



THE BOILER SPRING/SUMMER
2018

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: from *Red Queen* by Olivia Edvalson

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

Distribution. Online

Copyright © 2018 THE BOILER JOURNAL

All rights revert back to authors. No part of this journal may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the authors, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review.

For inquiries email theboilerjournal@gmail.com

THE BOILER

SPRING/SUMMER 2018

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

SEBASTIAN H. PARAMO

POETRY EDITOR

SHANNON ELIZABETH HARDWICK

POETRY READERS

E. KRISTIN ANDERSON

FICTION EDITOR

JOSEPH PFISTER

ASSOCIATE FICTION EDITOR

KIMBERLY GARZA

ASSISTANT FICTION EDITOR

JAHZERAH BROOKS

NONFICTION EDITOR

APRIL JO MURPHY

ASSISTANT NONFICTION EDITOR

LAUREN PILCHER

REVIEWS EDITOR GARDINER BROWN

ART EDITOR MARISSA GONZALEZ

CONTENTS

DANA ALSAMSAM.....	9
FALLING ASLEEP AFTER YOU.....	9
DANA ALSAMSAM.....	11
Is that Sappho you're reading?.....	11
DANIELLE WEEKS.....	12
DISTRACTION BY LIGHT.....	12
DANIELLE WEEKS.....	13
BORDERLAND CONDITION.....	13
BRENNA M. CASEY.....	14
thickly settled: a poem begun in august.....	14
BRENNA M. CASEY.....	15
long distance valedictions.....	15
TENNESSEE HILL.....	16
ST. MICHAELS, MARYLAND.....	16
BRANDON MELENDEZ.....	24
ODE TO MY UNIBROW.....	24
BRANDON MELENDEZ.....	25
line/age.....	25
BRANDON MELENDEZ.....	26
line/age.....	26
SARA PECK.....	27
dear anne with the broken fingernails.....	27
SARA PECK.....	28
dear anne with the broken fingernails.....	28
AMANDA BALES.....	29
THE GOD WHO MADE US.....	29
SOPHIA STARMACK.....	30
THE GRIEF SWEATER.....	30
SOPHIA STARMACK.....	32
MISS TEACHER, MISS TEACHER.....	32
SOPHIA STARMACK.....	34

THE DRY BOAT.....	34
LISA HUFFAKER.....	35
OCEAN, I AM WARNING YOU.....	35
LISA HUFFAKER.....	36
WORDS FOR A RESONANT SPACE.....	36
LISA HUFFAKER.....	38
VOICE LESSONS.....	38
EMILY PAIGE WILSON.....	40
A DOCTOR TIRES OF HER PATIENT.....	40
KATIE BERTA.....	41
A BODY IS A THING YOU HAVE.....	41
JESS SMITH.....	43
VOW.....	43
KYRSTEN HILL.....	44
THE WOUNDED DEER.....	44
KYRSTEN HILL.....	46
ZOMBIES.....	46
ASHLEY ROACH-FREIMAN.....	47
REFLECTION ON WHEN I HEARD YOU WERE SOBER.....	47
ASHLEY ROACH-FREIMAN.....	49
JUDITH BEHEADING HOLOFERNES.....	49
SUZANNAH RUSS SPAAR.....	50
USES FOR APPLES.....	50
SUZANNAH RUSS SPAAR.....	51
GIRLS WHO ARE PLANTING.....	51
JESSICA ABUGHATTAS.....	52
ANTHEM WITH EMERALD AND GOLD.....	52
JESSICA ABUGHATTAS.....	53
DARK ROOMS.....	53
KYLE LOPEZ.....	54
TUXEDOS AND CADILLACS.....	54
ANGELA YOUNGBLOOD.....	55
NAVIGATION BEFORE TECHNOLOGY.....	55

AMANDA GALVAN HUYNH.....	60
THE SMALL-TOWN MAN.....	60
AMANDA GALVAN HUYNH.....	61
DFW to LAX.....	61
NICOLE CONNOLLY.....	63
DX: FOREDOOMED.....	63
ERIN SLAUGHTER.....	64
It's strange, the things / that make you want to live.....	64
JEN CORRIGAN.....	65
BURST.....	65
MAYA PHILLIPS.....	67
AT THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE.....	67
JENNIFER JACKSON BERRY.....	68
A CO-WORKER SAYS HE DOESN'T BOTHER.....	68
HITTING THE CAT WHEN IT'S BAD.....	68
BECAUSE SHE'S TOO FAT TO FEEL IT.....	68
JENNIFER JACKSON BERRY.....	69
HOLY TITS, 08/12/1997.....	69
JENNIFER JACKSON BERRY.....	71
DURING THE NIGHT, AFTER THE DAY.....	71
I FINALLY SAW RED FLAGS.....	71
LINDSAY REMEE AHL.....	73
IN FULL LIGHT.....	73
LINDSAY REMEE AHL.....	74
MALACHITE.....	74
ERIKA GOODRICH.....	75
CONTEMPLATING EVENT HORIZON ON THE WINTER.....	75
SOLSTICE IN FLORIDA TWENTY YEARS AFTER MY.....	75
MOTHER WAS DIAGNOSED WITH SCHIZOPHRENIA.....	75
ERIKA GOODRICH.....	77
IF NOT THE BODY, THEN.....	77
KARISMA PRICE.....	78
THINGS I SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF BUT AM NOT.....	78

KELSEY ANN KERR.....	79
A MODERN TALE OF TRUE LOVE.....	79
ALYSE BENSEL.....	80
PAPERMAKING.....	80
WILL HEARN.....	82
MAN FOR SALE.....	82
MELISSA WILEY.....	94
LAND OF MILK AND HONEY.....	94
BRANDON THURMAN.....	101
AUGURY.....	101
TODD DILLARD.....	110
INTERVIEW WITH AN ADDICT'S SUN.....	110
STEVE BELLIN-OKA.....	113
ESSAY ON POWERLESSNESS.....	113
STEVE BELLIN-OKA.....	114
UNFINISHED STAINED GLASS WINDOW.....	114
NORA HICKEY.....	115
AMERICAN CRUSH.....	115
NORA HICKEY.....	117
21ST CENTURY LAWN.....	117
JESSICA MOREY-COLLINS.....	118
TO QUANTIFY EXPOSURE.....	118
JESSICA MOREY-COLLINS.....	119
EXERCISES IN FUTILITY.....	119
ROBERT JAMES RUSSELL.....	120
BLUE RASPBERRY.....	120
SHIR KEHILA ORNER.....	127
CALL ME SONG OR CALLS FOR PRAYER.....	127
ARTIST FEATURE.....	131
OLIVIA EDVALSON.....	131
from <i>FUTURE IN VIEW</i> :.....	132
from <i>DAUGHTER OF MIDAS</i> :.....	135
from <i>RED QUEEN</i> :.....	137

from <i>PECULIAR SPACE</i>	139
CONTRIBUTORS.....	143

DANA ALSAMSAM

FALLING ASLEEP AFTER YOU

I listen to the thump
of lovers above me

shaking the wall
like something terrible,

the sounds they make
filling their ears & mine.

I watch you sleep,
he tree rings of breath

rippling outwards or in,
our bed an old willow

matured then cut down
a hole at the center—

Quickly, I climb in.
I don't mind the tangle

of sheets around us
or how your hands

tuck between your knees
like a bookmark.

Our silence & fullness
leaf as I fall

into sleep with you,

the rhythm upstairs

becoming white noise,
the hum of working bees

slowing & speeding up
& growing concentric.

DANA ALSAMAM

Is that Sappho you're reading?

A slow erosion of thought how do you go forward
while standing still Or biking in circles on a small blue bike
Utter utterly How do you say desire without repeating
everything that's been said i.e. nothing at all *It seems*
you're alluding to a categorical problem Those little boxes
those tiny rooms that pull ponytails and sprinkle hair
into a field of crushed lipsticks You had me at sci-fi
garbage-fire heart cyborg melody limbs you had me
at neuro-atypical at bending youth and idealism Do you see
my thousand collars My grin at your paperback Sappho
I want you to let me speak the truth brightness falls out of you
like a jewelry box jangling to the floor an opal pendant
two baby teeth the book I leant with intimate marginalia
ochre freckled clavicle dew drop I want to live there in your
dark space in your too-loud train voice a stillness so new
we burst into glittering

DANIELLE WEEKS

DISTRACTION BY LIGHT

The eye is the lamp of the body.

There are more colors than I am
allowed to believe: her cathedral
arms, glass-stained skin the holy
layer the eye has forgotten how
to see. *But if your eye is bad.* No.
If my eye is bad, I would still feel
her move with all the wild good
in the world — song-lipped night
and sweat, the groan of creation.

Tear it out and throw it from you.

I never learned how to grow back
the torn-open places, my hands
a mess of numb violet, for good.
Here is the bad: here is the body
with its eyes torn out, believing
they must grow back corrected,
that they would not lose anything.

DANIELLE WEEKS

BORDERLAND CONDITION

Sometimes the day prints like a woman trying to ride a horse with a missing back. Too strange to be real, even though it is, even though the horse carries a half-moon of emptiness on its withers, too tired to be anyone's borderland escape. The woman doesn't have anyway else to go. Her old house is shaking, white squares patching themselves into the paint. There is not enough good in humanity to love. But sometimes there is a moment: a summer day, an air conditioner nestled in the window of a neighbor she's never met. The back of her neck glows. Oh, for the water of another. Woman, believe someone there sweats in a tank top with a holey hem, stirs pasta on the stove even though it's too hot to cook. Two people in the steam, now, taking turns stirring and standing directly in the artificial air stream as their skin tightens and shrinks to a singular point. See the hair and light lifting off the edge of skin. There is a borderland conditioned in the body, where the missing backs go. There is a beast for its crossing.

BRENNNA M. CASEY

thickly settled: a poem begun in august

golden rod and the sun singed cones of
the last of late summer's honeysuckle simmer in the fields;
and my inbox, says nate, is like a game of fucking minesweeper.

my chest grows heavy and reads like a road sign for a small, slow sped
new england village: THICKLY SETTLED.
and i regret not grabbing shoes out from under the desk,
as i head for the pebbly pumice of hickory ridge road,
thinking:
we muddy our own waters.

i read, then i realize:
"they were full- blown, abandoned to this."

in lieu of admitting i was sad, i described to you a somber scene:
told you i had walked to the old church yard on west main street
and sat underneath the double headstone i like so well.
"READER," it reads you from the new-found american folk art etch of a slate slab,
"if you knew them,"—two boys drown in the west river,
the one trying to save the other,—"you will weep with their friends."

in these days i think constantly of getting a tattoo of that line from that novel
great house by nicole krauss who is married to what's-his-three-names.
it would read in lanky hipster script:
"it would be wrong to say that the conditions of such a life had been a hardship."

and the scene is mostly somber, which is to say sad, because:
as the stream of autumn air bleeds in the nighttime
between the ineffectual grate of heavy-lidded venetian blinds,
somebody should fish us out from
the river's tow.

BRENNNA M. CASEY

long distance valedictions

we say goodnight symmetrically.
as in:

goodnight, your name.
goodnight, my name.

if i use your surname,
you use mine.

if you deploy my title,
i yours.

if i am yelling,
you match my capital letters.

and when you whisper, mmmm,
swaddled in bedclothes and sleepy,

such a long way away, i script my
mumbled volley in lowercase too.

it's paltry and precious
and all that we can give.

TENNESSEE HILL

ST. MICHAELS, MARYLAND

I watch the Murphy twins, ring leaders of our kid-circus, terrorize the marina. They throw lit tobacco wads like cherry bombs in fishing nets, onto nearby decks. I think about asking to cut their hair much shorter than it is. I know one of them would answer by pulling a red-threaded needle through my palm like they did to the boy in middle school Home Ec who asked why they both had the same middle name. I imagine they'd sew into my skin, *we don't go lower than this*.

But I know that isn't true.

At my twelfth birthday party, just after their parents started roaming downtown in formal attire, not panhandling, just strolling, and people dubbed them The Murphy Freakshow, I launched myself into the deep end of my swimming pool and both boys plunged in after me. At the bottom, we felt around the decorative rocks, had a lungless screaming contest. Never did we consider kissing like most newly twelve year olds do. Our kid-circus cohorts leaned over the surface, searching for two identical bodies and my gangly ghost.

That party had been the catalyst. The Murphy boys noticed Carrie would jump off anything and land on her ballet-broken-in feet. Rich had an affinity with fire complimented by a sobering stealth. My older brother Jer could bend himself ten ways to Sunday. The neighbor girl Kennedy was ungirlishly broad, waywardly strong, and I had the ability to hold my breath for acres.

Above all, none of our parents watched us.

Not when I catapulted into the water. Not when the boys followed. Not when we charred part of the family cat with a cake candle. Not when we snuck out through the gate. Not even when the constable ushered us home after we'd tried to burn our names with stolen brands into all the trunks at the Christmas tree farm.

Lionel Murphy took the hot iron to his tailbone, silent as his skin cooked, staring into Carrie's auburn hair like it was a spinning eye trick. His twin brother Micah wrestled the brand from Lionel, stabbing himself in the struggle. I was disinfecting the hole with pool water wrung out of my hair when I felt the town constable's flashlight on my neck. As the towering man reached for the iron, Micah pressed it to the skin of his tailbone, too.

Their gift to me had been my name stamped on a dog tag dangling from dense thread the texture of twisted together corn stalks, but the metal was gold,

truly gold—I made Jer bite into it to check—and that night I hung it above my bed like a dreamcatcher. Then I started telling people the Murphys weren't freaks, they were independently wealthy, and they weren't strange, they just had different kinds of fun. But people didn't listen, so I joined the freakshow and turned it into a full fledged ruckus.

It took a few weeks for us to get on as friends. Jer tried to assert himself as the leader because he was oldest but the Murphys politely dominated his efforts. When Jer suggested we climb the Magnolia trees and throw peeled oranges at cars, or that we break into the consignment shop and build a scarecrow out of old scarves, we'd get halfway there and end up at the firework stand with poppers up our sleeves. Then, we were in the middle of town flopping like witches on fire as the tiny rocks exploded inside our clothes. It was always for the better and eventually, Jer stopped trying. The plainest thing was that the twins liked me best. Even when Carrie and Kennedy grew into their bodies quicker, wore makeup and bras and miniskirts sooner, the boys walked at my side, rode their bikes to my house first. I was the only one who never got them mixed up.

Our mischief was an undercurrent of the town's turning. We didn't tag boxcars or leave notes in houses we broke into, but everybody knew, if only because we hung out with the Murphy twins. We only got caught once.

We hadn't known they clipped the wings of the ducks in the park, so after many valiant efforts, Rich caught one. We snuck it to the roof of the library to throw it out over the edge, just to see something take off mid-air. It dropped so heavily, so quickly, there was nothing we could do. If we'd known, we'd have been at the bottom with a bed sheet or basket. Maybe we wouldn't have thrown it at all. The feathers didn't billow up like in movies, just stuck with the blood and guts to the cobbles.

We didn't bother fleeing. The seven of us stayed on the roof, tried to talk each other out of throwing up and crying. The constable was there minutes later, drove us home without the radio on so we could really think about it. And we did. I don't think we ever stopped thinking about it.

Today was supposed to be the Murphy twins' birthday party. Our basement was prepared with streamers, pizza rolls, and a collection of beers we'd gradually stolen from our dads. Jer drove us to the pier and we paid the sybil who reads palms. She is the mom of a guy we go to school with, Craig, and she sat knowingly, even without looking at our skins or into our eyes, at a grandiose velvet-veiled table. A mulberry colored scarf hid her lightning-white curls, bracelet-sized hoop earrings held my gaze at the nape of her neck where the silver grazed. She was the youngest of all the high school moms and the only one with

white hair. Of course, Craig didn't got around telling everybody that his mom was a swindler on the docks. That they lived in the loft apartment above the crab shack. Or that even when we teased him into lying, Craig truly believe the things his mother predicted. The way she sometimes cried at school functions, staring into the abyss of our youthfully distracted energies as we danced and bobbed for apples at festivals. Once, she grabbed Melrose Carter by the wrist at our middle school field day and begged her not to climb any trees, even if someone dared her, even if her kite was stuck. She did anyway and slipped into a coma weeks later.

The only person Melrose told of the prediction was Craig, in a violated swirl of fear. He told her parents in the hospital lobby as he sobbed into Mrs. Crater's skirt, who was too stunned to pat his back. She simply walked up to Craig's mother lingering by the door and slapped her clean across the face. They moved to the docks after that and Craig pretty much stopped talking. To everyone.

Carrie had said since it was their seventeenth birthday, we had to do something wild. She wanted to trespass or steal like Jer's birthday last year when we took the cross-shredded papers from the credit union and bombed the high school principal's front yard. People came to school saying they'd seen the principal and her husband vacuuming the grass. We were on a reeling thrill for days.

When I suggested we get palm readings, Rich got hellbent on the idea, patting his jean pocket of loose change until everybody agreed.

Micah moved to sit at her velvet table as Lionel grabbed his collar, yanked him away. "I was born first." This was the first time either of them had mentioned birth order. It was surprising. I think we all assumed they just came into existence, of any vessel but their mother, at the exact same time.

The sybil traced the ridges of Lionel's upright palm and looked frantically between the identical faces. She reached out for Micah and compared them. Her lips pursed as she dragged her talons around their skin. "Your heart lines, your head lines are both the same, but your life lines..." She gummed an elaborately fake accent that definitely fooled tourists, landing the vowels hard. "One of you will die before your next shared year."

"What?" Lionel yelled, tugging away.

"Your birthday," Carrie whispered behind him.

He yelled over his shoulder, "I *know*."

Micah's hand was still limp in the sybil's grasp. I reached out and pushed her off, held his wrist as if protecting the pulse. His breath was heavy and perfectly strident with Lionel's. He stared into my face like there was an answer

somewhere there. I looked to the sybil, a drawn-on beauty mark by her lip, fake eyelashes fanning her cold eyes. I grabbed for one of the gigantic earrings but missed. Rich flipped the table and pulled down a tapestry clipped to the wall. Micah broke away from me and ran across the dock toward the water. Lionel followed.

I looked at her with disgust and betrayal, sure it went against every sybil code of conduct to openly predict a death. Then I remembered Melrose and decided she must hate beautiful people. Melrose had golden hair, silver-blue eyes. The twins were stunning, insultingly symmetrical and reflected the sun in such a way that they always glowed, even in Maryland winters. As we left, Rich spat on her rug and called her a lying bitch.

Now we are on the dock a few feet behind. Kennedy says softly, "I knew it was a bad idea to go out before the party."

"I'll beat the hell out of Craig and his trashy mother." Jer says with arms crossed, white-knuckled.

I shudder against heavy wind. "It's not Craig's fault his mother is trashy."

"It's Craig's fault his trashy mother wants the boys to feel like they're going to die."

She had never done to them what she did to Melrose, but the sybil always regarded both boys with sharp eyes. Even in primary school, she did not let Craig attend their birthday parties and snapped in his face like a dog if she caught him trading baseball cards with the twins in the pickup line. She chunked a crystal highball glass at a wall just above the twins' heads at a Christmas mixer and yelled as she was being forcefully escorted out, the boys picking glass from their hair, that she did it to banish bad luck. That it swarmed them as foggy crowns. I thought she sensed trouble, which they emitted like an odor, but now I feel that it was something deeper. A severance with some almighty thread was lost on both boys. I think this offended her. Or scared her. Or both.

Now we're watching Micah hang his head over the water on all fours. Lionel stands above and they look like a stack of shelves, perfectly mimicking just feet apart. Carrie limbos between, wondering if she should comfort Lionel or let him be. The worst part was that the sybil didn't even have to say it would be Lionel who'd die first. We knew.

Last summer behind the consignment shop he'd started kissing Carrie. Then, he started driving her around in his Jeep like he was her boyfriend; cutting across busy lanes, running yellows, running reds, as if he had the right to put her life at risk. It never mattered if Carrie loved him because she let him think she did. She's polite that way. Though, once she told me she'd kissed Micah thinking it

was Lionel and to her immediate shame, both boys tasted the same. I tried not to wonder why Lionel picked her and when I did, I tried not to hate her for it. Even harder, I tried not to expect Micah to pick me.

After some dry heaves, Micah finally vomits. Jer yells a joke about fish food but nobody laughs. “Let’s go to the basement, there’s a bucket of beer.” Kennedy slips Jer’s car keys from his hand and flips them between her fingers.

“Let’s go to the bottom of the marina,” Micah says. “There’s a begging shrine of broken glass.”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Yeah?”

