, you are disappointed to find, is easy; it's getting out that's hard.

On your counter, scrubbed clean this morning, you set the cold, metal mess of them, then detach the Newspaper Editor's from the group. Personalized, doused in Mariners colors: silver, green and navy blue. She handed it over after your second meeting, whereas the men tend to bide their time. When they offer theirs over, they pretend it's an afterthought. "Might as well use this." Same way

they'd address a secretary or personal assistant, an underling stopping by to water the plants.

The Editor's condo overlooked the space needle.

"I like to imagine I live in a treehouse," she told you. A pair of chihuahuas danced around her feet.

The showers you insist on are for your own benefit, but you've found the transaction soothes both the germaphobes and those whose self-concept demands they imagine you at ease in their homes. In the Editor's bathroom, you rinsed off quickly, but she wanted you to luxuriate. She'd turned on the heated tiles and provided a glass of water, slice of cucumber floating on top. To appease her, you left the shower running and went through her medicine cabinet. You've still never met anyone else who stores her toothpaste tube in its cardboard packaging. Hers stood on end next to a dropper of contact solution and a bottle of Klonopin, which, no, you didn't touch, because that's not your style.

When you emerged, she'd set takeout on a weathered table in front of the wood-burning fireplace.

"Afterward," she said, "I can rub your feet."

She pulled back the flaps of three brown paper cartons, revealing warm biscuits, date jam and goat cheese, roast chicken resting on delicate greens.

Later, she sighed beneath you. You'd have predicted she'd force your face into the pillow, but her submission made a deeper sort of sense. Her chandelier made none whatsoever. Liquid and pink. Afterward, you stared at it as she stroked your hair.

"I hate it." She followed your eye. "It belonged to my ex wife. It's one of two things she didn't keep."

When you told her you loved it, she shook her head. "You would." Her voice was affectionate. Familiar. She'd only known you three days. You didn't ask about the second thing, though your curiosity thrummed low like arousal. Tolerance, you'd learned was preferable to the sting of an unfulfilled request. Besides, she wouldn't have brought it up if she weren't poised to tell.

"I could make you french toast in the morning," she offered as you stood to leave. "Won't you be cold?" She and the dogs trailed you to the door.

You told her forty degrees and weeping rain was nothing compared to a Chicago winter.

"Is that where you're from?" She didn't wait for your answer, rather placed the key lightly in your palm. She'd have given you anything, probably. In your short time together, she gave you: three flats of blueberries, an ipod shuffle, a package of creamy card-stock which read: *"I don't mean to sound slutty, but please use me however you want. Sincerely, Grammar."* Also grappling hooks, either because she loved metaphor or mountain climbing, hard to tell.

"This was hers too," she said, of the key.

In your own apartment, you've strung yellow/white Christmas bulbs around the front window. In the last one, you hung glowing jalapenos, the apartment before that, purple lanterns like envelopes of light. You like it dim. No weepy reason, like you can't abide your own face in the mirror. Your eyes have just always been sensitive. Growing up in Pasadena, your mom told you sunglasses were for movie stars and you'd probably break them, so you scrawled blue magic marker across a sheet of saran wrap and stretched it across your eyes.

"You're sweating like a pro-wrestler," your mother's doctor/boyfriend told you. "They wrap themselves in plastic to make weight."

"Go take it off." Your mother's hair fell in waves down her back and the doctor sat behind her on the couch, brushing it, like they were best friends at a sleepover rather than two consenting adults.

Beneath the twinkling lights, you don't eat over the sink, but you don't set a neat place at the red table either. Here's just another way you're someone in between. This apartment has a fat window ledge, not quite a seat, but wide enough for

your bony ass, so you spread a paper towel on it, then tuck your knees to your chin. You eat tortilla chips or apple sauce or cocktail mushrooms. Lately you've been on a radish kick, but only if you're in for the night. When you were just getting started, before you had rules about showers and a cancellation policy, you went with a client to Poquito Más. He'd taken hours to come and you were starving, so while you waited for your burrito, you collected piles of radishes from the salsa bar and chewed them hard and fast. He'd been the sort who paid for a whole evening, wanting his dick in your mouth but also your hand in his. Across the table, he recoiled when you burped quietly; a month later, he still handed over his key.

So did the Actor, a curly-haired giant who looked like an immigrant, maybe because of his fish-hook nose. This was in graduate school when you thought you were a playwright. Loose with information back then, you drank just enough to confide in one or two classmates, so the Actor knew how you brought in extra cash. At a friend's party, you made the mistake of finding him charming. Not just the parts he meant you to, but what those parts hid. Outside he lit your cigarette then noticed your hands, pink with cold.

"Here." Pulling black gloves from his coat pocket, he shook them out, held the opening of one to his lips. "Let me just blow some ennui into this glove," he said.

One of your mother's boyfriends was a mathematician. Each time he took the two of you to dinner he refused to calculate the bill.

"You do it." He'd slide the check and his credit card toward your mother. "I'm off the clock," he'd say.

You're like that with sex. In your personal life, you don't have much, even in school, when you really just dabbled, one or two a month, to supplement

your stipend. Before that your client numbers skewed higher, because what else was there to do in Pasadena, really? The Rose Bowl only came once a year. When you do have sex, the off-the-clock variety, it's after you've known someone for months not weeks. You made an exception for the Actor. Because of the thing with your gum.

You were at his place, watching a Sondheim play that had aired on PBS in the '90s. One classmate still had a VHS tape and brought her player and another kept shrilling, "Johanna Gleason, dolls, she's the real deal."

A surprisingly solicitous host for a guy without curtains, the Actor distributed red wine and cold beer. You didn't realize he'd watched you scan the room for a garbage can until he held out his hand for your gum. You waited. He beckoned, so you placed the gum lightly in his open palm.

You stopped him when he first leaned to kiss you, and asked how he felt about your job.

"I'm not put off," the Actor said. "I'm only in awe."

After that neither of you mentioned it outside of sex, when he'd come up with questions. Once: "So you like going down on women?" Another time, "What's the most you've ever been paid?" You talked about his sexual past too, okay? His first time with some lesser member of the homecoming court. Afterward she'd opened the closet in their hotel room and released three laughing football players into the hall. His last girlfriend, the teaching major. She'd called him a naughty little boy.

"I couldn't even look at her after that," he said. "Condescension and dirty talk are not the same thing."

You got a job at Kinkos, which meant more hours for less money, and frankly more abuse, less respect. But it was worth it because of the dry skin on the actor's elbows, the way he perspired in his sleep and the span of his thick-knuckled hands. Another great thing about him, about all actors, really: their ability to transform their countenance without seeming to try. When the Actor

casually quoted a professor, you saw her flare momentarily beneath his skin. It was like having your own personal water park, or a Slavic trained seal.

On the morning you awoke early and took a shower before heading to class, the Actor's single towel was in the wash and you found only hand soap, so you made do. You were drying off with your sleep shirt when he skidded naked into the bathroom, eyes slitted against the light, hair standing seven feet above his head.

"My god, I'm so sorry, I didn't leave you a towel." He offered to run to the laundry room, accessible only via icy outside stairs. "You're just so resourceful," he said when you told him not to bother. You were already clean and poised to leave.

At night you'd wake to find him propped up, watching you. Open on his lap, the computer tinted his ruddy cheeks blue. "It's a good thing alcoholism doesn't run in my family," he said once, "because sometimes all I can think of is my next beer."

Wasn't his mother an alcoholic? Careful not to lecture, you murmured the question into his heavy arm.

"She can go months and months without drinking," he said. "It's only a few, maybe ten times a year some restaurant owner calls me to come pick her up."

After a performance once, you drove with him to one currency exchange after another. None would cash the thousand dollar check he'd earned for a commercial, not without calling the business that issued it, which they couldn't after five p.m. His features seemed to turn darker, more exotic with each refusal, until finally he looked like a murderous Soviet spy. You knew not to suggest he simply deposit the check at his bank and wait for it to clear. His account had been overdrawn for weeks—he made no secret about this—and the payment would only get sucked up by fees. Instead, you touched his cheek then turned on

the radio. Sang along to something lightly top forty until he rewarded you by smiling and squeezing your hand.

When he started following you around with the dustpan you thought maybe he was joking. By then, you'd begun to think of his dingy garden apartment as your own.

"Can you not leave crumbs on the sofa?" He'd ask. "If you have to drink coffee while you put on makeup, can you at least not drip in the sink?"

What's a sink for if not dripping, you wondered. He still held you to his chest when he slept, but sleeping seemed like all he did. Depression, you figured. You knew he was prone. A few times he roused himself to head out for an audition, order in Mexican or spray down his keyboard with cleanser after you'd borrowed his laptop to type up a paper while he drowsed.

Finally, you confronted him. You said he felt unreachable, critical. Was he upset about money? You'd been to the cash exchange place countless times by then.

"I wasn't quite ready to call it," he said, "but one thing I owe you is honesty. I guess I've stopped feeling excited about you."

You stared at the Beethoven bust set on its faux marble pedestal, a prop from some production his freshman year.

"And I'm sort of concerned about your hygiene," he added. "A person needs more than hand soap to get really clean."

The next day, you called, wanting the expensive moisturizer you'd left on a shelf in his medicine cabinet and the soft grey sweater you kept in your own special drawer.

"I've got an audition," he said, "but I can leave my extra key under the mat. Just make sure you put it back when you're through."

