

TWISTED VINE

Literary and Arts Journal

Fall 2017/Spring 2018



Cover Art

Qanat Quartier, Doha: Heaven on Earth by Reem Rashash Shaaban

Masthead

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Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the Fall 2017/Spring 2018 issue of Twisted Vine Literary and Fine Arts Journal!

In reading through the final draft of this semester's journal, I am struck by the variety of voices that are represented here. Our authors, poets, and artists have different worldviews, come from different walks of life, have lived through different life experiences, and have different methods of expressing their thoughts; but what they all have in common is that, through their chosen artform, they have struck a chord that resonated with us. Some submissions made us laugh, some made us think, and some made us cry, but they all touched us in some way. Whether you are reading fiction or non-fiction, viewing fine art contributions, or perusing poetry, it is our hope that you will also find that something--a thread of commonality which reinforces your connection to humanity.

One woman does not a journal make, and I owe a debt of gratitude to Twisted Vine's entire editorial staff. This has truly been a group effort, and I could not have asked for a better group to work with.

A special thank you to our Editor-in-Chief Dr. Heather Steinmann, who has been an amazing mentor to us for the last year. We have learned much under her guidance, and we hope that we have done her proud.

Jennifer Hungerford
Managing Editor
Twisted Vine Literary Arts Journal

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Almond Lamprey

–BEAR KOSIK

The cleric was having none of it. One way or another, this time, the truth had to come out. He much preferred if it came out smoothly and gently. He might not have any choice. Then again, some ways were no longer encouraged and others actually discouraged.

Some may be wondering about the catalyst to this irksome predicament. Others may be wondering if ‘irksome’ was the most appropriate adjective to describe the problem. It wasn’t. One might think it was in an onomatopoeic way, along the lines of ‘irk’ being the sound brakes make when a vehicle stops short or the analogous activity happens in the brain. Screeching halt, if you will, only much shorter in duration and spelling. ‘Irksome’ truly lies more along the lines of something that is tedious or boring. Irritating predicament would be much better. Regardless, this belabored example demonstrates the hazards in trying to apply adjectives that only sound correct but are really not applicable at all. And no, we are not delving into ‘belabored’.

Just what was the annoying matter that led us down this tortured path? It was the same kind of falderal that led someone to come up with the word ‘falderal’. This time, however, the problem was in the stanza and not the refrain. Yes, there had been a dispute over the lyric of a song. Actually not ‘a song’ but rather ‘the song’. Again.

The tune was a ditty that a smithy might have written had he had been forging a pen rather than a sword. It had all the elements of a popular tune save for a melody worth remembering. There was more to it than that. Not much more, but enough to take note. Or rather, notes parading through the line in search of harmony among the dissonant chords. An awful thing doused in shame and dressed up to look good. Yes, it was pretty embarrassing.

There had been no forewarning before the catastrophic cacophony of sounds was unleashed upon the rapt, unsuspecting crowd. Not that anyone could know what was suspected that needed to

be unsuspected now. The few who might have bothered to find out were called away to determine whether a rapt crowd can be unrapt and, if so, does one save the ribbon for future use.

Then the music started. Even before the first note, the performance couldn't be over soon enough. No one seemed to have just the right appendages or implements to stick in one's ears to mute the sound splurging from the choir. The noise, oh, the noise! The dogs howled (and sounded better). The situation deteriorated rapidly, like snow on an active volcano. 'Active' is required, by the way, since everyone knows that snow sprawls comfortably on Mauna Kea, Kilimanjaro, Fujiyama, and other, less iconic, inactive volcanoes. There was nothing else to do but concentrate on the words of the song as something separate from the work as a whole.

When the inaugural rendition had finally ended, no man, woman, or child could countenance the thing being performed ever again. Some people actually begged if it were possible to unhear the damned thing. Speaking of damned, the priest threatened to excommunicate any soul who even mentioned the tempo or key later on. Any new attempt at vocalizing even one bar of music from the song wasn't only met with dread. People drew knives. Not surprisingly given its reception, all copies of the piece were drawn, quartered, and burned. No one present could remember an *auto-de-fé* that had been as popular.

That was rather sad. Until someone could envision Semolina Pilchard climbing up the Eiffel Tower no song would be paired with the sort of lyrics attached to this monstrous collection of musical notes. They were entrancing, delightful lines. One could play with them for hours on end, particularly if one had eaten bread made from ergot-contaminated grain. Of course, the searing pain in the limbs from the ergotamine alkaloid could put a stop to the hallucinatory fun at any time. Gone green means gangrene, as the posters stated. Not necessarily the most needed public health campaign for a plague-riddled country. Nonetheless, folks appreciated the cheeriness of the slogan.

The lyrics to the misbegotten hymn held a power unknown since the Nicene Creed was hammered out. Not one or two, but five lads found sufficient courage in those words to renounce the

pleasures that come from earning a living to attend barding school. Some may doubt there ever was such a thing, but those five lads became known far and wide as the temptations slowly drifted away.

Yet those minstrels-in-the-making never successfully confronted the single point that stymied every person who had heard the words sung that fateful day. Whilst all else could be and had been scavenged, analyzed, and masterfully determined to be the correct verses after many days of testimony from witnesses (and some scurrilous mention of forced rhymes deemed more meritless than the Donation of Constantine), the accuracy of two words remained unresolved.

Some said the lyric stated ‘litoral waves’. Others said the lyric stated ‘literal ways’. Naturally, members of the boat club pushed for ‘litoral ways’. The ergot crowd favored ‘literal waves’ and demonstrated their firmness of conviction with suitable arm gestures. The warring factions snorted and stamped at one another after mass daily, twice on holy days, and every third market day.

The result was the Church had to become involved. The local priest had, of course, witnessed the original act, but always declined to favor one party’s interpretation of the lyric over another. He sought to be a peacemaker and, if that didn’t work, a backbreaker.

After many years of turmoil, everyone finally agreed that the one tee ‘litoral’ was preferable to the trending two tee version. (Future generations would disagree.) That left the issue mercifully separated by one letter in the first word. Then, someone suggested that everyone stop trying to describe the indescribably nuanced difference in pronunciation between ‘litoral’ and ‘literal’. The town folk would just have to accept the words as homophones and leave the choice as to which was intended to the conscience of the faithful. The priest had some concerns this resolution went against Church Teachings, but erred on the side of making progress in this ordeal.

An ecclesiastical court provided a breakthrough when it reached the verdict that wy and vee are close cousins alphabetically and graphically. That made ‘waves’ and ‘ways’ fraternal twins. To be honest, the objective evidence gave the court no room to wiggle. Not that the court liked to wiggle, although it was known to shimmy when matters from Shickshinny graced the docket.

Nonetheless, all had been satisfied that the most that could be done had been done to settle the matter.

Chaos awaited in the form of the one person who ought to know the lyrics perfectly, namely the lyricist. The composer had been dealt with already, fool that he was to stick around for the debut. He had been seized immediately and convicted under extraneous circumstances before the last stanza had been sung. The required defenestration from the Guild banquet hall was nothing to write home about. The hall is on the ground floor. The town leaders apparently hadn't fully grasped the concept and didn't intend to anytime soon. Anyway, the folks back home preferred to start a lynching by throwing the perpetrator out a window. They had no need for some fancy town trick like 'defenestration'.

After, the composer was shaved, tarred, and feathered, he was placed ass backward on a bass backward, paid the two florins due from his contract, and heckled out of town. Chastened by his experience, the man gave up songwriting and worked on his skills as a cut-purse and codpiece buffer. Once one is eye level to another man's crotch, the two naturally go hand-in-hand. Meanwhile, the lyricist had slipped away unidentified.

Unidentified, that is, until a man calling himself Almond Lamprey found lodging at the inn. Master Lamprey had supped and drunk a masterly meal. He was two minutes from securing a wench or a lad (or both, preferably). However, the innkeeper's wife had sent her husband to fetch the parish inquisitor. Standing orders were that all visitors must be questioned regarding the fuzzy lyric and their previous proximity to pestilent provinces.

Each time her husband trotted round to the sacristy to find the Monseigneur, who usually could be found polishing church property in his best vestments, the lady of the house was free to measure the inseams of the inn's guests for a research study on how long the innkeeper could be cuckolded. She had already gotten partway up Almond's thigh when she was dismissed.

The dreary father did not mince words (although he was known to julienne them from time to time). This Almond Lamprey was going to settle the matter of the lyric or be broken.

“Tell me the last two words of the second line of the second stanza or it’s the rack for you this evening.”

“Good father,” the younger man replied. “I cannot fathom why you are so serious about a song.”

“Cannot fathom? Do you take me for a fool? We are nowhere near the sea!”

“It’s just a turn of phrase, Monseigneur.”

“I will be the one turning things, lad. Have you never heard how a dispute begun eight years ago has wreaked civil disruption and wrecked marriages? This matter has torn this town into factions each resolute in its absolute knowledge of the truth.”

“Death and destruction the result of a little poetry set to music?”

“Indeed,” the old man said.

Master Lamprey wasn’t quite sure whether to be honored or horrified. Writers rarely discover the true effect of their talent on the lives of others. He wanted to be proud, but first needed to clarify what exactly they were discussing.

“It has been a few years. Can you perhaps hum a—”

“Stop! Clearly you are completely ignorant of these matters. I am the only person here who can even admit the melody once existed without being arrested. You are never to speak of the music again.”

That response set Almond back. Now, he wasn’t quite sure he wanted to discuss the lyrics. However, the cleric looked the type to apply the clamps and ask questions later.

“Can you give me some clue? The title, perhaps?”

The cowed head turned up a bit in thought.

“That seems a safe method to proceed. It was titled ‘Children of Heaven’.”

Master Lamprey grinned. “That’s an easy one. I repurposed the lyrics to that number just two weeks after running from here afraid for my life after I saw what you did to the composer.”

“Repurp-what?”

“Trade talk. I used them again.”

“And?”

“And the second version has been quite successful. I have even been told it has been sung by some cathedral choirs.”

“Very good, but—”

“What was that? The second stanza, second line?”

“Yes.”

“Of course. Let’s see....”

Almond hummed a bit of something the churchman didn’t recognize.

“I’ve got it.”

“Yes.”

“That line is, ‘We came upon the little waifs’. The words you misheard are ‘little waifs’.”

The inquisitor could not believe his ears. He sputtered, “Not ‘litoral waves’ or ‘literal ways’ or some variation?”

Master Lamprey cocked his head to look up into the cowl. One eyebrow arched high.

“Seriously? What would those things have to do with children?”

Meteorite

–SUZANNE MARSHALL

1.

Holding hands beneath an old bed-quilt,
they tilt back in lawn chairs, watch stars streak
the night sky, shards of light. A fireball flares,
hissing, spitting sparks, red and gold,
a trail of glitter behind;
touches earth.

2.

Within a ceremonial kiva –
crushed sage and a star-stone
smooth and black as night, silver-edged,
wrapped in a feather robe.
A winged creature that can no longer fly.

3.

An unearthly chime – his hoe rings against rock,
half-buried in loam, pushed up by spring frost.
The man levers it up, tugs it from the ground and,
eying its size, its heft, its charred surface mottled
with strange indents, he lugs it home to show his wife.
She lays it on the kitchen floor, propping the door open,
and lets in a warm breeze, lilacs.

4.

Dark pebble found in desert sand,
an ancient feel, old as the sun.
She binds it with a silver chain,
wears it at her throat.

5.

The gods have been known to descend
into our world. A flash of fire, stars trailing behind,
then dark flight, their bright light hidden
beneath a cap and muslin shirt.
To touch a woman's hand, the pulse
at her throat to smell lilacs, sage –
they'd choose earth.

Rose of Jericho

-NATALIE CROSS

Are you still alive
when your offspring
stops moving so you
curl into a ball so your
metabolism slows down
to zero so you stop
drinking water so
you're trapped in the
sand so the wind whips
you daily so your
hair dries into
kindling so your skin
sloughs off your body
so you crumble to your
bones so you cease
consuming light so you
can't move an inch
so you lose track of time?

Your roots find a drop
and decide that it's enough.
You open back up,
your hair grows green and thick,
and you learn to tolerate
obliteration.

Finding the Zen Mind

–MORGAN BAUSCH

It was April, and the light, rose-colored petals from the cherry blossom trees carpeted the ground in front of the Daibutsu of Kamakura. The delicate trees seemed to soften the view of this gigantic, gilt-bronze figure sitting in the midst of Kōtokuin Temple. Large and small bowls of fresh flowers of red, white, yellow, and orange sat in front of the enormous statue. They reflected brilliantly against the stark blue of the sky above the figure's head. The Buddha's rounded shoulders seemed to be bending towards them as if he wanted to breathe in the fragrances.

Tourists chattered like human plumed-bird flocks of various nationalities and ages. While wandering the temple grounds and waiting in the long line to enter the national icon, they took copious amounts of pictures with their phones.

When I was finally inside the temple, I got a quick glance at the interior. Small figures of Amida Buddha were sitting on shelves at various levels. The depressions of his face from the inside were huge and deep. The opened latticed windows high in the back of the Buddha offered a cool breeze that flowed around us as we made our way up the narrow steps and back down.

Over the years, many visitors had left graffiti on the inside of the statue, even though a plaque at the entrance to the grounds stated, "Stranger, whosoever thou art and whatsoever be thy creed, when thou enterest this sanctuary remember thou treadest upon ground hallowed by the worship of ages. This is the Temple of Buddha and the gate of the eternal, and should therefore be entered with reverence." The atmosphere was anything but reverential, with scrawled initials, dates, names of countries, and trite sayings on the inside walls. The little statues of Amida Buddha and their partially gilded platforms were too far away for them to reach.

When I came out, I noticed a monk standing motionless in front of the Great Buddha. He was dressed in clothing that indicated he was a Zen Buddhist roshi, a master or teacher, likely an abbot of his temple. His outer-sleeved robe was black with his gold kashaya draped over his left

shoulder. His expression resembled that on the face of the giant figure of Buddha. Both looked serene. The monk was bald, and his facial features were wizened. His age was difficult to determine, but he was definitely what I would consider an elder member of his sect.

I watched as he bowed deeply, his hands pressed together. Then he turned and made his way to a grassy area at a distance from the hubbub of the crowds. Sitting in the lotus position, with his hands posed in meditation, he closed his eyes. I was loathe to disturb him, but if he permitted, I wanted to use this unique opportunity to dialogue with him about Western and Zen Buddhist perceptions of what constitutes the mind.

I knew that some Zen Buddhist monks are considered “Westernized” because of their contact with Americans that come to study in their temples, and who are allowed to be mentored by the oldest members of their temple. I was hoping that the monk with whom I hoped to speak was one familiar with Westerners. My knowledge of Zen Buddhism was minimal as was my Japanese. I was hoping that he would excuse both and was conversant in English. Schoolchildren in Japan are taught English at a very early age.

In March, I had visited a traveling exhibit in a science museum in my home city of Phoenix, Arizona. It was devoted to showing how the brain operated. Each part of the brain was visually represented as a model. By the time the last sliced section was presented, all its functions were aligned with how the mind works. Perhaps, it could be surmised that all that we are; everything that we experience can be explained by the operations of a three-pound organ in the human body known as “the brain.” Yet, Western scientists have not reached an agreement as to the function and nature of consciousness, mind or even whether there is such a thing in existence.

I was especially interested in intensely investigating Zen Buddhism, as it is gaining popularity in the United States at a rapid pace. It appears to provide a sense of quiet confidence in its approach to its conception of what makes up the mind. So, I chose to visit the country of Japan in

order to examine Zen Buddhism's beliefs and practices, and discover whether it was a pragmatic way to view the real world.

I walked towards the monk dressed in the apparel of a Zen Buddhist master, stopped, and respectfully waited for him to acknowledge me, if he decided to do so.

He opened his eyes and looked up at me. I kneeled in front of him, so his eyes were shaded from the harsh glare of the noonday sun.

I spoke quietly:

“Konnichiwa, venerable sir, would you have some time to speak with me about Zen Buddhism?”

He inclined his head, so I sat next to him. He turned towards me, a slight smile on his lips.

You are American. I have found that many from your country are interested in Zen Buddhism.

“Yes, and I wish to know why, if you will allow a dialogue between us. In particular, your ideas about the mind to explain the world are different from what I have always believed to be true. May I explain?”

He nodded for me to begin.

“I have been taught that the brain and mind are synonymous. Everything that happens to us is a result of the activities of the brain, without exception. Since the brain is the fount of all that we know and can experience, it is the place of our identity, our connection to the world, and the medium through which we have our ability to interpret what we perceive. Our mind is the reason we prevail as human beings.

Last month, I had this ‘mind-as-brain’ explanation seemingly verified with science as the answer to the question of ‘what is the mind?’ If you will allow me the privilege, I’d like you to see what I saw in an exhibit about the human brain. I have diagrams and explanations for the anatomy of the brain that deals with higher thinking, behavior and emotions. With the last illustration, it will

have been shown that our minds exist only in the three-pound organ at the top of the body we call our brain.”

With an “old school” method to presenting my argument, instead of pulling out a tech tool, I reached in my backpack and took out a small black notebook. I opened it to the first page of my notes. I had drawn what I had seen in the exhibit, and color-coded each part of the brain to delineate the distinctions portrayed by the models.

The monk’s eyes crinkled with amusement.

I will be happy to make this visual journey with you, young man. I have had the pleasure of teaching many of your students of science that come to us to seek enlightenment.

I continued as the senior monk looked at the first picture. Glancing down at my notes, I began:

“The first picture shows a brown walnut split in half. It represents a little brain, with its left and right hemispheres. Even the folds or wrinkles on the nut are similar to those found in the brain. Though alike in appearance, the exterior color of the human brain is an off-white or gray shade. The adult weight is approximately three pounds or one and an half kilograms, and it is six inches long.

I turned the pages, explaining each of the brain’s functions.

“Next, we can see the segments of the brain within a side view of a person’s head. I made each of the important parts a different color to easily distinguish it from the others. I put the name of each alongside its differently colored section.

I pointed to the frontal lobe, with its purple color. This part of the brain is devoted to higher mental functions. It is responsible for thinking, personality, morality, behavior, self-awareness, emotions, motivation, and it controls our consciousness.

I was surreptitiously observing the monk’s face as I described what this part of the creviced mass could do. The Zen teacher seemed to be enjoying himself. He was smiling, leaning in to see the drawings.

The temporal lobe in blue is in charge of hearing, smelling, memory, and language, and the red-shaded parietal lobe is responsible for sensations, body awareness and attention. Finally, the green-colored occipital lobe is responsible for vision and perception.”

At this point, I was concerned that I had overloaded the monk with scientific terms: “Master, have you been able to comfortably take this visual trip with me?”

He replied in an untroubled voice, *Yes, young man, I have knowledge in this from two of my American students that were preparing to enter medical school in America.*

I found his reply astounding because of the representatives of extreme science that had been his students. I think he seemed to sense my amazement from my facial expression. I was sure it expressed my surprise that “hard science” individuals had taken quite a serious interest in a kind of philosophical way of living life that was peaceful, but impractical.

The rōshi smiled as I closed the notebook that had proven that the brain was the mind.

Since our journey has ended in the world of science to show the mind, perhaps it is time to explain how Zen Buddhism believes the mind to be.

He rested his hands on his knees, our eyes met, and he began:

The confusion you may feel about the subjective and objective view of the mind may be due to your concept of the mind as an object, the brain that can be touched and changed by the physical world of which it is a part. It must then be the opposite of Zen philosophy that to you may be a floating, passive consciousness untethered to reality.

“Yes, Old Father, this is the heart of my argument. For instance, self-awareness is located in the brain. It can be studied because it is part of a living mind.”

He regarded me thoughtfully.

Young sir, look around you. See the shades of green on the heavy curtains of trees behind the Great Buddha, the deep blue of the sky over his head, the gilt near his eyes high on his cheeks that remains of the gold glitter that once covered him. Hear the whisper of the wind as it talks to the

cherry blossoms opening their petals like fragile rose-soft ears. Smell the scent of the fragrant grass as it drifts languidly up to your nose. Pass your hand over its separate blades and feel the tips bow slightly beneath your fingertips; watch them return to their places when you remove your fingers, and see them as always yearning upward for the rays of sunlight to stay with them. Touch the ground with its brown welcome to those that would seek its path to enter the revered figure of Daibutsu.

If these senses were lost, how can your conscious experience be defined. You are left with your mind. But what kind of mind can exist without any physical sensations from which it can create mental perceptions? Your senses are merely sensations, so they must have some place to exist within, for them to be sensed.

The Zen student controls sound, color, form, and actualizes the truth in his everyday life. Sound comes to the ear; the ear goes to the sound. When you blot out sound and sense, what do you understand? While listening with ears one never can understand. To understand intimately one should see sound.

So, if we go beyond all the things floating around within our mind, we find awareness itself. This is the mind without mind - this is no-mind. It is this that is our true essence – our awareness. When our awareness is aware of itself, when it is undisturbed by mind, our true self emerges. Are you aware? I am. There is nothing more true than that.

“But, venerable one, personality, consciousness, and the supremacy of cognition in the brain would support the rationalist philosophical precept. Descartes said, ‘Je pense, donc je suis.’ The reality is that we are aware, because ‘I think, therefore I am.’”

Certain people believe that the mind is the same as the brain or some other piece or activity of the human body, but this is untrue. The brain is a physical feature that the eyes can see and that can be photographed or can be operated on by a surgeon. But, the mind cannot be considered a physical entity, because it is impossible to be seen with the eyes, nor can it be fixed in surgery or be

an object to be photographed. Therefore, the brain cannot be named the mind but just a part of the body.

Nothing in the human body can be recognized as being the mind because the body and mind are not the same. For example, when the body is relaxed and motionless, the mind is able to be greatly occupied, rushing from one object to the next. This shows that the mind and body are not the identical entity.

A Zen story tells this well. It is called, 'Moving Mind.'

Two men were arguing about a flag flapping in the wind.

"It's the wind that is really moving," stated the first one. "No, it is the flag that is moving," contended the second.

A Zen master, who happened to be walking by, overheard the debate and interrupted them.

"Neither the flag nor the wind is moving," he said, "It is MIND that moves

"Yet, as we have seen, the physical structures of the brain are the components of a sentient mind that controls and directs the body from its position in the human skull. So, it cannot be a free-floating thing that is outside its reality, can it? How can Zen Buddhism deny the source of how we perceive the world so we are able to live in it? It sounds other-worldly, which cannot be pragmatically useful, is that not right?"

A true answer can come from Keiji Nishitani, a Japanese philosopher and advocate for Zen Buddhism. He put forth that all things that are in the world are linked together, one way or the other. Not a single thing comes into being without some relationship to every other thing. Scientific intellect thinks here in terms of natural laws of necessary causality. But, in principle, when we distinguish being from beings, we transcend the realm of things that are. It is not that we go to some other world beyond the world we know, or enter into some different realm of beings. Philosophy does not go beyond beings ontically to other beings that dwell beyond or behind. Nishitani says it transcends beings ontologically in the direction of being.

“But, venerable sir, does not science of the brain define things as they really are? How is this different from Zen Buddhism’s version of what is already in existence with ‘ontic.’” It must be that ‘being’ is a physical manifestation of the mind, is it not?”

It would not be the same, because ‘ontic’ describes what is there, as opposed to the properties or nature of that being. Nishitani argued that modern science possesses a worldview of mechanism and materialism. For Nishitani, Zen Buddhism’s śūnyatā, or ‘emptiness’, is the way of interpreting experience from the standpoint of absolute nothingness, how the world appears when being has been transcended.

“Master, if I can inquire further, since we are human beings, we can only be evaluated by how our brain functions to give us purpose. So, the mind is the actual being that needs not transcend for it to function, or am I still entrenched with pure science to explain the mind?”

A popular Zen story that I often use with my new American students of science may assist here. It is called, ‘Empty your cup.’

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.

Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor’s cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. ‘It is overfull. No more will go in!’

‘Like this cup,’ Nan-in said, ‘you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?’

“Domo arigatou gozaimasu, Venerable One, I would like to empty my cup.”

Young man, I commend you for your questions for they are the beginning of your journey of enlightenment. Consider two Zen stories that may help you take your first steps.

The first Buddha life lesson is called, ‘Everything Changes.’

‘Suzuki Roshi, I've been listening to your lectures for years,’ a student said during the question and answer time following a lecture, ‘but I just don't understand. Could you just please put it in a nutshell? Can you reduce Buddhism to one phrase?’

Everyone laughed. Suzuki laughed.

‘Everything changes,’ he said. Then he asked for another question.

Zen's not about logic or words, but your state of mind. The second lesson that illustrates the impermanence of the mind is named, 'It Will Pass.'

A student went to his meditation teacher and said, ‘My meditation is horrible! I feel so distracted, or my legs ache, or I'm constantly falling asleep. It's just horrible!’

‘It will pass,’ the teacher said matter-of-factly.

A week later, the student came back to his teacher. ‘My meditation is wonderful! I feel so aware, so peaceful, so alive! It's just wonderful!’

‘It will pass,’ the teacher replied matter-of-factly.

Another excellent Buddha story shows the difference between science brain/mind and Zen. The lesson is called, 'The Stone Mind.'

The wise Zen teacher was walking on the mountain pass with one of his young students.

The teacher kept silent while the student spoke the entire time of Zen and the mind. After some distance the two men reached a giant boulder.

The teacher inquired softly of the student, ‘There is a big stone. Do you consider it to be inside or outside your mind?’

The student replied confidently, ‘In Zen everything is an objectification of the mind.

Therefore I would say that the stone is certainly within my mind.’

The teacher smiled. ‘Your head must be very heavy, if you are carrying a rock like that in your mind.’ The two walked the rest of the way in peaceful silence.

Zen Buddhism is a practice that needs to be experienced, not a concept that you can intellectualize or understand with your brain. Without being misled by language or logical thought, the quintessence of Zen is attempting to understand the meaning of life directly.

Zen meditation is a way of self-discovery and vigilance in a sitting position. It is the experience of living in the here and now, from moment to moment. It is through the practice of Zazen that Gautama got enlightened and became the Buddha.

Zazen is an attitude of spiritual awakening, which when practiced, can become the source from which all the activities of daily life flow – breathing, sleeping, eating, talking, thinking and so forth.

“Master, I am starting to see that Zen is a viable and useful practical experience in the present.”

“Very good, young one. Meditation provides insight into one’s true nature To be self-realized is to live fully through the body.

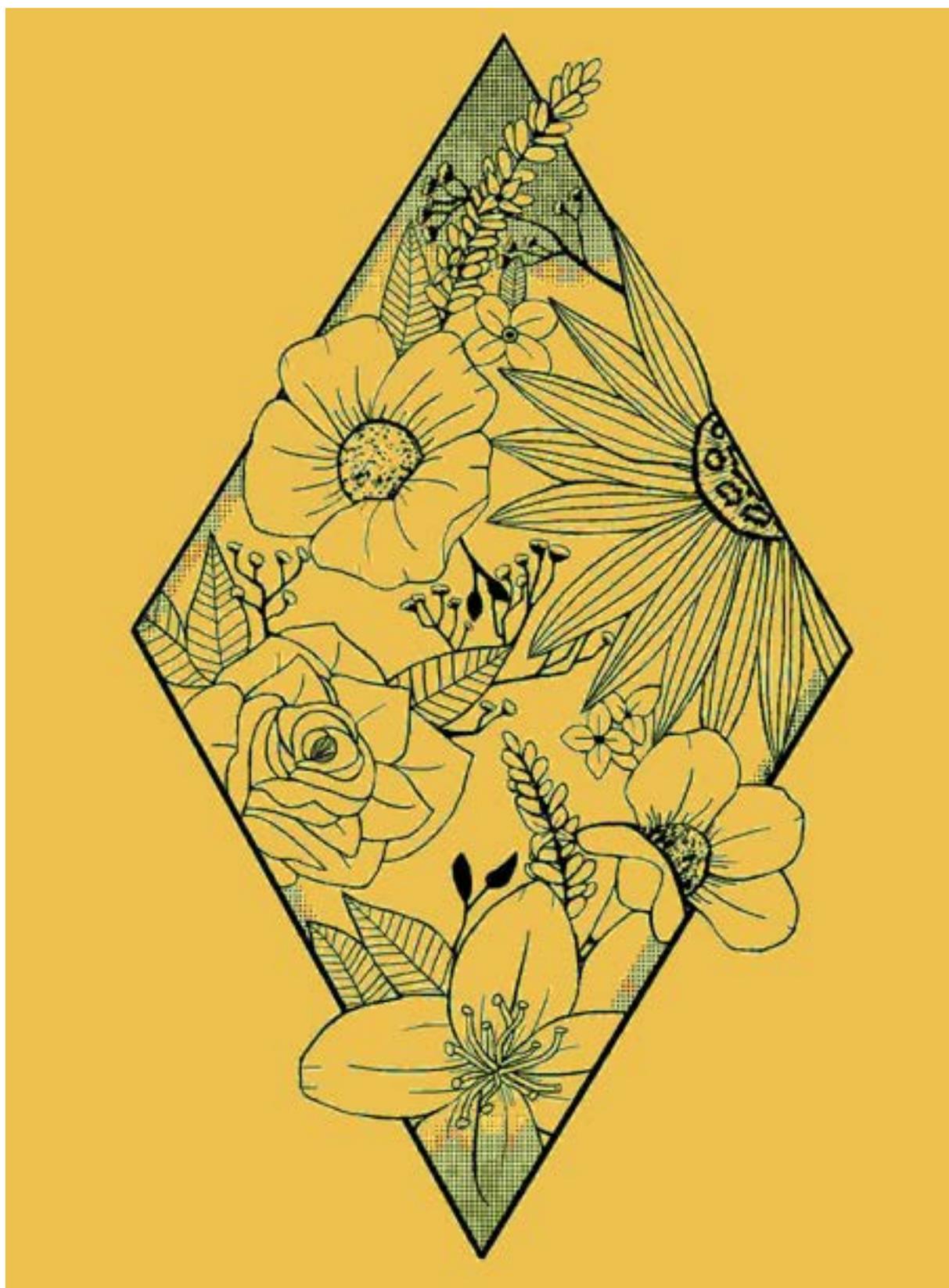
Perhaps, you will allow me a moment of meditation with you so you may experience Zen.

I nodded eagerly.

Keep your back straight; cross your legs with one ankle under another; fold your hands by placing your dominant hand faced palm up, holding your other hand also faced palm up.

Your thumbs are lightly touching. Close your eyes if you wish; clear your mind. Concentrate only on your breathing. Feel the deep breaths going in and coming out. If your mind wanders, bring it back by re-focusing on your breathing.

I sensed a calmness and peace and a letting go. I forgot about time. When I opened my eyes, the temple was beginning to be suffused with a reddish-gold light. It must be towards closing. I looked over at the roshi so I could tell him what I had felt. But, he was gone. Perhaps, he knew. I picked up several of the cherry blossoms that had blown over where we were meditating. The colors seemed more vibrant. They felt like silk. When I gazed up at the face of the Buddha; in the stillness, with the memory of the flowers on my hands, I decided to return to the temple



KRISTIAN KYLES – Blooming

The Guilty Have No Past

—ROBERT BEVERIDGE

Bolivia is full of old men
who have traded their German
Shepherds for chihuahuas.
None of them resemble
Orson Welles; all of them have taken
Jewish surnames. Ernst Röhm
and Heinrich Himmler pose
as brothers, run a watch repair shop.

They have founded
their own church, Our Lady
of the Immediate Stranger.
Their patron saint is Henry,
the saint of hitchhikers,
homosexuals, serial murderers.

Their plantations raise bananas,
except for that of Stefan Schwarz,
the caterpillar-mustached man
who raises rubber. The whole country,
on oppressive days, smells of cherries.

Picnic

–JASMINE RIZER

“Isobel doesn’t believe in labels,” my friend Mitch sneered, “because if she did, she’d be a bisexual alcoholic.”

Mitch was always saying things like this. It wasn’t that I thought he had called me anything bad with these words; I didn’t. But *he* thought he had.

“You know,” said our friend Gretchen, edging his way slowly between us, “that kind of snide comment is exactly why people like Isobel and me – ”

“Isobel and *I*,” Mitch corrected, because it turned out he was just that pedantic.

“Why people like Isobel and *I* avoid putting labels on ourselves,” Gretchen finished.

These days if you knew Gretchen, you would probably use a word like “gender-fluid” or “genderqueer” to describe him. But it was the 1990s, we were just undergraduates at a dumbass party school, and Gretchen was just Gretchen. He used male pronouns for himself pretty much all the time, had a long, perpetually tangled mane of beautiful hair, loved boys and girls, and usually used the women’s restroom. Nobody usually cared about this last one. It’s strange to think that in twenty years people would want to pass laws about it. If Gretchen knew that people were waiting outside a single-occupancy bathroom, having to pee, he was not going to spend a lot of time in front of the mirror in there fussing with his hair, and that went a long way with most of the women I knew.

In a lot of ways, Gretchen, with his long, lean body, his big hands, and his habitually stubbly chin, may have resembled what a lot of ignorant people imagine an actual transgender woman to look like, but he wasn’t a transgender woman. He was Gretchen. I loved him to distraction, and I hoped he never found out, because I was kind of a mean, hard-drinking, sleeping-around girl who didn’t have the first clue what to do about actually loving somebody.

All of this fussing and fighting involving Gretchen and Mitch and me was taking place at a nice civilized outdoor picnic auction thing, to which we three had been invited by mistake. Which is

to say, the organizers knew who we were, and invited us on purpose. Mitch was the lanky lead singer of Iron Horse, a local jangly rock band in the style of early R.E.M., only not as good. Gretchen occasionally played the piano with this band, and also designed breathtaking artwork promoting various musical and other entertainments around town, as well as covers for *Baby*, a 'zine that I co-edited with my friend Stephanie. (Stephanie had long hated Mitch's guts for reasons she wouldn't disclose, always saying with a shrug, "Look, he's your friend; it's not my place to drive a wedge between you.") The fabulously wealthy of Beech Grove were there to bid on crap like one of Mitch's guitars and a poster that Gretchen had designed with his own big gorgeous hands. It was a good cause – all the money was going to the local women's shelter, to buy things like blankets and boxes of tampons. The big mistake had been inviting any of us bright young things to actually *be* there.

I lifted my chin now and asked sweetly, "Hey, Mitch, what's the *label* for someone who would bust a move on an eighth-grader if he thought he could convince a judge she looked sixteen at the time?"

Mitch lurched toward me, looking meaner than I had ever seen him look, and Gretchen stepped between us. Now, Gretchen may have looked like a waif, but he was strong, and had a temper if you pushed him. Mitch knew he had better not lay a finger on me. "You know what, I am done with both you freaks," he announced, and stalked away.

Maybe he thought we were going to go after him. I don't know. I didn't care. Gretchen turned, placed a long finger under my chin, and asked, "What is going on, Isobel Tucker?"

I wanted him to kiss me then. His long bony face was familiar, and beloved, and close to mine. He was the prettiest girl and the sexiest boy and the kindest person I knew. I didn't normally approve of public displays of affection because they made other people feel like shit, but I lifted my body up on my toes and I lifted my face to Gretchen's -- only to have him put a hand in front of my mouth and sihi, "My Lord. Not fair. Izzy, seriously. Tell me what is going on here."

It was kind of a long story.

The night I met Mitch and Gretchen, they saved my life.

I don't mean this in a vague "I probably would have died if not for the support of my friends" way. I mean that Mitch and Gretchen walked into a room in which a man would maybe have beaten me to death if they hadn't gotten there first. He was their friend, sort of. More like their colleague. He was a musician, and Beech Grove was a small community, no matter how many brochures said we had "all the amenities of big city life." Most of the people in the so-called arts community tried to stay on speaking terms with one another as much as possible.

One of the people in this community was a pretty brown-eyed girl singer who had just gotten thrown out of a group called Noel's Ark. I had found her crying in a corner booth at the Furnace Room. Her now ex-boyfriend, Noel Greene, had broken up with her, and had thrown her out of his namesake band, even though it had actually been her band in the first place, and had been named Honeysuckle or Rainbow or something, until Noel had come along and appointed himself the genius at its helm. So I attempted to convince this young lady that she was better off without Noel Greene in her life, and we enjoyed several dances together to several Stevie Wonder songs on the jukebox, and then we went back to her tiny loft apartment, where we made out until Noel kicked the door in, shouting, swearing, and generally behaving unacceptably.

I was cowering under Girl Singer's bed. Noel Greene was trying to drag me out, and Girl Singer was hanging onto his arm saying, "Baby, she's just a friend," which might have been easier for Noel to believe if my shirt hadn't been dangling from a floor lamp. Noel grabbed me by the ankle and I was about to get hit, hard, a bunch of times, when in came Mitch and Gretchen, who had evidently followed him.

Mitch said, "Man, just calm down, man," but Gretchen said:

"Noel, you douchebag," and kicked him right in the balls.

Noel hit the ground. Girl Singer dropped to her knees beside him and started asking, “Baby, baby, are you okay?”

I sat up and got a good look at my rescuers, who were two of the most attractive people I had ever seen in my life.

Mitch was just what you call hot, in a very traditional way. I downright resented how gorgeous I found him to be. I found out later that he was a couple of years older than Gretchen and me, and had been trying half-heartedly to graduate for a while. Gretchen looked like nothing I had ever seen before. He stood with his hands on his hips, his hair a shade of burgundy never found in nature, his gender somewhat unclear to me in the tiny sparkly vintage dress he was wearing, although I thought from his speaking voice that he might be a boy. He looked me up and down, smiled that big sweet smile that would become so familiar to me, and said, “Nice bra.”

It *was* a nice bra. It was red lace, and I had paid too much for it, and I had worn it that night with a teeny, tiny white tank top, because I was a slut. It seemed somehow appropriate to meet two really good-looking men at a time when I had just dispensed with the pretense of a shirt altogether.

Here is how I knew that Gretchen was strong, and had a temper if you pushed him too far:

Once, the two of us were at a party, one of those things that someone with a lot of disposable income rents a warehouse to contain. The members of Iron Horse and a lot of hangers-on were present, as well as various other members of Beech Grove’s “arts community.” I was mostly there for the free beer.

I spent a lot of the night sitting on Gretchen’s lap, because it was a good excuse for us to be close to each other. It was one of those loud parties where everyone is shouting at everyone else just to be heard, which was also a good excuse for Gretchen to pull my hair back and address his comments directly into my ear whenever he wanted to speak to me. It was a pleasant almost-platonic-but-not-quite arrangement for us both, but this one guy had been glaring at us on and off all evening. He was

just a nondescript-looking guy in a Beastie Boys t-shirt. I still don't know what it was about the two of us that bothered him so much. Maybe it was Gretchen's made-up face, or maybe he thought I wasn't hot enough to be at this particular party. Whatever it was, he eventually came over, stood in front of us, and shouted the following rather internally inconsistent insult at Gretchen:

“Hey, faggot, whatever it is you're saying to your ugly girlfriend, maybe you'd like to share it with the rest of the class.”

“Hey, faggot” didn't get so much as a twitch out of Gretchen, who got called “faggot” all the time, probably because the slur “tranny” hadn't really picked up traction yet. But at the words “ugly girlfriend,” Gretchen stood up, nudging me to my feet.

Then, before I knew what was happening, he had pinned Beastie against the wall, almost casually squeezing the guy's windpipe. The guy started making this *noise* and it was awful, and Gretchen just stood there, not saying anything, just watching the guy squirm, until Mitch came over. Mitch walked up behind Gretchen and squeezed his shoulders in both hands, and said, “C'mon, Gretch, let him go. Someone'll call the cops and nobody will remember whatever it was this guy did to piss you off. They'll just remember how the dude wearing all the lipstick started a fight and broke up the party.”

After finishing this speech, he laid the top of his head gently between Gretchen's shoulder blades. He didn't care what anybody thought about this gesture. That was the Mitch I thought I knew.

Gretchen let the guy go, but then he stood right in front of him, blocking his way, and said, “I think you owe this beautiful girl an apology.”

“Shit!” said Beastie. “I'm sorry, okay, lady? You're, like, totally hot, okay?”

Gretchen looked at me. I nodded. “Yes,” I said. “Okay. That's good. That is a sufficient apology. Please, Gretchen, let him go.”

Gretchen stepped out of the guy's way, and Beastie couldn't resist tossing, “Crazy faggot!” over his shoulder as he stormed away, but Gretchen didn't care about that.

I was not supposed to know this, but Mitch and Gretchen had slept together on a somewhat regular basis during a four-week tour of the Southeast with Iron Horse. Gretchen let this information slip out one night after one more alcoholic beverage than he maybe meant to consume.

“Shit,” Gretchen said, clapping a hand over his mouth. “You can’t tell him I said anything about it. It’s all over now. Oh, don’t look at me that way. It’s not like he was *using* me. A lot of people our age aren’t, you know, sure, and I knew he wasn’t sure when – you know.”

Gretchen was usually fairly articulate. I knew the whole subject must be upsetting to him if it made him this incoherent, so I decided to let it drop.

I didn’t want to think too much about it myself. For one thing, I felt oddly, unjustifiably jealous that Gretchen had slept with Mitch and not with me. For another, I wondered if Gretchen might possibly have thought at the time that they were sleeping together because Mitch loved him, and was too much of a dude to say anything about it now.

I liked Mitch, but I had my suspicions about him from time to time. He came off as a Southern gentleman for a new millennium most of the time, but every now and then he would do something unaccountably shitty. I would tell myself, “He’s not usually like that,” but how often can something happen before it qualifies as “usually?”

A brief but not exhaustive list of awful things I saw Mitch do over the course of our friendship, up until the picnic/outdoor fundraiser where the shit finally hit the fan:

1. Once, when we were sitting outside the Electric Lounge at about three in the afternoon, skipping class and drinking beer, I saw Mitch leer at a bunch of high school girls that were walking past. I knew they were part of a high school academic team because they were wearing the same kind of dumb t-shirts we’d had to wear when I was on high school academic team. I kicked him under the

table and said, “They’re, like, fifteen, you creep.” He had the decency to look ashamed, and said something about not having realized how young they were. I believed him because I wanted to.

2. I once saw Mitch consume an entire box of Girl Scout Cookies and a whole six-pack of Red Stripe in one sitting, because they belonged to his roommate, and he knew his roommate was looking forward to enjoying them. “That asshole is going to go berserk when he sees his beer and cookies are gone,” he laughed. It was a tiny, tiny thing, but undeniably and deeply mean.

I told myself at the time that his roommate must have done something really bad to deserve it.

3. Once, Mitch wanted his then girlfriend Monica to be photographed making out with another girl for some stupid flier he was making for his band.

She didn’t want to do it. Monica didn’t like other girls that way, and she was serious about monogamy, and also she just felt like the whole proposition was just kind of gross, which, in context, it was.

We were all sitting at the end of the bar in the Green Light – Mitch, Gretchen, Monica, and me – and Monica was growing visibly more agitated by the second. Gretchen said, “Come on, Mitch, it’s not even really cool for Iron Horse to be associated with that kind of exploitation, right?”

Mitch turned around and snapped at him, “Then it’s a good thing you’re not actually *in* my band, Gloria Steinem.” Gretchen fell into a startled and hurt silence, and Mitch whined at Monica, “Can’t you see it’s all about the beauty of the human body? What’s wrong with you?”

The bartender, unbeknownst to us until several years later, when they got married, had long had a bit of a thing for Monica, and had been casually eavesdropping on the entire conversation. At this point, he wandered over, turned his back to the four of us, and displayed to Mitch his pasty white ass like a drunk college boy mooning a big rig. Then he pulled his threadbare corduroy pants back up and asked Mitch with great solemnity, “Why dontcha put *that* on yer band poster, since you love the human body so much?”

Three of us thought this was pretty funny. One of us did not.

Monica actually laughed so hard she slipped off her barstool and had to sit down on the floor.

Mitch started whining about indecent exposure and saying he was going to call the cops.

You have to understand that all of these incidents were punctuated by Mitch being Mitch at his most charming, aw-shucks-Southern-boy self. Mitch stopping after-church-brunch-hour traffic on Friedmont Street so that a tiny lady could push her mother across the street in a wheelchair. Mitch wading out of a flooded basement, through water up to his chest, holding a cardboard box full of kittens up over his head. Mitch literally saving my life the night we met, for fuck's sake.

Gretchen and I should have stuck together at this charity picnic thing. He would have kept me out of trouble. A dapper fellow in a suit took a shine to Gretchen almost as soon as we got there, though, and effectively squeezed me out of the conversation. He seemed like a nice man and I honestly didn't think he was excluding me on purpose. He just instinctively wanted Gretchen all to himself, and who wouldn't? He was a bit older than us, like maybe close to thirty, and frankly he seemed like a little bit more of a class act than most guys we met. I gave Gretchen's braid a tug by way of letting him know that I was bowing out, and I slipped off to the table where I was pretty sure I had seen some alcoholic beverages being lined up.

There was another girl standing there with a plastic cup of lemonade in her hand. She looked about the same age as me, and was enviably pretty, probably because she had put more time in on it than I had, but probably partly just because she was born with pretty genes, and I realized after a moment that she was watching Gretchen closely. I felt an unpleasant squirming in my stomach, like I had swallowed a family of sidewinders. I had only myself to blame that Gretchen wasn't my boyfriend, of course, but the thought of him laughing and kissing and also possibly swapping clothes with this beautiful creature, leaving me on the outside with my bad hair and my worn-down shoes, made me feel like I might die, or at least vomit.

This pretty girl turned to me and asked, in a tone a bit chilly, “So – you’re in Iron Horse with Gretchen Ritter, is that right?”

I laughed, surprised. “Oh, no. I can’t even sing in the shower without scaring the neighbors. Gretchen isn’t actually *in* Iron Horse, either.”

“But you’re friends with him. Good friends.

I hadn’t really planned on letting a deep, rapturous sigh escape me, but I did. “Yeah.”

“You spend a lot of time together.”

“Yeah.” I didn’t think at this point that she was going to ask me to introduce them. Some of the chill had gone out of her voice, but she sounded too serious just to be mooning over a pretty boy.

“So you know *him*.” She inclined her head towards a spot on the green where Mitch was playing hackysack with some trust-fund hippies. (I had nothing against them, but that was what they were.)

“Yeah.”

“Is he an asshole, or am I just being unfair?” she asked.

I thought about that. “He has asshole potential,” I admitted. “I’ve always thought of him as a pretty nice guy.”

I knew I couldn’t be about to hear anything I would like. Watching Mitch closely, she said, “Look, I was sixteen, so it wasn’t statutory rape, okay? At least not in this state. And I was sober, and in my right mind or whatever, so it wasn’t any other kind of rape, either. But there was something not right about what happened between me and Mitch Francis all the same.” She did turn look at me then, and she asked, “Does that even make any sense?”

“It makes perfect sense,” I said, my face heating up with shame as I thought about all the little shitty behaviors of Mitch’s that I had filed away under He’s Not Really Like That.

“It was a couple of years ago now,” she said, staring out across the grass again. “Maybe it was my fault. Probably I should just forget about it.”

A couple of years. Mitch would have been at least twenty, maybe twenty-one. He was in a band. He was gorgeous. He wouldn't have been fairly matched against any girl of sixteen he decided that he wanted.

"That asshole," I said. In retrospect, I should have stuck around at least long enough to say, "I'm so sorry that you had to go through whatever you went through," but you know what they say about hindsight. Instead, I stalked out across the grass to where Mitch was. "You asshole," I said. I shoved him in the chest, momentarily forgetting that he was twice my size. "What did you do to that girl?"