There’s a breeze-blown pause and I can feel Rich wondering how deep could he dive with an open flame. Lionel is about to reach for Carrie. She would let him. Jer wants his car keys back but Kennedy still clutches them. Yeah.

I pull my sweater off, step out of my boots. Rich takes a tin of tobacco and lighter from his jean pocket. In a blink, we’re stripped to the underwire. I look around and see that ours are the only warm bodies on this dock. Lionel and Rich wad loose tobacco, wrap it in rolling papers, light quickly and throw as far as they can. Carrie, Kennedy, and Jer bob in the cold water. I am still standing, half-naked, wishing I was older than the Murphy twins so maybe I could be the one to die first. My parents would miss me but only for a little bit. The Murphy’s parents would cease to exist, would freeze like pin-stuck butterflies wherever they hovered.

“Take it off,” Kennedy whoops from the water and I do. Micah stands next to me and in an uncomfortable instant, we have both realized we are grown. In this vulnerability we are very warmly harmonic. I think of the photograph I saw in a museum of a naked man and woman standing on the roof of a car, holding each other, the division of their bodies blurred. It was not romantic. This feels like it might be romantic.

Jer bets he can swim out to the dissolving tobacco bombs, drink the water and get a buzz. Kennedy untangles Carrie’s damp curls. As if I’ve passed my reflection in a hall mirror, I realize with a shudder that if anybody on earth looks like me, it’s Carrie. Still, nobody watches me and Micah. His hand is on my exposed hipbone and I feel his face, young with stubble. Neither he or Lionel look like their father, thankfully. They inherited their freckles from nothing but the sun.

“What’s your middle name?” I ask him.

“Churchman.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Saint.”

Micah and Lionel Saint Murphy, I think. “We could go back to my place.”

“Are your parents home?” He squeezes his lips together to encourage fleeting circulation.

“Of course.”

“We’d have to cut through Main Street,” he says.

We both know that their mother is circling the fountain downtown with a pet-cluster of amber pinned to her lapel. Their father stands in the square, holding an umbrella over a bronzed couple kissing even though it doesn't rain. The Murphy Freakshow. Even when this cruel nickname became true, when our kid-circus lead by the twins started to trespass, steal, and blaze, nobody thought to regret. To think of most prophecies and how they fulfill themselves.

I feel around Micah’s ribs for the old branding hole. “The pool water didn't help,” he says, remembering. He looks to his brother, sees the small forest fire in his hand. “Maybe Lionel killed himself years ago and it’s just taking this long for him to die.”

“I’d believe that but we’re too young to think that way.” I say.

“If we’re not too young to die, we’re not too young to think about it.” He wraps his arms around me. My hands find the brand at the base of his spine identical to the mark on Lionel. The skin is rumpled like a sheet with pockets and hard edges. As if in slow motion, Micah leans us off the dock and into the water. We surface as quickly as we land and start to kiss.

The bronzed couple from downtown are the only ones watching.

Not really. The bitch sybil is watching out her window. My parents are in the living room, watching TV and kind-of watching. Carrie decides to love Lionel before he dies. Rich is inflamed. Jer moves to kiss Kennedy to feel something. Micah inhales one of my deepest breaths, “They’re probably watching.”

“I was born here but Jer wasn’t,” I say. Micah breaks his paddling rhythm to touch my shoulder. He says, “You two are so different.”

I can’t say the same to him.

I see Lionel, holding his palm to a flame. I know he’s trying to burn away the death trajectory. I try to mean what I ask, “What if we sunk to the bottom and became relics?” His hair is so long, I want to cut it. I think about swimming down to find the sharpest bottle shard because his waves are too long and there’s just too much of him. I think the same of Lionel and then try not to do that anymore.

“Only if we sink as anything but wishing coins.”

“Why? Then Rich would swim for miles to get us.”

He smiles with all of his teeth like a true believer in something. A wolfish howl echoes from downtown and the sybil moves away from her window. Mr. Murphy still holds the couple's umbrella but cups his mouth with one hand, calling to his sons. Just before pulling me under, Micah pulls me closer. "Because then we'd always feel like we owed somebody an answer."

Then we are underneath. And the freak-show veil is torn.

Tobacco wads crater and sink. Kennedy's shoulders bolster and Carrie kicks her broken feet. Rich is about to ignite the elastic of his underwear while Jer searches for his car keys, worried that they're wet. This is our final act.

Nobody is watching.

I have been holding my breath for so long, I start to notice the oxygen absence. Micah's eyes are opened and glossy. He has let go of my body, floats away and I have stopped thinking about reaching out to touch him because this is not romantic. Small, bursting thoughts ring in my ears as I look at Micah, and he looks back at me with Lionel's eyes. Every time I have looked at him, I remember, and in every memory, it was never just one boy looking back.

Now, his skin is gaunt and he recognizes the expression on my face, that I am unraveling the longest string of revealing memories as he sinks further away. Moments before his body feigns empty, a familiar rock breaks the surface. Through algae film I can't tell if it's Lionel sinking after Micah or Micah divinely multiplied and saving himself, if they've ever been separate or if this is the truest trick, finalized in the foggiest water. All I can feel is the vibrant family crest they consecrated the night of my twelfth birthday, deciding in all quickness to become a fraternity of two, double-headed leader to a secret kid-circus where their twinhood was the most intriguing sideshow.

I have gone as deeply as it goes and my back is to the marina floor. Looking up, I see the romantic thing I'd been feeling; Lionel realizes with a static tug that Micah will not, will never return, so he runs pruning fingers through his own hair and locks both arms around his brother. Lionel cups a hand by his mouth and howls to their father hoping the desperate wounding will make its way downtown. The echo shocks my featherweight body.

I try to figure out what any of this has been. Have these boys ever loved anybody but the part of themselves living in the other? My chest throbs a warning pulse and I push off the ground, cutting every heart-head-life line in my hand.

Before I break the surface, I look at the Murphy twins and they have become something indivisible, so whole that their identical faces look like an illusion. I snap out of a consuming bewitchment and see that this was always the mind-game. Years of being different people beyond the glaring sameness— the

uniqueness of one was just repressed inside the other. Two boys living from opposite ends of a Chinese finger-trap, rooted in a shared center.

I want to say to them, “Good one. You really got me.” I want to sew their hands together and lament, *you were always going lower than this*. I emerge from the water newly foolish. With my first breath, I howl to their father, to the bitch sybil, to Carrie and Kennedy, Jer and Rich who are looking at me, panicked. I howl until Jer pulls me out of the water and my back is on the splintered dock while they ask me where the boys went, when they’ll come up.

BRANDON MELENDEZ

ODE TO MY UNIBROW

o unruly garden the first time you graced me with your hive
of coarse bristle I grabbed the smallest sickle I could find & cut
you from my face each morning I watched you dig
yourself back out from the parceled flesh where you refused to
die no matter how many times I tossed you to the guillotine
or cursed the way you stayed alive untamed
 you flaunt that face of rough edge & howling
lycanthrope between full moons. o monocled brow o
unhallowed survivor even a decade later you grow despite me
 I'm sorry I've named you sod ugly
 with vines we both know loving myself has
always meant dissection & harvest even if I never embrace
 your loud & abrasive clot please grow
 & grow & grow show me how to see
your reflection in the blade & rise anyway.

BRANDON MELENDEZ

line/age

if you trace my abuelos back / to the fire / they stepped out from / you will find a
room / with beheaded gods / floating in jars / of vinegar / a horse / with two
broken legs / guarding an adobe church / If you go back further / you will find a
knife / tucked inside a blank map / a single bronze coin / levitating on the
horizon

is it so hard to imagine my abuelos / deserve to come from more / than a trail of
open graves / even if they don't have the paper / to prove it / even if they can't
stand / ankle deep in the Rio Grande / without being washed away /

in a dream / I discover the severed head of a jaguar / sitting in a dry riverbed / I
ask my abuelo what it means / he says / follow the blood / back to its body /
trace the red dirt with your finger / you'll find what you're looking for / you'll
find someone else / got there first

BRANDON MELENDEZ

line/age

I am my father's son / sure / but I am not my father / 's struggle so
why do I keep pulling / his ancestors out / of my throat / like their
names belong / to me / let's say this bloodline is a border / I walk on /
but never across / & home is whatever soil / my father's hands / are
buried in / let's say I have a lineage / of ancestors who melted /
collarbone & vertebrae / into a staircase / who told me to climb &
never look back

SARA PECK

dear anne with the broken fingernails

in turn it regrows—impulse to gather
every escaped branch I can hold in the pit
of my shirt

whittle each to a point

there are so many more roots
than we planned for
think we never would have known
had we not teased them out
made visible the underearth
and now that we know
it's no wonder they don't believe you

SARA PECK

dear anne with the broken fingernails

we watch the rain misdefine *health*
and no matter how we look at it you've had to unlearn
how everything falls sideways

words, hair, slant

of water against glass

your shrinking pulls the air out of the room
like a well and you divide it into parts

minus arm

minus thigh

but our body's house has many rooms
and walls made out of light
only feel beautiful until they decay

I can't prepare a place for you
can't tell you to stop playing
in the wound of the barren rooms

my teeth are light-full still
my hands clawed to the chimney
to keep the birds out

AMANDA BALES

THE GOD WHO MADE US

We sorrow pretty to men. We pleasure a danger. We learned this young
on Baptist pews. Mary beatific. Delilah grotesque. Most others not even named,
this one's mother, that one's wife. These are the stories we gained, we girls,
while we prayed, we hymned, we itched crinoline, we terrified our bodies
tempted boys to sin. Our virtue, our worth. The same refrain we heard
in boot stomp count-offs and mouth harp moans, our halos honky-tonk
rhinestones we shined while we good-hearted and cried in the rain,
each verse and three-chord truth more lies to keep us tamed.

SOPHIA STARMACK

THE GRIEF SWEATER

wakes before her husband. Grinds the coffee.

walks me down the aisle.

wears my mother's breasts and sings like my dead sister on the phone.

dropped out of school. everyone was so mean.

is sharp as soccer cleats and twice as nasty.

dug up a rotted foundation in the woods.

wonders if it was molested as a child.

went to college. has two graduate degrees and still feels lonely.

goes to bed while it's still light.

is trying a new medication.

sits in the therapist's chair.

grades papers. still hasn't gotten tenure.

swallows hard.

feels fine but has a hard time sleeping.

bled on the sheets in its father's house while the boyfriend snuck out the window.

is named one, two, and three.

unfreezes pies at four am and waits to open. falls like snow.

is considering when to tell.

once met several other silences in an abandoned subway tunnel.

they all had long white hair.

drools on the pavement, tries to straighten out.

feels its tentacles frothing the dark.

claps its hands and flour rises like smoke.

folds and refolds the dough.

SOPHIA STARMACK

MISS TEACHER, MISS TEACHER

I wanted to write a poem that would remind me

that I am a goddess and not a cow

or at least a poem that would split the difference.

A poem that would wake me at five am to sing

It's so good to have a steady job!

But it didn't happen. My feet hurt.

I stood all week watching children take tests.

Five cried, one threw up, and two peed

but the last one smiled and said

Don't worry Miss Starmack, I'm only a little wet

I want to finish my work.

I called a woman to say, *hello, your eight-year-old daughter*

has gotten her period.

The mother cried so I didn't.

What do you say to an eight-year-old who's become
in between writing and math
a woman?

We sat in the empty science room next to the garter snake
the crayfish, the chinchilla in its tall wire cage.

I handed her a pair of extra-large panties, rose print
and an enormous pad.

I did not say, *You are a woman, your life has begun.*

I said, *Do you know what it is? Did your mother
tell you about it?*

I said, *Look at the chinchilla hiding under its bowl.
Its house is big as a teacher but only its ears stick out.*

SOPHIA STARMACK

THE DRY BOAT

Somewhere after the desert, Ruth's eyes fill with water.
In the high air, dust, her lover's face: rarefied, precious.

At home her brother is young and dreams of the fight.
In his lungs a dry crackle speaks endlessly of fire.

The white sky and the ranger say today is a dangerous day;
trucks move down the mountain with jars of water, precious.

In Ruth's hands, a white peach tells two things:
hot static fur, and the promise of water, precious, precious.

Three hundred miles from the ocean a man is building a boat.
It sails on its wooden scaffold, dry and peach-white.

Which is more dear to the dry boat man—his boat? his hands?
Or the promise of water, precious, so far inland?

LISA HUFFAKER

OCEAN, I AM WARNING YOU

I could do it, I could swallow you
whole.

(How preposterous, my saying this.
But standing
on this particular shore, shouting
into this particular wind, this
is what I'm shouting.) *Ocean, be warned.*

I am here to open the wordless white book.
I am here to turn the pages, wave upon wave.
I am here to read

what never was language
what never was image
what is only space and endless
rippling: white foam, jagged,
long-stitched in blue.

I am here for your voice.

For roaring salt, and light.

For your tilting prisms. And to attend
my own drowning.

(Let us begin.)

I am here for your confession.

Yes,

and I could drink you down,
if it comes to that.

LISA HUFFAKER

WORDS FOR A RESONANT SPACE

O Beauty, be sad with me!
I know for all your flowers you cannot
unbreak the broken world, not for all
the prisms you align so skillfully
with your graceful hands, like birds
to sing along the lit window, no:

what is dismal will be dismal still.
What is shabby will be shabby still,
and what is more, it will be inside us,
canker and cancer and inescapable,
because in opening we are left open,
because in ringing we are left ringing.
Once we merge with the universe
where is there to run?

O Beauty, was it when you walked by my side
under the arching trees, or later
in my quiet kitchen, you said the word
despair, laid it before me, together with *joy*?
And all I could do was receive those gifts,
marvel at them as I marvel
at anything you give me. Yes, and

side by side on a balcony, once,
O Beauty, I sat with you, and you wept
in my presence. O nothing could shine
as your tears shone. O the space around you
was a cathedral, and your face was all
its candles, and O Beauty your face
was its shimmering alcoves, and its shrine
and all its stained glass, and you let me
kneel there with my heart lit, praying.

But I cannot by praising you
undo the great undoing
which must and shall undo us and nothing,
nothing shall not be undone.

And so I beg you: give me your hand.
Be near me.
And let us mourn, let us mourn.

LISA HUFFAKER

VOICE LESSONS

“The voice is organ of speech.”

Say it a thousand times, with a Russian accent:

“Voice is organ of speech.”

Maestro, I got so sick of hearing it.

And body, I grew weary of your truthfulness,

body, you polygraph, you seismograph!

Any regret, any fear, all my shames

you broadcast into space: my whole aching

life, the stumbling wreck of it.

I stood naked, inside out.

Organ of speech! At least my liver

keeps its poisons to itself.

Maestro, you shook my ribcage

into 24 separate bones, you hung my skull

like an apple from the stem of my spine,

you wrenched open the fused hinge

of my jaw, and unclamped my hands

so I could not protect my throat.

You commanded: *open*.

You commanded: *speak*.

Whenever my tissues could not dilate

you found the adhesions

and pressed on those scars.

Sometimes you went in with a scalpel.

Maestro, you were merciless. And Rossini was merciless.

And deathless Mozart and all the pantheon

of composers – so merciless!

And music itself was merciless.

Yes, but music:
when it moved through that broken space,
sometimes I could cry with light.

EMILY PAIGE WILSON

A DOCTOR TIRES OF HER PATIENT

Red sailor, red sailor, red sailor, blue.
The moon is but the ocean's broken
tooth. Your symptoms thin as bikini
strings. Still the sun is setting.
Silicon dioxide's slick side, green
eye. All these primary colors can't
cut a prescription yet. Red sailor,
red. Cough drop sunset slicked skeletal.
I have my own hurts to nurse.
I have so briefly to be beautiful.

KATIE BERTA

A BODY IS A THING YOU HAVE,

an object you own
rather than a thing you are,
supposedly.

Confounding, then:
the aches, pains, the persistence
of experiencing them
and then

the opposite of that—
the body of the cat
hit by a car and left in the road
speaks for itself.

The mouth yawns and the eyelids cover, flaccidly,
the emptying that's happened beneath.

It's hard to put that next to
a body on the beach, a body
in a bathing suit
that bends toward a shell,
abdominal muscles
coming clear
through their sheet of skin.

The woman who owns this body
only feels what it is to *be* it
until it becomes an image.

In a mirror, she separates
herself
from herself,

each matching the other's gaze,
gesture, shrug. That which
is separable
is separated out.

That which isn't remains—
in the woman's brain, "soul"?
She places a hand on a hip,

just so,
to see how that
rings around the room.
Her image places,
just so,
a hand.

JESS SMITH

VOW

The sermon of the ocean: nothing lasts
that I wish dead. A light that looks like dawn
all day, that feels like the first hour
of winter, your hands demanding

their way into my sweater, the gust
of your blown mouth, how the breaking
waves strip the shore of its first skin, drag
their cage of larceny across whatever

has worked hard to crawl, on all
fours, away. Like the first time
I ever saw the Pacific, and you said
I told you it was bigger, the choking

foamy groan of high tide, God's jaw
unhinged and hungry. Your laughter slapped
against my skin, a signal that I, too,
should be happy. Of course the sea

has teeth. Of course we lie beside it
like a dare, starfish in our blood, limbs
that won't regrow, your hands at my
throat, isn't this romantic, isn't this

what I wanted? Isn't this how you always
end up—cold enough to know your blood
is hot, unsure enough to turn back
before you've even begun to run?

KYRSTEN HILL

THE WOUNDED DEER

*After Frida Kahlo
and Morgan Parker*

Hunters stay fluent
in damage.

They stay hungry
to read your insides.

You stay half-
woman and deer

with one panicked heart
tired from seeding

the language
of your blood

on the terrain.
You stay stalked

only this time
in a clearing,

arrows like a crooked smile
up your back.

Your body stay
a holy book of ache

and other feelings
they will take later.

Arrows drawn
to your leaping heart

cause it stay exposed
and don't trust

the cover of brush
with its dying.

The last time a hunter asked
Do you wanna die, Bitch?

You were on your way
to something you loved.

You said, *Fine,*
but I'll take you with me.

What's left but to lift
your resolve?

Float it like a ghost
familiar with the wilderness.

When hunters stay after you,
why they mad

when you stay sharp
like your mama's

good kitchen knife?
Let them be mad

at the space you claim
to make room

for your living.
Keep your glare armed.

Point it at whatever
wants you dead.

KYRSTEN HILL

ZOMBIES

Someone shares a viral post that *we all bleed the same color*.
Sometimes, I cry because we have to bleed so much to belong
to anywhere. I cry thinking of anyone bleeding without someone
who loved them to tell them to hold on
in America. I don't know where to put the blood,

or my anger without scaring my white neighbor
who feels *attacked* when I can't handle her knocking
at my door to complain about the incense I burn
when I meditate to get free for five minutes.

My friend says I should try to quiet my mind,
that I shouldn't hold it in all the time. I can't even
get through five minutes of trying without a white woman
in my hallway, coughing, waving at something imaginary,
telling me I'm killing her. They after me in a dream—

the zombies, coming from everywhere. I've given myself
away. They know where I live. I rush to barricade
my house with unhinged doors and table tops. I can't find enough nails.
I can't find a hammer. Everywhere I hide
is a ripped open place despite how determined I am.
They are hungry and I feel it—

what it is to be snatched, pulled until I can see my legs,
arms, organs coveted by so many hands.
It's a recurring nightmare I wake from, tired,
like there's a bunch of dead people's teeth
making a mouth in my heart.

ASHLEY ROACH-FREIMAN

REFLECTION ON WHEN I HEARD YOU WERE SOBER

That tiny shower
in the carriage house
behind your parents' You shed
concert shirt and jeans
gave me a sweaty beer
I didn't want Get in
you said God's gift I waited
by the vanity steamed-up
in my clothes Thought I should
You were the kind of poet
to equate a flower to a bruise
Purple writing Glad you're sober
He got a girl who fucks weird
My friend said You didn't call back
What did that mean
the first time you crawled into my bed
Pulled your clothes off Put your no-taste
mouth all over me Said *love love love* I thought
This A kind of power Texted me
on your wedding day Sounded pretty drunk
say things about your life hello? u up?
Fifteen years I haven't thought much
about you What kind of person bruises so easy
Flowers in panic Fucks uninvited
Texts drunk on his wedding day
how are things I remember
I boot-crushed a can on your front door
You were fucking some not-me girl weird
You know I never liked
your fat mouth your hairlessness your absent smell
You know what you did You wrote a poem
about me that got me alone
You tore the condom off when

I let you fuck me violently They call that assault now
I had a lot of bruises not flowers
I smelled weird that night I left confused
and sore I went to where I worked
to feel safe I was alone
You didn't call You got married
Stopped drinking I hear
how is your life u r awesome
Why did I continue to let you tug at me
Soft spots on my body
I even seemed
to want it If not you
In October the ginkgo drops berries
repulsive to crush Viscous stink
With the heavy heel of my boot I press
until one lances Inhale until I can't
Is that power I have

ASHLEY ROACH-FREIMAN

JUDITH BEHEADING HOLOFERNES

Imagine, for a moment, that I rose
from myself, sleep-heavy, liquid

with bourbon, bottom-shelf. Held-down, pinned.
That I had elevated from my bed, and fisted the hair

of the man who, in darkness, had made claim
to what I had teased (my relative ease),

but not offered. How good that feels, to think
of it now. His arrogance, the stink

of his loneliness. His patchy beard. Imagine,
my most private self, staking claim, instead, of his head.

