



SENECA  
REVIEW

# SENECA REVIEW

---

Hobart and William Smith Colleges Press

## **Editor**

David Weiss

## **Associate Editors**

John D'Agata, *Lyric Essay*

Katherine Jackson, *Art*

Kathryn Cowles, *Poetry*

Caroline Manring, *Poetry*

## **Assistant Editor**

Joshua Unikel

## **Copy Editor and Consultant**

Laura Glenn

## **Managing Editor**

Cindy Warren

## **Contributing Editors**

Stephen Kuusisto

Rosanna Warren

## **Founding Editors**

James Crenner

Ira Sadoff

Deborah Tall

Unsolicited manuscripts of poetry, translations, lyric essays, and criticism of contemporary poetry are read annually between September 1st and May 1st. Manuscripts sent at other times will be returned unread. No manuscript can be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. We ask that you submit work only once during our annual reading period.

Poems published in *Seneca Review* are indexed in *Index of American Periodical Verse*, *Annual Index to Poetry in Periodicals*, *Humanities International Complete*, and *Poem Finder on the Web* ([www.Poemfinder.com](http://www.Poemfinder.com)). Library of Congress National Series Data Program ISSN 0037-2145.

Published semi-annually by Hobart and William Smith Colleges Press  
Copyright © 2012 by Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Printed by Canfield & Tack

One Issue: \$10  
One-Year Subscription: \$20  
Two-Year Subscription: \$30

*Seneca Review*  
Hobart and William Smith Colleges  
Geneva, NY 14456

[www.hws.edu/academics/senecareview](http://www.hws.edu/academics/senecareview)

To submit online, go to: <http://senecareview.submittable.com/submit>

COVER ART: *Sentient Kitchen, Shuttling Shakers*, 20" x 30" photograph, 2011.

All photographs in the *Sentient Kitchen* series are of original sculptures built from silicone, glass, acrylic, and hair. Videos incorporate original sculptures manipulated with hidden wires and working parts.

# CONTENTS

---

Spring 2012/Fall 2012: Volume 42/1-2

- 6 INLAND IN EDEN ON THE INDIANA DUNES  
WITH NUCLEAR REACTOR  
*Donald Platt*
- 12 MY NEW WAR ESSAY  
*Paul Crenshaw*
- 16 THE MEMOIRIST  
*Eliot Khalil Wilson*
- 18 JAMES EARL JONES EATS WHOOPIE PIE  
*Matthew Gavin Frank*
- 25 THE DISCIPLES OF EMMAUS
- 26 PERORAL
- 27 NOTES ON THE SCARECROW  
*Emily Viggiano Saland*
- 29 EXCERPTED FROM *THE DARK BURTHEN*  
*Michael Ives*
- 44 TRIBES
- 45 IN RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION: WHEN DID  
YOU FIRST FEEL THE POWER OF POETRY?
- 46 NAILS
- 47 THIS
- 48 FOUR POETS IN THE TIME-MANAGEMENT  
WORKSHOP
- 49 THE POEMS OF RIMA
- 51 ROTTERDAM. A POEM OF A PORT AND AN  
APOLOGY
- 52 I AM MANY DON QUIXOTES
- 53 UNCLE SALIM  
*Ronny Someck*  
*Trans. Karen Alkalay-Gut*
- 54 MY MELANCHOLIA, MY MONOGAMY  
*Natania Rosenfeld*
- 60 PESSOA IN LISBOA  
*Sharon Dolin*
- 75 USE ICE IN A SENTENCE  
*Katharine Coles*
- 77 EMMANUEL'S SPRING
- 78 TERRIBLE EMMANUEL DESTROYS THE EARTH  
BY FLOOD



- 79 TERRIBLE EMMANUEL REGARDS THE SUN  
80 EMMANUEL AND THE LION  
*Chris Haven*
- 81 FROM ETYMOLOGY OF THE WORD HAUNT  
*Noel Thistle Thague*
- 86 FRAGMENTS OF A GREATER LANGUAGE  
*Geoff Hilsabeck*
- 100 MEDITATIONS ON THE TREE FROG  
*Angela Stewart*
- 102 CONDITIONAL SEED  
*Rosa Alice Branco*  
*Trans. Alexis Levitin*
- 103 STUDYING ABROAD IN THE COUNTRY OF LOVE  
*Marci Vogel*
- 106 LACKAWANNA
- 109 MIKE  
*Jerry Mirskin*
- 111 NINE LIVES  
*Susanne Antonetta*
- 114 WHY DIM SUM MAKES ME FEEL TENDER  
*Kim Adrian*
- 122 NEED ARISE  
*Clint Garner*
- 123 HOUSE OF A LARGE FOUNTAIN, POMPEII  
*Matt Donovan*
- 132 GIVING YOUR BODY TO SCIENCE  
*Brenda Miller*
- 133 FROM SCIENTIST TO ANIMAL  
*E. A. Farro*
- 143 MICROSCOPIUM  
*Nicole Walker*
- 145 THE GATORS HAVE TURNED  
*Tessa Fontaine*
- 156 VENTRILOQUENCHED, OR SESSIONS FROM THE  
SUMMIT  
*Aylen Rounds*
- 161 HOLES IN THE SKY  
*Jennifer Sinor*
- 173 SEX ON TWO WHEELS  
*Barbara Haas*
- 182 ANTHEM  
*W. M. Lobko*

183	CUSTER <i>Ryan Grandick</i>
186	ABOUT BILL <i>Jim Davis</i>
187	HALF-LIFE <i>Sheila P. Donohue</i>
194	A PAGE ON FOOT WASHING, PERMITTING SHAME, ERROR AND GUILT, MYSELF THE SINGLE SOURCE
197	A PAGE ON LOCUS AMOENUS, PERMITTING SHAME, ERROR AND GUILT, MYSELF THE SINGLE SOURCE
201	A PAGE ON MAN ROULETTE, PERMITTING SHAME, ERROR AND GUILT, MYSELF THE SINGLE SOURCE <i>Brian Blanchfield</i>
205	THE ZOMBIE'S PRAYER <i>Emily Bobo</i>
209	NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

# INLAND IN EDEN ON THE INDIANA DUNES WITH NUCLEAR REACTOR

---

*Donald Platt*

My daughter Eleanor insisted  
on taking our dog Sally, now 13 years old, with us to the Indiana  
Dunes to let her walk,

at least once before she dies, the white sands of Lake Michigan.  
Its shallows show  
milky green as absinthe, which sounds a lot like *absence*.

They deepen  
to the color of the turquoise in my nonagenarian mother's tarnished  
silver Navajo bracelet.

Absence or absinthe, the great lake extends to the horizon's honed  
straight razor and beyond.

Those tiny towers that rise out of the scintillant water to the west —

sheet of gold  
hammered on the anvil of the earth's curvature by setting sun  
until each wave

becomes a dimple or dent in the precious metal — are all  
that is left  
of Chicago. The whole day has been a parenthesis, held breath

in the calendar  
of our regular respirations. The three of us, Eleanor, Kyler,  
her gay roommate,

and I — no, wait, with Sally, the four of us — stretched out  
on the sand, sunbathed,  
swam in the absinthe. We took long walks with Sally,

photographed ourselves  
next to a huge driftwood stump with splayed roots bleached  
to the whiteness of bone.

It was the tailfin and vertebrae of some Pleistocene whale. All the while  
we ignored  
the nuclear reactor only a quarter mile down the beach. Its squat

concave cooling tower,  
emitting steam erratically, reminds me of a white castle standing alone  
on the back row of my dead

father's chessboard. It probably powers the whole of Chicago.  
I can't stop thinking  
of the chain reactions happening so close to us, how uranium

atoms bombarded  
by neutrons split apart, release more neutrons, gamma rays,  
and three million

times more kinetic energy than the same amount of coal.

It is like  
Eleanor's mania. Ten months ago the doctor on the psych ward

told us that despite sedatives  
they couldn't get Eleanor to fall asleep — "That girl could power all five  
boroughs of New York City!"

After three days, they brought her down with Klonopin, which works  
like a reactor's  
control rods pushed deep into the core to absorb

neutrons  
and slow the chain reaction. The smokestack keeps hiccupping  
steam. I rub

after sun lotion with aloe onto Eleanor's raw shoulders and back.  
My palms feel the braille  
of her brown birthmark, the size of a nickel, which had been

bright raspberry  
when she was young. For 21 years I have applied sunblock  
to that birthmark



and can pretend no longer that she is a child, though she is still  
and will be always  
my daughter. As I slather on more lotion, she's telling  
me of her plans  
to become a midwife, to deliver babies bloodstained and screaming  
to this life

where nuclear reactors and couples kissing among sand dunes  
coexist  
so easily. I think of the meltdowns — Three Mile Island,

Chernobyl,  
and Fukushima Daiichi. How one firefighter at Chernobyl  
joked, "There must be

an incredible amount of radiation here. We'll be lucky  
if we're all still alive  
in the morning." They waited two days to announce the disaster.

The Soviet radio stations  
interrupted their regular programming and played classical music  
before broadcasting

news of the "accident." As soon as people heard the Beethoven,  
Shostakovich,  
or Prokofiev, they knew something was wrong. Or perhaps it was

Ravel's Piano  
Concerto for the left hand. Ravel composed it for pianist Paul Wittgenstein  
whose right arm

had been amputated during World War I. I've been listening  
obsessively to it,  
a mere 19 minutes of music, over and over all summer long.

It begins  
with the faintest featherings of bows against bass viols' strings,  
and then the contrabassoon

like our dog's warning growl at the back of her throat. Meager motif  
taken up by cellos  
and violins that twine around each other. I keep seeing scraps of fog

wrap gauze bandages  
around uprooted, mortar-struck trees at Verdun and the bodies  
of the dead, slumped

like sand bags in the mud. It crescendos to the kettle drums' barrage,  
stops short. Piano cadenza —  
hail on a corrugated tin roof, staccato stutter of machine gun

fire, deeper register  
of distant 42-centimeter howitzers. Ravel wanted the cadenza  
to sound as if

the pianist were playing with both hands. But even his descending  
glissandos can't  
hide history, soldiers waiting in flooded trenches "to go over

the top" and be  
mown down. I always hear Paul Wittgenstein's phantom limb, fingers  
ghosting over the white notes

on the keyboard's far right end. That silence an absence no absinthe  
can allay.  
After Paul read the score, he suggested changes to Ravel,

claiming, "I am an old  
hand at the piano." Ravel replied, "And I am an old hand  
at orchestration."

The concerto survived intact. Not one note of the last century  
will be changed  
to make it easier to play. And, of course, Paul's younger brother

was Ludwig,  
imperious philosopher. In 1929, when Ludwig returned to Cambridge,  
the economist John Maynard Keynes

wrote in a letter to his wife, "Well, God has arrived. I met him  
on the 5:15 train."

In his *Tractatus*, God reduced the universe to seven

propositions.

"The world is all that is the case" is the first. The final one says,  
"What we cannot speak about

we must pass over in silence." In silence I should pass over Verdun,  
the nuclear reactor

at the north end of the Indiana Dunes, and my daughter's bipolar

disorder. Ditto

my desire for Kyler, most beautiful of young men with his orange-and-white-  
striped towel wrapped

around his shoulders, tangled wet brown hair that I will never wake to  
and muss some more,  
goose flesh over intercostal muscles, swimmer's tanned body,

wide brown eyes

in which I would dissolve. All this I cannot speak about.

"Look," says Kyler,

"the sunset..." and points. "It's like, like... a bleeding heart!"

We all laugh

at the kitschy picturesque he makes us see. But he's right.

The sky has parted

its blue-gray cloud robes to reveal molten glory, a million  
trillion hydrogen

bombs exploding — fusion, not fission, the heart of matter —  
nuclear reactor

eight light minutes away. For one moment I see Dana

pushing with legs raised,

cervix opening wide as Eleanor's head crowns, black-haired  
and bloody —

sunrise, not sunset — as the sun sinks into the now  
almost black lake,  
into absence, into absinthe, into absence's sweet absinthe.

# MY NEW WAR ESSAY

---

*Paul Crenshaw*

Will have the words *shit* and *fuck* everywhere. Also *Jesus Christ* and *goddammit to hell* and *Please God No. Shit* and *fuck* will be used when describing the action of war, the bullets and bombs. The others when describing the aftermath of the first.

My new war essay will be amorphous, random forms in morning fog. It will show shadows in sunlight, the moon ringed with frost on a cold night while oil fires bloom skyward, phantom shapes shimmering the stars. There will be cumulus clouds over the heartland, snowcapped mountains, rivers running to oceans.

Early in the essay there will be clubs, hurled rocks, then swords and spears. There will be walls and moats and then castles, gunpowder, cannons, flintlocks, repeating rifles. The industry of war will continue to grow, until there are all kinds of bombs, landmines, missiles that lock onto targets the size of small children, and men who stand around harrumphing and crowing and pleased, believing they have achieved something good with every new discovery, every invention of war.

There will be nothing good in my new war essay. There will be no birdsong before first light, no blue afternoons so beautiful it hurts to look at them. No stars flung across a night sky. There is no time for that. There will only be cold mud and dry dust. Freezing rain and snow high in the mountains, a thousand-degree heat in the depths of the desert. Just thunder and lightning, earthquakes, hurricanes, smog. Some of it will be real. The rest only imagined, or caused.

Fuck. Shit. Goddammit to hell.

There will be TV screens in my new war essay, lots of TV screens. Some of them will show soldiers in the streets of foreign cities, bullets ricocheting off buildings in little splinters of concrete. Others grainy night-vision litanies of anti-aircraft streaking skyward and the great green glowing of bombs mushrooming in the distance. Still others will show troops returning while people wave flags, and still others — though they will be hard to find — will show bodies bloated in the streets.

My new war essay will be covered with blood, and half-way through some kid will come home missing a leg and everyone

will pretend it is still there until finally an old friend — the closest friend, the one who will later get drunk and press the heels of his hands hard against his cheekbones — will make a joke about Ho-palong Cassidy and everyone will laugh a little uneasily.

In my new war essay there will be lots of rape. Plenty of pain. More murder and mayhem than stars in the exploded sky. There will be cracks and splinters, rocks and sand. Ricochets and high-pierced whining, the dull drone of engines, the thud of bombs off in the distance. There will be lots of bombs, lots of bullets, lots of flies, for it seems there are always flies in any war essay, and my new one will be no different — flies then, crawling on unseeing eyelids that shine like dull glass. Flies humming and buzzing like the paired planes overhead or the electric wires hissing in the street.

There will be white space in my new war essay. For reflection. A brief respite from the bombs and bullets careening around inside our skulls.

But not much. Because with too much reflection, the idea of war makes no sense. And my new war essay — any war essay — has to make sense.

There will be no marches in my new war essay, no drums, no songs being sung, unless they are forlorn cadences about soldiers lying dead in the rain, or bands on flag-filled streets echoing off the buildings, martial music striking up from speakers mounted on a military jeep. Any speeches will be kept short. They will confirm the need of what we are doing. They will provoke our patriotism and prove that providence has guided us here.

My new war essay will not slink through the streets like a dog. It will come brightly painted with slogans, and men in gray suits will cheer my new war essay from pulpits while people below them believe the words they spin into existence. There will be lots of flags. All colors, all sizes, all countries, little stick flags waving or jewelry flags pinned to lapels or bullet-ridden flags hanging limply from rusted poles above walls where twisting wires and broken shards of glass keep out the uninvited. People will salute the flags and bow to them because at the heart of war are flags, symbols of separation between us and them.

My new war essay will be set somewhere far away. (I don't want a new war essay where we live, do you?) So it will be set in Afghanistan or Iraq or Sierra Leone or along the Mexican-American border where carrion birds sit on telephone poles, waiting, while

the dead lie in the streets and the occasional outburst of automatic weapons echoes and whines.

Shit. Fuck. Goddammit to hell.

There will be no human interest stories in my new war essay because war has no interest in humans. There will be dreams, but all of them will end with lightning, or fire, some physical manifestation of what we already know.

✕

My new war essay will use the words *freedom* and *democracy* and *liberation* and the phrases *maintaining order* and *stabilizing the region* and *pacification*. It will be named “Operation New War Essay” and that name will capture the hearts and minds of the people on our side, while showing us what we have to do to the people on the other side. It is a name chosen for its ability to strengthen our resolve and steel our softened hearts for the job that lies ahead.

It will be contradictory. We will fight for peace. We will kill to save lives. We will destroy so that we can rebuild. It will proclaim to be an essay about peace. It will go so far as to proclaim that all war is about peace, and in my new war essay there will be many who believe that.

Of course there will be hatred, and misunderstanding. There will be fistfights, and more curses — shit! fuck! goddamn! — and screaming and things being thrown. There will be people shaking their fists in anger and banging tabletops, their eyes as hard and wild as the sentences they speak. We’ll all be able to find, in my new war essay, reasons to blow up people based on ethnicity, race, religious belief, sexual orientation, hair color or eye color or skin color, which hand they favor, if they like chocolate or strawberry ice cream more, the Steelers or the Cowboys, sweet potatoes or regular potatoes or no potatoes at all; and of course, you, the reader, will know that I am having a bit of fun at your expense, but you will also realize that many of the examples I come up with are just as silly as any of the other hundreds of thousands of reasons we have gone to war in the past.

There will be missing limbs in my new war essay. And missing children. Missing husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers. There will be missing teeth, and missing holes in people’s lives, long stretches of time where they only worried about surviving, or worried whether the characters in my new war essay would

ever come home. Buildings will miss windows and walls. Cities will miss running water, and the children who miss food in the areas of my new war essay where food is missing will run through streets missing buildings with their stomachs distended and flies swirling around them and carrion birds waiting. My new war essay will be repetitive. It will show the same images over and over, mostly death, places where even life is now missing, great swaths of land missing what once lived there, before my new war essay was written.

My new war essay will not make people feel bad though. Because it is only an essay. The images may be real, but once we finish reading it we can put it down. We can walk away, and forget about the bullets and bombs and missing limbs and missing lives, and even if we do become overwhelmed by the words that are not written in my new war essay — the words that can never be written about war because there really are no words that can ever capture what war is — we will be bolstered by my new war essay because more and more and more my new war essay will come to assert, again and again, that it is right, and is always right, and always has been right. It has to, to believe in itself. It has to deny any logic — it has to drown out any opposition. For there will come a time when someone will question my new war essay, and then the smoke lying heavy in the streets will become not so much a screen as a silhouette. And then there will come a dull silence hovering over everything, all quiet but for a rusty wailing in the distance. And then the war will begin.



# THE MEMOIRIST

---

*Eliot Khalil Wilson*

... and I'd like to add that I am getting it all down. I am flailing away at my keyboard like an enraptured Pentecostal organist. My elbows are raw from brushes with fame. I was a friend of a friend of the neighbor of Gary Coleman. I once saw Phyllis Diller on the street, and so it is that we are nearly pals and practically speak to each other. A week before my *bat mitzvah* Mel Gibson drove over my lemonade stand. I survived. It's all in the "Lethal Lemon Heart" chapter. You will want to know my reflections on this.

I will detail my childhood stardom. Give you the goods about my first pageant, first potty, first period, my acne battles, my text message wars, my weekly mall shoe crusades. I will go into my stylish drug problem. How I kicked the food habit. I will spill the beans about all the sybaritic parties — snow banks of cocaine, fountains of Dom Perignon, my best friend Phyllis (Diller) on the back of carnal llama. I will kiss and tell. I will spare no riotous details. I will not use the phrases *homeless wake* or *North Dakota open house*.

I will detail my deflowering in mythological terms in the chapter entitled "The Great Migration." I will spill it all: the rented Temple of Apollo, the sudden Mediterranean breeze, a rapture of bed curtains puffed full-bellied, the doves. There will be no mention of any drunken youth counselor and a waterbed in the back of a van in the parking lot of Applebee's outside of Lincoln, Nebraska. Of the select paramours to follow, there will be no cavalcade of scrofulous drifters.

My wedding chapter will read like a kind of psalm but with a detailed budget and intermarry. How the sun broke through just for me, how I bestowed kindness on the rented flower girls despite their lackluster performance. You will be there with me on my journey of self-discovery, self-empowering separation, and lucrative divorce. I will then appear blithely drunk and topless on every stretch of sand I can find: Cannes, Mykonos, Coney Island, Asbury Park, Appleton Elementary School's playground sandbox.

I will be my only subject. I will ooze wisdom from my famous, exceptional life. I will tell you about myself, my break-ups and -downs, my week at college, my new phone, the harrowing liposuction trauma and what they don't tell you. Did I mention that Gary Coleman and I almost share a brain and are practically joined at the hip, or head to hip as the case may be? I am nothing average American. All of it is true and important and in its seventh edition hardback by now.

# JAMES EARL JONES EATS WHOOPIE PIE

---

*Matthew Gavin Frank*

In winter, we beat the cream in steel bowls, and our wrists are hurting, and we call out in voices too high-pitched to be called masculine. We think little about our state, about its geographical tumorness, about our father's hands, the old net-scars there, trying, and failing, to wedge the whisks from our own.

✱

To the football game on TV, dad screams *Fuck a duck!* while mom, in the kitchen, tells you why brown sugar is brown. When she calls molasses *viscous*, you will think she's mispronouncing *vicious*. Her hands are shaking, but she never drops the whisk.

✱

In 1984, your third-cousin, your dad tells you, tries to hang himself with a length of cassette tape — *The Empire Strikes Back*. Dad uses words, like *pussy*. You begin wondering about the feel of the tape — the crackly smoothness of it. You begin wondering about magnetism and particles, and you read somewhere that ferric oxide is inorganic, and chemists consider it an ill-defined material. The throat, in contrast, is very well-defined. You touch your Adam's apple with two fingers and swallow — this beautiful up-and-down.

✱

In the whisking, is both the whisking away, and the whisking toward. How the air makes the cream solid. How the air, this cold, sweetens the chest.

✱

The secret is in the air, and therefore, invisible, and infuriating.

✱

Here, we work hard to make the liquid of things go away, apply strength and heat, coagulant and the kind of voice called *bedside manner*.

✖

In 1984, three teenage boys threw Charles O. Howard over the State Street Bridge in Bangor. Howard drowned in the Kenduskeag Stream as the boys, from above, hurled homophobic slurs, attacking, among other things, the pitch of Howard's voice.

✖

When we're ill, the most comforting vocal pitch to the ear is bass. When we're well, as when we're drowning, the jury's still out.

✖

In many Maine hospitals, Whoopie Pie, the official State Treat, is "liquefied" and chilled, and given to patients who've just had their tonsils removed. It is coagulant, sealant, replacement for both the standard ice cream, and the cut-away parts of us.

✖

In the Whoopie Pie is every Amish woman's broken leg, tendonitis, farmhouse mastectomy, the slowness of the horses. The slowness of horses to hospital. Is the chocolate cake buns your mother, or mine, describes as bosomy, the oven cracking their tops. In Maine, we know: it's the heat that fissures us. It's the cool of the cream in the middle that holds our parts together, keeps our insides, inside.

✖

Dad feels that the eel is a masculine animal, for obvious reasons. For less obvious ones, he calls the Whoopie Pie *bitch food*.

✖

Dad knows: rivers meander. He does not think of metaphor when he talks of weirs, the barriers he used to install in order to alter the river's flow, hinder the passage of the fish.

✖

I went fishing only once with Dad. He was not happy that I was afraid of the rainbow trout.

✖

In this kind of winter, we stay inside as much as we can. The ocean's there, close now. But with all of this ice, we never think of it as roiling.

✧

Your father, or my father, hides Bowie knives in his underwear drawer. Your mother, or mine, thinks differently of knives now, thinks of the things we must cut from ourselves in order to live. Here, in excision, is the extension of a life. Here, we fill in the blanks with sweetened cream. No one whisks it to soft peaks faster than your mother, or my mother. She whisks. Nothing of her body shakes.

✧

In 1717, the Great Snow decimated Maine. Horses froze and livestock froze and our vocal chords constricted and we all tipped more toward soprano. In cold, and in high-pitched voices, panic. We kept warm, and alive, by whipping. It wasn't until years later that we associated whipping with cream, 25-foot snowdrifts with dessert.

✧

In winter, we write our names on the windowpanes with our tongues. We name the sweetest, softest stuff after ice.

✧

Your father, or my father, likes masculine names, single-syllable names. Masculine voices. In bass, he says, is power. In the eel, is power. No other animal, he says, maximizes its muscle output more. Mom takes a cookie sheet of chocolate buns from the oven. Your father, or my father, says... *a good strong name*. You don't tell him — just like I don't tell him — that telemarketers often confuse you for the Lady of the House.

✧

Other names for Whoopie Pie: Gob, Black Moon, Big Fat Oreo, Big Fucking Oreo, Bob.

✧

A whirring sound: you can't tell if that's the snow, the electric mixer,

the football audience complaining on the television. You can't tell if the pitch of your voice is the smallest of something, the largest of another.

✘

In 1717, a record number of pirates raided vessels along the Maine coastline. The popular pirate boat of the time was a two-masted ship called *a snow*.

✘

The world's largest Whoopie Pie was slapped together in South Portland in March 2011. The ground was still soggy. The pie weighed 1,062 pounds, and was sold by the slice, and the proceeds went to the mailing of smaller Whoopie Pies to Maine soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. Your mother, or mine, says something about philanthropy and treats. Your father says, *It's all a big fucking something*.

✘

When Maine's blueberry farmers and potato farmers and sweet corn farmers and dairy farmers found that their wives had, in their lunch pails, wrapped in linen a small chocolate cookie sandwich with a sweet cream filling, they reportedly shouted, *Whoopie!* That they were eating cake batter leftovers did not deter their excitement. That my father, or yours, considers such an exclamation less-than-masculine did not slow their eating, compel them to wipe the cream from their chins. My father, or yours, is conflicted about farmers.

✘

In 2011, Maine legislators launched Proposition L.D. 71, "The Act to Designate Whoopie Pie as the State Dessert." The Pennsylvania Dutch, and the New Hampshire German, tried to intervene, claiming that the dessert belonged to them. Regardless, the proposition received full bipartisan support, and your father, or mine, asked what the fuck this had to do with the dropping lobster prices, and your mother, or mine, began whisking not only for her body, but for the state.

✘

My father says that James Earl Jones is the most masculine man he

can think of. It's his deep voice, he says. I don't tell him what I've read: that it takes greater vocal strength for a soprano to sing alto than it does for a bass to sing baritone. It's harder to go lower. On the telephone, when he's around, I try to sound more like a man.

✕

The bottom bun of the Whoopie Pie is the same as the top, except wetter.

✕

The breastbone of the dove is relatively stronger than that of the elephant.

✕

It's cold outside. I thumb through the atlas. I think of names written in snow, names drowning in thick streams. I think of how my father says he's beaten many people up, sure, but he's never thought to drown anyone. Of how Bangor means *monastic enclosure*, or *the sharp upper rods of a wattle fence*, or *horned*. Of how Whoopie means *sex*. Of how our entire state resembles a growth that demands excision.

✕

My mother talks of ghost itches, and whisks. My father has stopped talking. I've started doing push-ups.

✕

James Earl Jones says, "My stutter was so bad, I barely spoke to anyone for eight years." MaryAnne says, "We use gelatin in our cream." My mother says nothing to her of cheating, of shortcuts, of Darth Vader as thin salve, of sugar as the sweetest thing that will kill us.

✕

Nothing of: The stuff inside of us, whipped. Perfectly mixed. One thing dissolved into another, our wrists making it happen. Contradiction is: my feminine voice, and the strength of the muscles required to produce it.

✕

In the pasturage outside of Bangor, the hoofless horse notices no flies, makes no sound. That doesn't mean that neither is there, and ready to bite.

✖

Is my voice the voice of my body? Is a one-thousand-pound cookie sandwich the voice of the new war bond? My mother looks at a picture of herself young and her voice does something I don't like.

✖

Contradiction is.

✖

So, we eat two Whoopie Pies. One for comfort, one for the identity of our state. These two reasons are not the same, will never be the same.

✖

We are one out of fifty, and we are the extremity. We temper extremity by moving toward the cream in the middle. We need to do this so desperately, we legislate it.

✖

My father, and yours, sleeps on the couch. Our mothers are making Whoopie Pie to bring to the neighbors'. They know, but won't admit, that hers is the best. They know that, after she got sick, her Whoopie Pies got better. Like the cassette tape, this is also ill-defined material.

✖

We are swagger and insecurity. We wonder which is the cream, which the sugar.

✖

... of how Kenduskeag means *Eel-weir place*.

✖

We are body and voice, pectorals and castrato, the Force and the



Dark Side, we are the horse in the mild winter, our names frozen  
on windows. We look through our names and see the horses shiver.  
We are Ladies of the House. We are Bob. We are father and son.

## THE DISCIPLES OF EMMAUS

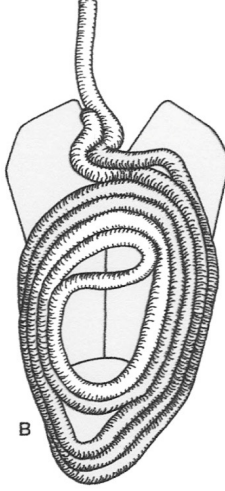
---

*Emily Viggiano Saland*

— After the forger Han van Meegeren

No sound today but of the thinness of things the clouds grown steadily patchy not enough cream for the coffee the cowbirds nesting again. And yet so much lint has built up in the dryer! In the back woods the parasitic birds root out a nest's rightful tenants. Through the filth on the sliding glass door we watch the downward trajectory of another robin's egg making space more space the shells bleeding out in the yard. (I always assumed that the old masters cloaked the Virgin Mary in blue to achieve some point about loss.) But here you tell me it was all about economics something in the rarity of lapis lazuli making ultramarine the most expensive pigment. The blue stone carried in from Afghanistan, cracked open and crushed into tempera yolk. How the painters must have cherished it so too the robin her counterfeit brood.

Permitting passage: yes *still* meaning enduring or else motionless some other species of waiting Yesterday I walked the dog the long way home or what I assume is the long way having never found a short-cut I wanted to tell you my earth remains presence on the a type of grip – what is clung to and directed along a set path or else here read *betrothed* It is not a tangle to fight one's way out of (*See Fig. B*) but rather a holy continu-ance like a leash clipped tight to the body and wrapped around a fist What follows is only an attempt to utterance sent into the void I tried to call out - each day its own muted attempt at following the voice to its point of origin My back to the wind I saw it rising from me in plumes but of the breath I heard no answer and still not any sound only *bush now bush now*



## NOTES ON THE SCARECROW

---

*Emily Viggiano Saland*

Some days the whole  
of the scarecrow is a spine.

When that happens, the only task  
of the scarecrow is to communicate  
earth's presence to the sky.

✧

The scarecrow is rigid  
as a spade scratched into the dirt  
[or in alternate readings,  
a seed].

✧

But if there was only one  
thing the scarecrow could offer  
to suggest scarecrow

would he give us the birds,  
or the field behind him?

✧

The scarecrow has been translated  
many times.  
Bits of him have been lost.

His arms, for example,

[Here, the text is illegible  
or missing entirely.]

✧

Some days, the scarecrow knows  
that this is the world,  
falling apart.

*[Antecedent undetermined.]*  
It's in the grass too,  
if you take it in your hands  
to be put in motion by the wind.

## EXCERPTED FROM *THE DARK BURTHEN*

---

*Michael Ives*

*The eye is not satisfied with seeing.*

— Ecclesiastes 1:8

- Feb 4 “Units” of feces, their pinched ends all elegantly aligned, as if by design, arranged at the throat of the toilet like a bunch of root vegetables, and then I flush and they explode and are sucked away.
- Feb 6 Unremarkable, except for the ragged side of one stool, which called to mind the surface of a wood rasp. The edge of a turd is the original Barbary coast.
- Feb 25 One rather long and almost perfectly straight cylinder, pinched off at the end like an elongated silicone crystal from an extrusion device prior to being sliced into superconducting wafers. Quite elegant, though painfully discharged. Reading from Goncourt’s journals the while.
- Mar 1 Immense heap of feces discharged just now, the summit of which rose at least an inch above the level of the water, like a great igneous mound along the Pacific Ring of Fire. Two-stage flushing required, in the intermission of which, while searching for a nail clipper in the upper vanity drawer, discovered a sample-size deodorant with a scent called “Sports Meadow.”
- Mar 4 Volcanic explosion this morning, courtesy of last night’s shiraz, dark and disheveled, like yew bushes. *A crank topiary obscures the DMV.*
- Mar 7 Frighteningly blonde excreta this morning, which must be the result of Trevor’s peculiar laxative recipe. Was reminded

of Johnny Winter. And Yellow Man. But who are the great albino jazz musicians?

- Mar 8 Read through several pages on the *Ismaili Order of the Assassins* while “discharging my Body of that uneasy Load.” Produced an undistinguished several small, thin tubules the color of sorrel leaves when they die. That the word “assassin” is derived from “hashish” has to be the most tiresome of all the etymological “wonders.”
- Mar 14 Two or three anonymous, kibble-like pellets which, when I flushed, circled each other momentarily like sparks above a campfire before submitting to their inexorable journey toward the septic tank.
- Mar 28 This morning an heliacal twist with a . . . of smaller dollops nested in the interior of it. Looked something like a pregnant gyroscope. When I depressed the flush handle, the works toppled over on its side and disappeared into the throat of the toilet.
- Apr 2 See Giacometti’s “Woman with Her Throat Cut” (or perhaps some sort of instrument of torture) and recall last night’s impression: that E.’s cocktail conversation was drawing naïve guests into Maiden of Nuremberg-type traps of intellectual ambush from which they didn’t recover for the rest of the evening.
- Apr 8 I see a hydraulic jack resting lightly on the Virgin Islands.
- Apr 10 Like the clown at a state fair birthing center muttering to himself, “Focus, focus, damn it,” I did manage to force an enormous set of luggage through the portal just now — rectilinear, remote, like half-submerged inscrutable monoliths at the mouth of a harbor, for which municipal tour guides offer competing explanations. The image of an ibis-headed driver’s ed instructor continues to haunt me.
- Apr 11 Another spiral this morning, unbroken, oriented at a 45-degree angle to the throat of the toilet with the upper surface

of one of the loops cresting above the waterline. A texture so smooth, I was barely aware of the emission. Imagining someone with such exquisite control over his sphincter that he could “turn” his stool as if on a wood lathe.

Apr 12 Read this morning from Moore’s *A Dictionary of Geography*, ... in distinction from the *Fumarole*, the exhalations from the solfatara consist principally of sulphuretted hydrogen and other sulphurous gases.” My urine smells like burning papyrus.

Apr 14 Delicious crème brûlée at Hattie’s last night. We dropped martinis from the roof garden. Revealed to R. and P. the rudiments of a copro-poesis. They had at the ready, as always, numerous precedents and ripostes. Artaud was mentioned, of course, and Michel Tournier. We smoked. No matter the regularity of my bowel movements (every morning after coffee), nicotine always produces an immediate laxative effect. Upon entering the men’s room, I encountered a large man with a deformed ear waving his hands in front of the motion sensor on the paper towel dispenser (unfortunate rhyme) as though he were playing a Theremin.

Apr 16 Unbroken coil of feces this morning, which reminded me immediately of the snake on the California state flag. Dropped a single square of toilet paper onto it, watched the lineaments of the coil slowly emerge, as if from behind a rice paper screen, then flushed away the works.

Apr 19 Immense discharge this morning, with peaks rising above the surface of the water in arrangements of considerable complexity, as of coral atolls in the Pacific. Presently I ruminate on the alleged translocation of the Islands of the Blessed, in a feverish but futile effort to escape the insufferable dignity of their inhabitants. Io and her fly, the Islands of the Blessed and the blessed, Prius man and his caca.

Apr 20 I see a broken sextant, but itself composed (loosely) of a broken ankh, a broken spoon, a broken shackle, and a broken taproot.



- May 8 While at the park, let loose a warrior king's tirade into the plastic basin of the Porta John. From outside it must have sounded like the cosmic sow slumbering in a gelatin mold.
- May 9 Single large sea-cucumber, dendrochita to be precise — like a length of Polish sausage terminating in a tuft of respiratory trees. Half expected it, hung over as I am, to follow me around the house.
- May 15 Perfectly immobile, mildly odoriferous stool this morning — innocuous really, yet invested with a terrible significance. I wouldn't think of probing it manually, though it might carry news of my imminent demise. This silent Bartleby-like mass, at once both sinister and meaningless — it calls to mind M's latest graphic novel, the flesh eaters of which she has elected to equip with peonies for heads, and not the cypripedium, or lady's slipper orchid, that I had proposed. "Not the cypripedium?" I said to her incredulously by phone the other morning, "even though the labellum, or lip, of that flower resembles the grossly oversized chin of a hideous alien and often appears to have veins running through it?" But she said she'd conducted informal "focus groups" and carried out research that vindicated her theoretical surmise — that an aberrant plasticity of association lurks beneath apparently stable categories of thought. Like huge canines inside a stupid cluster of petals, blood in the stool of a color-blind man.
- May 17 Neatly kerfed cylindrical modules of stool later this afternoon. Has my sphincter become a Play-Doh extrusion toy?
- May 25 To the degree that they abhor it, men wash themselves in shit. As one defecates into the same circling waters, other and still other waters circle beneath one.
- May 27 (Copromancy)
- May 28 Sunburst of rheumy floatage, as of a child's vomit - the larg-

er elements disposed near the center with coronal flares of finer stuff circumjacent.

- Jun 3 Magmatic and prolific.
- Jun 8 Too soon I shall enter my second infancy, and the bowel's berry shall then mingle with the linen.
- Jun 9 Recalled yesterday my boyhood neighbor, Cents, who badgered me for over a year to sing with his barbershop chorus. He must have been in his early forties at the time, I fourteen or fifteen. The rehearsals were held an hour and a half east, in \_\_\_\_\_, known chiefly for its maximum security prison. As Cents drove, he would alternate between jokes about the nature of vaginas and discussion of a family disease with which he was stricken, a disease that required that his colon be catheterized such that he had, in his words, "to shit out of the side of his body," which image made me shudder within. "They sewed up the asshole God bequeathed me and tapped another one upstream," I distinctly remember him saying. I was utterly mystified by the remark. During one rehearsal he let on that he had once witnessed a fight between my parents and considered getting involved but didn't, thinking it somehow inappropriate to interrupt my father while he "took care of his business." "Is your father a fag, do you think?" Cents would ask me on a regular basis, as if I thought this supposition humorous. He joked that perhaps I might arrange a date for him with my mother. "She's one hotty," Cents would remind me as frequently as he offered up observations about his colostomy. In the end I agreed to participate in one public performance with the chorus, at an Elk's Lodge in \_\_\_\_\_. While we were dressing for the event in the basement boiler room, Cents at last showed me the aperture in his side, after asking with great fanfare if I wanted to see his "asshole." (Strange, I had assumed for some reason that with the closing off of his rectum, his buttocks would have been surgically fused.) "What looks and smells horrible, but feels great?" Cents would ask me repeatedly during drives home from the barbershop chorus rehearsals. I always replied dutifully, "I don't know,

what looks and smells horrible, but feels great?" And Cents would answer, "Pussy," and he'd laugh, and I would laugh, but without knowing what I was laughing about. And then invariably Cents would challenge me to a farting contest, pretend to start unbuttoning his shirt, laugh again and ask, "Hey, how about that date with your mother?"