"What girl?" he asked.

It never occurred to me to make her day worse by pointing her out to him, just as it never occurred to me not to believe her. "She was *sixteen*," I said. "You were at least twenty. What the fuck is wrong with you? You couldn't settle for someone your own age? You have to have *all* of the women?"

Mitch laughed and said, "Sixteen is legal, baby," and that was when I picked up the fucking hackysack and threw it at his head, and the trust-fund hippies, God bless them, ran off to get Gretchen.

I explained all this to Gretchen, now, and he patted my hair absently, murmuring, "Sixteen. That's pretty fucked up. I mean, just because the law says you're not a pedophile, that doesn't mean you're not a creep."

I was exhausted and angry and I wanted to go after Mitch and hit him some more. But also, I was immensely relieved that Gretchen hadn't defended him. I thought about how pretty Gretchen must have been at sixteen, how striking he must have been to men and women alike and how many old-ass perverts of all genders must have thought they had the right to whistle and leer and stand too close. Maybe that was it. Or maybe he was just a decent guy.

“Screw him,” Gretchen said after continuing to absently pat my head for a second or two. “Let’s you and me buy that girl a burger or something.”

I snorted with laughter, and it wasn’t until then that I realized I had been about to cry.

“Okay, Jughead Jones,” I said. “Let’s do that.”

“Hush your mouth,” said Gretchen, crooking his pinky finger through mine. “I am not Jughead Jones. I’m Betty.”



OCTAVIO QUINTANILLA – Himnos para las vacas muertas

Hymns
for
dead
cows

Edison's Bulb

–JOHN GREY

Edison often put brainwaves to good use.
Like a light for the everyday.
A bulb same as this one above me.
It casts an even glow.
The lilacs come up purple not white.
The spines on the bookshelf are eminently readable.
I can even make out the dust on the computer screen.

I wonder what it would be like
to create something so perfect in its usefulness.
How rewarding for body and mind.
And what a comfort, even in old age,
to reach over the edge of the hospital bed
and flick on the wonders
of your youthful imagination.

Edison must have looked at the sun
and said to himself,
“I can make one of those.”
And, as a byproduct, I can raise mankind
out of a kind of darkness
that's not fully covered by church sermons.

I'm sure there were many equations involved.

And brow-tapping.

And stacks of intellectual dominoes

that just didn't fall right.

Plus he could have been sidetracked –

why not a patchwork quilt that doesn't unthread

instead of this electric light crap?

But he must have foreseen me reading

under a bed-lamp.

Or having to find something in the gloomiest corners

of a room.

And those camping trips with my father

when a fire informed what we were eating

but couldn't peer into the brushes,

pick out green eyes peering back.

True, light is not without its gruesome incidents.

Guy electrocuted on a pole.

Bulbs popping from a dripping ceiling.

Or me stumbling off a chair

as I try to replace one with burnt-out filament.

And there's that funeral light,

dimmed to imitate death

in a way that total blackness cannot.

And the streetlamps

that strangers gather mysteriously beneath.

But I'll take the downside.

Even its limitations.

Like, no matter how bright,
it cannot replicate day.

I'll even use it as a metaphor.

Like the bulb that pops into the head
as thought becomes idea.

Which makes me wonder
what popped into Edison's head
when he first came up with
the concept of artificial lightning.

Was it a bulb?

Was that cheating?

Bearded

—MICHAEL CHIN

Some people don't look like they're supposed to. Take The Bearded Lady.

Her name was Ellie. At nineteen, she told her mother she wasn't shaving anymore, piled her things in a suitcase, and walked to the highway to hitch a ride.

The trouble with hitchhiking without a destination is that you never know when you're done, and wind up riding roads forward and back, no end in sight.

She came upon the carnies at a rest stop. A pair of men—conjoined twins—paced clumsily, their gait not quite in synch. Three skinny girls argued about who was to blame for leaving a garment bag in San Antonio. A little Chinese man stood alone by the driver's side door of the biggest truck while someone worked under the hood.

Ellie decided the Chinese man was the most approachable of the lot. "I'm stranded here," she said. "Could I get a ride to the next town?"

The answer came not from the Chinese man, but from under the hood. "We can barely get ourselves moving." The man stood up straight, walked around the front of the truck, and looked her up and down.

"I'm awful sorry to bother you." She touched a hand to his sweaty, grease-stained arm.

"Name's Claude." Claude crossed his arms the way men do when they aim to flex their biceps without being overt about it. "We're a circus. I'm afraid we don't have room for freeloaders."

She tilted her head downward to look up at him, wide-eyed and meek. "I understand."

"But if you have any talents, you're talking to the right man."

"Are you the man in charge?" she asked.

"I'm his right-hand man." Claude touched the Chinese man's left shoulder. "The Ringmaster doesn't speak much English, but I can translate anything you want to tell him."

The Ringmaster bent away from Claude.

“Well, don’t you circuses all have a bearded lady?” Ellie asked.

Claude looked to the Ringmaster and set his hands on his chin. “Bearded.” He went on to cup his hands under his chest and bounce them up and down. “Lady.”

The Ringmaster rolled his eyes.

“What am I thinking? We picked up a bearded lady last month,” Claude said. “Half-breed. We call her the mutt. Thicker beard than yours, too.”

“That’s only because I shaved a couple days ago. Give it a week and I’ll have twice the beard your lady’s got. My momma always said it came in thicker than any man she’d ever seen.”

Claude scratched his chin, flexing harder. “Might be better than the mutt.”

The Ringmaster studied her face. “Where you headed?”

Ellie traced figure eights in the dirt beneath her foot. “Wherever you are.”

The *mutt* was named Susan and calling her a bearded lady was a stretch. Her body was shaped like a girl’s, but her fingers were stubby, and her head oddly configured—the forehead too short, the lower half of her face stretched so her nose stuck out. She had an overbite. She didn’t seem to have a beard as much as a coat of tan fur around her mouth.

The crew pitched two large tents and one smaller one. The smallest could have fit five or six people, but Claude explained that The Ringmaster slept alone.

Two camps formed. The prettier people--the dancing girls, the strong man, the acrobats—in one tent. The Fat Lady, the conjoined twins, the Reptile Man, Susan, and a dozen others crammed in the other.

“Sleep in the truck with me,” Claude said. “It’s warmer.”

Ellie layered on two sweatshirts and unfurled her blanket on the passenger side of the truck.

Claude waited in the driver's seat, the back reclined. "Passenger seat's stuck. It won't go back." His chest and arms were bare, and he rested beneath a blanket that only reached up to his armpits.

"Won't you be cold like that?"

"I could never sleep with clothes on."

She thought of braving the tents. But Claude had given her a ride and seemed like a good ally to have in the circus. Ellie pressed her back to the passenger side door and curled her knees up to her chest. "I've been thinking about my act. I can sing a little."

"The Fat Lady doesn't like competition. We had an Indian boy who'd sing funny songs. She sat on him."

"That's terrible."

"Artists are competitive. Only difference between a starving artist and a carnie is three square meals a day."

"You're not going to keep me and Susan both on, are you?"

"That's The Ringmaster's call. But probably not."

"I won't get too comfortable then," she said.

"You'd have to have worse stage fright than the Mummy to lose out to the dog-girl."

Ellie got a sense for the circular rhythm of how Claude told stories, egging on questions. It turned out the Mummy was a boy wrapped in strips of cloth to hide the way he shook with nerves in front of a crowd.

They circled back to Ellie's act, and she suggested, "I can dance a little."

"We got three dancing girls. Might not be able to crush your ribs, but they'll claw your eyes out if you cut in on their territory."

Ellie sighed. "I don't know if I'll be much use here."

"Well at least we know you're not a liar."

“How’s that?”

“I can see it now.” Claude ran the back of his hand over her cheek. “Five o’clock shadow.”

The next night, Ellie watched the show beneath the sagging big top that wouldn’t stay inflated. The dancing girls gyrated. While the men in the audience fixated on their bare midriffs, the children got up to chase one another or engage in thumb wars, and the women talked amongst themselves.

The crowd applauded, and The Ringmaster took center stage to introduce the Bearded Lady.

Scattered applause. Susan walked to the center of the ring, arms at her sides. When the applause diminished, she walked to within a foot of the barricade between performance space and the audience, then slowly walked the length of it, completing a full circle so everyone could see her.

Almost immediately, the catcalls began. *Do something!* and *I can’t see!* The act lasted an eternity.

The Reptile Man performed next. A snake slithered across the dirt stage and he slithered alongside it. “If you like that snake,” he said, “you should see the one I keep in my pants.” Laughter. Mostly deep, men’s laughter. He returned to his trunk at the entrance to the stage, and lifted out a pair of trousers. From one of the legs, a much larger snake poured out, onto The Reptile Man’s arm, over his shoulders. Higher pitched laughter. The children didn’t understand the joke, but watched the snake’s motion, open-mouthed.

Ellie scribbled in a spiral notebook, a remnant from high school. *Humor. Keep building.*

The Reptile Man carried the snake close to the crowd. “A snake can never be trusted.”

On cue, the snake unhinged its jaw and lunged to within six inches of a young woman’s face. The Reptile Man pulled back, holding firm to the snake’s body.

The woman touched a hand to her chest, mouth still frozen in a shocked oval shape.

“But like all things, if you understand its movements, you can learn to control it.”

Danger.

Ellie crossed out the word. How many times had that stunt gone wrong before The Reptile Man got it right? By the time the show was done, she'd taken three pages of notes and sat up late by the campfire reviewing them, in no rush to get to the truck. She'd found Claude wanted to talk for as long as he was awake.

That was the night she scripted an act for herself and Susan, performing together. Ellie decided the key was to accentuate their differences. Susan, for instance, was more interesting as part-animal than as a hairy woman. So, Ellie cast herself as the Bearded Lady and Susan as her unruly dog.

"What are you smiling at?" Nina, a dancing girl, stretched across a blanket closer to the fire, a yellowed romance novel with a cracked spine in hand.

"I'm figuring out my act."

"Don't think too hard." Nina licked a finger and turned the page. "The Ringmaster has pretty particular tastes. He appreciates beauty. He tolerates the freaks."

"Maybe he'll appreciate talent."

"We all have our talents, sweetheart." Nina stood. Short and rail thin. "And I've got more than one way of keeping my job."

Nina retreated, not to the tent with the other dancing girls, but to The Ringmaster's private space.

Ellie explained the act to Susan the next day and gave her a copy of the script. Susan listened.

By the next stop, Ellie's fourth night with the circus, her beard had grown past the point of stubble, dark enough to be visible at a distance. And so, Ellie put on her best dress from her suitcase. Per Ellie's instructions, Susan wore all brown.

The act proceeded as planned. Susan crawled into the ring. Ellie took the microphone from The Ringmaster and introduced herself as The Bearded Lady, Susan as Pepper the Dog. “Pepper’s previous owner didn’t train her,” Ellie said. “But I will.”

Ellie removed the dog biscuit from her pocket. “Here, Pepper.”

Susan cocked her head to one side, regarding her from all-fours, before slowly making her way to her master to take the treat.

Ellie removed another biscuit. “Now roll over.”

Susan made no motion to comply.

Ellie swirled her arm in a circle to simulate the rolling motion. Susan stuck out a paw and imitated the movement. A few chuckles rose from the crowd.

“Play dead.” This time, to demonstrate, Ellie lay on her own back.

Susan crawled over and plucked the treat from Ellie’s hand. More laughter.

Ellie sighed and picked up the stick she had left by the entryway. “Fetch!” She threw the stick over Susan’s head, across the ring.

Susan followed the motion of the stick with her eyes, then settled back to watching Ellie. Fewer laughs.

Ellie threw the stick again and again. With each iteration, Ellie sighed and stomped across the ring. Finally, she held the stick by its end and advanced toward Susan, ready to hit her. At this point, Susan leapt, snatched the stick with her mouth, crawled past Ellie, and set the stick back down. Susan watched her master again.

“You are hopeless! You’ll never learn!” Ellie stormed off stage and, once out of sight, looked back to watch Susan stand, dust herself off, and casually exit in human form.

Applause. Not thunderous applause, but no jeers either. Ellie beamed with a sense of pride in her own planning. She hugged Susan when she got off stage.

Susan squirmed.

Ellie clung a moment longer.

Susan bit her shoulder.

Ellie screamed and pushed her far harder than Susan had pushed her before. Hard enough for Susan to fall. “I was trying to be nice.” The shoulder of her dress had ripped at the seam. “Bitch.”

This word was too much for Susan. She pounced and brought the full weight of her body on Ellie, pinning her with her paws.

The Tall Man and a clown came to the rescue, hauling back Susan by her underarms. They didn’t scold her. Nor did either one of them check on Ellie. “She ain’t worth it,” the clown said.

“I helped her.” Ellie cried. “The ungrateful—”

“Quiet.” The Tall Man glared.

The both of them petted Susan’s neck and stared a hole through Ellie’s forehead.

Later that night, Ellie sat with her head back, eyes closed so if Claude woke, he’d think she were asleep. Feet propped on the seat, knees up, notebook out of sight beneath the blanket, she scrawled her notes.

Best case scenario, The Ringmaster would separate their acts, and she’d never interact with Susan again. So Ellie wrote purely for herself. Her best idea: she’d lecture on the importance of personal hygiene: that a lady should shave her legs and armpits, wax her eyebrows. A bawdy joke about her pubes. All the while, she would stroke her beard.

In the morning, she stumbled to the breakfast line. Stale bread and mushy apples.

Susan sat by herself and turned her whole head to tear loose bites from a slice of sourdough.

“We’ll eat better tomorrow.” Claude reached over Ellie for a green apple. “Tomorrow, we meet with King’s Circus outside Tuscon. King goes way back with our old ringmaster. We always eat and drink all night before the trades start.”

“What have we got to trade?”

“Acts,” Claude said. “That’s how you keep the show fresh. We’ll swap supplies, too. Food. Trucks.” Claude had made his way around the apple, turned it on its axis and took a bite of the core. “Don’t worry. I’ll vouch for you. The Ringmaster listens to me.”

Ellie settled on the end piece a loaf, as stiff as toast in her hand. She picked a shady spot to eat and spread her notebook across her lap to start translating her eyes-closed penmanship from the night before.

The next stop was a small town in New Mexico. Ellie found Susan there, helping carry a set of risers that would go inside the big top, and walked alongside her. “Our act tonight—we’ll play it the same as the night before, right?”

No response.

“If you want to do something differently, you need to tell me before the show.”

Susan never came to her. But at the right moment, Ellie found Susan waiting for her, and they entered the arena. Susan was quicker, more active, throughout the act, behaving even more like a dog than she had before. Ellie grew wary—particularly as Susan snatched the stick from her hand with a new ferocity. Ellie improvised a shrill scream and the audience laughed louder, clapped longer. Afterward, Ellie knew better than to come close enough for Susan to bite.

After the show, they started tearing down the big top immediately. Claude explained that they would race to the next campsite. The first circus to arrive would perform; the second circus’s personnel would join the crowd as paying customers.

They loaded the trucks and drove. Per usual, The Ringmaster rode up front with Claude, Ellie in the back of the cab, where she curled into the fetal position, closed her eyes, and dozed against the drone of Claude’s storytelling.

“Ellie!” Claude pushed her knee to rouse her. “Ringmaster nodded off. I need someone to keep me awake.”

She rubbed her eyes. “Why didn’t you wake him?”

Claude sipped from a soda can. “Once he’s out, he’s out.”

The Ringmaster’s winced in his sleep.

“Bad dreams. The old ringmaster had them, too. Used to stay up for days at a time. But I remember every time we drove to meet up with King’s Circus he’d sleep, too,” Claude said. “The old ringmaster used to disappear after the shows with their ringmaster—King.”

“Old friends?”

“Lovers,” Claude said. “King’s a beautiful woman. And she never ages a day.”

King’s crew didn’t arrive until two hours after them. The circus doubled in size with them there. More trucks. A man with four arms. A mermaid. An elephant. King herself was tall. She wore a pristine white gown, clean enough to look like she had been staying in hot-water hotels rather than tents and trucks. Blond hair cascaded from her head.

She ignored Ellie and Claude. “You must be The Ringmaster.”

The Ringmaster shook her hand. “King.”

Just as Claude had described, King’s circus paid admission and occupied about a third of the risers for the show. The elephant proved a source of entertainment for the line of spectators, standing up on its back legs and waving its trunk to passersby.

Ellie and Susan waited by the curtain, beside The Reptile Man as he awaited his introduction. “Don’t look now,” The Reptile Man said, “but you’ve got a look-alike.”

Ellie peered out. The Reptile Man took her shoulders to guide her to the same line of sight he had, where another bearded lady sat in the front row. Off-white blouse, brown skirt, bushy red beard.

“Our bearded lady has been with us for five years.” King approached from behind them. “A very unique act.”

Ellie swallowed. “I’m sure I’d enjoy her performance.” She had scripted their act in a day. How could they compare to a professional?

“Just as I’m sure he’ll enjoy seeing yours.”

“He?”

The Ringmaster joined them as the Reptile Man as he left to perform.

“His act is an awkward fit in our show,” King said, back behind the curtain, watching her bearded lady. “He does a comedic monologue. It’s good, but it’s over the audience’s head.”

Claude showed up. “You’ll see we’ve already got two bearded ladies.”

King looked them up and down. “Playing fast and loose with the term lady, aren’t we?”

Susan growled softly.

“That’s Susan—a bearded lady and an animal act, but only one mouth to feed,” Claude said. “We could trade, but we’d need a sweetener, since you’re trying to unload your guy.”

“I’ll have to see her act,” King said. “Regardless, I’m not trading you a bad talent, just one who doesn’t fit our needs.”

“Or maybe,” The Ringmaster said, “you tired of freak. Want only talents and animal.”

King eyed him carefully. “I spoke about that with the old ringmaster, it’s true,” she said. “Rest assured, I’ve rethought it. I’m open to any performer who can put on a compelling act.”

The Reptile Man finished and The Ringmaster stepped back through the curtain.

Susan lowered herself to all fours.

Claude lowered his voice and leaned close to King. “Press him and he’ll make the trade.”

Ellie didn’t like the idea of Claude determining anyone’s fate. She glared at him, but he only smiled in return.

The men set up the grills after the last act. The women ushered out the last of the audience members, and Claude and King’s right hand man unloaded barrels of wine from the back of a truck.

The bearded lady from King’s circus approached. Ellie prepared herself for sarcasm or a butting of shoulders, and so she was surprised when he led with, “What a wonderful act you put on.”

The voice came out deeper than Ellie expected, even knowing that he was a man, it was at odds with his womanly figure. “Is it true you’ve only been with the circus a month?”

“A week.”

“Incredible.” He shook his head. “My name’s Caleb.”

They spoke about her act. How she had written it. Her relationship with Susan. When it seemed impolite to go on about herself, Ellie turned the conversation to his act.

Caleb rolled his eyes. “King’s been having me stand outside the tent with the elephant to draw in spectators. Sometimes she’ll have me introduce an act or two.”

“But when King was talking about trades—” Ellie stopped herself.

“Don’t feel bad.” Caleb said. “At least she’s trying to trade me for acts and not a used tent or something. Fact of the matter is, King’s trying to get rid of the freaks. Focus on—”

“The talents.” Ellie tried to smile, to be generous to him. “Maybe you could join our circus.”

“Not a lot of good three bearded ladies are going to do anybody,” Caleb said.

They got in line for food. No one had thought to procure buns, so all around, people ate with their bare hands, nothing between skin and beef, skin and pork. Savoring every greasy bite. Ellie and Caleb found a seat by a fire with their food and their paper cups full of red wine. It smelled like grapes crushed under dirty feet. Fruit fermented amidst mold. Dark. Rich. Awful.

The two of them laughed and drank cup after cup. A dullness overtook her senses; it obscured the pain in her back from sleeping in the car and buried her insecurities about whether she’d hack it as a carnie. The world turned to burgundy, the air as thick as syrup.

Caleb’s beard grew glossy with spilt wine. “How old is your partner—Susan?”

The question had never crossed Ellie’s mind.

“Hey, Susan!” Caleb leaned back, looking past Ellie to where Susan sat alone, gnawing on a corn cob with the side of her mouth. “How old are you?”

“She doesn’t really talk,” Ellie said. “Just barks and growls.” The moment she’d said it, Ellie wanted to clarify that Susan didn’t like being called or treated like a like a dog.

Without explanation, Caleb seemed to understand that. “We’re going to guess your age. If you’re younger, holler at us once. If you’re older, holler twice. And if we get it, be quiet.”

“Eighteen.”

Bark.

“Fifteen.”

Bark.

“Twelve.”

No response. So Ellie said it again.

No response.

“She’s just a kid,” Caleb said.

“I didn’t know.”

Susan took one last bite at the corn, threw what was left of it into the fire and left.

“But if she’s just twelve,” Ellie said, “how’d she get mixed up in a circus?”

“It happens,” Caleb said. “Some kids are born into it. Others run away and find it.”

“I understand running away. But not when you’re twelve.”

“Happens all different ways. All different ages. Girl who looks like her—”

“There’s nothing wrong with the way she looks.”

He leaned back and propped himself on his elbows. “I didn’t say there was. But you know as well as me that if you don’t look the way people expect, they treat you differently.”

Ellie leaned back, too, and looked at the stars. They looked bigger out here, in a clearing, burning between the black silhouettes of Sissoo trees. Her head felt heavy with wine, and she turned her head fast to watch the stars blur from spots to lines of motion.

“Why do you let your beard grow?” Caleb asked.

“It’s how my body works. I’m a freak.”

“You could shave it. Wax it. Most girls in your condition do.”

“And what do most men in your position do?” She eyed his breasts. “Lop them off?”

“I haven’t met another man with my set of circumstances. I reckon most of them would eat until their bellies stuck out past their boobs, so all folks would see is a fat man, not a weirdo.”

“So what makes you different?”

He cupped his breasts. “I think they’re beautiful.”

Ellie touched her fingertips to her own breasts. She’d never thought about loving any part of herself. Not her breasts. Not her beard. “I have a birthmark on my chin,” she said. “A little brown spot. You can hardly notice it, even without the beard. But my mother has the same mark. And I always thought it looked stupid on her. I don’t want to look like her and the beard covers that up.”

“It’s still there, though,” He sipped his wine.

Across the fire, a pair of men wrestled. Someone played the flute, and the dancing girls swayed their hips while a half dozen men crowded. Another cup of wine, and Ellie turned in.

Ellie woke with arms pinned, jarred by her head landing on the driver’s seat. Her legs were up on the passenger side and the rest of her sunk to the floor of the cab in the space in between.. Then she was up again.

Claude was on her. He reeked of barrel wine and drooled on her chin when he kissed her mouth. He bit her collarbone.

She told him to get off. Punched the back of his head. Clawed her nails into his neck.

He told her to shut her mouth. Unbuttoned her jeans. Pressed against her.

She got the driver’s side door open and writhed away from him. Halfway outside, he caught her waist. She bent backward over the edge of the seat and hit her head on the door frame.

He pulled her in. She kneed him in the jaw. Outside, she ran a step, tripped over her crooked denim, and tasted dirt.

And Claude was back on her. They wrestled over her jeans—whether they were coming up or going down. He was stronger. She screamed. Once he had her pants to mid-thigh, he grabbed her underwear, clumsily catching a handful of pubic hair with the fabric and ripping.

Then, just as suddenly, he was off. Ellie spit out the dirt and pulled up her jeans. She heard growling. Something on top of Claude. He flailed. A blanket wrapped Ellie's shoulders

The Fat Lady was there. "The bastard gets like this when he's drunk. You all right?"

Ellie trembled. She hugged the blanket closer as she looked on.

The clowns pulled Susan off Claude.

Claude clutched the side of his head. "The bitch bit my ear! I'm bleeding!"