SUZANNAH RUSS SPAAR

USES FOR APPLES

On the island of wild ponies, we see only those fenced in. I am meat
with intrigue, meet a man at the bar whose face has withered.
Take an Apple, Make a Face my sister wrote on a kindergarten list.

It's September, fruit is either full or rotting and I still think I'm in love
with you, steer your arm like a scorch through the sand. I've always been
one for a tender attack: horse nose on my palm, spit downing my wrist

like when you kissed me, all bourbon and wet. In the bar I'm slow
with sunburn—skin flickers, features cooked stiff. *A Witch with a Face*.
Or: *Open Heart to Stamp a Star*. We can follow the wilted man

to Misty's stuffed body, so we do—my leg against yours as we go.

In a paved city I fell and busted my kneecap. No one saw—but you saw,
I picked myself up, shrugged to the bar, held my hands below

the table. Alone I hulled the stockings from my leg like a peeled rabbit, blood
grit to its pelt. For months the scar left a print like a heart
but it wanes, will soon be hushed. *A Witch with a Face*. Misty was a childhood
gem, a pony for the orphans who let her mother swim free.

This is a happy ending, an ending for children, mother pulsing and pulsing
further from shore. The car leads us to a bundle of box homes

and I won't go inside, don't want to see if Misty's in the basement,
gagged and stitched, an apple in her mouth. Her eyes don't blink,
she stares all day at the same white wall, wonders *when will they turn me?*

Misses her friends. *But*, perhaps *love is not for me*. I sit stagnant, make you spin
the car around. My skin peels in whole swathes. Tan my hide and bloat
with sawdust. *Spit out Seeds*, the list ends. *Spit out Seeds and Plant Them*.

SUZANNAH RUSS SPAAR

GIRLS WHO ARE PLANTING

For a few cents less see the sisters in the parking lot;
a girl eating orange peel, the brightest spectacle. In a town
that sleeps, there are feet that carry. Hometown sickness,
swallowed up sisters spitting out dirt. Halves of seeds
split open, tongued out on the asphalt like a litter
of moth's wings. Last week they stripped all the letters
from the street signs, hoped to rename them—something
like *soft street* or *boil*. But the glue re-wrote what was lost in debris.

They walk down the highway, blister of heat. Watch
as the sisters waver at horizon, watch horizon grow and seize
them. Tall grass, sacred by their fingerbrush, cloaks what is wild:
the alive and the emptied. Skeletons, all—looked over.
Look over the meadow, town approaches. Look over the sisters,
their chewed mouths, their hands full of pasture. The sun is high,
burnt hole in a yellowed curtain. Lace frays, hangs the moon up
too, sphere of smoke. The sisters buy a new bag of fruit. Swing sour.

JESSICA ABUGHATTAS

ANTHEM WITH EMERALD AND GOLD

Sing me an Arabi song you know—the one
where wind and love

mean the same—song of the sugary night
and tray upon golden tray

of minty tea—the song of my baba
poised over a boiling *breek*—

song of the '87 benz with his scent
of coffee black and marlboro

old spice—cardamom song
of mamas and babas
still together—

the stolen kitchen kiss—that song where we lay

still together
amid the olive groves
and the air is thick with possibility

while off somewhere the babas smoke
and the mamas read fortunes

in blue ceramic cups—in the shapes
their kahweh leaves—

where the hometown girl lights up
like an emerald
when the lovers are hoisted up

in two white chairs

and the lovers are us—
the one where the diva sings

*I don't want to fall in love
and she really means I do—*

JESSICA ABUGHATTAS

DARK ROOMS

I was five years old
suspended between fire and water
when you showed to me in the magazine the bodies
and sat in the secret dark while the party went on
loud outside without us

I remember when I would touch
my own body
I didn't know
I had a body

I could only see it from above
suspended in the speckled ceiling
a blackbird watching
the sinister tangling of shadow
that you consumed

a magazine, a memory

is this why
I inspect the women
the how shapes of their collarbone
and the way they breathe in the night

and is this why
I suspect the parties
why I can never seem to relax when there's
dancing and darkness

is this why

I can't believe sometimes I have a body
like the propelling ribs of a magazine
like the black and white twist of navel
how it stands slender and woman
in these elastic rooms of prayer
where the strangers cast wishes upon me
a reeling explosion
in the infinite dark you made

KYLE LOPEZ

TUXEDOS AND CADILLACS

Abuela's father would tell her
he only liked two things
black: tuxedos
and Cadillacs

My father said boys once whipped him
and his sisters as they walked
home from school,
spat 'niggers' at them
between belt lashes so hard
his sister left soaked in piss and tear

Schoolkids deemed me black,
or brown but not black,
or Spanish, light bright, black enough
or nowhere near

My brother told me 'we black,'
sagged his pants and balled at the park
16 months older – decades ahead
in decoding his face

The mirror once whispered to me brown,
not black. Stared me down looking nothing
like a tuxedo
or a Cadillac

ANGELA YOUNGBLOOD

NAVIGATION BEFORE TECHNOLOGY

Tucked between small mountain ranges, you'll descend like a bird of carrion to my childhood home. Redwood Valley is a blink of an eye, easy to navigate. A right at the house with a red barn off of E. School Street, where on dewy mornings children stand at the stop sign, wait—wait—waiting for the bus, you will find Pinecrest Drive.

The house I grew up in is on the left. Down the road a bit. Before asphalt disappears into dirt, just before a copse of Redwood trees. If you reach a steep hill of dirt and gravel where I once fell and cut my lip because my bike forgot how to brake, you've gone too far. Go back.

As you pull into the gravel drive, please note it is not the first house on the right. Alta lived (*lives?*) there. If you see a small Native American woman who used to train wolves and caught rain water in abalone shells to water her plants, please give her my regards.

My house is the larger ranch style just past hers. Maybe, too, you will come the same epiphany I came to at the age of six as your feet crunch rock on the path to the door, "Oh! Now I get it! The lights are on but nobody's home!"

Rerouting...

I was always struck as a child when I came across books with flowers or clovers pressed between the pages. Something once living, dried, now, an image. Was this not the purpose of ink on page? Pressing words to paper?

One image: Where the irises grew, I learned of beauty in gentle folds; feminine and bearded. Bulb plants the color of fresh bruises, resilient and still blooming. If you gently pull back the flesh of a petal and let it catch the light, just so, an intricate network of veins is exposed. The spiky green leaves, the cartilage backbone of each stem, do not bend in the wind or under the weight of the bloom, they quiver gracefully for their one to three weeks of unabashed flowering. With little to no tending, they will bloom again.

What do you call the bowl of a tree where the branches take off from the trunk? The basin at the divergence, the catcher of rain, fallen leaves, and debris? Rot pot. Decaying stew. Organic. Childhood.

Search results: Unable to find image.

The absence of. I feel like my life has taken up this mantra. I feel an unremembering. No recollecting. The collection is a scattering. Flash in the pan. Fools gold. Triggers; bang! Bang!

I remember a fence of wood and squared wire. Imposing. Insurmountable. But there seems to be more questions than memories. Scientists say black holes follow all the laws of physics, including gravity—especially gravity—that everything becomes so dense hurtling toward this one point, not even light can escape. My thoughts are following physics, and I am helpless in the pull.

Another image: My mother's hands seemed slender, elegant, otherworldly, juxtaposed to the soft doughy flesh of the rest of her. Her hands took on a life of their own, little birds chopping vegetables, cool hand to fevered forehead, fluttering monarchs of maternalism. Almond shaped fingernails and a bulb shaped callus from years of meticulous grocery lists and budgeting. Duality. These hands closed latches, brandished a fire poker, locked the bathroom door for two days. These hands said, "KEEP OUT!" in their futile quest to keep it all in.

Redirecting...

* * *

When I was in college I read Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. I became obsessed with Wemmick. Wemmick was a colleague of Pip, the main character, but to me, Wemmick was the meat and potatoes. I thought about him constantly, wrote an essay entitled "On Wemmick and Human Battlements," and walked around town looking for houses that had the facade of a castle tower; there are three houses in the town where I now live that I found in my obsession. He permeated my consciousness, slipped into my dreams. I felt a kindred spirit in Wemmick. A man who lived in the heart of a dirty and bustling city, separated by a moat and drawbridge. A home, shielding a cozy domestic bliss behind physical battlements. There was a work-Wemmick and a home-Wemmick. Each domain was compartmentalized. Separate. Safe.

I started imagining people walking around like their own castles, some with cannons, others with algae-thick moats 10 feet wide, a few with crumbling mortar. I felt a bit like the last castle—rocks askew, ready to fall apart.

Error. Please try again.

* * *

Crows are known to have episodic-like memory. They have to add "like" to the end of episodic, because there is currently no way of knowing whether a crow's form of remembering is accompanied by conscious recollection, which is a key

component in human episodic memory. Episodic memory is the who, what, when, and where of memory. Autobiographical. A collection of personal experiences that occurred at a certain time and place. Data.

Input: early childhood memory

Pages fell like snow, almost lazily, to the ground. A too-soft juxtaposition to books being ripped from their spines. Whiskey. Another flying book. Thud. Paper, gently drifting to meet the living room floor. Funny, that my dad built the shelf the books were coming from. Stained the wood. Something he created with his hands. These same hands were also capable of undoing, ripping the threads that bind, tearing things apart. I kept my eyes on the paper, tried to find beauty in the rage. My mom kept pushing the books back on the shelf. She never looked so much like a bookend.

When we moved out of my childhood home we had to wash the walls. Blank canvasses, lighter patches of paint, now hung where pictures once had. Squares and rectangles of wall surrounded by layers of nicotine. Where Norman Rockwell's *Freedom from Want* had resided over the dining room table, the serene image of a family being served a bountiful Thanksgiving meal, nicotine had exercised creative license—precise, hard lines containing a hollow space. Ten years of nicotine wrung out in the Pine Sol and warm water, staining my thirteen year old fingers, erasing histories.

My parents had hired a man to clean up the yard, tame the jubilant growth of the plants, take down the squared and wired fence on the left corner of the property. At what point do cages need not be physical? I watched him, first, remove the chicken wire, a later add-on to *keep things in*, that slightly tilted in at the top of the fence. Then he methodically began removing staples from the posts and rolling up the heavy squared wire of the enclosure. Next he unhinged the latched gate. Lastly, he pulled the posts from the ground. He made it look effortless. Funny, that that space still stands in my mind, just as tall and sturdy as the day it was built, despite me seeing it torn down.

External link:

More and more, with the building and removal of physical barriers and walls, psychologists are grappling with how these structures have impacted the human psyche. Since the seventies, a decade after the Berlin Wall went up, psychologists have been theorizing about the effects of physically imposed isolation. “Mauerkrankheit” translates to “wall sickness,” describing the malaise that accompanied living with the Berlin Wall. This term was coined after the fall of the Berlin Wall when mental health specialists saw a rise in despondency of those who lived near or within the confines of the barrier. Gritta Heinrich, who

lived up against the Berlin Wall in Klein-Glienicke said, “It was this real feeling of narrowness.” Despite the wall being torn down 30 years ago, many people who live in East and West Germany still experience “Die Mauer im Kopf,” or “the wall in the head.” In Israel and Palestine, where The Separation Wall still exists, they have only just begun studying the psychological implications of the barrier. The barrier that separates Pakistan from India is called “The Line of Control,” a double-row of fencing and concertina wire, electrified and motion sensed. The small area of land between the double fence is covered with thousands of landmines. As with Israel and Palestine, surveys and studies have only just begun to measure the psychological ramifications of these partitions. All studies show an increased number of individuals with distress, anxiety, and feelings of displacement. Each fence, line, barrier, wall, enclosure—keeping things in, keeping things out; signifying *other*.

What does this say of the parent/child relationship? If boundaries are drawn for “protection,” does intent outweigh consequence?

As I am writing this my father is having open heart surgery. I feel a suffocation of fear. Fear that he may die, heart exposed, chest open on the operating table. Fear that I am exposing him with each stroke of my pen as I attempt to fill in cavities. I can imagine my mom, chain smoking and watching the clouds like a furtive dream, waiting for the call, “Everything went well. Everything is going to be okay.” I feel distressed. Displaced somewhere between anxiety and anger. Anger at he who built the cage. Anger at her who put us in it. Anxious that they’ll both die with unspoken answers on their tongues.

I want to know the shape of my time in that enclosure. Need to know the shape that has forced itself into every relationship I have ever had. Dividing. Drawing lines. Was it for a summer? A handful of days? Over the course of a few years? I ask my sisters; we are united in our unremembering. Like a bookmark pressed between the long unread pages of our youth, it leaves an indelible image of where part of ourselves left off and picked up another text.

Unauthorized access...

I remember the playhouse. A one room wooden wonder my dad built with his hands. A-frame, shingled roof, exterior of white with yellow trim. Two windows for natural light. A counter on the wall without a window, fitted with a metal sink. No running water. How many times did I sweep that plywood floor? A door frame without a door, always open, beckoning, “Come on in!”

I called my sister and asked, “Which came first—the cage or the dog?” I could feel the distance through the phone as she shoveled buried memories. When she hit something hard she asked in turn, “Wasn’t our playhouse in there?”

I pulled out a shoebox of photos, scattered memories on the floor, in search of an image. A four year old me in front a swing-set. In the corner of the frame, our white and yellow playhouse inside the fence. Just as my dad had built the playhouse for us with loving hands, he had also built the cage for us, the cage my mother had locked us in on inattentive days.

Image found:

Six feet of separation. A few hundred square feet of lawn. Playhouse in the corner. At the far side of the fence is where the irises grew. Through my wire latticed lense I looked out at wild flowers. Laburnum. Rhododendron. Ivy that draped in heavy vines off the massive oak. Before the chicken wire was added to the top, my sisters would climb out. I couldn't. Wouldn't. I felt that the cage was there for a reason. That I belonged in it.

I sometimes wonder what my mother did while we were locked away. Did she imagine us safe while she walked the narrow corridors of her memory? Did she crave the isolation she physically imposed on us, her three daughters? I remember a quiet, but ever present, hysteria closed around our childhood. The 60 Minutes clock always ticking; another child abduction, strangers luring kids to cars with candy, Polly Klaas kidnapped from her home in Petaluma, her strangled body found in a shallow grave 30 minutes from our home. While keeping these things *out*, they were keeping us *in*. Intent versus consequence.

Black hole: My sisters and I named that enclosure "The Kid Kennel." An attempt to deflect pain, or any real depth of feeling, with humor. On the cusp, perpetually at the event horizon. But it is pulling me in. Dense. Denser still. No light memories can escape.

I have been smoothing the edges of this memory for years. Wearing the shape of the cage in my mind down to a more pocket-friendly size. A shape I can understand. Can carry with me, without consuming me. My favorite image of my sisters and I is this: A photo of the three of us. A day I don't remember. Overcast at the beach. Grey waters bleeding into sky. A sea of infinite horizons. We are facing the waves, the three of us, ready to jump. Together. On the cusp. At the precipice of something.

AMANDA GALVAN HUYNH

THE SMALL-TOWN MAN

Floydada, Texas

The first memory of my abuelo
rests on the lip of a Budweiser.
With a Mexican gameshow

on the T.V. he gave me a sip
and my throat kicked it back up.
His mustache laughed. The sting

like metal left out in a Texas
sun. These summers I spent
with my father's parents. Days

I'd flint through flea markets,
lose money at the local festivals,
road trip to the nearest town

for groceries, play in unfenced
dirt yards, and find myself
turning their tornado shelter

into a dungeon. Rocks became
goblins. Wood beams set
to cement a new driveway

transformed into an Olympic
Arena for a balance beam
performance—I fell

into terror. Two hands
tore me away. These hands
belonged to my Abuelo

left me on the cracked curb
aware that this little house
on E. Tennessee Street

was his—built by the same
two hands. The were
the same ones that reached

for the tortilla stack at breakfast,
unlocked the gate to his junkyard,
dragged chains across the yard,

changed the channel or turned
the music up on la radio. His hands
drove eighteen-wheelers full

of a season's harvest, waited
by the curb of the house
for Abuela to bring his lunch

out, the night of his shift. One night
he took us along with those hands
steady under a cotton plump

moon. Him, *A small-town man*,
he'd say; who didn't want more
than the work he could bear.

AMANDA GALVAN HUYNH

DFW to LAX

As I feel the wheels let go,
the lady behind me speaks
to her daughter—her voice
like the grind of a molcajete—
like my abuela's. Both
fluent in Spanglish with a dash
of long 'Ah' sounds in understanding.
Texas stretches beneath us
the way I rolled dough into Texas—
shaped tortillas with my child—
sized hands. Papas y huevos
in the air and a pile of toasted
tortillas. Only one spoonful of breakfast
could fit in my state-shaped
tortillas but she always let me make them,
pack them for Abuelo's lunch. Abuelo
always working at the junkyard.
Migrant to his bones he'd travel across
Texas while she stayed in one place.
She never climbed into the belly
of a plane. No desire to—the woman
quiets and the ground has become
stitches of color, farmland
and roads harder to outline. It blurs
together, and I wonder if I can see
Floydada from up here or if we
even fly near the town—where I know
Abuelo sits at the table alone—where
Abuela will never see how close
I lean to the window—trying to find her.

NICOLE CONNOLLY

DX: FOREDOOMED

Nostradamus knows the stars, too, get ill. He asks, how many jackals congregated in the parking lot during your birth? I live because Death knows if she takes me, it will super my nova & she wants to savor its once. Like a common lover, she pretends to let me walk away. He asks, if you sucked all the blessing out of the baptismal water, how many babies did you condemn to purgatory? Today, each of my entrances rouses goosebumps, constellations un-perfecting your skin. To map a planetary distance is to convert a million miles into a yawning centimeter; we couldn't be together, because I couldn't wait for you to change. He asks, did taking Saint Francis's name strip his consecration? Today, my childhood is a constellation in that I know a few things & make up the rest. Without a telescope, it's mostly so-called darkness. Read: first-grade journal entry—Neighbor boy threatens to baseball bat my mom. Read: my palm—supernova by suicide or medication? I chose this lipstick for its bullseye.

ERIN SLAUGHTER

It's strange, the things / that make you want to live

The night you didn't kiss me I felt inexplicable
urgency to finally / make that eye doctor appointment

There's something here / about blindness
as metaphor / Sometimes what people love
more than being in love is feeling

like part of a story / I want to write something
so beautiful it will make me believe / in pizza again

I want to write something with false

& monstrous wings / that has never known you / I wrote

you a letter & quit my job

to rewrite it / I wrote you a letter

& then forty years later forgot

who you were / Your eyes are so blue in a way

that doesn't even matter / You looked

right through me like you were harvesting / ice or uncovering

a well / Well, it's easy to be selfish

when you're not standing / here like so many flutterings

of atmosphere / By selfish, I mean wanting / when there are so many

other ways to be / What great weariness

all of this is / I could not be empty if I tried

JEN CORRIGAN

BURST

When they look back, they will remember it like this.

They will remember the dusky light, the road slicing through the trees. The wife will remember the hawk perched atop the speed limit sign. The husband will remember the opossum carcass on the shoulder, its insides split out of its outsides, ripe fruit bursting in the sun.

The evening is their last ditch attempt to love one another. The wife wears lacy red panties under her skirt. The husband pays for dinner at Red Lobster.

They say oysters are an aphrodisiac, he says, raising one eyebrow. The wife laughs and touches his hand. Every motion hurts, as if their love was a muscle they no longer used.

The wife looks down at the gray flesh in her oysters, the hills and valleys of the interior. She traces the cochlea-like whorls, imagines the creatures as ears.

They try to fill the car with words. The wife pitches a *remember when*, and the husband returns *oh yes, and*, as if rebuilding their marriage was improv, which, the wife supposes, it is. Love is just making things up as you go.

When the wife unzips the husband's trousers, he moans, and the sound turns them both off. But the wife takes the husband's limp penis and rolls it between her fingers until the flesh hardens. His penis spits out a teardrop of precum onto her hand. She resists the urge to wipe it on his boxers.