Jun 10 (Underwater ziggurat.)

Jun 4 Chiasmus: the demon shits end-stops of nacre while a black, feculent script passes from between the buttocks of the angel.

Jun 16 Harassed woman metamorphoses into heifer; shrub in flames into voice of god; Indo-European aspirates *bh*, *dh*, and *gh* into voiced plosives *b*, *d*, and *g*, etc.; gentle person into resurrection event; "blah-blah" into "yada-yada"; last night's pot roast into this fuscous, pelican-shaped heap.

Jun 21 On the eve of the summer solstice, the mediums, whose rates of digestion have been closely scrutinized for the preceding several months, are trussed up in an apparatus on a pillar at the center of a lake, their arms extended and open in a supplicative posture, their torsos held aloft by three iron rings, one under the arms, another at mid-chest; the last supports the buttocks and from this lower ring extend stirrups into which the feet are inserted to hold their legs. At the appointed time late in the evening before the solstice each is fed a paste of very specific composition containing liberal amounts of gold dust. In the morning a novice administers a series of palpitations and auscultations of his abdomen. Near midday the pontifex fits into the medium's anus a collared valve. Directly before the passage of the sun through the solstitial point at the southern Tropic, he is fed, as needed, a mild laxative. The whole of the priestly caste assembles along the shores of the lake. When the sun stands directly overhead, the work of the preceding year comes to fruition: gold coin begins to pour from the anus of the medium as if he were a slot machine. Hence, the mint and treasury of the tribe are at once contained in this excre-

tor of ducats.

- Jun 24 Tremendous din of pneumatic billingsgate immediately prior to this morning's evacuation. God, I thought for a minute as though I'd deflate entirely. Mrs. Blickstein upstairs would have found me days later, looking like a flaccid Claes Oldenburg sculpture, draped over the toilet.
- Jun 26 Smooth, steep, slightly furrowed cliffs of primary stool with an apron of coarse talus at the base. Begin to think I couldn't manually, with modeling clay, achieve a better facsimile of slide rock formation.
- Jun 30 Terrible constipation this morning. Felt as though I was passing a feldspar table radio through the delicate portal.
- Jul 8 Very strange dream last night in which I was examining my feces through a magnifying lens somehow fitted into the side of the *sphincter ani externus*, which scrutiny involved a combined 180-degree twist of the torso and dorsal collapse of the spine, both of which I accomplished without any strain whatsoever, though why the dream had me twist around so and not simply bring my head down ventrally between my legs remains a mystery (cf. childhood dreams of self-fellatio). Stranger still the agglomeration of objects in the stool as it passed by the lens: finger cymbals, escapements and tiny gears, radiolarians, damselfly wings, calliope bolts, all trapped in a smooth and accommodating matrix (an unconscious inclination toward pica, perhaps). Then was somehow sitting upright looking into an optometric console as if to be fitted for glasses, except that I was examining my own stool rather than reading off rows of letters. Whenever I moved my face away from the scope I found I was still lying on the ground contorted as before. An anonymous attendant slid the lenses in and out and asked me what I saw. This person was taking detailed notes and at the same time, or so I intuited, determining the composition of my stool. What appeared at first as the cementing matrix, upon greater magnification, proved to be itself composed of yet more objects. With each increment of mag-

nification, the ratio of matrix to trapped objects decreased until I arrived at what the attendant described as “the shit of the shit,” the elements of which fitted together like the tiles in an Escher drawing.

- Jul 9 *Evidence suggests that primitive refrigerators walked upright across the plains of New Jersey millions of weeks ago, presumably more adaptable members of the genus ice box, but the fossil record remains murky. Buried in a dark earth equidistant between points and condenser, prodigious coprolites tell us of these roving brutes of the Canarsie period, titans searching for the marrow of men, but when they found it, they called it Pop-Tart.*
- Jul 10 Divinities of our psychical moons stir typhonic forces at the center of the aliment, confirmable by this disgusting and voluminous slurry. *Came then the Rhubarb Monsoons.*
- Jul 12 In primitive/industrial terms, the defecating animal’s anus pictured as an opposed-blade damper, through which the flow of excreta is regulated by means of two ranks of Teflon-coated louvers which, actuated along a common linkage, are arranged such that adjacent blades rotate in contrary directions.
- Jul 14 I see a nebular region in the upper-left quadrant, and in the upper right a shag of pope’s knuckles cornered in a bay sprig. The rest says nothing to me.
- Jul 15 (Compression sutures.)
- Jul 16 Jehovah as the eternal two-year-old at play with his feces when by accident, after untold aeons, he happens to fashion a man out of it (think monkeys in a room with type-writers). Being of like substance with its father, the excremental mandrake has no need of a life-giving blast of air and, auto-animated, runs from its maker. God, ever in chase of his gingerbread boy!
- Jul 19 Titanic effort this morning to pass what felt like a pier of solid granite extending the length of my descending colon, the

force of which nearly blew my eyeballs out of their orbits. A jube of translucent blooms in my vision just after reminded me that perception is a mediated affair.

Jul 20 The Bristol Stool Scale! Abomination of vagueness! A physiognomy of the smiley face captures subtler degrees of nuance.

Jul 24 Shat what looked like the whole of the Carnac Stones this morning, which prolificacy inspired in my mind the fantasy of a tribal mascot who is fed and defecates for years on end and rises with the growing altitude of his self-produced dung heap.

Aug 2 (Cacation.)

Aug 4 Unruly gobbets massed around an irregularly flanged diagonal.

Aug 6 Decanted just now, *molto largo*, a dark and vile grume. My bowel's a viaduct of shame.

Aug 9 Loud, silly voidance about a quarter of an hour ago, all blousy at the bottom, then tapering off, with enlarged headstock, marbled like an Eisenhower-era jaspé linoleum.

Aug 10 The face of the sleeper is the emblem of innocence, but there is another face, which discloses, between its Aeolus cheeks, the all-appropriating event, different from birth, running through it, through all things. *A thiol plume steers the universe.*

Aug 11 Careful footsteps away from a wilderness latrine: petals on this wet black Earth.

Aug 13 My bastard accomplishment, these mute lobes of filth, building their puppet theater for hours inside me.

Aug 16 (Mud room.)

- Aug 27 Possible worlds of the philosophers are devoid of excrement because their architects are tissues of refusals.
- Aug 28 Happened absently to be opening and closing the vanity cupboard door when I noticed that the friction catch (consisting of spring clip + striking loop) and the human rectum/sphincter assembly were more or less homologous (that is, spring clip = rectum, striking loop = stool), but only in gross structure, insofar as while a distension in the walls of the rectum triggers, via stress receptors, the defecation reflex, which relaxes the internal and external sphincters and allows a release of rectal cargo, the two elements of the friction catch are parted by an external force. Expulsion from within vs. extraction from without.
- Sep 2 By a serendipitous arrangement of “components,” something like the profile of Teddy Roosevelt. I am the heir of Arcimboldo, though I work with a more limited palette.
- Sep 3 Carefully laid two pieces of toilet paper torn into triangles on either side of a miniature sea wall of delicate globes and bars: coupling system between the wings of an experimental butterfly.
- Sep 4 Disburdened myself of something halfway between a sea anemone and bizarrely crenellated castle turret or Donjon keep. Small cloaklets of bubbles obscured a clear view of its base.
- Sep 5 Quick dissipative envelopes of smoke — a geisha’s footfalls away from the imperial commode.
- Sep 6 (Dung an sich.)
- Sep 7 Like a Jules Verne character, tunneling through mantles of excrement in a blood-cooled vehicle toward the diamond core beyond aversion.
- Sep 8 Read an article yesterday in the *Times* about ongoing efforts on the West Coast to make sewer water potable. Draining

off the little bit of drinkable water from our excrement like bums squeezing alcohol from a handful of Sterno. The Big Bang of civilization retreats back into its anus. Call me the Spengler of dooky.

Sep 9 Time as an invisible worm: its peristalsis is the days, and months and years; its feces physical manifestations. But on what does it feed?

Sep 10 Life shits corpses.

Sep 11 Odd, sea-kale-like heaps this morning. I think of piles of cold dark pajamas in the corner of a recently deceased child's bedroom. I'm a sad old spado, I am.

Oct 7 Nasty gorgon of stool discarded just now. Resembled a blasted tree stump torn from a cliff's edge.

Oct 11 At nadir and zenith, innocuous spherules, each with a single, sine wave-shaped compression suture, which gives them the appearance of spherical and decrepit yin-yang symbols. In the middle, one fluke of a Danforth anchor resting on the head of a coach bolt with a bit of the shaft remaining. The whole center assembly nosed by small imperfect commas.

Oct 12 Two bollard-shaped masses this morning — rather bollards toppled onto their sides, or winches so toppled. The latent longshoreman in me wanted to belay a length of carpet thread around them.

Oct 15 Children are insensitive to mortality and immortality and thus are closer to immortality, and correlatively, unashamed of their feces. The adolescent, with his taste for heroic krinkle-kut spirituality, fastens, courtesy of a 24-hour hormone parade, to the idea that he will live forever — the debased immortality — but he requires constant ratification in the form of social acceptance, which carries with it the mandate to maintain a strict regimen of hygiene. No one knows what a hygiene detached from ideology would look like, a



hygiene practiced solely for the purposes of minimizing disease. The heroic depends on the hygienic. Filth is “not mine.” The *Satthipatana Sutta* prescribes long concentrated meditation on charnel grounds and corpses and the noxious vapors circulating just inches away from the *mudra*. Shit interrupts the dissociative dream, even if the interruption is itself only another layer of dream. Shit may be the closest equivalent to the *nunc stans*.

- Oct 16 I see nothing, nothing more than filth.
- Oct 17 I see filth.
- Oct 18 Again, filth.
- Oct 20 Okay, a lambda (lower case), the pediment of a bungalow (a stretch), and a short-barreled blow dryer.
- Oct 23 By middle age saxophones and oral sex cease to be the ticket to rebellion they once were, as the demands of vocation and diminishing health put a Jello-mold over all the old remembered liberties, which jiggle still but are no longer capable of real transport, and one’s free time is all that can, but only temporarily, banish the anxiety of shriveling horizons, while small docile explosions in the bowel rearrange to no effect scattered bits of an abiding will to accommodate.
- Oct 25 Antefixes, stopcocks, euphoniums.
- Oct 26 Desublimation: “Excrement has pitched its mansion in the place of love.”
- Oct 27 Swollen rolls of cinnamon bark this morning, as of a raft disassembled by cruel seas.
- Nov 5 “What can we know of the world?” asks Perec. “What quantity of space can our eyes hope to take in between our birth and our death? How many square centimeters of Planet Earth will the soles of our shoes have touched?” No one would deny these are rhetorical questions, but how

many will adjust their ambitions accordingly, how many acknowledge the futility of world travel? I reiterate what the true ascetic realizes: If you want to know the world, circumnavigate your own ejecta.

Nov 6 "It is said that the ordure of the Grand Lama of Thibet was at one time so venerated that it was collected and worn as amulets." Gould and Pyle, *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine*.

Nov 4 Grim dalliance of undedicated cleat shapes punctuated and wreathed in bubbles.

Nov 5 Two eels commencing to twine in the act of love (have no idea how eels breed). Their still passion breaks them at the twist point.

Nov 8 Mottled and woundy this morning, like the fur of a vanquished hyena.

Nov 9 As if a murex's egg mass had usurped the central whorls of a rose — the weight of it against a chance disposition of toilet paper forms the outer petals.

Nov 15 In the fascistic order of hygiene, the stool and its associated sensations play the conceptual Jew.

Nov 18 Loamy Capernaum of a discharge just now. Stray unopened tampons and replacement razor handles in the depths of the vanity drawer reminded me of ancient felled trees at the bottom of a river.

Nov 21 Delicate, flame-shaped, numerous: sculpted hyphens between what I've been and what I am.

Nov 22 The anus as articulator, and excrement the speech of physical aliment.

Nov 25 Fuselage of Paleolithic jetliner.

- Nov 27 Before the *Knowledge System* can finish asking, "Where is the washroom?" its user's manual has already opened itself to a page into which a bottomless hole has been cut. Whole epochs fall into it, never to be seen again.
- Nov 30 "No," she rebutted emphatically at dinner last night, "the exiting stool does not approximate a second penis." We finished in silence her delicious baba ganoush.
- Dec 1 The head of a wood louse, magnified a thousand times.
- Dec 3 Abyssal stones.
- Dec 4 Such loneliness this morning as I don't think I've ever experienced before, shitting out my substance as if in preparation for an embalming. Do the tiny insignificant agonies of my metabolism contribute to the texture or granularity of some supra-individual experience? Please? Or are they nothing more than brief flarings out from an oceanic and sovereign oblivion? Sieving shit by the seashore, then gone.
- Dec 5 Kitchen sink-style defenestration through the judas window this morning. Such a bleak assortment of loose slab and palings and rookeries of meaningless shapes. I'm just a lonely unpaid stenographer for my refuse.
- Dec 6 Why do I insist on trying to equate defecation with a speech act when I know full well there's no equation to be made? Is it just empty self-provocation? No, go deeper. There must be at work in this displacement the prohibition to take it in hand - my shit, I mean. Against the absence of manipulation (in the literal sense of word) I leverage a hackneyed deferral of signs.
- Dec 7 Proscription as ground of consciousness. *I am not this* pre-dates *I am*. Shit the primordial "not this."
- Dec 12 Cromlechs and temples too are a perishable architecture.
- Dec 13 "My blazonry is modest, for I have nothing to gain nor

fear.”

Dec 15 Soft diffident lumber.

Dec 18 Attempted once again last night at dinner to broach my speculations re: the “adjacency” of speaking and shitting. She dropped her fork and stormed off onto the patio. Watched her for the longest time, standing there facing the backyard with her arms crossed. The small panes of the French doors segmented her form in such a way that, for a split second, thought I recognized in one part of her head and right shoulder, segregated by the grid of panes from the rest of her body, the shape of some recent stool.

**NOTE:**

In 2008, the author was compelled, for reasons articulated to him by his gastroenterologist, to conduct the foregoing daily examinations for the duration of a year. When asked why it was necessary that the investigations be so protracted, the physician in question replied, somewhat cryptically, “All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full.” By this the author took him to mean that other than mere physical benefits would accrue from a thorough notation of the work of his bowel.

## TRIBES

---

*Ronny Someck*  
*Trans. Karen Alkalay-Gut*

When I dressed up as a cowboy I smelled gunpowder in the tribe  
of the trigger,  
And when I taught a hungry child to steal bread I kneaded dough  
in the tribe of justice.  
When I crumbled a crumb from that bread for a sidewalk bird I  
belonged to the tribe of nature,  
and when the bird sang in the cage I felt myself a part of the tribe  
of crime.  
When I stammered I belonged to the tribe of the slowly silent,  
and when I bounced basketballs I joined the tribe that scored with  
one hand.

When I was invisible in the tribe of the blind,  
I met Jorge Luis Borges in "The Garden of Forking Paths,"  
and when I read there, on page 9, that "the tiger wants to be  
a tiger," I sought shelter in the next page.  
The tribe of nomads introduced me to Cain,  
and the tribe of the irrational to Albert Einstein.  
Because of a broken nose Muhammad Ali is a distant cousin,  
because of black eyelashes I've earned a branch on the tree of  
crows.  
Because of Baghdad I belong to the tribe born in the city of  
a thousand and one nights,  
And because of one night in October '73 sometimes  
I hang onto the tribe of the hyphen between the word *shell*  
and the word *shock*.

After eighteen years the saxophones of the Lord  
raised up pails of joy from the bottoms of their throats  
and then, in one moment, I had  
A daughter.

## IN RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION: WHEN DID YOU FIRST FEEL THE POWER OF POETRY?

---

*Ronny Someck*  
*Trans. Karen Alkalay-Gut*

After all the whispers despaired of eliciting from her  
the word, "Yes,"  
I recited the "Lament for  
Ignacio Sanchez Mejias."  
She held my neck with the same hand that wiped a tear,  
and leaned her head as close as she could.  
Oh Lorca, I said to myself, I know it isn't right, but without the  
lime of words you spilled  
on the matador's bloodstains,  
I would not be holding  
this girl whose army uniform  
was more wrinkled than the cliffs of the Zin River  
at five in the afternoon.

We called those cliffs the flamenco footprints of the desert.  
The last horns of daylight burst from the head of the yellow bull,  
and we were just  
another row of regulars in the moment opposing the darkness.

## NAILS

---

*Ronny Someck*  
*Trans. Karen Alkalay-Gut*

*In memory of Yizhak Zohar*

To save his life in that war,

He sewed for the SS officers —  
the very boots that kicked him.

“Look,” he once showed me his hands,  
and I thought he wanted me to admire  
the tough skin of a craftsman.

“Look,” he almost wept, “with these fingers  
I would have strangled them, but every boot I made  
saved me a brother. “

He never stopped hammering,  
and if they'd given him a chair at the Academy of Language,  
the nails would have had names like  
Hitler, Eichmann, or Mengele.

His pleasure would grow as he smashed their heads  
and bent down their backs  
until their complete surrender  
into the darkness of soles.

Oh Revenge, if only because of this story  
it's possible sometimes to fall in love with you.

## THIS

---

*Ronny Someck*  
*Trans. Karen Alkalay-Gut*

This whose brain is the Commander of the body  
This whose body conceals desire in the cave of genitals  
This whose genitals moisten the lips of the hostages  
This whose hostage is the broken tooth in the mouth shouting  
    commands  
This whose command knows no borders  
This whose border is stretched like a sock  
This whose sock is silent  
This whose silence unravels threads  
from the gnarl of words  
This in whose brains words are stuck like a fence  
And after which nothing is left to say.



## FOUR POETS IN THE TIME-MANAGEMENT WORKSHOP

---

*Ronny Someck*

*Trans. Karen Alkalay-Gut*

Someone voiced regret that her laundry  
didn't have suicidal thoughts.

"So much time would be saved  
if it would just hang itself."

The second stored coal

In the mines of her eyes.

The third thought we should wrap  
the hands of the clock in leopard skin  
and wait each minute for the roar.

The fourth said, "I'm the poet of tomorrow."

They answered, "Let's talk about that the day after."

## THE POEMS OF RIMA

---

*Ronny Someck*  
*Trans. Karen Alkalay-Gut*

Listen Ronny, if the men knew how to whistle  
Like in my mother's stories,  
You'd be calling me "Rima Orchestra."  
Trust me, I'd just warmed up from their breath on my nape,  
And after their heads turned toward me  
I provided income for many orthopedists  
Who'd have to loosen up the spasms in their necks.  
At night I sleep on a slant, alone,  
And my sardine brain is infused with skull oil.  
Yes, I too don't know exactly what I'm saying,  
But where are the men who know how to stab the knife of words  
And then say that if I were Jewish I'd already have been deflowered?  
My dyed blond is the fantasy of Sammy the stylist.  
I swear I didn't make up his name. That's the way he was born.  
We went to school together at St. Joseph's  
In Nazareth, and during the breaks  
He'd sneak in to give me a faux ponytail.  
His father says that with hands like his he could be an engineer  
Or at least a window blind contractor and share the truck with his  
cousin  
But Sami is hooked on his scissors, and from our hair he's already  
built  
Three floors in the middle of our village.  
"What curls you have," he tells me,  
"Like the girls on the shiny pages of the tabloids."  
Just for that I'd marry him, but  
My father says that all the girls in the village hear the same thing,  
And I didn't do five units in English and five units in math  
To burn them up on someone who barely has an IQ of shampoo.  
I wrote my first poems in the antique café in Haifa.  
I sat in the chair they told me once belonged to Mahmoud Darwish.  
Without words I hid tears that pressed against my eyes.  
Poets are the world champions in weeping. That's a dumb sentence,  
I know,  
But my high school teacher said it so many times

I can't get it out of my mind.  
The best poem in the world  
Natasha, the wife of Ahmed the dentist, showed me.  
He brought her from his studies at the university of Moscow.  
"The seagull," she translated, "is the bikini of God."  
Some Russian wrote it. His name is Andrew Wossinsky.  
I hope I didn't mix up his name,  
But that's how I want to do it too:  
First to fly,  
Then be the first poet who knows how to swim in clouds,  
And then like that Russian, after one line  
To fall in love with silence.

## ROTTERDAM. POEM OF A PORT AND AN APOLOGY

---

*Ronny Someck*

*Trans. Karen Alkalay-Gut*

The masts of the crane like the legs of a woman  
Are creamed with grease applied by  
Men before the launch.  
In one of the raised lifts  
In the light of sunset I hide  
A letter of apology about the analogy?  
In the first line. But  
What can be done when in this port  
Even the boats look  
Like a bikini stripped off  
The waist of the pier.

## I AM MANY DON QUIXOTES

---

*Ronny Someck*  
*Trans. Karen Alkalay-Gut*

I am a lot of Don Quixotes.

Don Quixote who with one eye sees how Don Quixote  
draws with the tip of his fingers a woman's head

on the **a** wall built by Don Quixote from his imagination.

The imagination fantasizes about a horse and receives a donkey.

The donkey imagines the Messiah and gets brushed by the wings  
of the windmills.

The wind brushes the roofs of houses,

is sheared by the drawing out of a word

And slams the window shutters where Dulcinea gazes.

Don Quixote who in his blood steers her

to the Don Quixote of the lips.

There she takes off her dress and dissolves

like a kiss.

## UNCLE SALIM

---

*Ronny Someck*  
*Trans. Karen Alkalay-Gut*

In the days when there was respect for train tickets  
And they were printed on no less than green cardboard,  
Uncle Salim would produce from his jacket  
A little stack he'd gathered at the Haifa Station  
And helped us to imagine a steering wheel as wide  
as the width between our hands.  
We closed one eye, held the hole in the ticket close  
For a second, and saw through it  
A red tie sharp as a sword, that he wore  
To diminish the shame of the rail workers' khaki.  
Then he would breathe in the memory  
Of the locomotive of another country,  
And the cars full of stories from the Tigris and Euphrates,  
They would breathe air cleaner than the moth ball atmosphere,  
That clung to the suitcases of memory of the new immigrants

"The train to Eden," he heard  
Before he died,  
"Leaves in three minutes,"  
Just in time to load the cars  
With the 99 years of his life,  
The top hat he loved to move from side to side  
And the leftover applause  
He always saved for the voice of Abdel Al-Wahab.

### NOTE:

Mohammed Abdel Wahab (March 13, 1902 – May 4, 1991), Arab Egyptian singer and composer.

## MY MELANCHOLIA, MY MONOGAMY

---

Natania Rosenfeld

In Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet*, the reclusive narrator ruminates on brief infatuations:

*Two or three days like the beginning of love . . .*

*The value of this for the aesthete is in the feelings it produces. To go further would be to enter the realm of jealousy, suffering and anxiety. In this antechamber of emotion there's all the sweetness of love — hints of pleasure, whiffs of passion — without any of its depth.*

This is how I prefer to commit adultery: staying in the antechamber, and exiting after a short time.

The other night, I ran into my friend's husband out on a date with his boyfriend. As my friend and her husband have an open marriage and I'm fond of both of them, I was not shocked. But I thought of her at home with the baby, putting him to bed, doing the wash, while hubby was out on the town, and I didn't like it. I've always hated being left behind, feeling second-best.

My own choice, at this juncture of my life, is to be monogamous. The choice of many, you might say, so what is there to write about? Happy families are all alike. But most people would admit that monogamy is not altogether natural. Monogamy makes one chafe. Chafing is not fun; it makes a person question her existence. Hence, nonmonogamy.

Just now I am feeling sad, and a bit anxious, because my Other Person has gone away for the evening, and it is dusk, and dusk is a bad time for me. Dusk is the moment when everything suddenly changes and you could lose your soul. I am a melancholic, afraid of the dark and of being abandoned. At times like this, I could imagine committing an infidelity just for revenge on the Other Person for leaving me alone at dusk.

I know that we can't all have everything we want from one person. And most of us, by nature, want more than we have. And most of us begin to resent the One Person (OP, hereafter) when we feel the gnawing of this want. Therefore, it might be good to satisfy it elsewhere. Of course, most of us, and not just melancholics, find this messy. We're just not smart enough or cerebral enough or integrated enough to keep it clean. But some get messy nonetheless.

My friend Susan likes to cite D. W. Winnicott's concept of the

“good-enough mother.” She refers to things in life as being sufficient if they’re “good enough.” A good-enough marriage, good-enough sex, a good-enough job: all that should be good enough. In the past, it was precisely my melancholia that threatened to lead me astray: good enough always felt like failing, it felt like bad. Now that my melancholia is alleviated by medicine, and I know that I’m not a sucker to take life on its own, highly questionable, infuriatingly mediocre terms, good enough feels like — pretty good.

✕

The OP and I went to see the Rokeby Venus the other day in London’s National Gallery. That’s the Velazquez painting that was attacked in 1914 by a suffragette with a meat cleaver. Mary “Slasher” Richardson explained that her act had been prompted by the arrest, the day before, of Emmeline Pankhurst: “I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the Government for destroying Mrs Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history,” she said. In a 1952 interview, she said that she “didn’t like the way men visitors gaped at it all day long.”

One might remark that everything about the Rokeby Venus invites gaping, in particular the fact that she is gaping at herself in a mirror. Then there is her back, second only perhaps to that of Ingres’s famous odalisque in the Louvre. Actually, I think I prefer this one, although I’ve never seen the Ingres in the flesh. It’s not as long a road to travel (the Ingres has an extra vertebra). A brief expanse of taut, pinkish flesh, then a sharp curve, and you’ve reached the luscious behind. Yummy!

So the OP and I have our little infidelities together. We caress painted goddesses with our eyes. Sometimes we even fantasize that we invite a real woman to bed with us. My unshared fantasies involve me and two men, but the OP is less partial to that, which is why they remain unshared. We have an ongoing idea that one day we’ll go to a strip club, but unless it’s “woman-friendly” (whatever that means) and the dancers are truly beautiful, I’m afraid it will disappoint.

I have crushes regularly, on men and women. I’m not lying when I say the crushes satisfy me. They allow me to surrender without actually losing control. Like Pessoa’s narrator, I can shut down the image of my crushee whenever I want to. Sometimes I terminate a



crush from one day to the next. Or it terminates for me. Or I get so close to the object of my crush, male or female, that it transmutes into undying friendship. My faithful tendency serves me in both directions: I couldn't possibly betray the OP, and I couldn't possibly betray the friendship by trying to consummate the crush.

There was someone just the other day, but my crush ended because I found her impenetrable; her beauty was too masculine, too self-contained. Her eyes don't light up when she sees me, although I know she likes me. Then there was a man whose balding pattern is just too weird. His head looks a bit like a soccer ball. And I came to love him, as a friend. Since only one love, of the major, flesh-of-my-flesh kind, is allowed by my psyche, all other loves must be off bounds.

Oh yes, reader, I know: it would be a joke on me if all this went kerpow one day and I fell for someone in the complete, sexual way. Isn't it nice to think that my gray hairs mean I learned better long ago? But in case anyone wants to try me, you should know that the O.P. reads my journal — not all pages, it's true, but most of them — and knows my email password. I've arranged things that way. It's called fencing myself in, and I like it fine. Not all enclosures are prisons.

When I was a child — now we get into personal neurotic history — I never told my parents a lie. I was congenitally incapable of lying to them. It went without saying that they should know everything I did and didn't do. If I didn't eat my bologna sandwich, lovingly packed for my school lunch by one or the other parent, but threw it in the bushes on the way home, I confessed. That story about George Washington and the cherry tree: that was about me. It didn't even strike me as a remarkable story. Lying is a disavowal of allegiance, and wrong for that reason. No god but one god, and don't even try to hide.

"Do you love me?" I used to ask my parents regularly. *Lord*, I think now, *if I needed to be reassured of this, how could I ever go astray?* I had to expend all my energy making sure they still wanted me at home. It's the same now. I don't feel I can take my security for granted. In the night, in my dreams, there are terrible fights. My parents are disavowing me, the O.P. is disavowing me, he hates me, he doesn't care if he never sees me again. In the morning, I say, "Do you love me?" At night, I whine, "Do you love me?" The answer doesn't keep me from having the bad dreams.

This evening, I made the OP penne with squid ink for dinner. *Is this squid ink?* he asked, unbelieving (you can find these things in London, not on the prairie, where I normally live), and I decided I'll never make penne with squid ink for anyone else but him. It came from a jar, but that's beside the point. That's what one likes about the O.P., about marriage and all its grunting taken-for-granted: you can feed him from a jar and if it's good enough, it's good enough. Especially if it's something as good as squid ink.

Sometimes I cause myself agony by imagining his sudden, early death. I lie in bed at night fearing it just as I used to lie in bed fearing my parents' deaths when I was a child (an only child). Everything good and bad happens in bed. We have a nude over ours, a photograph of a woman's back by Irving Penn. She's our icon, our protector. I lie beneath her ruminating about the fact that I like the French word for back, *dos*, because it's both hard and soft, as backs are. It begins with a forbidding sound and ends in openness. When someone turns their back on you, you feel abandoned, rejected; when someone's back is facing you, you can also feel that person's vulnerability, availability. The *dos* (which also sounds like *do-do*, the French child slang for sleeping) is like the mother: you can't have her; yes you can. She's going away — no, she's staying.

I wrote about longing once: that longing is the intense desire to force a thing you've had briefly, or had a mere taste of, to stay. All is fleeting, and the needy soul rebels against this. "Don't turn your back on me; come back!" There is, however, repetition — something comes back again and again. That is exactly what can bore people about marriage, and lead them to seek pleasure on the side. But doesn't everything, even adultery, become repetitive? Within my enclosure, I find that, however unchanging the territory, repetition leads to growth. The OP and I do the same things, make the same gestures, adopt the same postures, and have the same conversations, year in year out, but the plantation becomes gradually more lush. If it is possible for the quotidian to get richer over time, instead of thinner and more stultifying, somehow, through husbandry, mine does.

I married the OP because I felt sure he would never bore me. If he does, it's my problem. At the same time, he's dependable. He wakes me in the morning with my tea. What a miracle that alone is! I'd give a hundred hotel-room adventures for years of tea in bed, every morning: tea with milk.

Monogamy is a milk cow with a bit of something dark and pungent thrown in.

Monogamy is the melancholic's refuge. Sometimes I just must collapse and drink from the teat. What right would I have to drink if I were playing around elsewhere? (Not everyone thinks of their partner as a mother, I suppose, but I apparently do. Until the OP took over, my mother was my best friend.)

Also, the melancholic — I hypothesize — needs to keep things ranked, categorized, separated, precisely because of her tendency toward boundary-loss. Sometimes, just for the pleasure (and the reassurance) of it, in bed at night of course, I make lists of my friends, in sections: top rank; top of second rank, bottom of second rank; top and bottom of third rank; fourth rank. There's also a category of floaters, people I care about but see only every few years and seldom write or talk to in between. Sometimes I demote or promote people from one category to the other, and sometimes I make additions. There are no subtractions lately, although there would have been if I'd begun this list in my early to middle adulthood instead of on the brink of middle age. The list being so complex, I've had to write it down on paper like a mathematical problem. Its sheer bloat- edness makes me feel my life has become something of a success.

And I try to keep my friends happy, because I don't want to be alone at the end of the day. Already, not having children, there is some danger of being abandoned in my old age, especially if the OP dies before me. This, too, I contemplate at night, staring at the black ceiling. This is why I must keep friends — and not have affairs with them. Affairs mean more losses. Ex-lovers won't come see me when I'm hobbling with my walker.

The psychiatrist and writer Peter Kramer, one of my secular saints, says, in *Against Depression*, that people who care more for others — firstly, women in general, who are already twice as likely to suffer depression than men are and then, women who are particularly prone to attachment — can become depressed when anyone in their wider circle, let alone amongst their immediate relatives, suffers adversity. This, to me, is all the more reason to keep that wider circle as wide as I can. That way, I have the security of many friends without the terror of being overwhelmed if something goes wrong with one of them. I suppose this is analogous to parents' feeling that having only one child leaves them in danger of absolute loss. In countries like Israel, where every kid has to go into the

army, only children seem to be particularly unusual.

My parents were worriers, and not just in the style of all Jewish parents, but with the additional element — I can only surmise this—of a fear that I'd turn out too unlike them to be a true companion. My adolescence was, I think, a greater shock to them than it is to most parents, because I suddenly was showing signs of ordinariness. My wanting to conform, to mimic the speech patterns of other teenagers as well as their tastes in dress and music, struck them as a betrayal of the refined culture of our threesome.

To have one's melancholia corrected by pills and talk therapy is illuminating. Having suffered briefly once or twice from full-scale depression, I know how lucky I am. Most days, I have the capacity for self-analysis; most days, I am resilient and fairly even-tempered. But the equilibrium is buttressed, and not just by the medication and the talking cure. It's buttressed by the sofa and the cup of tea, by what one therapist once called, after Freud, "regression in the service of the ego"—evenings of reading mysteries under the blanket, or just mornings in bed with breakfast and the paper — and by the safe breast of the OP. If there were anything I could not tell that breast, my face buried in its tickly, abundant hair, my existential security would be wobbly.

Lately, I've had the dream of rejection especially often. In it, people turn their backs on me both literally and figuratively. I surmise that I need to spend more time getting used to the idea of people's backs. Perhaps being an only child made me ill-conditioned not to require complete attention. I think, although this might be a late construction, I felt lucky to be there at all. Only in adult life did I find out my mother's pregnancy with me had been an accident; there was an abortion before, and one after. Though I didn't know it as a child, perhaps I sensed that I had barely squeaked through to existence.

Yesterday I saw a picture of a town in Kansas after a devastating tornado. All the houses had been laid waste. That is my terror; I must keep my house, and those around me, standing.

It's getting dark. Where is the OP? I twist on the bed and look up at our nude. The back both offers and withholds, hints of what's ahead without ever revealing it. He said he'd return soon. He'll return soon.

## PESSOA IN LISBOA

---

Sharon Dolin

*Countless lives inhabit us  
I don't know, when I think or feel,  
Who it is that thinks or feels.  
I am merely the place  
Where things are thought or felt.  
Ricard Reis (Fernando Pessoa)  
13 Nov. 1935*

Pessoa means *person* in Portuguese. The most generic of names for this most elusive and shape-shifting of poets.

✧

Lisboa is the best place to land on my birthday. For what are birthdays, but a way of emphatically saying *I am here*. But who is that *I*. And where is *here*?

✧

To celebrate one's birth? I'd rather celebrate the death of all the unhappiness that preceded this day.

✧

When Pessoa writes of the "ennui of the brave" in his *Book of Disquietude*, he has eluded it by casting those thoughts onto Bernardo Soares (whom he deems a semi-heteronym) who is, and is not, Pessoa.

✧

I don't *write* as in *compose*. I pull invisible threads from the air and conjure them into legibility with this pen.

✧

Impossible to be in Lisbon without a brooding sense of being inside and outside oneself.

✧

To know the self by becoming an other. As Rimbaud said, *Je est un autre*.

✧

Perhaps poets are the true ventriloquists of language — throwing our voice to revive/enliven the dummy of words.

✧

Café Brasileira in Chiado: in the center of everything. Why would Pessoa ever need to travel again?

✧

*Lisboa*: from the Phoenician *Allis Ubbo*, “safe harbor,” from the Latin *Ulyssippo*, after “Ulysses.” Ulysses Tower overlooking the Tejo (Tagus River).

✧

What does it mean to say Ulysses founded Lisbon? Ulysses: husband, lover, trickster, thief, conqueror, conquered, mercurial — even down to the leg scar that unmasks him. Lisboa: city of masks, city of the poet who would be nothing but masks.

✧

The imaginary is always sweeter than the real: as the beloved’s untasted body tastes sweeter than this almond tart.

✧

Is it possible to taste still unsavored kisses? His almond lips on my neck. His tendriled arm on my waist.

✧

What is the taste of future kisses? Quince and autumn winds.

✧

What is the taste of withheld kisses? Olives and the smoke of burning cork trees.

✧

Here I am in the Port of the Gauls, scaling a hill in a 90-year-old tram to gaze from a castle’s ramparts. Here I am on the threshold of

love. All anticipation. No mournful fado. All songs as yet unsung.

✧

"I am the space between what I am and what I am not, between what I dream and what life makes of me . . . clouds . . ." — Pessoa, *Book of Disquietude*

✧

At the Oceanarium (40° C outside), I was the space between the octopus and the glass, between the sea dragon and the aquatic plants it resembles. I sweated into nonbeing.

✧

"Clouds: indescribable rags of the tedium I impose upon them."  
— Pessoa

✧

On Praça do Comércio, no clouds. Only the Tejo and an unrelenting sun to rival my temper.

✧

Not tedium. Ennui or lazy-headedness that comes from air thick as argument.

✧

When so many embraces have been delayed, the languorous minutes fill with the unbidden.

✧

Fear: Within the mourning of virtuosic joy. As Shlomo Carlebach, the ecstatic Hassid, once said to me, "Be happy even in your grief." What all poetry strives for: to create something shapely out of our tears and rage.

✧

At Sintra the yellow domed palace recalls the absent Moors who recall the absent Jews.

✧

Climbing into the heat. My stuporous brain, my restive heart.

✧

The ache of desire is the aching desire to be desired.

✘

As we roll down the path in the road of cork trees and cedars, always the play of his lips down my neck.

✘

Why have I spent much of my life thirsty for kisses, having to soothe myself sipping words through a straw?

✘

*If* means you are allowed to dream.

✘

Is it possible to miss what I've yet to discover?

✘

Field of sunflowers. And here I am offering up my corona to you.

✘

In Silves, russet hilltop castle to remind us of the way the past hovers over the present.

✘

The taxi driver complained of too many "Negros" on the beach of Cascais and Estoril coming from Capo de Verde in Africa. And I: *Well, isn't it because of Portugal's history in colonizing those places?* And he, laughing: *Yes. You're right.*

✘

The bitter Dutchman on line for a coffee in the bus station. Of Amsterdam: "Criminals. All criminals in that city." As though fleeing to the wilderness of Portugal he could escape his bitter misanthropy.

✘

My fear: that the man who guards his heart too perfectly has forgotten how to leave a small passageway for love. As the owner of even a mansion must create a door flap for the cat to pass through with



the gentlest of paws.

✧

Think of your heart as a hand. If you clench it too tightly, how can you hope to receive the gift you seek from another or to offer a caress in return?

✧

Or the heart as an eye. Close it to prevent sun glare but then you are unable to see the smile that could warm you.

✧

On the other hand, the risk of a too-open hand is that you won't be careful enough about what drops into it: spiny sea urchin, desiccated bone, pitcher plant heart that opens to consume you.

✧

What is more satisfying than to see the smirk on my son's eleven-year-old face when I've managed, against his will, to introduce him to a Portuguese boy on the beach with whom he is now playing paddle ball.

✧

When I read the word *suicide* in Pessoa: *a tiredness of life so terrible . . .* . [A]s a remedy to this situation, *suicide seems uncertain*, I feel a wave of pangs in my solar plexus remembering my young friend R., who, for eight months could do nothing except, in the end, plan and execute her own death. If only she had had a more extreme *tiredness of life* that would have made her incapable of taking those pills, of lighting those briquettes.