The Reptile Man got the chewed up remains of the top half of Claude's left ear from Susan and flipped it off his thumb onto Claude's lap. "Hear no evil, right Claude?"

"Help me!" Claude said.

Susan barked. The clowns held her, face forward, teeth away from them.

Things settled by degrees. Claude cursed at Ellie, but quieted after The Fat Lady told him she'd let his ear rot instead of sewing it back on if he didn't quiet down. The clowns invited Ellie to stay in their tent.

After Susan stopped growling, Ellie hugged her. "Thank you."

Susan licked her face.

Ellie stayed in a tent the first time that night on borrowed blankets and pillows, Susan to one side, The Fat Lady to the other, flat on her back, under a plastic roof, under stars.

In the morning, Ellie entered the breakfast line to pick over leftover food from the night before, and spotted Claude by The Ringmaster's side, gauze around his ear.

King wore the Ringmaster's shirt.

Ellie headed straight for them.

"We'll throw in the bearded lady and the bitch as a sweetener." Claude made no bones about Ellie being close enough to hear.

"No," King ran a finger beneath The Ringmaster's chin. "I love doing business with you boys, but that won't work. Shame. But we had a nice rendez-vous and we'll try again in the fall."

"Maybe we could take your bearded lady off your hands," Ellie said.

Claude stood over her, leaning in with his chest. "You're not a part of these conversations. And we don't need another one of your kind clogging up the schedule."

"And yet you wanted to trade me *their kind*," King said.

Claude took a quarter step back and put his hands in the air. "A figure of speech."

King looked Ellie in the eye. She seemed to study her face, and through it, something deeper. Taking Ellie in, whole. "You know what? I'd like to give you our bearded lady—gratis."

"It's another mouth to feed," Claude said. "And we don't need the act."

"We accept," The Ringmaster said. "Thank you."

King shook The Ringmaster's hand. When Claude reached to do the same, she walked away.

Ellie rode to the next destination in the covered back of a truck, amidst rigs and trunks of equipment. Caleb on one side of her. Susan on the other. The ride was bumpier. The company better.

She sat, notebook open on her lap. Together, they reviewed the bearded lady act. Caleb nodded along. Susan split her attention between the notebook and peering out through a break in the cloth covering to the road outside.

Ellie flipped to her notes from other acts. Caleb read with her.

"You know, coming up in the circus, I was always told there are only two kinds of acts," Caleb said. "Acts of self interest and acts for the audience."

“Every act is for the audience,” Ellie said.

“Every act is performed in front an audience, but that’s not the same.” Caleb pointed to the page, where she had written *keep building*. “You keep building to engage an audience.” He pointed to *sexy*, a note from one of the dancing girls’ routines. “Some people enjoy a provocative act and some performers execute such an act for the benefit of others. But sometimes if a person is trying to look sexy it’s just indulgent.

Ellie started to write down what he’d said, but her pen had run dry.

“We should change the act.” Ellie capped the pen and tucked it in her pocket.

“I’m riding your coattails here,” Caleb said. “Don’t go changing on account of me.”

But pieces were already falling into place in Ellie’s mind. She scanned the page and crossed out words like *sexy* and *danger*. Underlined words like *funny* and *instructive*. She imagined an act without anyone getting hurt or threatened. An act that would appeal to children and their parents alike.

This is how it works.

Start with a backdrop of soft, slow music, sung from backstage by The Fat Lady.

A child crawls onto the stage, alone.

An woman comes along. The child bucks at her, but then lets the adult pet her nose. They hug. The adult takes the child by the hand and teaches her to walk on two feet.

A man comes along. Takes the child’s other hand to hold her up straight. The three of them walk together. The child breaks off to walk—to run, even—but always has a home to come back to. They are a family.

The act is still called The Bearded Ladies. After they watch it, few spectators recall why. They see three people who hold each other close. They feel love. They are entertained.

Sometimes people don't look like they're supposed to, and sometimes the family you're born into isn't the one you belong with.

Some people are born with birthmarks. A beard is a choice you make every day.

3 Boys Smoke Pot on the Porch at Night

—HEATHER GLINIECKI

Dude,

you live across the street from a gazelle,

he said.

Naw,

it's 'Giselle', not gazelle,

I said.

Um,

I don't think that's what he meant,

he said.

Agile spirits rise on fragile eloquence. Ethereal, fickle, and unsound in profundity. As minds wander from door, to lawn, to fence, to sky. Lofty shadows feign ignorance.

All I'm sayin' is,

I hate wearing shoes,

he said.

What do ya mean,

you own more shoes than clothes,

I said.

I hear you but,

I kind of like just having them in my closet, ya know,

he said.

Wisps rose from lips, and laughed. Down lit lanes, ablaze with lampposts blowing life into breathless exhaust.

What I want to know is,

what would giving true literature to, say, fifty intelligent people really do?

he said.

Or what if,

we gave it to fifty intelligent toddlers?

I said.

Seriously though,

I bet Gazelle likes literature,

he said.

‘Giselle’,

we laughed.

Mardi Gras with Greg

—MARK SPANO

Curiosity is the hair of our habit standing on end.

—Samuel Beckett from Proust

I met Greg through the same friend from Elderwood who introduced me to Win. My friend had given a party and made a huge kettle of boiled shrimp. It was a summer afternoon and everyone was very drunk. Greg arrived late with his girlfriend Lydia. Greg was four years older than me and had attended Elderwood Prep before I had arrived. He was out of college and grad school and had even been in the army. He was tall, blonde, brawny and rode a motorcycle. He was bagging groceries in Kansas City with my classmate and was looking for a “real” job.

Lydia was thin and blonde and kept a tight grip on Greg. They had met while doing a play together that summer. I knew on sight that Greg was gay. Lydia must have had some fear of the same. She hated me like the plague.

Greg and I became fast friends. We were never lovers, but we hung out, gave parties at which we required all of our guests to perform, went to the bars regularly and shared stories of our sexual exploits like little guys swapping baseball cards.

Greg had attended grad school at LSU in Baton Rouge. Had I ever been to New Orleans? Well, why don't we go to Mardi Gras? We did.

My Midwest party experiences and few hit and run love affairs had not prepared me for the flat out Dionysian hysteria of New Orleans during Carnival. Unlike so many of my gay friends in the early seventies, I was never interested in drugs or anonymous sex. At Mardi Gras both were present in Rabelaisian abundance.

LaFitte's was the tiniest corner building in the Old Quarter. The grimy tavern was packed to the walls with young men mostly dressed in jeans and white tee shirts. In one corner of the room,

guys were on their knees servicing other guys standing in front of them. I was incredulous at the sight of it all.

I had a couple of offers to engage in the general group dynamic, and as exciting as all of it was, and it was somehow inexplicably thrilling, I could not have sex in public with a total stranger. I confess that I am far too much a romantic to have gained any pleasure from participating in the revels. Simply being there witnessing all of it put me in a heightened state. I didn't need drugs. I was totally wired by the biggest party in the world.

Greg knew another place down Rampart. It might be less crazed, so we went. No sex in the new bar, but still wilder than anything in Kansas City. The hottest guy in the bar was leaning with his back to huge post. He kept looking my way. He was medium build, dark, in tight jeans and shirtless with an open motorcycle jacket revealing a rippling and fur-covered belly and chest. It worked for me.

Greg leans in to me, "I think Mr. Wonderful over there likes you."

"Yeah," I reply not believing the whole dreamlike quality of the previous place with public sex, and now this club with an angelic apparition eyeing me from his post across the room.

We kept up the looking back and forth considerably longer than the usual phase of glances through the gay bar courtship ritual until the leather clad angel began to move from his post toward me. As soon as he embarked in my direction I recognized he was not terribly sure of foot, and he had been using his post to maintain verticality. He stumbled to about half the distance between us and stopped. He stood upright, smiled sweetly at me, then, raised his hands to his face, bent forward as if to bow to me (Surely chivalry was not dead in the Old South.), and vomited one long hurl of haute cuisine and alcohol, resurfacing the already grimy parquet of the club.

Greg burst into spontaneous and uncontrolled laughter. A bartender quickly jumped over the bar and led my woozy ailing dream boy to the men's room as I recovered from the shock and

disappointment of losing Mr. Right in the very moment before I was to have had him. It took me a few beats to join Greg in laughter as we ambled off into the lights of the French Quarter in search of further adventures.

Nearly thirties years later, it is the week before Christmas. I am in small house that Greg has recently moved to in Kansas City, so unlike the other palaces he and Mitch have renovated over their years together. I sit on Greg's bed, the television is blaring. Some of our friends are in the other rooms of his house, drinking, talking, trying to make themselves comfortable when we are all finding it impossible to make Greg comfortable. Comfort is impossible. Everyone exists in a quiet tension.

Greg is asleep. I am not watching the screaming television. Why don't I turn it off? I just hold Greg's hand and look at the gaping purple jewel-like gash in his neck. He is heavily drugged and in late stages of melanoma. A matter of days my brother told me earlier that week when I decided to fly home to visit my dying friend.

When Greg is awake he is only slightly coherent except for when the priest visited. He jumped up from the couch like his old self, chatted up the priest who was an old friend from AIDS fundraising and began to straighten some of the clutter of the sick room his whole house had become.

He wanted no confessions or last rights. The priest was Mitch's idea. Greg treated the priest as though it was the clergyman who was sick and needed Greg's help. I believe the priest left disappointed unable to his stuff for Greg.

For some of us, Nicholas, Greg and myself included, Jesus did not die for our sins. We must die for our own. Salvation would be great, wonderful, a joy, the entire burden of life lifted, but not for us. It simply cannot be. I don't know why this is so. It just is.

Skeletal Remains

June 16, 2017

–SANDRA WICKERSHAM-MCWHORTER

I wish I hadn't looked up as we zoomed to Lake Erie
 Because a barn near a bend in the road caught my eye.
 A giant T-shaped beauty with a metal roof.
 Yet, huge gray timbers and small boards in a muddled mess
 Cascaded down from the center of the larger section
 Like blood gushing from a wound,
 A waterfall of wood from trees long dead,
 Now facing a second death.
 A festering cancer oozing life.

Anger grew despite the larger section being intact,
 Turning my thoughts to other dead or dying barns
 I frequently see and wish I didn't.
 Thousands of abandoned farms dot most American states,
 Especially in the Midwest.
 Their loss fueled by high prices, low profit, government regulations,
 And high taxes on the very thing
 That feeds those who impose those crushing levies.
 Old farm ways denigrated, destroyed,
 To make way for hulking, sky-filling metal silos on mega-farms
 Or look-alike condos in the middle of farmland.

Enough people don't know we need old barns
 To preserve our country's tangible, visible past.
 The enviable skills of bygone craftsmen disrespected.
 Concern for preserving priceless history, nonexistent.
 Centuries of barns protecting hay and animals
 From the elements, lost.
 Remains of their wooden skin puddled around them on the ground.
 Piles of timber and boards left to rot in the sun, wind, and rain
 By people who don't, or can't, care
 That they're destroying America by apathetic disregard
 For our colonial and pioneer legacies
 Of clearing a space in the primeval forest by a river,
 Building a homestead to provide food and livelihood for a family,
 Then a town, then a state.
 Their barns showed the skills they brought here with them
 And passed to future generations.

Craftsmanship from men who could hew giant chestnut logs
Smooth with perfect 90° angles and straight edges
With only a broadax, rippling muscles, and bull-like stamina.
Buildings they fastened together with long wooden pegs
And dovetail joints
That could withstand anything nature hit them with
Better than today's best fasteners.
Barns that needed neighbors to come help a family
Erect the symbol of future food, prosperity, and security.
Parties of men, women, and children
Who celebrated when the job was done
With picnics and music.

If I stopped and went to the barn and touched it,
Listened with heart and ears,
Could I hear the people's laughter and music,
The men and horses grunting as they strained to lift massive walls
With nothing more than rope, sweat, and muscle?
Could I hear the fiddle music and conversation?
Could I smell the sweat and food?
Could I smell the wood being sawn and shaved to fit?
Could I see the people as they worked and played and ate?
Could I learn of their hope for the future of their country?
Could I feel the heart of the barn slowing to a stop
As the family-farm industry in America dies with it?

The Feast

—MARTY EBERHARDT

This is what you did in 1970. You met in Big Sur, over a summer campfire, and you changed each other's names.

“You don't look like an Emily.”

“What do I look like?”

“I think you are Sage.”

“Sage, like sagebrush? I've never seen it.”

“I hope you can do that soon.”

He said he was learning silversmithing on the Navajo Reservation, so she named him Turquoise. Turk for short. His real name was Bob.

When Sage called her college roommate and told her she was dropping out of college to go live on the reservation with Turk, Jean said, “How convenient. I thought you'd find a way out of three more years in moldy New England. I kind of expected you to find a commune, though.”

“Jean, it's what we've been talking about. Living on the land. Learning from Native Americans. It'll be better than a commune.”

“I'm not saying I'm not jealous. I'm just saying it's convenient.”

The conversation with her parents went less smoothly, but she wasn't a minor anymore. “Emily, I forbid you to do this,” said her mother.

“I'm sorry you feel that way, but I have enough savings from my summer job to do it without your help.” She'd never defied her parents before, beyond things like choosing a college that was not her mother's alma mater. They had always been so reasonable. That thought gave her pause for a bit, but Sage was tired of always meeting expectations. Getting good grades. Going to a good college. Right on track and she could see the future just a little too clearly. She was hoping her leap off the train would provide both the unexpected *and* the beautiful.

Sage and Turk hitchhiked to Arizona from Big Sur. They couldn't get a ride out of Barstow, so they tried the first cheap motel, around 8 p.m. There were just two cars in the lot. They approached, she and Turk, all 6'5" of him, his I've-been-camping-for-a-week shoulder-length hair tied back, and just as they began to turn the office door handle, the "no vacancy" sign went up. Turk tried to open the door anyway, but they heard the deadbolt slide. When "no vacancy" signs suddenly materialized at three more motels, they trudged along a nearby field until they found an open place to roll out their sleeping bags.

In the morning, after a breakfast of two handfuls of M and M's, they had to stand by the side of the road with their thumbs out for hours. They were hoping for a hippie van, but all they saw was vacationers whose jaws tightened the minute they caught sight of them, or businessmen. Some of these guys even gave them the finger.

Even though she'd shivered in the desert summer night, Sage was sweating by mid-morning and thinking longingly of the shower in those cheesy motel rooms. Finally a salesman picked them up. He asked if they lived in a commune, and when Turk said they didn't have a house yet, the guy asked if they were looking for some place that believed in free love. "No, man, that's not cool with us" Turk said, to Sage's immense relief. But the guy was a little too interested in the way Turk put his hand on her knee, and she was quite glad to get off I-40 at the exit to wherever the college was where Turk was learning silversmithing and teaching remedial math.

She was hoping for a bed that night, and trying to still the little dust devil of doubt that was whirling in her stomach. They had slid out of the fried flat browns of the Mohave Desert, into a different kind of desert. Everything was red and orange and soaring. High mesas and weird rock monuments were sprinkled with dry grey plants, which smelled like sweet campfire smoke. Sage plants. Turk had named her for them.

This must be why people went west. A huge sky and huge colors. She would stay.

Turk worked and learned silversmithing on the temporary campus of a reservation community college. For the time being, it was housed in pukey-green-colored Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school. The college faculty, like Turk, were mostly Anglos. Sage and Turk crashed on their living rooms floors for two weeks before they found their own place, a hogan about four miles from the college.

Her old roommate Jean had had to look up “hogan” in the library, and she’d written, “You’re living in a *mud hut*?” It wasn’t exactly a mud hut; it was a log cabin glued together with mud, facing the east for sunrises that were more red and orange and pink, too. She’d wake in the morning and see their landlady’s sheep in the pen, ready to be herded out among the mesas all day.

Turk was the first man she’d been with. The others had been college boys. He tied his black-brown hair back in a Navajo knot and spoke some Navajo, which probably made people a lot friendlier than they would have been. Mostly, he was trying to learn a different way to be, because he felt the mainstream culture had failed him, in Vietnam. He respected all the protest marches Sage had been on, back East, but he said that wasn’t the way he was going to deal with the culture’s materialism and corruption, he wanted to learn how to live in beauty, and wasn’t that what Sage was seeking, too?

If she sometimes wished that Turk was a little more communal about chopping the wood and doing the cleaning, she decided she should just go with it. She called Jean on her birthday, and her friend asked if she would have fallen for Turk if he’d been silversmithing in Boston. Sage told her it was a moot point because he wouldn’t be silversmithing in Boston.

Sage and Turk had no car, so they had to catch a ride in to the campus with the landlady’s son. Their best friends – their only good friends, really – were Joe and Molly Yazzie, a Navajo and a Boston Catholic. Joe was on staff at the college, and they had a home with the usual amenities in the government-housing compound built by the B.I.A. Joe was a Vietnam vet, like Turk, and he’d fallen in love with Molly when he’d met her at a blowout in Las Vegas after he was discharged. Sage

sometimes wondered if what Molly and Joe had was love. Her mother had always told her she'd know it when it happened, and Turk was sure he was in love, so maybe she should stop second guessing herself. Turk told her she needed to "loosen up, man, and let things happen."

And so she did. The weeks were busy; she was taking classes in Navajo history and language at the college, and volunteering as a teacher's aide at an elementary school. A little girl there drew a picture of Sage, with her brown hair and grey eyes, but the child used a blue crayon for Sage's eyes and a yellow one for her hair. A foreigner, for sure.

Sage called her mother with this story, but she got no laugh. She described the hogan, and the sheep, and the sky, and the awe-inspiring view of blue and red mesas that she saw every time she used the outhouse, but her mother just asked if she'd considered re-enrolling at her Eastern school in January. Another time she told her mother about the Navajos' Long Walk, which neither of them had known about, but which killed off nearly a third of the 10,000 people in a forced deportation.

"Even though it happened a hundred years ago, the Navajo – the Diné – have family stories about it. It's like how people in Ireland feel about the potato famine,"

"If you go back to Boston you could change your major to anthropology," said her mother.

One weekend Turk bought some "really good stuff" from another vet. He said they needed to be in the right space before they explored a canyon he'd noticed far to the south. He must have spent considerable time testing the stuff before he bought it; at any rate, he didn't get home until afternoon, and then they needed to smoke a couple of joints, so they got a late start. He waved some sage over them both, purifying them. They turned to bless the four directions. Turk set off at a fast pace and Sage tried to match his strides, heading towards the canyon on a compass course. The summer rains were long gone and there was a clarity to the dry air that turned the sky an impossible shade of blue. Some crows flew out of the mouth of the canyon, maybe a mile away. Turk said they were harbingers of change.

They came to a hogan, right at the canyon mouth. There must have been a road to the house from somewhere, because a vintage pickup sat beside it. An old man, bent over a cane, his gray hair in a Navajo knot, made a hobbling dash into the hogan when he saw them coming. Turk said they if they waited outside for a while he might come out and greet them. They waited maybe ten minutes. It was hard to say how long it was; neither one of them wore watches, and they were high, after all. Sage got a bad feeling.

“I think we’re not welcome here.”

“Don’t worry about it, Sage. Let’s go on.” But to get to the mouth of the canyon they had to go by his house, and she thought she saw the curtains on the back of the house move. The crows flew straight over them, cawing loudly, and Sage said, “What if it’s the harbinger of a *bad* change?”

The crows followed them to the mouth of the canyon. “They’re guarding it,” she said. Turk gave her a dismissive look. She tried another tactic.

“Let’s come back here when we can spend all day. We got a late start. It’s going to get dark soon, and we can’t explore the whole thing.”

Fortunately, Turk went for this. The farther she got from the old man and the crows and the canyon, the better she felt, until she was running ahead of Turk, racing the sun back to their little hogan.

Turk said the whole day meant they had great and glorious things to do together. The crows were proof. She tried to convince herself that he was right, but she still felt like Turk was missing things. The old man didn’t want them there, and neither did the crows. She had to work hard to enjoy sex that night. Turk didn’t seem to notice that, either.

It turned out that the high desert got cold at night, even in the fall. And she had to admit she shivered in the back of pickup trucks; they had to hitch rides to buy groceries in a town two hours away. But she wasn’t going to complain. One thing that did bother her was having to get the fire

going in the woodstove every single morning. Turk told her that this was traditionally the woman's job in a hogan.

The first weekend in November, even Sage's down jacket wasn't warm enough for those rides in the back of pickups, and it took half an hour in the heated grocery store before she stopped shivering. She and Turk loaded up their backpacks with the makings for mac and cheese, and brown rice and vegetables. She persuaded him to splurge on lunch in a diner before they headed back. They listened to "A Boy Named Sue" about six times in a row; a cowboy put a whole lot of quarters in the jukebox. It was absolutely worth it because but it was warm in there, and the mealy hamburger was warm, too. They left after drinking more coffee than she really wanted. She was glad she did, because they had to hitch for an hour in a bitter wind before they got a ride out of town. It was dark by the time they got home, and the temperature had dropped twenty degrees since they'd left. The woodstove had been cold for hours, and her fingers could barely move to crinkle the paper for a new fire. Turk put the groceries away, and she made a mac and cheese dinner.

The next morning, as she was chopping some wood for the stove, her landlady, Esther Begay, brought her some, already chopped. "It's cold," was all she said when Sage said, "Thank you." It was Sage's first interaction with her.

"Turk, how come we don't have any Navajo friends?" Turk looked stunned, so she backed up. "Okay, there's Joe. But let's invite Esther and her family for dinner."

"Cool. Maybe the Sunday after Thanksgiving. Turkeys are cheap then."

They were spending Thanksgiving with some Anglo friends just off the reservation, but they could get ready for this afterwards. They'd have a feast in the hogan for their landlady's family, all five of them, plus Joe and Molly. Buying food for nine would stretch their budget, which mostly came from the math classes Turk taught at the community college. Sage still had some money left in her savings account from her summer job.

The weekend after Thanksgiving, Sage and Turk hitchhiked to town and filled their packs with a twelve-pound turkey, twelve potatoes, gravy mix, store-brand stuffing mix, celery, onions, margarine, pumpkin pie filling and frozen crusts. Plus green beans and zucchini, because the iceberg lettuce was the color of the dirt roads around there, and they had to have fresh vegetables. Of course, they had to add in the basics, like milk and cereal, for the rest of the week's eating. It was more food than she had ever bought, but even though only seven guests were invited, it would be good to have leftovers.

Sage figured her pack weighed fifty pounds. On the way home, they had to walk an hour, again, before anybody picked them up, and they were stuck at a lonely intersection for another hour, as the wind kicked up red dust and the sun set, turning the mesas colors that didn't cheer her the way they usually did. They came home to an icy hogan, of course. Turk had to talk to their neighbor about a ride the next day, so she put the turkey in the refrigerator, lit a fire in the stove, and stirred up some instant noodle soup. Her fingers were working, at least.

The next morning, Sage's throat was raw. Turk went in to the college to work on his projects; he had a couple of orders for Christmas presents. There wasn't enough firewood to keep the stove going, but she couldn't find the energy to chop more, so she put on her down jacket and sank deep underneath the covers. Somehow Esther Begay knew she was home, and stoked up the stove. She left a little pile of wood on the floor, and left before Sage could thank her properly.

Turk came home and heated some canned soup.

"Hey, Sage, rest up! Molly will help you cook, but Joe and I are going to go check out a new canyon on Sunday."

"Wait a minute. You're not going to help get ready for this thing?"

"Hey this is *my* tradition, hon. The chicks cook a feast and the guys go out hunting, and they come home and compliment the hell out of the women. Joe and I are not gonna shoot anything, believe me, but we're gonna see if we can feel the true spirit of the desert."

At least she could hand off turkey and pies to Molly. She had an actual oven. A Dutch oven on the wood stove only went so far; besides, the burners would be filled with potatoes and beans and zucchini and stuffing. Sage made it into school the day before the feast, and stopped by Molly's house. Molly handed her a cup of Throat Soother tea.