In a fourth grade essay, you described yourself as a "sleepless insomniac" and your teacher wrote "redundant" in red. So then you thought redundant was a synonym for sleepless, until once when you were showing off for your mother's boyfriend,

the dentist or the linguist, he disabused you of that too. Disabused, not abused. Christ. Your insomnia wasn't your mother's fault. Not the fault of the long line of boyfriends making use of her bedroom just a thin wall away. She liked intelligent men who couldn't quite believe someone so blond had chosen them, not when they'd slunk dateless into their own senior proms. In adulthood, the mens' anger had gone subterranean; now wealthy or at least salt-and-pepper-distinguished, they thrilled at their newfound power to humiliate and refuse.

You'd lie in bed listening to sex sounds or clinking glassware or sometimes your mother weeping quietly into the phone. Staring at the glowing constellations stuck to your ceiling, you imagined tying one end of a rope to yourself, then getting in a car and driving straight across the US. A special kind of rope, invulnerable, no matter how many holsteins it snared. No matter how many semis strained against it or river barges it caught on, it would remain too strong to snap.

One night you overheard your mother talking about the computer programmer who did stand-up on weekends, how he liked to take her straight out to dinner after sex, liked people seeing her hair a blond nest of messy, cheekbones blackened with mascara, liked people knowing how deep he'd plunged his cock down her throat.

"Which is fine," your mother said into the phone, "which is no big deal, really, there are so many worse things a man could do."

That night you stared at the constellations till they blurred and imagined the rope around your waist and you making it all the way to Rhode Island, the other end still looped around the mailbox at the base of your drive.

Rice crackers tonight, and when you've finished, you shed your tight skirt and suit jacket. You've draped your white eyelet dress over the chair you bought at a swap meet in Missouri. Upholstered in slippery white brocade, the feet curved wooden claws. From outside, you hear horns and laughter and brooms on cement, but all you see through the window is a billboard.

"Being taken for granted?" it asks. *"Imagine how God feels."*

This apartment isn't like the Editor's, overlooking budding tree limbs and distant sky.

You throw on a jean jacket and lock your door, choosing the right key on the first try. What you miss about the Figuroa parking attendant is his daily recognition, but New Yorkers don't need cars, and cabs come quickly when you wear your white eyelet dress.

At the corner, you drop the envelope containing the Editor's key into a rare mailbox. Most have gone the way of phone booths. It might be the last remaining one for miles.

You only drove the Secretary's car once, the day her optimism caved like a tent with a broken pole. She took pills, too many, though maybe she just lost count. She was always in pain from arthritis she'd first noticed, she told you, in college when the boy she liked pointed out the twist in her left ring finger, how her knuckles swelled like his grandmother's. Before that, she'd always thought she was normal, but now she knew better, thanks to the boy.

After she took her pills, she managed to drive herself to the hospital, but once her stomach had been pumped, they called you.

"Greg was still listed as my emergency contact," she said when you arrived by bus, your hair—long then—swept into a kerchief, your grey shirt ringed with sweat. She sat slumped in a chair, the skin on her face pleated, her usually pink cheeks grey. "I told them he was dead. When they asked who to call, yours was the only number I could remember. I was always too paranoid to program it into my phone."

"My sister, my best friend, my neighbor, I couldn't think how to reach any of them."

As she talked, you led her through the automatic doors that slid open like a mouth exhaling summer's hot breath.

"But that's the world we live in, isn't it? The people you know best become names on a screen. The things they used to tell you over coffee reduced to black and white bursts."

In the passenger seat she rested her forehead against the window.

"Not to mention those fucking emoji. My sister's a lunatic for those."

You adjusted her mirrors, and pulled onto the frontage road. "I'm glad I was here." You almost weren't, but you didn't tell her. And by that evening you were once again on your way out of town.

LIS SANCHEZ

FLOR DE MUERTOS

Since you left, a grim spirit has entered my face,
turned it to stone. Such is the way grief works

and why all summer I've braced for when you come up
from the cemetery in Oaxaca
by teaching my face to accept small seeds into its cracks.

Nights, I cry out to the clouds,
Let lightning strike this slab!
Let these fissures open like sluices!
Let rain and offal course over this rock face!

Already, invisible fingers are probing
the small pockets of gall behind my eyes.

Root girths swell and form tough forks,
loosen the strata of my forehead.

Soon, whole layers will fall away,
humus will fill in my faults
and from my fecund face will burst marigolds,

their centers made acrid by blood and bile
but never by tears, whose torrents
could deaden their bitter scent.

My blossoms in their eagerness
will mimic a torch of monarch butterflies,
lighting your way up my walk.

How my petals will shiver under your fingers.
How you'll bury your face in my bouquet.

How you'll breathe deeply, how you'll breathe,
my love, until you're dizzied, sick and sated

and can't take any more
of the stench you've sown by being dead.

MELISSA GINSBURG

DROUGHT

For drowning, drought.

For distance, silt

In streams after rain

Travels. Measurement

Is a winglength

By which to calm

Your drowning down,

A wall to hang

Desire on. For thirst

A loose nectar

Vial. Eat your fill,

Dial your drowning

In. As wind blows

Silt in drought. As

A dowser stills. A well

Unfills and shines

The bodies out.

MELISSA GINSBURG

PRAYER

This time next year
What will I
Be reading what will I

Think will I
Speak
Finally as a bruise

From the black garden
As the eye in the center
Of tenderness

REBECCA VALLEY

HAIBUN FOR MY MOTHER, STANDING IN THE SNOW

You open your mouth. Inside there is a snowglobe. On the nightstand a cup of water has frozen. It expands, and the shards cut my cheek in the shape of two bodies, separated by a frosted pane of glass.

In my one hand my mother is asleep on the sofa, watching headlights hit the wall over and over. In the other you are dozing in the bathtub, your mouth open, fingering the damp rim of the drain.

Now I am a raw scrape on my mother's knee. I am the purple skin peeling off her breastbone, when the bandage came off and no one was there to see it.

In the cat's eye, a snowglobe. My mother stands inside it, touching the dogs in their own language. I turn a cup over, inspect the damages. The fragments paint a kaleidoscope on the wall.

ERIN ELIZABETH SMITH

THE HOLLER BRIGHT WITH DYING

When autumn goes paprika
and orange, Dot would almost think
herself in Pennsylvania
where the Endless Mountains
were Spanish stew before the brown,
where she lost her mother
to plastic-bottled bourbon,
then the smoky recovery
that follows. Years later,
Dot sits on her front porch
while her neighbor noises
his land with a hand-cranked
weed whacker, her cigarette
butts turning her flower pots gray.
She wants to see herself
differently—the rabbit hutches filled
with the wriggling pink of kittens
consumed, the spot of blood
in a cracked egg, how gin settles
in each triangle glass. She wants
to be happy for the life
she has ruined for no one,
alone here in this quick-shifting heat,
where the season promises
a kind of dying
we all sometimes need.

BRUCE BOND

MANDOLIN

after Picasso

From a studio apartment, downtown,
across the rise and fall of monuments

and fortune, you just might see a ball
come crashing through an old façade

and think, what better place to hang
a portrait, and what better art than this:

this girl and her mandolin, her abstract
flesh pulling at the manhole, her hand

gloved in the hand from another point
of view, her figure, as the painter saw her,

heard her, broke her into orphaned
bolts and pieces, a girl exhumed, plotted,

diagramed, scored to the ashen drone
of trucks that feed the warehouse district,

where painters pitch their lofts and work
among the toxins. Eyesores of the new

dark age, they need us to redeem them,
as desire needs its dissonance to fade

and fading needs its music and mallets
need a good job to beat their fractured

measures through the alley. Call them
instrumental then, each deafening ping

a world apart, a world, and thus, a part,
so when the past collapses at your door,

you will not turn away. You will hear
the chime of random metal in the drawer

you closed long ago, when you were small
and progress was a glorious colossus,

when every blackened engine was an angel,
and with a little care, it hummed. It sang.

JOAQUÍN ZIHUATANEJO

FOR THE PRIVILEGE OF KICKING YOU ONCE

After "Every Hard Rapper's Father Ever: Father Of The Year" by Douglas Kearney and the Argument Between My Abuelo and My Father at My Naming Ceremony

because it rhymes with walking
stalking brown women
all that idle Faulkner talk
she, wet seed wild
he, hot blind sun
we must be

because it rhymes with mocking
new world ball-hawking
shucking our gods—I mean crops
locking your doors
keep on knockin'
but you can't

because it rhymes with fucking
a tousled Puebla dress
a cowboy belt unbuckling
an infant's lips suckling
a father's fist knuckling
it all evaporates when you lean on it

JOAQUÍN ZIHUATANEJO

XOYACALTITLAN

A home or a place of decay

What you hear
Dried cochineal beetles
Crushed in molcajete
What you feel
Florid warmth rivers
Onto maguey fiber
Much too common for cotton

A framed seascape shatters against hard wood floors

What you hear
Canon fire
What you feel
A rapier
Slicing through tongue
Leaving you
Silent as shorn flesh

The slamming of a door

JOAQUÍN ZIHUATANEJO

VISITING HOURS

1

Tortillas blacken on comal,

The smell of cornfields ablaze,
charred husks blister then rise like murmurations.

Hinges groan as bed folds back into couch;

Our people gave the world the concept of zero.

Key turning ignites engine;
a boy's hand becomes diving bird outside truck window
in the cab a corrido is sung;

strangled sobbing;

candles on altar in sala glow;
pine forest bisected by asphalt;

carcass rots in the sun;

overhead, shell made of black feathers;

key turning opens cell;
when do visiting hours begin?