✧

Every time I think of R.'s disappearance I'm confounded once more by the uncanniness of death. Of her laugh gone from the world. Of her poems, none *still* to be penned. Each lyric now a tomb — pages pressing together a dead flower.

✧

The rocks rising out of the sea at Lagos are impervious to the boys climbing them, to the beautiful winds we hurl at them, unfurling as

the tides slowly chip away at them for centuries.

✘

When he said he liked my warmth, I am waiting, like the sea star underwater, for him to lift me up to find my soft mouth.

✘

Swimming above schools of fish: bliss.

✘

Why are we drawn most to what is hidden? To see an octopus. To lure a heart out of its cove.

✘

*What middle-aged man who's not sure how much gas he's got left in the tank wouldn't like your passion:* How did I know he was excluding himself?

✘

Once my heart begins to open like a sunflower lifting its petals to the light until, heavy with seeds of love, it bends its neck in fullness.

✘

Writing is a way to discover what I have to say. Kissing is a way to discover what I have to feel.

✘

Yet one more man who wants to postpone opening to me until he is certain, not realizing the impossibility of knowing in advance what the water will feel like by standing on the shore or sticking a toe in.

✘

Only by diving in can one know what it feels like to be wet. So it is not possible to taste my love's kisses by looking at his lips. Nor for him to know what it will feel like to swim in my sea.

✘

Even with the sea's tendrils all over me, his absent hands are the wavelets caress.

✘

Such endless joy contemplating these volcanic cliffs with their schists of sandstone. The unruly sea mountains jutting up that boys climb and dive from. Women have no need for diving. We carry the sea within us.

✧

The only course open: to become the hermit crab and let the elusive one find you.

✧

In Lagos, even the sound of the broom sweeping the early morning street sounds sensual.

✧

Fado cry of the glass bottle being tossed into a pail.

✧

So rare for a moment of quiet when I hear my cloud-driven mind and not my son calling me down from the sky with his plaintive *Mom*.

✧

The more he rebels, the more my son needs me to be the one against whom to flail.

✧

The power to wound contains the power to heal.

✧

Words can be blows to the heart. So can the absence of words.

✧

Why is it the ones who say they want so much to love cover their heart with impenetrable thorns around the rarest of roses? Why do I still believe I can avoid the thorns?

✧

And what of my flower? Why don't I know how to grow thorns? Why do I prefer to be the bee rubbing my body in the pollen of possibility.

✧

Small shells and stones I choose from the beach are translucent: onion shells, moonstones, because they know it is best to let the light pass through them, transmuted.

✧

Did he keep the black onion shell — a rarity — I gave him: the best, first (last) way I could give him a piece of darkened light?

✧

As the hermit crab must take the risk of no shell to find a bigger home, so must the heart expose itself to find the proper heart within which to dwell.

✧

I'm not interested in opacity — in objects or men who bounce back all the light.

✧

Nor in transparency where, unaffected by the light, they let it pass through them unobstructed and untransformed.

✧

To be changed by the light. Even damaged by it. The only way to truly live.

✧

Why do I seem to encounter/desire those men who want to know if they will like the book of me before they have turned a single page?

✧

*The past is everything I never managed to be* (Pessoa). My past is all the selves I've worn through like sand — ground-up shells and stones crushed by relentless tides.

✧

Shadows on the cliffs to make a denser light. Too soon, too soon I am leaving the sea burnished bright.

✧

Inscribed on the fountain wall outside the Roman wall of Lagos:

*Valeu a pena? Tudo vale a pena  
se a alma não é pequena.*

Pessoa, *Mensagem*

(Is it worth the trouble? Everything is worth it  
if the soul isn't too small.)

✘

Another mountaintop with three monumental fixed birds with three rotating wings in the wind.

✘

Nausea of existence can coexist with ecstatic bends in the road.

✘

In Lagos, we never went to see the former slave market (now a gallery). Out of guilt or empathy or indifference? Instead, we observe the African street vendors.

✘

On flirting: It is bad form to flirt with a man who's with a woman and senseless to flirt with one who's with a man. Which left one crazy blonde Dutchman in the bus station café line. And maybe the hotel owner in Lagos whose tan was as dark as *café com leite*, which in English sounds like "coffee combed light."

✘

At the tomb of Pessoa in the Jeronimos Monastery in Lisbon, there is a statue with inscriptions:

*Para ser grande, se inteiro: nada*

*Teu exagera ou exclui.*

*Sê todo em cada coisa. Põe quanto és*

*No mínimo que fazes.*

*Assim em cada lago a lua toda*

*Brilha, porque alta vive.*

(To be great, be complete: don't  
exaggerate or exclude anything.

Be each thing. Put yourself in  
the littlest thing you do.

So, in each lake the full moon  
shines because it rises so high.)

14.2.1933 Ricardo Reis

Fernando Pessoa

1888-1935

✧

*Nã: Não quero nada.  
Já disse que não quero nada.*

(No. I don't want anything.  
I've already said that I don't want  
anything.)

*Não me venham con conclusões!  
A única conclusão é morrer.*

I don't come to conclusions!  
The only conclusion is to die.)

1923 Álvaro de Campos

✧

*Não basta abrir a janela  
Para ver os campos e o rio.  
Não e o bastante não ser cego  
Para ver as árvores e as flores.*

(It's not enough to open the  
window  
to see the fields and river.  
Not enough not to be blind  
to the trees and flowers.)

20.14.1919 Alberto Caeiro

✧

Near the Belém Tower, in the gift shop, Fernando Pessoa as a cartoon  
keychain. A refrigerator magnet. A coffee mug with his black silhouetted  
heteronyms. An empty notebook.

✧

It's not true that I can't put aside my other urges for my son. It's that almost  
nothing pleases him: not the view from the tower, not the carved stone arti-  
chokes, nor the mosaics of Joseph's tale, nor the custard pastry of Belém.

✧

*I know not what tomorrow will bring.* — Pessoa's last words, which were written  
in English.

✧

The greatest gift a lover gives aside from himself: hope.

✧

The greatest theft by a false lover: hope.

✧

What does it matter if the entire time I'm in Portugal I write dreams to a man who will spurn me upon my return. The pleasure is all in the dreaming.

✧

Anticipation is sometimes more powerful than many actual experiences. My anticipatory travel anxiety vanishes like a cloud wisp as soon as I board the plane. Alas, that the anticipation of a tryst often surpasses the pleasure of the tryst. Which does not mean it is best not to act but only imagine. Only to remember: how potent are our fears as well as our imagined joys. So potent they have their own reality.

✧

Thus my dream of real kisses exceeding imagined ones. At the least: surprising me. Imaginary kisses to the second degree.

✧

When one false love briefly eclipses the beloved, the corona of the true beloved flames blindingly bright in your heart.

✧

Floating above fish in the ocean cove in Lagos — the only time I come close to floating instead of thrashing within desire.

✧

My son's anxiety: fear of stepping down on a sea urchin on a submerged rock in the ocean makes it hard for him to swim, more likely he'd step down on one.

✧

My anxiety — that I will never be found. That most of my life I've been submerged, with no diver slipping within my cove or retrieving me like a brain coral or a shell gone to mother-of-pearl from waiting.

✧

Of how many fears is this true: that the fear itself contributes to the likelihood of the feared event coming to pass?

✧

Fear of failure — as in musical performance or on the theatrical stage — can increase the likelihood of failure. Call it a negative homeopathy. The homeopathy of fear.

✧

Does fear of loneliness increase loneliness? Does fear of never being truly loved push away its possibility?

✧

The pageantry of the bullfight in Lisbon. The dancing horses, the pink capes. The brass band. The bleeding bull being tricked into leaving the ring with its as-yet ungored fellow bulls. The cowbells around their necks. The bloody spikes of death around his. Beauty and terror. In the end, can ritual trump cruelty? For the cheering spectators, it did. For me and my son who left after two bulls and the prone protesters outside besmeared in fake blood: No.

✧

We climbed the 500-year-old Tower of Belém when the Portuguese were a conquering power. Ate in the *pastellaria*, the custard *pastel de Belém*. Portugal now a conqueror of every sweet tooth. Each sea-lover.

✧

Riding on Tram 28 up to the ruins of Castle San George, a tram known for its pickpockets and its ninety-year-old rattle up the hill — the only thing taken from me: my heart's breath.

✧

At Casa Pessoa: all the shaving equipment of Pessoa's personal barber. As though viewing this reliquary of implements of what grazed Pessoa's face, we would at last be able to know the chameleon-poet in his unsheddable skin.

✧

We ate lunch at Pessoa's Café Martinho de Arcada under the porticoes of Praça de Comércio. The Tejo close enough to taste... or at least to float his orthonym upon.

✧



At Casa Pessoa: Ricardo Reis's doctor's desk with his personalized stationery and calling card. The calling cards of all of Pessoa's heteronymns. When one has a name, a biography, and an address, one is conjured into being.

✧

Did Pessoa become more diffuse because he spread his personalities around? What drove his heteronym Álvaro de Campos to insult the one girlfriend, Ophelia, Pessoa ever had? As though when she left him she left his alter-ego and not him. Love me, love my heteronym, my Jungian shadow.

✧

The record: One passionate kiss. Riding streetcars together. Perhaps Tram 28. As though intimacy were a journey through the beloved city — not each other's bodies.

✧

As though Lisboa were the true Ophelia of his affections.

✧

Did Pessoa choose Ophelia because of her namesake — so he could be a Portuguese Hamlet, his antic disposition heteronymic?

✧

How many of us in love role-play? How many times have I been mother, whore, sister, equestrienne, prostrate filly, ravenous, parched, indifferent, coy, empress, slave. And sometimes a mere wife or girlfriend.

✧

Some imaginary connection between Pessoa and Joseph Cornell. One created people inhabiting the rooms of his poems; the other created dioramic worlds inhabited by midnight birds and ballerinas.

✧

What do I create? Do I merely satisfy the reader's prurient interest in the hatreds and desires of another in shaped lines?

✧

A very pregnant woman getting her coffee in the rain. Nostalgia for the days when I was the one teeming with new life. When whatever lines I wrote were extensions of the umbilical line.

✧

At Café Brasileiro in Chiado, the other café Pessoa frequented, a bronze seated figure of the poet outside with a bronze chair beside him for tourists to fill. When empty, how many understand Pessoa is never alone — is most companioned by his own selves?

✧

Why are there some places (sun places) where my soul expands and shines away the anxious shadows. Why does that rarely happen in New York? Why is it when I'm dog-paddling in another tongue — a Romance one — that I feel most at home?

✧

Or does the self who speaks a pidgin Portuguese become an orthonym of the one who speaks New Yorkese.

✧

Who is the "I" who writes? *Uma Pessoa*. A person(a). Is there a core of self — or do the clothes — the outer garb of self — make the wo/man. Pessoa enacted the answer in his poetry, which sometimes spilled over into his life. As in calling cards for his chief heteronyms. A diary by his semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares. A diary even more fraught with existence because it dated and recorded thoughts about the quotidian.

✧

Some say Pessoa's split self derived from his formative years in Durban, South Africa, developing an English-speaking self before returning to Lisboa. Cervantes our greatest — first? — master of the slippery self.

✧

Or was it God?

✧

A fleeting sense of my tough Israeli self in Haifa when I was twenty-

one and knew the right inflection to the Hebrew, *Mah zeh?! (¿Qué pasa? What gives?)* to thwart a gang of young men who were hassling me and another young woman.

✧

The shrew-turned-piteous self I became at the end of my marriage: buried beneath dozens of poems.

✧

Shaz in Turkey dare-deviling through the semidesert on a quad bike. Being called a *hoon* by our Aussie guide.

✧

Sha-Sha belting out lead vocals on Rock Band in my purple leggings and leopard top.

✧

The flirty girl I become with each new date.

✧

The woman walking around with an open wound after each romantic land-mine.

✧

*If there ain't no ardor, why bother?*

✧

I am a creator of doors where others see walls, waiting for someone to create the handle with his desire.

**NOTE:**

Translated fragments of Pessoa's poems are my own.  
Translations from *The Book of Disquiet* are by Alfred Mac Adam (Boston: Exact Change, 1998).

## USE ICE IN A SENTENCE

---

*Katharine Coles*

1. On warm mornings the bay is choked with /                    /.
2. *Saturated            floating under heavy snowfall*
3. maybe the /                    / is already a poem.
4. A /                    / is like an
5. /                    / only smaller.
6. How many names for /                    / can you come up with?
7. Did /                    / exist before its name?
8. Men in fur, putting the /                    / into words.
9. Men with /                    /-bitten fingers,
10. with /                    / in their beards.
11. Beyond definition, *the wreckage of other forms.*
12. Beyond measurement, beyond *accumulation.*
13. I keep saying "gash" when I mean /                    /.
14. I am lying on the shelf *almost awash.*
15. I am lying down *with raised rims*, among
16. /                    / *formed from* /                    / *or the wreckage*
17. of /                    / . Sometimes I am and sometimes not *attached to a coast.*
18. In Italian, /                    / means *loose gravel or stone made*, perhaps

and perhaps not *formed on a quiet surface* or *under agitated conditions*.

19. You won't learn anything useful from me. Tongue-tied, I don't know how to see

20. except that /                    / *protrudes up to 6.5 feet above sea level*.

21. In English, here and now /                    / *can be categorized*.                    ]

※

- a. Floe
- b. Old
- c. Growler
- d. Slush
- e. Pancake
- f. Rind
- g. Floe-bit
- h. Frazil
- i. Brash
- j. Cake
- k. Floeberg
- l. Breccia
- m. Berg
- n. Grease
- o. Shelf
- p. Young
- q. Bergy Bits
- r. Tabular
- s. Shuga
- t. First-year

**NOTE:**

This poem begins with an erasure from *21 Kinds of Ice*.  
For Jennifer Bogo

## EMMANUEL'S SPRING

---

*Chris Haven*

Terrible Emmanuel plants. He has seen what can come of the earth and he digs. Rotting peels and tin cans first. Blue shirts and sweat. He considers his wing but refrains. This is a crop. Sequins and stone. A diamond. Fourteen tree stumps and he needs a bigger hole. A checkered rag and Jimmy Carter's teeth. Black beards. Anthracite coal and light sweet crude and a ticker machine. The hole goes deep. It is transformative. Knives and the buttons from every machine. A glass jar. Window screens. A dusting of his own dominion. It occurs to him the hole is incomplete and he wishes he could take the happiness he sees but that's outside his creation. It should always be buried, he thinks, because of what the darkness can do. The last in is black smoke. He fills the hole and regards the mound with disdain. His earlier optimism saddens him. He realizes that the child he was, the one who believed in the earth, is buried in that hole. He considers his hand. The shovel has bitten into his skin. It has left ragged marks like teeth around an apple. Terrible Emmanuel turns and sniffs the air. Spring will have to wait. There's more burying to do.

## TERRIBLE EMMANUEL DESTROYS THE EARTH BY FLOOD

---

*Chris Haven*

Because destroying the Earth by fire is too quick. Because ash is too fertile. Because floods take longer. Because he didn't like the way that guy looked at him. Because he's bored. Because he can. Because they deserve it. It's the only thing they deserve. This is not the first time. He's done it three dozen times. One time, he made a guy build a boat. But it was a pathetic boat and the guy died anyway. Maybe, this time, he'll keep a guy around, make him write about it. Or maybe not. What's the point? Because story is nothing. Because birds are nobler than fish. Because escape is nobler than endurance. Because destruction is greater than creation. Because in the end, dust wins. Sometimes he wonders why he made grief in the form of water. Sometimes he wonders if maybe he shouldn't try so hard. Because it's embarrassing. Because water should be the form of regret. Because everyone needs to start over.

## TERRIBLE EMMANUEL REGARDS THE SUN

---

*Chris Haven*

Terrible Emmanuel understands the sun. There is the outside and there is the core. Recurrence and redundancy. The arc of distance. The shape no other can visualize. Almost like flying. He remembers flight but does not miss it. He will find a wing or make another from the dust, if it comes to that. He will remember how it is done. This is not what worries him. It's core, shape of a ball joint. He touches his bone above the missing wing. Position the concern, the core and its condition, when it might shoulder its way through. The smallest pain in the body, arising like an echo. Warmth has its place. It strikes, a distant voice. Every creation a redundancy. A touch. A depression. Every recurrence a redundancy. Every core the same shape. Every creation a redundancy. Every shape. Every core.



## EMMANUEL AND THE LION

---

*Chris Haven*

Emmanuel found the lion. Few things brought Emmanuel joy, but the lion turned out all right. This lion was injured. He could not open his eyes. Emmanuel came near, felt heat on his chest and in his neck. Not fear but it helped him understand what others felt. Emmanuel felt it was still in him to heal but he wasn't sure of the approach. The lion smelled the wound from Emmanuel's missing wing on the air between them. The tongue of the lion searched his teeth, retreated with a snap. Emmanuel tried the sound with his own tongue. It was a small, thin sound. He drew near and put his hand on the lion's brow. The lion seemed to agree and tilted his head. There are five infinities. This may be one. Even the all in all is not alone at the table. Emmanuel removed his hand. The lion still blind, his eyes the lightest blue, a new color in Emmanuel's palm. Emmanuel tied a rope around the blind lion's neck. You will do something for me, Emmanuel said. The lion licked the wound on Emmanuel's back. The tongue scraped the tender flesh from the bottom up. The flesh was not lion. It was good to have turned his back. It was good to have a space inside of him, not Emmanuel but lion.

## FROM ETYMOLOGY OF THE WORD HAUNT

---

*Noel Thistle Tague*

*Foundation.*

In the winter, filled first with water, then with ice. So became a burn of sun, pane of unshattering light in the field. Lilacs and sumac, a sign. Planted as they were to frame front doors, kitchen windows, couch the house in a hospitable beauty. To startle with wind and soften.

*Also:* Primeval funeral. Sink-hole of our daily living. Mawing space. Houseless cellar that took everything. Still, somewhere there are films of us. Photographs on which we depend. For we have stared into the cellar like a wound and seen the whole beloved space, spills of sun across sills, over cane chairs onto the table where babies were born, we have seen ourselves there, on that table, and can one ever step away, finally, can one come away from the aggressive erasure of one's living, the history you think you see and then again, there it is, a more-than-loss, a taking back, a never-was, a reed-punctured slate of rainwater.

*Walk.*

I carried a milkweed's desiccated tongue and a corner of salt plucked from the road where it blinked like quartz. Pale and galed, the light washing over the field. Grape vines brittle as wild bones gone to seed, corpse-hair falling from a line of defeated trees. The wind makes a wild thing deaf and approachable. I noticed the deer before he noticed me. Young velvet, snuffling in the grass. I want to be in the world without startling. Yet I want to startle.

*Wind.*

Bodied in hanging linens, lean and curved and billowing through the gauzed edges of sun-backed oaks. Stretching over limbs, rioting through the canopied interstices. Bodied as it comes through the windows, knocks things off tables, spills the child out of bed, froths the fire.

*Also:* Like her, made visible in its movement through others. Stands of white pines winging upward, great rooted flocks. Hawk-in-sky rebuffed by god-hands.

*Trash.*

Before there were dumps or recycling, there was the domestic pit. One type of life then: Mason jars, pieces of china rounded as sea-glass, brittle rubber, pop bottles and carafes and insulators. To each house its own undesirables, thrown out back and buried. Rising as bulbs or graves. The ground gives underfoot. In the earth, things sink and shatter.

*Last Known.*

Silhouette in the screen door.

*Boundaries.*

*First.* Beginning at the southwesterly corner a hemlock stake marked; and runs thence to the southeasterly corner a hemlock post; thence past a pine tree, a point on the edge of "Chipaway" bay; thence along the shore of said bay to the northwesterly corner a hemlock post standing in the marsh west from a hemlock tree marked; thence along the westerly line to the place of beginning.

*Second.* Beginning at the northeasterly corner a hemlock post cornered and marked; and runs thence along the northwesterly bounds to a hemlock post standing in the easterly line; thence to the northeasterly corner of the same, a Norway pine post and stones on a bald rock; thence to a beech tree on the edge of "Duck Cove" in Chippewa Bay; thence from a pine tree marked; thence to the place of beginning.

*Third.* Beginning at the center of the Cook Road a stone set in the ground; and runs thence to a pine stake and stones (on the side of a lane); thence to the edge of Chippewa Bay past a hemlock tree marked; thence along the shore of said bay from an oak stake marked D.D.G.; thence to a cross cut in rock, to a cross cut in rock on the top of a knoll. To an iron pin set in concrete. To a cross cut in rock on the north side of a road. To a drill hole in rock at the top of a ledge. Along the southwest side thereof to the shore of Duck Cove and the St. Lawrence River; thence northeasterly along the shore as it winds; thence east on said line to the creek; thence following the margin of said Creek in westerly direction to the water's edge and thence along the water's edge to the place of beginning.

*Correspondence, Juvenile.*

Being you is wonderful.

OK, remember last year around November. I think, I asked you why you made fun of me. You said it was just the way we got along. And it hurt me it hurt me really bad. But I never told anyone. I don't

whisper stuff about you not at all. 'Cause if I did our friendship would suck & you would be saying things about me. I have never ever, ever, ever, ever (well, maybe not that last ever) lied to you OK. I have a good sense of humor and I *joke* there is a big difference. I haven't told you or anyone this before. But you are like my sister, loving, caring, fun, and you have a dark side (if you know what I mean). I would do just about anything for you. So let's stop fighting. OK.

*House.*

Sometimes left so long, their meanings shed away. They become extensions of their plots of land: pine needles dune over thresholds and field grass spears through porch boards. Animals swoop through window holes, new generations of inhabitation, *haunts of coot and hern*. The room that received the best light now overgrown with saplings, with the reaching limbs of the east-facing oak. Rat snakes overrun the cellar, black on black, something furtive in the dark.

*Also:* Some intact as tombs, nailed shut and shuttered. Or a shutter missing. Possessions glance against window-light: brittle curtain-lace, rocking chair, spectacles, a man's dress shoes. Records, newspapers, dishes, rounded shoulders of retro appliances. The place swells with abandonment. It wants so much a body to live in it. You press against the pane. You want so much to inhabit: it's what you know to do. Look in, look long. Your reflection will be there now, in pale shadow with the other things behind the glass, as your body walks back down the hill.

*House.*

You render me unable.

*Wind.*

Blows bitter. Buckles fields and warps shutters. Whose wind is this? Industrial wind. Company wind. Wind that requires a law.

“Industrial wind power will forever change the character and personality of this town.”

“In all probability there will be very few issues in our lifetime that will create the hatred between neighbors that the wind issue has created here.”

The wind enters this way: catches an edge in the expanse, a telephone pole’s splinters, a word, and draws itself out into a wail, becomes sharper, a shriek, incises the ear, balls permanently into the head where it is now, throttled down some, a cold whine.

## FRAGMENTS OF A GREATER LANGUAGE

---

Geoff Hilsabeck

for Johanna

My poor dog at my feet trying to sleep through the heat, eyes shut, waiting for it to pass. My wife Johanna in the cool arcade of the Harvard Library reading room. I translate a poet I discovered during a year living aimlessly in Lisbon. It's hard. I can't even say his name right; my mouth can't form the vowels, can't dig up from the throat the *R* that opens it. *Ruy Belo*.

Ruy Belo is a feeling I want to get right, the feeling of a day not too far away not too near, impossible to place but passed every year without notice, with the same motions that govern every other day of the year, the day that makes us most, what, nervous? confused? human? That we know it's there, that we can't know for sure where: Ruy Belo conjures this bewildering feeling with remarkable precision.

✕

September? October? Lisbon. I am seated at a table, surrounded by books, going over some recent translations with professor Miguel Tamen, director of the *Programa em Teoria da Literatura* at the University of Lisbon and my benevolent and generous guide through the vast wilderness of Portuguese letters.

I have been struggling through some prose by Herberto Helder, something impossibly foreign about brandy and the Church, nostalgia for childhood, or is it childish nostalgia, incomprehensible shadows rising in the middle of the room. Miguel takes a book by Ruy Belo off his shelf and reads a poem. It is the first poem of the third section ("Fall") of the book *Homem de Palavra[s], Man of Word[s]*. The mood is lighter than Helder, the light softer. The poem takes place in the late afternoon not deep into the night; in it are irony and its attendant absurdity, and pathos, a disarming sort of resignation, the sea lapping against every line. Miguel and I translate it, roughly, in step.

UM DIA NÃO MUITO LONGE NÃO MUITO PERTE

*As vezes sabes sinto-me farto  
por tudo isto ser sempre assim*

You know sometimes I feel fed up  
with everything always being the same

*Um dia não muito longe não muito perte  
um dia muito normal um dia quotidiano  
um dia não é que eu pareça lá muito hirto*

One day not too far away not too near  
a very normal day an everyday day  
a day in which I seem not overly stiff

*entrarás no quarto e chamarás por mim  
e digo-te já que tenho pena de não responder  
de não sair do meu ar vagamente absorto*

you come inside and call for me  
and I say to you sorry to not respond  
to not leave this vaguely absorbed air

*farei um esforço parece mas nada a fazer*

I seem to make an effort but there is nothing to do

*hás-de dizer que pareço morto*

you tell me that I seem dead

*que disparate dizias tu que houve um surto  
não sabes de que não muito perto*

what nonsense you say look something happened  
you don't know what not too near



*e eu sem nada pra te dizer  
um pouco farto não muito hirto e vagamente absorto*

and me with nothing to say to you  
a little full not overly stiff and vaguely absorbed

*não muito perto desse tal surto*

not too near the something that happened

*queres tu ver que hei-de estar morto?*

what do you think am I dead?

✕

Belo died of a heart attack at his home in Queluz. He was fifty-five. *Homem de Palavra[s]* is a mid-career book divided into the four seasons, plus sections on place, time, and, the final section, “images drawn from days.” Once I dreamed of translating the entire book, the rhymed and unrhymed poems, the prose, but my translations consisted largely of failures, failed lines, leaden phrases, mistaken conjugations, and false friends. Never did I come near a satisfactory whole. I just could not bring his music into English.

Still, I keep returning to Belo and the poems in *Homem*, convinced that he is a major poet, indeed, the very voice and breath of Portugal. Belo put into words the country in which, all of a sudden and not really for any reason, I was immersed for a year in my twenties. I am thirty now.

✕

August. On a rock in Lisbon. Just arrived. The people in this country are friendly and poor and short and dark, and it is very hot. The walls of the buildings are covered with faded tile-work, haphazard and often incomplete because everything here is in disrepair, streets branching off into streets that bend around and dead-end. Our neighborhood is called *Alfama*, and we are *Alfacinhas*. *Alfacinhas* are poor in a poor country. Our neighborhood is built on a hill of bedrock, filled with steep marble staircases, and the sidewalks are cobblestones of diamond-shaped marble. The old city walls spill

bougainvillea. There are plazas and squares and fountains, and the apartment buildings — it is all apartments — have small, low, wrought-iron balconies on which their inhabitants, mostly elderly, rest their arms, leaning out the window and watching open-air trams crawl up and down the hill, smelling the smoke of grilled sardines, the smoke of Portugal that drifts up from the river. At night Fado music, the notes of a guitar accompanying the moans of rusty old lounge singers in black shawls, and the screams of children up late, everything right up against each other, our neighbors right there, just across a narrow alley, with a parakeet hanging from the laundry line and a picture of Christ on the table.

✘

*Vizinhança*. The word comes near the end of the poem “And Everything Was Possible” in the section called “Spring,” a word that when I say it out loud in my study in Somerville, Massachusetts, sounds simple, clear, and true: *vizinhança*, neighborhood, all the neighbors, from *vizinhar*, to neighbor, to be or live near, to adjoin, and the noun is *vizinho*, neighbor. I translate it as *neighborliness*.

When was that? I myself don't know how to put it

I only know I had a child's power  
between things and me there was a neighborliness  
and everything was possible was just a matter of wanting it

My upstairs neighbor is a retired bus driver named Ray who claims to know the mayor. My downstairs neighbor is Nick; I guess Nick makes bombs for the government at a lab in Lexington. My closest neighbor is named Johanna. We share a home, a dog, and a garden. In the garden we grow vegetables. We try to grow vegetables. The transplanted tomatoes yellow and crack with blight, hot sun turns the dirt to dust an inch below the surface.

✘

Just September. *Alfama*. Someone screams something I can't understand, and a dog starts barking. Someone revs and revs a motorcycle. Chatter chatter chatter, the street. Never have I lived in a neighborhood so noisy — walk outside — people are right there do-

ing things, or more likely not, smoking, shouting and shooshing in this gorgeous foreign tongue. Johanna comes back from a trip to the beach with our gay French neighbors carrying armfuls of bougainvillea and potting soil and planters. Throw the soil in the planters and pot the bougainvillea and repot the plants we have and there are geraniums too. We approach, abut, cling to and clasp, converge, in sight of, at the heels of, up against, adjoin, adhere, approximate, follow, echo, savor of, smack of, instant, at hand, to come, coming, all these words for *near*, together with the stiff and stained old mattress all springs and the French doors open a crack and the neighbor's laundry hanging on a line.

✕

Here at home the radio murmurs constant politics. I'm bothered by words I hardly understand, "rate-setting," "borrowing cost," and others like "failure." How did it start? Casually, of course, go off birth control, sex on the right days. Nothing. Strange. It's been six months. Results indeterminate, some aberrations and malformations, nothing serious. Keep trying.

*Belo* means beautifulness, fairness, perfection, or, as an adjective, beautiful, fair, and fine. On the cover of the second volume of his collected poems, Belo looks like a balding surf rocker, standing on the beach in sunglasses, real L.A. cool. On the third, however, he looks like the bearded John Berryman near the end of his life.

*SOME PROPOSITIONS CONCERNING BIRDS AND TREES THAT THE POET ENDS ABRUPTLY WITH A REFERENCE TO THE HEART*

Birds are born at the far ends of trees  
Trees that I see instead of fruit yield birds  
Birds are the liveliest fruit of trees  
Birds begin where trees end  
The birds make the trees sing  
When they reach the birds trees become thicker they move  
leave the vegetable kingdom to join the animal kingdom  
Like birds the leaves alight on the earth  
when autumn is descending mysteriously about the country  
I would like to say that the birds emanate from the trees

but I'll leave that kind of talk to the novelist  
it's complicated and does not lend itself to poetry  
has not yet been isolated from philosophy  
I love the trees principally that yield birds  
Who hangs them there from the branches?  
Whose is the hand the innumerable hand?  
I pass, the heart changes

I remember passing the same woman every morning on my way to get coffee. She sat on a bench with a dog at her feet drinking *vinho tinto* from a box. And yet she was necessary; people talked to her. At the end of our street, where it meets the old Roman road, was a *ginginha* bar like something out of Toulouse-Lautrec, old men in and out, smoking in the doorway, drinking coffee and beer and cherry brandy, playing cards in front of a trash pile, fantastic noses the shapes of loaves. Did they gossip, or was that for the women in the *leitaria* and the *tasca*?

Now look at this guy. He leans out the window of his front door, rubs his smudged face and smokes.

✧

I want to tell you about Fernando Pessoa because Pessoa was Belo's biggest influence, and he is Portugal's most important writer. He is the James Joyce of Portugal with statues of him across Lisbon. One stands where he was born, opposite an opera house on a square in a now very tony neighborhood called *Chiado*. Smoke from street vendor chestnuts, Lisbon comical, magical, and sad: some girls chew gum and wear makeup; they lure fables from the river. Heartless fabulists.

Or I could tell the story differently: if France is a painting, England is a novel, and Holland is a dollhouse, Portugal is a short lyric poem published in the *Diário de Notícias*. The poet, adopting his own name late in life, is obscure and eccentric. His name is Fernando Pessoa.

*Pessoa* means person.

If this story has a heart, it is somewhere else, perhaps in Durban,

South Africa, where Pessoa was raised and wrote his first poems in English, or maybe back in Lisbon, now a man, sort of, who at some point in time, or maybe not, split into two and then those two became four and five and six, until the poet formerly known as Fernando Pessoa found himself in the company of some seventy-odd people. Seventy-seven-or-so names attached themselves to him, and each name had its own music, each a separate source where music was being made.

He called them *heteronyms*. These, he claimed, were separate people, each with a country, a history, a music: Alberto Caeiro, the keeper of sheep; and his students Ricardo Reis, a lapsed classicist, and Álvaro de Campos, a Whitman acolyte; the Baron of Teive; Bernardo Soares; others who exist now in a letter to a friend, a fragment of a gloss on a poem never written.

Of all the heteronyms, Bernardo Soares sounds clearest to our ears, on this continent, in this century. Soares was a bookkeeper who, in spare moments, wrote the notes that would become the prose masterpiece *O Livro do Desassossego*, *The Book of Disquiet*. Soares says in that book that he prefers prose to poetry because he is incapable of writing in verse, but also because prose allows him to speak freely. Prose “dr[aws] closer,” as Richard Zenith puts it in his introduction to the *Selected Prose*, and gives a “more naked picture of its subject.” Prose doesn’t collapse when a poetic rhythm creeps in, as a poem does when even a toe of prose gets into verse.

I met Zenith, Pessoa’s translator, once, at a conference I organized near the end of the school year: strange to meet the translator, the mouthpiece, the man who echoes another’s music and makes it his own, except that with Pessoa he has to echo and make his own the music of seventy different people.

Without Pessoa, there is no Ruy Belo, as though Belo is a seventy-eighth or -ninth heteronym. Belo’s learning suggests Reis, his line is like that of Campos, his images are drawn from Caeiro, evoking the pasture littered with sheep, the country we hardly see, olive trees in rain, men working things all the things left to themselves. Who is Ruy Belo? But what does that word *who* mean? And *is*? In a dream my friend says that *what was* gathers in a small wooden box inside

of us. No, I say, echoing Soares, we are the site of thoughts and feelings, which pass through us like theatergoers through a square. A man is not one man but many, a kind of movement, or music.

✧

February. My friends and I drink too much coffee and then come by tram to the Cemetery of Pleasures (*Prazeres*) by way of the Garden of Stars (*Estrela*). This is the cemetery where Ricardo Reis came after hearing of Pessoa's death, an imagined man mourning the man who imagined him.

Where am I? Why am I here? I am way too big for this city; on the Metro my head hits the handholds, and I struggle in the shower with its collapsing plastic doors. On someone else's streets, this strange tongue, the wilderness of these poems: another tongue! Another country. In the language the people, their history, the long history of their movements, how they say hello. I want so badly to joke with strangers, just small jokes and teasing, seemingly meaningless things. I don't know a good place to get a drink, don't know how to say *how do I get there, not for writing for drawing, this whiskey tastes like home*. My toothpaste is called pasta. I crave a sandwich and a Coke.

✧

More samples, blood drawn. Our approach to getting pregnant becomes more rigorous: a hormone, a schedule, clumsy adjustments, falling into each other, summer surrounding our bodies in a liquid never seen. This too a country I cannot cross to.

I seek a complex poet in a strange language in the hope that he will somehow lead me to myself. Nothing is familiar, not the sounds of the words nor their associations, not even their particular meanings. Take, for instance, the word *antigamente*. Belo often turns to it, a shopworn but not worn-out little book in itself, a story about how it was. It opens the poem "Cinco Palavras Cinco Pedrinhas."

FIVE WORDS FIVE STONES

*Antigamente* a word for what was  
 a dense scent applied to the skin of the present  
 world of reiterated actions immemorial rhythms  
*Antigamente escrevia poemas compridos*  
 Used to be I wrote long poems  
 Today I have four words to make a poem  
 They are: downhearted prostrate desolate discouraged  
 And wait I forgot one: vanquished  
 It occurred to me before I close the poem  
 and somewhat sum-up what I think of life  
 rent day went by  
 With these five words I surround myself  
 and from them comes the music necessary  
 to continue. *Recapitulo:*  
*desistência desalento prostração desolação desânimo*  
*Antigamente quando os deuses eram grandes*  
 Used to be when the gods were large  
 I always had many lines at my disposal  
*Hoje só tenho cinco palavras* only five words  
*cinco pedrinhas* five little stones

Walter Benjamin wants a translation to “lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s *mode of signification*” (my emphasis). He wants the original and the translation to be “recognizable as fragments of a greater language.” Bernardo Soares says, “The only way you can have new sensations is by forging a new soul.” Fragments of a greater language. New sensations, a new soul.

I want to capture the music of Belo’s imagination because to translate is not simply to mimic the outward man but to convey what is everywhere inside him, or is it about him, issuing from him? It is to become an instrument on which he plays, or better, on which plays that which played on him. Is he flute or flautist? And me, what am I? Whose is the hand that holds the stops, and whose breath floats over the opening? What the psalms call *a song of degrees*. Or, as the poet says somewhere, words made of a water always spoken.

A SONG OF DEGREES

I have been translating from Portuguese a poet  
who as a young man before he left  
the Church belonged to Opus Dei.  
He studied canonical law in Rome.  
I never get his name right.  
But he left and he wondered  
what happened to childhood and spilled  
the animal spirit of the sad, an animal sadness,  
olive trees in rain men working  
things all the things left to themselves  
sunset being nothing and nobody else  
across a thousand pages, more, drew from stones  
the music necessary to continue.  
I cannot get his rhymes right,  
these casual quatrains on the death  
of a famous cyclist, day dying,  
how he kills himself by letting both arms fall,  
*a minha maneira de me matar*  
*é deixar cair ambos os braços.*  
I want to translate "Humphrey Bogart"  
but can't get it right. Pure-water gaze.  
The poet's brother.

Only sunset  
sunset only sunset and not even that

Seasons of failure. Johanna stops eating wheat. She stops drinking,  
and then starts again. I lock my bike to a cement post in the base-  
ment. Try again. Nothing. Why? The egg wasn't ready, the sperm  
was confused, had an extra head, a cleft tail, dystopian in its aspect,  
despairing in its outlook, distracted, disoriented. I hear Johanna  
sobbing in the shower. Coming on two years. The trying, the fail-  
ing.

*O life now full now empty*, Belo says, wind mistaking our feet for  
leaves. Something so ordinary laughably humdrum about his song,  
hears them sing in the cathedral, drinks coffee, bright sun washing  
his hand. *It is room it is noon it is a mouthful. A child says that he knows*



me.

I carried these poems with me across an ocean. Plodding, plodding, together with three dictionaries, Soares's paragraphs, together with surrender.

As Casas As Casas As Casas

Oh life, he ends another poem, *ó vida*  
*simples problema de respiração,*  
simple problem of breathing,  
and breath a simple solution,  
an improvised liturgy,  
this instability, he calls himself,  
homeless in the fragile poor houses  
mute dumb witnesses of life  
that live and die with us  
The carpenters the landlords the attorneys  
know nothing of houses  
The poor yes know about houses,  
these poor know everything, *conhecem tudo,*  
feeling his way through a house,  
intoning in its nooks his hymn to houses,  
*na casa nasci e hei-de morrer*  
in the house I was born and will die  
*na casa sofri convivi amei*  
in the house I suffered entertained loved  
*na casa atravessei as estações*  
in the house I flitted through the seasons  
I breathed — oh life simple problem of breathing  
Oh *as casas as casas as casas*

To draw closer, as the bough of a tree draws close to the earth in the callous and generous hand of chance. Dear Johanna, dear sweet song of my mornings and in the evening and all day. We try and we fail and we try and fail again and in these attempts we make the hour sing, we make the day long with love.