"Molly, are these women in communes doing all the cooking? I thought we were trying to find new and better ways of doing stuff."

Molly cocked an eyebrow and said, "Yes, maybe it's all peace and love with *them*." Sage wasn't sure if Molly was talking about discord between her and Joe, or if she was saying something about Turk and Sage. So she covered her confusion with a laugh.

Joe and Molly came early on Sunday morning to pick up the turkey and pie ingredients and then Joe and Turk went off in the car to God *knew* where. Sage's throat was only scratchy, and not pulsing with pain, thank God. The feast was to be at five, about an hour before dark. Sage managed to keep the wood stove at a somewhat even temperature, and at four-thirty she pulled the stuffing off and heated the gravy. Turk and Joe were nowhere to be seen, and they had the car. Surely they'd be coming in the door with Molly and the turkey at any moment. Of course, there was no phone anywhere nearby.

The family next door arrived right at five. They were disappointed in the vegetable fare, but they ladled up so many mashed potatoes and so much stuffing that Sage figured she'd seriously underestimated how much food to cook. They'd brought their own chairs, as she'd asked. To Sage's relief, she spotted car lights heading down the long dirt road towards them. Two sets of them, in fact.

None of them were Turk, Joe, and Molly. Robert, their landlady's son who gave them rides to school, said, "You invited the family." Of course, in the Navajo Nation that didn't stop at the nuclear family level. Turk should have known. Joe certainly could have warned her. Where the hell were they?

Now fifteen people milled around the hogan, which was about the size of Sage's parents' dining room, but unlike that room, space was taken up by a double bed, a stove, cupboards, a two-person table, and two chairs. Plus their clothes, which they kept in wooden boxes labeled "Valencia oranges." The twelve adult Navajos, were looking through their record collection. The three kids were looking through Sage's jewelry boxes and family pictures boxes on top of one of the crates. There wasn't much else to look at. On the old turntable, and Sage was playing Jefferson Airplane and Cream. When another set of lights moved down the road, Sage considered bolting before she had to entertain more guests. There wasn't anywhere to bolt to, however, except the landlady's house next door, and of course no one was there. Any thought of flight disappeared when Molly walked through the door, carrying a twelve-pound turkey that smelled like herbs and garlic and salvation. She had commandeered a ride from one of the college teachers.

The next moment, Sage was looking at empty platters. Somebody had carved the turkey faster than her father had ever managed. And then all at once there were only a few bones and piecrust bits left. Some of the men made a few jokes about Turk missing his own party, so they'd had to eat his share. But the guests didn't stick around; there was nowhere to sit and no food. People called out their thanks, the pickups started up, and the neighbor family, who were all male except Esther, walked home. Sage looked at Molly and Ester and said "This place feels huge now!" and they all cracked up. The younger women gobbled up the leavings of sautéed zucchini and onions, which hadn't been popular. Sage put "Box of Rain" by The Grateful Dead on the record player. "Maybe you'll find direction/Around some corner where it's been waiting to meet you." Esther offered to help wash the dishes, and she put a big pan of water on the wood stove.

"I'm pretty sure most men in communes show up for dinner," said Molly, stacking the dirty plates a little too loudly. "I'm also pretty sure *my husband*, at least, could have warned us about how much food is expected at a feast." Esther Begay didn't say anything, but Sage appreciated the gentleness in her eyes. There was nothing tired about Esther's eyes, although the skin around them

signaled a long life in the sun with no fancy skin products. “You need to eat something good,” she said. She’d noticed they’d had no chance to eat turkey. She stepped out, and a minute later, she was back with a pot of mutton stew. It was warm and greasy and it tasted like kindness and filled Sage’s belly with thanks. Sage pulled out Turk’s bottle of Kahlua and they sat in the two household chairs, with Esther on the bed. As the Kahlua bottle began to wane, they all sat together on the bed. It felt so good to laugh. That’s how Turk and Joe found them, chortling on the bed together. The men showed up a couple of hours after the party was over, their eyes all wild with something.

“Hey, Molly, got any turkey left for us?”

“What do you think?” Molly was not gentle with her husband.

Esther restored peace. “There is mutton stew.”

Sage told her she was sorry; they’d meant to host *her*.

Those clear eyes held Sage’s. “They are welcome to it,” she said.

Maybe Sage was learning about harmony, after all.

“Ester, thanks. We’ll get the dishes.” They long since taken the hot water off the stove.

Ester nodded, and glanced over at the men. Then she hugged the women goodbye and was gone.

“That was a major missed opportunity, Turk.”

“Aw, Sage, the sunset was so far out. We couldn’t leave. It was way cooler than turkey and potatoes. You had it together here, right?”

“Yeah.” There wasn’t much else to say, and Molly said it.

“We’ll be spending the night at our house, guys. We’re exhausted. The dish water may still be warm enough.”

Both men stopped with their spoons halfway to their mouths, and the women found the belly laughter they’d left on the bed.

In the night, a light rain hit the window of Molly's guest room. Sage knew the Navajos called these winter rains "female rains." The male rains were muscled with thunder and lightning. Sage's eyes wouldn't close, but instead of the white stucco wall of Molly's room, she imagined the hogan wall beside her bed there; she saw the mud between logs gathered from nearby pine forests in the high mountains. She still hadn't been up in those mountains, and she wanted to do that, some time.

Before dawn, she whispered to Molly, and took her car back to the hogan. The men were snoring amid dishes covered with zucchini stuck in turkey grease. An open, now empty Kahlua bottle sat on the bedside crate. Sage quietly packed her backpack, scooping up her clothes inside the fruit box, and the jewelry and family photos on top. She stepped outside just as the huge pink clouds turned as orange as the mesa.

She took some of the wood from their hogan's little pile, and left it outside Esther's door. Dozens of crows swooped low as she climbed back into the car.

For the Young Man

–SARA ANDERSON

This is for the young man.

This is for the young man
in the Chrysler LeBaron.

This is for the young man
in the Chrysler LeBaron,
who pulled too slowly
onto the freeway.

This is for the young man
in the Chrysler LeBaron,
who pulled too slowly
onto the freeway
and didn't see the oncoming plow.
For the young man who died at the scene.

This is for the driver of the plow.

This is for the driver of the plow,
who couldn't stop in time.

This is for the driver of the plow,
who couldn't stop in time
and who dreams.

This is for the driver of the plow,
who couldn't stop in time
and who dreams of the young man
who died at the scene.

This is for the girl.

This is for the girl
in the passenger seat of the LeBaron.

This is for the girl
in the passenger seat of the LeBaron,
the young man's fiancée.

This is for the girl
in the passenger seat of the LeBaron

the young man's fiancée, who pulled herself clear.

This is for the girl
in the passenger seat of the LeBaron,
the young man's fiancée, who pulled herself clear,
shattered leg, punctured lung and all.

This is for the young woman
in the passenger seat of the LeBaron
the young man's fiancée, who pulled herself clear,
who went on to marry another
and who had two children, both boys.

Which is what the young man
in the LeBaron and the young woman,
his fiancée, discussed nights, driving:
their shared future, a home,
the two children they would have.

This is what the young man and his fiancée
discussed nights in the Chrysler LeBaron,
driving back roads
home in the dark.

In Memoriam: Christopher Michael Street
(February 2, 1972 – January 19, 1993)



KATLYN HUNGERFORD – Flowers and Fluidity

La Cañada

-RAE KIM

Under the moon, humid manifestations gather in the patchy grass
Blue evening gives way to toothy June
And at last, a bellow slips from beneath the harelip of the sun.
At the bottom of the hill, young spidery saplings meet Valhalla
A mouse's last kiss in the jaws of the corn snake

The canyon burns for ocean's balm, in the
Black cracks betraying the tender core of the earth
Why ask for what you have not?
The breath of the city is whiskeyed and tumbleweeded
Breathe that, then, and meet the doe at the sunlight-licked nape of neck

Simple winter reaches not,
Coyote sermon reaches not,
The goliath heads of legend and lore.
Strung up here, they speak only to engines
And the red-tailed hawk.

Now, Lend Me Your Horse

—JEFFREY PERSO

“Now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate.”

--W. Somerset Maugham, “Appointment in Samarra”

I traveled Amtrak, the Empire Builder, from Chicago, I recorded in my scientific journal. It was the first time I had been back in L, the boondocks of my birth, since my parent’s double suicide, one successful, one only partially so, mother moldering in the wet earth seven years now, father brain damaged and soul dead, confined to the insane asylum.

Even in “the best of times” L can be a difficult place to visit, the roads often impassable, sleek from condensation, blocked by high water, or snow, or rock slides. In “the worst of times,” when there is no money for repair, the town’s treasure spent on more pressing needs, such as a new jail, mad house, or basketball arena, the roadway is cracked, blacktop broken, sink holes making L and the local environs nearly inaccessible. In fact, just last month the bridge connecting L and Minnesota fractured and foundered into the Mississippi River, killing sixty-four, many crushed by concrete, falling steel support beams and girders, others trapped inside cars and minivans, river water rushing in, doors jammed, unable to open, windows rolled up, drivers drowned at the wheel, children strapped silently in federally approved safety seats.

Completion of the Interstate highway interchange years ago, when roads were still built, resulted in the rerouting of the already insignificant traffic that mistakenly stopped for gasoline or a quick lunch at a town diner, thus L remains largely cut off, removed, isolated to all except the most determined pilgrims. So the train remains one of the few reliable ways to approach L. Although freight trains run regularly through the village and along the Mississippi and Black rivers in both north and south directions, the passenger train stops in L but once a day, and with few exceptions almost no one ever gets off. Plenty of people get on the train there, migrating northwest to the Twin

Cities or southeast to Milwaukee or Chicago. Yes, plenty of people have the good sense to leave L. And once gone, healthy people generally have the good sense not to return.

In fact, almost immediately, while stepping from the coach, I was seized by a severe case of claustrophobia. I felt faint, I could not breathe, perspiration beaded across my brow, and even though I had just arrived I was desperate to depart.

Contained in a narrow valley surrounded to the east and west by long-running high bluffs—minor mountains—the sky clamps low like a lid or tight cover. The air is thick, heavy, wet. Fog fences full; miasmatic vapors, rotting organic waste, mists from the surrounding marshes foul the air. Most days it is difficult to catch your breath. Indeed, an unusually high number of children born in L expire in their cribs from sudden infant death syndrome.

Also many residents suffer from breathing disorders such as asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, cystic fibrosis, pneumonia, COPD and mesothelioma. There is even an occasional tuberculosis epidemic. Not to mention influenza and pleurisy. At night mosquito crews are out in full force, orange city fogging trucks slowly making their way down the streets and buzzing through alleys, clouds of chemicals billowing behind and above them, filling the air, DDT rising into trees, bark and branches shadowed black, leaves sparkling sugar-green in the dark. Happy, doomed children on bicycles pedal behind, shooting in and out of the thick, sweet fog. Night hawks and bats circle beneath yellow streetlights, feeding in a frenzy on gnats, fireflies and mosquitoes.

There are 53 varieties of mosquitoes in L. The biggest are known as *gallinippers*—the genus name *Coquillettidia perturbans*. They can easily span half an inch with their fine, shapely legs extended, depositing every third night as many as 100-300 eggs on so-called *mosquito rafts*, all of which simultaneously hatch within 48 hours in puddles, ponds, ditches, rain barrels and any other available water body. Real beauties. Model invertebrates. Then of course there are the ordinary, run of the mill type of mosquitoes, the ones that with a nice stinging red welt-raising bite can cause everything from sore, itchy mounds on the back to, in some cases, crippling encephalitis—well-

known and honored for its disease transmitting mosquito population, a deadly type of encephalitis is named after L: LACV. I removed pen and scientific journal from jacket pocket and sketched the long, thin, serrated proboscis of a female *treehole* mosquito, blood dripping from its sharp point.

I never felt at home in L, never a part of L. Trapped, cornered, even as early as elementary school all I wanted was to get away, to climb over the surrounding bluffs, swim across the river and escape to the wider world. Always the outsider, I was different somehow, exceptional in some unknown yet important way. I possessed a secret inner strength lacking in others, and it made me stand out.

But was I really that unique? Weak, a coward, afraid to defend myself and strike the first blow I turned my back and took the lashes and the abuse, and then I ran, forever the coward, shivering in the night afraid and alone. The “good children of L” seemed to sense this too, the mean, vicious, stupid, bullying children of L, the bourgeois beneficiaries, the happy children of L. I kept away from the children of L, avoided them as much as possible. Strangely enough this seemed to draw them to me, attracted them to me, making me a person of interest, an object of curiosity. They followed me wherever I went, chased me, hunted me, and when finally catching me to show their respect, acknowledge my superiority, they beat me and bullied me—after school, before school, before church, after Sunday School, it did not really matter where or when, once caught, cornered and captured I was honored, my difference celebrated, and I was beaten.

I was not an easy child to raise; no, I could indeed be difficult, introspective, moody, more than a little self-centered. I liked to be alone, valued my own company, and did not take easily to strangers. I could not be bothered to say hello to acquaintances, family friends or neighbors encountered on the streets or in the aisles at the corner grocery store. Oftentimes people didn't make an impression on me. It's as if I didn't see them, as if they didn't even exist, mother said repeatedly.

“It's as if you think yourself better than them somehow,” mother scolded. “You can't even say hello, or wave, or smile, as if neighborly courtesy and social niceties are beneath you,” she said

to me more than once. “Where that comes from I don’t have a clue, but I know it’s not from me,” she admonished. “Did you hear what I said? Do you ever listen to a word I say?” “I don’t understand.” “You never do.” “What?”

Yes, all my life I have been trying to get away from L, and yet here I am back in L once again. After my parents’ double suicide and mother’s funeral, paying off burial expenses and other debts, and committing father to the insane asylum, as the firstborn it had fallen to me to see that the family *estate* was administered correctly. Not that there was much to attend to. A three-bedroom “colonial” where my brother Cristo, sister Lara and I were raised, where our parents “took matters into their own hands,” and where Cristo, Lara and two dogs still resided, the house contained the family furniture, “heirlooms” and “memorabilia.” Throw in father’s low-mileage 1968 red Thunderbird convertible that had rarely left the garage since he had been forced to give up driving due to encroaching blindness not long after he had driven it new off the car lot, an aluminum flat-bottomed fishing boat with a 50-horse Evinrude outboard motor docked inside a ramshackle and rotting boat house anchored to the Mississippi River shoreline, plus any junk my brother had carted in over the years – books and magazines and newspapers for his *research*, rusting water heaters, washing machines and dryers, kitchen stoves, lawn mowers, lengths of pipe, copper wire and coils, tin, boards and planks, car parts, “found objects” for his “constructions,” all deemed “worthless,” according to my sister – and that was pretty much it for the family “estate.”

As a result of our parent’s “last will and testament,” I and my brother and sister each owned one-third of the property, and any nincompoop with even a modicum of diplomacy, much less financial acumen, could have handled the proceedings, but according to Lara, who possessed neither, the sticking point was the equitable dispersal of the funds gained from the impending sale of the house. Real estate prices had skyrocketed in recent years (even in L!), and according to Lara, who had recently been released from a local drug and alcohol detoxification unit and had gone through such transactions before, having been married and divorced three times, along the way dropping two

late-term pregnancies into the abortion basket, now was the time to sell. She had engaged a realtor (whom she had meet while in rehab; cocaine), and put the house on the market. To her credit she wanted to ensure that the money was distributed evenly, that one sibling did not profit at another's expense. "I'm not interested in ripping anyone off," Lara said during one late night phone conversation. "Fair is fair."

But she had done all this, retained the realtor, and put the house on the market, without first consulting anyone. So of course there were complications. I was not opposed to selling. I saw Lara's point of view. L held little interest for me, it was little more than a ghost town, a graveyard housing dead and incapacitated parents and unpleasant memories, a place I had been trying to distance myself from for years, a past I would just as soon forget. And yet there I was, back in L, a place I had no desire to be. I had come back because not only was it time to sell the house because Lara needed the money, I had come back because Cristo and Lara were at each other's throats most of the time now, for one thing after another, if it wasn't one thing it was another thing, if not this thing then that thing, and she, Lara, was afraid that one day it would go too far and Cristo would finish her off. Or *she* would finish off Cristo, or perhaps *they would finish off each other*, whomever finished off the one first, the other going down then too only moments later, finished. Lara was convinced that one would finish off the other any day now. There was little doubt of that.

And so there were two reasons to come back to L: To oversee the sale of the house, and to prevent more bloodshed. And to make matters worse, if that was possible, lately Cristo had been acting even weirder than usual, Lara said, and he refused to even consider the benefits of a sale. The mortgage had been paid off for almost a decade now, and he and Lara had lived there rent-free all that time. A literary and conceptual *artist*, working on his *masterpiece* — "Preliminary Notes for a Re-Valuation of Fate" — fifteen years in the making, Cristo was one of those people who, no matter how hard he tried (and it was not always clear that he possessed the motivation to do so), could not, or would not, hold a steady job. "I'm not in it for the money," he wrote in one of the letters he had

sent me over the years. “Just as any moron can receive an education, and a diploma to disprove it (sic), any moron can earn a paycheck. It’s the experience, the raw materials of existence that I am after.” To those ends he would work for a while, long enough to qualify for unemployment benefits, living frugally, stockpiling his pay. Then he would take the next six or nine months to work on his “visions.” (*Hallucinations* Lara called them.) Fired, laid-off, or just quitting on his own, he had labored his way through life as, among other things, a waiter, short order cook, dishwasher, taxi driver and landscape factotum. He had emptied bed pans, changed diapers and sheets in nursing homes and mental hospitals. For a number of autumns he had hitchhiked across the river and took temporary jobs in Minnesota apple orchards, an original Johnny Anti-seed, going nowhere, planting nothing.

“Please come to L,” Lara pleaded during another frantic late-night phone call. “I feel like I am dying here.” Each day, she said, a heavy numbness seized her limbs, and she could barely drag herself from bed. “I feel like a piece of wood,” she said, her arms turning into “branches,” her feet slow, as if they were stuck in the mud and growing roots. “But still your shining beauty remains.” “Fuck you,” she said. “You know I always admired you for getting away. I was envious, jealous. I looked up to you. I wanted to be like you. I wanted to get as far away from L as I could, like you did.” But one thing led to another, she continued, and there she was, all these years later still stuck in L, living in the family house, a dried-up mud-nymph and heifer living with her crazy brother. This might be her last best chance, she pleaded. With her share of the sale she could finally get away; maybe Seattle. She could make a fresh start, and have the life she had always had dreamed of. And now was the time to do it.

“Who knows what tomorrow might bring?” she said, ice clinking in her glass as she gulped between words, her voice sounding like rain in the street sluicing off a wet tire. “I hope you’re using tonic,” I said, “I can smell the gin through the land line.” “Moron,” she said. “I’m on the cell.” “Then I can smell it through the air, bouncing from tower to tower.” “Whatever,” she said, getting back to

her point, “The point is the housing market could crash, the bubble burst, and then what?” In other words, she wanted hers, she wanted it now, and she would do whatever it took to get it. She was not going to stay in L a moment longer than was necessary, and she was not going to let an eccentric failed “artist” potentially lose all that money on some foolish literary hash-pipe dream. She insisted that if I didn’t arrive soon, one day I would have to come from afar to fulfill my *set purpose* and sorrowfully gather her bones from “the banks of this plague-stricken river.”

To protect her interests Lara had thought of hiring a lawyer (there were several of those in rehab too; cocaine; crystal meth), but soon she realized that the only interests the lawyer would see satisfied were his own. I was called in because I could remain “objective,” Lara said, because I was a “Doctor,” Doctor John Voltaire, Professor of Biology and Freshwater Science at the University of Illinois-Chicago, which was odd, ironical even. I had never done well academically, C’s and B’s all through elementary school, eventually dropping out in high school twice, once in 10th grade and again senior year—and so here I was now *a teacher, a professor, PHD*, a “Doctor,” one who spent all his days on a college campus *teaching*, surrounded by students, *respected*, and for the longest time I had *hated* teachers, *hated* school and everything that went with it—books, students (the little pricks), classrooms, libraries, homework, teachers, administrators (bigger pricks)—and now I was one who practically *lived his life in school*.

After kindergarten (pretending to nap I admired Mrs. Szabo’s white underwear while looking up her skirt), I detested elementary school, middle school, high school, teachers, students, classmates, I skipped every class I could, played hooky for days at a time, walked the streets of L with no purpose in mind other than to stay away from school, stay out of the classroom. In fact, I was jailed twice for truancy, declared *delinquent* by Social Services—and now for the last *sixteen years* I’ve been in school *every day*, Monday through Friday, I have not missed a day in *sixteen years*, I have perfect attendance, holding class even when ill or with a broken foot, accruing along the way over 1500 hours of unused sick leave. Elected to committees—The Undergraduate Policy

Committee, The Grievance Committee—presenting papers at internationally renowned conferences and seminars, I have been honored by the Department for *perfect attendance* as well as *Teaching Excellence* and as one who has made “the most important contribution” to *student success* at UIC. For *sixteen years* I have held classes and student conferences, spent hours researching in the library, attended meetings and graduation ceremonies, and in gratitude, in *honor* of that commitment I received the “Length of Service Award, in Recognition of and Appreciation for Service to UIU,” handed out at a formal ceremony in the Union Auditorium. I had three such awards—for five years, ten years and fifteen years; everyone in the university community received this award, whether they worked in the boiler-room or the classroom. Once every five years we lined up according to our college or division and, after the University Chancellor announced our names to a smattering of polite applause (some honorees invited family as witness), we marched single file onto the stage to receive a warm handshake and an unframed 8x11 sheet of parchment paper embossed with the UIC logo, official seal, and our name, in *bold face print*.

Because of my honored service, reliability and success, I was needed as a mediator; I was a *scientist*, Lara said, accustomed to using *reason* and *logic*, and because for the past seven years I had stayed out of the family squabbles. I was impartial, she said, objective. I could, she said, talk our brother down and out of the “insanity tree,” into which he had apparently climbed into the higher branches. Little more than a bum and freeloader, Lara said, I was now, with appeals to logos, pathos and ethos, to convince Cristo that with his share of the sale he could, as she put it, “find a hovel befitting his usual squalor and mayhem.”

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Sheltered by a stand of Norwegian Pine, the family “estate” sat significantly back from the sidewalk, perched atop a slightly sloping berm, the backyard bordered by a red-stained fence. The property ran from the alley, halfway down one city block, all the way to the corner, then turned and extended another fifty feet to the next-door neighbor’s modest bungalow. Exiting the taxi, a light

asthmatic mist beginning to fall, I approached the dark house and pressed the doorbell, which wheezed a few times and then coughed into silence. I waited, knocked, and tried the doorbell again, the rank lilacs covering the front walk arbor already stinking like cat urine and rotting peanuts. Cristo often stayed out all night, engaged in *research*. Sometimes he did not return home for days, walking until dawn, making notes, descriptions, sketching supporting illustrations in his workbook, gathering *materials* and *impressions*, sleeping under viaducts when fatigued, returning to the alleys and streets only when the sun was well risen. Additionally, Lara said, Cristo had taken to collecting strangers and bringing them home with him, hoboes and cripples, con artists, maybe even drug addicts, all kinds of strange and strange-looking people he would meet while roaming about God knows where. She had grown afraid to even leave her room now, Lara said, listening at her dead-bolted bedroom door before stepping out to make sure there was no one home. Who knew what she might find, she said, what those strange people might do to her, those deviants and perverts, or even to Cristo while he slept? Or to the house? Something had to be done, my sister said. Clearly things had gotten out of hand.