The wife puts the husband's penis in her mouth and bobs her head up and down. He takes one hand off the wheel and places it on her skull, pushing her head down. She hates this, and she has told him that once before. *You say you want me to be in charge, but you just can't let go of control*. They fought. She stopped giving blow jobs.

When the husband gasps, the woman thinks it's because he's about to come, and she tightens her lips until they burn from the pressure. Then there is the keening of the tires across the pavement, the whump against the hood, the crack of the windshield spidering out.

The wife sits up. *What happened?* she asks. *What happened?*

He doesn't reply, just drives. His face is a blank kabuki mask, his body motionless except for the delicate tilting of the wheel, the adjustment of the pedals.

It isn't until they pull into the dingy dark of their garage that the husband tells her.

The wife remembers when she was a child, when she and her brother would climb on the roof and drop things onto the driveway: chipped coffee mugs missing handles, already broken electronics, old fruit swollen with juices. She thought of the time they dropped a watermelon, how its flesh burst out, staining the pavement pink.

We need to go back, the wife says. *We need to call 911.*

The husband nods, but doesn't switch the car back on. Neither reaches for their cell phone. They sit until it's too late to change their decision.

They spend the night in the car with the seats reclined. The wife thinks about Stephen King, how he recovered and wrote *Dreamcatcher* with paper and a fountain pen. She never finished reading the book. She hated the movie.

The next several days, they don't leave the house. The husband scans the paper each morning. The wife flips through the news channels.

After two weeks, the husband goes into the garage and scrubs the dried blood off the car, makes an appointment at the body shop. *Hit a damn deer*, he mutters into the receiver. *They're everywhere this year.*

One night as they lay next to each other in bed, the wife says, *I blame myself.* She tells him *I prayed for something to keep us together.*

The husband kisses her and gently pushes her onto her back. They make love in silence.

As weeks, months, then years pass, both are surprised at how they've learned to forget. Time stretches further and further without the memory surfacing, and they catch themselves laughing. They are joyful even though they don't deserve it. The wife wonders if, when they die, they will be forgotten. The man wonders if people can live outside of memory.

The wife never gives the husband a blow job again, and he never asks for one. When they look back, they remember the way the trees flash past, the relaxed sleepiness of full bellies and soft conversation. They rewrite the memory in their heads, imagine it as passion. Together, they construct the fantasy, the wife opening her mouth, starving, the husband winding his fingers in her hair, their bodies singing together as if their very cells are about to burst.

MAYA PHILLIPS

AT THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE

My father will begin again. He has bought
a juicer and a book on integrative health.

Here, with the doctor as witness,
my father swears to his body,
on his body, the all of his life.
This is his new start.

The doctor remains silent—
after all, what can one say to the dead?

A shot of insulin ?
Two pills before bed ?

Or
I'm sorry
as though he forgot
to write the prescription, as though
the insurance was declined:
I'm sorry—

He presses the stethoscope to the stale echo of him.

What can one say?

JENNIFER JACKSON BERRY

A CO-WORKER SAYS HE DOESN'T BOTHER
HITTING THE CAT WHEN IT'S BAD
BECAUSE *SHE'S TOO FAT TO FEEL IT*

I remember walking high school halls
when I was a freshman
& upper-class boys would push
each other into me.
More than twenty years & I'm still trying
to figure out the theory of the push.
Embarrass him? Embarrass me?

It happened when I was alone.

Those boys didn't think about me.
About how I had to steel myself
for an impact, about how I could have been
knocked over.

It happened when I was with someone.
I had to pretend to be ok.

I'd usually take a shoulder to my own, tall for my age.

Was the pusher hoping I would like it?
Then want his friend in every way I could want someone?

Then he'd be embarrassed by the love of a fat girl.

Another co-worker responds: *Hit the cat anyway.*

JENNIFER JACKSON BERRY

HOLY TITS, 08/12/1997

Lilith Fair, Star Lake Amphitheater, Burgettstown, PA

Blessed & divine accumulations of fat
bouncing in the rain-soaked run
from lawn to parking lot.
We weren't waiting for lightning
to shut down the outdoor concert
even if Jewel hadn't played
the main stage yet. I was 19,
my sister only 16. Jewel was the reason
those men were there. It wouldn't have been
for the Indigo Girls or Lisa Loeb.

Holy tits! they yelled.
I wish I had found a safe place for us
in the gap of two front teeth,
in between two guitars slung low,
in the curve of thick black spectacles.
I was angry at the feminist organizers too,
shooting off an email when I got home—
where are the f-ing plus-size t-shirts?
I don't know how to respond to catcalls—
maybe because they didn't
& still don't happen that often to me.
In 2010 Sarah McLaughlin staged a revival
& Lisa Loeb Eyewear Collection launched.
Each frame was named for one of her song titles.

Several dates were cancelled,
performers backed out.

How do you make five lbs. of fat holy?
Add a nipple.

JENNIFER JACKSON BERRY

DURING THE NIGHT, AFTER THE DAY

I FINALLY SAW RED FLAGS

I dreamed a fire. Flames from an open oven stuck to my shirt. Foot stamping, foot stamping as family swarmed around me. I dreamed a fire that somehow leapt from a burnt shirt on the floor into the wall & bubbled paint. I pointed at the bubble & said *call 911*. My husband aimed a glass of water at the bubble & said *that'll do it*. I dreamed an orange fire—finger pointing at me. Another glass of water. No one believed we needed a fire department. These people believe me in real life. They didn't believe me until the wall turned into a nightmare. Then my mother thought it was so important that we gather pictures, documents, policies before we escaped. In fact, no one was going outside until I found the title to a truck I don't own anymore. I ran topless to the fire box, didn't grab & run with it under my arm, no, flipped through folders looking for specific papers. I dreamed a fire in a house where I still live. I didn't wake up until finally we were outside. I saw a phone at someone's ear, but heard no sirens yet. I woke up. I woke up with a hot danger in my belly. I went to the bathroom. Same sequence a couple hours later (heat then shit) when I saw messages scroll across my screen from a man whose toxic friendship I just tried to end. Question: Why am I dreaming fire?

- a) There is no explanation for what we dream.
- b) There has been a flickering light I was made to believe

was only visible to me. c) Both & neither of the above.
I dreamed a fire. I woke up before I knew
the full scope of the damage.

LINDSAY REMEE AHL

IN FULL LIGHT

Rain the color of saffron,
a curtain of amber.

Rain flooding music inside full of flood,
we're all returning

the way water returns, (on our way
to the river)—

Pigeons slap their feet in puddles,
evanescent as a word spoken

in the sunrise, a flood that flattens into trespass
the rest, the way your mouth—

We're all dancing an empty white wine dance floor—thrown
over a bridge

tumbling under cold stream water
the shingles and more off the roof.

If
we drag our fingers down
the abyss is right there:
a cold moving river from the boat.

LINDSAY REMEE AHL

MALACHITE

It was like the night I was six, stunned, I braced myself against the bed frame of my grandmother's guest bed—at the base of the bed a presence, something watching me. I was immobilized for hours, knowing it would take me to Hades if I moved. So I didn't move, didn't breathe. Like that night we were in the bar, Coleman Hawkings' "Don't Take Your Love From Me" playing, the amber and green and yellow and clear liquor bottles before us, your voice sounding as though you were just resurrected from ancient Egypt's *Field of Malachite*, pure paradise and you must have been, handing me the green stone, still cool instead of warm from your hand. "To understand the language of animals," you said. But I wasn't humble. "I already understand the language of animals," I replied. My mistake, my glance up to the corner of the ceiling to take a moment, and by the time I glanced back, you were gone, and in your place—a vacuum, a hole, a waiting, a breathy anticipation, as evil and strange as the presence from the base of the bed so many years before. But I held your gift, heavy, still cool in my palm, an invitation to leave this place, a thread to another world. And why does anyone take their love away? And how could you be waiting for me when you no longer exist?

ERIKA GOODRICH

CONTEMPLATING EVENT HORIZON ON THE WINTER
SOLSTICE IN FLORIDA TWENTY YEARS AFTER MY
MOTHER WAS DIAGNOSED WITH SCHIZOPHRENIA

[1]

In a room north of here my mother rocks on the edge of a bed. Every hour
collapsing
into the next.

[2]

Around my mother: ash falls like stardust.

Beside her: an ashtray of cigarette butts
become dashes
that mark passing hours.

[3]

Against my window, a winter sun presses its palm.

Against a window, my mother presses her palm.

[4]

Her diagnosis, like snow that falls
in summer. A crocus
frozen beneath the bloom.

[5]

As darkness rises & the moon muscles its way into existence,

Stars flower
& flame:

little
elegies.

But brief moments of being.

ERIKA GOODRICH

IF NOT THE BODY, THEN

what does a woman own? If not her name.
If not the prayer nailed to her tongue. If not

the hours of submission. If not
the bones grown inside her like a city

of glass. If not the sky. Or the shadow
—s cast by the sun. If not, then—

Under night's cathedral, I kneel.
Next to the roses & rhododendrons

wisteria wilts in the garden. Water
moves through me, empty as wind.

Lord, I never asked for this.
I never asked for my body to be a petal

bent at the mercy of unforgiving
winds. For rain to rise

in my throat. Lord, why
did you make me to ache, a naked

stem? A woman. Why did you make me
your pilgrim with iron-wings?

KARISMA PRICE

THINGS I SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF BUT AM NOT

after Erika L. Sánchez

The only woman I trust in New York is the pharmacist who hands me my Pristiq.

For the first time, I told Adam I loved him and meant it.

I like white male soul singers.

My father thought I'd marry a white man.

I don't know any words to the Negro National Anthem.

I think death is nothing but a forgotten life.

Jazz funerals show me otherwise.

I did not cry at my father's funeral.

I was God when I burned every ant with a magnifying glass.

I watch *Addams Family Values* until I've convinced myself Gomez Addams is my father.

I stole a toy beeper in front of a nun who complimented my name.

I've stopped trying to hide the fact that I did not cry at my father's funeral.

I've never been on a date with someone I liked.

I have to check the stoves three times until I can fall asleep.

I do not check on my older brother because he never checks on me.

My pastor says depression is nothing more than a demon.

The congregation applauds until their palms bleed.

I go to church on communion Sundays to be a cannibal.

KELSEY ANN KERR

A MODERN TALE OF TRUE LOVE

Your arm flies out in front of me
as we come to a quick stop
on the asphalt, avoiding the SUV,
and I think of last winter, caught
in a snowstorm, how I was terrified, stuck
on I-70 near Bethel, until I found a way out
into a friendly pizza shop
where someone led me to safety,
to a hotel, and I felt like such an adult
but I was so lonely in that blizzard,
sitting in bed with a book on one side,
journal on the other, thinking
about texting the girl from the pizza shop
just to feel a sense of company,
so I turned on the TV to watch
faces appear and disappear, to hear laughter
and let it lull me to sleep.
I wish I'd known years ago
that after my parents died
I'd still find the kind of love
where someone's reflex
is to protect me, arm flying out
without a thought, always there
like a safety bar on a rollercoaster,
the beginnings of a summer romance
that would blossom into
a lilac bush in spring—
the sense of shelter, scent of home.

ALYSE BENSEL

PAPERMAKING

My husband liked gradient puzzles. He appreciated the way the color blurred and changed. All that color, he said, that no one's fucked up yet.

After he finished a puzzle, he collected scraps of paper, bills, and junkmail. He brought back discarded paper from the office. The papermaking process was reserved for the basement, alongside an abandoned brewing barrel and burlap sacks of grain. He painstakingly ensured the paper was smooth and the mottles from different colors were barely perceptible.

When he moved back to the island where his family lived, the summer after we graduated high school, he sent me prototypes for the stationary. He scrawled little drawings and designs around the edges, with few words written in contrast to my letters crammed with words. On one of the envelopes he sketched a cicada emerging from its nymph shell, maybe in response to my question about his mother's health. In words, he returned my questions with more questions. *How are you? How's the weather? I miss you.* Questions that asked nothing at all.

Before we married my husband had half a dozen penpals, all of whom loved paper and ink not for their utility, but for their beauty. The ephemera club, I teased.

Everything is ephemera, he reminded me.

When I began framing all of his past letters in large glass frames, to prevent more tearing and so I could turn them around to read the back, he hated the idea that anyone could read what he had written. *How are you? How's the weather? I miss you.* But you didn't write anything personal, I responded. He returned to ripping up paper before carrying his filled basket down to the basement, where he soaked the pieces and screened the fiber with a small mesh frame.

When the sheets had dried, the paper appeared on his work desk in our shared upstairs office. Several ink bottles had been lined up at the top edge of his desk. Later that afternoon, he decorated pages with calligraphic loops and swirls around the edges—not words, exactly, but evoking words, on the edge of a hieroglyphic language. I tried to decipher them when he was asleep. Holding the sheets to the overhead light, I squinted at the markings as I slowly rotated the paper. The cryptic incomplete loops, the wilting *m*'s.

Before sunrise, he burned the letters above our gas stove. I heard the pilot light staccato on a few minutes before the alarm.

The next day he used the remainder of the paper to draw elaborate mazes. He began from the center and worked his way out, barely lifting the pen to mark dead ends or offer the right path. One year every maze was a heart. Another year the mazes became labyrinths. Only one way in. Only one way out.

The year all the mazes were hearts, and cicada song had shuddered into evening, I stayed awake beside my husband until he eased out of bed and padded to the office.

I slipped out after him, then paused when I heard talking. He was murmuring something. When he emerged from the office holding the letters, I was still standing in the hallway. He looked up.

There are words here, he said. They are trapped between the pages. He brushed past me to go down the stairs.

I didn't follow. I knew the answers behind what he had been asking me for years. But I had never made much effort to translate what I assumed were easy questions. How no one else understood the unsent letters were memorials he burned to ashes. The questions he had been asking for years changed: *How long has she been gone? Where is my mother? I miss her.*

WILL HEARN

MAN FOR SALE

I started talking to grass two weeks after Dad's heart stopped. I hadn't lost my mind or thought it would help the grass grow, but Dad had talked to the Zoysia, especially as he grew older, and the more I took the positions he'd taken in his final days, the more I became an awkward version of him.

"You're doing alright," I said and wiggled my toes in the grass.

For hours he'd stood there in his dirty robe, water dribbling from the hose in his hand, mumbling encouragement. That grass was an island in a sea of hardy invasives, clinging to its territory, guarding it like an underdog country in a border battle.

"Don't give up," I said, looking down at it.

The Zoysia hadn't impressed anyone by spreading, but it had impressed me with one thing: it outlived Dad. And though I'd never believed it before, I thought it might need encouragement to go on living, the way everyone did now and then.

"Who are you talking to?" Gloria said. She was the teenage Jackson daughter, and the only one in the family I would end up liking.

Even though Dad's body had been dropped in a hole at the cemetery in town, it seemed he was actually buried here, still mumbling encouragement from below the dirt and beneath the shade of the oak trees. I'd guessed that he followed us home from the funeral. As if things weren't hard enough.

He had given direct, however obscure, instructions in his will: the estate was to be left to Gerald and I. And because Gerald was too busy and I was a pushover, it was my responsibility to sell what I was beginning to believe was actually our Dad to the strangers.

Like I said, I wasn't losing my mind. But I wasn't quite myself either.

"My brother and I lived out here during the summers," I said, ignoring Gloria's question and waving my arm like a magician at the landscape around me. Gloria's younger brothers did not look up from their phones.

At that time, I figured the two boys' hearts were the ones I needed to win. Since Gerald was pushing me to sell as fast as possible, and because I'd always been one to take the longer, harder route to success, I ignored Gloria.

I tried for Mrs. Jackson instead. She had been walking around with her bleach-bright smile all morning listening to her husband's visions of demolition and ostentatious construction.

"Doesn't the lawn look fine, Mrs. Jackson?," I said, gesturing to the Zoysia.

She looked at it and nodded. The rest of the lawn was a disaster, just overgrown weeds, but if you just looked at the Zoysia, it truly was fine.

"Could I," Gloria cut in, looking from me to her Mom, "have pool parties and invite friends over?"

Mrs. Jackson beamed. "Oh, of *course*, honey. You could have *all* of your friends over."

I looked around. "But, there's no pool here."

"Not yet," a voice drifted down from the garage. Mr. Jackson high stepped towards us, pinching his khakis at his hips, watching his loafers and talking excitedly. "But it's number one on the list."

I surprised myself when I spit in the grass, like Dad at a church barbeque. He never wanted anyone thinking he was impressed, and a good spit seemed to express all the complexities of his distaste with none of the labor of speaking.

"There's a pond, you know," I said. I wiped my mouth and pointed past Gloria. "We swam in it all summer."

Gloria was horrified. "Aren't there—*things* in there?"

"Of course. Fish, frogs, turtles, even—" I paused, hoping to see the eye color of the boys, "—snakes."

The oldest boy raised an eyebrow but didn't look up.

A soft moan escaped Gloria's mouth, and she turned to walk uphill, putting as much space between her and the pond as possible. Mr. and Mrs. Jackson smiled painfully at me.

"We never had trouble with the snakes," I said.

I spit in the grass again.

*

"Maybe you could come down and help," I said. "It's weird without you and Dad."

Gerald snorted into the phone. "You mean it's weird not hearing all his hacks and spits and groans and farts? *Aggh, Uggh, Huhh, Waaap.*"

"*Urrph, Grrrk, Wuumph,*" I said.

Gerald laughed and said, "I miss the old man."

"Seriously," I said. "It's weird."

"I'm tied up with the car wash right now, Bill," he said.

"I thought it ran itself? That's why you bought—"

"Out of office work," he interrupted. "Besides, aren't the Jones's about to close?"

"The Jacksons," I said. "Maybe. I just—"

"What," he said. "They low-balling?"

I should have said yes. Capitalization was hard-wired in Gerald like it had been in Dad, and it pleased me to think of him going red-faced berserk on the Jackson boys, scaring them from their virtual worlds. Reality, hot and heavy, in the form of Gerald.

"Their offer was disappointingly high, actually."

"What? Would you prefer we give it away?" Gerald asked.

"No," I said and opened the curtains in my childhood bedroom. "But do you remember how simply we lived? We were always short on money."

"Our poor childhood doesn't make your point, I don't think."

"What I mean is, I feel like we're selling everything Dad worked for just so we'll have some extra money. Surely he didn't—"

"A better life," Gerald said. "That's why he worked."

"Yeah, but—"

"Just sell the place, Bill," he said. "Dad would be glad to see a couple of boys grow up there."

I adjusted the blinds to let more sunlight in and squinted. The yard outside was a canvas of highlighted organelles and dark blurs. There were shapes whose identity I knew—the old wheelbarrow, a collection of Rhododendrons, the pond—but their details were lost in a glittering gauze. I looked harder, and my cheeks felt tight against my eyes.

"They don't know *how* to grow up here," I said, trying to blink away the blurriness. "The other day they experienced less of the outdoors than I thought humanly possible while actually *standing outside*. They just don't want it." (Haha—somehow both funny and sad)

"It's a new generation," Gerald said. "Just—"

"I couldn't even get them to walk down to the pond," I said, pacing the floor.

"That's not—"

"They're going to put a pool in," I said.

"What?"

"They'll dig up the *Zoysia*. They'll—"

"Bill!"

We were quiet.

"Just sell it."

*

I sat at the kitchen table in my underwear when the Jackson's white SUV peeked over the crest of the asphalt driveway, like the end of an eclipse. Behind on my work and with a new sensation of two stones rubbing between my lower vertebrae, I groaned.

Dad's house was being methodically disassembled, as if I might find a letter saying it was okay to sell his home. I looked through the dozens of photo albums on the bookshelf and scanned sci-fi novels, hoping he'd left a note or marked a passage that would tell me something. I even listened to the old lock-box Gerald and I used to steal from. I pressed my ear to it and dropped a few coins in, but the ringing of copper was empty. At least I'd paid him back.

His bedroom smelled like him. Milk, which he drank at night, and cigar smoke—scents of his little indulgences, reminders of his routines. The way his beard scratched my neck when I hugged him, or the sparse, buzzed hair like that of a baby otter I once petted. In his last ten years he'd quit getting dressed except for the old robe that hung on his door. I suggested we bury him in it. Gerald didn't like that.

When I was seventeen Dad had joked about my shoulders, that I must've gotten my build from the milkman. I began holding myself straighter. What

power. A few words carried enough weight to forever change my posture, like an injury, or a promise of love.

I'd gotten no smaller, so it was surprising the robe fit. I searched the pockets for a note, but there was only a flaky, used tissue. I put it back and smoothed the pocket over. Straightening my shoulders and sighing, I went to greet the Jacksons.