✱

After the section called "Spring" comes "Summer" and in it are beautiful things like the title "*Idola fori*" and the beach and the body of god, and after the section called "Summer" comes "Imagens Vindas Dos Dias," images drawn from days.

Whenever, Lisbon. A stray dog curled up by a red mailbox. Digging snails out of brown patterned shells and washing them down with a little cup of beer. A pigeon hops around on one foot below the church just past the Sé toward Baixa, its other foot sliced off by the metal wheel of a tram. Someone scrubs the inside of a marble fountain. The thieves' market teems with buyers and sellers, people looking to make a buck, tiny worthless objects arranged on tables, a busted camera, a gramophone, its horn made of an emerald-colored glass (emerald that reminds me of my grandmother), pocketknives and silver lighters, dirty glasses, everything used, handled, the feel of things touched and carried. I like to hold a thing that has been held.

These steady illiterate movements homeward. At the end of our street, at the foot of a massive, zigzagged, ziggurat of a staircase, a handful of women crack each other up. The heat, the heat.

Yesterday when I walked up the hill from São Bento to Camões I felt all alone in this city across the ocean. I sat at lookouts. The painter hugged his friend who wore colored tights and sat with his stuff while he went somewhere. Gray sky.

✕

Dear Johanna,

I married you that I might come near you.

✕

*Tristeza branda*, mild sadness, what Belo describes as exhaustion, tired from the ardor of effort, the effort required by days spent considering suicide, too afraid of regretting the act, and if he did regret it, could he return? Surely he could return, to see old friends and enemies and pass through the streets one more time.

Afraid, immobile, he lets both arms drop.

✱

Now, here. Maybe there is success in my failure, because Belo tells the story of failure, what he calls in a prose poem *fins de fevereiro*, ends of February, like these fragments, another forgetting of his umbrella, absentmindedly leaving it in the library or on the train, the boat, on the way to the funeral of his friend, his failure to arrive at it on time. The connections between things unclear, what cause for what effect? The tree becomes the birds at its ends. Those birds are the tree's fruit. Where does one end and one begin?

He titles one of the "Fall" poems "Lucas 21, 28." It is somewhere between a translation and an explication of the verse: "And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads."

LUCAS, 21, 28.

Listen, just pieces of the language you understand, only occasional notes. *Opõe o peito*. Break the words apart, the vowels, each a different shade, each echoes and resounds; they lift up the line. *Levanta a cabeça*. Lift up your head. And later: *Levanta-te*. Arise, get up, get out of bed. *Coragem coração*. Take heart, heart. Hear, reader, the hard consonant shift to something softer, turn from solid to liquid, *cor* and *cor* to *ção*, the shift suggesting release, letting go, even giving up. *O espírito* the spirit *nas coisas* in things *comparece* appears. Attend to it, to them. *Aproxima-se* — the word opens the last line — a beautiful word, the *x* in Portuguese not the guttural scrape of an *x* in English but a whisper that issues, lightly, from the mouth, like a broom sweeping through a room, or a storm approaching in the leaves of the trees, a sound constantly running through Lisbon, a murmur under the speech of the people — say it, *aproxima-se* — approaches, comes near, is brought near. What nears? *A libertação*. Liberation, freedom, release, a certain wildness, recklessness, heedlessness, just ahead, just what's ahead. Why translate it? Only say it:

*Aproxima-se a libertação*

✱

The last poem of *Homem de Palavra[s]* is “CÓLOFON OU EPITÁFIO.” It comes after all the seasons have passed. *Cólofon*, the printer’s mark, or a brief description of the printing and publication of the book, from the Greek meaning “summit,” “top,” “finishing.” But better to keep it in the original, with those three *ó*’s, each a different sound, and the lightness of the word, up there at the front of the mouth. We’ll call it “CÓLOFON OR EPITAPH.”

*The month has thirty days. And the day has many hours. I want to stop there. The next few lines are awkwardly constructed, rough-hewn and simple and vague, insisting on, consisting of, things, the best thing, he himself a made thing. How does it end? He imagines his dead body, so long and straight, and, briefly, his boyhood. Says his name and then, smilingly, wistfully, once upon a time.*

But I lied, turning the poem into prose. The poem ends without punctuation, with only the open field suggested by the indefinite arc of an indefinite gesture.

## MEDITATIONS ON A TREE FROG

---

*Angela Stewart*

Frogs have teeth on the roofs of their mouths.

Frogs do not drink, but absorb water through their skin.

A group of frogs is called an army.

Frogs close their eyes when they eat and press them into their heads to force food down their throats.

There are tree frogs living in the maple across the street. I sit on the porch with my friends and tip my chair onto its back legs for hours. We eat chocolate bars and popcorn like we are watching a movie of the people passing, and we drink until late, until the cicadas stop their chain sawing and the birds tuck their beaks under their wing-pits, and the ripping croaks begin.

“What is that noise?” I ask one night, because tree frogs are absurdly loud for the one-and-a-half inches of space they consume. “I don’t know,” they all say. One friend suggests frogs. “Do we even have tree frogs in Iowa?” I ask, but no one knows. And so I check. And we do — gray tree frogs that change color to match what they’re sitting on, from white to black to gray or green, though when they are dead they go gray. They are singing to find a mate. I read some more.

The word *frog* comes from the Greek, meaning “without tail.” However, frogs used to be called Salientia, which in Latin is “to jump,” which makes me wonder how it was decided that “the jump” was the trait to name this animal after and not “the croak.” Or why the “tail-less-ness” and not the “bulgy-eyed-ness.” And when did we stop naming things for what they do, and how did we forget so much? Language sprouts legs like a tadpole and morphs meanings without a trace of the old in the new. We say frog and think we are saying a name instead of its description.

I want to know what else we have forgotten. The word *man* is from the Old English “mann,” and this, I think, is disappointing. I had been hoping for “penis” or “hairiness” or “sex-ing,” though what does catch my attention is that “mann” was originally a gender-neutral term. Once, “mann” really did mean all of us. But before the old English was proto-Germanic, and before that proto-Indo-European, and in ways that I do not understand but accept like a child accepts that the earth is round though it looks anything but,

some linguists say that the word man is connected to the meaning “to think” and that Latin borrows it for “mental,” “mind,” and “remember.”

If a frog is a “to jump,” then we are a “to think,” and maybe at the heart of mann is a brain and not a heart at all. We have not named ourselves “to love,” though we do, and guide our lives by it. Scientists say that at best we can hold on to feeling in love for seven years. That the seven-year itch is really a matter of chemicals, that a brain can only stay drunk on love for a short period of time until it cries out for rest. Because no matter how we begin, one day you will turn to me and hate my crooked front teeth that you once found endearingly imperfect, and I will look at you and find your stories boring that had once seemed so profound. It is inevitable. But at the center of a word is the thing we have forgotten and the thing it really is, and at the arrival of an exhausted love is the “to think” itself. A frog jumps, a mann thinks, and in thinking is the thing she is. This essay is a love song. In seven years I will not love you at all. Then, I will think you until all thinking burns off, until what is left of me is a heart in a maple croaking all night long.

## CONDITIONAL SEED

---

*Rosa Alice Branco*  
*Trans. Alexis Levitin*

I see you gazing at the dead that history has embalmed  
for our enjoyment. You open the sarcophagus where a Pharaoh  
awaits you. He has already eaten the food, gazed at the treasures,  
but life (he feels) is not in the wheat,  
the gold, the photographs. He wants the light of the flash,  
the forbidden light that mixes with that of day. I feel the dance  
of your muscles as your hand caresses my waist,  
and you draw me in just as the river overflows,  
as it forgets its banks. The sarcophagus is cold,  
history burns just in the gaze of the visitors, and I burn from you  
in the precise curve with which I draw away from time. Back home,  
the house brings dust and ash to our eyes mixed with the water flowing  
in our bones, as if this afternoon had not been buried  
forever, as if your hands had touched the flesh  
of the statues, and I were a seed germinating your fingers.  
And so you open the door and light the bedside light. We are all the gods  
and all the animals that disrobe them, the blazing struggle. Who now  
would say there is a god, just one and holy? Before the word, I feel you  
in the breathing of my veins, veins that rise and burst atop the roof  
and your naked foot outside the bed's warmth weaves circles around  
time. Mortality is hot and dispenses with sacrifice  
(says she) laughing in the open sheets. What awaits me  
after the wheat? There is no after or even before. It is at dawn  
that dew feeds the fields and in the humidity entwining  
its petals the flower knows nothing of times of drought.  
You are my dew. What I say is only now, today, and I bite my lips  
to forget all I thought I knew or didn't know.

## STUDYING ABROAD IN THE COUNTRY OF LOVE

---

*Marci Vogel*

My French teacher was dying the year I studied *je m'appelle* in the mirror, a distant relation, charming, sophisticated. Courage comes from *le coeur*, the heart, leading out from the center. Years later: *Mademoiselle*, how many languages do you know? *Mes étudiants*, that would be one.

✧

She was in love with a translator, yearned to give syntax over. A poet who worked at Microsoft warned her not to betray her original tongue. Be passionate about writing code, he said. Between mystery and love, you want to triangulate the language.

✧

She walked into an equation scrawled on the white board:  $A \neq B$ , which she took to mean: metaphors should be flipped like coins, tossed into a fountain or placed on the sockets of eyes.

✧

She thought she had given him the boot, but when she reached over and lifted the latch, he was in the trunk, knocking to get out.

✧

He was working on his own legends. Where are my angels, my explosions? Where are my dancing animals, elephants charging on darkened savannahs?

✧

They met at the intersection of high plain and sky. I keep trying to connect, she said, it's the hardest thing.



✧

“Terminal Étude” is the title of a poem translated by Alissa Valles. It refers to one of the terminals at Fryderyk Chopin Airport in Warsaw, where Valles had to wait several hours for a delayed flight. It could also mean *the last study* or even *study for the end*: we two who were one.

✧

She once saw a man with  $\pi$  tattooed over his heart. Did that mean it went on forever? Should she have stopped him, asked him if it hurt?

✧

When I was a girl, I had a crush on Lincoln, all sad eyes and stooped shoulders. I thought I could heal him, heal the whole country of sad.

✧

I will find you, ready or not. Are you hiding behind the rock? Tucked inside in the tree’s spire? Are you drifting down the aisle, bride to the nave of the green heart?

✧

The Hmong toss balls at one another to find a mate, but it’s not a game. If you court love in the New Year, it’s a serious endeavor. You are approaching a beautiful girl, probably with her mother behind her. It’s intimidating, like approaching love should be.

✧

Who’s your favorite Beatle? he asked, hoping for a resemblance. *Quelle question!* How can you not love a man who promises the sun, calls you little darlin’, breaks into laughter at the end of the song?

✧

He showed her how to download the application for new languages. She tilted her ear a little to the left, learned the words for chandelier, cut glass, bow against gut, moving his fingers along the fret of her instrument.

✖

At the end of those French movies, it always says *Fin*, which I take to mean: it is finished, but it is not the end.

## LACKAWANNA

---

*Jerry Mirskin*

I've just ridden my bicycle 40 miles and have stopped into a gas station to use the telephone. It's Saturday night, about 10:30 p.m. and two guys with gray stockings over their heads come through the door. One of them is waving a gun. They advance on the attendant and push him to the floor. The boy falls easily under the pressure of the faceless intruders. The place is just about empty. There is the attendant, a cash register, and there's me. The one with the gun waves it above his head like he's taking the temperature of the air. He looks at me and pauses as if he didn't expect anyone else to be there. I'm using the telephone and drop the receiver as if it were loaded and pull the trigger on my voice. Don't shoot! My voice comes out real high and real fast.

We are in Lackawanna, New York. At sunset, in this steel mill town, the sky is often luminously orange or green. But now it's dark. On a whim, I hopped on my bike and started riding. Going to see my girlfriend. She doesn't know I am coming. It's a surprise. When I get to Lackawanna, a few miles south of Buffalo, I decide to call, to make sure she's at her friend's house where she's visiting. I'm not much of a bicycle rider, but I have a destination. By the time I get to the gas station, I'm exhausted.

The guy with the gun is standing over the attendant. He pauses, as if not sure what he's going to do next. The attendant has his hand up and is frozen in that upside down submissive crouch that says surrender in animal language. He has a horrified look on his face as he takes in the faceless men.

A few weeks before, I had gone with my girlfriend to her parent's house in a small rural town outside of Buffalo. I brought with me some window screens that I had gotten from the factory where I am working for the summer. It's an okay job. Like most, it has its ups and downs. I'm "the college kid," and almost immediately I almost get into a fight with an older worker. He's from the South and has about forty years in jobs like the one he's in now. He has ideas about

college kids. I can't remember what we were arguing about. We were just about to square off when he says, "I'm going to be all over you like white on rice." No one talks a lot at the job. It's mostly work, work, work and coffee breaks. The figure of speech — "white on rice" — stands out, and I laugh and tell him it's a wonderful expression, and the stupid spell we're under is broken. We do not become good friends, but after that we share stories and cigarettes. Without realizing it, I was sizing up the place. Pretty soon, I had figured out who I wanted to spend time with, and I also had figured out the differences between the screens made at the factory. There were three kinds: the traditional metal, shiny aluminum, and there was vinyl. The vinyl was the most expensive, aluminum next.

I think it's all over when the guy with the gun begins to remove his stocking. It's like I know the story. If we see his face he's going to use his gun. I look at him and then back to the phone, which is dangling in midair. As you can imagine, everything seems to be happening in slow motion. Fragments of tiny distant sounds are coming out of the phone, which I know are words, but all I hear are riffs of fractured air that approach, but cannot enter my stunned and frightened mind. The phone is twitching at the end of its coiled line, and I'm afraid that it's betraying my own fear, as if the sight of it will convince him what to do next.

When I brought the screens to my girlfriend's house, her parents were a little confused. I pointed out a little hole in their backdoor screen and they seemed pleased. I worked on the door while my girlfriend and her sisters sat on the grass peeling peaches they were going to cook in a pie. Her brothers ran around the yard playing. I liked having something to contribute. It was one of those beautiful summer afternoons, and the image of everyone in the backyard with the sun and the peaches stayed in my head.

I expect to see an ugly face when the guy reaches below his neck and tugs the stocking up and off, but it's not. It's an average twenty-year-old face, and its owner looks down at the boy on the floor and starts laughing. His partner has removed his stocking and is laughing too. The attendant hasn't moved from his crouch, but his panic is dissolving. They're not going to shoot him or me, it's just a prank. They've staged the scene as a way of squeezing out an ounce of

humor from their friend who works Saturday nights. It seems so stupid, but in the world of pranks, stupid is funny.

As I step by them to leave, the boy with the gun looks at me and smirks and says, "We're his friend." He believes he's explaining something. He's offering me a share in the meaning of their act. I want to tell them how glad I am that they're not my friends, but it's enough that that's true, and I don't trust that they are not capable of following one stupid act with another.

The next day, I am at my girlfriend's parents' house, and I tell this story as we sit around the kitchen table. It's another beautiful day. There is pie. I don't know if it's a good one, but I have a story to tell. I look at the screen door and am pleased that air is coming through and nothing else.

## MIKE

---

*Jerry Mirskin*

In New York freezing is about forty-two inches. That's how far you have to dig if you're putting in a foundation. In this case, we were digging by hand because the backhoe couldn't get in. I'd done work like that before. One time on a farm, I had to dig a grave for a calf. I remember I was up to my waist in the hole. It was winter, the farmer came by, looked down and said, That's deep enough. Another time, I was digging and found a row of horse teeth. They were coated with dirt, but after I cleaned them off, I realized that they weren't teeth, but a row of keys from an adding machine. I remember holding the unearthed numbers in my hand. They'd been in the ground for some time, but I had a feeling they could still add.

Now it was summer and hot. Over ninety degrees. The foreman came by. Mike. He was a good guy, but I couldn't see it. All the others were inside, and I was out there in the heat. He picked up a shovel. It wasn't work that a master carpenter would do, but he started in. I wasn't assuaged. I wanted to know why I was the one in the hole. He didn't say. I knew a little bit about him. He had graduated high school and went right to work. By the time he was twenty-five he was an accomplished craftsman and even taught a class in construction at the local community college. I also knew that he was recently married. His wife, a cute but tough girl, drove motorcycles in a circus. She was one of the riders in the round steel cage, going around and around and upside down, held by centrifugal force. Often there was more than one motorcycle in there. It was really loud and smoky, and you wondered how they didn't get dizzy or collide and crash.

Mike was in love with her. The circus was in Florida. One night she called him. They had been going together on and off. She was sick of it, but didn't know what to do. Mike got into his car that night and drove twenty hours to where she was. He proposed and they came back together. He would talk about her. Sometimes he would even share some of the private things they did. Other times he talked about how he'd come home from work, tired. She wasn't

working and she was lonely and wanted to play. He told me how he used to stop at a park on the way home sometimes and take a nap, so that he had energy to be with her. I pictured him lying on the grass in some park. Resting between his work life and his home life. We were digging. After a while, we stopped to take a drink. The sweat was pouring off. He looked at me. I realized that he'd probably have to go back inside, but he didn't go in. Instead he started talking. He said that his dad died five years ago. He said that he couldn't get used to the idea that he would never see him again. His dad would never see him with a good job, or a wife and all they were planning. I hadn't ever seen him upset. I hadn't actually seen a lot of men upset. He said he would work for a whole year in a trench and give all his pay if he could just see his dad for five minutes. A year of one's life for five minutes. I tried to picture that meeting. The meeting that couldn't happen. The truth was as flat and hot as the face of a shovel. For a moment there was quiet. There was sadness, but it felt peaceful. After a while, Mike went back into the house, and I went back to digging. Back to the girl in the cage. Back to driving all night long on the highway.

## NINE LIVES

---

*Susanne Antonetta*

When the glass came out of my ankle, just above the bone, it kept on bleeding. I would later know I bleed that way but I was only seven, and it hadn't happened before. My grandfather's fourth wife for some reason tried to comfort me, but I couldn't stand her, for her sunken cheeks and inverted mouth with no lips, and bovine stupidity: she quoted stories from the *Weekly World News*. They say cats do have nine lives, she told me one day. Eighteen years later she arrived in a box at my parents' house, burned, and my husband, then fiancé, and I ripped the package open: most boxes were for us. She'd become fat ash, like bits of newspaper that spiral from a fire. We saw the bone, in splinters, but where, I wondered, were her oils, her moist eyes, those lips, that seemed to be retreating into her face.

Is this how my son, I wonder, knows my mother. Will he pour a canister of her into the ocean someday, thinking just of the wind, how it blows her back in his face.

I had an inordinate number of grandmothers.

Doves live all around my parents' house, their *ooo-ooo ooo-ooo*. Walking with their puffy heads jerking to another rhythm. They have been attached to the soul when all they show is the one syllable of sadness and resignation.

My parents' house, slate green, though small has many levels, each little room or little grouping wanting to be on its own. The stairs are a problem; my parents fall and break things — hips, ankles, backs. The house abuts power lines. People think these lines cause cancer, so my parents worry no one will ever buy the house, though anyway they won't move, won't go somewhere where it's easier for old people to live. The neighbors died a decade ago in a murder-suicide, on my son's birthday. My parents have been robbed in a home invasion, though they weren't quite sure what was happening till it was over. The men got into the house with fake badges and led my parents into the basement. My father saw one man stealing and one hiding in the bushes outside. *Of course*, people tell me when I com-



plain they won't leave, *it's their house.*

Which I have come to understand. I could lodge as many valid complaints against my own body.

My mother at ninety-one has become her mother, without the demons. That grandmother, the English metaphysician, the Christian Scientist, died surrounded by ghouls; she threw windows open, fighting to drive them out. She too lost her memory but something else came. Now the wind hits the cherry tree and petals blow, nursery colors, and I see how my mother's face, all folds, would catch them if she sat outside.

My father and my mother have places on the couch, where they sit most of the day with a paper or puzzle between them. I tend more and more to sit at the same end of my couch. I wonder when I'll be unable to sit anywhere else, capable, of course, but restless, eyes shifting around the room, until I move back to my place.

My son when he visits his grandparents goes wild and sticky with boredom. He can't think of anything to do so he plays video games and makes *That's What She Said* jokes, jokes my father unknowingly sets up, muttering of a cork or a letter, *It's jammed in and I can't get it out*, and my Echo sounds from a corner, *That's What She Said.*

Things have lost their essence at my parents'. Nothing is itself; it's a *thingamajig* a *whoziwhatser* a *watchamacallit*. No names, just the frustrated act and the unsayable need that would enable it. I have no name, often, but I have utility. My hands are capable of glasses of water, making food. Sometimes I'm known as *Chrisusbrujimar* or *Chrisusbrujinick*.

My son at fifteen has grown angry, so much so that I go home from this solo visit to my parents' house to two of him, himself and his anger. His grades slipped and I'm making him see a tutor. I take his laptop away at night. *You want to control me*, he says. *You treat me like I'm two*. He's capable of saying, *You're being a bitch*. I don't tell him all the things parents can do just as I don't tell my parents I remember all that they did. I'm not proud of my withholding; in either case, such telling would not help. I've become a stick figure or a paper

doll, a thing swiftly made for action, with no eyes or mouth, easy to make more.

A day or two after I return, so very recently, my father calls. *We had a little excitement last night.* The son of the man across the street, who lives with his father, shot six rounds from a rifle at the neighbor's house. The police came and had a scuffle, took the son away. *Why did he shoot?* I want to know and my father says, *He has long hair and tattoos, you know, all over, like.* The shooting makes the New Jersey newspapers and I look up the story, though there's no more information than what my father told me, less actually, as the man's long hair and tattoos don't make the paper. I think of my parents' house as the center of a triangle, poised between three points, power lines on the left, murder-suicide on the right, gunfire in front. It's mystical, as triangles are: Greek. They're caught in some field made by voltage and violence, one that sizzles on the edges but holds them static within.

If I keep traveling, I tell myself. If I keep listening to my rap records. If I simply kill myself in the next two decades, somehow I can avoid this.

I come to think there's a metaphysical bank where you deposit all the things you could say but don't, especially things you could hurl at parents. My shock treatment at fifteen. A time my father punched me. My mother's refusal to call the ambulance when I slipped at fourteen into a drugged sleep, the fact that I have no idea what she would have had happen instead. They grow, draw interest. I see these things go in — notes slipped to a blue goddess of a teller — but I'm not sure what she'll give me if I ask for a withdrawal. (Even my parents' capacity for tender care of my grandfather's fourth wife in her dying, though none of us ever liked her, really.) I daydream it's for my son, my fifteen-year-old. I like to think my silence collects into passes the world will give him when he needs them, though it may be simply all he will never say to me, in another currency.

## WHY DIM SUM MAKES ME FEEL TENDER

---

*Kim Adrian*

In college I knew a boy who walked funny, and a wrestler with golden ringlets, and a Greek boy who danced like an angel, and I knew a boy whose mother killed herself with a heavy-duty electrical extension cord. I knew other boys in college, too, but for some reason these are the four I still occasionally remember with affection despite the fact that, in reality, I never actually got to know any of them all that well. To tell the truth, I don't even remember most of their names.

The wrestler is the one I liked the best. He used to be able to put his enormous, wide-shouldered body into an empty green beer bottle. It was a magic trick of his. I don't know how he managed it, but he'd set the audience — a bunch of drunken frat boys, their drunken girlfriends, and other partygoers, like myself, on one side of the room, himself on the other, and an empty bottle of Rolling Rock in the middle. Drunk as he might be (and I believe he sometimes achieved great heights of drunkenness), this boy always managed to maintain a reserve of mystery, even a quality of dignity, which is why I liked him so much and why he was able to fit inside a beer bottle. Of course, he didn't really put himself inside the bottle. It was a kind of miming operation, or an optical illusion, or just the power of suggestion, but in any case, we all gasped whenever he slowly lowered one incredibly meaty leg (with its comparatively dainty foot, usually clad, as I remember it, in a white tennis shoe) into the bottle. And as he maneuvered his other incredibly meaty leg (at the end of which dangled another comparatively dainty foot in another white tennis shoe) into the bottle we laughed disbelievingly, perhaps even a little uneasily. And somewhere in the backs of our minds, as he wiggled his slim hips and slightly waspish waist past the neck of the bottle, and then struggled more and more desperately to pull in the rest of himself — his enormous chest and even more enormous shoulders, his beautifully sculpted arms decorated with a few plump and well-placed veins, and finally, his head, which was a silly and captivating thing with its sparkling blue eyes and great masses of shiny blond ringlets — we were all struck, I'm certain, by the poignant yet essentially pointless beauty of humanity.

This boy and I had a tradition. I'm not sure how long it lasted — a year or two, perhaps, long enough to become a “tradition” of sorts, despite the fact that it was really just a small thing. It went like this, whenever we were at the same party, we would at some point meet (without setting a specific time, or verbally agreeing beforehand to do so) on the front stoop of whatever building the party happened to be in. Rain or shin, warm or cold, at some point, the wrestler with the blond ringlets and I would find ourselves standing outside, where we would chat. About what — I have no idea. Things completely inconsequential. They didn't matter to me then, and of course they matter to me even less, now. What mattered was only the gentle, exploratory tone of these conversations, and the simple ritual of them. Absurd as it may seem, I know that, somewhere way back in the furthest reaches of my mind (which has since that time become so crowded, so preoccupied with the basic managerial tasks of living it's a wonder I can remember anything at all), I secretly hope that someday the blond wrestler (who has no doubt, by now, become at least partially gray) and I will find ourselves standing on the front stoop of some run-down New York City brownstone or other, chatting for five or maybe ten minutes the way we used to — gently and about nothing at all.

✕

The boy who walked funny was a different story altogether. His name was Geoffrey, spelled the English way. He was very tall, and very thin, and very rich, and I think there was something developmentally wrong with him, beyond the limp. I say so because he was incredibly innocent. Like a child. He even looked like a child, his face was so wide-open and soft-skinned, his gray eyes were so hugely magnified by the thick lenses of his wire-rimmed eyeglasses. Geoffrey's hair was coarse and blond, nearly white, and it stood on end in all-different directions. He spoke with a lisp about things a four-year-old might notice: a plane in the sky, a bug on the sidewalk, the down on my arm, illuminated by the sun. I suppose it was partly on account of his hair, and partly because of his strange fixation on childish points of interest, and partly because he was, like myself, going to an ivy league university, that I was convinced that there must be more, much more to Geoffrey than he let on. In fact, I convinced myself that he was an eccentric genius, and spent every minute in his company searching for proof of this hidden ge-

nius, verbally poking and prying in order to catch a glimpse of the hard brilliance I was certain must be lurking beneath his befuddled and almost comically gentle exterior.

When I say that Geoffrey walked funny, I mean that something was wrong with one side of his body, so that in order to walk he had to swivel and pivot on his good side (his left side, I believe it was) in order to lift and advance his bad side. You've seen people like this walking along some street in some city or other, no doubt, and you've thought, as I have, *How do they do it? day after day, how do they manage not just the physical pain but the social consequences of such a limp, which are no doubt quite grave, and not just the social consequences, either, but the practical problems, too, which would almost certainly be enough to drive any normal, able-bodied person to desperation in a matter of hours, if that long?* Whether it's a misguided impulse on my part or not, people who walk in this way often strike me as quietly heroic and immediately likable, even lovable; such easy affection accounts for my still vivid memory Geoffrey. I thought I might fall in love with him. I thought it would be interesting to try, in any case. Perhaps I was still too young to understand what a perverse and destructive emotion pity is. Or maybe I didn't care. Mostly, it was a game for me: I thought I could cultivate love the way I could draw a picture or make a plant grow by watering it. Why did I bother? Why did I think these things? Maybe I thought it would make a good story, down the line. Or maybe I was bored. Or maybe I felt I needed a cause, and Geoffrey seemed like a good one.

In any case, my efforts failed. In fact, the longer I knew him, the less Geoffrey appealed to me. He just didn't make sense to me. Still, I admired him for his limp and his hair and for the fact that he came from money and looked like a genius even if he wasn't one. I'm fairly certain Geoffrey sensed my specious motives in all of this, but he carried on as if everything were wonderful. I'm not sure why. All I know is that for every awkward conversation we faked our way through, my subconscious disgust for this boy grew, until, unfortunately, it suddenly announced itself at the most inopportune moment.

The whole process didn't take very long — our relationship stretched over a month or two at most. The breaking point occurred one Sunday morning when we were walking through the Biblical garden on the south side the cathedral of St. John the Divine in Morningside Heights. It's called a Biblical garden because in it grow

as many of the flowers, fruits, herbs, and vegetables mentioned in the Bible as they can fit, given the climate and space constraints of New York City. As I remember them, the plants of this garden are impressive not as plants (as plants, they are, in fact, a fairly weedy-looking lot), but as living phantoms, ghosts from an ancient fable. In any case, the real attraction of the garden wasn't botanical at all, but zoological: the cathedral maintained (and still does, I believe) a collection of peacocks, some of which are albino — all pearls and diamonds — and these extraordinary creatures were allowed to wander wherever they pleased, even out onto the sidewalk on Amsterdam Avenue, with their long gleaming tails trailing behind them. This ersatz Eden, then, was the setting of Geoffrey's and my first and only kiss. The sun was hot and bright that day. Or maybe it was rainy. In any case, I distinctly remember a kind of oblique glare pressing down on us. And I remember Geoffrey's erection poking lightly into my abdomen. And I remember most clearly of all the uncomfortable impression I had that I was making out with a child, no matter how tall. I remember thinking that the soft tongue clumsily searching the inside my mouth was *too* soft, and I panicked. I stepped away, too discombobulated to make any kind of coherent or thoughtful excuse. I'm not sure what we talked about then, or how we parted, only that I was assiduous in my efforts to not stare at the wet spot on Geoffrey's khakis — a spot Geoffrey himself never seemed to notice.

For a period of time after that, he pretended I didn't exist. Even when I said hello in the cafeteria line, from a distance of no more than a yard, he made as if he couldn't hear me. Eventually, we both fell into more successful relationships. Me with my future husband, who drives me just as crazy with love and frustration today as he did back then, and Geoffrey with a short dark-haired girl who used to hang, as the saying goes, on his arm and who, for all I know, may well be his wife today.

✧

Short but classically handsome, the Greek boy used to do this thing on the dance floor where he'd just spin and spin and spin and spin on one foot without seeming to make the least effort. Have you ever seen Fred Astaire? The Greek boy danced like that. Like walking, like it was nothing but actually his body was doing all of these beautiful things, and he was never out of breath. I was also known

around campus for my dancing — not because I could do any special tricks, like the Greek boy, but simply because I loved to dance and did so with abandon.

When I think about the night I spent with this boy, whose name, unfortunately, I can't quite remember, I see the two of us as if we were in a movie. Actually, I see myself more than I see him; specifically, I see myself *from his perspective*. Maybe this explains why I can barely remember his face — just a blur of tawny skin, high cheekbones, and black eyes. We went out dancing a few times. Ate a couple of meals together. Once he let me borrow his sweater when I was cold. It was black and brown, and he was anxious to get it back. One time, when I was lighting a cigarette, a tiny chunk of sulfur flew off the match head and struck him on the eyelid, where it burned his skin. I bought a jar of vitamin E cream and dabbed it over the mark. Beyond these few details, however, I remember next to nothing about this boy. Nothing, that is, except the night of the red underwear. Oddly, it's the red underwear I remember most clearly of all. For instance, I remember that they weren't actually underwear, only the bottom half of a finely ribbed, all-cotton leotard I'd cut up one day when I'd run out of clean underwear. This is why they barely stayed put on my body: they had no elastic to hold them up. This is why I apologized to the Greek boy.

"They aren't real underwear," I said.

"It doesn't matter," he told me.

But first, let me set the stage — because that's exactly what it was like: being on a stage. The Greek boy belonged to one of the more exclusive fraternities on campus, and his room, which he shared with another boy, was enormous with very high ceilings. I may have embellished things over the years, but I remember ornate creamy white moldings and velvet, moth-eaten drapes. I remember that the two single, unmade beds looked small and nearly toy-like in the enormity of that room. I remember that the Greek boy took care to lock the door, so that his roommate wouldn't barge in on us, and then, I think, he shut the drapes. One thing seemed crystal clear to me at the time: the Greek boy was in a bad mood. I was aware of a kind of severity in him that I'd never seen before, and I remember that he was drinking whiskey straight out of a bottle while sitting in an armchair covered by a white sheet, and he wasn't offering me any — if I wanted a sip, I had to ask. I also remember that the expectation hanging over both of us that night was that we

were going to have sex. The problem, I believe, was that neither of us was particularly interested in this prospect. I suspect we were both scared. Maybe he was afraid (as I know I was) of giving up what I was beginning to suspect were impossibly childish notions about love and sex belonging together. Maybe we were both afraid of the cynicism an act of intercourse between us would entail. That, anyway, is how I think of it now, how I explain what happened next.

“Take off your clothes,” he told me, and for some reason I obeyed. Crouching over my own body, I slid off my jeans, my socks, unbuttoned my shirt, unclasped my bra.

“Stop,” he said. This left me in my underwear, which, as I’ve already explained, were red, and not underwear at all. “Walk over to the window.”

It went on like that for a while, with the Greek boy directing me from his armchair, telling me to walk toward him and away from him, across the enormous room and back, ordering me to turn, to bend, to stand up, to raise my arms over my head, to spin in a circle, slowly. I remember feeling like a piece on a chessboard, that’s how carefully he seemed to consider each new move for me. “Again,” he said many times. “Again.” All of this went on for an extraordinarily long time, at least that’s how it seems to me now. And what’s funny is that now, so many years later, I see that as far apart as we were that night, we were doing something together, resisting something. Together we were refusing to grow up. Together, we were playing at being children. Together, we burned ourselves into one another’s memory.

✕

The last boy is the one I remember best of all, and the one I can tell you the least about. How did he look? Medium build, medium height. Brown hair. It’s pretty foggy. What kind of car did he drive? Something sporty. At least, it felt sporty to me. I know his mother had recently hanged herself with an extra long industrial-strength extension cord, I remember that much. And I know that his girlfriend at the time, a dancer, had broken up with him right on the heels of this event, and I remember thinking that was pretty shabby. I think I said as much to boy, although in what context I no longer recall, but the setting of the cafeteria vaguely suggests itself. He was only the friend of a friend of a friend of mine — or, to put it more precisely, his ex-girlfriend, the dancer, was a friend of my



boyfriend's sister. And by "my boyfriend," I mean my future husband, whom I had only just recently started dating, but in whom I had complete confidence and with whom I was a 1,000 percent in love. This was obvious to everyone even remotely in our orbit, which is why the time I spent with the boy whose name I no longer recall was not romantic in the least, but time spent in the spirit of a friendly Platonic inquiry or an extended How-do-you-do?

We had two things in common: suicidal mothers (although, of course, his mother had succeeded in killing herself, whereas mine was forever only making failed attempts) and food. We didn't talk much about our mothers, but we did talk about food, and somehow, we got onto the topic of dumplings — the Chinese kind, greasy and sweet, that you sometimes find at dim sum restaurants. I'd never had this kind of dumpling before and the boy whose mother had just killed herself found this tragic. "They're amazing!" he told me earnestly. "And so cheap. You've got to try them. I'll tell you what. Let's go to Chinatown today. I'll buy you some. We'll drive down there. I have a car."

The car had actually belonged to his mother. I suppose that fact is neither here nor there, but I was aware of it the whole time, and I suspect he was, too.

We spent the afternoon and evening together — a long stretch, but I can't remember exactly how we passed all that time. I know we sped down Morningside Drive with the windows wide open and the Talking Heads blaring on the car stereo. I'm pretty sure we saw a movie at the Thalia. And for a while, we sat in a park filled with flowers and homeless men and women stretched out on newspaper-covered benches. At some point, we strolled around the Village, where the boy bought me a homely necklace made of oversized ceramic beads. It is something I never wore, yet kept for many, many years in a clay dish filled with ponytail holders and old lipsticks. Finally, after it was already dark, we drove to Chinatown to find some dumplings.

The streets were so crowded that we had to drive as slowly as the pedestrians (who kept spilling off the sidewalks) were walking. This was perfect for our purposes — scouting out a good dumpling restaurant — although in the end, we didn't eat at a restaurant at all, but bought the dumplings from a man selling them out of a steaming street cart. The boy whose name I no longer recall pulled up halfway onto the sidewalk and got out to place the order. He came

back with half-a-dozen small wax-paper bags inside each of which were three or four dumplings, big as golf balls, white and vaguely translucent. Some of these were coated with sesame seeds, some with tiny black mustard seeds, and some were plain. Inside, the dumplings were smeared with bits of ground meat, or stuffed with gobs of sweet bean paste — yellow and red and black. The skins, which were made with rice flour, were so gummy they made our teeth stick together, and this of course was both amusing and gross, but mostly amusing, even delightful. The grease from the dumplings slid down our throats and chins, so hot still that it felt light, not heavy or cloying. It felt almost quenching, like water. There were dozens of dumplings, and it's not easy, in fact, it's fairly hard work to eat such chewy, sticky, meaty morsels one right after the other, but that's what we did, sitting there in the dead woman's car; they were just so good, and we were so hungry. And to this day, when I order Chinese dumplings, or anything equally hot and greasy and sweet, I think of that boy and of the flowers that were in bloom that day — cherry and apple blossoms mostly, because it was spring, after all. It was April.

## NEED ARISE

---

*Clint Garner*

Somewhere on those high planes we exhaled the last of ourselves,  
walked that narrow rim of red clay around the quarry.  
And when the pines drifted east we sifted in a long, slow curve —  
we couldn't have dug up our dead if we wanted.  
We were towns we'd left once more, our bodies  
cleaving at the mouth, a nullity about the eyes — as if  
all the stars had gone supernova — leaving us  
to reimagine the pallor as terrain.

In all our starts

we spent our breath leaving, joined at every state line by upshot.  
This was our ambition: to make these bodies of ours a home,  
then hide them. But it never did leave us altogether, did it?  
One of us would see a knife  
stuck in the bark of a sycamore in the fields,  
or down by the riverbanks a big hare sat on its haunches —  
have to start our way back, harder than ever  
to heft the palms of our hands.

We had a habit of referring

to household oaths, and the ferocity of the affections  
that informed them. Should we have shut that window?  
Now clutter. Should we have said *harder by the sun?*  
Now annihilating the cool whitewashed compound  
before us. Should we have said  
*what a man might look like undressed in the field,*  
because for all we knew life might have been meant  
to happen through the breast?  
These were the avatars by which we knew each other, and  
what escaped us then is now mired  
in the wash of the field.

## HOUSE OF THE LARGE FOUNTAIN, POMPEII

---

*Matt Donovan*

Here, not much remains. Among other things, there are a few sheared-off pillars and some grass-covered stairs, a pebble-strewn atrium, four marble thresholds of four bricked-up rooms, some nettles and a bowing brick arch. Yet the back garden's eye-snaring fountain is still fully intact, with its patterns of stones and glass and shells, its mosaics of wing-spread birds and half-moon bands and a baffled-looking river god with a scraggly beard of reeds, and its two stone-carved faces — a mask of Tragedy, a lion-hooded Hercules — gap-mouthed and flanking the sides.