2

I lay on the hood of a 1984 Chevrolet Monte Carlo,
a plastic bag dances within wind,
you shatter the reflection of constellations
with stone a boy's need for destruction.

Tonight the smell of rain lingers;
tomorrow morning, we will wake sore
in the neck from seats that will not lean back;
you whisper to me in the darkness,
something about la llorona and death,
Is that the best you got, I ask?
Somewhere in the black
a frog or toad hops into the water.
You join me on the hood as I gaze at night sky,
silent, so I ask again, Is that the best you got?

They're all dead you know, the stars we gaze at.

BERNARD FERGUSON

under fireworks, the immigrant remembers his feet

the rocket's climb into the mouth of summer & its slow bloom in the sky
i name it honestly: violence as spectacle

my apologies, i grew up in a wide belly
a harsh tear of sound & a culling of men

along my street & now i run my hands
down the blinds when a storm rolls in

no beauty to be found in a thunder's rattle that ravishes
what has not welcomed a ravishing

once, a body was drained of what sweat it had to offer
& then pressed into the earth, an eternal kiss with the dirt

& this is where i appeared
a fresh pair of kicks & no instructions

there is a new country birthed at dawn
& in it running remains the same

a gambit against what swallowed
those who came before us

kudos to you, oh reaper
your ensemble has lined 26th ave with such gorgeous tones

i have checked the locks twice
& touch nothing even with so much to touch

i am sure there is comfort in these things that shed
& blossom until they are unrecognizable

but it was under a rainless night like this one
that i wished for a street without wounds

forgive me, i cannot be blamed for my feet
& what they might do under this recklessness

this sky slowly becoming itself
forgive me for what begins in the chest

this thump & fervor that bathes each rib
forgive me the small moments of reprieve

the wind's rattle a softened whisper around
each one of my necks

even in stillness, the marrow of me
churns for what i know to exist

these fingers bend & flinch
beneath your dusk spilling with sound

& pull me toward a place
without teeth

GLENN SHAHEEN

COURTESY AFLOAT

Here in the close quarters of strangers we call
a city I try to go unnoticed, hoping I will fail,
that somebody will notice me anyway. Ruinous
music and yet replicable. Breaths within my head
I've meant to take and hesitated. Harmonies,
melodies, there's more beneath every song, little
mistakes in the recording, the errors more
interesting, the stumbles what make our moments,
hm, is it lived in? Some evidence, a human unsure
of the next fret, language a half step behind brain,
a competor, a competitor, whatever. Poets online,
I know them, I know their ad campaigns, they are
so sure about themselves, so thrilled and full of
a confidence or false bravado I can't weave. I'm
just trying to figure out the gears beneath my skin
in a way that hopefully leaves me in one piece.
I'm an Arab and proud of my ability to cause
little quakes within white strangers at the airport, in
a Wendy's late at night, them deflating a bit when
they hear my voice uncut by accent. I'm still
a bad man. I'm still a servant of Death. So, I'm
afraid, are you, suckling from the opulence of
the rotten teat of our country's corpse. It's ok,
we're good at rot, we're trained in it, the rich
assure us fester is a luxury, cheeses, delicacies,
little maggots jumping from the rind only add
to the experience. I used to want to make replicas
of disaster. Frozen moments in destruction,
miniature in text or plastics on the dresser. Get
close, look at this mess that was a human, a human

you could perhaps even stand to be around for ten
minutes. Well-honed images of bees, flowers,
the poets have dumped anger and insecurity
somewhere and I fell out too. Still writing little
writhing things onto the page, still wanting to
make ugly a beautiful world. Two notes a half step
apart. Each alone could tell a story but together
they tear the narrative apart. The momentum
of the skyscraper suicide who dies of fright before
hitting the ground. Do I believe in love, yes, do I
believe in destruction, well, I'm trying to master
it, to use it on my skin like a salve. A leftist with
a gun but I'd rather it was stolen, unbought,
manifested from a light night desire for no profit.
Give me a great man's death and I can get behind
it if it saves a great many people. A hero only
interesting if she doesn't act like a hero. Death
waning from sight, at least, the meaning of it.

LEONA SEVICK

HOMECOMING

Each time I return to this house that doesn't
feel like my house, I enter like a thief or maybe
its victim. Pushing on the door with gingerly
dread, I listen for alien sounds that whisper
turn and run back to wherever you've come
from, wherever you've been. Its tidy, hushed
dignity does not dissuade me from opening
every closet on the second floor or dropping
down to my hands and knees to survey
the space below each bed. I test the glass
knob on the attic door, look for the folded
paper I've stuffed into its crack—assurance
that the door has not opened, that this house
has not betrayed me. The potted plants eye
me with limp need as I practice these rituals.
Patient as an empty chair, this house shows
no signs that it's had enough. Gently sighing
from time to time, it reckons that the years
will pass and one day I'll come home to it
and forget to test all the window locks.

MOLLY BESS RECTOR

PORTRAIT OF MY TWIN AS FUKUSHIMA DAISY

The fallout fields grow daisies with faces
stuck together in a permanent kiss.
Not the result, necessarily, of radiation, but still
you can trace in them certain obsessions:
how the cells fold and redouble, genes not content
to stop after producing just one eye.

In another life, my sister and I are mutants.
We like the word 'split,'
we stroke its sweetness with our tongues,
admire it like a god: that which gave us form.

In this life, we are simply lucky—separate, intact—
our mother's body the godlike thing,
the hardworking thing that wouldn't stop at one.

Not so unusual, these kinds of anomalies,
a body's odd compulsion to do more
than enough, to produce, say, the two eggs,
two hundred white petals
now bending to the grass the single daisy stem.

My sister tells me her blood sings to her.
And perhaps the singing is why she splits
the south, takes weeks driving
Northwest from New Orleans—
sleeping in her car at national parks,
her profanities blooming glossy against traffic, burnished—
learning to quiet that racket in the veins.

She takes the practical approach to nuclear destruction,
insisting we should live in Portland
while we still can, before the radiant electrified waves
make it across the Pacific.

JAMIE LYNN SMITH

HOTHEAD

But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.

I Corinthians 11:15

I was born with a big hunk of bright red hair. Not auburn, not ginger, not strawberry blonde, but just straight-up Crayola-crayon red. Granted, I arrived in 1974, and so the photos from my youth have an odd, kodachrome cast to them, as if viewed through an enormous pair of sepia-tinted sunglasses. Still. The hair is pretty dang red.

Like me, my hair resisted management: slipping out of barrettes, refusing to be tamed, curling at the edges. My mother would coat my hair with olive oil at night and I would wake up looking like a chia pet. Grandma used to chide me that my hair was the only thing louder than my laugh, and suggested with pursed lips that both the follicle and the child needed *training*. Red hair was loud, unruly, announced itself without meaning to—it was everything I did not want to be, and could not help.

My younger sisters were born towheaded, Gerber-lipped, chill. My mother liked to dress us in matching outfits, and often chose pastels: delicate lavenders, eggshell blues, and worst of all— pale pink. My sisters' peaches-and-cream complexions glowed, but I looked as if I had food poisoning. In family pictures, I stand scowling like a distempered animal, my skin jaundiced by a butter-yellow terrycloth romper.

It was Easter, 1984 before I finally put my foot down with the costuming. That year, our Easter dresses were pistachio tinted dotted-swiss aberrations that poofed out over these god-awful crinolines, and required itchy white tights. I snarled and fussed, until finally my mother relented- allowing me to choose my own outfit. I wore a plaid dress, leg warmers, clogs, and crocheted poncho to church. She got her revenge—in the Easter photo, I look like the triumphant doyenne of a bohemian Scottish dance troupe, while my sisters flank me in pale-green frothy lace, decorated like cupcakes.

It wasn't just the outside of me that was redheaded, and this is where I wonder about nature, nurture, and self-fulfilling prophesy. Nearly all my personality flaws and rash decisions were blamed consistently on my coloring—fearsome temper, too-big personality, wildness, creativity, possible witchcraft. Being a redhead gave me license to fly, and I soared, dancing this weird line between reveling in and reviling my difference, the otherness with which I was inflamed.

My sisters—The Cupcakes—were compliant good-natured girls who spent hours watching reruns of *Gidget* and playing mild rounds of house and school with their creepy Cabbage Patch Dolls. I scorned The Cupcakes for the company of a neighbor kid, Jason. Before he moved away, we were far more likely to be found in the woods building a human catapult out of lumber stolen from the barn, attempting to melt down various metals over an open fire, or sharpening sticks so that he and I could joust on our bikes.

"That redhead will drive me to drink," my mother would say, banishing me to my room for some harmless stunt or another involving the nail gun, Jason, and guerilla warfare.

Overwhelmed with my management- follicular and otherwise- my mother often delegated disciplinary matters to my stepfather. He raised me with the same misguided good intent and hapless bafflement as he did The Cupcakes. I never, ever think of him as my stepfather, although that's what he did: he stepped up and fathered when my biological father bounced. We had a bond of mutual admiration forged in orneriness, love of diesel-fueled equipment, and a tendency to believe, "Aw hell, I can do *that*!" More often than not my mother's rants about my "narrow scrapes with death, fire, and dismemberment" elicited little more than my stepfather's raised eyebrows.

"Aw, the girl's just high-spirited," he'd say, "That's a redheaded colt for ya!"

He'd slip me a low-five when my mom wasn't looking. Later, when the poor woman retired to bed with several aspirin and a stack of Harlequin romance novels, my stepfather would laugh at my antics and explain with great patience that if I was going to make a *proper* moonshine factory, I'd need to craft a still, procure at least six feet of copper coil, and use a soldering iron.