Mr. Jackson stood in the driveway shading the sun with one hand.

"Sorry we're a little early," he said. "We had some ideas." He did his own magician's wave.

"Three hours early," I said, squinting at him over my coffee cup.

"Yes, well," he said.

I coughed and something loosened in my throat, a warm piece of phlegm that stuck against my vocal chords giving me a fit.

"Agggh!" I said. "Grrrrk."

"Good," Mr. Jackson raised his voice over my hacking sounds, "Sounds great."

Back inside and at the front window, I thought of taking the garden hose and standing in the yard. With the dirty robe wrapped around me I'd talk. "Please," I'd beg. "Just grow."

If the Zoysia could win, I could sell. Or maybe I'd know I couldn't sell because Dad had finally spoken, like the Burning Bush. The Zoysia, however, wasn't winning, or burning, or speaking in any way. I didn't have the energy to look for miracles, so I turned away from the window.

I knelt on the kitchen floor with the contents of the pantry. Cans of tomatoes from the 90's, crackers hard as plywood, and out-of-production cereals. How had he gotten so old? How had I missed the signs that he was declining? What else had I missed?

Lessons I could never get back.

Thoughts lost with the time I didn't spent with him.

When I drug myself back to the garage the family stood around Dad's workbench. Peering over their shoulders I saw a plan view of the property. The boys were paying attention, and I saw their eyes. Green and Blue.

"Plans," I said. "It looks like—" I fought my new habit of spitting, and pointed to a red square near the pond. "What's this?"

"Our gaming space," the youngest boy explained.

"For video game playing?"

The boy looked at his older brother.

"Virtual reality, mostly," the older one said.

"When I was your age," I said, "the whole world was our space. Our virtual reality was here," I tapped my temple, "and it was *unlimited*."

The boys looked at me for a moment, and then turned away. "We'd have to have our own internet connection, of course, Dad. The load would be too much to share with the main house."

"Of course," Mr. Jackson agreed.

I felt very tired.

*

"Remember when Dad finally got cable?" I asked.

Gerald laughed. "Yeah and we watched all of those *stupid* sci-fi shows."

It was quiet except for me digging in the kitchen drawer. I loved those shows.

"Gerald, they're going to *destroy* this place," I said. "They want to turn it into an amusement park."

I found a box of cigars and removed one, smelling it.

"Isn't that what the place was to us? If Dad could've afforded it, we'd have had all sorts of stuff."

"What if," I said, lighting the cigar, "Dad didn't want us to sell? What if —"

"Are you smoking?"

I squinted through the smoke and spoke around the cigar. "Wha' i' I sell and regret i'?"

"Bill," he said, "try showing them what it is you love about the place. Show them the pond, show them the dog cages, the garden, and Dad's record player. Maybe they'll start to understand, and maybe you'll feel better."

"Is that what I'm supposed to be doing," I asked, "just making myself feel better?"

"You can try," he said.

Gerald always had a way of convincing me, and I felt my doubts blur.

"Okay," I said. "But I wish you'd come help."

And I really did.

*

The four of us stood in a circle beneath the slow-growing water oak that marked our heights over the years. The youngest boy, Tim, touched the marks and smiled. There was one below him.

"I'm tall," he said.

"Alright," I said to the group, "on the count of three, we'll go. You find something interesting and bring it back. Last person back has to go first, explaining why his thing is best. Then we vote."

"What is this game even called?" Gloria said.

"Mine's best," I said.

They were silent.

"Isn't it, like, not fair," Gloria said, "because you're biggest?"

"I'll give a ten second head start then."

This was reasonable to everyone.

"One, two—"

"Wait!"

John, the oldest boy, began to take his loafers off. "I don't want to get them dirty."

"Great idea," I said. We all removed our shoes.

“One, two, *three!*”

Being barefoot mutated them, and as they erupted in a downhill sprint, they were children again. No more devices. No more adolescent angst. Gloria’s hair danced behind her, and the boys screamed in delight, bounding through the tall grass.

They disappeared behind the pine trees, and I strolled down after them with my hands clasped. Gerald might have been right. Dad *would* be glad. I listened to their giggling fade, and then it was just me and the oak leaves that danced in the treetops, the faraway crows cawing at one another, and the warm sunlight. I was living an old life, one I no longer had rights to, and I felt alright.

I’d allowed myself the dangerous luxury of faith, bathing my worries in the hope of things working out. I’d begun to believe. For the first time since Dad died, I was relieved, like I could breathe and see again. Then, someone screamed.

As I arrived at the pond, tasting the cigar from the night before, heaving, I found Gloria making an awful, air-slicing wail. John, who was only marginally closer to the pond, looked towards the water like it were a volcano, simultaneously plugging one ear with his finger. Young Tim squatted at the water’s edge with one finger submerged.

“Timothy, no!” She screamed. “There are *snakes!*”

“Gloria,” I said when she inhaled. “Stop scream—”

“AHH!” She said.

Tim removed his finger and looked at me.

“There *are* snakes,” I said, “but they’re just as afraid of you as—”

“AHH!”

John stepped behind his sister. “This isn’t fun.”

I’d had enough. I tore my shirt over my head and threw it at Gloria who stopped her screaming long enough to catch it.

“What—” she said.

I took two steps and leapt. Tim’s curious eyes followed me, and I bellowed, “Cannonball!”

Nostalgia is a funny thing. Like swallowing a capsule I was filled with memories, and they slid through me as the warm water passed over my body. Summers spent swimming and playing, conversations of adolescent understanding, beers stolen from Dad and shared between Gerald and I, and even my first kiss over on the levee. All of it was here, and the feeling was too big and too fleeting to comprehend. It was warm, and it was brief, cut short by a new feeling—a sharp pain in the meat of my leg.

I rose from the water screaming, to find Gloria already there, a pitch above me. We were an off-key choir trying to sing over one another, and we might have gone on that way for some time if John hadn’t pointed and shouted, “Cool!”

Sticking from my calf was a piece of aluminum the size of my thumb. Gloria, somehow, screamed louder. And Tim just dipped his finger in the water again.

*

"It wasn't that deep," I confided, "it just scared me."

"What *was* it, though?" Gerald asked.

"Probably trash Dad threw out. Maybe part of the old jon-boat." He'd been in the early stages of dementia and wouldn't have remembered. Over the previous winter when his electricity shut off, I asked if he paid the electric bill. He just told me about the ice storm of '93.

"I was there for it, Dad," I'd told him. "But did you pay last month's bill?"

Gerald broke into my memory. "I guess they didn't get in and swim with you."

I looked down at the bandage on my leg. "Very funny, Gerald. It's your fault, really."

"I'm just glad you didn't scare the buyers away."

"Thanks for caring."

The television was playing lowly, the bright images of exploding ships and lasers reflecting off of the dull wood floor and walls. "It seemed to somehow encourage them," I said. "They're just going to fill the pond in and make another parking area."

"Jesus," Gerald muttered.

I felt encouraged. "For the kids and their friends," I said. "They want their own little home down there. Where we grew up fishing and playing and climbing trees, they're going to park their stupid cars and play video games and eventually do drugs—"

"Come on," he said. "We did plenty."

"Yeah—"

"We weren't there for the bass and fresh air."

"No, but—" I stopped. A man dressed in a cheaply made costume had just burst through a portal. He shot at a two headed creature whose heads were screaming in unison. Like Gloria and I.

"I'm equally afraid of selling," I said. "What if we sell and start to forget about Dad. What will we have left of him? How will we remember him? His home was his world."

Little James, Gerald's infant, cried in the background of the phone line.

"Dad's value was never in the things he gave us, it was in the time he spent with us. And he knew that. Everyone did."

"But how do I know that now?"

"Bill, I'm sorry, but I've got to go." He paused, moving closer to James's wails. "You already do know. You've just got to get it through your head that nothing changed just because he died."

He hung up, leaving me with the two headed monster and the flashing special effects of some poorly designed future.

*

On Wednesday I remembered it was Wednesday because it was the third day in a row I hadn't done any work. The family was outside making plans, and I was inside brooding. Gloria came in, bored and looked at the mess in the living room.

I lay on the couch throwing and catching a signed baseball of Dad's, and I was feeling rather sorry for myself.

"Are you keeping these?"

At her feet lay dozens of records.

"Depends," I said looking at the albums around her. "You interested?"

"Maybe."

"Those were my dad's," I said. "He taught me what rock and roll meant."

She was quiet.

"Everything seemed to have a story attached to it—the time he rolled his truck into the ditch in front of his parent's house (almost made it home!), a fox he killed and sold to a bartender, a girl he loved, a job he hated, what my grandparents thought of the devil's music."

Gloria laughed and picked up a pair of Zeppelin albums.

"These are cool," she said.

"Give me five for the pair," I said, tossing the ball too far and missing it. It thudded next to her.

She frowned at the baseball. "Eight for all four," she said and looked down at Neil Young and The Doobie Brothers.

"Ten," I said, rolling over and looking at her, "and I'll throw in that Steve Miller."

"Deal," she said.

Unexpectedly, and for the first time that week, I felt accomplished. "How about some lunch," I said, standing. "I think we've got some tomatoes in the garden."

She stood with the stack of records in her arms.

"Got any hot sauce?"

"You bet."

"Deal," she said, smiling.

Her teeth were bright like her mother's.

In the garden we brushed against the tomato plants who released their pungent fragrance and whose tiny hairs tickled our bare flesh. Gloria helped me pick the ripest tomatoes.

*

After lunch she asked about photographs. I told her stories of Gerald and I catching fish, the springwater pool in town we visited on Saturdays, and the Memphis Zoo, where I once petted an otter. It was easy to remember these things, and I found I was eager for her to ask more questions.

I was unlatching a chest of forgotten treasures. I told stories, and together we examined their value with a magnifying glass.

"You kill any of those?" She gestured at the mounted deer heads.

"My Dad," I said.

"How much?"

I looked at her. "You want—"

"The antlers," she finished.

I looked at the wise deer, the dust on his black, glass eyes, and the bleached antlers reaching for the ceiling. I supposed he wouldn't miss his rack.

"My Dad killed that one over on Mr. Greenley's property. Biggest buck of his life," I said. "That was the same year his brother died."

"I'm sorry," she said.

I shrugged. "It was well before my time, but I was always sorry too. He didn't talk about it much, but he didn't have to. Gerald and I never forgot."

Dad had wept bitterly the only time he told us the story of his brother getting cancer. He'd been eighteen years old. They were the first tears I ever saw on his face, running onto his beard like water on grease, not mixing as much as floating there. Afterwards, Gerald and I went to sit in the Zoysia and stare at each other. Who would die first?

"Twenty bucks," Gloria said, picking her teeth with a toothpick. "Final offer."

"You didn't let me counter offer," I said.

She hesitated, but then stamped her foot. "Final."

It was a deal.

We continued through the house. I told stories, and Gloria named prices. Touching his things and telling his stories, I knew Dad was near. I stopped at the coin lock box and put a nickel in. Details I hadn't thought about since my childhood were being whispered through his belongings. Everything seemed new again. Gloria made a list of her new possessions on an old, unpaid, and certainly forgotten parking ticket.

"You sure know a lot of his stories," she said. "I don't know any of my Dad's."

"His stories were gold, for the most part," I said.

"Does that mean some were silver?"

I laughed. "I guess so. Maybe the ones I forgot. They were probably gold when he told them, though."

She was already turned away, heading to the staircase. I took the stairs one at a time, as my left knee had begun to hurt. Dad's left had given him trouble. "He told stories as often as we'd listen," I went on. "I wish I'd listened more."

Gloria walked patiently behind me, even holding onto my elbow as we made the final turn in the staircase. Back in the garage with the other Jacksons, she pumped my hand.

"Go ahead," she chirped, "make him an offer. I just stocked my bedroom for less than a hundred bucks."

The boys looked up. Mr. Jackson raised a finger to speak and stopped, and we all decided to be quiet. A breeze shook the oaks that shaded the driveway, and a few fallen leaves scooted into the garage with us, whispering like little ice skaters on the concrete. I leaned against the door knob to take pressure off my knee and smiled.

I felt better than I had all week.

*

"You're selling Dad's stuff?"

"I didn't think you'd mind," I said, taking a sip of milk.

"You're the sentimentalist," Gerald said.

I looked at the tally of cash on the yellowing notebook paper. The numbers meant nothing, just black curves and cuts across the blue guidelines, the money only a dull whir beneath Dad's voice telling stories that day.

"It's all or none. The stuff doesn't really mean anything. You were right. I feel better."

"I said show them what you liked about the place, not sell all of Dad's belongings."

"I didn't think you minded?"

"I don't."

I stood in my underwear, barefoot, with the phone pinched between my cheek and shoulder. I gestured through the dark room. "It's like mailing a goodbye letter after his ship already set sail. It'll catch up to him, eventually."

"What is? What does that even mean?"

The milk was cold on my lips. Behind Gerald's voice I heard James cry.

"Need to go?"

"Not yet," he said, sighing. "Not just yet."

I caressed the curves of the wooden bedpost and opened the curtains. The moon was bright enough to make the room a shade of blue, and the tall grass was illuminated in brushed highlights. My vision had worsened further and everything was soft and quiet.

"Do you remember when Dad set those quail loose on the property so we could hunt them with dogs?"

Gerald chuckled. "You nearly shot one of the Pointers."

"Aim fast," I said.

"Shoot slow," he finished.

I opened Dad's bedside drawer and found a pair of wool socks. I sat on the bed and unfolded them. "How about when we tipped the boat over that one night?"

Gerald laughed again. "You screamed like a child."

"I was six," I said. "You were caught under the boat. I literally thought you were dying."

"Dad made us wear life vests for six months," he said, still laughing.

"Still trusted us out there, though."

"He wanted us to learn how to take care of ourselves, no matter what."

"I suppose we did."

"I suppose."

I shuffled my feet along the concrete into the bathroom and flipped the light switch on.

"Jesus," I said.

"What is it?" Gerald sounded interested, like maybe I'd found the life vests.

The mirror had a jagged, black crevice that stretched the length of it. In the distorted reflection, I saw Dad's bulbous belly, white-tighties, and bald head shining in the vanity light.

"Nothing, I guess." I rubbed my stomach and set the glass of milk down. I peered at my reflection, at the bags under my eyes. "Just starting to feel a little—" I stretched the skin around my eyes with one finger.

"Listen, Bill," he said, "I thought maybe I'd drive down. It's only a few hours, and it seems like you could use some help before the closing."

I frowned. Were those liver spots?

"I'm fine." I fingered the loose skin on my neck. "It shouldn't take but another week."

"At the most," he said.

I looked at my new crows feet. "Right," I said and smiled. My teeth were yellow, and I ran my tongue over them. I blinked, trying one last time to clear my vision.

"Well, just let me know," he said. "The carwash doesn't take much running. I really don't have much going on."

In the background I heard the familiar sound of his wife's voice.

"That's nice of you, brother. Now go kiss James, and tell him good night for me."

"It's eight thirty, Bill. Tell me you're not going to bed."

I limped to the bed and patted it. My body ached, and I wanted to lie down. When I pulled the covers back, a new smell came free. It was unlike the others, but certainly routine, something along the lines of firewood and baby powder. Dad's dust rose in the moonlight, and I moved my hand through it like water.

"Goodnight, Gerald. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Not too early, old man," he said. "Seriously, though, not before—"

I hung up and set the phone on the bedside table. There, in the blue light of the country night, lay a hunting magazine. In the bottom corner a white square had our home address, and the edges of the pages were worn. I eased into bed. The room was cool on my lungs.

I let the magazine fall open to a dog-eared page. A pencil ran in the space under the words, like a punch in the night, right in my gut and up through my throat. An underlined passage:

"... stewardship of the land starts at home, with the way we show up for our families and friends, and how we interact with whatever piece of land, no matter how small, God has given us..."

If the air could hold memories, then by breathing I recounted them. I felt close to him. His belongings were strewn across the abandoned house, some tagged for new ownership, some destined for landfills. The pond was filled with

unremembered trash, and the Zoysia probably would not win. But I still knew my father and his stories.

The ceiling fan softly thumped the air, the house breathing around me. A chill snuck into my blood, and I brought the comforter to my chin.

I closed my eyes, the magazine pages fluttering beside me.

MELISSA WILEY

LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

7:45 am

The last day of my life, I tried walking into someone else's. I tried but couldn't gain access a couple hours after having sex with my husband, when my thighs gripped his hips as he slowed his rhythm. After clearing his throat, he told me to spread my knees wider across the mattress. Only earlier in the week I pulled a hamstring that resisted healing and preferred staying shredded, likely because it realized my life had nearly ended.

Since dying and surviving the experience, I have stopped waiting for life to become a man whose cock is always hardened. Since discovering the afterlife harbors no more hell than heaven, I have stopped envisioning an eternity spent beside someone on a bed with no box spring beneath it, a bed cloaked by gauzy curtains. Yet I can still see traces of its edges as a fly buzzes through a hole in a nearby window's screen. The time there is always late morning, and I haven't had my coffee. Even in paradise, I was always waiting for someone to fill my cup with something missing.

8:30 am

Yesterday morning, I drank my first cup with milk inside my kitchen as I waved goodbye to my husband. I bought my second at a shop I used to frequent until its manager left my life entirely, when he decided to take another position. I walked inside the shop one last time regardless, hoping for if hardly expecting salvation.

The last time I saw him, several months before this, he mentioned he was born with a broken collarbone. In response, I suggested his bones were like sea star arms to comfort him. All good things grow back in the end, I said without believing it. Before his first birthday, his clavicle had fused itself into oneness. As an adult, he looked a ripe, whole specimen.

I can no longer clearly see his face in what has become a receding memory of my life before this. I only know that months ago, as I stood in front of him with my coffee cooling, I pretended to trip over a fallen napkin by way of demonstrating the further bones that could be broken were he to trip across some swath of

cotton. Life lived too far away from a bed without a box spring risked more injury, I was trying to warn him.

Seeing him a couple times a week for a couple years on end almost made the gauzy curtains seem an option. Looking at him alone, I often felt as if I was staining the bed sheets with honey already. I often caught myself swatting the fly that wasn't buzzing around me. Life is nothing, however, if not leaving those you love yet hardly know on a fairly constant basis. That was true before I died and remains true after. There is no heaven where anyone wraps his legs around yours forever. Leaving the coffee shop after confronting his continued absence, skies began to darken into as black a blue as the bottom of the ocean.

10 am

I walked across the street and inside a florist's, where daffodils nodded from their stems, nodding as if in agreement with something I hadn't said but they heard regardless. For a couple minutes, I lazed among a world perennially verdant rather than return to my apartment, where I had left a manuscript that I was being paid to edit. Work, though, makes less difference as life's end approaches, while plants feel necessary.

I bent over at my waist to smell hardly any scent from several purple succulents. The florist had arranged them inside a suitcase whose leather skin reticulated into a web of veins and arteries. She had made a vase of a suitcase dating from the 1960s, because the beauty of things so old they might be dying always enhances the lesser beauty of the living. As I stayed there bending and staring, I remembered how in this life I was so soon leaving there was once a suitcase that contained an organ, the smell of whose leather casing once suffused our kitchen.

For years, its aroma lingered near our oven after my dad carried it up a hill every Easter morning. When opened, the suitcase revealed an inflorescence of organ keys that always reminded me of teeth blotched with coffee stains. With my dad's fingers pressing them, the teeth sounded church hymns referencing a reality beyond the senses.

10:20 am

Perhaps the ghost of his old suitcase inside the florist's was my dead dad coming to express his sympathy for my own death approaching. Only I never went with him to Easter sunrise service when he asked me. I always thought there would be more time until there wasn't. With each passing spring, I saw the suitcase folded near the oven, yet I never saw him play what lay inside it.

The organ was too heavy for me to ever lift, much less carry, even inside our kitchen. When I asked him how he managed it, he only smiled, saying he did some huffin' and puffin'. I hated, though, to think of him as a steam engine. Even now, I want to say this explains why I never climbed the hill with him—to avoid witnessing what must have been some pain in his exertion—but I know it doesn't.

Given his heft, given all the extra weight he carried in his abdomen, I'm still half convinced my dad sprouted wings at these moments when I was never with him. I've pictured the same of everyone I have loved, however, when some source of hurt approaches from which I can hardly shield them. I have done this in place of offering any real assistance. From the florist, I bought a small bouquet of pale and pink carnations.