✕

All through my childhood, a fat *Children's Bible* sat on my shelf propped next to a uniform azure block of Hardy Boys Mysteries. I don't remember who gave it to me — it seemed as if it had always been there — and if I also don't remember ever reading it, I spent plenty of time pouring over its pastel-heavy illustrations or just gazing upon its cover, with its mottled marble design and turbaned, staff-clutching desert wanderers who had their belongings strapped to donkeys and seemed to be on a long journey toward the title's dwarfing, serif-flourished *E*.

Inside, among all of the gauzy drawings of burning cities and Roman troops and buff, kind-faced Jesuses, I dog-eared my favorite pages: doomed hoards in rising rainwater, clinging to what was left of the shore; the son of God perched atop a jutting clump of rocks, with arms spread wide while a crimson and cloven Satan soars off, defeated, into a radiant sky.

✕

Of course, this Pompeii home's fountain no longer functions. At one point, though, water would have flowed from the mountains for more than twenty miles to the city's brick reservoir. From there, it would have been channeled through a complex network of pipes that led to one of the town's pressure-reducing towers, then diverted along what's now called the Street of Mercury before being pumped through its nozzle and sloshing down a short set of center-stage steps in order to swirl and glimmer in the basin beneath those

bookending stone masks that, it's believed, were designed to hold candles.

The fountain, strategically placed in order to be seen by all visitors to the home, served as a little flag-wave of prosperity and is representative of the kind of showy garden ornament that was fashionable in the years before Pompeii was destroyed. It is, one early visitor wrote, much more a novelty than a thing of beauty. For one thing, the fountain's positioning within its covered structure — known as an aedicule, or "little temple" — is asymmetrical. Moreover, the mosaic's fragments of stone and glass are arranged haphazardly, although this appears to have been intentional, with the irregular angles and jagged shapes serving to refract the candlelight that would have spilled from the mouths and eyes of Tragedy and Hercules and created an effect that was either a picturesque shimmer or, as some have guessed, something fairly ghastly.

✕

Hercules — as a Roman god of victory, fecundity, and commercial success — can be found throughout Pompeii. In the town's homes, gardens, baths, and shops, he's often immediately identifiable by his trademark club or lion skin cape or some shorthand version of one of his twelve labors: wrestling a three-headed dog, say, or shouldering the weight of the world while en route to the golden apples.

Other times, stripped of signifiers, things are less clear. One fresco perhaps shows Hercules freeing Theseus from the Underworld, although the image might actually depict a gaggle of musicians and mimes — we can't be sure. That almost featureless head perched high on the Porta di Nola arch belongs either to Hercules or Minerva. The man asleep beneath the cypress, or the drunk trying to aim his piss, or the hunched figure leading a pig to slaughter — they all might be Hercules as some have claimed, but look as if they could represent nearly anyone at all.

✕

"Split a piece of wood," the Gospel of Thomas claims, "And I am there. Lift a stone and you will find me."

Yet he's been found elsewhere too. A slice of toast, a bathroom tile, a rusted-out cast iron pan. Dry wall splotches, plywood grain, soap scum, ketchup, an MRI. There's Jesus in the bark of the storm-ravaged oak, in the butthole of a poodle named Carmi.

Years ago, cued by a viewing of *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (at a time when a white-robed Max von Sydow hovering climatically in the clouds answered everything I might ask), I once swore to my parents that I could see a groomed, kernel-eyed head of God nestled at the bottom of my popcorn bowl.

✧

On the garden's back wall, against a backdrop of yellow and blue, as a means of creating a sense of lushness that went on and on, there had been frescoes of myrtle trees, oleander and lavender, as well as some heron-like birds hunting lizards behind a painted lattice fence. Oddly, despite the pains taken to create that illusion of paradise-thick foliage, the trompe l'oeil effect was undercut by a separate hunting scene — men chasing after a boar — painted toward the top of the bricks. This is not a lush paradise, the men with spears insisted, but merely a wall.

Which is all that we see today. That painted garden began to collapse not long after the house was excavated, and the fresco is documented only through nineteenth-century etchings. Even if, just a few years back, some leaves flecked with red flowers still remained, now there's nothing left but a few blotchy pink streaks, and that last holdout bush has vanished.

✧

In the center of a courtyard in Rome, where one can sip cappuccinos or Sardinian wine while watching wall-cloaking jasmine shape-shift in the wind, there's a fountain with a statue of Hercules strangling a serpent. He's perched on a little platform just above a wider circle of six Silenus heads spouting water into a larger pool that's surrounded in turn by six gurgling mouths that look as if they belong to either wolves or dragons that circle a still-wider urn-shaped basin that rests in a pool where water bubbles and ripples night and day.

Here, the half-god hero is nothing more a chubby infant, and even as the snake coils around his forearms and legs, even as water squirts from the forked tongue that juts from its splayed mouth and algae coats the lion skin draped across his back, the kid seems worry-free. With one foot resting on his little bronze toes and the fat-folds of his metal belly glistening, he even looks amused.

In most versions of the story, Hercules skins the Nemean lion

upon completing the first of his labors, impossible feats assigned to him as a means of atoning for the murder of his wife and sons. This fountain's jumble of chronology, though, is easy enough to overlook. I assume the sculptor needed the lion hide as a signifier in order for his work to avoid the appearance of depicting some random, cast-bronze kid smirking while strangling a snake. The artist, too, must have assumed that we'd all understand well enough that the slaughter is still to come.

✧

From "rock" we get to "heaven." How does this happen? We can't be entirely sure, although the trail, some believe, is there. Somewhere within the Indo-European roots, it began with "ak," meaning "sharp" or "edge," which, at some point along its lurching etymological path, hitched itself to "men," giving us "akman," meaning "sharp stone," or "sharp stone used as a tool," then both "hammer" and "the stony vault of heaven."

Do I know this to be true? I don't, but I wish it deeply.

✧

Although George Stevens scouted for locations all through the Middle East (stopping along the way to consult with both the Pope and Israel's prime minister), those particular rocks and peaks didn't seem sublime enough to serve as a backdrop for the life of Jesus. Thus, even though he would need to airfreight backdrop palms and his film's budget bloated out of the gate, Stevens decided to film *The Greatest Story Ever Told* in the United States' Southwest.

Meaning Nevada's Pyramid Lake became the Sea of Galilee, and Moab was the location of the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus wandered Death Valley for forty days and nights, and Mary and Joseph rode donkey-back through miles of unmistakable American landscape against miles of Technicolor blue. And meaning, as the production dragged on into winter, the crew needed to shovel snow from the set and blowtorch the rocks outside of Lazarus's home, and walk-ons were baptized in the Colorado River while wearing wetsuits hidden beneath togas, and the winter-bleached canyons were spraypainted yellow and pink in order to create a cascade of lilies of the field.

For the engineers of Lake Powell, it also meant that the flooding of Glen Canyon would have to wait until Stevens hauled away

his helicopters, rented camels, and mess hall tents. When at last the Holy Land became mere rocks yet again and the water's flow could begin, the flooding lasted for seventeen years, at some point spanning the canyon floor, at some point reaching the faux-Jerusalem walls which, having been discarded by the film's crew, eventually sagged, toppled, and slowly decayed, at last fully submerged.

✧

During the weeks leading up to my family's trip to Pompeii, there were inevitable questions from our five-year-old son.

What do we do if the volcano erupts? How will we get away in time?

How do you know it won't wake up? Was everyone who died there bad?

I told him about seismographs, scientists keeping watch, how our rented car — *badabing!* — would carry us home. Choosing to stopper up all kinds of thoughts (Cyrus still sleeps in "Justice Served!" Batman pajamas), I told him there was just no way. Easy.

Easy enough, too, not to mention the unconsoling fact that the last time Vesuvius erupted — March 18, 1944 — barely anyone was killed. During that spring of the war, American pilots stationed near Salerno first heard a sound like a detonating bomb. By Sunday night, according to one diary, "the roars became more frequent, and grumbled like a lion." All during the night, streams of fire shot into the air, and the wings of some of the grounded bombers melted in the heat. The earth bellowed, someone wrote, and Vesuvius panted like someone gasping for breath and black stones pummeled the trees and tents and, on a night in which nearly everyone in the end was safe, the whole world seemed aflame.

✧

In 1980, an earthquake destroyed part of a bakery as well as the roof of the House of the Labyrinth and forced a complex grid work of supports to be propped against walls throughout the site. During one especially soggy October, a flash flood raced through the Villa of Diomedes, causing a large chunk of wall to topple off. At the House of the Moralist and the House of the Chaste Lovers, garden walls caved in, and, on a beautiful autumn day, in a Pompeii house known for its sumptuous outdoor space, a pillar thudded into the grass without warning.



Just a few years ago, much of the House of the Gladiators crumbled to the ground, turning it into a road-blocking mound of rubble. Although the house had been damaged before (during the bombing campaigns of World War II, frescoes depicting winged, shield-wielding Victories were forever lost), it had remained essentially intact. Now, though, this place — a kind of barracks where gladiators once scribbled graffiti on the walls (“On April 19th I baked bread”) and trained with spears and nooses for battles that, as one ancient advertisement boasted, would take place “without interval” — remains an out-of-bounds heap of earth and stones.

✕

In the back corner of our two acres in New Mexico, there’s a lumpy cluster of rocks, perhaps twenty feet across. Because of the land’s odd undulations and lack of clear landmarks within its desert scrub, I never seem to reach the spot by the same path. Nonetheless, after a short, disorienting bout, they’re always there.

Standing on those rocks, I can see paddle cactus, yucca, wilted mistletoe, and drought-stunted pines. At the base of the steep outcrop, there’s a long-toppled piñon, guarded by a straight-backed juniper and a single clump of desert marigold. Across the dried-up riverbed, there’s a gnarled squiggle of tree roots where the earth has eroded, and the rocks themselves are scattered with pinecones and blotched with lichen that’s charcoal-black.

Some days, I drift out to those rocks just to sit alone and feel the sun’s heat and listen to the hodgepodge of sounds: mostly the interstate or a jet’s distant roar, but sometimes a grasshopper’s whirring leap or a towhee’s two-chirps-then-wild-trill cry. More often, though, rather than carving out moments of rarefied hush, I’m there with my wife and sons, swapping on-the-spot tales. “The Story Rocks,” Cyrus dubbed them a few years back, and if our family has anything resembling a Sabbath ritual, it is this: some Sundays, when there’s no playdate scheduled and the weather is fine and one of us happens to think of it, the family pilgrimages here with root beers and little Ziplocs of snacks and takes turns making things up.

To be clear, most of what we spin is fairly forgettable stuff: riffs on magic sneakers or talking ducks or a clumsy astronaut bear. Once, however, we tag-teamed our way through the lab-blast origins of The Cactus, a green-spandex-wearing do-gooder who, perhaps unsurprisingly, can shoot spines from his chest and hands.

Our invented hero has remained a family fixture ever since. In the prenoon heat, sprawled on our backs with Cheetohs-reeking breath, we still find new ways for the Cactus to go *mano-a-mano* with his dreaded arch-nemesis, The Porcupine, before sealing his inevitable victory with a trademark loop-de-loop beneath the light of yet another full moon.

✧

Even if the story of Hercules is chock-full of change, some transformations, it would seem, make for better art.

Herculean moments not depicted by the Romans include Hera, after trying to prevent the bastard half-god from entering the world, transfiguring Galanthis, the midwife who helped deliver him, into a skittering weasel. Or there's Hercules's mother, long after the mortal half of her son has died, clasping the severed head of Eurystheus, the man who had imposed the twelve labors, and gouging out its eyes with a hairpin before the head shrivels, some say, into a shape resembling a duck.

Of all the frescoes, sculptures, and friezes excavated in Pompeii, none depict Hercules becoming a god after he's duped into wearing the poisoned tunic that sears his flesh and melts his bones and, Ovid tells us, makes his blood hiss like a hot blade dipped into water. And none capture Hercules punishing the money-extorting Minyans by slicing off their ears and noses and hands and threading the pieces into necklaces he forced each man to wear.

✧

The only time I've seen Cyrus in abject fear, we were in bed, glutted on brioche French toast, watching *Looney Tunes*. For a while, all was well: Sylvester the Cat exploded on cue, and the Coyote continued to pitch from cliffs, disappearing, with a little whiff of smoke, into the desert far below. But everything changed during a cartoon featuring Bugs and Dr. Jekyll, a man addicted, our son learned, to guzzling beakers of fizzy red stuff from his lab. Terror, of course, ensues, especially given how Jekyll keeps sputtering back to Hyde, and Bugs, thinking he can save his newfound friend, nails shut rooms only to find the panting, wild-eyed thing lurking behind him once again. Halfway through the episode, our son was weeping, begging us to make it stop.

Easy. We turned off the TV, explained what we could about

magic potions, and allowed him to gobble down the last strawberries. Soon, we were sprawled beneath the quilt again and Bugs was back, battling it out with Bruno the Acrobatic Bear who, reassuringly, had the rabbit in his crosshairs from the get-go.



In the Marvel comics that I grew up with, Hercules managed a few not entirely welcomed cameos. An ill-advised brawl with the Hulk ended in a tie (a tie!), and, in a notorious team-up with Spider-Man, he once saved New York from destructor-ray-wielding robots who, in a fiendish plot, intended to ransom the city for two billion dollars. "And if they can't STEAL a city, THEY'LL DESTROY IT!" the revved-up cover warned. Except the City-Stealers, as the villains were called, didn't count on Hercules chaining Manhattan to his chest and, fists clenched, literally dragging the entire island back to the bay.

Euripides's *Herakles*, of course, depicts a vastly different man. When that play begins, his wife and children are about to be killed by a bloodthirsty king, and, in a further scramble of the story's usual order of events, we learn that Hercules, off in the Underworld wrestling Cerebus, is already on the verge of completing his final impossible task. Despite this last fact, there's no hope or heroics to be found: the villain takes his time sharpening his knives and belittling the twelve labors; the lion skin no longer signifies triumph, but rather the butchery to come. (Whenever he wears that mane and jaws, the Chorus asks, "Who could tell beast from man?")

If convention insists that the heavyweight arrives to rescue his family with mere seconds to spare, his appearance also ensures their deaths. In the end, we already know what the Messenger will report: as the hero stood, torch in hand, his sons at his side, preparing to offer tribute to the gods by plunging a flame into water, madness flooded through him. His heart thundered like waves pounding the surf and, as torchlight flickered across the basin, for a long time Hercules didn't move.

After he awakes and finds his family scattered in a heap around him and his hands wet with their blood, Hercules doesn't need a Greek playwright to jumble his story's chronology in order to insist that, given what he's done, no atonement is possible.

"The earth itself," he says, "can hardly bear up under their weight."

✧

Many times now, I've heard the laundry room's tell-tale clatter, and, from among the dark swirl of clothes, fished out a full handful of stones that Cyrus had pocketed during his day.

Every time, when I hand them back, it's always the same. Before bed, beneath his ceiling's scattered glow-in-the-dark stars, with its lopsided Big Dipper and our own invented constellation in the shape of a wide-mouth C, he tells me the story of why he chose them, then arranges the stones in a row on the windowsill, seeming to know in advance the precise place of each one. He's dawdling, of course, resisting lights-out, but he also works with such precision and care that I let it slide every time. Often, he'll step back, assess what he's made, then lean in again to reorder one or two, as if knowing exactly what's needed to bear him through the night and what the procession affords.

## GIVING YOUR BODY TO SCIENCE

---

*Brenda Miller*

You make such a fine specimen after all: reproductive organs deformed, something wrong in the blood, the cells. Cells that divided incorrectly, so you become a test case for interns who file into the room where you sit in your paper gown, feet in socks, smiling your crooked smile as they shuffle in nervously, not looking at you. You, who will be paid \$30 for donating your living body to science, who will lie back and hook your feet in stirrups while nervous young hands practice putting in the speculum.

*Speculum*: such a strange word, like *speculation*, the nose of it nudging aside the most sensitive tissues so the curious may peer inside. Inside, they slip gloved fingers to diagnose the mystery: your strange cervix with its cockscomb hood, the errant cervical cells, a riddle for them to figure out on their own — you're a trick. Tricky to get the speculum in without hurting, so hurt you they do, yet they're the ones who wince, say *Sorry, sorry, sorry* all in a rush as they put gloved hands inside, feel around, and one of them gets it, only one. One man who's proud of himself for divining what's wrong with you, even pats your knee as he says it — *DES Syndrome* — as if those words now form your name, as if he now owns you.

You smile again, say *Congratulations*, your pelvis aching as they file out, and one of them — a young woman with straight black hair — says to you, surely against the rules: *Don't you feel weird doing this?* and then she's gone. Gone with the rest of them, and you wish you'd said something — something about the \$30 and how it will buy groceries, something about helping womankind — but you wait silently in the empty room for the next batch to arrive, staring at clear jars of cotton balls and Q-tips, the tongue depressors, the bandages, and metal cabinets shutting in all manner of secrets.

## FROM SCIENTIST TO ANIMAL

---

*E. A. Farro*

The Trinity Site is a fenced-in area of desert about the size of a football field outside Albuquerque, New Mexico. The first atomic bomb was detonated here in the summer of 1945. The same open flat land, scraggly tall weeds, lone tufts of grass, and bare gray dirt are inside and outside the fence. I'm four months pregnant; I didn't realize that this field trip on grassland ecology would take me to a nuclear bomb test site. I don't show yet and no one at the conference knows I'm pregnant. I don't know if it's okay to be here. At the entrance gate we signed a waiver acknowledging the risk of stepping on undetonated explosives, but nothing about radiation.

A monument of black lava marks the location of where the explosion crater was. The government bulldozed the green glass that formed from the heat of the explosion. Black-and-white photographs along the back fence document the bomb assembly. Descriptions on placards accompany the photographs, as if this were a museum and not metal chain links that separate desert from desert. The photographs show young men, limber, full heads of hair. They strap the bomb onto a sedan to drive it to the site. These were young scientists like me. They were probably enthusiastic to explore how the world works. Did they realize the devastation this bomb could produce? I am angry that this too is science. I walk slowly toward the gate. It's 97° F, full August sun. I feel the boundary of consciousness, *I don't want to faint here*. I think of the tremendous accomplishments these scientists made. When the test bomb went off here, citizens in Japan still had forty days to go about their daily life. Forty days to not know that your shadow can be photographed onto a sidewalk by a nuclear bomb.

Part of my work as a scientist is to track the hydrologic cycle with hydrogen and oxygen isotopes in lake water and rainwater. This work is built on baseline information from a global network that monitors tritium in precipitation to check for clandestine bomb tests. As a scientist, my goal is to understand the connection between water, climate, and ecosystems. And yet. The tools I use were developed for military interests.

A sign tells me an hour in the fenced area will expose me to

half of a millirem of radiation. Hand to belly, I think of Byrd receiving radiation. We named the fetus Byrd on the spring morning we found out I was pregnant. We had gone outside to examine our bewilderment in the early morning light. The perfect body of a cardinal lay on the sidewalk in front of our apartment. Though I knew I was five weeks pregnant, I was convinced that in the moment the test stick showed two pink lines, a piece of this bird's soul dropped down into my womb.

The sign continues with information about common ways we receive radiation in our daily lives. My body, the vessel for this baby, cannot protect against gamma rays. On a cross-country flight you get about two millirem of radiation. I want to leave this place; I contemplate renting a car to drive home. I imagine the conversation with my husband Steven. He would weigh the risk of driving 2,000 miles against the risk of two millirem of radiation.

I walk out the gate, back into plain desert, I expect the exquisite heat to let up, but it's the same. I kneel to inspect the vertebrae of an animal on the ground; a piece of jaw attached to spine. The other scientists on the field trip move in groups from photograph to photograph. Stair-step limestone mountains frame this small piece of earth. The fence and the plot of land are obliterated when I step back and see the horizon of mountains reaching beyond.

On the bus I sit alone. No matter the event: a wedding, an exam, a canoe trip, a work conference, my pregnant body and this fetus are the subplot to everything. My mind secretly calculates, forages for fresh food and opportunities to rest. I don't feel like chatting about my research while the pregnancy plot flows through my mind. I feel lonesome though, like I am sitting alone in the elementary school cafeteria. As we drive away from the Trinity Site I watch the expanse of desert, ocean-like, out the bus windows. I think up excuses to use later for why I will not be drinking beer. I think about how I have avoided telling colleagues and work peers that I'm pregnant. *I must tell my advisor.*

In my early twenties I sought spirituality in experiences: mind-opening books, intense love affairs, deep philosophical discussions, exotic trips. In graduate school I race, throw myself ahead. I try to get to my office before eight in the morning; hunger drives me home at night. I eat dinner and then roll into bed. I burn out each academic year with class work, labwork, writing papers, teaching.

In the summers, I go out West to collect samples of mud and water from lakes. I survey trees and wildflowers in mountain forests and tundra. Sleeping outside, away from computers, phones, electricity, and running water, I reincarnate. My body, as much as my mind, a tool for work, and inside me tension and bitterness unravel. I return home strong and happy. In the mountains I know the purpose to life. Back home I only remember *the feeling*, but I can't remember what I *knew* in the dramatically textured landscape.

A female professor in my department tells graduate students, "My husband and I thought that if we worked hard enough, for long enough, something would come through." They lived airplane rides away for several years before finding jobs in the same place. *Be patient*. Only then did they have a child. We are expected to live apart from our partners, some scientist even live apart after having children. I spent childhood between divorced parents' houses, so I am confused by the advice that Steven and I each find the best individual jobs possible. Institutionalized parental leaves are only for tenure-track faculty — it's as if we must earn our right through academic achievement to live with our lover, to have a family.

One day I realize it's already done. The idea of children is in my heart; somewhere in me the seed of motherhood has rooted. I feel a palpable emptiness. Steven and I talk round and round. We cannot rationally decide to have a baby. It would mean not living apart, not following the best jobs, and then perhaps not making it academically. Our bodies decide for us. We find each other again and again, unable to choose with our minds, we answered with limbs and mouths, call out each other's names.

I am exhausted yet insomniac, hungry yet repulsed by food; glad that my body works yet cramped and uncomfortable. My friends say how they loved their baby from the first moment they knew they were pregnant, how they loved never feeling alone. In winter I walk out to the middle of frozen lakes, I walk to find absolute quiet and stillness, to be completely alone. I don't feel a presence with me as I deliver my talk in Albuquerque, as I fly home, as I go to my office, as I make love to Steven.

I hear the heartbeat at the midwife's office and I cry at the fury of effort, the speeding thump-thump. On my bike I imagine the heartbeat in my pelvis and the heartbeat in my chest. I imagine a double glow from each spot. But I don't use the word *love*.



The fetus' first kicks are like a small animal roaming inside me. Sometimes Byrd feels like one of the invasive eighty-pound carp in the Mississippi you catch with a garbage pail lid for self-defense. The fetus is closer to the size of a goldfish. My initial reaction, from the gut, is to make the movement stop.

The scene is not dreamlike, but in the bold red, orange, yellow brushstrokes of a cave painting. Myself: lines of hair and limbs, the pregnant belly an exaggerated globe in orbit. Animals with manes blowing in the wind.

I imagine walking into the archeological scene; hunters back from an expedition hang animals from trees. Blood drains from slit necks into clay bowls. The grace of a stretched antelope, muscle and bone.

My craving for blood is in the category of dirt, rocks, rust, laundry detergent, chalk. My pregnant body in flux, perpetually unfamiliar.

What I mean by craving: as I pump my legs round and round on the bike, I hold the image of sweating glass of red blood. In my office I read over applications, but my mind focuses on the glass, the deep color. Like pornography, the cup of blood is separate from a body. It is impossibly cold while the clay pots catch steaming liquid that smells of mud and shit and scrap metal.

I'm a bridesmaid in my friend Sally's wedding; the guests are mostly poets. I'm five and a half months pregnant; Steven is at a conference in England. I stay at her parents' house. In the afternoons I take long naps, lose myself to the bliss of sleep, transcend the prewedding tensions of an interfaith marriage, signage to direct traffic on the highway. The night before the wedding I stay in. Sally and Peter go to a bar where all the young friends gather. I'm asleep by nine. I want to be able to stay up late the next night.

I wake up and it's dark; I need to pee. *I need to pee now.* I hear the shower running, I hear Sally's voice. I imagine knocking, "Can I come in for one sec?" The shower curtain *is* opaque. I'm about to burst. A map of my room comes to mind. There are three doors: one to the hall, one to the closet, and another with framed pictures leaning against it. I get up quietly and walk with my arms out in front of me. I feel for the picture frames in the dark. I move pictures over one by one; find a lock below the doorknob. I have to pull the

door with my whole body weight. I pause, the shower beats down. I hear giggles. I step outside onto wet tile. The almost full moon illuminates a clay fireplace and metal chairs. I'm thankful for the thick covering of Douglas fir that hide me from the neighbors. I step to the side of the door and crouch. Emptying my bladder is heaven, even if someone were to find me: naked, barefoot, and pregnant, it would be worth it.

In the sixth month Byrd wakes me at night with frantic movements, like a set of bees let loose. I stop shaving my armpits and legs. I figure nature is already taking me back. My internal organs shift into new configurations as my uterus expands. When I touch Steven's lean body I'm surprised, as if I expected the whole world to inflate with me, as if we are all in a Botero painting. I no longer fit into normal clothing. I read in a pregnancy book how I might feel ridiculous having sex, "like a rhinoceros." But I know that I'm ripe, that I'm bursting with potential. That *potential* is excruciating, awesome, profound. The tufts of armpit hair a part of my beautiful animal body working.

At seven months the movements don't wake me. The kicks are less sudden. Byrd now does swim-bys — like a sea mammal swimming toward a crowd, pressing its body against the glass. I wonder if Byrd is trying to get out, to make contact, or just turning. A friend tells me how she didn't realize until she was twelve-years old that her mother didn't know everything she was thinking. I'll be observing this child forever and I will never know Byrd's mind.

I ask my stepmother when I will become a mother, she says, "When the baby is born." The continual risk of miscarriage haunts me. I read in a book to consider my options ahead of time for what I'll do if the baby dies in childbirth. What if the baby dies at seven months? Or eight months? Is there more loss for each month that the fetus grows? Am I a little bit more a mother the longer I carry Byrd inside me? If a baby is born and dies right away, are you a parent in a way you wouldn't be if the baby died inside you at nine months? At three months? Will the soul come back in a later pregnancy? Are souls out there waiting?

Steven and I go to the pool. I wear a black-and-white polka dot bikini. An old women in the shower points at my huge belly, "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"We didn't find out," I say.

It felt too intrusive watching Byrd in the ultrasound, seeing the mouth open and close, seeing the flow of blood, seeing bones through skin. In the pool, a limb of Byrd's presses out below my ribs, I wiggle it back in. I like that our family of three are all in the water, I feel closer to Byrd. *We are all in this together*, I say with arms and legs moving through the water.

Voices burst from the house. Shoes of all sizes barricade the entry. There's an eddy of children in costume, children in red jumpers, children entangled in cats cradle. I am eight and a half months pregnant and it is almost Christmas. I am too large to squeeze past a group talking on the stairs. "Excuse me," I say to a thin man in a plaid shirt. He smiles and steps back an inch. It's not enough. I smile. He walks up three stairs and onto the landing. I feel a wicked sense of glee as groups of people move to let me go by, my belly huge and vibrating.

In each bedroom a circle of people play music. In one room they sing sea chanteys, in the next, banjo, guitar, mandolin, and fiddle radiate out as new players join at the edges. Despite the cacophony of music I'm sleepy, legs like tree trunks; my feet flattened by the extra weight.

The children at the party make the miracle and strangeness of pregnancy feel normal. The day before a graduate student said to me, "You know that is basically a parasite." I hear researchers in my lab speculate about a past female graduate student who got pregnant and dropped out. Studies discover over and over that motherhood is the reason woman leave science, leak out of the pipeline. A female professor tells me that she taught the day after giving birth. Another female professor tells me she took five days off, *it is all you need*, she said and looked me in the eye. I want to ask the parents at this party what did you need? Why did you decide to have children? What does it mean to be a parent?

I realize that my body is not wakeable with cookies or music or splashing water on my face. I open the door to the room where we threw our coats. Six girls lying on the bed roll their eyes. They cuddle closer together, hands clasped, bodies pressed like spoons. They look like vampires waiting for sundown; black eyeliner smudged from rooting around or from tears or from just not being washed off for days. One girl whines, "You bumped me." She sits up, moves

her body away from the pile. Another girl comes to check on her, she kneels in front of her with her legs on either side of her body, lays her friend back down. I remember this intimacy with my high school girlfriends. I wonder at it now, physical intimacy not aimed at sex or release. I find my coat in a pile by the window and go out quickly, close the door behind me.

My final week and I don't know these are my last days to jump in a car without a thought, to sit in silence. On Monday I hear from the National Science Foundation that I will not get a postdoctoral fellowship. I can't wear clothes on Tuesday, just a blanket wrapped around my waist, the pressing, pushing, buzzing of my belly too much. With the winter sun on my back, I email and call potential postdoctoral advisors from the sun porch of our apartment. We spin out ideas, discuss upcoming deadlines. Each day starts at seven, I work until Steven comes home for dinner. I don't want to make love; I don't break up my day with a swim. I am not ready for the baby. I have up to a month left, but I must get the applications in. I am like a puma on the hunt — patient, silent, untiring, absolute focus. I re-read my work from the day before bed, then Steven sits behind me and we breathe together. I try to match his slow rhythmic breath, unravel enough to sleep.

Friday morning I wake to wetness between my legs. An unscented colorless fluid forms a puddle when I stand. I know I just got a bad lottery ticket. The general hospital rule, based on science, is that a baby should be born within twenty-four hours of water breaking. We also know from science that for a first-time mom whose water breaks before labor starts (about 25 percent of moms) it will take twenty-four hours to go into labor. I reread my applications one more time, go to the post office with a cloth diaper in my underwear. And then I call my midwife.

I put my foot on the shower stool and lunge. Water pounds me. I rub my nipples; turn my face to the forceful stream. A clock is ticking. I rub my clitoris. The contractions come as if I am a wind-up doll, my nipples and clitoris the crank. I must keep labor going. These places of deep intimacy, of sexual allure, transform into the effort to open the tight purse-string of my cervix that holds the baby inside. The contractions reel me. It has been twenty-five hours since my water broke and only in the last few hours did labor start. I grasp the handicap bar. *The pain is with me, the pain is part of me, I*

chant. *Yes, yes*, I say out loud. *Tick tick tick*. I focus on opening. *There is only the present; the past and future are not real*. I'm in a realm I've never known. If I were ever to speak in tongues it would be now. If I were ever to lead a séance, I would be able in these moments. I walk the halls of the hospital in an emerald-green cotton dress. I press into a wall or grab Steven as I am rolled and thrown. I follow the intensity.

It has been thirty hours. A thin nurse with corkscrew curls and the face of a child puts a hand on my arm: "We are going to start you on pitocin." We have the technology to inject a body with hormones that will intensify contractions, induce labor. I feel as if I have been slapped in the face. There are no signs of trouble for the baby or me, just the threat of potential infection, just statistics indifferent to me. I want to learn from my body, I don't want technology to make me more efficient. They hook me to an IV, I stand across from the child-faced nurses, the bed between us, "E. A., now is the time to go into the pain," she says. The synthetic pain.

"It's a boy!" I look, but cannot make sense of what I see. I shake, my teeth chatter. They lay Byrd on my chest, I count four toes. Nurses stand on either side of me, push with their whole body weight into my abdomen. I scream. I count four toes again. The nurses press with their hands again. I scream. The nurses pause.

"It's totally okay, but he only has four toes," I whisper to Steven.

"There are five toes." Steven pets my face.

I feel Byrd wriggle on my chest, wet with amniotic fluid and blood. I count four toes again. The nurses press into me again. All my calm, my control, the focus on breathing, the focus on the task at hand is gone. I scream; nothing left to give.

"You are hemorrhaging," they tell me, perhaps for the second or third time. I feel movement and wonder what's on me; I remember Byrd. "Someone keep their hand on the baby, I can't hold onto him," I call out.

"I've got him, I'm right here," Steven says.

Unbelievable, a bit of Steven, a bit of me, and then my body grew this fetus. My womb opened, a baby came out. Every person was made this way, I remind myself when I hear about a serial killer on the news, I remind myself when students file into my classroom in sweatpants smelling of mildew. Is my amazement a measure of

the distance between nature and myself? The human hubris that we are somehow beyond the mess of wilderness?

As we leave the hospital a nurse reassures me, "Go home and lay on the couch, take your shirt off, just lay the baby on your chest. That's all he wants. He could pick your shirt out from a pile of shirts right now, he knew your smell before he was born." All I want is to inhabit the world of smell and touch and breath. But I dream I am naked and showering with my midwife, I dream blood rains from the sky. I read that inducing labor increases the risk of hemorrhaging; it tires out the uterus so it does not clamp down to stop the bleeding as it should.

My father, a childhood friend, strangers ask, "Was it natural?"

"I did not use pain medications, but..."

"Good," they say before I finish.

I can't stand and hold the baby for more than a moment without feeling faint. Steven brings me pot roast for breakfast, I am ravenous and anemic.

"You didn't use pain medication?" Other friends and strangers exclaim, "You know you don't get a gold star for doing that."

What meaning do we imagine in the actions of our corporeal selves? The body our temple? Or just the vessel we inhabit?

Like people without pets handed a puppy, we are cautious and follow delicate routines with Byrd. A neighbor comes over and unswaddles him; she waves his thin arms and legs in the air, giggles and blows on him. She laughs. I don't know this side of motherhood yet, I am raw and in love and terrified. I can see we are missing part of the point, the joy.

We go out as a family three weeks after the birth to fulfill our need to eat colors and ideas beyond the cycle of feeding, diapers, sleeping, and calls from family. Between bright paintings on the walls of the gallery we find a black curtain that opens into a dark room with four carpeted benches in the middle, a screen as large as at the movies. The images are of black and white clouds, as if we are looking out of an airplane. Orchestra music blares. On the screen the atomic blasts at Bikini Atoll go off. Waves radiate out towards a dense scattering of battle ships.

I think of the great team effort that went into developing *the bomb*. The great curiosity that lead to the creation of great destruc-

tive energy. Science is asking questions and finding ways to answer them. The answers always evolving. Often the use of discoveries and ideas serve the purpose of others: governments, military, court rulings, resource management, hospital rules. It is easy to escape into answering questions, the suspense, risk, innovation give a sense of purpose.

Byrd is warm and sleepy from being carried on Steven's chest. I lick his forehead to wake him, blow on the wet spot. My bare breast reflects the light in the film: the light of sky and clouds and sun and water. His mouth suckles the air; he turns his head left and then right, searching. I position his head and he opens his mouth wide as if to bite into a hamburger. When I kiss Steven now I cannot help but imagine that we are suckling at each other, a muscle memory of comfort. I thought I was discovering breathing skin for the first time kissing as a teen, I thought I was discovering a new form of energy. But now I use my whole body to hold Byrd, feed him, sing to him.

The bomb goes off over and over, we see it from above, from one side and then another side. I wonder about the sea creatures in the waters below, the reef today, sunk skeleton ships. Steven and I will move forward in time as scientists, the questions infinite. The movie is silent for a period of explosions and then the sound of the blast screeches and echoes. Byrd's eyes open for a moment, then close. My nipples tingle. I will be a mother with my whole body forever. Steam and water move up, it makes me think of a flower that keeps blooming. Deep in my breast tingles. The water moves outward in a ripple of waves that engulf ship after ship.

# MICROSCOPIUM

---

Nicole Walker

## Mi·cro·sco·pi·um

The Microscope: a small southern constellation south of Capricorn.

In the 1968 film, *Powers of Ten*, Charles and Ray Eames adjust the lenses of their cameras and zoom out. Beginning with a man at a picnic in a park, every 10 seconds, 1 meter wide, viewed 1 meter away, every 10 seconds the lens moves 10 times farther away and the field of view grows 10 times wide. Cars. Docks. 1,000 meters. City on the lake shore. Edge of Lake Michigan. Then the whole lake. 10 to the 6th earth as solid sphere. Then, whole earth. Good night moon. Paths of planets: Venus, Mars, then Mercury.

Then, that sun, causing its imposing light all over. But then everything disappears. Oh universe. How did you grow so small?

On Sunday night, a student I'd had in the past, Jordan Mahoney, 21, was riding her bicycle through a neighborhood south of the school when another 21-year-old drove her F150 drunk, 66 miles per hour, through that neighborhood. A neighborhood is only as big as the streets are wide, as the reflectors are bright, as the sidewalks are thick, as the stop signs are red. This was a small neighborhood. So small that a driver, driving fast, can't even see it. The driver, driving fast, drunk, exponentially, shifts into the 10 to the 7th power and there, there is no bicycle. There, there is no girl with hair as black as the paint on your truck, as black as your skid marks, as black as the sky beyond the reach of the sun.

That is the problem with death. In the zooming of both time and space, you become smaller and smaller. Now, you're a picture on the cover of the *Arizona Daily Sun*, a newspaper so small, the crease is a cut and thereby, you are halved again.

And then we pause and start back home. This emptiness is normal. The richness of our own neighborhood is unique. Let's go home. 2 seconds per exponent this time. 10 to the 7th, 6th, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Let's reduce. Let's go smaller. 10 to the minus 2, approach the surface of the man on the picnic, cross layers of the skin, tiny blood vessels, an outer layer of cells, a capillary containing red blood cells, then into nucleus of the man, holding the heredity of the man, the



coiled DNA itself, in an alphabet of 4 letters, the code for the man, 4 electrons. Quantum motion. At 10 to the minus 10. We enter a vast inner space. The carbon nucleus. So large and so small. The domain of universal modules. A single proton fills our screen, fuels our scene.

Jordan is still full of potential energy. Jordan's carbon atom still dots the curb. Those protons still shimmer with the quantum energy. If only we could get to know Jordan again, at this quantum level. A class held on the side of the road, her words as inky as 10 to the 40th power, her words as resonant as the hydrogen bonds that keep the street, the grass, the tire, the bumper, the metal, the thump, the braking, braking, braking all together.

## THE GATORS HAVE TURNED

---

*Tessa Fontaine*

What's left of an alligator carcass floats belly-up in the middle of the river. It's small and coated with a thin white film suggestive of delicate fruit. Soft white reflected on the blue-silver water. The half-curved toes of the gator. The gloss.

I listen to the squawk and swoosh of the Mississippi from a ten-foot tin motorboat weaving in and out of floating Styrofoam. We're in the Delta. Everywhere, wild. Everywhere, wild my heart beats because killed gators in the Delta are never just killed gators in the Delta, because my open palm moving toward a friend after a shot of tequila is a gator.

We're in the middle of the boat in the middle of the river, driven by Leila, a naturalist, who tells us the gators have been turning up half-eaten lately.

"Fish?" I ask.

"Not exactly," she says, spitting and smiling. "Cannibalism. They're eating their own."

Species turn on themselves all the time. I'd like to think the reasons for this are unknowable but, of course, each creature's survival has one central drive all the time: fight. Once they develop fangs, tiger sharks will eat their siblings while still in the womb. Twenty-five percent of a desert scorpion's diet is desert scorpion.

"Longest gator on record was right here in the Delta. Over nineteen feet," she tells us and holds one arm out wide, as if to measure this place. "I've seen this before — gators eating their young. Not just other gators' young, but their own."