#

I was the first redhead born in nearly a hundred years; the last redhead was my great-grandfather. James Louis Hendrickson had twelve children: all brunette, brown-eyed, tall. Not a single redhead among his fifty grandchildren. When I was born—the first grandchild on both sides, the first great-grandchild, copper-headed—it was a sort of triumph. Sort of.

My parents were young, scared, unmarried, and in over their heads the summer of 1973 when I was misconceived. By then there was Roe vs. Wade, Marvin Gaye was crooning "Let's Get it On", *Laugh In* went off the air and *Mary Tyler Moore* came on, the National Archives were on fire in D.C. and plenty of soldiers were still over in Vietnam. The rest of America may have lost its virginity, but Knox County, Ohio was stuck at third- maybe even second base. Things like the counterculture, the sexual revolution, and —most importantly— The Pill hadn't made a dent in my mother's consciousness.

When my mother told her boyfriend she was pregnant, he dumped her, accused her of sleeping around and denied culpability. She took my biological father to court for breach of promise and child support, but again- it was the seventies, so there was no DNA, only a blood test that was nebulously reliable.

She brought me into the courtroom, where the judge got a gander at my hair and a sub-gander at my biological father's matching mop. It's my understanding that there wasn't much of a trial left to be had. Paternity was established by follicle. For my mother, my hair provided both victory in court, and a constant reminder of a man who did her really, really wrong.

To make matters more painful for my mother, while my paternity case was in litigation, Craig married another woman- a redhead. They celebrated the birth of their daughter - red haired, blue eyed, pretty as a lark—with an announcement in the local paper including a family photo that showcased brand-new wedding rings on their interlocking fingers. By 1974 there were no scarlet letters, stocks or whippings for adulterers…but a scarlet-headed, fatherless child was no different a letter when you were twenty and desperately single—and your ex bandied about town with his new wife and daughter.

So my mother put me in my grandparents' care until she married. No one made a bigger deal of my red hair than my grandfather. He meant no harm, drawing attention to it every chance he got- for him, it was a great point of pride— "There's my girl!" his voice would boom, "It's the redhead!" I believe now that the love he professed for my red hair was a move to claim me, to affirm my

belonging, perhaps even to teach me to be kinder to myself. This was not the least bit comforting when the entire fourth grade referred to your frizzy orange mop as "Tang."

The unwanted attention my hair drew aggravated a host of nagging questions I could not answer: Who was I? Was I maybe a witch? Would I grow up to be a "frisky little sorrel filly" like the dirty old man in the park suggested? Would my inherent nature– perhaps evil, nefarious, and shirking as my absent biological father's– somehow rise to the surface?

#

Having red hair seemed to in some strange way erase all bounds of civil behavior– one would never, for example, approach a total stranger in a supermarket line and ask her "Whoa! Where'd you get that magnificent pimple?" or declare "I just love obese women!" Why was it then socially acceptable to harass little bright scarlet *me*—struggling to be unobtrusive, minding my own business, trying not to glow in the dark— by bellowing, "Hey! Where'd you get that red hair?" or, worse yet– ruffling my mane and chortling, "I just love that carrot top!"

Oh and Good Lord have mercy, the questions. When I was a little girl, they were fairly innocuous. In adolescence men began to say increasingly alarming things to me in a tone that both terrified and outraged me.

"I just love redheads."

"My wife is a redhead you know…"

"Does the carpet match the drapes?"

"Well hello, fire crotch."

"Hey– red!! Show me that burning bush."

"Redheaded women buck like goats." (*Et tu, James Joyce?...and eff you, too. I know Joyce wasn't directly addressing me, but I **loved** Ulysses until that damn line, at which point the entire Joyce Honors Seminar side-eyed me, smirking, while I held the book over my face, casually propping it up with a middle finger and staring down anyone who made the mistake of eye contact.)*

Some of these nasty things were said to me at work, some at parties, some in bars, some at family reunions, some waiting in line at the DMV, and once – in a cloakroom, where my boss tried to feel me up on the premise that every other redhead he hired had given him a blow job, *so why not me*?

I further resented my hair for the cultural comparisons and associations red hair elicited: a saloon girl, a fallen woman, the poster from *Reefer Madness*, that crazed ginger in the orgy at the end of *Clockwork Orange*—- although, I never really minded being thrown in the same lot as the stripper Tempest Storm (her autobiography is *amazing*). It is tiresome, though that every female with red hair is portrayed as whorish, garish, hyper sexualized, criminally insane or all the above. I have yet to date a man who has not complimented me on my hair, often in some kind of anticipation that I will be sexually wilder, capable of inducing a spectacular degree of ecstasy simply because of the amount of pheomelanin raging in my follicles.

Every redhead I know has these kinds of stories. Many stories are far worse than mine.

#

Much as I hated what I endured—the teasing, the sly winks, the gross comments from mouth-breathing degenerates—I could never bring myself to change my hair color. (Ok, I used to indulge in the occasional box of henna, but to my horror it only made the hair redder, and me, angrier). I couldn't be me- and ostensibly this outrageous- without my cussed red hair.

The closest I ever came to parting company with it, was when I sold it. I left my small hometown the summer after my freshman year of college and went to live in Chicago. I was ready for not just change, but transformation: eager to live in a city, to escape the cornfields, forests, and trade the chaw-chomping good old boys of my youth for glib urban professionals who owned more than one suit, and knew how to pronounce the names of all the wines on the menu. My roommate, intent upon aiding my Liza-Doolittle makeover, set me up with an appointment at a high dollar salon where Tony, the stylist, promptly offered me a free cut and $350 for my locks- waist length, never permed or colored, healthy and thick as rope.

"Cash?" I asked. Tony nodded, smiling without showing his teeth.

"Cut it," I said.

Tony put it in a braid that hung down my back, something my mother had done nightly when I was a child. The scissors beat their wings around my cheekbones, cool metal skimming my neck. Tony lifted and trimmed and snipped

and tugged, pronounced me "not the least bit tender-headed." I could not bear to look, keeping my gaze averted to my lap on the wispy pile of hair accumulating there. Finally, Tony sighed in pleasure, rubbed some sort of lavender- scented product into my scalp, and showed me myself in the mirror. I remember running my hands through it and thinking of an old horror film.

Mia Farrow. Mia Farrow in *Rosemary's Baby.*

Tony and the other stylists gathered around the chair, cooing and complimenting me, passing around and petting at the long braid now detached from my body. He handed me seven crisp, whispering fifty dollar bills. I suppressed the urge to wail.

I hardly recognized my own reflection in the storefront windows when I made my way home. Coworkers gasped when they saw me. Men stopped holding the door for me at the supermarket, offering to carry my groceries, and giving up their seat on the El. My parents sent me a postcard in response to the snapshot I mailed them, that said "TOO SKINNY. EAT SOMETHING. NO MORE HAIRCUTS! P.S. —DAD WORRIED YOU ARE GAY."

Unfortunately, my shorn scalp did nothing to abate the redhead comments, but relieved of my big wig of red hair – and to a degree, my appearance of femininity- I felt off-balance. When I tried to brush my short little baby-doll hairs, I would automatically extend my arms too far, tugging at hair that wasn't there any more, and leave unsightly scratches at the nape of my neck. I had one style and one look with this pixie-girl business. No more ponytails, messy buns, braids, barrettes, clips, or headbands for me: I was a one-trick pony. A roan, with no mane to comb.

A few weeks later I bumped into Tony on the street in Lincoln Park. He took my face in his hands, tilted it to the light and said I should come back in for a trim, then asked me how I felt.

"Like Samson," I said.

#

I wonder sometimes if my life might have been different if I were blonde; then again it certainly would have been different if I were, you know, *calm*. By the time I was thirty, I had a solid reputation for a short fuse—a tendency to ignite that got me into trouble, whether commuting on public transit, standing in beer lines at

concerts, picnicking at a nude beach on Lake Austin. En route to meet colleagues for happy hour, a stranger stopped in front of me on 57th street declared that he loved redheads, and licked my hair. My coworker's boyfriend witnessed the whole thing from the window of a bodega, later reporting to Kalli that before he could get outside he'd seen me belt the offender with my handbag while pedestrian traffic made a wide, wide berth around me.

"Why didn't you help her?" Kalli demanded.

"Help *her*?" he said. "She was chasing him down the street screaming *I'LL KILL YOU*!"

These sorts of anecdotes were funny only because, miraculously, I somehow tended to escape unharmed, if not unhinged. Friends started to say things to me like, "Perhaps you should be more careful," or "You know, you could have been killed…" and even, "Please, for the love of God, stop being such a jerk."

"James means fierce, " I'd say, shrugging off friends' suggestions I tone things down a bit. "I guess if the hairs on my head are numbered, I'll keep the Good Lord busy counting them."

The fact of the matter– and the problem—is that I prided myself on the outrageous behavior that red hair allowed me just as much as I resented the unwanted attention. The red–tinted glasses through which I viewed the world let me thrive on a certain perverse satisfaction in imagining myself to be some sort of badass force to be reckoned with.

It was wearing on everyone– except, it seemed, on me. My friends began to look tired when I regaled them with yet another story about putting some perv in his place. My friend Susan confronted me after I had a spat with a woman at Whole Foods.

"You get angry about everything," she said. "The woman was in a wheelchair."

"So what?" I countered. "I would have let her ditch me in line, if she'd asked instead of just cutting in. But when that bitch called me a nasty ginger—"

"You were *being* a nasty ginger."