Welcomed now with no answer to doorbell or knock, neither human nor animal, I made his way upstairs and called out, entered Cristo's bedroom. No brother. Across his mattress blankets drawn tightly, smoothed, pillows puffed. Clothes folded atop a bureau. More newspapers, magazines, books. Record albums. On his writing table manuscripts, pencils, envelopes, a dictionary. Scribbled notes darkened the wall above his desk. *Destiny/Free Will, Prophecy. Oedipus. Jesus/Judas. Samarra.*

I returned to the hallway, and walked until I stood outside my parents' bedroom, where Cristo had found them that fated night, he told authorities, the newspaper reported, father in bed, unconscious, stretched out stiff in his pajamas, vodka bottle and pill bottle empty on the nightstand, mother motionless, the swinging ceased, urine puddled beneath her feet, silk scarf around her neck and knotted to a spike hammered into an oak ceiling beam, still warm when Cristo cut her down, but

father still warm then too, Cristo testified, and still breathing too, mere minutes away from death himself, according to the coroner. But who helped whom? Did mother help father dress, slide on his slippers, fill his glass with ice and pour his drink, feed him pills, and then tuck him under covers, positioning the pillow under his head, and only then stepping atop the stool and placing the noose around her neck? Did father select the scarf from Mother's closet; hammer the long nail into the beam? Did he help her secure the scarf around her throat, help her climb the stool before kicking it to the floor beneath her feet?

Contributing to the confusion and uncertainty, in suicides where hanging has been used as a means of taking one's own life, there will be several ligature marks around the neck area as the process of hanging can be sometimes a tricky and clumsy one and may require several attempts. With Mother's rheumatoid arthritis, her fingers knotted and stiff, this tying and retying, this doubling or tripling of suicide attempts was certainly a strong possibility. She may have created the ligature marks herself, or she very well could have needed assistance. *If she was not forced* onto the gallows pole. Did Father "help" Mother retie the noose before tightening her silk scarf around her throat? Or did he chock her with his bare hands, and then tie the knot? Did she struggle, resisting at the last moment her death, and so *he needed to tie her neck* again, and again, and maybe again, each time placing *his hands* around her neck to hold her in place? In addition to these extra ligature marks there were bruises indicating that, whoever strung her up—mother or father—or someone else—that person was trying to make sure that she could not be cut down easily from the makeshift noose.

Intriguing questions certainly remained around the case, the coroner said at the inquest, but impossible to know the answers, it was admitted, impossible to pinpoint the exact sequence of events, who did what, when, and to whom.

And they are still mysteries these many years later, mysteries that remained unresolved even as Father lay for days deep in a coma, unavailable for questioning. I could barely look at him, when I could bring myself to visit the hospital, which was seldom. I did not even cry at the sight of the

frightened little man all hooked up to tubes and machines and dripping bags. I almost laughed, the dread and horror a tight death mask fitted to his face. I could not stand the sight of him, my own Father. I could not look at him. I could not be in the same room with him for more than a few minutes. I wished he would die and in his dying take from me all that was his that was inside me, his genes, DNA, his cowardly mannerisms and appearance. I felt that I was coming to resemble him physically more and more every day. Looking in the mirror I saw his face and receding hairline. When I spoke I heard his voice, when laughing, the hyena.

I lingered now at the bedroom suicide door, heart loud in my chest and ears, angry and hurt and confused, but I did not go in, thinking: *There will be that too. There will be time for that. There will always be time for that. It is unavoidable. But not now. Not now. Tomorrow maybe, or the day after tomorrow. Perhaps if I am lucky the day after the day after tomorrow. But not now.*

Returned to my childhood room, I could not catch my breath, the air dead, close, listless, oppressive. I opened a window and unpacked my bags, hanging trousers and shirts in the closet, placing socks and underwear into dresser drawers, Ambien and Clonazepam within reach on the night table. Not knowing when Cristo would return, exhausted by the train trip, jostled by pale prostitutes working Marketplace Station, rain now raging against the roof, I dry-swallowed my medications and crawled into bed, lightning stabbing the black sky, thunder viciously rolling across the valley, trapped in its natural torment, imprisoned, seeking escape, beating against the bluffs.

The long night looms; it is in the darkest hours that I see most clearly, shadows illuminating what passes unseen in obvious daylight.

Above my head the stained ceiling bubbles and warps, condensation creeping through familiar, familial cracks. I drew the cool sheet close to my throat, thinking of flash floods and mud slides, rivers and creeks rising beyond banks. Turning onto my side, sucking the violent air into my lungs and closing my eyes I sense Mother and Father, and Lara and Cristo gathered around my bed, certain I cannot but dream of murder.



FABRICE POUSSIN – Joy

Ladybug as Harem Bracelet

-TAUNJA THOMSON

As red as cherry slices
as shiny as lacquer
I would tempt them
upon my wrist
from there to sojourn
around *radius* and *ulna*
then in single file
over the minor hill of *scapoid*
over the tor of *capitate*
to arrive at *metacarpus*
and there to encircle
the base of *phalange*
as if restless red opals had come
to liven up the landscape
of hand.

Infectious

—ANDREW ROMRIELL

Matt Cabert tried to imagine it didn't hurt. That it was instant. Painless. That the bullet shot through his father's head and ended his life before he could feel it. He hoped he had died before he could even release the trigger. Pain could be such a burden to bare.

Liz Cabert, however, just wished their father would have taken his life in a month warmer than October.

The evergreens spiked from the cemetery ground, crooked like Liz's breath in the mid-October cold. Her father used to tell her they planted evergreens there because evergreens never died. They could tell a story of rebirth, of an everlasting life. She wondered if her father believed in a life after death there at the end. She wondered if it had brought a sense of hope to him in his final moments.

The maid found him. "I was out in the garden," she had told the police that Sunday afternoon, only hours after his suicide. Liz had just arrived at the police station. Matt appeared to be too broken to go there, but Liz needed to hear. To understand.

"The squash was near ready for harvesting, you see. I heard a loud noise in the house then." The maid had paused, knocking her knees together before continuing. "I wasn't sure what it was. Not until I found him there in his office."

Liz didn't want to believe it then, and she still found it hard to believe in the graveyard, a week later, watching her father's gold-trimmed casket descend into the earth. She couldn't look anymore, so she glanced to the evergreens. True to their name, they remained a vibrant green, even on that bitter day. Liz studied their crooked spines, but moving lightly in the wind that blew down from the canyon. Little by little it had made them bend over the years. Liz wondered if they'd break one day.

Before long, the minister finished, and Liz turned away from her father's tombstone laden

with white roses. She wanted to run from that place and never return, but there was still too much to be done. The burden of his death had fallen on her.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" Cousin Jerry said to Liz as the crowd dispersed. "I'm sure your father loves it."

"Yes," she said. "I suppose he would have." She couldn't disregard Jerry's use of present tense when talking about her deceased father. "Matt," she called to her brother who had wandered to the edge of the empty space near their father's grave. "We need to get going." Evergreens towered over most of the cemetery, but her father laid a ways outside their canopy near her mother. The trees there were smaller, not yet grown.

Matt turned to her from the trees, his eyes puffy and red, his long, black hair plastered back with gel. He looked surprised to see Liz and turned back to the tree line a few times before trudging back to her.

"Where were you going?" Liz asked, bumps rising on her stomach from an itch of cold invading her coat.

Matt turned back to the edge of the grove and said, "I just thought I saw someone."

"Here for the funeral?"

"Maybe. She's gone now."

"Hey, champ," Jerry interrupted, giving Matt a childlike slap on the shoulder. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," Matt said. He kicked a twig into the grass.

"Not an easy day for you, I'm sure."

"Yes, well, we should go," Liz said quickly. "It was good to see you, Jer."

Liz turned, wrapping her arm around Matt's shoulder and began the trudge back to her car. To her dismay, Jerry followed. "Where was Anne today?" he asked. "I didn't see her at the wake either." No. Liz's sister had not been there. The eldest of Liz's family, Anne had moved to Miami

three years ago. They hadn't seen her since.

"So, you flew in from Tennessee?" Liz asked.

If the change of subject surprised Jerry, he didn't show it. Instead, a smile too big for his face shone pearly teeth. "Yeah!" he shouted. "Business is really booming these days. John thinks we'll be able to build another shop in Nashville come spring. If that goes well, we'll be heading to Atlanta next. People always need their cars fixed, you know. I don't think we'll ever make the kind of money your dad did though." Jerry laughed.

Liz let Jerry talk about his plans for going national one day all the way back to their cars. Matt stopped multiple times to look behind them, but Liz kept dragging him along. Their father had said that lingering in graveyards only brought death closer.

Hours after the funeral, a metal bench iced Matt's backside long. His suit pants were not thick enough to provide protection from the cold. It had seeped in. His whole body shivered, but he did not remove himself from the garden. The yellow roses that surrounded him were his father's favorite. Matt had spent many summer hours here talking to him, watching the wind catch the lips of the roses, their petals whispering underneath the weeping willow. The memory caught in his throat, making it hard to breathe. The hollow pain in Matt's chest felt unbearable. He didn't know how to survive it.

October marked the last bloom of the roses. The yellow would fall away soon, leading into winter. Matt wanted to hold on as long as he could.

"They're truly beautiful, aren't they?" Amara said from a few feet away. Matt hadn't noticed her. He'd only met her a week before. He didn't yet know how her feet swept across grass; how her breath froze in the stale, autumn air; how her dark hair fell like water against her collar from beneath the same white shawl she wore every day. Matt peered up, but didn't respond.

Amara stood in front of him, examining a bush of a few yellow roses. Her fingernails played with the petals of a single flower--one that had not yet bloomed. Matt's father had always told him to never touch the roses. The oil from a single finger could kill the petals. Matt had forgotten to ask if that had actually been true. "Roses in October is strange to me," Amara said, her voice heavy like the branches of the weeping willow above her. "I always think they'll be dead by now. Yet, they always surprise me with their inherent desire to survive."

"Why are you here, Amara?" Matt asked, his voice cracking like spring ice.

Amara dropped her fingers from the yellow petals and shifted a white shawl across her shoulders. "I'm here to help you grieve, Matthew." She knelt, dirtying her pants with mud. She grasped his hands, her fingers ambient--alike to the frigid air around her. Matt felt like he had to persuade himself that she was actually there at all. "Why else would I be here?"

"Then why did you stay in the trees today?"

Amara stood. She brushed over to the unblossomed rose and let her fingertips lick the petals again. She looked ghostly, standing beneath the willow tree, tending to a rose.

She plucked the flower from the bush with a tiny snap of her fingers. She slipped the rose into Matt's grip and knelt down once more. "I don't like flowers at funerals. Why pick something alive lay it on the deceased? Seems like there are better things to do with them."

Matt didn't know how to respond as he twirled the green stem across his hand. "Yellow was always my father's favorite. My sister wanted white at the funeral though. Said the color fit better."

Amara didn't speak, but rather took a seat on the bench next to Matt. They sat in silence, both watching the yellow flower spin through Matt's fingertips. The rose drooped in the cold air.

Three days after the funeral marked ten days since Liz's father had been found with his skull shattered, drowned in blood, sitting in his office chair. According to an online checklist of what to do when a loved one dies, Liz had done everything right. Yet, she still had piles of files and paperwork

to sort through. Her father had left everything to her and Matt--his entire estate, his company, his wealth. Every obscure object the man had accumulated in an attempt to find himself after his wife had died four years before. Liz had to sort through it all.

In her parents' bedroom, atop her mother's old black and green fleece throw her father refused to throw out, Liz flipped open a new box--one from her father's office. Most of the office boxes had been filled with useless receipts and notes from years back--things that Liz had to look through but almost always threw out. This one, however, had three leather-bound books. When she flipped it open, she found it dated as a journal entry from nine months ago.

Liz had no idea her father kept journals. In all her life, she'd never seen him write in one. She had hardly seen him write anything but his own signature for his work. Perhaps that's why she couldn't take her eyes off the small book, why she fell against the backboard of the bed and pulled her mother's blanket over her knees. Maybe she believed she could find some fundamental truth as to why he would take his own life--why he didn't even leave her a note.

The journal began with pain. He talked about his wife, Liz's mother. How the cancer had come quickly. How they told him she would be fine. How she wasn't fine. How she died three months later. How he couldn't stop seeing her roam the halls of their house, too big for one person. How he didn't know how to survive without her.

He wrote about his children. A daughter that he hadn't seen in over two years. A son without aspirations. A daughter much too busy to come over anymore.

He said he kept the old blanket because it made him feel warm.

Liz cried, dripping tears on the pages of her father's journal, causing the ink to run afresh. She hadn't cried about it yet. She hadn't had the time to cry. There had been too much to be done.

But now, no matter how much she wanted to stop reading, she couldn't--as if she owed this to her father. As if she could listen to him now. As if that could make up for her telling him she had been too sick for Sunday night dinner.

As if that could change the fact that she had just wanted to sit and watch *Parks and Rec* on Netflix instead.

When she read about last three months of her father's life, a man named Aja started to appear frequently across the pages.

Aja really understands me.

Aja lost his wife some time ago too. He wears the white gloves in memory of her.

Aja keeps telling me that the pain will stop when I make it stop.

As the name invaded her father's story, Liz noticed a change in his writing. The words shifted from pain to apathy--from suffocation to breath--but Liz couldn't remember her father ever mentioning Aja. Her heart throbbed against her chest, and she wondered if he had said the name and Liz had just not cared to listen.

Two weeks after the funeral, Matt stood in front of his father's tombstone, arm linked with Amara's in the November chill. A yellow rose dangled from Matt's fingers--not one from his father's garden, but from Flowerama on Fort Street. He had hoped some of his father's might survive long enough to bring here, but the cold had come hard and strong this winter. Snow had already fallen on the cemetery. The evergreen pines hid beneath a soft layer of snow, green needles poking out from the white.

"I know you don't get the flowers," Matt said to Amara, letting her arm slide from his own. He stepped a few more paces toward the tombstone, the snow scritchng beneath his shoe. "I just had to. For him."

"I understand, Matthew." Amara remained unmoved, her eyes peering up into the bruising sky.

The black, polished granite tombstone stood erect from the snow. The carved words "Frank Cabert - Loyal Friend, Father, and Husband" had been dusted by white, a light residue remaining in

the creases of the letters. Matt pulled his sleeve over his ungloved hand and wiped the snow away as if dusting off an old book. "I'm sorry, Dad," Matt said, his voice steady. "I'm sorry I haven't been around more."

No noise followed his words. He wasn't sure what else he had expected, but the silence reeked of his own disappointment. He wanted to cry. He wanted tears to blur the letters of his father's name. He wanted to be blind and unseen. He wished he hadn't come now. It felt too real. Too close. His father had said that graveyards brought death closer. He felt it creeping up behind him.

He sniffed and looked away from the dark grave. "I wanted to bring Elizabeth," he said, trying to soak up the silence. "She said she might drop by later. She's been working a lot. I suppose it's her way of coping. I haven't seen her in a few days. She missed Sunday dinner again."

Matt's throat caught on the words and he choked on his tongue. Amara placed her hand on his shoulder. He gripped her fingers. "I miss him."

"I know."

Matt hesitated, wondering if he should speak the words aloud. He worried that saying the words would make it real. "Can I tell you something?" he asked Amara.

"Of course."

He paused again. "I almost feel jealous. Of my father."

"Jealous?" Amara asked.

"It's just," Matt said, his face burning, "I wish he hadn't gone and all. But at least he's free. At least he doesn't have to hurt like this anymore." Tears fell from his eyelids, down his red cheeks. It pained him to say the words, but they felt like a release.

"I understand," Amara said quietly. "You shouldn't feel ashamed. There's no pain where he is now."

Matt nodded, and, after a few minutes, let Amara guide him back toward his car. “Thanks for coming with me,” he told her.

“There isn’t anywhere I’d rather be.” She lifted her white shawl a bit higher on her shoulders. “But I wish your sister had come with you.”

She sounded like she was simply stating a fact. Like she was a teacher.

“Well,” he said, “I guess she’s just busy.” After a moment of pause, he added, “Maybe she’ll come to dinner this week. I’d like for you to meet her.”

Amara nodded, her white scarf fluttering in the wind. “I’m sure I’ll meet her soon enough.”

Liz’s breath curled in the frozen air. Her heels cracked against the sidewalk. She gripped a coffee in her hand, but it did nothing to shield her fingers from the chill of the last November dawn. She walked straight-backed across the barren concrete, cars speeding by beside her. Her office was an easy walk from her apartment on a calm day like this.

Nearing two months since her father’s death, Liz had managed to find a sense of normalcy in her life again. She hadn’t moved into her parent’s mansion like her father had seemed to imagine she would. Matt hadn’t wanted to either. “Too haunted,” he had said. So they sold the building and kept living in their respective apartments. Liz had meant to keep close with Matt after, but two months had gone by and she could count the number of times they’d seen each other on one hand. Between becoming the new CEO of her father’s company and attempting to restart her life, she just hadn’t found the time yet.

She enjoyed the peaceful mornings when the sun rose. It was a quieter world--more serene, like nothing in life could actually be broken. The gentle hum of cars pealed against her skin. Frost nipped her dry eyes. The unawaken city granted peace. She inhaled a deep breath of cold, and her phone rang.

Placing the cold glass screen against her ear, she answered. “Matt? You’re never up this early.”

“Hey Liz,” Matt said. She expected some sort of laugh, but instead a pause proceeded a slow drawl foreign to Matt’s tongue. “I just--are you busy?”

“A little. I’m going to the office. Is this something quick, or do you want me to call you tonight?”

Another pause. “I’ve just been thinking about Dad, and I guess I just wanted to talk with you about it.”

A tightness in Matt’s throat clenched on the word *Dad*. The sound reached out and constrict Liz’s lungs like the vines wrapping around their parents’ old house. She wondered if the new owners had torn them down.

“Look,” she said, trying to unravel her voice, “let me call you tonight. I won’t be able to focus if we talk about it now.” She had arrived at the door of her building, the white bricks reaching up ten floors above her. The brass handle looked frozen, and Liz regretted not bringing gloves. Her coffee had long gone cold. “Will that be okay?”

Matt didn’t answer right away and the silence hung in the air. The cold itching farther down into her coat crafted goosebumps across her stomach. She could tell Matt needed to talk, but this conversation warranted attention, attention she couldn’t give now. Matt never did seem to understand what it took to oversee the family business.

“Sure. That’s fine.” He sounded tangled. Constricted. Hung up inside himself. For a moment, she considered just being late for work, but her breath hung frozen on the windowed door. She longed for warmth.

The white lights of the great willow tree in the center of town shone down on Bridgerland Park. Nearby residents had come to call it the Tree of Life based on mythological and biblical tales.

Matt had always loved going there, and his father had never let a year go by where they hadn't gone. The lights had been lit at the beginning of December, but it had taken two weeks for Matt and Amara to finally visit the place.

Blue and white baubles hung high above him surrounded by glittering white lights. They must have been hung with such care--one by one--hook slipped over each branch of the willow. When he was eight, he told his father that he wanted to be an ornament hanger when he grew up. "You can be anything you want to be," his father had said, ruffling Matt's hair to make hanging snowflakes fall around his face.

"It's absolutely wonderful," Amara said from beside him, her hands deep in her coat pockets, her white shawl hanging loosely around her shoulders.

"It's my favorite place."

"Your father," she said, her voice even and thick, "he used to take you the day they set it up. Why did you take so long to come this time?"

A cloud of air lifted from Matt's lips as he gazed deep into a nearby glittering ornament. "It was too hard," he answered.

"So why come at all?"

Matt peered down at Amara. Her figure shimmered like the ornaments above them. "I figured I should see it before I go. Feel close to him again." Matt felt tears rising behind his eyes. "I've never felt so alone," he said. The past few weeks had suffocated him. The hollowness inside had broadened. The pain had overwhelmed him. He just wanted to see his parents again. His father's warm embrace. His mother's soft words of comfort. He craved to be with them again.

Amara nodded. She didn't look at him, so he set his gaze back on the tree. "You see the way the ornaments hang so beautifully in the air," she said. "Like they're floating where neither ground nor sky can touch them."

Matt envied them. Amara's hand met his, and their fingers twined together, tying knots with their knuckles, lacing the tips with warmth Matt hadn't expected.

Liz stood beside the tombstone, her shoulders covered in powdered snow. She had cried so much the past week that her mind felt dry. Numb. Lacking any substance. Matt's name, carved into the surface of the grave, carved into her. Guilt traced her veins, guilt from her father's suicide. Guilt from her brother's.

Others kept telling her it wasn't her fault. She never heard them. Of course it was her fault. How could it not be? Her father had called her distant in his journal. Matt had called and she had brushed him off. She had sworn to be better--to put her family first--to never let what happened to her father happen again. Yet, here she stood, staring at her family's tombstones, knowing that there was so much more she could have done. She had killed her father. She had killed her brother. It had been easier focusing on work. It had been easier to take care of herself.

"Hey Matt," she said, calling out to the nothingness that surrounded her. "It's Christmas Eve, and I just wanted to come say hi." She wanted him to answer her back. She wanted his voice to reach out from some place deeper than she could speak. She wanted to feel her phone ring and see his name shine through the glass. "Remember last year?" she asked. "Remember when Dad knocked over the tree and it broke the window? I remember Mom laughing so hard. She laughed even though she was so sick. She laughed until she cried. Dad felt so embarrassed. He taped plastic around the window, but it didn't make a difference. We all huddled under his and mom's giant comforter and watched Christmas movies all night. I felt like a kid again, like I didn't have a care in the world outside our little family." Icy tears rolled down her cheeks, freezing against her skin. "I remember feeling so warm. I just wish you were here now." She coughed and sniffed back her tears. She let out a tiny laugh and said, "I figure it's what I deserve. I never acted like I had a family, so I may as well

not have one.” Her weighted eyes glanced from her mother’s grave to her father’s to Matt’s. “I’m sorry.”

Then, something itched inside her. A fleeting thought of how things might be easier for Matt now, how they might be simpler. Creeping jealousy rose, and Liz’s eyes shifted back to the evergreens stretching high into the sky. A man stood there, a white jacket hanging loosely from his shoulders, his black hair cropped. He stood frozen as the air around him. As if he’d been there from the very beginning. As if he knew her somehow. As if she knew him.

He raised a hand toward her, beckoning her closer. She turned away.

Counterpunch

—LEONORE HILDEBRANDT

They try to see it—but what are houses in reverse? No one
in town will open up her bundle, investigate the catch—
a net of squirming fish. And thoughts are easily undone.

Her work unties convention—elusive midnight suns
in arctic circles. Light-filled mandalas. A bird about to hatch.
It carries them, but is it real? Or just a clever pun.

Nightfall makes them doubt. (Fortunes are lost and won,
colors may trick.) When they see her flower patch—
a net of squirming fish—these thoughts are easily undone.

They try flamboyant terms. Hyperspace. Zero-Sum.
And still the echo cleans a rock, a thing unmatched.
It carries them, but is it real? Or just a clever pun.

“Finger paint,” the critics say. “Naiveté.” Her children, one by one,
move out to Poorman’s Point. She stoops to bring another batch
into the net of squirming fish—and this thought, too, is easily undone.

They close the temple’s metal gate. But to be lifted—spun
around a moving axis—weightless, unattached.
It carries them, but is it real? Or just a clever pun,
a net of squirming fish, a thought that’s easily undone.



OCTAVIO QUINTANILLA – Ven

Come. Sit
at my feet.

Let me
touch your face

while the poem
writes
itself.

Inertia

– WILLIAM AUTEN

So much was pulled up by her question. So much fell down from it. When she asked it, the division already firmly wedged in the young man widened and deepened, but the division did not appear *ex nihilo*, a term he vaguely remembered from tests that he could care less about but had to take in school. He was already divided before she asked him.

* * *

She had been talking for so long that Saturday afternoon that he had slumped against the bench, his skinny frame S-shaped on the plastic, legs kicked out, black jeans absorbing the heat. Amber had thought, at one point, that he had fallen asleep, maybe exhausted from all the time he had put into his practicing, maybe he was ignoring her, or that he had kept in one earbud, his music playing while she talked, that side of his face turned from her, maybe because he had landed on it and scraped it during one of his runs, maybe to escape their talk, but when she confronted him again about their commitment, with a tone sliding more towards an imperative and further away from an interrogative, he tossed his head back until his mop of hair uncovered his dark eyes.