Here is nature doing its work.

"I wonder if they realize what they're doing," I wish she'd said, but instead, she cranked the throttle.

✧

I read and reread and read and hold and reread Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* because I hope it means that you can cope with illness through the use of metaphors, or metaphors can teach you how to talk about illness, or that illness really is just a metaphor, something more or less than what it is at its dirty little core.

✧

There was this yellow highway mutt, howling from 2:20 to 2:30 a.m., every night. And these bats, taking their mothers into their mouths.

✕

The dead gator is just over my mother's shoulder, a few feet from the boat. I look between it and her, my mother, who sits across from me and eyes all the wild.

"Hungry?" Leila asks, tossing a tuna fish sandwich onto my mother's lap.

Leila drives the boat in boots unreasonably large and hot for August and doesn't much look at my mother, my step-father, and me on her benches, but we're in for as deep as she'll take us.

"People say they can hear singing in this part of the river," she says. "Can you hear it?" she asks, but doesn't wait for an answer. She steers us past her house, which is deep in the swamp and only accessible by boat. It sits back from the bank, shadowed, like some forgotten nest. Squinting toward the house, I try to imagine lines along all the routes around and through it that have ever been walked until the entire structure looks to me like a planet with hundreds of orbiting rings. I want to know who loves her there, and how much and for how long. I want to know this about everyone in the world. *Who loves you?* I want to say, scrunched up close to strangers' faces. My eyes bulging, pressed against a fish tank so the question comes through a crumbling castle and tender brown poops: *How long have they loved you?*

It is easier to ask these kinds of questions through a fish tank. Or inside an anecdote.

The cicadas and motors and thick, thick grind make it too loud to hear anything else. And then, I'm inventing a memory of my mother's hand touching the back of my hair as it curls in the heat. Or maybe it's mine reaching for her temple.

Delta light falls on the woman's curled hands, bony, the green hoses of raised veins, always dry from scrubbing off paint; those hands holding colored pencils, as a child presents a drawing of a face and says, *Help, this doesn't look anything like a face*, and the mother, to the child's immediate displeasure, sketches first a horizontal line across the center of the face, then a vertical one.

*Here, she says, is how you measure the bridge of the nose to the sleep-pockets in the eye, here is how you find the chin and measure up for the*

*larger lower lip, the thinner upper, cleft, brow, cheek angle — build your face around the cross.*

I am young and spend hours in the afternoons drawing reams of cartoon families. Babies with fat toes and dog tails. Teenagers with knob-knees, acne, and boyfriends the size of a mouse. Quadruplets attached at the shoulders being raised by a blind, one-armed grandmother. Each family member named.

She flips over a blank piece of paper, draws a perfect oval, and divides it into quadrants with a cross.

*Make a map on the face so you know where everything fits, she says.*

*No, I say, upset. Faces don't have lines. I don't want lines through my face.*

*Calm down, she says, you're being ridiculous.* I was often being ridiculous. *We'll erase the lines when we're done.*

But they were there. A map that charts the face, the lines that arc the brow and crest the crown, intersections, vivisections, the cuts and cures to the face and head to fix the skull, the bones, the plates. Incisions. Predictions. A map of the future.

✕

A bed in a room. Chrome. Humming.

✕

I checked out *Illness as Metaphor* from the University of Alabama's library. The edition was printed in 1978; it's ragged, yellowed, and full of someone else's marginalia. The notes are neat, pencil, with orderly letters and starred or underlined passages. Sontag writes, "Karl Menninger has observed . . . 'the very word cancer is said to kill some patients who would not have succumbed (so quickly) to the malignancy from which they suffer . . . patients . . . have every right to resent being plastered with a damning index tab.'" Next to these printed words, the marginal author has written: "Mom would not say that she had 'c' because she feared it would have power over her."

I'm immediately inventing narratives: the marginal author is 19, 20, she's in tempo running shorts and a Humane Society 5K tee-shirt, she's got her legs tucked beneath her on a library chair, she's alone, the nylon of the chair is cool, her phone has missed calls, her mechanical pencil is nearly empty.

She writes on: "By not saying the 'c' word, it did [have power]."

✘

Say it.

✘

I'm inventing a memory of her two curved hands coming together like a gator face snapping.

✘

I am of a species. I am watching all the kingdoms for answers.

✘

Say it.

✘

My mother has been dying for two years and one month.

✘

It's more accurate to say, like the thesis of an undergraduate paper I botched, we are all dying all the time. But that isn't how anyone thinks about it. There is a difference in the precision of measurements. Temperature, ounces, milligrams, rates, pressures, fluids, levels, percentages, potentials. A focus on measurements.

Maybe it is most accurate to say her central pursuit for two years and one month has been actively staving off dying.

✘

We should throw carnivals in honor of people who work that hard for even one day, ever. I think about this a lot. The kind of party I wish I could throw. I've been watching this up close for two years and one month. I can't conceive of what it takes for her to stay alive every single day. I don't think I have it in me.

✘

Dear Marginal Author,

Illness : Metaphor as Coconut Cake: Polaroids

✘

Leila has a cooler of Mountain Dew and a pile of tuna sandwiches. To our sides, tall swamp grass and mangrove trees. "Gators are sa-

cred to many native peoples," Leila says. She's not formally trained, but honors each species we pass, calling them by their names.

✧

Dogs howled from the highways through the night as we drove from California through Mississippi to Alabama, the August heat pilling on our lips.

✧

But here my memory of this day becomes less the day itself, and more an increasingly desperate attempt to recall conversations I had on the boat, in the car, in the weeks before I moved, and give them meaning like the swell of cellos behind two hands finally, finally clasp. To recall those first days coming to and falling in love with Tuscaloosa, and the way I can't love Tuscaloosa as consistently as I want to because I leave all the time now; I drive from Tuscaloosa to Birmingham, get on a plane to Vegas or Phoenix or Chicago, get off that plane, wait, pace, cry into a refrigerated airport sandwich, get on another plane to San Francisco, have someone pick me up at a terrible hour, drive to whatever hospital my mother is in. She can no longer talk or walk.

I tell her stories. I recount the tale Leila told us of the Pascagoula tribe who faced an impossible battle against a neighboring tribe, clasped hands and walked into the river until every singing mouth was underwater. They never came back up.

Leila asked if we could still hear the river sing. I tell my mother in her aluminum bed that yes, I hear the river sing from Mississippi to Alabama, the river song and kudzu song. She responds to this in the only way she can respond to anything — with her own humming. They are short melodies, a few notes at a time. These are her only form of vocal communication now. Then she's singing and I'm singing and the Indians in the river, singing, and history and my home in Tuscaloosa and all the things that hum for me all vibrating at once against the same threads, wrecking each other with the small buzz of music.

✧

But this isn't an opera. These are dirty dogs on the highway, howling.

✧

I'm afraid I betray her by writing this. Do I betray her by writing this? I fear that to write this is to accept it. Using the word *dying* discounts the unbelievable work she is doing every hour to fight the dying, how hard it is to try to point to a YES or NO, the wild-eyed stare, the heartbreak of concentration, how hard it is to identify a picture of a face when someone says *face*.

✧

That's what work is.

✧

We've paid Leila for a full-day tour, asked to be boated as far into the swamps as we can go. As we pass sinewy trees with visible roots, I hear her say, "Bald cypress, tupelo gum," and "cottonwood." She points to little palms and says, "Dwarf palmetto," then to a fragile, curled stalk: "Ruppia." Leila calls each thing by its name in the same quiet voice, like each naming is a prayer. Words to digest in Mississippi. Words with meanings and knowable cycles of rejuvenation.

We sit silently in the boat. I am listening to the Mississippi slap and buzz, to water and bugs and the almost unbearable stickiness of it all, to the perfect violence of this backdrop. Everywhere gators are storing each other in their stomachs. Taking each other inside.

✧

The cross reveals that the corners of the eyes are on the same axis as the tops of the ears, topographies easy to plot. Eyelids have fine creases, and can help convey age. Shade the tear duct. The pupil is darker than the iris, though the iris should also be shaded, and if you look closely, there are subtle veins across the surface of the eyeball.

I was often ridiculous.

The shadow of the nostrils. The twin ridges between openings.

I was afraid the lines would always be there, even if they were only faint. The face would always be marred by scars. The head, vivisected.

✧

My step-dad believes he's a machine that translates musical notes

into words.

He holds the phone up to her face and says, "Honey, your daughter is on the phone."

She begins humming.

The notes are a bit off-key, none of the melodies are recognizable in and of themselves, but somehow each tone follows the other in a familiar way, like she remembers small chord progressions but not the progressions between progressions that make up larger songs. *Na-na-naaaa, na-na-naaaa-na-na*, she says into the phone, the third *na* in the first refrain high and long, the third and fifth in the second strong and lilting up. The sounds are soft.

"Did you hear that?" my step-dad says. "She wants to know how your garden is, honey, how well your garden is growing?"

"Fine," I say.

"Great."

"Good," I say. "Tomatoes and swiss chard really going gangbusters."

"Great," he says. A beat. "I think she has a bit of a headache all the time," he tells me. She can't make any gesture to confirm or deny this. He says, "It's worse in the mornings."

I know what that looks like. The concentrated pain of closed eyes. The stillness.

"*Na na naaaa na.*"

"She wants to know how you've been sleeping?"

I've studied her face, asleep, awake, focused, lost, the angle of her arm, the cinch of her waist, the line between creases in her eyebrows while she sleeps, I know the focus of measurements.

"*Na-na-na-naaaa,*" she says, and then a hushed, "*na.*"

"What is it, sweetie?" he asks her. "Oh," he says, "She wants to know how your cat is."

※

She's been on the edge of death, sometimes with only one fingernail holding on, again and again, and fighting back again and again. This fall and catch, again and again and again.

*Who loves you?* I want to ask the nurses taking care of her, the doctors. I need to know this information for each passing uniformed-body, I want it for everyone in the universe. *How much are you loved? By whom? For how long?*

We were counseled by hospice workers and grief counselors



for months, we were promised by multiple neurosurgeons that she would never progress past the near-vegetative state she rested in for a long time. Pull the plugs, everyone said. Don't make her live like this.

But we didn't. She resists the dying. And now, she sings.

✧

*Resists* is an idiotic word to use. It's flabby. Writing about illness keeps bringing me back to the language of war: battle, fight, wrestle. The agency that language of conflict gives, the agency we wish for. The violence it implies, on both sides.

✧

And so the music is the sound of gators spinning in the delta, the music becomes what saves you and what breaks you.

✧

She fights the dying.

✧

The mutts, paws deep in gravel on the highway flanks, howl long and low for her, the tiny bones of her body now risen from her skin, the sweet shake of her paralyzed hand when she yawns. I'm opened inside to a new and surprising tenderness.

✧

At night, delta bats dive over the water for bugs and echolocate the distances between each other to learn the angle their mothers are swooping. Bats in captivity have been known to eat their own cubs. The bats are delivering frequencies from their hearts into the wild around them and reading the distance from its timed bounce-back, calculating and calculating and calculating. It's important to know how to avoid falling into your mother's mouth. It's crucial to understand the triangulation of three pairs of wings passing.

✧

Dear Dentist, Dear Neighbors, Dear Sunshine, Dear Fuckups, Dear Peanut Shells, Dear Gems, Dear Teachers, Dear Postmistresses, Dear Trombone Notes, Dear Deer, Dear Hobbyists, Dear Quarter-back, Dear Aphids: Who loves you? And how much?

✧

Dear Marginal Author —

Did she make it? Does it matter that that isn't the point anymore?

✧

Leila says a gator will pound its head or bite the edge of the water to show everyone it's his home. The Pascagoula at home in the river. My mother handing me condoms and telling me she'd kill me if she found out I'd used them. My step-father stringing chili pepper lights on our two-headed Christmas tree. The year we ate fish sticks. The night our dog died.

✧

We sit still and watch the battle.

✧

One night I slapped my dear friend in the face after we'd both shot tequila. We were at the black-walled bar on the strip where I knew every bartender's name, and they handed me the drink I like when I walked inside. There is a ceramic bust with two huge breasts on a shelf in the corner. People leave the bar to use the bathroom next door, and a regular brings a taxidermied bobcat in to sit with him.

My dear friend and I disagreed about the level of attractiveness of a guy a few stools over, then talked about a poet or music or something innocuous, and when she leaned toward me for a hug, the tenderness was too much to bear. I slapped her in the face. To enact something. *Anything*.

✧

Who are you out there, alone? Who are you without knowing who you are to someone else?

✧

Sometimes I'm afraid I hear her calling me but I'm so far away, it might only be the sound of that kind of wanting. I'm so far away. I turned.

The house is circled by orbits. I don't want to stand on the worn

hallway carpet and look out the skylight to redwoods above. I won't run my hand over the kitchen cupboards, I won't run my hand over my mother's knuckles and ask her how she's feeling. Instead, because I'm worse, I'll tell her this story:

"We've gone as far as we can go," Leila says. Ahead of us, the narrow channel breaks into skinny streams and mangrove branches have joined at their knuckles to form a wall. She slows the boat to a putter and begins a steep circle back in on our wake. Low flowers near the reflection of sticks going green with algae and splitting in their wet float. We'll point our nose toward the dock. A jolt, suddenly, on one side of the boat, as something bumps us from below. We are quiet, listening. Another jolt, and then another on the other side, and the water around our boat fills with pieces of green-gray bodies emerging from below. Sections of their bodies rise above the water and look like stones, but quickly we can see that there are dozens of them, taking turns with their muzzles to knock our boat. Below, the splash of gnashing teeth, starving empty teeth. Their bodies jumping up out of the water reveal small bodies, entirely fierce, baby gator bodies. We are rocking in the boat, we are gathered in the middle, clinging and screaming. Leila is digging through a cubby beneath her seat and we are grabbing at what we can find in the center of the boat to push them off, and all the baby gators are trying to get into the boat, they are turning and they want something from us, and one particularly hard pound on the left back side of the boat knocks Leila to the floor, gripping at her ankle. My mother is screaming, my step-father is panting and pounding, the babies can't get enough.

From some deep and unfamiliar reserve, I crawl over the life-jackets, buckets, flailing limbs between where I'm jammed in the back and the driver's seat, and use the steering wheel to pull myself upright. A strong jab to the right back dips the sill of our boat to just above the waterline, and the snaps of gator teeth seem almost to my cheek. I grab the throttle in my right hand. My mom starts to lose her balance when a gator holds onto an oar she has in her hand. "Hold on!" I scream back to her and I throw the throttle forward. I think I'm deaf, I hear my blood pumping in the meat of my ears. A quick turn or wrong kind of acceleration will throw us all into the water, and the weight of that paralyzes me for a moment.

I see the bottom of my mom's shoes, I see Leila's closed eyes and mouth moving, as if in prayer, I see my step-dad looking at

me, looking at me. I throw the throttle. We jerk forward. Some little thumps of gator heads clattering on the boat below us. We jerk forward, our necks a little whiplashed, the boat rocking, but then forward. Forward. The thrash of bodies snapping in the water behind us, like the babies had become untethered from nature.

✧

When, or if, I can quell the grief, I open to a new and surprising tenderness. When missing her doesn't ache like knowing you've slapped a dear, sweet friend in the face because you didn't know what else to do. Dogs on the highway.

✧

Dear Marginal Author —

I didn't save anyone.

I'm sorry.

I'm holding still, inside the belly of something huge.

There are tuna sandwiches.

There is ordinary life.

✧

Because, in the end, or, really, in the middle, I'm still some small kid in the middle of a boat in the middle of the river in the middle of the night, desperate to be told, *I am the one who loves you*, and *I love you so, so much*.

## VENTRILOQUENCHED, OR SESSIONS FROM THE SUMMIT

---

### *Aylen Rounds*

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability:

- In the last forty days, have you: Willingly believed statistics provided by scientists whose qualifications you did not know? Been haunted by nightmares involving the Rockies?
- Matthew McConaughey is afraid of revolving doors. Cameron Diaz has a doorknob phobia. Have you had any trouble being inside of anyone recently?

I noticed from your intake form that you're having some trouble with thirst. Of course, you can lead a horse to water, or you can sit on your couch and drink Bud Light. Steven Petrosino drank 33 ounces of beer in 1.3 seconds. Peter Dowdeswell, while upside down, drank one pint of champagne in 3.3 seconds. The largest cup of sweet tea ever made was 912 gallons in a glass that measured nine feet high. Drinking a gallon of milk in an hour might kill you, but then, what won't? For one thousand days, a man named Mahesh Ahirwar drank his wife's blood drawn by his own hand. American scientists say that drinking semen will lower your blood pressure. British scientists say it will give you throat cancer. But tell me, do you drink alcohol, and if yes, how often, and let's talk about your family. If my hand was a collection of finger puppets, which finger would symbolize your mother?

✕

At five, you drank hot prophecy in a snowstorm and lost your first language in a traffic accident. How does talking about this make you feel? One: My brother grew up to be a puppeteer. Two: My cousin grew up to design a website dedicated to drinking cold sodas in hot showers. You, too, were born. But. Three: I can't decide which is scarier, becoming someone's marionette or having my hand rot inside someone else.

The fear of dolls is known as pediophobia. The lifeless eyes of a doll may bring to mind the unseeing eyes of a corpse. Using puppets

in therapy, though, enables individuals to express thoughts they might otherwise think of as unacceptable. The most popular kind of puppet in clinical settings is the kind held on the hand because it is easy to manipulate. Now, secretaries will always ask what you're coming in for. If you answer honestly, they'll blink and crinkle up their noses. To be safe, just say, well, you know, I've just been feeling a little anxious lately. Those nice ladies don't need to hear how those glass eyes stare and stare.

✕

Actually, milk probably isn't the worst way to go. It's better than a ham sandwich, am I right? Like poor Mama Cass. She isn't remembered for "Dream a Little Dream" or even that scandal involving the other mama and the two respective papas; she's become the poster girl for the lamest death of all time, which, it turns out, isn't even legit. That ham sandwich was just a witness — an innocent bystander, if you will, in the wrong place at the wrong time — of some run-of-the-mill heart attack. A heart attack's not the best way to go over the Big Ridge, either, of course, but in the grand scheme of things, it sure beats cold cuts and Wonder Bread, wouldn't you say?

George W. Bush choked on a pretzel his first month in office. It was only a secret service Heimlich maneuver that kept him in the White House. But we do not speak for our politicians like we do for our puppets. Instead, we look at them and think of corpses, mountains of them, forming new ranges inside the boundaries of Chile, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Vietnam, El Salvador, Guatemala, Rwanda, Argentina, Brazil, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and the Congo and bleeding outward, forming a tremendous tide.

✕

What I'm hearing you say, and tell me if this is wrong, because I don't want to put words in your mouth, but what I'm hearing you say is that you spend a lot of time thinking about mountain passes, but you're afraid of actually reaching their full elevations. Would you say this is accurate? Dogs are afraid of brooms and mops. Billy Bob Thornton is afraid of antiques. I drove to the top of Present Mountain and looked down at Would Be laid out below, and it was so beautiful that I thought I might never come back down.

But I couldn't stay. I hadn't brought any water with me, and that's a hell of a way to go — staring into the bright lights of the future while croaking from simple dehydration. And I'd hate to have my body discovered by somebody else coming up to enjoy the view and instead finding some idiot who died from a Should Have. Anyway, I also wasn't sure I wanted to watch that glorious vista colonized by well-meaning robots.

✕

If shadow puppets held an election among themselves, I wonder if I might win. Would you call yourself stable? You're sure lookin' good, doll. Sometimes I lift my lips to an empty glass, and I'm surprised there's nothing there. Care to get a drink sometime? Hot beverages aren't as popular in the summertime, even though it's been proven that they cool a person down just as well as a drink on ice. Sometimes I want to say, ugh, don't be such a dummy, but that would be offensive to puppets, who can be quite sensitive. But an action figure is different than a doll, because.

Sock puppets get sweaty. Shadow puppets get sneaky. Robots become more and more human all the time. In tropical and suburban locations, we continue to sip vodka tonics, gin off the rocks, coffee without cream, tea without sugar, Coke with lime, and, when we think no one is watching, to press our lips straight to the taps of our lovers with the faucets at full blast — like garden hoses in midsummer. We may feel like we're losing our sanity, but sometimes that feeling is the first step to finding it.

✕

Rivers grow from tributaries, and we grow anxious. Ordering just whatever's on tap means a person has surrendered their right to choose. Now, that's a topic we haven't discussed. Is choice something you value? Having to decide between fifteen million tracks on iTunes for a three-minute song just isn't worth the effort. But then, I don't know, I'll probably wear Old Spice deodorant for the next fifty years, and grocery shopping at the Dollar Tree has always relaxed me because there's only one type of ketchup — you either pick it up or you don't.

Still, if somebody were to come along and say, all right, this is America, and we're all going to slather on the same brand of butter from now on, well, I'd have a problem with that. More than deodorant or ketchup, what I like most is being able to choose not to choose, having that be *my* choice. You take that away from me, and all I'm going to want is choices, hundreds of them, thousands of them, fifteen million of them, enough to stack up into a mountain that can be seen for miles.

✧

You called your father from a place called Ing once, and he said, wait, where did you say you are? I don't think I heard it right; there's nothing like that on the map I've got here. He was at the factory. You could hear the lunch bell ringing, a clock ticking. One of the old guys was yelling to him from across vacuous right angles. You knew he'd heard you the first time, but you said it again anyway, leaning up against your crippled car, hobbled by a flat tire and the sudden realization that the world extends beyond even the best cartographers. The metal of the passenger door scorched through the back of your shirt. The sting was exquisite.

I'm near a ten-foot sign imprinted with the fifth commandment, you said. A few hours ago, I passed a Stop sign. But it didn't matter what you said; the syllables were deflated even before they left your mouth.

✧

Have you ever had inappropriate thoughts about children or animals? My doctor prescribed me medication to keep the dolls from staring at me while I'm asleep. But now, everything is covered in frost, and I'm not sure I ever have appropriate thoughts about anything.

The presidential debates were televised for the first time in 1960, and it's said that John F. Kennedy won the election because everyone fell in love with his young and hopeful face. I suppose it's possible that hope was actually a real thing once, before flag-draped coffins fresh from Vietnam started replacing those pretty faces on our TV screens.



✖

You know, many people hear voices — inside their heads — some time in their lives. It's much more common than we might imagine. It can be a frightening experience, certainly, but nothing we necessarily need to panic about. Do we ever *need* to panic about anything? Do we ever *need* to feel any feelings, or are they always an optional part of the package?

I don't know, dummy. The maps mostly show Was, a landscape we like to think of as a varied topography. But the elevation is actually almost all below seeing level, and what our eyes do capture is a monochrome skyline. There is only one city; no Littleton, no Walden Pond, no Harper's Ferry, no Pearl Harbor, Chicago, New York, or Wounded Knee; no Sutter's Mill, no Gettysburg, no Oklahoma City, no Washington, DC — only Before, stretched in every direction. Despite our own best efforts to tell them apart, the brick buildings all bleed together.

✖

Pediophobia includes robots. Robots include vacuum cleaners. Loaning a next-door neighbor a vacuum is against the law in Denver, but you live in denial. Ashton Kutcher openly admits to being afraid of his wife's doll collection. A mannequin named Clara was married to a man named Dauveed on a California street in 2009. Some say that Warren Harding died after being poisoned by his wife in 1923. Still, the statistics say that people who are married are more likely to be satisfied with their lives. Do you live alone? I live in the river, but I still wake up thirsty.

✖

Some people find it helpful to breathe into a paper bag. Some close their eyes and count. Still others simply open their mouths and pour. I'm a whiskey man myself, and they say that means that I know how to settle an argument and that I'm willing to pay for good service. Of course, they also say that Edison invented the lightbulb, and that the 1950s were the happiest times — remembering poodle skirts instead of Jim Crow and McCarthy. Betrayal is blue. Annoyance is orange that burns into anger. Nostalgia is not a feeling, but it covers us in violet. If nothing else, we are good at forgetting. I remember mannequins in store windows. I remember

## HOLES IN THE SKY

---

*Jennifer Sinor*

I have been sitting in my study with Georgia O’Keeffe for the past few weeks. She knocked on my door one morning in early May, perhaps having heard I had been reading her letters, and handed me a wide-brimmed hat before entering the house. We’ve spent most of the last days sitting across from one another, her in an old armchair upholstered in mauve, me in a straight-backed chair with popped springs. As is her nature, she is quiet most of the time, preferring silence to talk, words only getting in the way. On the first day we sat together, the tulips in my front yard an army of color, she said, “Words have been misused.”

In my confusion, I asked her if she meant a particular word, something I had said or not said.

She shook her head and continued, “The usual words don’t express my meaning, and I can’t make up new ones for them.”

I nodded, knowing all too well how language fails us. Paint, of course, is her syntax, pigment, her letters. “I paint,” she once said, “because color is a significant language to me.” In that medium, I am illiterate.

O’Keeffe prefers herbal tea, as do I, and we both like to sit in the morning silence, my young sons off at school, the house settling around us. Steam from the cups clings to our cheeks and chins. The heater glows at our feet, cutting a path of warmth along the floor of my basement study. As if around a campfire, we turn our legs, brown our calves. During the past three weeks, sitting under my one window, we have said little. In her worn face, crumpled like a sack, felted with use, I see my husband’s Aunt Eileen who, at ninety-six, is two years younger than O’Keeffe but who is dying in a bed in Richmond, Virginia, thousands of miles from here. “We are all dying,” I said to my husband when we first learned Eileen was no longer eating. “Yes,” he said, “but Eileen is dying faster.”

Our cat, Luna, pushes open the door to my study, her white paws bright against the dark carpet. “That’s fine, fine,” O’Keeffe says and pats the space next to her. Eileen uses the same phrase.

“That’s fine,” O’Keeffe repeats as Luna comes closer to her outstretched hand. At ninety-eight, sight failing, bones thinned to translucence, everything seems to be fine.

Before my first son, Aidan, was born, I drew a picture of the two of us running in the winter dark while the rest of the world slept. We appeared very small as we ran along the floor of Cache Valley, the Bear Mountains rising in black like a quilt set to cover the earth for winter. My legs churned under me, bent at the knees, caught in that moment when neither foot has contact with the ground. I was flying, and my hair trailed out like a scarf.

I drew Aidan running as well, inside of me. He assumed the same pose in my belly, bent knees, churning legs, only he was swimming rather than flying, making his way through water as warm as the South Pacific, in darkness that even stars failed to pierce. While I listened for the approach of a car or the bark of a dog let loose on its morning business, I imagined he ran to the shush of waves, an ebb and flow of water that matched the rhythm of my stride.

※

I ask O’Keeffe about Eileen. “How long, do you think, before she dies?” A silly question. O’Keeffe has never met Eileen, only knows of her as the old woman whose body is failing, whose downward slide has my husband, Michael, and I huddled during parts of the day trying to decide if and when he should fly back. She looks out the one window in my study, a basement window that frames the cherry tree in our backyard, and, beyond that, the sky.

From our position, underground, we are afforded the same perspective as her painting *The Lawrence Tree*, where the viewer looks up from beneath the tree into branches and stars. A tree standing on its head is how O’Keeffe described it to her friends. What I love about that work — as with so many of her paintings — is that our own place in space, as viewers, is uncertain. Are we on our backs on the ground? On a bench? In our graves? Or are we floating in space like one of her skulls, hovering in a kind of ecstasy?

The Lawrence tree exists. You can go to northern New Mexico, to the Lawrence Ranch, and sit underneath it. It is site specific like many of her landscapes. But when you look up into the tree, you won’t see what O’Keeffe saw. Your tree won’t be nearly as wondrous. That’s because O’Keeffe faithfully rendered aspects of the actual landscape — the contours, the planes — and then abstracted them to get at the emotional truth of her vision. In *The Lawrence Tree* we have a record of what it meant for her to look up into those

branches, the bliss she felt in its limbs.

I ponder the green leaves of the cherry tree outside the window of my study. Because O’Keeffe has not told me how to hold the death of Eileen in my hands, I ask her about the tree.

“What do you see?”

She sits in a chair beside me, Luna curled up in her lap. The house remains quiet except for the click of the space heater. O’Keeffe pets Luna, the long slender fingers made famous by Stieglitz running the length of the cat’s body. I want to be the cat, to be petted by the hands that turned a tree on its head.

“Telephone wires.”

✧

Michael brings scrambled eggs and butter-soaked toast covered with raspberry jelly that streaks the plate like blood. My finger follows the sticky river, red to my lips and the taste of childhood. Minutes later he arrives with juice, careful not to spill, and sets the glass on the nightstand. The bedroom remains dark in midday as if someone in the house suffers a migraine or the stomach flu. The yellow eggs warm me from the inside out.

✧

I was born in Texas, but it took O’Keeffe two decades before she made her way from her birthplace in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, to the Lone Star State. When she did, it would feel like coming home. The boundless sky, the open plains.

She wrote to Stieglitz in 1916, two years before they became lovers, “The plains — the wonderful great big sky — makes me want to breathe so deep that I’ll break — There is so much of it — I want to get outside of it all — I would if I could — even if it killed me — .”

The open space of the plains would influence O’Keeffe throughout her career. You only have to look at her work to know that O’Keeffe was fascinated with holes, spaces. Empty places that pulse with energy. I am thinking of her pelvis bones, her flowers, her canyons. I read once that O’Keeffe had a “passion for voids” and that her use of frames — whether fishhooks, cattle bones, or geologic formations — are reminiscent of the open windows in nineteenth-century paintings, windows that created feelings of longing, provided thresholds into the unknown. The window frames the abyss, contains it long enough for us to see it, experience it. Like a

sculpture, the window simultaneously shapes the emptiness and births it.

The holes in O’Keeffe’s work, her voids, were the subject. Not the bone, but what can be seen through it. And what she saw was both beautiful and sad, terrifying and sublime, a space so complex, and charged, and personal, that words would never capture it.

✧

Aidan plays in the other room, chattering a combination of vowels sopped in drool. Six months gone from my body, he still topples like a tree when placed on the floor without support. He waved to me from the car seat where Michael had hurriedly strapped him down, apparently unshaken by his mother’s place in the snow bank. Ambulance lights flashed red across his face.

✧

In her autobiography, O’Keeffe writes, “It is surprising to me to see how many people separate the objective from the abstract. Objective painting is not good painting unless it is good in the abstract sense. A hill or tree cannot make a good painting just because it is a hill or a tree. It is lines and colors put together so that they say something. For me, this is the very basis of painting. The abstraction is often the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself that I can only clarify in paint.” I see this in O’Keeffe’s work. Maybe because I have traveled to the places that O’Keeffe has painted and know the way she takes what is there and bends it. Consumes it. Digests it. Reinterprets it. I’m not sure of the right metaphor. The result, though, like her landscapes, contains no middle space. It has elements of the real and elements of the abstract — both the near and the faraway — and never sacrifices one for the other. She would see no need for choice.

✧

“Is it too late?” I ask, close to an hour after neither of us has spoken. I don’t know if I am asking about Eileen or about my own cloudy ways of seeing.

When I look to O’Keeffe for an answer, I see she has fallen asleep. Her hand rests on Luna, midstroke.

Last night Michael’s mother, Kay, called us close to midnight. She and Eileen live together in an apartment not far from Michael’s

sister, Nancy, and her family.

"Eileen is dead," Kay cried. I could hear her easily, even though Michael held the phone to his ear. Her grief could not be contained by a mouthpiece.

"How do you know?" Michael asked, voice soft.

Kay had gone into Eileen's room to check on her, just as she did every night before bed. She had tried to rouse Eileen but couldn't, was convinced that she had died.

"I have lost my second mother," Kay cried. I could imagine Kay on the couch in her living room, surrounded by the antiques she and her late husband had collected over the years, strong, solid desks and end tables, all polished until they shone like stars. I knew how her shoulders would shake quietly as she held the phone, the tiny gasps that would escape her lips. Not large sobs, but rather constrained sadness, gathered and collected in the same way she had led her life.

When Michael's father died, we stood in the hospital room, Walter still in his bed, his mouth frozen in a final gasp. Michael and I had come the day before, having flown over the roads between Indiana and North Carolina, not even taking time to pack. When we arrived, his father breathed in long gasps, sometimes going for minutes before taking in more air. Then, in the early morning, just as the sun was breaching the Appalachians, one of the pauses became permanent. In the wan light, Kay, Michael, Nancy, and I circled the bed, gathered around a center that was no longer there. It was there I first heard the controlled shattering of Kay's heart. The tiny breaths, pants almost, of grief.

"Call Nancy," Michael said to his mother, the phone held tightly to his ear. He looked at me with eyebrows raised, clearly unsure of what to do. "Ask her to come over."

Ten minutes later Nancy called us back. Eileen was only in a deep sleep. She was not dead, though I imagined Kay had a taste of what it would feel like when she was alone.

✧

It was January 6. Eight inches of snow had fallen by daylight. Large, wet flakes still swam through the sky, like a flock of fish caught in a current running parallel to the ground. When I left the house that morning, I was the first to mark the snow.

✧

We are standing at the mouth of Green Canyon, about a mile from my house. O’Keeffe hadn’t wanted to leave my study, but I convinced her that days like today — May afternoons where the sky is charged with blue and snow still caps the mountains surrounding this northern Utah valley — cannot pass unwitnessed. Of course, it takes little to encourage O’Keeffe to come outdoors. She loves the natural world, draws her inspiration from it, claimed in her later years that the country around her home in Ghost Ranch, in particular the Pedernal, a geologic formation that appears in so many of her paintings, had been given to her by God. If she painted it enough, he had told her, it would be hers. No, her hesitation this afternoon is not from her desire to be inside rather than out, but from her need for solitude. Translating the unknown into the known, framing the void, requires isolation. She wrote to Jean Toomer in 1934, “I feel more or less like a reed blown about by the winds of my habit — my affections — the things that I am — moving it seems — more and more toward aloneness — not because I wish it so but because there seems to be no other way.” She doesn’t like to be around people, especially strangers, and when electricity and indoor plumbing arrived in O’Keeffe country, bringing more and more neighbors, O’Keeffe almost left. At the mouth of Green Canyon, new housing projects grow like canker sores. I notice that we both keep our eyes trained on the canyon walls, the sky, the faraway places still free of “man’s destruction.”

We stand, in the middle of the day, in the middle of the week, in the middle of a canyon that was birthed millions of years ago by a river that now only runs in the spring. Junipers dot the valley walls, big tooth maples. It isn’t northern New Mexico, but it’s not too different from it. Above us, the sky.

“And what do you see here?” I ask, pointing to the scraped hills, the bonsai-ed juniper. “What would you paint?”

※

Last summer, when I sat with Eileen in her room, sun pouring through the window, the woods alive with birdsong, I knitted a scarf. Every now and then, while perched on the edge of her bed, ball of yarn unspooling in my lap, I reached for Eileen’s hand and rubbed the thin skin, conscious of how so often we restrict touch to only the infant and the infirm. With each passing hour, I purled the

invisible flakes of her skin as well as the dust motes floating in the sun into a scarf I was knitting for my mother.

✧

The snow crunches beneath my running shoes, January light thin and brittle. My breath is slow and quiet from years of running and my hair beats an even rhythm against my jacket. Five miles into my run, my mind is empty of thought, though my feet register the softness of the deep snow. I am running on cloud.

And then I fall.

✧

Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir, *Persepolis*, tells the coming-of-age story of the author, a child growing up in postrevolution Iran. Late in the book, we come to a cell, the square frame in a comic, that is totally black. The cell recounts the moment when Satrapi returns to her street after a bombing scare and finds that her best friend has been buried under the rubble of her house. Only a bracelet remains. Satrapi's howl is rendered in blackness. Such emptiness is much more horrifying than any image Satrapi might have drawn, any words she might have conjured. We import our own demons into that black cell. We fill her void with our pain.

✧

O'Keeffe was smart not to trust language. "Words and I — are not good friends," she wrote Stieglitz, just at the moment in her career when she first broke through in her painting. For two years she had been struggling in South Carolina to give birth to her own vision. When she moved to Canyon, Texas, the landscapes, the boundless sky, gave her the space to realize it. Her friend, Anita Pollitzer, took the charcoals she had been making to the famous Alfred Stieglitz to see what he might say. His response, though potentially more legend than fact: "At last a woman on paper." What he held were her early abstractions, sketches without narrative or figure. Two black lines — one fairly vertical and another lightning-shaped. A swirling ball of black. O'Keeffe had been reading and rereading Kandinsky's book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Her work realized Kandinsky's commitment to emotional truth, the "departure of art from the objective world and the discovery of a new subject matter based only on the artist's inner need." Years later, long after she held



her first pelvis bone to sky, she would quip, "Nothing is less real than realism."

✧

O'Keeffe never lets others watch her paint, throws white sheets over her work when visitors arrive, so I guess I should not be surprised that she won't tell me now what she sees in the canyon walls around us. In fact, she isn't even looking up. She is looking down, at the rocks near her feet. She pulls a tiny white shell from the ground; it is round and swirling. I thought her skin white until she holds the shell. Now I see how many whites exist in the world.

"It's the shell of a mountain snail," I tell her. "But I like to pretend it's a seashell left over from when Lake Bonneville, a giant inland sea, covered this area. Thousands of years ago. We walk now on the shore left by the lake, the bench."

"Texas was like an ocean," she says. "Nothing but sky and prairie. More like the ocean than anything I have known." She turns the small shell in her fingers, bits of dirt sifting down.

"I grew up in Hawaii," I tell her. I know she has been to the islands three times. I have seen the twenty paintings she completed after her trip in 1939. I feel closest to Hawaii when I am in Utah, which makes people laugh, but it's true. Maybe it has to do with how you can see an entire train churn up the valley, the oceanic space. But sometimes I wonder if it's about the landscape itself, how beautiful it is. I pick up my own shell. "Such beauty demands conversation," I say, knowing, of course, that no noun embodies the emptiness in a shell.

"Do you know what art is to me?" she asks, her shell now in a pocket which she pats softly with her hand. "Filling a space in a beautiful way."

✧

Here is a flower, she says, a black peony, and we see the artist herself.

✧

I am shaking when I call my parents, the momentary warmth the eggs provided now gone, the cold having re-roosted in my core. "I'm okay," I begin and there is silence on the other end. "I was hit by a van this morning while running," I say, "but I'm fine. Michael

made eggs. I'm fine."

O'Keeffe is walking back from the trailhead toward the parking lot, the canyon now behind us. Cache Valley spreads below us, rows of houses, trees, cars. I check my pockets as we walk, convinced I have left something behind. I realize, though, I took nothing with me.

We walk on the shore of a many-year-lost lake, between clavicles of the earth. The mouth of the canyon is behind us, and a red-tailed hawk circles overhead. Against the sun, he is but a shadow, errant comma in search of its sentence. Were I to paint the valley, I would paint the canvas blue, the blue of the Pacific Ocean, the blue of ancient Lake Bonneville, not a slope or rock in sight, the earth under water so that everything is sky.