"That isn't the point."

"Perhaps," Susan said. "It would have been better for her to just call you an asshole."

She suggested I take up breathing exercises and get acupuncture. Others suggested yoga and meditation, less caffeine, Bible study, more sex, a vacation, getting my thyroid tested. I never paused my kvetching long enough to listen, let alone consider that my so-called red problem wasn't really a problem at all—but one that others might be eager to trade, swapping their mountain of suffering for the molehill of pettiness I perched on, shouting and fighting windmills with my handbag. For a time, in my mind, I believed my scenes were defensible on the premise that prickliness *was* me: each red hair hackling in alert, my way of growling *Beware of Dog.*

#

There's no denying I was entirely, overly sensitive and that my cantankerousness was inexcusable. These are the kinds of things, though, that make me wonder about nature, versus nurture. To what degree is my hypersensitivity simply the result of "search for the devil and she will appear"? To what extent is my exasperation a reasonable outcome after spending a lifetime of St. Patrick's Days explaining over and over again that I am not Irish, I'm from *Ohio?* As for how St. Patrick's Day affects temperament, I challenge you, reader, to spend a full sun's journey during which strangers pinch you and coworkers talk you like you just fell off a Lucky Charms Cereal Box….and we'll see what a jolly good sport *you* are by lunchtime. I was fed up with that nonsense by the time I was ten; by the time I was thirty I'd learned to wear a hat all day and take lunch at my desk when the dreaded holiday came round.

I skipped the office party, of course, and worked late in my classroom, dreading the long walk home up Second Avenue, past the row of Irish bars. When I could put it off no longer, I went to fetch my things from the main office. There were leftovers from the festivities— a plate of sugar-cookie shamrocks with Kelly-green icing and a few half-eaten loaves of soda bread scattered around, some parsnip chips. A string of foil Irishmen sagged from the ceiling, their spindly legs and rusty beards gently bobbing in the breeze from the heat vents.

"What's all this?" I groused, digging through the mess to try to find a book I'd left on the table that morning. My friend Kalli was also gathering up her things. "It was a party," she said. "We missed you, Smith."

I launched into a tirade about my hatred of the holiday and my hair.

Normally people cut me off, but she just packed up the cookies, wrapped the soda bread in plastic baggies and cleaned the table– listening through my entire misanthropic and anti–follicate recitation.

"I never knew all that about you," she said. "But then again… nobody knows anything about you. They're not allowed to."

"Thanks," I said, because I didn't know what else to say. She was right. This was true. I was awful, a lot. And a lot more awful than I needed to be.

Kalli shrugged and smiled. "I wish you didn't hate it," she said. Her face was wry and her voice tentative, as if extending a hand she worried I might bite. "I—hope you don't mind my saying this, but I think red hair is beautiful."

Her kindness took all the wind out of my careening mills. For the first time in years—maybe ever— I said, and meant, "I never mind hearing it from my friends."

I don't remember the walk home that night, or feeling particularly nonplussed or light on my feet, or inexorably changed. But what I do remember is cringing—then, in the teacher's lounge and now also— to think of the pettiness that fueled me in my misspent, reddened blush of youth. I mistook my own flame for inflammation. I remember thinking about how foolish and how useless was the quaint and convenient notion that I could do no better by others or by myself because of some random genetic trait. The problem was never my hair, the problem was a combination of my unwillingness, or inability, or bewilderment over how to channel the energy and vitality and sheer red volume of myself into a flame that lit up the room, instead of a wildfire that left a swath of scorched earth.

It feels ridiculous to look back at how long it took me to learn to accept a sincere compliment and take a joke, for God's sake. Other than the guy I hit with my purse (who I maintain to this day, totally had it coming) it's embarrassing now to recall how I crushed the enthusiasm of others because of my own resentment; and how long it took me to learn that graciousness costs me nothing, but a lack of generosity is an ever–mounting debt that can never be paid in full.

My hair is long again, longer than it's been since I was a little girl, when my mother combed and braided it into submission each night into tight twin pigtails that I curled around my head before I went to sleep, dreaming of what I would become and who I was to be. But now there are long, white strands creeping into my crimson mane, and while I have no desire to return to my

former, surly–girl self, oh, oh, oh– what I would give for this hair to stay that red, forever.

WILLIAM CASS

LIFEBOAT

Michelle finally gave up on sleep altogether shortly after four o'clock and quietly got out of bed. She gathered her clothes in the darkness, looked once at the slumbering shape of her husband, Paul, and went into the bedroom that had been their son's to change. She took her fleece jacket from the coat rack next to the front door, left the house, and drove through their silent Coronado neighborhood towards the beach. In her rear-view mirror, she could see the bridge to San Diego lit like a tossed blue ribbon against the night sky.

There were no other cars along the curb where she parked at North Beach. The crash of the waves was her only companion walking down to the shore and along it. A full moon bathed the sand and froth with dim white light. She went in her usual southward direction, her balled fists deep in the pockets of her jacket against the early February chill, her mind filled with the same haunting thoughts that had been chasing sleep for months. She'd often taken such solitary pre-dawn treks, but never so early.

It was low tide, and she walked in the wide swath of wet sand with her head down, so she didn't see the beached rubber lifeboat until she almost stumbled up against it. It sat still at an angle where the last whispering crawl of the waves almost reached it. An outboard motor tilted up at its stern. The only things inside were a nearly empty jug of water, a gas can, and an enlarged Google image of shoreline in a plastic sleeve. In the moonlight, Michelle could clearly see words written in Spanish on the image's edge; the shoreline in it was the one that reached from North Beach down past the Tijuana border to Puerto Nuevo. A collection of footsteps leading from the boat dented the wet sand towards the dry; she followed them with her eyes until they became indistinguishable with others heading in the direction of the boulders that bordered the street.

Michelle looked up and down the empty beach. She stood roughly halfway between the entrance to North Beach and the main lifeguard tower perhaps two hundred yards away to the south. The tower loomed tall, dark, and silent while she considered things. The lifeboat didn't necessarily mean migrants from Mexico. It could have drifted loose without being noticed while being towed behind a cabin cruiser. It might have involved drug smuggling, although it seemed likely that it would then have been used to return the way it had come. It could even have been stolen by some teenagers on a lark from one of the harbors nearby and then dumped and left to be found. But, there were the Spanish words, the shoreline's image, the water jug, and the retreating footsteps that made the first seem most likely. Michelle looked at the boat and frowned. She felt for her cell phone, but hadn't brought it, so retraced her steps back up the beach to her car and drove away.

At home, she closed the door to the study to keep from awakening Paul and called the police. A woman at the station took her report. She didn't ask Michelle what she was doing on the beach at that hour. When the call ended, Michelle looked out the window. A gray cusp of dawn muffled the sky over their back hedge. She thought about the day ahead, the things that she needed to prioritize at work, those that awaited her when she returned home, and her heart made its familiar drop. She blew out a breath and went down the hall to get ready.

She'd showered, changed into work clothes, and was pouring coffee into a travel mug when Paul came into the kitchen and put his arms around her from behind. She set the pot down on the warmer and put one hand on his. He was a big, heavy man, and she felt his girth against her and his chin on her shoulder; she could smell the sourness on his breath.

He mumbled, "Morning."

"Hey," she managed.

"You go for your walk?"

She nodded. He began to sway a little behind her. She moved grimly with him for a moment, then said, "I have to go. I'll be late."

She separated his hands at her waist, picked up the travel mug, and slid by him to the back door.

"When will you be home?" he asked.

"Regular time."

"Anything special you want for dinner?"

She shrugged and regarded him in his rumpled T-shirt and plaid pajama bottoms. His downturned, goofy eyes that she'd found so endearing a decade earlier in college when they'd first started dating were still full of sleep, and his short brown hair was matted. He kissed his fingertips and extended them towards her. She did the same and left.

After she'd started her car in the driveway, she sat in it and looked at the rusted birdfeeder outside the kitchen window that they'd mounted together when they'd first rented the house. She saw a light go on in the bathroom, and saw his bulk pass its frosted window.

"I admire you and respect you," she said softly looking at the window. "But, I don't love you anymore."

She said the words slowly. They were ones she'd practiced many times before. She thought of the lifeboat and wondered if whoever had been in it had gotten away.

Michelle had a meeting to attend as soon as she got to the non-profit where she worked, so she waited until she was alone in her office afterwards to bring up the private email account on her computer she'd set up after meeting Stan. That had been at a NPO conference in Los Angeles, but he worked and lived in San Jose. She'd been struck by his eyes when she first saw him across the room during a break, and a few minutes later, he appeared at her side and introduced himself. The attraction was instantaneous. They exchanged cell phone numbers and agreed

to have dinner together that evening in the hotel restaurant where they were both staying.

At dinner, they drank and talked freely. He was divorced with no children. She told him about her husband and their son who had passed away – his severe disabilities and lengthy hospitalizations. They went upstairs to his room afterwards for a nightcap and lay propped up on the bed because there was only one chair. She admitted how unhappy she was in her marriage; he told her about his ex-wife leaving him after having an affair. The night got late, and they ended up falling asleep next to each other with the bedside light still on. At one point, she awoke and felt his hand on her hip. At another, she heard him turn the lamp off, the room went dark, and he replaced his hand where her skirt met her untucked blouse. She didn't return to her own room until she heard birds tittering outside.

She hurried and checked out almost immediately. If he'd gotten up by then, she had no way of knowing. But halfway down the freeway to San Diego, she glanced at her cell phone when it pinged on the seat next to her. It was a text from Stan that said he missed her already. She pulled to the side of the freeway, hesitated, then responded, "Me, too."