10:30 am

As I walked back to my apartment, rain began falling in fat, hard droplets. Brown birds perched on browner branches, not seeming to care or notice my crumbling carnations. Back inside my unit as I untied my shoelaces, I confronted a portrait I painted years ago of my husband. It's one of a series depicting him winged and naked, which once seemed to me the obvious course of human evolution. I have since revised this theory after dying and remaining the same person.

I was less in love with my husband while painting it than in search of a good subject. I was attempting to depict a timeless beloved, while he remains timely and complicated. In each of the portraits, he flies over a sepia ocean with a full erection. Perhaps a kinder person then, I may have painted him with wings as compensation for some part of me knowing he would someday also realize there is no hell or heaven. In this way, I may have been trying to help him survive his own life's end. His chiseled, handsome face I made yet more chiseled and more handsome.

For weeks, birds have gathered half a block from my apartment. They flutter wings smaller than those I rendered in the portrait of my husband. They crowd inside a bathtub then shake their feathers free of any dampness before flying higher to rest amid plastic branches. For months, I've assumed this is a pet shop about to open, but no sign ever announces its opening to the public. No other animals ever make an appearance. The birds are apparently not for purchase.

2 pm

The woman whose manuscript I'm being paid to edit writes about color theory with remarkable acumen, something she herself has often told me. I edit her

findings for grammar and spelling, though I quickly lose interest. Each time I reread what she has written, she states again at the beginning that all color is the mind's invention. In her eyes as well as those of science, color has no objective existence.

The human retina house three cones, she mentions early in her thesis. Once light strikes them, neurotransmitters convince the brain to interpret the sensation as hues along the visible spectrum. Without any cones in the eye generating this illusion, the world would likely have no florists. A colorless world would have little reason for flower arrangements. No suitcases disemboweled of their organs would hold any purple succulents whose odor they diminish.

Of color blindness much has already been written, for which reason this manuscript explores its opposite, reporting on women born with four rather than three cones inside their retinas, women who as a result see millions more colors than the average. Science to date reveals less about their wider color spectrum and more about language's inability to accommodate a vaster array of perception. These 12 percent of the world's women have no way of knowing how much more colorful their world is than that belonging to the rest. They are also invariably mothers or daughters of colorblind men, many of whom live out their lives believing they see the world the same as everyone around them.

As I trimmed some of my client's sentences while formatting her references, I realized love and color were no different. You could love someone who had vanished, yet no one would know how vividly the love still shown behind your eyelids. Someone could tell you all color is a phantasm, but that doesn't make scarlet flowers turn pallid. You can look all you like at a suitcase holding an organ, but this doesn't mean you hear its music.

3:45 pm

My pregnant sister called to say she'd gone to the gynecologist to hear her baby's heartbeat. Only the gynecologist told her she heard nothing, which meant my sister was having her second miscarriage while caring for two young children. The boy whom she and I had both sensed the baby becoming would soon filter from her uterus the same as any ordinary menstruation. She said she felt too sad for a long discussion, but she wanted to let me know so I didn't buy any clothes or toys for the baby.

Her version of heaven had been growing inside her then suddenly stopped breathing. For the past month, her heaven had made her vomit each morning and

gain some weight in her belly. In six months' time, hers may have existed outside her body, wearing little hats and jackets, which neurotransmitters would have overlaid with color defying reality. I told her how sorry I was while wondering if tomorrow she too might feel dead while living, knowing nothing better was coming.

5 pm

My husband called to ask what we were eating this evening. He called knowing I cook only pasta or scrambled eggs if I bother cooking anything other than layering meat and cheese for sandwiches. I suggested we meet at an Italian restaurant down the street from our building, and we agreed to 6:45, which would allow us both to work a little longer. I decided I would wait a day or so before telling him about my sister. Sensing my own life ending by then, I didn't bother trying to picture a fetus dissolving out my sister's body winged and naked.

6:30 pm

Walking to the restaurant while the sun dropped behind the skyscrapers as its color deepened from tangerine to red and bloody, I stooped to pull some strands of grass growing between the sidewalk cracks. I bent over, probably looking as four-legged as a family living in rural Turkey who were featured in a documentary I watched the previous evening. The family crouched the same as I was doing in place of walking upright. Neither the parents nor their children were capable of standing for more than a few moments without losing their balance. To the camera, the father expressed his fears of them being compared to monkeys.

As I watched the documentary, a bee had flown in through a hole in our window's screen. My husband started swatting, but I insisted that staying frozen as corpses was our best option. He ran into the next room as I sat there motionless and shallowly breathing. While the Turkish family stood clinging onto chain-linked fences, the bee rested on my nose a moment. It traveled down to my lips as if tempting me to eat it. Its fuzzy body and fluttering wings made me ticklish. I closed my eyes, trying to convince myself I was only dreaming. When I couldn't do this, I remembered that even when I opened my eyelids, the bee had no real color to its sting or body. Of everything that happened that last day of life still lived with a belief in a better one to come after, this felt most important, letting a bee trace the outline of my lips. Coming close to real pain rather than feeling the ache of something missing.

While we ate our platefuls of spaghetti and our waiter refilled our water glasses, I asked my husband if he remembered the bee last evening. He looked toward the restaurant's windows and nodded. When I told him it had kissed my lips, he only shook his head, saying he didn't believe me.

8 pm

Half a block from our apartment, my husband pointed at the birds inside what I was still unsure was a pet shop or wasn't. Some lights were on, and a woman wearing a sweater with a cowl neck was sweeping the floor of fallen feathers. My husband tapped on the glass, when she waved us in. After we opened the door, the birds' silence on the other side of the glass changed to screaming.

Most looked to be blue and yellow finches. Many were masturbating, using hard notches of plastic branches as phalluses that never went flaccid. Several had plucked some of their feathers from between their legs. They were all females, the woman practically shouted to be heard above their shrieking. She said they had grown aggressive because they wanted to be mating, something that her limited space prohibited because she had no room for their offspring.

She had rescued them all from an adoption agency and was planning to open this space as a form of community therapy, she explained while putting her broom away. She was also adopting several bunnies and wanted to provide pastries and coffee. People living in apartments without any pets, she added, could come and play with birds and bunnies gentler than humans.

Yet the finches' needs seemed to me more basic than bridging the divide across species. As I looked at the birds pleasuring themselves with plastic, I wondered how she made her money to fund this project. After we left, my husband said he found her attractive. I too had noticed her beauty as well as a certain calm she radiated amid the finches' screaming. Were my husband inclined to play with birds or bunnies, he might find his own land here of milk and honey.

8:30 pm

Inside our apartment, our bathroom ceiling was leaking. We would have to wait and call our handyman in the morning, I said, when my husband grew silent before mentioning that in the past few days I'd been smelling badly. I knew he said this now because the water falling from the ceiling angered him. For some time, though, I had been decaying. I had been dying for so long by then that I'd become inured to my own odor more than likely.

As the leak in the ceiling strengthened over the next hour, my husband began turning more against me. I had been the one to want to rent this cheap apartment, he shouted. I should be earning more money instead of staying home editing on a freelance basis. Our whole life would be drier now if only I lived a more normal existence. In response, I screamed instead of saying anything. I screamed while wondering if when he came close to me he smelled a suitcase organ, which was always a little musty. Perhaps inside me there also lay some latent music.

10:50 pm

After he came to bed with his hair wet and matted from the shower he takes each evening, he asked what I'm really doing while he goes to his office and I stay home and edit. I'm wrestling with color theory, I didn't bother explaining. Only because I am not the daughter of a man with color blindness, I can see no more colors than the average.

In the darkness of our bedroom, all the world's colors then dissolved into grayness. Shapes alone arrest the retinas after dusk descends. I closed my eyes and imagined a broken collarbone fusing itself into wholeness. The vision resembled the act of mating though was quickly finished, never to be repeated.

11:45 pm

Unable to fall asleep, I left our bed and walked inside our kitchen. I poured milk into a saucepan, turned on a burner and watched its blue flames surging. Never before have I drunk warm milk to put myself to bed, but this once I opened a jar of honey and began stirring an amber string into liquid begun bubbling. I yawned, my feet cold from the floorboards. After draining the cup to its bottom, I lay myself against a warm, familiar body. I lay awake for most of the evening while watching spring snowflakes begin to twitch before landing on the sidewalk and melting.

BRANDON THURMAN

AUGURY

Half-asleep & listening to the dark, the woman couldn't shake the image of the ceiling fan rattling itself loose & chewing her to bits. The heater was grumbling. The refrigerator droned. Underneath all that white noise, she could hear what was keeping her awake: a sound like a caged thing battering itself against its bars. She looked over her shoulder & saw her husband's shirt fluttering over his chest. Out of the dark, then, he yelped. She jumped & jerked her head back around.

"The light bulb." It came out as a moan. "The key!"

"Sweetie?" She peeked over at him.

His eyes were stretched into a wide glare. "The *key!*"

"*What* key?"

He groaned. "The light bulb! In the garden!"

Just as she realized what was happening, consciousness drained from his eyes, & his head clunked back onto the pillow.

She rolled over & stared at the wall, wide awake, counting the clicks of the fan.

~

The next morning, she tried to joke about it as they cooked breakfast. "You were talking in your sleep last night."

"Mmm? What did I say?"

"I don't know. Something about a garden."

"Huh."

"I asked what you were talking about. You yelled at me."

"Oh." He cracked an egg. "Sorry."

She tapped her foot unconsciously, debating whether to bring it up. "Your heart was making an awful lot of noise." There was a long pause. She decided to try. "Can I take a look?"

He began to over-scramble the eggs.

From behind, she eased her arms around his waist & tucked her hand under his shirt. "I love you, you know. You have the most beautiful heart."

He turned to reach for the bread, wrenching his torso out from her arms. "I love you, too," he grunted, slamming down the toaster lever.

~

As he brushed his teeth, he scowled at himself in the bathroom mirror, dumpy in his boxer briefs, his shirt still on. The shower curtain snapped open, & in the reflection, he saw his wife step out of the shower. He averted his eyes, then peeked quickly back. Feathers were drifting through the bars in her chest, falling to the bathmat beneath her feet.

“He’s molting,” the man pointed out.

She grimaced at him, the sparrow in her chest slumped on its bar. “I guess breeding season is over,” she quipped, wrapping the towel pointedly around her chest.

He frowned over his toothbrush & looked away, brushing his teeth harder.

“You’re going to brush your enamel off,” she snipped as she left the room.

After he had closed & locked the door behind her, he stripped off his underwear & then, after a moment’s hesitation, pulled his shirt over his head. He didn’t look in the mirror but stepped quickly under the scalding water, into a blur of steam.

~

That sun-bright day in the basement, he ran manic, his heart squawking, a child. What had he been playing? Trapped in the Bermuda triangle? Chased by mutants? Olympic ice-skating? He dashed & twirled & leapt gracelessly, his sweat spattering the air. Peeling his damp shirt off, he sat at his mother’s old electric organ. At first, he played as a mad scientist, rampaging along the keys, but he ended quietly, his fingers pirouetting out a soft melody.

From behind him, a curt clearing of the throat.

He whirled around. He hadn’t heard his mother come down the stairs. She was staring at his chest with the strangest look, as if being shown an x-ray of a useless bone broken beyond repair.

He looked down & saw the bustle of color: ruby, turquoise, gold. His cheeks went hot, his mother’s odd stare flooding him with a familiar pang of awareness. Every other boy’s heart he had seen had been female, their feathers subtle shades of brown & gray, but the doctors had confirmed it: his heart was male.

His heart stilled. Its ludicrous tail-feathers drooped out from the cage. His mother stared it down, & it let out a low mew.

"Put your shirt on, young man," she snapped, stomping back up the stairs.

~

Sexual dimorphism. It was dark outside, past midnight—too late for the boy to be up—but he couldn't sleep. He rubbed his finger over the word in the dictionary, then down through the definition: *the phenotypic difference between males & females of the same species.* There. His heart's brilliant plumage, spelled out in black-&-white. He closed the book softly, like a sacred text, & slid it back into its empty spot.

~

"I do," he was saying. He pulled out the Kleenex his friend had stuffed into his pocket ("You're going to need this") & dabbed at his eyes.

Across from him, his bride was crying too. His father, officiating the wedding, indicated that it was time to exchange the keys. The man took his key & clunked it into the keyhole in his ribcage. With a turn, the lock clanked into place, & he handed the key to his bride. Her eager heart opened its mouth & slurped the key right down its throat.

Sniffing through a broad smile, the woman locked her own chest & offered him the key. His stubborn heart clamped its beak shut. Gritting his teeth, the man worked his finger into the sharp yellow stub, wrenching it open & forcing the key in. The audience applauded.

That night, still panting from their clumsy love, he collapsed onto the pillow as his wife went into the bathroom. His heart's beak fell open, & out toppled the key. The toilet flushed. He yanked his bedside drawer open & fumbled the key in.

His wife came back to bed, slipping under the covers beside him. He clenched her tightly, his belly pressed against her back.

"You're hurting me," she giggled.

He went slack. "I just love you," he whispered. "I do."

~

Stress twisted every muscle in his shoulders & neck into one unsolvable knot. He pulled into the garage, slammed the car door shut—a little too hard—& tramped inside. His wife was standing in the kitchen, beaming, her smile a kitschy halo radiating out from her head.

"What?"

She looked hurt for a moment, then said, "I found it."

"Found what?"

"Look!" On the table lay an old reference book opened to the Qs. He saw *queasy, queer, quarrel, quarry, quirk, quiver, question*. Then he saw the picture. His heart. He read the caption:

Resplendent quetzal (*Pharomachrus moccino*), a bird in the trogon family. Found from Guatemala to western Panama. Well-known for its colorful plumage.

He stared at her.

"That's it, isn't it?" She was almost hopping, her heels twitching against the floor. "Let me see!" She grabbed for his shirt & began to tug it up. He leapt back, & she slipped, crashing to the ground.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." He scrambled to help her up. "I'm sorry."

She held her lips so tight they quivered. "Why won't you let me? I'm your wife."

He tried to look anywhere but her eyes, but she stared him down without a blink. Giving in, he reached down & grabbed his shirt at the hem, pulling it over his head.

He had been dreading the dumb look of pity she gave him then. "What happened?" she asked.

He didn't say anything, but she knew. She remembered the nights she had heard it hammering itself (even now, she couldn't bring herself to say *himself*) against the bars. The one & only night she had heard its cry, crackling into something like static. The bloodied feathers she had found in their bed sheets. She looked at it now: its feathers sparse, skin mottled & scabby. She remembered something she had read earlier in the evening: *...indeed it was noted for usually killing itself soon after being captured or caged.*

He tugged his shirt back on, & they stood staring at each other from across the room. She handed him an envelope. "I bought these for you." She left the room.

Working the envelope open, he paper-cut his finger & cursed. Inside were two tickets for a cruise to Central America.

~

"When the conquistadors came," the Mayan tour guide was saying, "they asked the Mayans what this land was called. The Mayans answered in their native tongue, '*Ma'anaatik ka t'ann.*' 'Ah,' the Spaniards said. 'Yucatán.' But what the Mayans had really said is, 'I do not understand you.'"

The man did not understand how the conquistadors could have heard *Yucatán*. He wondered if the tour guide's story was true. The bus was bumbling along the road inland from Merida, bumping over rocks & potholes. The man's head banged against the window. His wife's head banged against his shoulder. "Ouch," they said.

"You'll see in the ruins of Chichen Itza a very old carving," the guide continued, "in the form of a bearded man." He paused for effect. Someone yawned; a baby screamed. Disappointed, he added, "The Mayans have no facial hair!" He let a woman in the front row rub his face: smooth, it couldn't have been him. The woman nodded with wide eyes. "Our stories tell us that the Mayans heralded this bearded man's arrival as the coming of Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent King, Giver of Time, the Morning Star..." He paused. No one bit. "...the virgin-birthed symbol of death & resurrection!"

"Ahhh!" The North Americans nodded in appreciation. Now they saw where he was going.

Leaning conspiratorially over to his wife, the man whispered his suspicion that the Mayans had gotten their myths mixed up when Cortez showed up with his Bibles & his beard. She smirked. The tour guide continued emphatically, as if sensing dissent, "Carvings of the bearded man are scattered all over the earth—everywhere there are hairless people!"

His wife whispered, "Sounds like ol' Quetzalcoatl was showing off."

The man snickered. His heart rose & pecked at his shirt.

The tour guide was finishing in a hushed, over-dramatic tone. "...but no one remembers what the Morning Star said."

Remembering dark, starless Sunday nights, the man wanted to say, "It's the same where I come from," but he kept quiet, staring out at the foreign landscape. From the fields, stones cried out in every language, but were still misunderstood.

~

The man stood at the bottom of the pyramidal temple, his neck craned back to see the features as the tour guide pointed them out.

"The Mayans were brilliant architects," the guide raved. "They built temples upon temples upon temples like a Russian nesting doll. They designed this one so intricately that, on the equinox, the shadow of a serpent will slither down its staircase—" He wriggled his hand through the air for effect. "—& listen to this!" He clapped his hands, & the man's heart cried out.

“Ooo,” the tourists purred. They all began to clap their hands, & the sky burst into birdcalls. The man’s heart perked up to join in, & he realized it hadn’t been his own heart calling in the first place.

“The Mayans designed the acoustics of this temple to transform their handclaps...” He clapped again, twice, briskly. “...into the song of their sacred bird. The quetzal was thought to be the god of the air, symbolizing goodness & light.” The man’s wife shot him a self-satisfied half-smile. He stared back blankly, unable to make sense of the words. “Mayan kings wore extravagant headdresses sewn from their colorful feathers.”

Everyone had stopped clapping by then, but from somewhere among them, a sacred bird sang.

~

“Be back at the bus by 1:30, or we will leave you,” the tour guide said. He pointed to the sky, to a cell tower blinking red. “Follow that tower back to the lot.”

The man wandered off into the ruins of an ancient ball court, remembering how the guide had told them that the winners of the ballgame had, as their prize, their heads cut off. In the middle of the court was a carving: a headless man, a tree blooming from his wound.

His wife came up beside him, wrinkling her nose. “Come on.” She pulled him into a web of trails lined with Mayan vendors peddling souvenirs. The vendors bantered as they walked past, “Almost free! Almost free!” The man’s stride turned into a slight skip, & a stupid smile creased his face. Everywhere he looked, there were quetzals: sculptures & headdresses & bright stray feathers.

“One dollar, one dollar, one dollar,” a vendor babbled, a feathered headdress in his hand. The man made eyes at his wife & walked over, grinning, holding out his dollar bill. The vendor took it &, with a flourish, pulled a piddly charm out from behind the headdress, presenting it to the man with a sneer.

As they walked on, the man began to see how everything duplicated: the same masks, same carvings, same calendars. The men sitting alongside their booths chiseling were a slight-of-hand, he realized. Everything was mass-produced here.

He checked his watch—1:20—& grabbed his wife’s hand, leading her back towards the bus. “I think it’s this way,” he nodded, but he could hear the uncertainty in his own voice. He scanned the horizon for the blinking tower, but trees blotted out the edges of the sky.

“There!” his wife pointed. A sign: *Salida*. They followed the path deeper until they came to an unfamiliar resort with tourists sprawled all around. Behind

the resort was a parking lot full of tour buses. None of them were theirs. The realization slapped them in the face, too late: they were lost.

The man looked at his watch. 1:30. He saw dread wriggle into his wife's eyes & started to walk faster, resolved to stay calm for her, to fix his mistake. A dignified-looking old man stopped them, whipping a cane into their path. He leaned forward on the cane & asked in slow, molasses-thick English, "What are you looking for?"

"The buses!" they wheezed.

He gestured with one hand—calm down—and pointed behind them with a patronizing smile. "The buses are right there."

Exasperated, the man & his wife ran, gripping hands. From the corner of his eye, he could see her heart fluttering in panic behind her tank top. He remembered two things at once: the tour guides words—*We will leave you*—& that he had left his ID on the ship. He imagined being nameless, stripped of identity, stranded & stared down by the masked Mayan gods.

His watch read 1:40.

He ran, holding back the tears stinging at his eyes, ran past dozens of vendors looking concerned, pointing this way or that. Panic scrambled the elementary Spanish from his brain. (*¿Dónde está el autobús?*) The words ran in front of him, squirming just beyond his grasp.

—& then there he was, hairless face stained blood-red with fury: the tour guide. He was muttering, "They're going to kill me. They're really going to kill me. I'll lose my job for this."

Hunched over, hand on his heaving stomach, the man grabbed a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket & slipped it into the tour guide's hand.

The guide's fury slid into a sly smile, & he led them proudly back to the bus, a merciful priest, sheathing his knife.