* * *

When Amber repeated her isolated, emphatic question, “You’re in this, right?” and received nothing but a chin nod from Javy, the two of them having sat on the park bench for an hour after he had finished practice, she glared at him, June’s orange glow lower on their faces, the glow bouncing more intensely off the waves and the sand, the metal and concrete undulating around them. She had

asked the question—her second attempt—in a different way, her question revolving around the monosyllabic theme that they had kept saying to each other over the past several months as the start of summer rolled up: This will last; I want this to last; I don't care where we are, but we will have us; we have to keep this on; I will be here for you.

* * *

Javy knew why he couldn't answer her. The young man knew it inside himself but kept it from coming out, deflecting, avoiding, saying nothing when Amber asked him again about their promises, the direction those promises set in motion. He was headed to where he wanted to be, until...

* * *

The applications of physics to real life are everywhere that you look around. So said the introduction in the book; so spoke the teacher reading the book's introduction, repeating it to students in the class who had read it and wanted to hear it again: honors students; kids with a clear, direct path; kids needing the last credit requirement to graduate; kids who were genuinely interested in the subject. And the teacher read the introduction again for those students who did not read the first assignment of the year: the usual suspects in the hierarchical halls of high school, Javy's name included.

* * *

"Besos," he quickly offered to her, pressing out his lips, slouched on the bench.

Amber stared at him, saw the one earbud stuffed in his grimy ear, saw no signs on his cheeks of spilling off his skateboard and face-planting on any of the solid obstacles in front of them. She snarled until her aquiline nostrils flared and said, “Hell no, Javy. You get kisses from me when...no, check that, after, *after* you tell that little raja in Playa no more. Got me? She is so much trouble, Javy, and I am not going to catch anything she has or gave to you.”

“I didn’t do anything with her,” he responded, quickly retreating his lips, and then stared at the concrete steps and the metal handrails fastened here and there in front of them. The lines of skaters had lengthened at the park, winding along and cresting atop the ramps and the bowls, the metal coping around the rims sparkling in the sunset; the lights on the pier’s amusement rides on the other side of the beach had flickered on. Swimmers and surfers, runners and walkers, children and dogs—the ocean churned. Evening was coming, but the day was the longest that it had been.

Amber’s head swiveled like a pendulum slicing into resistance when it reached the bottom. “You go do your skater-boy thing, you come back, and we really make this real. You’re not getting paid for it anyway.”

“Not true. I’m getting something.”

“Amateurs bring home what?”

“I’ll be with the big boys.”

“Merch don’t pay rent, Javy, and it don’t pay baby formula and doctor’s visits. They can use you up then spit you out. You could get injured...then what? Who pays for that?”

Javy shrugged and re-crossed his legs. Pains sharpened in his hip and neck from working on one vital trick earlier in the day that could springboard him far away from here.

“I don’t want to hear anything anymore about Miranda Hernandez sniffing around you, got it?” Amber continued. “She’s a distraction, she’s wrong, and she’s gonna pull you down.” Her right leg jackknifed, the faster she talked and the louder her voice rose, her blue Chuck Taylors throbbing in the warm air. “I heard you were with her Thursday at the mall.”

“Thursday? The mall?”

“Javy, don’t...”

“Yo, me and the boys were kicking gaps behind Panda Express.”

“That’s not what I heard.”

“It’s true. Paul Blart rolled up on us.”

“Oh, really? Because that’s what you need now, Javy...to be arrested or something worse.”

Amber eagle-eyed him from the side of her face.

“Yo, it was cool. He did his thing and then drove off.”

“But you saw her, right?”

“Yeah, I saw her, and I stopped to say hi. That’s it, I swear. Besides, I was hungry.”

“Hi? That’s it, Javy? And...,” Amber glowered as he massaged his neck, “hungry for what?”

Javy finally turned off his music and jammed the earbuds in his shirt’s torn front pocket. A marionette line of skaters screeched across the metal piping of concrete boxes. One by one they slid, plopped down, and ticky-tacked their wheels away into open space, avoiding others whizzing by.

“I heard you were keeping your board in front of your crotch the whole time you talked to her.”

“I always do that. You know that. You *seen* me do that. Who told you this?”

“People we know. People watching out for us. Besides, it doesn’t matter. You weren’t covering up anything talking to her?”

“What? No. Look...” Javy stood up from the park bench, grabbed his board, and pivoted it so the weathered green wheels faced Amber and the deck’s grip tape faced his faded denim jeans like paper burned along the edges. “See? It’s all natural.” His free arm motioned to the air, welcoming in her judgment, while his other arm tightly held the chipped tail.

Amber looked him up and down and stopped her eyes on the tail and the wheels fig-leaving Javy’s groin. “I guess.”

“We good?”

“I guess.” Her thick curls bobbed on her shoulders when she shrugged. She pulled down her shirt until it covered her waist.

“Come on, chica. I leave Monday.”

“Good...you need to think about what you’ve done and what you’ll do. We need plans, Javy Contreras, we need real plans.”

* * *

In physics class, he missed hearing about Newton’s Three Laws of Motion. Head cradled in his palm, drool on his chin, pencil quiet in a rigor-mortis hand, he was asleep, idling in neutral at the back of the room with the other students who did not want to or knew why they could not sit at the front. He knew why then, too.

* * *

B\$P. Amber saw that tattoo on his right shoulder, dark blue script popping against his skin, thanks to the angle of the setting summer sun.

* * *

Before meeting her at the skate park near the ocean, he had been grinding front-side to fakie on a fourteen-stair rail. It had been the one thing that gave him a momentary sense of breaking free, of feeling whole. The trick had come alive, slowly like an earthquake gaining momentum, but the trick had also asked him to surrender the late morning and the early afternoon hours—all of them;

but once he grasped the trick, it gave him, in return, a thimbleful of seconds to relish. Again and again, the Laws put him in his place. *I'm going to...* Nope. Knees skinned open. *I'm...* No. Palms jammed on the concrete. *I'm going to slide...* No. Metal handrail to the groin; hip jolted, neck whipped back. But then, after two hours of tries, the rest of the boys were there to post his brief victory on social media with all the right things to say so that everyone else in the world could be a part of it.

* * *

“I got my parents telling me to do one thing. I got you telling me to do something else. Austin pretty much handed me off to the dude from the shoe company, but I don't know what to say or do. And I got me. I can do this,” he threw his head at the park, “but I can't do anything else. I'm not brains, but I can skate. That's what I know I can do.” Several seconds passed until he spoke again. “We don't know if it's a boy or a girl.”

“I know,” Amber replied.

* * *

The old guys, some streaks of grey or white in their hair, those with hair left, talking about the old days are the same guys who bubble-wrap their kids before bringing them to the park; the same guys with their spouses or lovers reminiscing about the dichotomies of their youth: fake or real, fringe or mainstream, professional or amateur, vert or street, a hobby or a career, fatherhood or...

* * *

She helped him pass the final exam in physics that spring. This was when love was something other than an object at rest and staying at rest, full of potential to move in a better direction. When the semester started, she sat near the front, third row from the teacher and all the formulas scribbled on the board, absorbing and understanding the formulas, but as winter went away, green pushed through the browns on the mountains, and he started talking to her more and more, she moved to the back, closer to him. *Magnetized*, she wrote in her journal.

* * *

He crossed his arms while sitting next to her on the bench. The beach was more golden, the concrete sloping around them more grey. She could see sweat beading on his forehead under his flat-billed hat pulled down to the tops of his ears. “Did you like my gift?” Amber asked.

Javy cocked his head and then sighed from the side of his grimaced mouth. “I...yo, look, you can’t... That was freaky, you know? You just...you just dumped that on me in the middle of dinner with my family. You dumped it on my family. Now they all know. I was gonna tell them, but not till I got back from tour. Not real cool.”

Amber sucked in her lips and stared into the crowd gathering around the park. The kids wearing department-store skater clothes thickened, as did their parents holding snacks packed in small plastic bins with color-coded lids. Javy and his crew couldn’t stand them, especially the food and their attire. She waited for him to see them, crack his usual jokes about them, and then storm into one of the bowls, showing off and protesting at the same time, holding a mirror to them as he wove among them.

He glanced at the thickly padded and helmeted kids waddling along the park, but he stayed next to her. “My parents were...I don’t know... We talked. I mean, they ripped into me. My little

sister and brother would not shut up *all night* about it, but my abuela, Amber, come on... My abuela was there.”

“I know,” she said, lifting her small chin to the sunset and resting her hands on her belly.

“Your dad was like, ‘Go home, Amber. You don’t want Abuela Contreras coming out here.’”

“Ah, yo, you have no idea. My mom, she saw you and wanted to tell you what was really up. You don’t mess with my mom or her mom.”

“You’re nineteen,” Amber replied. “You’re an adult. You can take care of yourself. This is what I’m talking about.”

Javy watched two kids drop in from the top of a hubbah on his left. The first kid pumped up her knees and legs in time to cross the planter, but the kid following her did not. His deck’s nose clipped the planter and ejected him off the board. He landed shoulder first on the concrete by a crowd that lowered their phones onto him, pixilated thumbs down, the camera lenses having traced the rider’s flight-path from promising shirtless-bro-sailing-through-the-air start to nature-versus-man-nature-always-wins finish with a rash decorating his upper arm, the red matching a neon stripe on his board. “And...,” Javy continued, “you said you loved me. That’s...yo...I’m...I’m not there.”

“We talked about this. We’ve been over it a million times. That’s what you said. That’s what you said to me, Javy, when we’ve been together. In your car, at my place, walking and holding hands, being *with* each other.”

“No, I know I said it, but...”

“You said that.”

Javy nodded and watched the skaters pulled up by invisible strings. “Yeah...I said it.”

“But you didn’t mean it?”

“I don’t... I guess... I don’t know.”

Amber lowered her head and wiped mascara trickling from her lashes. “OK...well... It’s yours. It can’t be anyone else’s. Unlike you, I haven’t been with anyone else.”

* * *

SoCal. NorCal. Oregon. Washington. Back down through the Golden State. Three months, all summer. He could go to cities he has never been to. He could be a part of it—minor part today, major part in the future; he could be a part of it, catching up to the door and crossing its threshold, not in the middle or at some other far-off segment; he could be at the start and be with it straight through to the end.

* * *

“M’ijo, we need to talk.”

Javy’s head dropped under the shadow of the front porch. He could see the dark living room and his bedroom’s window open, the summer breeze pushing back the curtains. Coming home, he thought he would be alone, everyone else out to watch a movie. He palmed his deck until the skateboard rested like a small piece of driftwood next to his hip. “A’ight,” he replied.

“Amber...”

“Oh, yo, muy loca chica, Pop.”

“You watch that now,” his father’s voice snapped. “There’s a reason why she’s acting that way, isn’t there?”

Javy shrugged.

“Is it true? What she said? The photo? All of that?”

“Yeah, but I got...”

“What you got is in the here and now,” his father interrupted. “What you got, m’ijo, is something more important here than what’s out there.”

* * *

She stared again at his tattoo, started to speak, but stopped. She has had different hopes, ones that have repeated in her dreams or in her journal entries or in the songs she keeps selecting, songs about eternal love, love never ending, love more than a wireframe waiting to be fleshed out from a palette of colors. She stared at his tattoo as he watched the ocean and the skaters threading the cones and riding the kinked rails. Beer, money, pussy.

* * *

Which is worse? Wiping out trying to pull off a front-side-fakie, losing balance, and eating concrete in front of a hundred onlookers, a few of whom may be reps from manufacturers or big-name sponsors—or wiping out in front of the one girl you've been crushing on, and who's been crushing on you, ever since senior year in high school?

* * *

The gift was a picture of the baby growing inside her. She brought the ultrasound to the house not to scare him or to pressure him into anything but to simply show him, half out of fear, half out of joy, pushed and pulled by both, by him, by her, by their respective families and their respective expectations, showing him this, her not talking, an image changing them as they stood inside the shadows of the world's moving clockwork hands. Once she drove there, knocked on the door, Mr. Contreras looking out the window, wiping his mouth, BBQ sauce on the napkin, Javy wide-eyed, Mrs. Contreras twisting in her seat, Javy's abuela staring at what Amber held, once she started this,

she could not have stopped it. There is a direct relationship between an object's mass, acceleration, and applied force. The Law says so.

* * *

Physics, algebra, good writing, and grammar can't get him to where he wants to be. These are abstract and airy, ghosts passing through ghosts, a sequence of yawns in the middle of the day that has been relegated to brick walls, books, homework, and schedules. None of this has the smell of flesh on concrete, metal, or wood or inside the light-charged air; none of this is motion.

* * *

Shred the PCH, the tour promoters called it, where each skate park along the way has its own landscape, each landscape with its own responses; they are so localized that another park miles away has its own *operandus mundi*—expressed locally with its colors and obstacles, and yet, they are all subject to universal laws grounded underneath them.

* * *

This day and that day and the day before it and the day after it blur together, uneven and lopsided in all that the days have opened since they have spent time together. She has worried that the end was on its way, sealed in order to be unsealed at the right time and at the right place, like a tube with a map inside that shows where and when to meet one last time. And watching him avoid her question on the bench, she's reaching a point where anything falling out of his mouth would be welcomed, even a *No* at this point, because that would mean he at least heard her.

* * *

At first, they called him Sergeant Poopenstein because he always wore tan pants that, on hot summer days, made a dark ring around his rear end. The hardcores hated him, not because he was a security guard (they actually thought he was cool and just doing his job) but because he was put there, at a run-down-past-its-prime mall, of all places, paid to be there by people who didn't understand free expression or open space or individuality. After the movie came out, Javy and his boys simply called him Paul Blart. Every time he finished ID'ing and talking with them, which was every time they skated at the mall, the golf cart squeaked when he sat in it and sputtered away behind the loading docks, the driver's side tipping and scraping blacktop. He told Javy and the boys to not get into traffic or damage anything. He told them that he was watching them anyway, from a distance. He said he used to do this when he was their age.

* * *

An object moving through space creates its own space and uses the space around it. The landscape affects an object in motion or at rest and is affected by an object in motion or at rest. It is, a word he missed on a quiz in English class, *symbiotic*.

* * *

“You could always, you know, walk down to that clinic,” he said.

Amber's mouth gaped. A bubble of saliva popped as she scowled at him. “Are you really serious? *That?* That's your solution? You think you got rumors and problems now, just wait till that

catches up with you. I show up one day, and my stomach's flat, but there's no baby, then what? Who's talking then?" Adjusting her shirt, she jolted up from the bench and, before walking off, said, "Go do your tour with all your other thrasher cabrones, I'll let you, and then you come back and be a man."

Javy watched her climb into her car. She sat for a few seconds while she cried, typed on her phone, and then drove away.

* * *

Kids these days: showing up dressed in the latest fashions and accessories from major department stores or from links buried in the pages and promos and search engines of online retailers. The kids looking like skaters but, in his head as he sees them, not yet skaters, not real, not earned; the kids these days with their hovering-on-the-horizon parents; the kids showing up to the skate parks like packages shipped to a museum—extra padding, germ sanitizers on standby, insured and safety guaranteed, a lawsuit waiting if this all falls through, someone else's fault. He was never this way, partly because he never had the money, partly because to guarantee anything is to stop movement all together. A pair of kids opened a lunchbox and pulled out snacks from the high-end, specialty grocery store. Organic and Fair Trade. No preservatives. Not beef jerky or nachos with cheese from a pump at the convenience store. Not suicide Slushys mixed with all the flavors available, blending all at once. Not him. Not them. Nothing has a lasting effect if everything that is solid lasts, never slips into the air. The kids these days.

* * *

Money—not an Unmoved Mover, not a Watchmaker—moves time and space; money marking its dollar-sign symbol on the surfaces of things—where and when things are due.

* * *

He didn't cheat on his final exams that spring; she showed him where to fill in the blanks, where to move words into their correct spots, answers clicking in place, like when he starts a run from one of the wings of the park or from a banked point of entry. Nor was he asleep that whole semester in physics class; he dreamt of doing what the teacher had to break down into formulas and problems to solve. He lived what was talked about and quantified. Actions as ignited substance; words as their shadows. This was before the mechanics of how the world operates revealed itself compartment by compartment like the doors of an Advent calendar.

* * *

Pros—real pros with real sponsors and real money and big parties where he has wondered if the letters of his tattoo would be present in the flesh, where she has feared the letters of his tattoo would be present in the flesh. All that matters to him is tapping into a web of those interlocking contacts: who can deliver, who can move, who can arrive, who can stay.

* * *

“How much will they pay you?”

“Shirts and shoes, yeah, and decks and wheels and all that.”

“But not actually money...a paycheck.”

“A little.”

“A little?”

“OK... It’s money for food, but I can’t keep it. But, look, if I had to buy all this stuff on my own it would come out of my pocket.”

“M’ijo, what’s in your pocket now?”

* * *

Where they are is where they are. It is natural. It is artificial. It is loose. It is tethered together. It is either/or. Nothing in between. No wiggle room. It is all they have until something else arrives equal and opposite.

* * *

Austin came up with the name Sergeant Poopenstein; Austin, who was offered a contract by a rep scouting them at one of the parks; Austin who turned it down because to sign his name on the dotted line would be selling out, wouldn’t be “the fucking real-deal shit anymore,” would end up making him someone’s “lil bitch.”

* * *

A family of five stopped in the crosswalk while the father pointed to the Italian villa–styled building on the corner of Pacific and Walnut. Amber slammed on the brakes less than a mile from the skate park. *Don’t be Peter Pan*, she sobbed to herself and waved to the family that realized they were holding her up.

* * *

Javy looked to his right at the empty part of the bench. The pain in his neck tightened along a one-lane road of muscles between his collarbone and the base of his skull. Skaters crisscrossed each other on the ground or in the air like skeins of paint flung across a canvas. Screams from the amusement park briefly overwhelmed the grinding and shredding sounds at the skate park. In the distance, a spectrum of colors exploded like a star unable to stop following its trajectory down the skeleton of the Ferris wheel.

Talks like radio

-D.S. MAOLALAI

hungovermorning
crisp
as a birdfeather
dropping from a tree
likealeaf
like
skipping
stones
this
hungovermorning
a lady walks along
pushing a baby
that
gabbles
talks
like
a radio
and dogsniffle
and grass bending
oh
thismorning
I smell the air
january
tossingacoin
skipping my heart
sun like sunlight
skipping my heart
no headache
cold air
everymorning
should be a morning
like this.

Picking Blackberries

—SEONAIID FRANCIS

We gathered brambles that day too,
stumbled by the sullen loch
gazed back at solemn seals,
the silent heron,
sea and sky indifferent -

in that melded grey
the berries glowed ripely,
jewel red and deepest indigo,
and we were filled with such desire -
such desire -

a late rose smouldered white against the briars;
crushed by the stillness
we picked until our plastic tubs
grew heavy with rich promise,
a purple wealth of brambles -

then took them home,
and let them rot.

The Last Supper

–YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB

“You did a wonderful job with the potato barley soup, Henny darling,” Mama said, “Just the right amount of everything, including the seasoning. Not too much salt or pepper.”

“Thanks, Mama. It’s your recipe. I just followed that,” Henny responded.

“It’s a recipe passed down from mother to mother, and you will pass it down to your children. It’s bigger than any one of us. And you followed it perfectly. And never brush off a compliment. If I taught you how to make potato barley soup, I taught you how to take a compliment,” Mama replied.

“Delicious, Henye,” Papa agreed, slurping with gusto.

Henny had been making her way in the kitchen on her own for quite some time. How long had it been? Ten years? Her mother would just oversee things, guiding here, suggesting there:

“Wait until the eggs are fully boiled and then cool them off in cold water so they will peel easier.”

“Don’t knead the biscuit dough too much or it won’t come out light and flaky.”

“Make sure the ratio of water to rice is two to one, and be sure to put in enough salt.”

Mama had all sorts of pointers to keep Henny on track in the kitchen. And some of her pointers were non-verbal. She’d shake her head if she thought there was too much flour in a measuring instrument. By placing her hand lightly on Henny’s, Mama instructed her on how to hold the knife and position the blade for the optimal result when chopping vegetables. Sometimes Mama would just say “Ehp” warningly and Henny would know what she had in mind. Her mother’s gestures and touch were as much a part of Henny’s inner life as her words.

Even if the kitchen wasn’t exactly a new arena for Henny, her independence in it *was* somewhat new. As she moved from the refrigerator to the stove to the counter to the table to serve her meals, Henny felt a surge of confidence. I really do have the hang of this, she thought. She

could assemble ingredients in a natural order and had learned to compose individual dishes keeping a fully balanced meal in mind, the parts and the whole in seamless balance.

Sure, Henny and Papa always enjoyed Mama's meals—complete with a protein, a vegetable, and a carbohydrate or starch—as a finished product. But now Henny could really visualize the preparation of such a meal herself. It was no longer something “magically assembled” and handed to her in the evening. Of course, Henny knew her mother worked long and hard to produce such meals for the family and was always careful to thank Mama. Both she and Papa were. But now Henny had the tools to replicate Mama's, or the generations of foremothers', traditions.

And perhaps in the future, she could make these recipes her own. Embellish them for the new era. Or embellish them so utterly they'd be transformed, reshaped into another recipe altogether. She would see. An array of possibilities spread out before her. Henny felt she had so much to look forward to. Henny's future shone before her, vivid and mysterious.

In the kitchen, Henny saw Mama in a totally different light. Or rather, Mama *was* different in the kitchen; it wasn't just Henny's way of seeing. She was sure of that. It wasn't simply a matter of Mama's confidence and expertise here. Mama was happier here in the kitchen. No, that wasn't exactly it, either. Mama seemed less anxious, less stressed in the kitchen. There was a lightness to her step and touch, a lightness to her body and skin. Even her brow was missing its usual furrows.

In the apartment and in the family grocery store, Mama was forever worried—about the rent, about store income, about the uncertainty of their very future. Would they be evicted from home and place of business? Mama and Papa didn't argue very often, although on the rare occasions when they did, it could get heated. Mostly, they expressed their concerns that were left unanswered, hovering in the air between them. Henny could see the worry reflected in her mother's knitted brow, in the heaviness in her father's step, the way he trudged across the floor, instead of lifting his feet. Papa liked to present himself as unconcerned, fatalistic even—what will be will be—but Henny knew better.

And Henny knew they both had sufficient reason to worry. Sure, the grocery store had regular customers—the loyal ones who bought their bread, milk, fruit, even packaged meats, and other essentials. But were they enough? And, even with their *vegeles* clattering behind them, did they buy enough? Henny wasn't sure. She would never say that to her parents, but she herself had doubts as to the long-term feasibility of the store.

Papa regularly declared that they were not competing with the nearby supermarket, that theirs was a specific clientele. He used much the same language about Congregation Haverim Ahuvim, the synagogue founded by his friend Arnold Kestenberg. What was it he'd said citing Mr. Kestenberg? Oh yes, that it wasn't competing with Yeshivat Sheloshah Devarim, the exclusive talmudical yeshivah nearby. Perhaps both men convinced themselves of that. And maybe that was true. But just as there was a yeshiva nearby, so too was there a supermarket nearby the store. And just as Haverim Ahuvim seemed small in the shadow of the yeshiva, so too did Rumshevitz's Family Grocery seem small near the supermarket.

When Papa was off the premises, Henny looked at the grocery store's books. She knew the "score." And it did feel like a score in which her family was perennially on the losing team. Henny didn't think her parents were "losers." Far from it. She admired their tenacity and dedication. She just felt they had been dealt a raw hand. Was that the expression? Or was it the wrong hand? Either one would work. Henny knew she mustn't think that way, but the numbers didn't lie.