They saw each other a dozen or so times over the next year. Each visit involved him flying to San Diego, getting a hotel room, and then her finding a way to take time off work to meet him there. Their intimacy deepened quickly, but she was careful to put physical limitations on things. The most they did was kiss, hold each other, and talk about possibilities together. Each time scared and excited her more.

When she opened her email that morning after the meeting, the usual smile creased her face when she saw his message waiting. In it, he said that the job he'd told her about at his NPO was definitely hers if she wanted it, but he could only keep it open for her for a few weeks. He said he loved her. She sat back in her chair and re-read the message, then the entire string of exchanges under the

subject line: "Move Here". She felt the beat of her heart in her temples. Finally, she typed, "Oh, let me think! Let me see. XO."

For dinner that night, Paul had prepared corn chowder, salad, and crusty bread. The dining room table was set and wine poured when she arrived home. While she changed into sweatpants and a flannel shirt, he dished out the food and brought it to the table. The overhead light was on; he left the candles unlit.

As always, they ate mostly in silence. Paul told her a little about his day teaching at the elementary school in town; the school had received good news about a fine arts grant they'd applied for, but he'd also had to deal with a parent after dismissal who was upset about a report card grade. She forced herself to find something to say. She told him about a fundraising event she'd put final touches on. She told him the soup was good. She watched him turn his attention to it, slurping regularly as he did. She knew that if he had any inkling that she was unhappy, he would attribute it to the lasting effects of their son, Ben's, death two years earlier. Whenever she rebuffed Paul's attempts at lovemaking after Ben's birth, he said he understood; she knew that he excused any moodiness or change of behavior in her and attributed it to Ben. But, she didn't really think he suspected anything about her deep discontent; he was just too oblivious, too eternally hopeful. Those were things she'd once found ingratiating in him, too. The truth was she'd been unhappy even before becoming pregnant and hadn't found a way to tell him. She understood that the impression she gave him at the time was that she was just as enthusiastic about trying to have a child as he was. She avoided thinking about that, but felt both angry and a blush of guilt when she did.

He burped, chuckled, and apologized. She watched him rip apart a piece of bread and thought of how little they'd grown to share over time. It was true that Ben's troubles had consumed them for the six years he'd been alive, but that diminishing had begun early in their marriage. It hadn't taken long for Paul's

innate generosity of spirt and selflessness to begin irritating her. He always insisted on staying overnight at the hospital with Ben during his admittances so she could get some rest; he took Ben to most of his doctors' appointments. She grew weary when people stopped her in the grocery store to tell her what a good teacher he was, and she bristled at the devotion he showed to the old lady next door, taking out her trash each week and mowing her lawn. Even when Michelle made passive-aggressive attempts to rouse him – setting her unwashed dishes in the sink, leaving the shower so it dripped, discarding her dirty clothes at the foot of the bed – he cleaned up after her with good-natured silence.

After dinner, they sat in front of the television. She flipped through the channels from one side of the couch while he graded papers on the other, glancing up now and then at the screen. She waited her customary hour or so, then handed him the remote, and headed to bed, saying she wanted to read. She closed the door to their bedroom, changed into her cotton nightgown, got under the covers, and checked her cell phone for texts. The last one she'd sent Stan before leaving work for home read: "I've settled. I have." The bubble with his response was there; it said: "Don't settle. Live." She touched the narrow box to reply and heard Paul come into the kitchen. She listened to him pour the rest of the wine into his glass, drop the bottle into the recycling bin under the sink, and return to the living room. She tapped the screen on her phone and wrote: "Sleep well, my sweet."

The weekend arrived. They spent it like most others. By the time Michelle had returned from her morning walk on Saturday, Paul had gone off with his watercolor kit and easel to paint somewhere. She spent time in the study on things she'd brought home from work, checking her texts and emails often for messages from Stan as she did. When Paul returned in the early afternoon, he mowed their lawn and the neighbor's and finished other yardwork while she cleaned the house, paid bills, and did laundry. Later, he got things ready for the bar-b-que, and she

went to the library to check out a movie on DVD; they'd settled on comedies. After dinner, they watched it from their separate perches on the couch, then he turned out lights and locked up while she got into bed ahead of him and feigned sleep.

On Sunday morning, he played pick-up basketball with the same set of guys he had since they'd moved there. She substituted her morning walk with a weekly yoga class at a studio nearby and had coffee afterwards with some women she'd gotten to know from the class; when they shared stories of disappointment or dismay about their husbands, which was often, she said nothing. After lunch, he went to school to lesson plan for the week ahead while she repeated her Saturday morning routine of work from the office, emails and texts, or fiddled with some sort of project. That Sunday afternoon, she reluctantly returned to cleaning out their son's bedroom closet and came upon the paper bag of rectal valium syringes that had been put there shortly after his death. Those had been used when Ben had a seizure that lasted more than five minutes. They needed to be disposed of at the police station, which she'd intended to do long before, but had forgotten. So, she got her jacket, brought the bag out to her car, and drove to the station.

Its entry area was empty except for a big, brown-haired female officer who sat behind the counter typing on a computer. She paused and looked up with a combination of weariness and expectancy. Michelle explained to her why she was there and then extended the bag. The officer took it from her and said, "We can take care of that for you."

Michelle felt her brow knit. "I recognize your voice," she said. "You took my call a few mornings ago about the lifeboat on the beach."

The officer nodded. "That's right."

"Was anyone apprehended?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "The matter was turned over to the border patrol."

Michelle stood nodding. Something spread over her. She said, "How often do they catch migrants who try something like that?"

The officer shrugged. "I wouldn't know that either."

Michelle nodded again. "That was pretty brazen, don't you think?"

"I guess so," the officer said. "Yes."

Michelle nodded once more and said, "Well, thanks."

She left and returned to her car along the curb in front of the station. She didn't start the engine right away. She stared out the windshield at the white brightness of the afternoon and thought about whoever had been in that lifeboat. What had led them to make that attempt, and how had they found the courage to risk everything and try?

Michelle sat breathing deeply for several moments. Finally, she rubbed her forehead, reached for her cell phone, and checked her texts. There was one from Stan that said, "Please come." She looked out the windshield again towards the bridge and then replied, "I might."

She didn't decide for sure until the following Sunday when she was rummaging in the desk of the study looking for a postage stamp. There weren't any in the general drawer they kept for things like that, and none in hers, so she pulled out Paul's drawer and found a Valentine's Day card on top. Her name was on the envelope, and there was a brochure inside the card from a bed-and-breakfast up the coast. On it, he'd drawn a heart and written: "February 20th and 21st...for my lover and wife."

Michelle closed the drawer quickly, a numbness spreading over her, followed by a chill. "I can't," she whispered. She shook her head. "I just can't."

A whimper, like a small cough, escaped her, and she thought of the boat on the beach. She shook her head harder. Her hands trembled as she lifted her cell phone, scrolled to the last text with Stan, and tapped the words: "I'm coming."

When she sent it, her heart immediately began to race. She felt untethered, disoriented, filled with disbelief. She felt as if she was standing on that beach with miles of empty sand on both sides of her.

The preparations were surprisingly few and easy. She began by getting a new checking account and credit card at a bank other than the one she shared with Paul that had branches throughout the state. That was something she could always undo if she changed her mind. She waited a day to see if she would, but felt no different, so told her boss at work that she'd found a new job she couldn't pass up and would be leaving. Her boss congratulated her, said she'd be missed, but that the timing was good because they'd just completed a big project together, so Michelle wouldn't even need to give two weeks' notice.

That same afternoon, she left work early, bought a new cell phone, and texted Stan the number. His reply was almost instantaneous: "When?" She was jittery with anticipation, anxiousness, and excitement, so was afraid to delay; she replied: "Tomorrow."

She stopped at their bank, transferred some of their joint account into her new one, and got her birth certificate and Social Security card out of their safety deposit box. Paul was still teaching when she got home, so she gathered some personal documents, her laptop, and a few clothes and toiletries, packed them in a duffel bag, and put that in the trunk of her car. She took no photos.

There was still an hour or so before Paul would arrive home, so she busied herself in the kitchen making fresh marinara sauce and pasta for dinner. She moved frantically and almost cut herself chopping onions.

When Paul came through the back door and into the kitchen, she was stirring a pot at the stove. He stared at her wide-eyed, grinned, and said, "Well, this is a nice surprise."

She made her best attempt to return his smile, then turned back to her stirring. He came behind her and kissed the top of her head. "Get off early?"

She nodded.

"Well, that's good. A treat." He moved off into the bedroom where he called, "I'm going to change and take out the trash. Then I'll open wine."

That night, she didn't even try to sleep. She'd cracked the window next to her for the fresh air it provided and lay on her back staring at the ceiling in the darkness. Paul snored quietly, his large figure turned away from her under the covers. She heard the final ferry of the night belch its horn at the pier several blocks away. Not long afterwards, the night's last southbound train rumbled faintly into the downtown station across the bay. She found herself blinking rapidly and drying the palms of her hands against the sheets. Towards dawn, she listened to a siren from the fire station whine its way across town. She put a hand over the thud of her heart and whispered, "Stop."

When the first light crept under the curtains, Michelle got up and drove to the beach for her walk. She stopped where the boat had been. It was low tide again; there was no sign it had ever been there, no footprints, no mark where it had sat angled in the wet sand. Just the quiet whoosh of the small waves and the long, curving stretch of shoreline to the south. In the blush of dawn, she could just make out the tip of Mexico in the distance. Her fingertips tingled; she felt short of breath.