~

Back at the bus, the man & his wife were met with bored faces. They slumped into their seats & listened to the tour guide lecture all the way back to Merida about human sacrifices, describing in gleeful detail the way the priests sliced open their victim's hearts & kicked their bodies down the temple steps. The whole bus quaked & shivered. Nauseated, the man closed his eyes, feeling his heart peck mindlessly at itself.

At the port, men with military guns slung over their shoulders demanded to see the man's ID. He tried to explain that he had forgotten it on the ship, but they just shook their heads & adjusted their guns, irritated by the dumb tourist

who left his identity behind. They patted him down & shook him up, but eventually let him through.

Once he had boarded the ship, he made his way to the slot machines for no particular reason. He had given the last of his money to the guide, so he just sat & watched a disheveled man pull the lever over & over. He fixated on the slots spinning like an ancient Mayan calendar towards the end of time, closing his eyes. He imagined himself headless, a tiny sprout slithering from the gore, imagined himself a Mayan ruler with a pompous feathered headdress, ordering new temples to be built over the ruins of the old.

He grinned, stroking his stubbled face. Below his feet, he felt the ship rumble to a start, disembarking from the Yucatán, the land of misunderstanding.

~

She had been watching. His beard grew out into a burning bush, a bright orange flame contrasting with the bruised purple deepening around his eyes. One night she woke up to find him sitting by the bed, his knees pulled tight against his chest. He was rubbing something metal between his fingers. She didn't want to see what it was. She watched him drop it back into his bedside drawer, curl up on the floor, & fall asleep. His body looked fetal, she thought. She imagined it spiraling, a dying galaxy.

Sleep did not come for her. She drifted in & out of the dim visions that bled through from her dreams, taunting her insomnia. In them, she was trudging through the night, wandering through the garden from a book she had read as a child. The plants were withered, crumbling beneath her feet. A labyrinth of stone walls stretched out around her. There were no stars above her, no moon. Through the thick ink, she could feel a black hole tugging on her from behind the stone, crushing the light in its gravity fist. It dragged her into the maze, her fingers scraping against brick & stone, searching for a handhold to grasp onto, for some loose brick's forgotten secret. Then everything toppled, & she fell into a blank black sky. Her ribcage hinged open, & a sparrow flew out, holding an orb in its beak. At its core, the bulb began to spark & glow. Gravity changed its mind, & she plunged back into the stone maze. By the light of an electric moon, she saw a misplaced brick & wriggled it from the wall.

She blinked awake & found herself standing over her husband, his bedside drawer open, her chest's key in her hand.

~

He woke up on the floor, his whole body sore. Had he heard someone yell? What time was it? His bedside clock was blinking—12:00, 12:00, 12:00. Outside the window, the sun punctured the horizon like an open wound. Was it rising or setting? He remembered his mother's aphorism: *Red sky at morning, sailors take warning. Red sky at night, sailor's delight.* She had shown him in her Bible: Jesus had said it. The words themselves bled red.

He wandered out of the bedroom & called his wife's name, but there was no answer. Opening the back door, he saw her in the distance, at the tree line across the yard. The mountains' shadows loomed over her. The rising red light seeped closer. As he started to walk out to her, he had the surreal thought—but couldn't place why—that she looked like an ancient priestess, half-shadowed, half-lit in red. Then, seeing what she held in her hand, he broke into a run. When he reached her, he was gasping for air. "*What are you doing?*" The cold dew numbed his feet. A knife was dripping in one of her hands; in her other, she held something still. She dropped the knife unceremoniously & held that hand out to him.

He shook his head and muttered—*nope, nope, nope*—but reached out anyway to take it: his key, tacky with blood. He saw her sparrow wrapped loosely in her other hand, how its chest bloomed red, & dug his nails into his palm.

She dropped the dead bird & took his hand. For a moment, he thought she was going to hold it, but she just peeled back his fingers one-by-one, prying the key out from his fist. She lifted his shirt, eased the key into his chest, & opened the cage.

Nothing happened for a while then. They stood there, eyes locked, the cold prickling their skin into goose-bumps.

Then his heart left his chest. It wobbled off on weak wings towards the mountains. They watched as it made a drab bow across the sky & disappeared behind the trees.

The man opened his mouth to say something, but the woman turned & walked away from him, warming her shivering arms in her hands.

Above her head, he saw an alphabet of black birds, flying to the south, blurring in & out of words from a language not meant for him.

TODD DILLARD

INTERVIEW WITH AN ADDICT'S SUN

When did you first learn your mother was an addict?

It was like hearing a bell ring
every silence replaced with glass / shattering
the sound spreading like news or fire
through my childhood / my then / my now / my old age
so when my mother held me as a baby
her arms hummed with an addict's shiver
when she touched my hair to tuck me in
she exhaled moths / when she laughed
she laughed as if
already drowned / I am getting lost
I knew / and then it was like I always knew
I cannot source the knowing

What about your friends?

a friend knows when they should
not know / when to step over
a nightgowned body
stiff as a specimen in the foyer
how to help
when you're feeling mischievous
draw those chalk lines around her
how to say *when do you think she will wake up
or die* in a way that says *I love you
and am willing
to approach your edges*

Describe a typical day.

I would ghost home from school
and find her flesh—
puddled / boneless on the toilet

when I cupped my ear
to catch her breaths / she fell

she hit the ground / she burst
into a thousand down feathers

so many I couldn't breathe
I couldn't breathe / without breathing her

dinner that night would be fault
all of it mine / I ate every bite

Why do you drink so much?

If love exists
at the bottom of a well

it exists
in the bottom of a throat / I mean

if love exists in drowning
it is born in gasps / I mean / have I told you

my favorite bedtime story / it's the one
where headlights cut into a scream

it ends when a window shatters / invents
new constellations / on the gravel / sky

Is there anything else you would like to say?

what I said in the beginning
about the bell

what I mean is
we all have glass tongues

and learning to speak / hard truths
invents a shattered language

what do you think it is I am
holding / up to the light

STEVE BELLIN-OKA

ESSAY ON POWERLESSNESS

That April when I was eight I talked for hours to the red latex of a helium balloon, pretending it answered. One hand cupped around the spherical face, the other a fist anchoring the ribbon, the sky blue spinal cord of its invisible body. Running my hand along its cheek, it squeaked like the worn-out hinges of a door closed slowly, not the way the door to my parents' bedroom often closed—their voices raised, music swelling, the slam a cymbal crashing before the muffled undercurrent of strings resumed. Once I rubbed too hard and the balloon popped like blood vessels when a man's fist strikes a woman in the face, ethmoid bone creaking. Then it was quiet and the rain began, blurring the windows of the family room like eyewash.

STEVE BELLIN-OKA

UNFINISHED STAINED GLASS WINDOW

Where I was with you—an abandoned
cathedral, wood rot and pew, columbine
flowers purple as bruises. Faces etched
in soda-lime glass. Nickel to blacken
their hair, their eyes; selenium for the lips,
full and pinkish. *If you can't love everything,*
you said, try to love what, in the end,
matters most—not the image complete
but the idea of it, the form, the figures
kneeling on a wash of chromium meant
to suggest grass. The sun behind them
like a yellow coin once of value but no longer.

NORA HICKEY

AMERICAN CRUSH

The sun is AstroGlide all
over your limbs
a syrup so terrible
sweet the world glistens
like an eye
just tongued and moles
that source from some secret
are trying to tell you
something old. Pleasure equals
rot. Fruit at the height of ripe
will soon turn sour. It's how
we will die—
a bush of greed. Wanting
to be orange and aromatic
forever. How does one see a poppy's
static burn and fantasize a minor
death? You imagine being

in the womb

is like saying the letter

M

over and over. A hum. A sort of self

suffocation. An opiate? You think

it appropriate to twin a birth

with a death: the

end, the white bright

exhaustion of cells. And all

of it orgasmic. All of life just

wanting a little lube, to lay with—

NORA HICKEY

21ST CENTURY LAWN

The grass is tight and shiny like a scar
after scab—what the skin remembers
is actually not a whole lot. The Earth,
who can say—mine or yours, a

god is still an alien thing. An owl
flying from dusk registers
higher on the spiritual Richter
scale. If my relationship to

cells is like a stained glass
saint at night, let me moisturize
myself to oblivion. Fall into sleep
slow, an egg dipped

in glass. The run down heater
sounds more like a blizzard
than the thing itself. Funny how
robots are in every corner

of the Earth. I wish they were
more jubilant and wet. I wish
a flood of robots from a dark
factory—metal hand

on clefted chin, an angular
cupping of flesh. How did this start
with grass? The oldest
automation, faithful and green.

JESSICA MOREY-COLLINS

TO QUANTIFY EXPOSURE

Zone everything. Prohibit the over-cold, the low-laying
and vulnerable. Buffer each tendril of the watershed
and buffer your loved ones with great care not to
buffer your love. When thinking of the tundra

rest your mind

on successively less desperate organisms—
polar bears may only hold your attention
for so many seconds, lest the Arctic's
greening and the musk of unfrozen mud
work its way up your ankles.

Do not think of albedo. Do not think
of life as a succession of leavings. Draw
flow diagrams—land's hazards curve
with the earth's contours, land's hazards
have their own gravities. Prohibit the over-dry,
the eroded coast. Build back from the cliff face

and factor beauty

as a colluder with risk. Do not list your lovers
or wonder pointedly whether they think of you; do not
drink away your fear of dying alone. Do not think
about sunk costs, or how ponderously the man-
made habitat has expanded around you, how
roadsound hums you, now, to sleep.

JESSICA MOREY-COLLINS

EXERCISES IN FUTILITY

We wanted to feed
every mange-crust ed mutt
in Rosarito until so many licked
our greasy fingers
we knew
we'd have to feed them of ourselves
if we were to ease
any hunger at all. I came
into your life already proclaiming
myself difficult to love
betraying my belief
that love is difficulty.

ROBERT JAMES RUSSELL

BLUE RASPBERRY

People would always say to me, more than anything else, that the store's smell was too strong—that all you could smell was cologne. They'd walk up to the registers and say, stone-faced, that it stung their eyes. How could you shop for clothes, they'd say, if you had to walk through a humidior of fragrance spritzes to get to them?

(It was a mandate, by the way: to spray their musky cologne every thirty minutes on every mannequin, every T-stand, every meticulously folded sweatshirt and jean wall. To literally walk around and spritz everything in sight. It became the unofficial smell of unrequited crushes, weekend bonfire parties, sneaking off from the group and making out. And if the District or Regional Manager popped in on a whim and was not greeted with a sharp palisade in air quality, if they couldn't smell it from the mall entrance, if they were not embalmed in the perfume the moment they entered the store, we'd hear about it.)

I worked on and off as a manager at Abercrombie & Fitch for years. It was a go-to job after college, as I navigated the film industry in Los Angeles, and after graduate school, as I tried to figure out what to do with two English degrees. The job, I quickly found out, in addition to running the store generally, required me to be a doormat—to absorb the daily barrage of (typically) mothers who hated the brand, the low-cut tops and low-rise jeans, the sex appeal and overt-sleaze, as they saw it, that was dangerous and inviting their children into a world they had been protecting them from their whole lives. A&F was, as I was told time and time again—reminded often by my own family, too—everything that was wrong with the world.

The first time I experienced this blinding animosity, a few weeks into the job in West Michigan, I was the only manager in the store, running the registers. I was drinking a giant-sized blue raspberry Slurpee throughout my shift. This was 2003, the last year the infamous in-house magazine/catalog *A&F Quarterly* would be printed. There had been widespread outrage over models appearing flat-out nude in the pages, no Abercrombie clothes in sight.

A mom stormed in with a copy of the back to school issue, titled—not subtly—the “Sex Ed Issue.” It was dog-eared, bent. It looked like pages had been torn out, others burned with a lighter. She chucked it at us behind the register as she stormed forward, me and the two college freshman Brand Representatives (their official, Orwellian titles). We all ducked, and the dictionary-thick magazine

slapped against the back wall, fell open along the floor to a page that showed, simply, in black and white, two men and a woman running naked toward the ocean, mountains hovering sleeplessly in the distance bearing no trees, no snow, naked themselves.

The mom cursed at us for a couple of minutes. Her face puckered and reddened. *Did we know the damage a book like this would cause her son!?* she asked us. *Why were we peddling such perversion!* We did as we had been instructed, though, and listened, waited. We nodded along.

After her rant, the store muzak drummed up, the beat of nameless European techno sweetening our eardrums once more, the ceaseless rhythms she'd been screaming over returning, pounding. She looked me up and down, arms crossed, a bag hanging over her shoulder I hadn't noticed before. She said, "And I have some returns."

The problem was with the color red.

If you had cherry, raspberry, watermelon, and strawberry flavored products, how could you distinguish them by color, these red fruits? It was a simple question with a complex answer.

In the late 1950s, consumers were growing impatient and demanded to know if the ever-growing world of food additives was safe—if these artificial colors and flavors being added were dangerous in the quantities they were consuming them.

For a while, Red No. 2, which produced a deep red wine color, was used to color raspberry flavored items. But word got out that Red No. 2 especially was unsafe, poisonous. In 1958, the Food Additives Amendment was passed, dictating that food manufactures had to prove additives they used were safe. Red No. 2 was, but the public found out this study was funded by the very same industry that made the dyes, and Red No. 2 seemed to have its day—banned outright in 1976 in the United States.

So, the color for raspberries was quickly ousted, and manufacturers were left scratching their heads: Raspberry was a popular flavor, but they had no way to distinguish it. What was there to do?

Founded as an outfitter of expensive sporting and outdoors goods, Abercrombie & Fitch existed in that model until 1977. Exchanging hands for eleven years, it emerged in 1988 as a subsidiary of Limited Brands the way your high school

crush emerged after a summer break of touring Europe with their family: the acne's gone, they're taller, there's a worldliness to them you can't quite place but you find irresistible, and they have little to no interest in you any longer.

And from there, infamy was achieved: the brand became associated with the "popular" and the "elite." Kids saved up to buy just one of their infamous graphic t-shirts with the bad sex puns. The A&F brand was billed as a lifestyle, a way of life geared towards high school and early college students.

Wear A&F, the stores lauded, and see the world!

Wear A&F and get straight A's!

Wear A&F and be good at all sports!

Wear A&F and get invited to all the parties!

Wear A&F and everyone will want to talk to you!

Wear A&F and be cool!

Wear A&F and get laid!

Wear A&F and never be alone again!

* * *

ICEE, the still-popular frozen carbonated beverage, changed the artificial raspberry game.

In the early 1970s, raspberry flavors still floundering without a color to call their own, The ICEE Company got creative: they had incalculable quantities of blue dye sitting around, but no naturally blue products to marry it with.

But, they said, what about the whitebark raspberry that turns a dark blue when ripe?

(Although, if we're being honest, it's more of a deep purple. Still...)

Yes! they said. *Good enough!*

And so, raspberry flavoring was paired with Blue No. 1 dye. Blue raspberry was born.

* * *

The CEO of Abercrombie & Fitch, Mike Jefferies, was legendary. He once said in an interview, "That's why we hire good-looking people in our stores. Because good-looking people attract other good-looking people, and we want to market to cool, good-looking people."

The phrase "good-looking people" was one I came to despise. I saw how it made people feel, shopping in our store. The management culture was one of cold-shouldering-rejection. We were supposed to ignore customers—we were told, in no certain terms—to seem "out of touch" with what was going on. It would make customers want to be part of our brand.

Once, I arrived at the store epically hungover. I formed go-backs in a dressing room into a sort of mattress, covered myself with wool-lined jean jackets and distressed green surplus coats, and napped. The other workers—friends, at the time—knew to leave me alone.

When I woke up twenty or so minutes later, I had drooled on the clothes, made a sort of nest. I looked at myself in the mirror: ruddy-faced, blood-shot eyes, sunken cheeks. On the wall behind me hung a poster advertising the new styles of jeans for the upcoming winter season. I admired the way they hung on the hips of the male model, how they fit him perfectly, even though I knew how these photos worked: clothes pinned and pulled back, tightened and loosened for maximum perfection.

My bleary-brained reflection in the mirror, unshaven, earlobes too long and knees that bowed inward, was off-brand. He didn't, at all, look the part.

* * *

Other companies followed ICEE's lead, pairing Blue No. 2 with raspberry flavor, leading children everywhere clamoring for the electric blue color, the electric blue. But why?

Back in 1922, American chemist Melvin De Groote was one of the first to study children's attractions to brightly—and often unnatural—colored foods. It's how, for example, pink lemonade was born: it sold better than the typically colorless regular lemonade. Children just had to have that pink-colored beverage.

This appeal has been capitalized on ever since. It doesn't matter that dazzlingly blue raspberries don't exist in nature. It doesn't matter that most, even today, haven't heard of the whitebark raspberry. (Native to the Western United States, Alaska, parts of Mexico, the fruit is too soft to be grown commercially—it wouldn't survive the farming, the packaging and shipping—so no one bothers. It's a trophy, a niche fruit. It's a dream.) What matters is the manipulation: these companies can, with great success, tell our brains how to react.

We don't even know yet all the ways we've been spellbound.

* * *

The A&F brand represented a twisted view of what "beautiful" was and should be.

During the holidays, A&F paraded shirtless men in Santa hats, women in barely-there camisoles (Yes, *yes!* I learned what a *cami* was working there!) and pajama pants folded down real low, right below the hipbone, underwear sticking out. Consumers and media reported on it, aghast, derided the brand's loose

standards, and I, too, working there, hated this adherence to one-kind-only physical perfection—oversexed, standoffish, their way or nothing at all.

There were posters we managers would get, hung up in the back office, that showed exactly how the models at the front of the store had to wear the clothes, what angle shirts and hats and pants had to be tilted to, how much cuff jeans should have. It was horrible. I felt uncomfortable about my own body already, had suffered my whole life with body issues, how I saw (and still see) myself, and I detested seeing people feel as if they didn't belong based only on what they looked like—on physical traits they couldn't change.

And yet, it *workea*. The stores were always packed. People came by with digital cameras and early camera phones and snapped photos with the models. People hung out in the store, met friends and flirted there. They made wish lists of expensive t-shirts they couldn't afford, tried on sweatshirts and outerwear they'd never actually own. It was a place to meet. A clothing store that people wanted to hang out in, to be *seen* in. To be viewed, perhaps, the way the models were viewed. That they, too, had potential.

* * *

Blue raspberry flavor makes your tongue, your lips, turn blue.

Blue raspberry flavor burns your tongue with its too-sweetness.

Blue raspberry flavor stains the plastic snow-cone cup rim, your fingernails.

Blue raspberry flavor won't get your eighth-grade crush to talk to you, won't make you seem more interesting.

Blue raspberry flavor won't get your parents to stop fighting or your brother to stop stabbing knives into the drywall.

Blue raspberry flavor won't teach you how to talk to people, how to be yourself. It will only tell you how to lie, how to become something you're not.

* * *

Rumors swirled about Jefferies leading up to his famous in-store visits, every time—that he had calf implants, pectoral and chin implants. That he had distorted his body to the point of being unrecognizably non-human. That he refused to talk to people he considered ugly. We asked each other, scoffed, *What right did a man who hated the way he looked so ruthlessly, who changed himself so tremendously, have telling us if we were good-looking enough or not?*

And yet, his visits were short, albeit gaudy, affairs. They were meant to be surprise visits. To catch us off guard. We spent so much time folding jean walls,

folding shirts with perfect creases, and tucked away at the Home Office in rural Ohio, he assumed (wrongly, oh so wrongly!) that clothing stayed like this in the stores when he wasn't around. That, magically, after a busy Saturday, piles of clothes remained untouched, lorded over, fantasized about, folds remaining unbroken, unaffected by customers.

But word about impending visits would get out, as it always did. Regional Managers would whisper to District Managers: *It's your store, be ready!* And then you had to pull all-nighters, get no sleep, order pizza in and listen to music and fold and re-fold piles of everything, again and again measuring stacks against thick plastic folding boards and wooden rulers. And then, the next day, the visit would happen. Everyone was placed perfectly in the store, every room decked out in Brand Representatives wearing the new hotness of the season, everyone would be smiling, the whole place lacquered with cologne. You'd get a call from someone: *Jefferies is in the mall!*

The store would be on high alert. Higher-ups lingered nervously, as if he never made these visits. And then Jefferies would stroll in, followed by a cavalcade of lackeys all wearing the A&F brand, middle-agers wearing popped-collar polos, distressed jeans, A&F sandals. Jefferies would literally strut in, walk to the back of the store to the register, look around, smile at the staff, and then march back out. And that was it.

In all my time working at A&F, I saw him twice, in-person. He looked just like a...man. I couldn't see his calves, his chin looked like a normal chin. And yet, each season more posters arrived full of mandates about how we had to look, how we had to tell our employees how to look, what haircuts were acceptable, what colors were on- and off-limits. Each season we were told, bit by bit, to let go of who we were and give in to the Brand. They told us, every time, that we just weren't good enough.