✧

When I turn, turn, turn — here, first, the moment before the turn, when all that aches is my head and my pride, sprawled in the middle of the road, snow seeping into my running tights, ice caught in the bands of both gloves — and then the actual moment I turn, just my head, to look behind, in the direction that I have come, because something tugs at my heart to do so, or at my gut, or maybe it's a voice I hear, quiet but insistent that tells me I do not have the road to myself, or maybe, yes, maybe it's the vibrations of the vehicle on snow-covered asphalt that I feel, hand to rail to check for trains, hand to doorknob to feel for flame, rattle climbing shin, then spine, then inner ear, so that I turn and see how thin the line is between here and there, safe and not, whole and broken.

A van the color of snow bears down on me, already so close I cannot see above the headlights — they are on, white and open in fright — and the tires, spinning black, the world reduced to grill and rubber and the sound of the future swerving out of control down the hill, sliding this way and that, weaving back and forth, tread throwing snow like fire, breath, the smell of rubber.

Like the animal that I am, I claw, four paws, toward the edge of the road, knowing I will not make it, thinking only that I must try and live for my son. I offer the van my flank in hopes of sparing my head, which means I am no longer facing the monster but trained on the pile of plowed snow that rises steeply like a canyon wall alit with morning sun. Aidan, then, is who I am thinking of when the

van reaches me. He fills my body once again. Here, then, the van is hitting me. Scream of engine, flash of light, my son who cannot sit on his own without toppling like a tree, ice shards in my mittens, tire in my side, air aflame and filled with snow so that all is bright and burning. I am lifted into the air.

✧

O’Keeffe and I are snorkeling to the Haliewa Trench. In a letter to William Howard Schubert in 1950, she wrote, “I want to go to Hawaii again,” so we have gone. It wasn’t hard to convince her. She sees the ocean in almost every open space, as do I. The Bear Mountains, where I live, is a reef without its sea. We could feel the salt water of Lake Bonneville lapping at our feet.

The mask and snorkel I keep in the garage fit her. We both wear child-sized masks, our faces thin and narrow. Even so, her mask is filled with water, the wrinkles like ravines channeling the water beneath the rubber edge. I show her how to clear it.

“Press the top of your mask and blow out,” I say. We tread water on the north shore, black fins windmilling our feet, and I demonstrate. “Do it in the water,” I tell her. And we both sink back into the sea.

The Haliewa Trench is on the north shore of Oahu, just past Haliewa Town itself. In the winter, surf tournaments are held offshore, but now, in the late spring, the water is warm and calm. We are about twenty yards from the beach, both of us swimming easily. I listen to her breaths through her snorkel, checking to make sure she isn’t panicked. Too often, beginning snorkelers scrunch their faces in fear and take deep drags of air. But O’Keeffe floats along the surface beside me, occasionally pointing at a colorful fish or dancing patch of seaweed. I don’t have to look at her to know she is smiling. I have read too many of her letters.

The sun casts forests of light all around us as we head for the trench. About fifty yards from the beach, it runs for miles parallel to the shore. The seafloor is now only about ten or fifteen feet below us, but I can feel the temperature change on my belly. Goose bumps appear on my arms.

We swim between two worlds. Below me, fish dart here and there, giant fleets of bright-yellow-and-blue tangs, silver tuna and grouper, tiny purple wrasses. The ocean clicks and chatters, simmers. Seaweed dances with the current. On my back, I can feel the

sun and the wind of the other world, the one I inhabit, the one with air. My snorkel keeps me connected to that place. I hear the wind sing across the top of the tube.

If I wanted to, I could dive to the sandy floor below us, touch a head of coral or point to a particular fish. My ears would hurt with the change of pressure, and I wouldn't stay long before zipping back up to the surface, but I could, if necessary, still "touch." There is a kind of comfort in that knowledge, knowing that the "earth" is still within reach. But the deeper you travel into the ocean, the more you must give yourself over to the second world, the one filled with fish in neon colors, the one where the idea of ground no longer applies.

When the plankton arrive, we swim through rafts of cloud. I smile at the idea of water turned to sky, our bodies now birds, and watch the plankton filter through my water-wrinkled fingers.

Suddenly, the trench appears, as it always does, a canyon in the sea. My heart starts to race. I can hear my breathing increase in the hollow of my snorkel, a physical response to enormity. At one point we had been in twenty feet of water, and then, just like that, the earth falls away into blackness. The plankton turn to stars in the face of nothingness. We cannot see anything below us, in front of us, or, with a few more strokes, behind us. We are floating deep in space. Save for the rattling breath in my snorkel, sound has ceased. My eyes try to sort through the layers of black, distinguish between the black above and below. We are without degrees, an emptiness that is complete. When I look over to O'Keeffe, to the tiny oval of glass in front of her face, I see her eyes. They are the brightest things around.

Here, then, is the void. Saltwater enters the pores of my skin, tangling my lips. When O'Keeffe's arm briefly touches mine, the charge ignites my skin. What is outside, now in, returned to the saltiness of the womb. Black of crow wing. Black of night. We swim inside an O'Keeffe.

The part of me that defines who I am burrows under its wing.

And then I see the flash of O'Keeffe's arm as she swims past me, the palest of whites amid the black. The wake of her fins vibrates against my chest; tiny air bubbles cling to my bare skin and then pop. Her passage a comet-tail of froth. At the artist's movement, the emptiness is shaped, if only in the tunnel of her departure.

✧

At the moment Eileen dies, Michael and I will be snorkeling on the Waianae coast of Oahu. We will be holding hands and following a green sea turtle whose shell is calligraphied with age. The turtle will drift in the current, poking the reef here and there, paddling his flippers. Sometimes he will change direction abruptly and swim right toward us, and we will have to use our fins to back-pedal, the water turning to froth and lace. We won't know that Eileen has died, so our pace will be slow, happy to follow a turtle as he wanders along a reef of brilliant blues and yellows and greens. The sky will stretch above us, the sea, below, and someday I will try and translate the moment, this "inexplicable thing," into words, attempting, like O'Keeffe, "to understand maybe by trying to put it into form."

#### NOTES:

- "Words have been misused." Letter from GOK to Derek Bok, June 1973.
- "The usual words . . . new ones for it." Letter from GOK to Derek Bok, June 1973.
- "I paint . . . to me." Karen Karbo, *How Georgia Became O'Keeffe*, 117.
- "The plains . . . even if it killed me — " Letter from GOK to Alfred Stieglitz, September 4, 1916.
- "Passion for voids." Jennifer Saville, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Paintings of Hawaii*, 45.
- "It is surprising . . . clarify in paint." *Georgia O'Keeffe* by Georgia O'Keeffe, Viking, 1976, unpaginated.
- "I feel more or less . . . no other way." Letter from GOK to Jean Toomer, March 1934.
- "Man's destruction," *Georgia O'Keeffe* by Georgia O'Keeffe, Viking, 1976, unpaginated.
- "Words and I — are not good friends." Letter from GOK to Stieglitz, February 1, 1916.
- "The departure of art . . . inner need." Richard Stratton, Preface to Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, viii.
- "Nothing is less real than realism." *Georgia O'Keeffe* by Georgia O'Keeffe, Viking, 1976, unpaginated.
- "Texas was like an ocean . . . anything I have known." Paraphrase of a letter from GOK to Anita Pollitzer, Sept 11, 1916.
- "Filling a space in a beautiful way. That is what art means to me." *Portrait of Artist*, Laurie Lisle, 51. I have paraphrased her words.
- "I long ago . . . not copy it." *Georgia O'Keeffe* by Georgia O'Keeffe, Viking, 1976, unpaginated.
- "The unexplainable . . . into form." *Georgia O'Keeffe* by Georgia O'Keeffe, Viking, 1976, unpaginated.

## SEX ON TWO WHEELS

---

*Barbara Haas*

I had been holding my father's hand for a couple hours when the nursing home's recreation director stopped in, clipboard at the ready, to describe the day's activities: dominoes, BINGO, cards, a sing-a-long.

"What things does he enjoy?" Her gaze was the take-charge equivalent of a firm hand to the forearm,

My dad at 90 had grown paler and less substantial each day. Though he lay on his back, slightly propped up against the pillows, a frank and open position, he was turning inward. Skin ashen, wispy hair like spun cloud, muscles slack and atrophied, watery eyes blurred with macular degeneration: he was like a math problem working toward some ultimate numerical reduction. String theorists often claimed that the universe tended toward entropy: disintegration, disarray and decline. Everything was always becoming something else, even when it seemed to be standing still. That was happening for Dad. My unsentimental younger brother had summed it up: "I think we all know the destination here." He and his wife of 32 years had managed Dad's care long before the nursing home ever came into play, including that difficult stretch right after the failed driver's license eye test. My brother's normal sleep patterns had never returned, and his wife was still tapering the Xanax.

*Dad's destination is everyone's destination*, I had wanted to retort at the time — but the words seemed hollow, lame, and paltry. A lot of things end as you know they will — just not the way you think.

When I'd kissed Dad's brow this morning, his skin felt cool against my lips. This was July, right after the All-Star Break — and I'd thought to give him baseball scores from the night before, but I saw him lying there, practically sinking into the mattress, and I didn't see how they could matter.

The recreation director stood at the door. She deployed an eyebrow quirk — left one arching playfully upward — as a means of selling the day's activities. She was one of a resourceful crew of nurses and aides at this home who treated death like a bearable nuisance. It wasn't sad or tragic, just annoying. The staff possessed skills diverse enough to cover the dispensing of medication, check-

ing of vitals, the release of the deceased to the proper authorities — as well as teaching everyone how to make something clever out of pipe cleaners, felt squares, and sequins. The recreation director leaning against the door jamb now looked like a person who believed unabashedly in the palliative properties of pipe cleaners, felt squares, and sequins.

“What things does he enjoy?” she had asked, her clipboard, her shield.

I thanked her and said I thought Dad would just enjoy quiet today. She smiled and left, and I heard her spiel next door where a rheumy, age-battered woman always moaned, “Help me” whenever someone walked by.

I scooted closer to Dad, my knees touching the bed. When I squeezed his hand, he squeezed back.

As sad as I felt about his last few months in a nursing home, I would have felt sadder still if he had made something out of pipe cleaners, felt squares, and sequins. “I don’t want to display anything on the refrigerator,” I told my wife that night, tweezers at the ready as I examined her back for ticks. “It’s not like when Isaiah was in preschool.” My son was now 20.

“Weirdly, the craft materials are the same.” Kathy stood still, facing the shower curtain, hands clasped before her, calm. “That place is bizarre.”

“I hate it.”

Returning from work she had stripped down in the garage — a safe, airlock kind of space — so as not to contaminate our house with chiggers and ticks. Her homemade hazmat suit consisted of long sleeves duct-taped at the wrists, canvas pants duct-taped into boots, do-rag under baseball cap, shirt duct-taped to her pants at the waist. A duct-tape strip sealed the entire button placket down the front of her shirt, and she kept the collar tightly taped, too. All the fabric reeked of DEET. When she’d left for work this morning, she had looked like an old world peasant, like someone right off the boat who hadn’t bought American clothes yet. *Borat* came to mind.

A geologist with the USDA in Des Moines, she had been walking the Soap Creek watershed in southeast Iowa as part of a project to determine the sediment load flowing into the creek. The intent ultimately was to construct a 200-acre lake along a slow meander point to serve as a settling basin for excess sediment, but first she had to calculate rates of runoff at various confluence points. Guard-

ing the creek on both sides was 20 feet of dense briar and bramble. The few clear areas were cow pastures where the ground was chunked out and pitted from the hooves of half-ton animals coming down to the water to drink. "Ankle-breaker," Kathy had said. After that lay thickets of rusted barbed wire in twisted heaps. She had to wrestle her way through thorny multiflora rose as she followed the creek and also sneak past the occasional bull.

My wife was 59 years old. It didn't take a string theorist to explain that 59-year-old geologists don't move like 29-year-old geologists do.

Chiggers and black biting flies were ubiquitous along Soap Creek — as were the hard-to-defend-against deer ticks, tiny as specks. Heat and humidity were a constant. Low-slung sticky spiderwebs blocked the path. Kathy had to crouch and duck-walk along, continually watching her feet so as not to misstep. The place sounded ghastly, like a nightmarish landscape where the fairy-tale character had three chances to *complete the heroic task*.

Was it worse to spend the day at a nursing home or to spend it scouring Soap Creek?

I tweezered deer ticks from her back and didn't feel very philosophical. The moment was too gritty, the view too acute, as I scanned her skin with a geologist's hand lens. 10X magnification was enough to give me a harrowing look at razor-sharp mandibles, grasping legs and trenching feet. These plump, spotted tick bodies had tightened with blood.

"Dad is dying in a place that actually believes in pipe cleaners, felt squares, and sequins," I said. The magnifier was in my left hand, and I tweezered with my right. When I found a tick, I flung it into the toilet. Eight and counting. My technique was improving.

"It's too much." She shook her head. "I am so sorry."

"No matter what your life's been like," I said, my voice too loud for this small space, "you will probably never sit down of your own accord and make something out of pipe cleaners, felt squares, and sequins."

She nodded. "The great leveler, no question. They're trivializing old age."

A quiet moment enveloped us. I worked, practically trembling. She didn't move. The room seemed to hold its breath and then sink into a solid domestic kind of silence. It was the middle of the work week, and we were a married couple sharing the natural intimacy



of 9 p.m. A comfortable stillness steadied everything.

My wife. The old battle ax. My ball and chain. We had come to our romance late in life, both of us in our 50s. She had never before been married, but we lived in a state where two women could do that. Today, anyway. Forces were afoot in the legislature to change the law: Christian fundamentalists, the religious right. Everything was always becoming something else . . .

We were married now. In two years would we be?

I sighed and plucked at a tick.

Didn't most married couples, hetero- or not, ask that?

Kathy glanced over her shoulder and gave a half smile. "You know, Dad was always so robust. What a stylish fellow." She had set her glasses aside, and her eyes had a kind, vulnerable look. "Nothing in his life has ever had anything to do with pipe cleaners, felt squares, and sequins. I mean, *please*."

"Yup." I felt the tears welling. "Dad was stylish."

He had favored the unhurried simplicity of an afternoon chess match. He enjoyed sailing, fine wine, jazz, and growing trophy roses in the backyard. In this nursing home, however, it was as if "they" intended to erase that. "They" were transmuting him into something else, something he had never been, as if to recalibrate and compact him down to a manageable density. He would disappear not through death but defamiliarity. Death itself would be no final betrayal — but my denying him would be. I would stand there beside his bed, staring right at him, and say, "This is not my dad."

Because I would not recognize him.

Because he would be transmuted by then, transmuted into something that was no longer the man I called Dad, but a natural process larger than any of us and to which we would all submit. There might be edema or kidney failure or sores or fluid in the lungs — or all the above. An awful minefield of ailments required a nimble step at a point in life when one could scarcely balance on two feet. *The destination*, my younger brother had said. His eyelid had twitched. He woke at 3 a.m. most nights and was awake until 5, while his wife lay in a Xanax stupor beside him. *We all know what it is*, he had said. *The destination*. Dad was receding into history, and a measure of our history was receding, too, the history that included being siblings who still had a father. When great poets broached the subject of death, they did so with dramatic imagery appropriate to a grand moment, even finding in death the stuff of resurrection

and new life. Aging was different, though. Poets wouldn't touch it. It was hard to convey the entropy of aging with much dignity, nuance, or dimension.

Because there wasn't any, I thought.

The notion of Dad lying there right at that moment — wispy, infirm, disappearing — perhaps needing to be changed, perhaps waiting for the attendant to come change him, the attendant who still had to change five other people — that thought wrenched something within me.

The last tiny deer tick did not stay in my pincer grasp, but darted up the stainless steel shaft of the tweezers so fast I lost track of it, even under 10X magnification. Six legs sprinting! Alarming! How adamant and tenacious it was, eager to latch onto warm mammalian skin once more. It dashed with deadly over-excitement.

I laid the hand lens down and patted Kathy's bare shoulder.

She threaded her fingers through mine.

*Which was worse — the day in a nursing home or the day at Soap Creek?*

Her work there would end in two weeks, though she would see blistering summer heat before it did, suffer a Lyme disease scare and endure itchy bites that wound up taking more than two months to heal. My nursing home days would end, too — beside an open grave in a shady grove. Dad would join Mother, a matched pair lying side by side. When the old veterans fired off their 21-gun salute, it would blast all breath from the air.

✕

I trimmed Dad's fingernails like I had trimmed my son's when he was young, edging carefully along. I got out an emery board and filed a bit, then pushed the cuticles back, a makeshift nursing home manicure. "Thank you," he said, eyes closed.

I kissed him and put the clippers away.

"Any rain yet?" he wondered.

I gave a brief weather report, highlighting the triple-digit temperatures.

"Hah," he said.

I described Kathy's work down at Soap Creek.

"Oh," he said.

It had never really sunk in that I had a wife. How could I have a wife? I was his daughter... Daughters didn't have wives. He accept-

ed her, though, and made her feel welcome. Even after accounting for infirmity and old age and, generationally speaking, not quite getting it, I detected something behind his gaze that said, “Remind me again. Who is she to *us*?” When Dad still had a gaze, that is. Macular degeneration had bleared that.

His skin felt cool and dry, just as the hospice information predicted it would. The pamphlet spoke of allowing death to come about, not thwarting or preventing it. It described a process of withdrawing from life so natural as to be systematic: lips bluish, gaze remote, waning interest in things that had once been dear — the grandkids, the roses, the American League pennant chase.

I took up my post, knees pressed against the bed, his hand a bare claw in mine.

Death didn’t happen everyday at the nursing home, but it was a frequent and anticipated outcome — not a looming presence so much as an expected norm. The staff worked well within the uncertainty it brought, the disruption, just as people in developing nations learned to roll with routine power outages. They did it with good-natured efficiency, relegating death to the role of a predictable inconvenience, something that generated a ton of paperwork. You had to account for death more closely than you did Medicare charges, for example, or Veterans Administration disbursements. It was the important nexus of several financial interests — banks and brokers, insurance companies, the IRS and Social Security Administration. Each required official documentation. The nursing home enjoyed many death-free periods, however. During them, the residents ate the usual subsidized meals and played countless games of Mexican Train in the activity room. It was a hoot. Like a nonstop holiday. The place most resembled a cruise ship then, but without exotic ports of call, unless you considered a crazy detour through the Valley of the Shadow the most exotic port of all.

Dad’s breakfast tray lay untouched nearby — cold toast, clotted egg, thin coffee. Someone had twisted a pipe cleaner into the shape of his name and it lay atop his napkin, bright fuzzy loops spelling out “Louis.”

“Help me,” came the plaintive voice next door.

*Help me.*

✕

It was the job of the field office in Davis County to secure per-

mission from property owners for Kathy to walk the portion of their land that bordered Soap Creek. Occasionally she would need to park her government-issued SUV off to the side of a landowner's driveway: *Was this okay?* The field office took a couple weeks to confirm permission for all that.

The temperatures during the Soap Creek project crept above 100 degrees every day. Kathy tried not to drink very much, because she didn't want to stop to pee and thereby breach her hazmat suit out there. By 3 p.m. when the heat index hit 105, she would start getting dizzy. A headache followed, sometimes nausea and chills, too. Then she'd walk back to the SUV, which might be a rugged mile away at that point, and call it a day. She'd be grimy and weak, having sweated through her hazmat suit for hours. She'd be thirsty and tired.

Naturally, that was when the landowner confronted her, the one the field office had neglected to contact for permission, the aggressive one.

*His land, goddammit. Fucking vehicle on his fucking lawn.*

He browbeat her, ranted, cursed her, all because she had had the gall to park the SUV, the one with the white gov plates, on this strip of grass beside his driveway. My wife stood there, duct-taped into her clothes, sticky with daylong sweat, looking like an immigrant who might never assimilate into this culture. There was no one else for miles, just an irate landowner and this 59-year-old woman. She weighed all of 130 pounds. Iowa agricultural land stretched in every direction around them toward a great emptiness at the horizon. He upbraided her.

*Fucking this, fucking that.*

Because she had parked there. On that strip of grass. He pointed. The government SUV. Right next to his driveway. He got up in her face. Spittle flew.

The heat beat down on her as it had for hours, and she received his invective. AC blasted out at her from the wide open door of his truck. She felt a little shaky. She had to pee really badly. The duct tape covering the buttons on the front of her shirt was mud spattered. Burrs and hitchhikers clung to the fabric. She smelled of pyrethrin. Every faint sensation on her skin brought ticks to mind. The guy eventually ran out of steam.

As she said later, it was easier just to take it, not to dispute, explain, or argue. "Assume there's a gun," she said. After all, this was

southeast Iowa . . . . Notify the field office, figure out who dropped the ball, move on. As it turned out this guy's father would be the actual recipient of the 200-acre lake on Soap Creek, the settling basin the USDA planned to build. An unsightly pasture on the old man's property would morph into a private fishing pond for his own personal use, courtesy of the federal government.

Sometimes in Iowa the land stopped being land and became something else — a lake in this case. How could you own property in a place where this happened? How could you draw up a plat or a deed? The only way a farmer could get red in the face and curse you up one side and down the other for parking next to his driveway was if he really, really, actually believed it was possible a) for someone to own land and b) for land to remain land.

In a state like this, who could do that? Who could dwell in that delusion?

Because everything was always becoming something else, even when it seemed to be standing still, even across geo-time and an apparent changeless millennia, the grand illusory stasis of life though the ages — and Davis County was not exempt from this process, no matter what any given landowner believed.

In a year, the guy would kick back each Friday afternoon in a jon boat on the sparkling waters of his dad's new lake, ready to hook some bass, ready to cast his line into a quite personal and private delusion. By then, Kathy would be drilling 100-foot soil cores through northwest Iowa's glacial till, looking for the Yarmouth-Sangamon Paleosol — far, far from Soap Creek. But every step she had logged there, every branch she had ducked, every thorn that had torn her skin, every tick bite she had suffered would be transformed — as if by magic — into spotless afternoons of pure relaxation and the splash of placid water for this guy in his boat.

A lot of things end as you know they will — just not the way you think.

My stylish 90-year-old father was destined still to manifest in diverse directions, even though 'they' tried to keep him busy in his final sunset days with pipe cleaners, felt squares, and sequins. The big change, the one that generated a ton of paperwork for the affable nursing home staff, happened all at once — and then *poof!* In a year he was a wind chime hanging from the walnut tree in my backyard, his voice the mellow notes that sounded when a breeze blew through. He became the new roof on my older brother's house

in Tennessee. The money that helped my son go to college. Surprisingly, and no one could have seen this coming, a change even less predictable than the one Dad himself had gone through, he got translated into a candy-apple red Harley-Davidson in my younger brother's driveway.

"A chick magnet," my suddenly divorced brother told me.

Metal fleshed with muscle, like sex on two wheels — a bright brawny beast. We stood there admiring it, my brother and I, he sweating a bit and still catching his breath. He had torn up and down the back roads just now. The thing gave off heat.

# ANTHEM

---

W. M. Lobko

[Print]

Photograph me staring at  
the photograph my brother  
had snapped of himself on a glacier  
before blasting a hole in his throat.

Hang beside it the postcard  
of an old west town sign  
announcing *I'm in Surprise:*  
*Population, 1.* The moment

I realize no one cares if there's  
a body of work about him,  
college kids in Oslo will find  
a way to visualize the invisible

webbing of wi-fi signals by slowly  
walking a rod with mounted strobes  
over the snow, the bitmapped  
landscape overexposed, unreal.

## CUSTER

---

*Ryan Grandick*

Sometimes, I think, searching leads me to an island. A wooded one, hidden away, like one of those islands off the coast of Japan where soldiers never learned the war was over. How big? As big as it needs to be for the purposes of my telling. Big enough for two men to hide from each other and maybe never find each other and maybe never understand each other or know each other truly. Name? There's no name, only the meaning, only a setting, a place where a man can hunt and never find what he's looking for and another man can disappear forever. The place is a word in that ancient language given to us by God to help us understand the ineffable, the secret and hidden and mysterious and painful and never really quite there. It's a metaphor for something bigger that barely exists, like a cloud larger than the world that disappears after the day is done, blown away to scattered remnants across the sky.

I remember North Carolina, although it's been so long that it's as real to me as the island. We're walking down a pier toward a lighthouse. We just ate fish, I think, in a restaurant decorated with their bones, and I wonder now if they're the same. If, after we ordered, the cooks took the refuse and, like tribes, fashioned art from the remains and put them up like banners announcing that we had indeed been there, that this had happened. Or maybe the skeletons never existed. Or maybe I had a burger, not fish. And I'm holding a plastic shark, and we're walking down the pier, and people are fishing off the sides, and we go into the lighthouse that's no longer a lighthouse, but rather a museum, a skeleton, a herald from the past built into the ocean, or maybe it wasn't a lighthouse, but it was certainly a museum. Of that much I'm certain. And I look at more skeletons, more fish, and I try to hold this in, try to keep this memory intact, and somehow I fail and I succeed all at once.

The man's on the island, and he's real, or rather he was. And I break through the trees into a clearing and find nothing but leaves and needles and stones covering the forest floor and I hear the crunch, little tiny signifiers, little symbols of my trespass, just enough to let him know that I exist, information that I hoped would bring him closer but instead must have sent him farther away. After



all, if he wanted to be found, he would have come to me. Maybe, like the Japanese soldier, he doesn't know that the war has ended, that he's lost. Or maybe he does know. Maybe the hiding, the fleeing, maybe that's it for him, that's his purpose. His ways and means. Would you believe that, even if I told you the island isn't real, would you believe that the man was, or rather is?

I remember not finishing my dinner and I remember him punishing me for it. Not striking me, not like he did her, though I never saw it, but instead spanking me. In my memories he raises me above his head, as if offering me up like Isaac. Those were the memories that I allowed myself: the ones that fit the legend. And I remember watching *3,2,1 Countdown* on the bed, a handle of vodka next to me, or a jug of water, some clear liquid that I, like Christ, change the composition of at will. At one telling it's a jug of water and at the next it's alcohol, but then, alcohol's his signifier, his symbol. To me the two are irrevocably entwined. He gives me my first sip of beer and I hate it, but then I could only be three or four, and she's taking me and my sister and my half-brother — who I only knew as my brother at the time and who disappeared as soon as he did, who once showed me a picture of a girl that he taped to his chest so she'd be near his heart — across the country to visit our grandparents in Omaha, far from the pier and the skeletons and the doublewide that I barely remember but had remembered for me by the people old enough to do so, and the dead dog Duke, the white one, who I do remember and who got hit by that car and who taught me to stay out of the street.

And I search and I search because, to me, he's something less than human but more than idea: he's a monument, a museum, a skeleton, and he holds inside him knowledge about himself and about myself and I need to know but I drag my feet because I don't want to, because nobody really wants to understand themselves fully. And as soon as I meet him, all my memories are thrown into question, those shaped by time and space and isolation and the stories told to me. He takes me to the beach, he gives me that beer, he holds me up toward the sky as he spans me, twisted into some ill-defined contortion. He makes me hold the frog in the palm of my hand, the pet dead and frozen into a monument to itself. The stories help define who I am and I hate to lose them and I drag my feet. But I search regardless, slowly and carefully and to no avail. And would you believe me if I told you that I never found him?

Everything I know about him exists in bits and pieces, information I found out after, in his journals, his writing, in the stories his sisters told me about him, his sisters who I won't call my aunts because they, in their own small way, hid him from me, hid him away by not finding me, not telling me, not helping us understand each other while we really could. I know he wrote and drank and I know he hated himself and I know he had the tendency towards martyrdom common in the writers and the drinkers and the self-obsessed, and that he felt that by not existing, he was somehow saving us, like Christ, and I hate him for that too. And I know he was like me in many ways, too many to be meaningless, and the differences between us have come to construct who I am, how I set myself against his myth. Or I don't know, I was told, which is different from knowing. I'll never really know how I hold up against him, how I stand in opposition.

Have you ever read Kafka? Nabokov? Do you ever wonder where the lines are? And I'm on the beach and I see a turtle, about the size of a dinner plate, and it's on its back in the sun, and I sit and watch as its skin yellows and boils and blackens and cracks, and I want to flip it over but it won't let me. When my hand nears it thrashes and bites at my fingers. And so I watch and I watch and it dies and it dies and it finally dies and I leave the island because, when the turtle dies, it stops existing. Do you believe me when I tell you that? Do you believe my story? I only ask that you tell me you do, whether it's true or not. I need to feel understood more than I have to be understood, and so you say yes, yes you believe me and I say yes, yes I believe you too, and we're both speaking that language, that ancient language, that cloud language, that gets behind the world and opens up the heavens.

## ABOUT BILL

---

*Jim Davis*

He should be coming at you with a straw hat.  
If you don't see him, I soon will. He wonders  
if I've met the girl I'll marry, or the man I'll kill. My father  
planting snapdragons in the garden; hanging tomatoes  
cast shadows like squid: squid in the briar, squid in an orchard  
picking apples.  
He split the soil fed with pig shit, with a hand like the strong face  
of a shovel: a digging spade, a sheltering trowel,  
to bury fists of bulbs and teardrop seeds. Please, he buried  
the bit of finger taken then released by the snout of a hog, pouring  
slop  
in a Galesburg hog-house, one slow summer  
when his grandfather, Olmstead, set the dandelion seed to air, to  
breathe  
fire across the prairies of western Illinois, when he, the bringer of  
ghost bulbs  
was still butchering hogs. Cousin Bill fell in a well  
on his way home from haystacking, with a pitchfork like a lance, a  
straw hat.  
He was thinking about the dark-haired girl in class, lectured  
on the delicacies of writing curriculum, stealing glances,  
watching her laugh. He wonders if she has seen anything like his  
father,  
torn to bits by a coyote pack, in the garden, planting snapdragons  
in this, our suspicious and curious earth.

## HALF-LIFE

---

*Sheila P. Donohue*

1.

Birds drop from trees and hop on the immaculate lawns.

The sky is summer-blue. Tourists, we drive through Palm Springs, down the wide boulevards beside the green lawns and clean white sidewalks. We go three miles and see no people. We see cars, birds, mountain, sky, palm trees, boulevard, empty sidewalk.

Q: Why bother having sidewalks?

A: Because they keep the lawns from running off to Burbank.

Doug says this. He's driving, his long limbs stretched out leisurely in front of him as though he's reclining in a barcalounger. Beside him, James puzzles over the map. I haven't seen them in half a year, not since Saigon. I'm in the backseat, and when I laugh, James and Doug's new son, Benjaminh, still mostly a baby, turns his face toward me from within the cave of his car seat, sluggish with travel and indifference. He stares at me, his face blank as a fish.

2.

Outside of Palm Springs the manicured lawns give way to a baked brown scrub as though we've just left a movie set and entered the real world, which, it will now be revealed, is Mars. The desert reasserts itself in dust on the windshield, cacti on the shoulder, a mean sun above. At Joshua Tree, yellow boulders, eroded to smooth globes like mounds of melting ice cream, drilled with holes I'd like to press my head through, both palliate and terrify. Once upon a time, fish swam through these holes. Now tourists climb the ancient rock and leave the arid bones of birds to the desert floor. One must not take, we have been officially warned, anything — not a feather, not a thorn, not even the smallest of stones from this place.

In his carrier on James's back, Benjaminh swivels his neck,

lulled by the alien landscape. When we rest and let him down, he squats by the scrub bush and presses his small fingers into ancient bubble holes preserved in the boulder. This one square foot could occupy his brain for years.

We've seen no other people for two hours, only the burning sun, an orange fire above the rocks. Our car is just over the next mound, transforming to an oven. Anything could happen. Dead engine, night fall, coyotes bounding from their dens, our bones stripped bare.

Get a grip, Doug says, it's not actually Mars. Haven't you heard of cell phones?

But there's no signal when he flips it. For a split second we're toast. Then he grins and the phone lights up.

Just kidding, he says.

### 3.

The Joshua Tree is a cactus disporting itself like a tree. It is an agave with dreams of bark and birds. A giant yucca with aspirations of immortality: with no rings, its age cannot be told. The Mormons named it for its praying arms. At a maximum height of forty feet, nothing in this landscape is taller except rock. Rock molded by glaciers and rushing water. In the still air, nothing moves, not the rock, not the cacti, which in any case are not swayed by wind. Everything looks dead, but don't look now — we're the ones who are passing. Taking nothing with us. Driving at a safe and lawful pace past the boulders with their mellow holes and the cacti's sixteen different ways to bloom while being prickly so that no one will touch it, although they will want to. As for animals, or their tracks, we have seen none, not even the kangaroo rat, whose head we have badly wanted to see bouncing up from behind boulders, now, now, now. Nothing, despite being armed with a postcard printed with all the possible tracks, drawn to scale one-third of size, noting front and rear foot pattern, and advising that *Track size, depth, and pattern may differ according to soil, sand, or snow type, age of track, and weight or speed of animal*. Adjusting for such variations, we still have seen nothing of the local fauna.

Habitat Liberace! says Doug, pointing out the window at the Palm Springs skyline. Species: *Spandex humongo homo*. Summer

Coat: gold lamé. Speed: only on weekends. Track size and depth: very long, but shallow. Winter retreat: Why, Palm Springs, of course! Vegas gets so cold in the winter.

Beside me in his car seat, Benjaminh laughs and suddenly looks at me, smiling.

4.

What is he hearing? — pebbles on the tarmac; planes humming in the air; the wind from a thousand windmills on the other side of this California town? Benjaminh cocks his head and listens. Fast ribbons of synapse vibrate, marked with his original language and now this new one, in which clunks, whistles, thrums, whooshes, and chirps are as potentially relevant as the sound of his new parents' voices, calling to him, calling him back from the busy stylus in his brain. We've arrived. James unbuckles him and swings him up high into the air. Benjaminh laughs and stretches his fingers. Sun, sky, grass, palm tree, tilting as he turns.

5.

"Today is the Lunar King's Birthday Festival," Joy's assistant Linh announces, "and the American Consulate is closed. We will start Minh's adoption paperwork tomorrow."

Q: Who is this Lunar King, whose birthday is so important that even an American office in Viet Nam must take the day off?

Linh shrugs and smiles, sweetly displaying her crooked teeth. "I do not know this king," she says.

Q: What king is this important, yet not important enough for you, Linh — an educated and gregarious woman — , to have any knowledge of him? Are the shops closed? What about Vietnamese offices?

Linh shakes her head, confused. No, all these others are open.  
... A lunar king, then, whose birthday only an American office

observes.

Q: But how a king? As far as we know, Vietnam has had no kings. Perhaps a French king, from the colonial days?

No, no: this is a lunar king, and must therefore be Asian.

"This is all they have told to me at the American Consulate," Linh says, smiling again. "The Lunar King's birthday."

It is Monday, January 21st. *Lunar King, Lunar King*, we mumble. Could it be — ? No, how improbable. And yet — Luther King? Is it perhaps Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, birthday?

"Oh," says Linh, laughing with her hand over her mouth. "I think this is what they have said."

6.

In the bumpity-bump van we bounce over dirt roads through the densely black Vietnamese jungle. The sun set a half hour ago and now our van's headlights and what they illuminate are the only living things. We are in western Vietnam, on our way back from a temple near the Cambodian border. Kim, our driver, does not seem to know where he is. We've been looking for the Vietcong Cu Chi tunnels, and, as one would suppose they should be, they are proving difficult to find. The day has been long; we would like to tell Kim to forget it, to take us back to the hotel, but after all he has done to get us this far we can't bear to tell him to turn around now. Besides, he speaks no English, we speak no Vietnamese, and so we don't know how we would explain, in any case.

At last the road widens and we stop at what appears to be an entrance separating two chunks of similar dark and leafy rubber jungle. Kim speaks with an official who wears a khaki uniform. Even though we understand no words, we can tell that Kim is begging. It is well after five, the tunnels have closed, but Kim is determined we shall get in anyway. Miraculously — we do not know how Kim manages this — the official at last nods and stands aside for our van to drive through.

At a small wooden pavilion in the middle of this verdant jungle a man greets us. He gestures to a tunnel entrance, a small covered hole in the ground. He explains, in passable English, that these old

war tunnels are in places no wider than the width of a man, and the ceiling can become so low that we will have to crouch to move forward.

Right, I tell Doug and Jim. That's okay, you two go on. I'll just wait here.

Oh, come on, they say, tugging on my arms. This is history. It'll be an adventure. You'll never get the chance again.

Not on your life, I say.

At last they go in without me. I watch them disappear down the hole, imagine them crawling their way along dark tunnels beneath me, under the earth, with the spiders and the scorpions.

Up in the night air, I sit at a picnic table under the small pavilion lit with a few dim bulbs and watch geckos skitter up the walls. An elderly man shuffles about, attending to a TV set hung near the ceiling broadcasting some kind of comedy-variety show, like a Taiwanese, I'm guessing, version of Sonny and Cher, cum cowboy hats. Canned laughter rings out into the jungle thirty years above the maze of tunnels. Everything, I now understand, no matter its original purpose or tone, will eventually charge admission. And hadn't we wanted to come?

In a lit display case, souvenirs are for sale: mockups of grenades, pistols, what look like genuine National Liberation Front army buckles, postcards of soldiers that may or may not be authentic. When he realizes I won't be buying anything, the man flicks off the display light. Despite the TV, I can hear the jungle around me moving, its rustling all the more suggestive of large animals in the absence of any breeze. I peer into the blackness, sweating on my chest and down the small of my back. James and Doug and Kim have been gone for almost an hour. And if they don't return? What then, if they don't return?

Please, get a grip: I'm sitting at a picnic table, drinking bottled water, watching comedy TV, trading nods with a perfectly nice elderly man in rubber flip-flops.

At last they return, silhouettes rising out of the lit hole into the black night.

Back in the bumpity-bump van I touch James's hand. I can't believe you did that, I say. The darkness. The closeness. Don't you get claustrophobic?

Yes, he says. It was pretty bad.

Then why did you go?



He shrugs: I didn't want to disappoint Kim.

7.

The blackness of the continuing jungle outside the windows is unchanging. We doze, awake to jolts, doze, and wake. No one speaks. Kim peers into the night. It's very late and we've had a long, exhausting day. A pebble rattles, caught in the hubcap. All at once Kim flings his hand to his forehead and shouts out, *Oh!* He exclaims again, *Oh, oh,* shaking his head and muttering. He looks back at us with horror.

What is it? What is it? We crowd around the back of his seat. Is he all right? What is happening?

In his absence of English, or our absence of Vietnamese, Kim begins gesturing to explain himself. He points this way and that, turning around in his seat. His meaning dawns on us with a terrible dread: after an hour of driving through the dark jungle, Kim has after all taken the wrong road from the tunnels. We are lost. In a *jungle*. We shall have to turn around.

But all the roads look alike — narrow tracks in the dense, unchanging foliage. Our hearts sink. We look at each other with dread. What if we cannot make it out? Do such things actually happen? *American Tourists Lost in Vietnam Jungle. Presumed Dead.*

And then Kim is laughing, tossing up his hands and smacking his legs with pleasure. He's just kidding. We're on the right road. It was just a joke.

Our hearts pound with relief. We begin to laugh, patting Kim on the back. Who would have pegged young, earnest Kim for that kind of prank? The nerve of it. We look at him with a new appreciation.

It's almost ten o'clock when at last we reach the hotel. We climb out stiffly, stretch on the curb, and then — *Oh no!* Doug exclaims. The video camera! We left the video camera at the restaurant where we had lunch! He speaks the name of the restaurant for Kim, mimes a video camera at his eye. Kim freezes, the smile instantly wiped from his face. Three hours back to the restaurant, this means, another three to get home again.