She stayed long enough to be sure Paul had already gone to school when she returned home. She went into the study, took out a piece of paper, started with his name, and then wrote the long-practiced words she couldn't bring herself to say to him in person. She added only: "I'm going away." She signed the note, set it on their bed, and left the house again quickly. She stopped at the trash cans in the alley where Paul had moved them. They hadn't been picked up yet, so she took her old cell phone that she'd sealed in an envelope and buried it in one of them.

Driving away, a daze engulfed her. Cresting the bridge, and then watching it disappear in her rearview mirror, it seemed as if she was watching herself from

afar. She turned on the radio, fiddled through stations, then turned it off again. It was a gray morning. She wouldn't have minded if it began to rain; the thought of it brought something like relief. She tried to hum, but felt a lump crawl into her throat as she did, so stopped. She glanced at the clock; if she kept a good pace and traffic cooperated, she could be in San Jose by late afternoon. Stan would be waiting; he'd written that he would be taking the day off work. They would meet at the door of his townhouse. She'd ring the bell, or perhaps he'd be watching for her and would come out to the car. They'd embrace, and then things would start anew. Suddenly, the image of Paul in his classroom writing on the whiteboard invaded her thoughts, followed by one of a newly swaddled Ben being handed to her in the delivery room. She shook her head to make them go away; she bit her lip.

Once she passed Del Mar, there were few cars on the freeway. The wide ocean stretched out to her left, and foothills on the other side were lush green after winter rains. A long train going north pulled abreast of her between the freeway and the coast, then gradually moved on ahead and disappeared. She passed the fields of flowers east of Carlsbad, a vast checkerboard of colors. She thought about going there each year to visit them, first with Paul, then with Ben and Paul, and for the past two years, not at all. Her grip tightened on the steering wheel. She was leaving that, leaving all of it, behind.

ARTIST FEATURE

J. LEIGH GARCIA

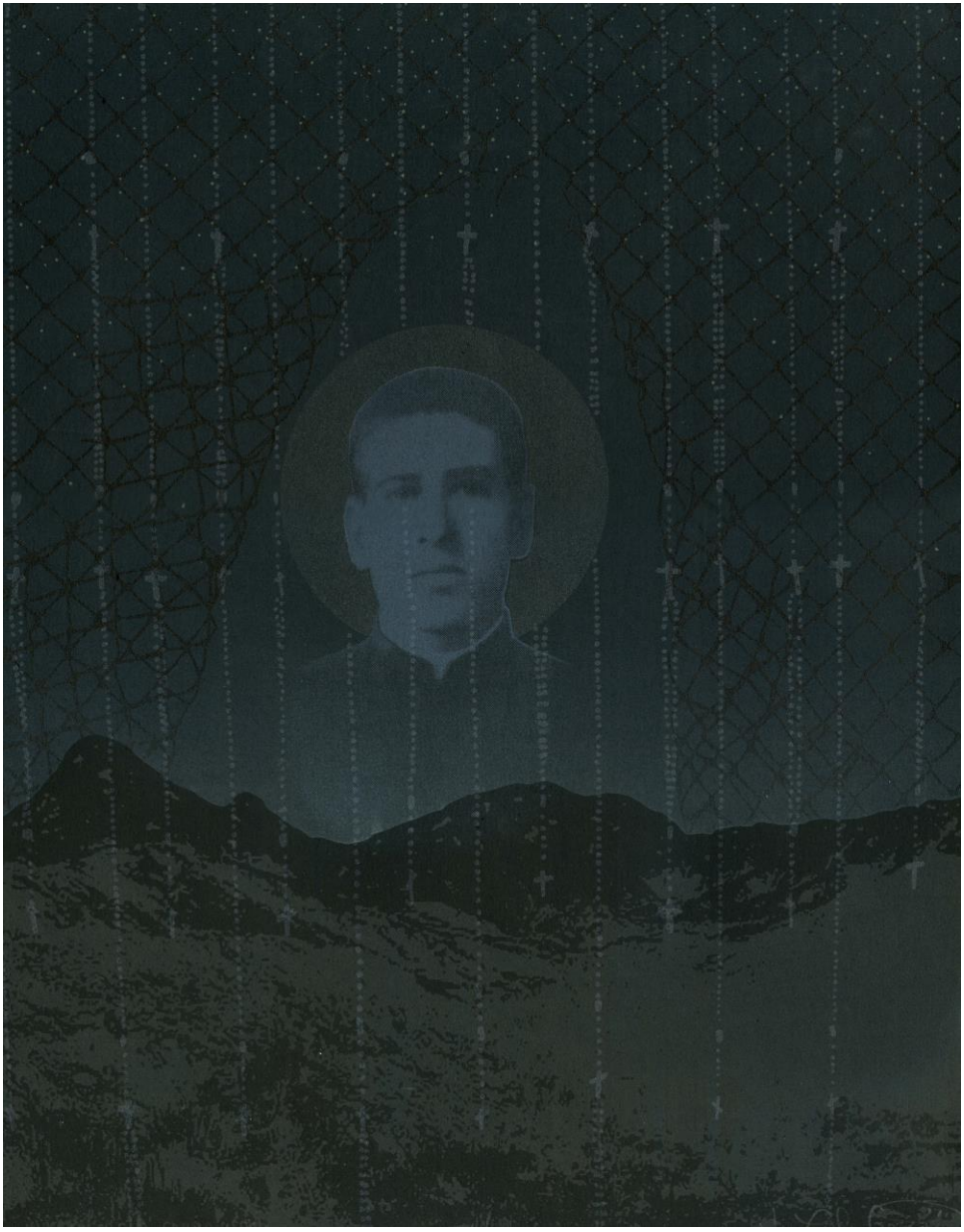
ARTIST STATEMENT: As a seventh-generation Texan and Mexican-American, my ancestral connection to Texas land has led me to an investigation of the ethical impact of my Tejano culture. Issues that current and future undocumented Latinxs face, such as harsh working conditions, the separation of families, and death while crossing the Mexico-U.S. border, cause me grave concern. Through the lense of my biracial heritage, I aim to shed light on these contemporary issues.

El Sueño Americano

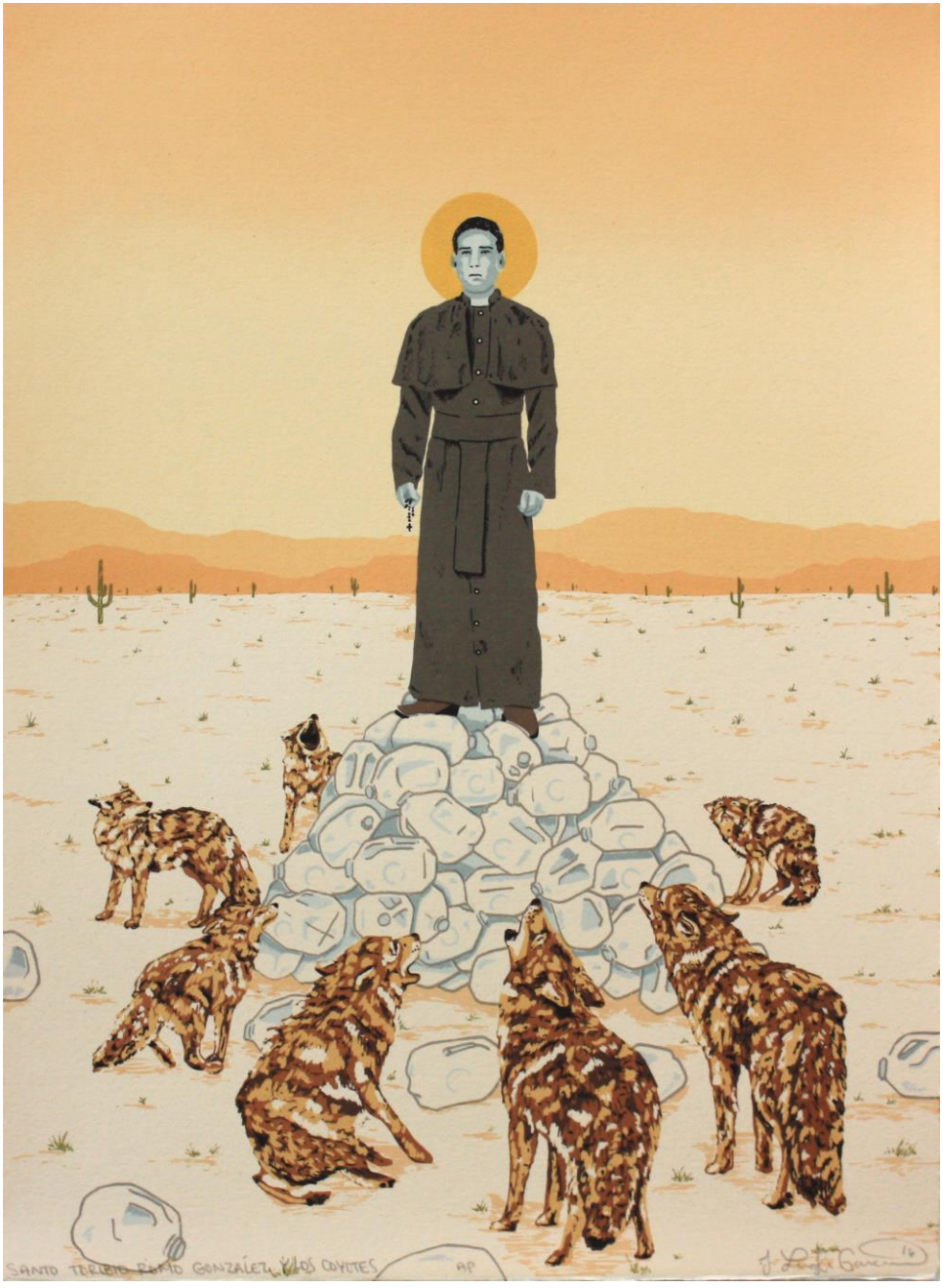
Undocumented Slavery

Vamos

Bendita Sea el Agua



Cuando la Agua Corra Seca



Santo Toribio Romo Gonzalez y Los Coyotes

CONTRIBUTORS

Bruce Bond is the author of twenty books including, most recently, *Sacrum* (Four Way Books, 2017), *Blackout Starlight: New and Selected Poems 1997-2015* (L.E. Phillabaum Award, LSU, 2017), *Rise and Fall of the Lesser Sun Gods* (Elixir Book Prize, Elixir Press, 2018), and *Dear Reader* (Free Verse Editions, 2018). Three books are forthcoming: *Frankenstein's Children* (Lost Horse Press), *Scar* (Etruscan Press), and *Words Written Against the Walls of the City* (LSU.) Presently he is a Regents Professor of English at University of North Texas.