* * *

Many artificial flavors are combinations of *other* artificial flavors—raspberry contains, for example, more cherry and banana and pineapple artificial flavoring than actual raspberry. We're being conditioned in ways we can never fully understand. We're tasting a thing that exists nowhere but in our minds.

* * *

Working at A&F taught me about layering clothes—two polo shirts, yes, three t-shirts at a time, too—and to love jackets and denim, how to put an outfit together. But it also taught me how to hate my body.

I'd flip through the catalog at the models, I remind myself now, whose job it is to look that way. *They do nothing else all day but workout to look like that*, I tell myself. And yet, I'm back there in that stockroom, often, back in that tiny cramped office looking at the mandates from Home Office on how the male employees should dress, feeling ashamed at how I look in the mirror beside the printed photo directives. In those photos, the models' hair never grays and they never grow coarse hair on their backs or their necks and their football-sized biceps with the veins perfectly center-mounted and their teeth so white and their square jaws like action movie stars and and—

Whitebark raspberries don't look like what we imagine raspberries to look like—the color, obviously, is off from what we see in picture books and imagine in our minds, and they're oblong, resembling blackberries, not the red raspberries we're conditioned to imagine. They're ugly, in the way expectations make something ugly.

I haven't had an artificial blue raspberry Slurpee or ICEE or piece of candy since the mid-2000s. My taste for that flavor has vanished. But a couple years back, at the local farmer's market, they were selling whitebark raspberries and I bought them on a lark. I was desperate to know what they tasted like.

Back home, I washed a handful and studied their shape. I popped one in my mouth and held it there a moment, rubbing my tongue along the drupelets. I bit in and it exploded, as berries do. I shouldn't have been surprised by the flavor, the taste, trickling down my throat. It is, after all, exactly what it portends to be.

SHIR KEHILA ORNER

CALL ME SONG OR CALLS FOR PRAYER

“Women usually know,” my dad told me over ice-cream, whipped cream melting on the sides, “when they conceive. They *feel* it, somehow.”

*

Summer: the weekly visits to my dad’s are netted with disclosures.

Coming home that night, I stood by the kitchen window with my mom, hanging laundry to dry between thoughts. “Why was he telling you that?” she asked, the rope tightened, socks clipped on. “Why now?”

Darkened by wetness, skirts and scarves curved the rope with their weight. *It had a belly*, we say in Hebrew: the rope like a shelf supporting books, sunk at its midpoint. The plastic basket emptied. “Yes, I think it was the first time we’d made love,” my mom said, “that I got you.”

Did my parents make *love*, that night? I only know they made me, and I was not love—not love-made. But if I must stick to their terms, I could only write this: at thirty-two and forty-five, my parents made careless love. They made love careless—right on their first date, after meeting on a bus, Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, across the aisle—*do I know you?*

On the phone, when my mom found out my dad’s age and familial situation—a bachelor in his mid-forties—she said, *don’t call anymore*. But he kept calling, listened and asked questions. He was thoughtful and intelligent, and she was alone. When she gave in, invited him over—there was no need to care, anymore, nor to be careful. Just hurry.

*

From beneath her wedding dress, tight inside the growing belly, I asked my mom: *call me Shir*.

If I wanted to change my name, whenever I did, as many times as I did—my mom would say “It was your choice.” But it was only my choice in *her* story.

The ritual went on: my mom sipped wine, red and sour under her *hinuma*, then watched my dad almost break the aluminium-glass. Just almost—and that was it.

My dad hated presents and told his family not to bring any to the wedding. He was specific, repeating this request on the phone, in invitation-letters. My mom

did not follow, and all the presents they got were brought in by her guests. Except one.

Knowing my dad's stubbornness, nearly all his family members obeyed—even if reluctantly. One woman, Shifra—the mother of my dad's brother-in-law—called my mom in private, to ask if she could keep a secret. "From me to you," Shifra said. "He doesn't need to know."

The night after their wedding, my mom thought of Shifra's present: a check she did not want all for herself, a secret she did not want to keep. Unable to foresee my dad's reaction, she drastically misjudged the situation. *Not yet*, she must have told herself, *it's too early a time for secrets*.

My dad was furious. "She should have known better, being on *my* side of the family!"

"But she gave it *to me*, Naftali: it's under *my* name."

This didn't seem important to my dad. He told my mom she had to throw the check out, that she had no right to keep what wasn't hers. "You either throw it out," he said, "or too bad we ever got married."

The check was tossed in the trash, and they stayed together. Over the next two years—past the big fire in the Jerusalemite woods, past my birth and the murder of prime minister Yitzhak Rabin—my mom kept throwing things away.

In *Pessah* of '95, spring-cleaning before the holiday, she found a nine year-old matzot package in the kitchen cardboard—*best before March '86*. She thought they must have been forgotten, that it was obvious they had to be thrown out—but within a few days, my dad noticed they weren't on the shelf. "I'm keeping them for emergency! How could you not understand?" His wrinkles were deep as gorges. "Never throw anything *of mine* away."

And so my mom started throwing out her own things. The urge to clean was persistent, incessant, following her around the apartment. Like the muezzin calls for prayer, it echoed back from the corners of their bedroom. In the early morning hours, before sunrise, the deep male voice found its way to my mom, across the hills and border of East Jerusalem, cutting her nights in half. *You should clean*, the voice said to my mom, *keep cleaning*.

Was this her prayer?

My dad's nights were different: he slept soundly inside his cocoon. There wasn't much that could reach him in there, not a sound, not my mom. Their bed, like Jerusalem, was divided—split by a border of blankets, a confine marked by wool. My dad's night were full, extensive. He was used to the muezzin.

Notes:

Shir is Hebrew for song or poem.

Hinuma is Hebrew for the white veil worn by women in the Jewish marriage ceremony.

ARTIST FEATURE
OLIVIA EDVALSON

from *FUTURE IN VIEW*:

Future in View is a collage series inspired by the deep archives of NASA's public image database.

The series explores a female-oriented future, highlighting the success of hardworking individuals, and representing women of the future.



from Future In View

from Future In View



from Future In View

from *DAUGHTER OF MIDAS*:

Daughter of Midas is a series intermixed with Still Life and Portrait, exploring the relationships between people and their objects, and the obsession of material.



from Daughter of Midas

THE BOILER | SPRING/SUMMER 2018

from *RED QUEEN*:

Red Queen is a series portraying a Queen witnessing her loss of power. Once standing tall amongst her people, The Queen comes to find that, without them, she is nothing. This particular photograph is meant to represent this moment - The removal of the crown, and the damaging effects of abusing a role.



from Red Queen

THE BOILER | SPRING/SUMMER 2018

from *PECULIAR SPACE*:

Peculiar Space emerged from a challenge I was given to turn a vintage dress into something extraordinary. Inspired by David La Chapelle's X Files Series, *Peculiar Space* portrays a trapped astronaut caught up in a complex universe with many twists and turns.



from Peculiar Space

THE BOILER | SPRING/SUMMER 2018



from Peculiar Space

CONTRIBUTORS

Jessica Abughattas is an American poet of Palestinian heritage. Her latest work has been published or is forthcoming in *BOAAT*, *Muzzle Magazine*, *Thrush Poetry Journal*, *The Journal*, *Tinderbox*, *Literary Hub*, and elsewhere. She holds an MFA from Antioch University and lives in Los Angeles.

Lindsay Remee Ahl has work published in *The Georgia Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Barrow Street*, *BOMB Magazine*, *The Offing*, and many others. She was a Fletcher Fellow at Bread Loaf for her novel, *Desire*, (Coffee House Press). She holds an MFA from Warren Wilson in Poetry.

Dana Alsamsam is a queer, Syrian-American poet from Chicago who is currently an MFA candidate at Emerson College. She is the assistant poetry editor at *Redivider* and senior editorial assistant at *Ploughshares*. Dana's poems are published or forthcoming in *Poetry East*, *L'Ephemere Review*, *Blood Orange Review*, *Bad Pony Mag*, *Rag Queen Periodical*, *Oxidant Engine*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Luna Luna* and others. She was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Amanda Bales received her MFA from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Her work has appeared in *The Nashville Review*, *Raleigh Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in central Illinois. [@amanda_bales](#)

Steve Bellin-Oka is a native of Baltimore and has lived in San Francisco, Mississippi, and Canada. He earned his M.F.A. from the University of Virginia and his Ph.D. from the University of Southern Mississippi's Center for Writers. He is the author of a chapbook, *Dead Letter Office at North Atlantic Station* (Seven Kitchens Press, 2017). His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Tar River Poetry*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, and *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, among others. He has been a finalist for the Tomaz Salamun Prize, the Autumn House Press First Book Award, and the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award, among other honors. He is the recipient of fellowships from the Vermont Studio Center and the Virginia Center for Creative Arts. He lives in Portales, New Mexico and teaches at Eastern New Mexico University.

Alyse Bensel is the author of three chapbooks, most recently *Lies to Tell the Body* (Seven Kitchens Press, 2018). Her recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in

Alaska Quarterly Review, *Pleiades*, *South Dakota Review*, *West Branch*, and elsewhere. She is an assistant professor of English at Brevard College, where she directs the Looking Glass Rock Writers' Conference.

Jennifer Jackson Berry is the author of *The Feeder* (YesYes Books, 2016). Her chapbook *Bloodfish* will be published by Seven Kitchens Press in 2019. Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *BOAT*, *Grist*, *Poet Lore*, *Connotation Press*, and *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, among others. She lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her website is www.jenniferjacksonberry.com.

Katie Berta lives in Phoenix, Arizona where she works as the Senior Editor of *Hayden's Ferry Review*. She has her PhD in poetry from Ohio University and her MFA from Arizona State. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Kenyon Review Online*, *Washington Square Review*, *Blackbird*, *The Laurel Review*, *BOAT*, and *Forklift, Ohio*, among other journals.

Brenna M. Casey is a Lecturer at Duke University where she teaches courses in Creative Writing, Literature, and Gender Studies. She received her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Notre Dame and a Ph.D. in English from Duke University. Her work has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Bitch Magazine*, and *Post Road*, among others.

Nicole Connolly lives and works in Orange County, CA, which she promises is mostly unlike what you see on TV. She received her MFA from Bowling Green State University, and her work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in such journals as *Pretty Owl Poetry*, *Flyway*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, and *Big Lucks*. She currently serves as Managing Editor for the poetry-centric *Black Napkin Press*.

A nominee for the 2017 Pushcart Prize, **Jen Corrigan's** prose has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Rumpus*, *Pithead Chapel*, *The Tishman Review*, *Hypertext Magazine*, and elsewhere. She is a prose editor and book reviewer for *Alternating Current Press*. Visit her at www.jen-corrigan.com.

Todd Dillard's work has appeared in numerous publications, including *Best New Poets*, *Electric Literature*, *Nimrod*, *Split Lip Magazine*, and *Barrelhouse*. He was a finalist for the *Best Small Fictions 2018* anthology, and has recently been nominated for Best of the Net. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife and daughter.

Olivia Edvalson is a portrait photographer and photo illustrator based in Rochester, NY. Raised in the enchanted woodlands of New Hampshire, her imagination has no bounds, and it is a guiding force within her work. She earned her BFA in Advertising Photography from the Rochester Institute of Technology in 2018. <http://oliviaedvalson.com/>

Erika Goodrich is a graduate student at the University of South Florida. Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Nashville Review*, *CALYX Journal*, *Juxtapose Literary Journal*, *The Pinch Journal*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, among others.

Will Hearn grew up in Mississippi and is now living in Orange Beach, Alabama. His fiction has appeared in *Literally Stories*, *Visitant Literature*, *Everyday Fiction* and soon forthcoming in *Louisiana Literature*. He is a full-time firefighter and story writer. He's on Instagram and Twitter [@will_hearn](#).

Originally from Milwaukee, WI, **Nora Hickey** now lives in Albuquerque, NM where she teaches at the University of New Mexico. Her poetry and nonfiction has appeared in *Guernica*, *Narrative*, *the Massachusetts Review*, *DIAGRAM*, and other journals. You can hear her discuss the weird and wild history of Albuquerque on the podcast *City on the Edge*.

Krysten Hill received her MFA in poetry from UMass Boston where she currently teaches. Her work can be found in *apt*, *The Baltimore Review*, *B O D Y*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, *Word Riot*, *Muzzle*, *PANK*, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, *Winter Tangerine Review* and elsewhere. She is the recipient of the 2016 St. Botolph Club Foundation Emerging Artist Award. Her chapbook, *How Her Spirit Got Out*, received the 2017 Jean Pedrick Chapbook Prize.

Lisa Huffaker is a poet, musician, and visual artist. Her poems appear in *Southwest Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Measure*, *Able Muse*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and elsewhere. Her project, White Rock Zine Machine, offers tiny books by Dallas-area writers and artists, sold through whimsical vending machines. She is a classical singer by training, and sings with the Dallas Opera. She served as a Visiting Artist at the Dallas Museum of Art last summer, where her installation, *Sound/re:Vision*, invited visitors to interact with a music box Zine Machine, compose chance music, and create zines inspired by a playlist ranging from opera to gamelan.

Amanda Galvan Huynh has received scholarships/fellowships from The MacDowell Colony, the Sewanee Writers' Conference, and Sundress Academy for the Arts. She was a winner of a 2016 AWP Intro Journal Project Award and a finalist for the 2015 Gloria Anzaldúa Poetry Prize. Her work can be found in the following journals: *RHINO Poetry*, *Muzzle Magazine*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Silk Road Review*, *The Boiler Journal*, and others.

Kelsey Ann Kerr teaches writing composition at the University of Maryland and American University, and holds an M.F.A. in poetry from the University of Maryland. She has received scholarships from the Sewanee Writers' Conference and the Big River Writers' Conference. Her poetry also was nominated for *Best of the Net 2017 & 2018*. Kelsey's work can be found in *Stirring: A Literary Collection*, *New Delta Review*, *Mezzo Cammin*, *The Sewanee Review* and the *Atlanta Review*, among others.

Kyle Lopez is a poet from Montclair, New Jersey. He is a TuCuba fellow with the CubaOne Foundation and an MFA candidate in poetry at New York University, where he is also a Goldwater Fellow. Kyle serves as Poetry Editor of *EFNIKS*, a media space for queer and trans people of color. His poems are published or forthcoming in *The Florida Review*, *Argot Magazine*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Capital Pride DC*, and elsewhere.

Brandon Melendez is a Mexican-American poet from California. He is the author of *Gold That Frames the Mirror* (Write Bloody 2019). He is a National Poetry Slam finalist, two-time Berkeley Grand Slam Champion and *Best Poem* winner at the national college poetry competition (CUPSI). A recipient of the the 2018 Djanikian Scholarship from *the Adroit Journal*, his poems are in or forthcoming in *Black Warrior Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Muzzle Magazine*, *the minnesota review*, *Sixth Finch*, and elsewhere. He currently lives in Boston and is an MFA candidate at Emerson College.

Jessica Morey-Collins received her MFA from the University of New Orleans, where she won an Academy of American Poets award, and worked as associate poetry editor for *Bayou Magazine*. Her poems can be found or are forthcoming in *Pleiades*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Sycamore Review*, and elsewhere. She currently studies hazard mitigation in the University of Oregon's Masters of Community and Regional Planning program. Find her at www.jessicamoreycollins.com

Originally from Israel, **Shir Kehila** has lived on Mount Desert Island, Maine for the last four years and received her B.A in Human Ecology from College of the Atlantic. Her poems have appeared in *Beech Street Review* and *The Albion Review*. She absolutely loves cats.

Sara Peck is the author of a chapbook, *Yr Lad Bob* (Persistent Editions) and a collection with poet Jared Joseph, *Here You Are* (Horse Less Press). She runs a bookshop and teaches school in Charleston, South Carolina.

Maya Phillips was born and raised in New York. Maya received her BFA in writing, literature, and publishing with a concentration in poetry from Emerson College and her MFA in poetry from Warren Wilson's MFA Program for Writers. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *BOAAT*, *Ghost Proposal*, *FreezeRay*, and *Anomaly* (formerly *Drunken Boat*), and her arts & entertainment journalism has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Vulture*, *American Theatre*, and more. She currently works as the associate content editor & producer at the Academy of American Poets and as a freelance writer. She lives in Brooklyn.

Karisma Price was born and raised in New Orleans, LA and holds a BA in creative writing from Columbia University. She is an MFA candidate in poetry at New York University where she is a Writers in the Public Schools Fellow. Her work has appeared in *Four Way Review*, *Narrative Magazine*, *Wildness*, *Glass*, *Cotton Xenomorph*, and elsewhere. Karisma lives in New York City and is a reader for *Winter Tangerine*. Along with Kwame Opoku-Duku III, she is a founding member of the Unbnd Collective.

Ashley Roach-Freiman is a librarian and poet with work appearing or forthcoming in *Bone Bouquet*, *THRUSH Poetry Journal*, *The Literary Review*, *Ghost Proposal*, and *Nightjar Review*. The chapbook *Bright Along the Body* is available from dancing girl press. Find out more at ashleyroachfreiman.com.

Robert James Russell is the author of the novellas *Mesilla* (Dock Street Press) and *Sea of Trees* (Winter Goose Publishing), and the chapbook *Don't Ask Me to Spell It Out* (WhiskeyPaper Press). He is a founding editor of the literary journals *Midwestern Gothic* and *CHEAP POP*. You can find him online at robertjamesrussell.com and on Twitter at @robhollywood.

Erin Slaughter is editor and co-founder of literary journal *The Hunger*, and the author of two poetry chapbooks: *GIRLFIRE* (dancing girl press, 2018) and *Elegy for the Body* (Slash Pine Press, 2017). You can find her writing in *Prairie Schooner*, *Passages North*, *F(r)iction*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, and elsewhere. Originally from north Texas, she is pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing at Florida State University. Her first full-length poetry collection is forthcoming from New Rivers Press in 2019.

Jess Smith's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *Waxwing*, *The Rumpus*, *32 Poems*, and other journals. She is currently pursuing at PhD in English at Texas Tech University, where she co-founded and curates the LHUCA Literary Series.

Suzannah Russ Spaar is a poet from Charlottesville, Virginia. She received her MFA from the University of Pittsburgh where she served as a contributing editor for *Aster(ix)* and poetry editor of *Hot Metal Bridge*. She is the co-author with Lucia LoTempio of the chapbook, *Undone in Scarlet* (Tammy, 2018). You can find her poems in or forthcoming from *Luna Luna*, *apt*, and elsewhere.

Sophia Starmack received an M.A. in French and Francophone Literature from Bryn Mawr College, and an MFA in Poetry from Sarah Lawrence. Sophia was a 2014-15 Poetry Fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, where she currently serves as Writing Fellowship Coordinator. Her poetry and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Barrow Street*, *Best New Poets*, *The Threepenny Review*, and other publications. Her poetry chapbook, *The Wild Rabbit*, was published in 2015.

Brandon Thurman is the author of the chapbook *Strange Flesh* (Quarterly West, 2018). His poetry can be found or is forthcoming in *Nashville Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *The Journal*, *RHINO*, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, and others. He lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas with his husband and son. You can find him online at brandonthurman.com or on Twitter [@bthurman87](https://twitter.com/bthurman87).

Danielle Weeks received an MFA in poetry through Eastern Washington University's creative writing program, where she also served as the poetry editor for Willow Springs. Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Bayou Magazine*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Salt Hill*, and *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, among others.

Melissa Wiley is the author of *Antlers in Space and Other Common Phenomena* (Split Lip Press, 2017). Her creative nonfiction has also appeared in places like *The Rumpus*, *DIAGRAM*, *Phoebe*, *Entropy*, *Waxwing*, *The Offing*, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, *Juked*, *Noble / Gas Qtrly*, and *PANK*. She lives in Chicago.

Emily Paige Wilson is the author of *I'll Build Us a Home* (Finishing Line Press, 2018). She has received nominations for *Best New Poets*, *Best of the Net*, and the Pushcart Prize. Her work can be found in *The Adroit Journal*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *PANK*, and *Thrush*, among others. She lives in Wilmington, NC, where she received her MFA

from UNCW. Visit her website at <https://www.emilypaigewilson.com/>

Angela Youngblood lives and writes in a small northern California town. She holds a B.A. in English Literature from CSU Chico. Her prose has recently been published in *Entropy*. Amateur plant enthusiast, but not-as-vigilant-a-plant-caretaker-as-she-would-like-to-be, she tries to nourish things to grow. She sporadically posts on her nebulous blog youngofblood.wordpress.com.