But then Doug slaps Kim on the shoulder and grins. Just kidding, he says.

8.

In my lap in the orphanage's pale tea-green room, stretching his legs long, baby Benja-Minh grips my thumbs and stares up into my face. I suck in my cheeks, make a fish mouth out of my lips and waggle them. His eyes widen. He studies me and then, after a long moment, I see something click in the depth of eyes: something in his brain has just turned on. As I gaze at him, amazed, he sucks in his ample cheeks and for a moment, brief but real, he's made a fish-mouth of his lips. Leaning over from above, his new parents laugh with delight. Ben's eyes roam my eyelid, iris, nostril, earlobe, earring. His lids droop, open, droop again, close. His arms go slack. His breathing is full and resonant, like a voice inside a drum.

9.

Water trickles over layered pebbles in the fountain, seeps below the tile basin, returns to begin again.  
Bright blue sky above.

## A PAGE ON FOOT WASHING, PERMITTING SHAME, ERROR AND GUILT, MYSELF THE SINGLE SOURCE

---

*Brian Blanchfield*

Foot washing is a sacrament in Protestant orders that understand the Bible as the word of God, including the Old Particular Baptists and the Primitive Baptists, especially in the Piedmont and Appalachian regions from Pennsylvania to Georgia. In the Primitive Baptist churches I grew up in, the ritual was part of an annual communion. After a short sermon or reading from scripture — I think there is a story in which Christ humbles himself to wash the feet even of the apostles who would soon betray him and enjoins others to such humility — the members of the church would rise to sing hymns, called out by title or hymnal page number, and a procession would begin in an orderly fashion such that, sister with sister, and brother with brother, a pair would form and a wash basin would be chosen to fill with warm water. With two small white towels the partners would sit on and kneel before the front pew and alternate soaping and rinsing the feet of the other. It was touching to watch an elder and younger man exchange the service, lean and muscular, gnarly and horned. Maybe ten basins were in use at a time, and everyone else kept up the singing while the pair worked silently. I sang the lyrics of “Palms of Victory” or “Come Unto Me,” watching every grimace and blush on my mother’s face with her slender feet in the old woman’s hands the last time. A thirteen year-old knows his single mother’s foot. An 8½ narrow: back when a Naturalizer salesman would bring his shoehorn and ramp-stool over to straddle his customer’s fitting.

To wash one’s own feet independent of the rest of the body, and even to wash the feet of others, was not an unusual act in the time and place Jesus Christ lived, in an economy of hospitality, Greek in origin. He and his friends wore sandals, of course, and customarily the feet were the most unclean part of anyone entering a home, particularly travelers. Was that the function of the first foyer, the anteroom? Odysseus, dressed as the beggar back at Ithaca, was recognized by the scar on his leg when the old nurse was cleaning his feet. A warm foot bath was a welcome, and for a friend to give one to a fellow friend was perhaps a tenderness. Reciprocity was at the

heart of it. To not return the favor was to upset a balance. It may well be that, originally, "the shoe was on the other foot" when an erstwhile guest held his former host's upon repayment of a visit. Somewhere Guy Davenport must have an annotated bibliography on the topic, tracking it homosocially through art and literature.

In Greek drama it was even more honorable to wash a horrible foot, a putrid foot. In *Philoctetes*, the ogre has been exiled on his island on account of a deception rooted in foot disgust. His fellow sailors led their wounded, festering compatriot ashore and sneaked back to the boat slip without him, unable any longer to tolerate the smell of his rank, diseased, accursed foot. But the play concerns a second deception in which a young honorable man is enlisted, by Odysseus, to gain Philoctetes' trust, to hear his laments and sympathize, to enter his cave and tolerate the stench; he takes the ogre's magic bow when he is seized again predictably by foot pain. Because the young man's sympathy is real, his guile is tested. Nonetheless, he procures the treasured bow for Odysseus in the wings. It is for Philoctetes as though the first betrayal was reopened. Whatever psychic detachment from his own extremity he had managed is annihilated. His relationship with his own living rot, we know, will only grow more shameful. And Odysseus, elsewhere the revenant hero, messiah incognito, is here a craven opportunist, whose villainy, equally, is detachment from shame.

When my stepfather Frank, in a torrent of spite and fury, humiliates my mother in the company of family or friends, over dinner or in his own hospital room, as he does regularly, relentlessly, set off by her miscomprehension of something or an oversight he has discovered, the room is stunned, shaken. There is nothing like it. Mortification is arresting for everyone present. However nefarious or admirable his other dealings may have been, the great disgrace of his life will have been his terrorism of the one devoted to him. The lasting shame of mine was enduring it by detaching from it. I left when I was seventeen, five years into their marriage, and I visit as seldom as I feel I can.

Frank has had, for five or six years now, a chronic wound on the sole of his right foot, a condition not uncommon to advanced type 2 diabetics like himself. Bones in his feet are gradually crumbling

and splaying, and abrasions form. Charcot syndrome. Because of the related impaired circulation and complete localized nerve loss, there is no pain, but there is constant danger of necrosis and toxic shock. The wound on his sole has intermittently wept and cracked and granulated for years, but never closed, despite a number of stimulative water and pressure and debridement treatments, and its inability to heal is the single reason he has been prohibited the kidney transplant for which he arranged a donor long ago but for which he would need to be infection-free during postoperative immunosuppression therapy. The aperture of his wound has varied from dime to half-dollar size and I have seen it three or four inches deep. Even then, it was frightfully clean, like a throat.

My mother cleans it, every evening, after dinner, after the dishes. She has a kit, a kind of carpet bag, with gloves and sprays and brushes and ointments and individually wrapped antiseptic wipes. He lifts his heavy leg to the butcher block table in their kitchen, and her movements are quicker and rougher than you might imagine, though her concentration is intense. She wipes the gullet of it, and the rim, she gets it to granulate. After twenty-five years of marriage she knows this part of his body best. He hasn't ever really seen it. Often, during, feeling nothing, he watches television.

## A PAGE ON LOCUS AMOENUS, PERMITTING SHAME, ERROR AND GUILT, MYSELF THE SINGLE SOURCE

---

*Brian Blanchfield*

Latin. Right? Happy Place. A pleasant place, a propitious place for happiness, luck, creativity, abundance of spirit to take hold. Does everyone have one? The locus amoenus is one of the early conventions of the pastoral mode, which is the oldest minor genre in poetry and lyric writing, and maybe the most mutable. In a certain light, Gwendolyn Brooks's urban Bronzeville poems from the sixties were pastorals: linked persona poems whose dropped-in-on scenes together made up a village, a community; and in another light so is Rufus Wainwright's cover of The Beatles' "This Boy": nostalgic, plaintive, performing and lamenting the fungibility of men as love partners. "This Boy": it's the one that begins "That boy . . . isn't good for you." (He sings it with Sean Lennon, the slight one, at cross purposes.) Most commonly now we think of the pastoral as nature poetry or soft-focused naturalist writing, potentially embarrassing for its unproblematized birdsong and lilting reverie on the wonders of streams. But nature itself was in the work of Theocritus and later Virgil only a kind of stage, a theater for the idyll or eclogue or scene to begin. The poem or songful story would be spoken by a shepherd — that is, by a young man who was amative and uninhibited, rascally, gracefully intelligent, highly literate, musical, fit, unself-conscious, curly-haired and beautiful, and the capable herder of livestock meanwhile. The early urban poet's ideal of the rural shepherd, goatherd, neatherd, or swain was implausible, a fantasy: that's who spoke the poem, which could be a number of things but was often an extrapolation of a detail in a myth known well by listeners. The listeners too were a fixed premise: fellow shepherds and lyrists who were sometimes involved by name in the poem. What was it like for Herakles to leave his men and search frantically for his young, barefoot lover who had been drowned by river nymphs attracted to his beauty? Well, before I tell you, I must have led my sheep to pasture and found some shade, confident of their containment. It must be noontime, which is the most sempiternal of hours in the day. The sweet competitiveness of other shepherds who know my reputation as a poet and lover must be about me,

electric. And, I must be in the right place. A clearing or a glade, a hillside outcropping of rounded rock one happens upon, with the long golden hair of the grasses matted and soft. The locus amoenus.

It is a reasonable question to ask whether the poet is different from the person who writes the poems and pays the Comcast bill late again and gets balsamic dressing on the side and snaps at the customer service person at U-Haul headquarters. The philosopher and poet Allen Grossman makes the distinction between them and further suggests — best as I could tell and as well as I recall — that the poet (I believe he says the “poet in time”) is contingent on the poem, is made the poet by the poem, each poem. A sort of separation happens perhaps. I think Grossman divides him up further and identifies, third, the lyric speaker as the default voice itself in a lyric poem, which in fact we do recognize immediately in poetry, the voice that is more overheard than heard. Often I am permitted to return to a meadow. If that spoken line were piped in through an intercom, you would still know right away it was poetry. This is someone unnamed saying something to someone unnamed, either in a particular context or in the realm of forms, I am not him, and I want you to hear it. Come into earshot. In what kind of place is all the hearing overhearing? The kind of place where all the looking is onlooking. The locus amoenus.

So, am I in a voice in a poem; or am I in a place from which I’ve prepared to speak; or have I situated someone other there, a figure, a projection, to speak, so to speak? More than a decade ago, after giving a reading, reading some of the early poems that went into my first book, I remember clearly a particular consternation someone felt and related to me. It seems it was the following day. It was someone not especially familiar with poetry but someone who knew me well; I can’t remember who. It’s the kind of experience that repeats a half dozen times, in dreams too, until you sort of equip yourself for it. There is a question that is embarrassing, kind of flooring in its reasonableness. The question is easy but the answer is hard. (Isn’t it always, about identity?) The person asks, maybe even works up the nerve to challenge, “But why does what you write not sound like how you talk?”

Why is poetry pretentious? Is that the question? Certainly to an-

swer, "Well, there I was speaking as my representative shepherd" doesn't help the cause. There are all kinds of ways to answer the question, including to define poetry as another art that pulls attention to the medium, language, defamiliarizing it from its usual invisible, directly communicative and expository functions, thereby discovering it afresh, activating and liberating it. But it is in usual, directly communicative and expository language that this explanation is offered, and seems paltry, and even if one cuts to the chase and says, "You don't tell a dancer that's not how you normally move," the defensiveness concedes the point. What was the point?

Think about pointing for a moment. Imagine there was but one person in a group who points, who understands pointing as an act that might send the gaze of others in a direction he indicates with his outstretched arm and indicating finger. But with each demonstration, all the others keep their eyes on him, even and especially on his extremity, which repeatedly extends and goes rigid and to which he seems to want to draw attention. For these others, it is a kind of dance to do. There is no casting from the body with any part of the body something as divorced and immaterial as someone else's attention. He introduces pointing again and again, but it doesn't take. He makes strange asides like, It's as though to indicate had never been a transitive verb. (Note to Rufus Wainwright: a "Me and My Arrow" duet with one of Harry Nilsson's sons.) It doesn't send.

So, you know, pointing is a construct. The child looking not past the pointer finger proves it. The self is a construct. Often I am permitted to return to a meadow. Poetry is a construct. When you say your poem it somehow isn't the person I know speaking.

No one writing a poem, achieving pleasure in discovery of intention and pattern and melody and association and parallels and syntactic and other tensions, is trying to be someone else. But once made, the poem so made registers as speech. And that speech is always, rather mysteriously, someone else's. Someone with givens, in a world. Theocritus may have been the first to find an exterior figure for this transformation, particularizing the givens of that speaker, and of the milieu for poems. Those givens are representative pretenses of poetry still.



The last of the things I like that Allen Grossman says in his famous and pretentious *Summa Lyrica*, or maybe he's quoting someone, is that in the social realm of speech we face one another, asking and answering and remarking and informing, in exchange. But in the realm of speech a poem opens onto, we all face forward. We look on. We are positioned toward the speech differently than as we stood in the world a moment before, the world we came to the poem in. It is not meant for us exactly, this speech. It's in the locative case. Not a word of it, but the condition of the speech itself: it points us elsewhere if we listen. We listen in. The doings there are ongoing. What is that place? The one behind the construct of the idyll.

## A PAGE ON MAN ROULETTE, PERMITTING SHAME, ERROR, AND GUILT, MYSELF THE SINGLE SOURCE

---

*Brian Blanchfield*

Man Roulette is down right now. The cameras don't seem to be working. If the prospect of video chatting one-on-one with a man somewhere in the world, a man with whom you may build a small relationship or virtual transaction more or less premised on mutual attraction and sexual interest, appeals to you as it does me, and you confront this functional blackout, the logical solution is in substitutive logic, a hacker's logic, exchanging other words for man in the URL. They aren't synonyms, exactly, that you come to know to try: you come to know to try the offensive categorical generalities of pornography, even where your own identity is inscribed, delimited. It is a safe assumption that there are imitation sites, mirror sites if that's what they are called, but the most obvious, gayroulette, doesn't open anything. But a second choice, boyroulette, redirects to pinkroulette, which I would have considered only well after cockroulette, for example, I am embarrassed to say; but pinkroulette.com is quite active, with several channels ongoing (or cylinders spinning?) — sixty users in each, apparently — and very nearly identical to the interactive site I discovered for myself in the summer of 2010.

The modus operandi of Man Roulette is quickly appreciated and even mundane, but what it affords and requires of its user is phenomenal, and understood only gradually. There is an incoming video image in the image box at the top left of the screen: him, he in his deeply underway life dialing you in, staying on you for the moment at least, your station one of the many. Each successive occupant of the incoming image box is called "Partner." (Substitutive logic pervades the whole endeavor, really, and is part of roulette erotics.) The outgoing video image in the image box beneath that one, at the bottom left of the screen: "You," as you appear on camera, as you have chosen to position yourself on this day, relearning that the lean of your head to the left lists to the right rather in the mirror picture, lit as you wish under the overhead wall lamp. I show my face, my entire face, in my image box, which puts me in a minority of users, and since so few do, I wonder if it is unwise to do so, and why. Ano-

nymity is below the mouth, one concludes. I am in a still smaller minority for entering the fray entirely clothed. I look likewise for other faces, other men who like to disrobe later.

To the right of the video stream is a large text-field. What you type and submit appears to you attributed to You. What he replies and enters comes from Partner. There is, as it turns out, a lot to say while watching Partner look at you watching. He is, to begin with, in a room of some kind, particular, contingent, "real." With art and clocks and books and pillows and cigarettes and mail and daylight, or lamplight, with a bed or desk or basement sofa, with doors you can ask him to open, bags he may or may not empty, of content you may deduce about. The bottoms of his socks are dirty. You give it to him that his socks are dirty, that his door is ajar, that his grin is telling. "Partner: Are you for real?" The quite separate utility of the text field in Man Roulette returns credibility to the Cartesian mind/body divide, (even as opposing theories of self are likewise validated here: the self as instantiated only when relative to others in microcontexts, identity as entirely a matter of performance). Something for sure shifts into gear once the hunter-gatherer channel-surfing gives way to a single engagement and You and Partner partner up; a familiar compartmentalization may be experienced afresh: See something, say something. The image boxes are a font of eidetic fantasy and comparative self-regard, a kind of fuel for the text field in which you create and remark and send, then watch for effect. The transcript of the date has its slow build here; reading it over later, if you cut and paste and save, you can recall his smile at certain points in the play, a particular surrender, a fidget, a sigh. You can re-create sensation. The text field is where the evening is spent, and the image boxes are where the night ends, typically. A sleepy last look, a wistful good-night mouthed. If a date, it has been a date in which the two of you exchange as in confrontation but show simultaneously as adjacent, facing outward, as in a journey. The text field is the steering wheel, the handling, and the winding road at once; and your image and his are the chassis and heavy engine, the cruising velocity, the arrival. Partner and I filled evenings and long nights in the text field during the summer and fall of 2010. I know I fell in love on Man Roulette at least once, thought about Partner days on end, and I can recall real, breathing moments together in which I felt Partner fall for me: Albert in Detroit; Diego in Guayaquil, Ecuador; Sean in Franklin, Massachusetts; Bruno in

Ouro Preto, Brazil; John Patrick in Milan. "Partner: you are not like other guys."

Man Roulette is down right now. Try other words for what you want, other words for what you are. Boy is a redirect, but it takes you there. It was on Man Roulette I learned I was an older man, an older man fantasy for some, a station to move right past for many others. Though I had had only younger lovers and boyfriends for some time, I think I hadn't realized I was no longer young myself that summer. On Man Roulette I was a mustache and a hesitation to smile. I was vain about my hair. The light was best at my desk upstairs. I swiveled into it at key moments. I said 35 instead of 36, when asked. I swiveled. In the text field, I would race to establish an unexpected mix of permissive mischief, acute sensitivity and oblique non sequitur, to wager at intervals something true and peculiar about him or his situation. I was, in contrast to Partner, a good deal more controlling, I came to realize, and much more invested in how I came across, and — however much I love to divulge to a stranger — less willing to risk. Partner I liked for being legible in his expressions, for his inability to contain himself, for his freedom in his rooms, for what seemed a freedom from tactics, for his relaxing inhibition.

Meeting someone on Man Roulette and maybe Skyping with each other for a few more dates is, in the end, for all its anonymity and performativity, no different than other love and sex relations, I find. I mean, people find their positions rather naturally vis-à-vis one another. I am, and was that summer, what my friend Maggie once termed a social passive top. (Which sounds like one of eight possible combinations, the most smug of the eight, although private active bottom sounds self-involved too.) I think she meant, I'm scripted to be the catch; to draw in rather than pursue; and then, sure of his interest, to assert a kind of self-governance and skill at scaffolding, building a kind of domicile I can invite him into, a narrative usually, a construction of us with great focus on why he is special enough to belong, very pleasurable for both of us if Partner is dispositionally complementary. I'm attracted to his pleasure. I give him, in short, a fair amount of what I always want and routinely prevent, the experience of being fully seen and understood. You're lucky if you can read the script you're acting out.

What is different about Man Roulette is vantage, a kind of inherent third-person perspective on the both of you and your date. You get to see it all. An overburdened pair of blue briefs in Guayaquil, a candy wrapper with funny Italian. You have to oversee it all. His reaction reading your remark, your impulse to get a reaction. It took me a month and a half to tell my therapist what I had been doing. I said it was probably trivial, but we saw it was human.

## THE ZOMBIE'S PRAYER

---

*Emily Bobo*

"Mamma, where are you?"

Prone on the floor of her room in Child's Position, pelvis groaning, ovaries twisting like skinny balloons at a child's birthday party: snake, poodle, giraffe —

" — I'm right here," I lie. I'm not here. I'm light years away. And at two, my daughter can already tell.

She touches my cheek.

"I'm here," I say, pulling myself up to my knees. "I'm right here."

I am a zombie. Not the rotting-on-the-outside kind of made-for-TV zombie. A real one. Rotting on the inside. My uterus leaking blood to my ovaries and colon. My breasts growing tumors. My lymph nodes swelling with pus and disease. My hair is bleached blonde. My teeth bleached white. The TV tries to sell me a paste to bleach my age spots. I eat salads for lunch and drink shakes for breakfast. When the sun goes down, I eat chocolate and drink wine, wine, wine. And a pill to sleep.

I used to be wild. Wide awake in the here and now. I swam naked in February, drove my Chevy 90 miles per hour through a holler, held a lit roman candle like it was a dick and aimed it down the highway. I peed on semis, drank Hot Damn, and puked in the ditch. Hunted snakes and raced barrels on the back of a sixteen-hand GoManGo at the Little Britches Rodeo.

Now? I go to church on Sundays. Work weekdays. Walk twice a day. Go to the grocery. Buy organic. Shop at the Farmer's Market on Saturdays. Watch TV. I have a husband and a daughter and eight big faux-clay pots on my deck that are full of weeds. My cat has cataracts and arthritis. I wait for her to die. I'm thinking of painting my kitchen cabinets.

By the time I get home from my job teaching writing, I am too tired to play with my kid or talk to my spouse. When the cat rubs against me, I push her off, saying, "Go away," so often my two-year-old tells me, "Go 'way," when she's into my purse or onto my cell phone. She calls my mother more than I do. When I do talk to my mother, I speak in a monotone, grunting single syllables like it's her fault I'm no good.

Rotten. That's me.

"Mama, where are you?"

I'm refilling my glass. Wine, wine, wine. Red wine! Drink, for we know not where we go, nor why. *Where are you, my darling daughter? In therapy? Not yet? Just wait. I'll screw you up good.* Isn't there some children-of-a-shit-mother insurance policy I can take out to pay for her future psychiatry? I'm pretty sure State Farm has one. *Sign me up.* For sure, she's going to need it.

I'm at the dentist office, getting my teeth cleaned by the ax-wielding hygienist. *Gentle Dental, my ass.* I'm telling myself, "Go away. Go away. Pretend it isn't happening." My zombie prayer. But the scrape and click of her hook keeps pulling me back into this rubber chair with the fluorescent light on my spit-speckled face. And I'm wishing I hadn't rubbed so much coke on my gums in the 90s, that I had used my mint-flavored floss for more than a breath mint. Her gloved hands taste like powdered plastic. The water bowl behind me sounds like a running toilet, as she brings the vacuum around to suck tartar and pus and blood and life from my mouth. And I feel the corners of my lips splitting just a micro-bit wider.

"Go away," I tell myself when I'm stuck in traffic, when I'm dodging the third call from my mother, when my daughter's throwing a fit in the checkout lane at Kroger, when I've got a nipple-stickered boob stuck in the mammogram-masher, when I'm waiting in a private room because the doc wants to talk to me about genetic breast cancer, when my gynecologist has her finger inside me probing my ovaries, asking, "Does this hurt? Does *this* hurt? You may experience some slight discomfort." That's what they tell you just before they insert the speculum and crank you open. Twirl the Q-tip. Clip the cervix. Like it's a hedge or a rose bush. And I wish mine had teeth so I could post a sign, "Beware of the Chihuahua." I want to kick all these plump-bodied, kind-faced, well-meaning women and say, "Did *that* hurt?"

Yeah. That's what it's like — slightly discomforting — when the cousin who molested me tries to friend me on Facebook, and I'm too afraid of explaining it to his mother to deny him access to pictures of my daughter. "Go away. Go away. Pretend it isn't happening."

"Mama, where are you?"

I'm cowering on the floor of my soul, chanting, "Go away. Go

away," like it might save me from being afraid that I'm not a good mother, that I suck at being a wife, that I'll never amount to anything, that I have wasted my life, that I will die unknown, that I have no purpose, that because I am a shit for a daughter fate will make me a shit for a mother, that I'm too good for my job, that I'm really not, that the love of my life doesn't actually know me, that if he knew me he wouldn't love me, that he has already left me, that I am too afraid to live, that I will take too long to die, that I will screw up my kid, that I'm old, that I'm young, that I can't really do this life, that it's too late to realize this, that I chose the wrong color for my cabinets, and that my ass is too big, that it will just keep growing into perpetuity, that I will be that woman with the little round head and huge fucking ass that starts at my knees and ends at my ribs, that my ovaries are no good, that they will take my uterus and my boobs, that there is nothing wrong with me, that everything is wrong with me, that I have been wrong about everything, and that Brad Owens was right in 6th grade, and I really am a bubblehead who is somehow still missing the point.

"Mama, where are you?"

I have no clue. Last I knew, I was chasing a brain like some dead-eyed monster, gobbling up degrees like an ever-hungry zombie, cashing in my past, my identity, my belief in God and a good pair of boots, cashing in casseroles and fireflies in cottonwoods, cashing in beauty and goodness and the sacred sound of wind in wheat — all for some starched, white piece of paper I can hang on the wall of a shared office at a community college.

"Away. Away. Go away." I had just wanted out and away — away from the smell of dirt and debt and death. So I left my mother on a couch fighting chemo for a horde of rotting men squatting on my chest, pulling stories from my tongue, their fingers wet and dripping with my brain, their mouths running with my wheat.

"What'll it be, baby? Sex, drugs, rock-n'- ro-o-ol-ll?"

I sold my past for a future I already owned.

"Shhhh," my daughter says, index finger drawn to her lips, "there's a ghost in my room." She slides her eyes sideways, left then right, in a frighteningly grown-up way.

"Oh. A ghost? Where is he?"

She points behind me at the green curtains on her window,



nods, whispers, "He's hiding."

Later, ghost forgotten, she covers all of the eyes in her fairy-tale activity book with stickers. "Scary," she says, placing a pink jelly-bean over the black eyes of the gingerbread man. And she's right. They are scary. Those empty, black-hole, zombie eyes. *Run, run, run as fast as you can*. They're all scary. Little Red Riding Hood, Goldilocks, the wolf, the three bears, the three little pigs — *Who's afraid of the big, bad wolf?* I am. I'm afraid. I'm terrified of what she sees in my eyes, what sticker she will choose to try to fill me, her rotting mother.

And as my knees start to buckle and my ovaries twist my gut to licorice, she says, "Twirl, Mama!" Her little round arms flung wide as the room, her head tilted back, her mouth stretched open. "Twirl! Twirl! Twirl!"

This takes bravery, too. Loving a child is no less wild or reckless than skinny dipping or fucking or drinking or fighting or learning or writing. It's more. It's living outside a cover.

And suddenly I am here. Right here. I'm twirling ever faster, faster, faster, my feet stumbling on the red alphabet rug in front of my daughter's bed. And we're falling together on top of the yellow Z, tickling bellies and toes, weeping joy from our pores.

And for just this one moment, I am awake, and I feel fierce, and I am fearless with a hope that I can be here, now, today and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. Amen.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

---

**KIM ADRIAN**'s short stories and essays have appeared in *Tin House*, *Agni*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *New England Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Raritan*, and elsewhere. In 2010, she created the website Food Culture Index, which documents depictions of food in the arts. Currently, she is at work on a memoir. She lives near Boston with her husband and two children and teaches creative writing at the independent writing center Grub Street.

Raised in the U.S., **KAREN ALKALAY-GUT** teaches poetry at Tel Aviv University, and chairs the Israel Association of Writers in English. She has published over two dozen books of poetry in English, Hebrew and Italian translation. Her publications in 2012 are *Layers*, *Miracles and More*, and *Belly Dancing in Tel Aviv*. Her exhibition with photographer Ezra Gut of poems on the Galapagos will be published this year.

**SUSANNE ANTONETTA**'s most recent book, *Inventing Family*, a memoir and study of adoption, is forthcoming from W.W. Norton. Awards for her poetry and prose include a New York Times Notable Book, an American Book Award, a Library Journal Best Science book of the year, a Lenore Marshall Award finalist, a Pushcart prize, and others. She is also coauthor of *Tell It Slant: Creating, Refining and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*. She lives in Bellingham, Washington, with her husband and son.

**BRIAN BLANCHFIELD**'s first book of poems is *Not Even Then*, published by University of California Press, in 2004. Poems from my second collection, "The Understory," have appeared recently in *The Nation*, *The Paris Review*, *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, *Boston Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Lana Turner*, and other journals.

**EMILY BOBO** is the author of *Fugue*, a chapbook about a girl and her piano, which appears in Lost Horse Press's emerging poets' series, *New Poets*, *Short Books III* (2009). Bobo is also an Associate Professor of English at Ivy Tech Community College, where she teaches Poetry and Creative Writing to single moms, ex-cons, and other non-traditional students. She treasures her students and their stories.

**ROSA ALICE BRANCO'S** most recent collections are *Cattle of the Lord* (winner of the Espiral Poetry Prize of 15,000 Euros for 2009) and *The World Does Not End in the Cold of Your Bones (she tells herself)*. Her books have appeared in Spain, Tunisia, Switzerland, France, Luxembourg, Brazil, Venezuela, and Francophone Canada. Here in the USA, her work has appeared in over thirty magazines, including *Atlanta Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Prairie Schooner* and *The New England Review*.

**CHRISTINE CHIN** is an artist whose work makes humorous and ironic commentary on contemporary issues of technology and the environment. Recent projects have addressed artificial intelligence, genetically modified food and alternative energy. Her work has been shown nationally and internationally at venues including the New York Hall of Science, Art Basel Miami, and Canon Communication Space, Beijing. She has an MFA in photography from the University of New Mexico and is an Assistant Professor in the department of Art and Architecture at Hobart and William Smith Colleges.

**KATHARINE COLES'S** fifth collection, "Reckless," is forthcoming from Red Hen Press. Recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Crazyhorse*, *Gettysburg Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *Poetry*, *Image*, and *Best Spiritual Writing 2011*, among other publications. She spent a month in Antarctica recently writing poems under the auspices of the National Science Foundation's Artists and Writers Program.

**PAUL CRENSHAW'S** stories and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Best American Essays 2005* and *2011*, anthologies by W. W. Norton and Houghton Mifflin, and numerous literary journals, including *Shenandoah*, *North American Review*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. He teaches writing and literature at Elon University.

**JIM DAVIS** is a graduate of Knox College and now lives, writes, and paints in Chicago, where he edits the *North Chicago Review*. His work has appeared in *After Hours*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Whitefish Review*, *The Café Review*, and *Contemporary American Voices*, among others. His work has received numerous awards, including first prize in the most recent Line Zero Poetry Contest, and

multiple Editor's Choice awards. [www.jimdavispoetry.com](http://www.jimdavispoetry.com)

**SHARON DOLIN** is the author of five books of poems, most recently: *Whirlwind* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012) and *Burn and Dodge* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), winner of the AWP Donald Hall Prize in Poetry. She is currently a Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at Hofstra University. Sharon Dolin also teaches at the Unterberg Poetry Center of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y and directs the Center for Book Arts Annual Letterpress Poetry Chapbook Competition.

**SHEILA P. DONOHUE'S** work has been published widely in journals. Her short essay on the poet Hayden Carruth will appear in an upcoming issue of *Poetry* as part of their Remembering Poets series. A recipient of a Stegner Fellowship and Jones Lectureship at Stanford, she lives in Evanston and teaches at Northwestern University.

**MATT DONOVAN** is the author of *Vellum* (Houghton Mifflin, Mariner 2007) which won the Bakeless prize in poetry, as well as the Larry Levis Reading Prize. His nonfiction has appeared in journals such as *AGNI*, *Kenyon Review*, *Threepenny Review*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*. He has been the recipient of a Pushcart Prize, a Lannan Residency Fellowship, an NEA Literature Fellowship, and a Rome Prize in Literature.

**E. A. FARRO** spends her summers living outdoors and conducting field research in places such as Alaska, Ghana, and the Rocky Mountains. She is working in tandem on a collection of fiction stories and nonfiction essays about women straddling traditional roles and professional aspirations. She was a mentee in the Loft Literary Center Mentor Series in Minneapolis and has a PhD in geology.

**TESSA FONTAINE** lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where the outlaw Railroad Bill once dodged the Sherriff and threw food off a train to the hungry townfolk. Recent work can be found in *Creative Nonfiction*, *The Normal School*, *DIAGRAM*, *[PANK]*, *Fugue*, and more. She teaches writing and performance to students in prison, and sometimes to students not in prison.

**MATTHEW GAVIN FRANK** is the author of the nonfiction books, *Pot Farm* and *Barolo*, the poetry books, *The Morrow Plots*, *Warranty in*

*Zulu*, and *Sagittarius Agitprop*, and the chapbooks “Four Hours to Mpumalanga” and “Aardvark.” Recent work appears in *The New Republic*, *The Huffington Post*, *Field*, *Epoch*, *AGNI*, *The Iowa Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Best Food Writing*, *The Best Travel Writing*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Prairie Schooner*, and others. He currently teaches at Northern Michigan University where he is the nonfiction editor of *Passages North*. This winter, he prepared his first batch of whitefish-thimbleberry ice cream.

**CLINT GARNER** is a Georgia native. He received his MFA from the University of Montana, where he also served as a poetry editor and co-art director for *CutBank*. His poems have appeared in *491* and *Off the Coast*. He and a handful of fellow bibliophiles have started a collaborative literary small press — look out for beautiful artifacts from Peel Press in the near future.

**RYAN GRANDICK** hails from Council Bluffs, Iowa and is currently pursuing a Masters in English at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He holds a BA from the University of Iowa and has seen work published in the *ScissorTale Review*.

**BARBARA HAAS** has placed her fiction and nonfiction in such journals as *Glimmer Train*, *The North American Quarterly Review*, *The Wapsipinicon Almanac*, *The Hudson Review*, *Epoch* and others. She is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship — and her MFA is from UC Irvine.

**CHRIS HAVEN'S** poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poet Lore*, *Slice*, *Sycamore Review*, and *Blackbird*. He teaches creative writing at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, where he edits *Wake: Great Lakes Thought & Culture*. These poems are part of a series about Terrible Emmanuel, a cranky, fallible figure short on benevolence who considers himself to be the supreme being.

**GEOFFREY HILSABECK** is the author of two chapbooks, *The Keepers of Secrets* (The Kenyon Review, 2004) and *Vaudeville* (The Song Cave, 2012). *Vaudeville* was nominated for the 2012 Essay Prize. His work has appeared in *6x6*; *Forklift, Ohio*; *We Are So Happy to Know Something*; and on NPR. He lives in Somerville, MA.

**MICHAEL IVES** is the author of *The External Combustion Engine*, from Futurepoem Books, and *wavetable*, forthcoming from Station Hill Press. His poetry and prose have appeared in numerous magazines and journals both in the United States and abroad. The language/performance trio, *F'loom*, which he cofounded, was featured on National Public Radio, on the CBC, and in several international anthologies of sound poetry. He has taught at Bard College since 2003.

**ALEXIS LEVITIN'S** thirty-one books include Clarice Lispector's *Soulstorm* and Eugenio de Andrade's *Forbidden Words* (both from New Directions). His most recent publication is *Brazil: A Traveler's Literary Companion* (Whereabouts Press, 2010). In 2012 he will publish Eugénio de Andrade's *Art of Patience* and the contemporary Brazilian poet Salgado Maranhão's *Throbbing Sun* (Milkweed Editions). He and Salgado will take that book on a three month long reading tour in the fall.

**W. M. LOBKO'S** poems and interviews have appeared most recently in *Kenyon Review Online*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Sixth Finch*, *La Fovea*, and are forthcoming from *Boston Review*, *Slice*, and *RealPoetik*. His poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. In April 2012 he co-hosted an episode of *Late Night Library*. He holds an MFA from the University of Oregon and currently teaches in New York, where work on his poetry manuscript *Kin Anthem* and his novel *The Quick Brown Fox* doggedly continues.

**BRENDA MILLER** is the author of *Listening Against the Stone* (Skinner House Books, 2011), *Blessing of the Animals* (EWU Press, 2009), *Season of the Body* (Sarabande Books, 2002), and co-author of *Tell it Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* (McGraw-Hill, 2003). Her work has received six Pushcart Prizes and has been published in numerous journals. She is a Professor of English at Western Washington University and serves as Editor-in-Chief of the *Bellingham Review*. Her latest book *The Pen and The Bell: Mindful Writing in a Busy World*, co-authored with poet Holly J. Hughes, was released in 2012 from Skinner House Books.

**JERRY MIRSKIN** is an Associate Professor at Ithaca College. His first full-length collection, *Picture a Gate Hanging Open and Let that Gate be the Sun*, won the Mammoth Books Prize for Poetry. His second full-length collection, *In Flagrate Delicto*, is rated PG-13. He is this year's winner of the *Arts & Letters Prime Poetry Prize*.

**NATANIA ROSENFELD** is the author of a critical book, *Outsiders Together: Virginia and Leonard Woolf* (Princeton University Press 2000). Her poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in numerous journals including *The American Poetry Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Raritan*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *Southwest Review*. She is a professor of English at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois.

**AYLEN ROUNDS**, originally from the Seattle area, teaches English to college students. He is currently a graduate student at Eastern Michigan University.

**EMILY VIGGIANO SALAND** holds a BA in English and Classics from Cornell University and an MFA from George Mason University, where she was the Heritage Writing Fellow and Editor of *Phoebe: A Journal of Literature and Art*. Her poems have appeared in or are forthcoming from *DIAGRAM*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Smartish Pace*, *Pear Noir!*, *Mare Nostrum*, and *Booth*. She currently works at Marist College and resides in Pleasant Valley, NY.

**JENNIFER SINOR** is the author of *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing*. Her essays have appeared most recently in *The American Scholar*, *Utne*, and *Brevity*, and she has work anthologized in *The Norton Reader*. She teaches creative writing at Utah State University where she is an associate professor of English.

Born in Baghdad in 1951, **RONNY SOMECK** moved with his family to Israel as a child. The author of ten volumes of poetry, he has been translated into thirty-nine languages. His numerous and varied prizes include the Prime Minister's Award, Yehuda Amichai Award, the Hans Berghhuis prize for poetry 2006 at the Maastricht International Poetry Nights, the Netherlands and most recently the Polish Cross of the Order of The Knights for Distinguished Service.

**ANGELA STEWART** holds an MFA from the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa and has previously published in *Granta.com*, *Gettysburg Review*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Relief Journal* and others. Her collection of essays on trees is forthcoming with Sarabande Books in 2014.

**NOEL THISTLE TAGUE** was born in Kingston, Ontario, and raised in the Thousand Islands region of northern New York. She has an MFA in Poetry from the University of Montana and is currently a PhD student in Critical and Cultural Studies at the University of Pittsburgh.

A native of Los Angeles, where she co-curates the 3rd Area Reading Series, **MARCI VOGEL** has been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize and the AWP Intro Journals Award. Her poetry, fiction, and nonfiction has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Colorado Review*, *Zocalo Public Square*, and she enters USC's PhD Program in Literature and Creative Writing this fall as a Provost's Fellow.

**NICOLE WALKER** most recent collection of poems from Barrow Street Press is *This Noisy Egg* (2010). Zone 3 Press will publish this year her collection of hybrid research/lyric essays, *Quench Your Thirst with Salt*. Continuum Press will publish *Bending Genre: Toward a Theory of Creative Nonfiction*, edited by her and Margot Singer in 2013. She's the nonfiction editor of the literary magazine *Diagram*. She edits the artist/writer collaborative project *7 Rings* on the *Huffington Post*.

**ELIOT KHALIL WILSON's** poems have been published in dozens of journals. His first book of poems, *The Saint of Letting Small Fish Go*, won the 2003 Cleveland State Poetry Prize. He currently lives in Denver, Colorado.



**ESSAY:**

**KIM ADRIAN, SUSANNE ANTONETTA, EMILY BOBO  
PAUL CRENSHAW, KATHARINE COLES, SHARON DOLIN  
SHEILA DONOHUE, MATT DONOVAN, E. A. FARRO  
TESSA FONTAINE, MATTHEW GAVIN FRANK, RYAN GRANDICK  
BARBARA HAAS, CHRIS HAVEN, GEOFF HILSABECK  
MICHAEL IVES, BRENDA MILLER, JERRY MIRSKIN  
DONALD PLATT, NATANIA ROSENFELD, AYLEN ROUNDS  
EMILY VIGGIANO SALAND, JENNIFER SINOR, ANGELA STEWART  
NOEL THISTLE TAGUE, MARCI VOGEL, NICOLE WALKER  
ELIOT KHALIL WILSON**

**POETRY:**

**ROSA ALICE BRANCO  
JIM DAVIS  
CLINT GARNER  
W. M. LOBKO  
RONNY SOMECK**