William Cass has had over a hundred short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines such as *december*, *Briar Cliff Review*, *J Journal*, and *Gravel*. Recently, he was a finalist in short fiction and novella competitions at *Glimmer Train* and Black Hill Press, received a Pushcart nomination, and won writing contests at *Terrain.org* and *The Examined Life Journal*. He lives in San Diego, California.

Anthony Cody is from Fresno, California. He is a CantoMundo fellow, an editorial member of the Hmong American Writers' Circle, a fellow at US Poet Juan Felipe Herrera's Laureate Lab at Fresno State, and a graduate of Fresno State. His poetry has appeared in P*rairie Schooner, TriQuarterly, Tinderbox Poetry Journal, ToeGood Poetry Journal, Tropics of Meta*, and *El Tecolote Newspaper*, in Gentromancer, a collaborative art project with visual artist Josue Rojas. He served as co-editor of *How Do I Begin?: A Hmong American Literary Anthology* (Heyday), in which he also contributed poems. He currently resides in Chicago, IL.

Karla Cordero is a descendant of the Chichimeca tribe from northern Mexico, a Chicana poet, educator, and activist, raised along the borderlands of Calexico, CA. She is the recipient of the Loft Literary Center Spoken Word Immersion fellowship (Minneapolis, MN). Cordero's chapbook, *Grasshoppers Before Gods* (2016) was published by Dancing Girl Press. Her work has appeared and forthcoming in *Tinderbox, Word Riot, Poetry International, The Acentos Review, Toe Good Poetry,* among other publications.

Bernard Ferguson is a Bahamian immigrant living in Minnesota. He's excited to convince you that Fall is not that great of a season. He has work featured/upcoming in *Best New Poets 2017, Nashville Review, Winter Tangerine, Raleigh Review* and *Santa Ana River Review*, among others. Please tell him about your favorite reggae songs.

Mag Gabbert is currently a PhD candidate in creative writing at Texas Tech University, and she previously received an MFA from The University of California at Riverside. Her essays and poems have been published or are forthcoming in journals including *32 Poems, The Rattling Wall, The Rumpus, The Nervous Breakdown, Cleaver*

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Lisa Knopp is the author of six books of creative nonfiction. Her most recent, *Bread: A Memoir of Hunger* (University of Missouri Press, 2016), is about eating disorders and disordered eating among older women. Both *Bread* and *What the River Carries: Encounters with the Mississippi, Missouri, and Platte* (University of Missouri Press, 2012) won Nebraska Book Awards. Knopp's essays have appeared in numerous literary journals including *Georgia Review, Missouri Review, Michigan Review, Gettysburg Review, Crab Orchard Review, Connecticut Review, Iowa Review, Shenandoah, Creative Nonfiction, Prairie Schooner,* and *Seneca Review*. Her current project is *Like Salt or Love: Essays on Leaving Home*. Knopp is a Professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, where she teaches courses in creative nonfiction. She lives in Lincoln, Nebraska. Please visit her website atwww.lisaknopp.com

Alexandra Kessler received her MFA in fiction from Brooklyn College. She received her BA from The Kratz Center for Creative Writing at Goucher College in Baltimore, MD. She was awarded two summer fellowships from the Kratz Center for Creative Writing in 2013 and 2015, the 2014 Lizette Woodworth Reese Award in Fiction, the 2016 Ross Feld Award, and the 2017 Lainoff Prize for Fiction. Her work has been published by *Fiddleblack Press, Spartan Lit, Burrow Press, Joyland Magazine,* and others. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Cameron Alexander Lawrence is a graduate of the University of Arizona and lives in Decatur, GA, with his wife and four children. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *West Branch, TYPO, Forklift Ohio, Whiskey Island, Image, Pittsburgh Poetry Review, Asheville Poetry Review, Wildness,* and elsewhere.

Annalise Mabe is a writer from Tampa, Florida. Her nonfiction, poetry, and comics have appeared in *Brevity, The Boiler, Columbia Journal, New Delta Review, The Offing, The Rumpus, BOOTH, Word Riot, Hobart,* and more. She was a finalist for the december Curt Johnson Prose Award judged by Eula Biss, and currently serves as a nonfiction editor for *Sweet: A Literary Confection.* Follower her at *annalisemabe.com* @AnnaliseMabe

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Molly Bess Rector lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where she co-curates the Open Mouth Reading Series. A former Edward F. Albee fellow, her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Bear Review, Hobart, The New Guard,* and *Nimrod*, among others. Find her on Twitter at @mollybessrector.

Sarah Terez Rosenblum's debut novel, *Herself When She's Missing*, was called "poetic and heartrending" by Booklist. She writes for publications and sites including *Salon, The Chicago Sun Times, XOJane, , Curve Magazine* and *Pop Matters.* Her fiction has appeared in literary magazines such as *kill author* and *Underground Voices*, and she was a 2011 recipient of Carve Magazine's Esoteric Fiction Award and the 2015 1st runner up for Midwestern Gothic's Lake Prize as well as a finalist for Washington Square Review's 2016 Flash Fiction Award. In 2014, she founded the Truth or Lie Live Lit Series. Sarah teaches Creative Writing at Story Studio, and The University of Chicago Graham school.

Lis Sanchez has writing appearing or forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner, Salamander, New Orleans Review, The Bark, Puerto Del Sol, Lunch Ticket Amuse-Bouche*, and

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Leona Sevick is the 2017 Press 53 Poetry Award Winner for her first full-length book of poems, *Lion Brothers*, and the 2012 first place winner of the Split This Rock Poetry contest, judged by Naomi Shihab Nye. She was a finalist for the 2016 Ciardi Prize and a semi-finalist for the 2015 Philip Levine Poetry Prize, and her chapbook, *Damaged Little Creatures*, was published in 2015 by FutureCycle Press. She is provost at Bridgewater College in Virginia, and can be reached at leonasevick.com.

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Erin Elizabeth Smith is the Creative Director at the Sundress Academy for the Arts and the author of two full-length poetry collections, *The Naming of Strays* (Gold Wake Press 2011) and *The Fear of Being Found*, which was re-released from Zoetic Press in 2016. Her poetry and nonfiction have appeared in numerous journals, including *Ecotone, Mid-American, Florida Review, 32 Poems, Willow Springs, Third Coast*, and *Crab Orchard Review*. She also teaches in the English Department at the University of Tennessee where she's the Jack E. Reese Writer in the Library and serves as the Managing Editor for Sundress Publications and *The Wardrobe*.

Jamie Lynn Smith is a native of Knox County, Ohio. An alumnus of Kenyon College and Fordham University, she is the recipient of a University Fellowship from The Ohio State University, where she completed her MFA in Creative Writing. Her work has appeared in *The Kenyon Review, The Pinch, American Literary Review, The Low Valley Review, The Boiler, The Watershed Review* and *Barely South*. She currently teaches Creative Writing at Bluffton University, where she edits *Bridge: The Bluffton University Literary Journal*. Jamie Lyn is working on two new projects— *Ever After*, a collection of short stories, and her first novel, *Appalachia*.

Mike Soto's poetry has recently appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Gulf Coast, PANK, Fugue, Hot Metal Bridge, Michigan Quarterly Review, and others.* "Fue El Estado" takes its title from the rallying cry after 43 students from the Ayotzinapa teachers college in Guerrero, Mexico were forcibly disappeared. Evidence points to federal and local officials, military personnel, police and bus drivers, all being complicit in handing over the students to their killers, who then burned their bodies and threw the remains into a river. The phrase translates, "It Was The State."

Caitlin Thomson is the co-founder of The Poetry Marathon, an international writing event. Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies and literary journals including: *The Adroit Journal, Rust + Moth, Barrow Street Journal,* and *Killer Verse*. You can learn more about her writing at www.caitlinthomson.com.

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Joaquín Zihuatanejo was awarded the 2017 Anhinga Press-Robert Dana Prize for Poetry. His new collection, *Arsonist*, will be published by Anhinga Press in September of 2018. His work has been featured in *Prairie Schooner, Sonora Review, Huizache*, and *Southwestern American Literature* among other journals and anthologies. Joaquín received his MFA from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Joaquín has two passions in his life, his wife Aída and poetry, always in that order.