There the numbers stood, stark reminders of the ground that trembled beneath them. As if they needed such reminders. No wonder Mama's brow seemed permanently knitted. At least until Henny saw them in the kitchen, when the knitting thread unspooled and Henny saw smooth, contented skin.

The reason for Henny's relatively late exposure to the ways of the kitchen was that she spent most of her childhood and young adulthood in her parents' grocery store. Henny felt thoroughly comfortable in all aspects of the business. She knew the inventory inside and out. She knew which

distributor to call when they were running low on anything from produce to canned goods to sweets for children and adults to household cleansers. She could run the register without any assistance, directing customers to aisles and ringing up sales in front of her without a single pause. All the while, Henny exuded a quiet cheer that welcomed folks in. Some patrons came by specifically because of Henny's presence. They regularly told both Henny and Papa so on numerous occasions. Henny blushed at the compliment and thanked them profusely, as Mama had, in fact, taught her.

"That's my girl," Papa would say.

"You must be so proud of her," a patron would say.

"I am. We all are," Papa invariably replied.

Henny was pleased that Papa was proud of her, that both of her parents were. But she didn't dwell on it. There was too much to be done in the store. And in Haverim Ahuvim, where Henny liked to help in the women's auxiliary events whenever possible. She especially wanted to represent the Rumshevitzes there since her parents were so busy with the store. Besides, it was important to be a part of the community, too. And the synagogue was a second home for her. And as helpful as she was in both business and communal spheres, she wasn't able to remove the furrow in Mama's brow or lighten Papa's step for good.

"Please have some whole wheat sesame bread, Papa," Henny said, offering the plate to her father.

"Delicious. Did you bake this, too?"

"I did, Papa," Henny answered.

"Well, it's out of this world, my dear," he said, spreading a generous helping of butter on the bread. "And no modesty, Henny. You've really outdone yourself."

Papa chewed with his mouth closed, but the pleasure she saw in the consumption, rather than the praise, of the meal pleased her. The domestic sounds of spoons clinking against china bowls and knives slicing bread chimed pleasantly in her ear. The things you notice even when you've spent so

many years with the same people, she thought. The things you notice when your time, uninterrupted, with them is approaching its end.

* * *

What Papa didn't say was that I'll do my husband and his belly proud, Henny thought. That is the sort of comment a father would make to a daughter soon to be a bride. But Papa couldn't bring himself to say it, even though Henny's wedding, upcoming the very next evening, was foremost on all of their minds. Still, Henny knew Papa was thinking it.

When Mrs. Silverstein, the matchmaker stopped by the store and first suggested Dov Ber "Velvl" Weissman for Henny, Papa was noncommittal, neutral.

"Mrs. Silverstein, thank you for coming by. Thank you for thinking of our Henye," Papa said effusively. And then, this question: "What can you tell us about his family?"

"Well, he's a fine yeshivah *bahur*, Mr. Rumshevits," she said, "He was at the top of his class in all of his yeshivahs, and he's the star pupil of the yeshivah in L." Henny was in one of the store aisles, arranging the boxes of pasta. She could hear the entire conversation. Henny noticed Mrs. Silverstein didn't respond to Papa's query about Velvl's family. Papa surely noticed, too.

"Mrs. Silverstein, that's all very well and good. But family is what's important to us. A family says everything about a boy or a girl," Papa persisted.

"What can I say, Mr. Rumshevits? He's had his troubles. Who hasn't? But he's a good boy. A better one you won't find. Give me a call if your daughter is interested. I think she'll like him. I have a sense of these things. This isn't my first *shidekh*," she said, winking at Papa.

Henny couldn't see the wink from where she was positioned in the store, but she heard the wink in Mrs. Silverstein's voice. She checked all of the pasta boxes. None of the dates on the boxes were past. Good. Mama hated to discard expired merchandise.

After Mrs. Silverstein left the store, Papa said, “Henny, I know you’re over there. I know you heard everything. So what do you think?”

Henny emerged from the shadows, her presence a confirmation of her father’s hunch. “Sure, Papa, I’ll give him a shot. I’ll go out with this Velvl.” If nothing else, she was curious. She didn’t know anything about him, but what did she have to lose?

When Velvl came to pick Henny up from their apartment a week later, Henny was waiting with her parents in their living room. Mama and Papa insisted on being there. Henny found it a bit awkward—the three of them waiting for her date to arrive, starkly assessing his assets and shortcomings—the ever-vaunted “first impression.”

“Why doesn’t Papa answer the door and chat with Velvl? And then I’ll come downstairs and get Mama from the kitchen? Or Mama and I will come downstairs together?” Henny suggested.

“Nonsense,” Rochelle had said, “We’ll all meet him at once. No need for theater. We are who we are. He should see that right away, and we should see who he is right away.”

Henny needn’t have been concerned at all. Dressed in a black suit, large black fedora, white shirt and charcoal gray necktie, Velvl shook Papa’s hand and nodded at Rochelle and then Henny. He introduced himself as “Velvl Weissman,” rather than “Dov Ber Weissman.”

“And this is my wife Rochelle, and this is our dear daughter, Henye,” Papa said.

“I’m pleased to meet all of you,” Velvl said.

Then, rather than stopping for some small talk, Velvl abruptly signaled to Henye, and the two left the house for their first date. Henny could tell her parents weren’t pleased by the abruptness of their departure. He certainly wasn’t trying to make a good impression, she could imagine Mama thinking (and saying to Papa after they left). Henny didn’t know whether she should be offended on their behalf or feel herself a partner in some unexpected rebellious flouting of convention. She had to walk quickly to keep pace with Velvl’s gait.

* * *

“Would you like some fried white fish, Mama?” Henye asked.

“Yes, please, Henye. It’s out of this world. Just the right amount of breadcrumbs and oil and not too long in the frying pan, either,” Mama answered. Henny was pleased. Mama really had approved the entire meal, or maybe she was particularly fulsome in her praise since Henny was about to be married.

Given that her wedding was tomorrow night, Henny couldn’t believe she spent all day creating such an elaborate, multi-coursed meal and was now eating it with her parents. She really ought to have been going through her last minute preparations, or confirmations to make sure that everything was on schedule and arranged according to plan.

But all of that was done. Her parents visited the wedding hall. The flowers, the band, and the food courses were all in order. Henny wrote the place cards herself in a hand she hoped was neat and festive. She added some flourishes on the cursive “L”s and “T”s. Henny’s wedding dress was hanging in her room. Just thinking of it made her smile. It had a lacy pattern over a silk bodice and sleeves and a simple skirt with a seed pearl border sufficiently above the train. Rochelle and Henny had selected it together. Could something go wrong? Sure, something always could. But Henny and her parents had really thought of everything.

As she reached for the plate of fried fish, Henny speared the smallest piece onto her plate. Her bowl of potato barley soup had been too large, and her slice of whole-wheat sesame bread had been too thick. She needed to fit into her wedding gown tomorrow! *At the rate I’m going, that’s not going to happen*, Henny thought. Sure, fish was protein, but this fish was fried and breaded. Did I have to cook it that way? No, but it’s Mama’s (or Bobe’s) recipe, and Mama wanted it done this way.

And Mame had wanted this supper to be special, as a family, just the three of them sharing a meal before Henny left them. There was a phrase on all of their minds about the supper and what to call it, but no one dared utter it. It hovered unsaid, *like so much in our household*, Henny thought, but still somehow audible between the clinks of the silverware against the china and the praise of Henny's cooking.

But it won't be our last, Henny thought. But it will be, she knew. At least as this configuration of three. *This Holy Trinity*, Henny thought, smiling.

"What are you smiling at?" Papa asked Henny.

"Me? I'm just happy," Henny said.

"Good. A bride-to-be should be happy on the night before her wedding," Papa seemed reassured.

Henny didn't think Velvl would make it a practice of having them dine as a married couple with her parents. She just had a feeling that would not be encouraged. Maybe he didn't trust her parents' level of kashrut. Maybe he would want to make sure that all was cooked to a certain level of rabbinic supervision? That their plates had been dipped properly in the *mikveh*? Maybe she could invite her parents to their house? Hmm. Henny wasn't even sure that would be permitted. And would her parents be comfortable? Her father wouldn't care; he'd just want to see his baby girl. Mama, on the other hand, might be more reluctant. She wouldn't be comfortable under Velvl's eyes. She'd see disapproval radiating out from them. Henny wouldn't be able to tell Mama otherwise. Nor would she want to.

* * *

Of course, Henny's premonitions weren't based on conjecture. Velvl was clear from the outset about the kind of home he intended to build.

“I want a life devoted to serving *ha-Kodesh Barukh Hu* through rigorous Torah study and strict observance of all of the *halakhot*. I want to learn and teach and I would ask my wife to tend a home for our family so that together we can raise God-fearing children,” and with that Velvl paused, testing the impact of his words. Speech really, since it all seemed so carefully rehearsed. When no reaction was forthcoming, he asked,

“Is that something you’re looking for, too?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Henny said quickly, if uncertainly. Was it? She really wasn’t sure. And Velvl never asked her to put into words what exactly she was looking for. He only asked if she was also looking for the same thing he was. How could she say no? Wouldn’t that seem rude or disrespectful?

Henny knew she wanted to raise her children in a deeply Jewish home, as she herself was raised. Didn’t she love going to services at Haverim Ahuvim all of those years? Didn’t she love volunteering there, helping with the preparation of the *Kiddushim* and the bake sales and all of the other Women’s Auxiliary sales? Still, somehow Henny sensed that Velvl wouldn’t want her to remain involved in Haverim Ahuvim after their marriage, just as he probably didn’t trust her parents’ level of kashrut. It was just something she could tell, even on their first date.

Still, Velvl was self-assured, so certain in his ways, and was so persuasive. He looked as if he’d brook no dissent. Not that Henny ever offered any. With his piercing hazel eyes, his well-trimmed beard, his broad shoulders, well-proportioned body, his large hands—and Henny could have gone on—he was so very handsome. Henny couldn’t resist his charisma, his magnetism, despite her twinges of misgivings. With just a few tweaks, Velvl could have been looking out at Henny from the pages of the movie fan magazines. Only, there he was sitting across from her at a wrought iron table along the promenade by the river.

* * *

“And last but not least ...” Henny said as she brought out a lemon poppy seed cake with drizzled frosting. Her parents applauded and exclaimed “Wow” and “Bravo!” as Henny cut them each a generous slice. And here too each of them was no less effusive in their praise.

“Not too sweet,” Mama pronounced with gusto.

“It’s just right, Papa agreed, “The poppy seeds remind me of Mama’s challah on Shabat.” Henny thought they were going to make a reference to Goldilocks (“our own “Goldie”), but they didn’t. Neither did she.

“Thank you so much,” Henny said. And she was grateful for all they had given her, for allowing her to shine. How would she ever leave this circle of adoration? Could she survive outside it? “For everything,” she added, bending down to kiss each of them on the cheek. They stopped chewing, smiled, and extended their face sideways, cheeks upturned.

There would be no more picture shows, Henny thought suddenly. No more Mae, Hedda, Barbara, Jennifer, Lauren, Joan, Bette, Rita, Katherine, Judy H., Judy G., Claudette, Ginger, Lana. No more Clark, Gary, Spencer, Buster, Charlie, Humphrey, John G., Edgar G., Groucho, Sid, Fred, Lesley. No more viewing their magnified faces on the big screen, as the backdrop to her small life, or on the pages of the small zines, almost brown before they were purchased from the pharmacy, in their homes—domestically situated, sure, but still glamorously posed. No more slipping off to the Sunday matinee or weekday evening screening with her parents or her Uncle Bernie and Aunt Malkah or Braynah Ariel, a girlfriend from Haverim Ahuvim. No more inhaling the intoxicating scent of unkosher popcorn upon initial entry into the theater, no more trying to tune out its crunch throughout the movie. No more slipping into unfrayed red velvet seats as the curtain opened onto the newsreels, no more deciding to choose the primacy of a center seat versus the easy access and escapability of an aisle seat. No more moviegoers whispering “Shhh” to Henny when she explained

something to Mama the way Mama sometimes did when girls were whispering and giggling during services at Haverim Ahuvim. No more.

No more music. No more Sophie Tucker, Andrews Sisters, Barry Sisters, Pennywhistlers, Billie Holliday, Ella Fitzgerald. No more Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Jellyroll Morton, Artie Shore, Eddie Fisher, Eddie Cantor, George or Ira Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Paul Robeson. No more gathering near the standing polished radio, crowned by a doily and a Christmas cactus, to hear the songs of the day or to listen to the shows asking about those songs. No more music from the radio at all. No more. Velvl had said as much on a subsequent date at a kosher restaurant. Had it been their third or fourth date?

“I don’t want my wife and children to watch movies or listen to impure music. That would contaminate our household and divert us from the path of holiness,” he announced, over the roast chicken. Henny only nodded. Of course he wouldn’t.

It was all over, Henny realized. The arena of grocery store, home, Haverim Ahuvim, of movie and song—and the way all of them had been so intertwined—would all be behind her tomorrow night.

Suddenly, Henny felt herself deluged by questions, by unpreparedness. How would she manage? Why was she defying her parents when she feared they were right? How could she both admire Velvl’s commitment yet also see love the pictures and the popular tunes? Was she only accepting her first proposal because she feared there wouldn’t be another if she declined this one? Did she fear remaining unmarried and working in her parents’ store until the end of her days? How would the store go on without her? Her father couldn’t afford an assistant. How would her parents manage without her? Would her parents stay together without Henny as discreet peacemaker, as glue? Was there still time to slip out of her betrothal? It wasn’t too late, was it?

My father, my mother, what have I done?

Deep breaths. *Inhale, exhale*, Henny told herself, her hand reaching for the back of a chair to steady herself. She couldn't possibly answer those questions tonight. She wouldn't even try to. Surely, these were the proverbial pre-wedding jitters that so many brides experienced. And Mama and Papa certainly weren't going to raise any of their own concerns. Instead, they raised their glasses in toast.

"To our Henye," Mama said proudly, "To our daughter, with thanks for a delicious meal."

"To our Henye, may she prosper in happiness!" Papa echoed. None of them made mention of Velvl. It was as if his presence could not be announced or even acknowledged tonight. Still, she'd seen their worried sidelong glances throughout this meal. Was their daughter making a mistake? How well did she know him? Had they ever really found out anything about his family? And such a fun-loving, high-spirited young woman ... with such a serious, stern young man! *A bit of a killjoy, is what he really is, if you ask me*, Henny overheard Mama saying over the phone to Aunt Malkah. But she didn't ask Mama or Papa; she'd gone and done this. Was doing it. Would be doing it tomorrow night.

Henny smiled and blew kisses at her parents. There would be time for "Le-hayim"s for the bride and groom at the wedding and the *sheva berakhot* in the week that followed. Tonight was in honor of their grocery store that sustained them. Tonight was for the synagogue for "everyday people" that was her spiritual center. Tonight was for her parents and herself and the love between them, a love that could never be dimmed. Tonight was for the music that was etched into her mind, that made her feet dance.

Henny turned on the radio. There was a waltz. She watched as Papa took Mama's hand in dance, watched as they danced in the living room together. Henny smiled and shivered as a chill overtook her. Henny put on her sweater that was draped over one of the kitchen chairs and got to work clearing the table and washing the dishes.

After those tasks were completed, Henny went in to the dining room to wash the plastic on the white tablecloth. There were a few stray lemon poppy seed cake crumbs and even some poppy seeds without cake scattered on the table. It wouldn't take Henny long to have the table completely clean. Henny decided she'd leave the festive white tablecloth on the table tonight. She would remove, fold, and put away the tablecloth in the dining room breakfront tomorrow morning.

When Henny looked up from the dining room table into the living room, her parents were gone.

Altitudes Higher Than You

–DANIEL MOORE

Depending on your brain's addiction to REM
and the lies you believe about sleep deprivation

being the reason you like kissing cats
with the front of your car on Sunday mornings

as the world prepares to worship their maker,
an important question could possibly arise

unlike the cat last Sunday or your bloodshot conscience
which barely made it home from a date with

a feline rescue employee. Has the word accountable
given up on you like Abraham on a mountain

with a knife in his hand ready and willing
to murder his son as a sign of being well rested?

Depending on your brain's addiction to REM
and the hours spent dreaming old testament style

it may simply come down to this stop dreaming
of driving with mice in your teeth

on the way to a picnic with children at
altitudes higher than you.

Laguna de Patos

—RICHARD GONZALEZ

My mother, Lourdes, had an almost obsessive-compulsive demeanor. Most times, she was blasé about my friends and acquaintances. Nevertheless, when it came to wandering around the neighborhood, “*Vagando con muchacos locos*” she called it, she often freaked, constantly restructuring my activities away from what she considered undesirable behavior. My dad could never understand these odd anxiety attacks.

“They’re boys after all,” He would reply emphatically to her.

“Do you want them to grow up as Ladies of the Night?”

Acceptable recreation was serving as an altar boy at the then traditional Latin Mass and Rosaries for Fr. Van derHaat, her idol. She always thought the presence of a Dutch priest that came from so far away especially blessed St. Patrick’s cathedral. I always sensed otherwise that he was plainly on a “mission from God” being in this hot, dusty provincial town. Otherwise, he was o.k. and never whacked me, but the rest of the gang was always getting reprimands for laziness. Fr. Van derHaat constantly roped my male cousins and neighborhood friends into being altar boys. The “cool” guys in the ‘hood called us “Alter-toys” and “fags”. What a drag. I usually did my bit to please Lourdes by being chummy with José Carbajal or Oscar, his younger brother who was my age: two premier, idyllic neighborhood kids. Lourdes always complimented them on their good manners, good haircuts, and fine clothes that she said showed high upbringing.

I sucked at Latin, but Oscar was worse—he never memorized anything. Van derHaat required us to memorize a huge list of Latin responses parroted out at the appropriate time. The Latin was not the hard part, but remembering when to recite the proper response was tough because we often day-dreamed or had the giggles and would make up words like “*Abracadabra con tu novios*”, instead of “*Obra por nobis*” or *Ad Tu MaMa*, instead of “*Ad deum qui laetificat...*” and “*Picate la panza*” instead of “*Pater Nostrum.*” Even worse was “*Da me nos los dominoes*” for “*Dominus*

vobiscum.” Fr. Van derHaat would look at us strangely, assuming we mumbled the Latin because we were ignorant or had poor enunciation, but never commented further. His favorite server was one of my older cousins, Sonny, who always gave the precise response in beautiful, understandable Latin elocution and constantly at the correct time without screw-ups. He was destined for a bright future. However, even then, I felt religion or being a priest was not his ultimate calling. Sometimes when Van derHaat asked us to prepare the wine flasks for Communion, we took forbidden swallows--- what nasty, sweet offal; even now, I get serotonin-induced headaches from wine. Moreover, the Masses were too frigging long!

One hot Sunday in July, Oscar and I imbibed a little too much and Oscar upchucked even before the “I believe, i.e., Apostles Creed” and he was rushed to L’Hospitel Hotel Dieu, across the street, by one of the nuns: they thought he had heat exhaustion. I had to do all the service by myself almost puking as well. I laughed my ass off after he came home. Rosaries on Friday were worse, all the intense incense made my sinuses act up and I had headaches for the weekend.

Hanging out with many of my crazier cousins and objectionable neighborhood buds was not one of Lourdes’ top lists of acceptable recreations. A wild, hyperkinetic, but totally harmless “gang”, we wandered all over town: swimming in Smelter town holding pools, Ascarate lake, Memorial Park, and sneaking into the snooty Upper Valley country club pool after-hours, when the security guard, Miguel, was generally asleep from too many beers. When my neighborhood bud, Piti Vasquez, was able to “borrow” his dad’s cherry-red ’50 Mercury soft-top, unknown to Lourdes of course, we often drove to Elephant Butte and once as far as Balmorhea to swim in forbidden places like the underwater caves.

We were excellent swimmers, or so we thought. Carlos Cuarón, the lifeguard, and my patient cousin, Irene, a P.E. coach at the Cathedral Community Center (“the CC”), trained us all. We were invincible. Whenever we decided to do night swims or trips to prohibited places, each one of us would tell the other’s parents that we were “spending the weekend ” with a cousin. William Hill,

another shrimp tag-along and I would throw tantrums if we heard of their plans and could not go too, threatening to tell my mother and Uncle Art, a police officer. Fearing dire consequences, the gang usually relented. Although, my tagging often put a crimp in their plans, I was pleased to win out. Habitually, this plan involved picking up girls. A common favorite expression, especially from J-D when luck was not on his side was “*oh qué mala suerte.*” I didn’t know what that meant, but I really liked it and used it myself like a big shot.

Piti was the only 16- year old with a learner’s permit; his dad was the mayor’s brother and was often gone on business trips so the keys were “readily” available. Piti’s mom was a real dish (my cousin J-D’s tag)--a clothes buyer for the Popular Dry Goods and she was away from home a lot. My 14-year old cousin J-D Guieu, Jean-Daniel or “Frenchie” was my ultimate role model. Both Piti and J-D were “*güeros*” or blondies as Lourdes and my aunt Jovita called them. They could do no wrong.

My aunt Jovita was a unique person of the times: a feminist professional who took no shit from anyone. Her sister, Monique, was J-D’s mother. Both sisters were born in San Francisco, California and their father Joaquin LaFarga was a cigar roller (*torcedor*) of premium Cuban cigars for a large company there, although he called himself a *tabaquero*, a more ritzy title. The girls lost their mother to TB in San Francisco when they were both pre-teens and the old man decided to move to the Southwest, God knows why, where he couldn’t get a job. Essentially, they had to raise themselves and cater to the old man too, a real bastard. After the old man died, Jovita married Lourdes’ youngest brother, Uncle Art, the cop who eventually worked his way up the ranks to Captain and finally cracked the Gringo Glass Ceiling (GGC). At the time, besides law enforcement and the fire department, there were many other GGCs: women lawyers and college academics that had low esteem, minimum wage paying jobs, and little clout. Monique married Louie Guieu and produced J-D, the glorious one. Monique was a compulsive gambler and often she, Louie, Uncle Art, and other cops would stay up all night long on weekends playing poker and drinking. Her

favorite drink was Dubonnet on the rocks with a twist of lime. Often, all of them would drive to Las Vegas to play blackjack. Monique always came back flush. The others always lost. Aunt Jovita was generally annoyed, but tolerant of her sister and husband. Monique fervently believed in the Absolute Truth forecasted by her Ouija board.

Often ragging on Lourdes' antiquated, conservative Edwardian mores, Jovita was otherwise devoted to her. She often helped the family financially during the Depression of the '30s. Her three sons were Lourdes' paragons of virtue and character (Sonny, "the jewel") and she regularly nagged me to follow their mannerisms. Gag me with a spoon; this was just like another Oscar and José recap.

Contrary to that grand scheme, I generally emulated the "gang's" lowbrow behavior patterns, essentially trying to perfect beautiful armpit farts, Coke burps, and other scatological responses. At the CC showers, we slapped each other with towels, sang "Your Cheating Heart" and other crappy cowboy songs, and laughed at attempts to decipher what each had eaten for dinner the night before by the peculiar odor and explicit view of each of our bowel movements. Bosco chocolate floats prepared by my aunt, 'Lupe, cousin Tury's mom, the only aunt that tolerated our lowbrow behavior, initiated many of these eruptions.

Mid-August one day when Lourdes felt secure that I was at the CC, William Hill, the other shrimp of the bunch, my age, squealed. He was angry because the gang never accepted him: too chicken, too cheap. He never bought RC's or Grape Sodas. But he was always around when aunt 'Lupe cooked burritos for us after CC swims, or whenever we went to Big Burger in South El Paso or Fred Hervey's Oasis for fried onions; what Piti and Frenchie requested from the good-looking waitresses.

After an episode when Frenchie and Piti banned him from our gang, Hill told Lourdes of one of our little "excursions", once to the Juarez Country Club with Piti and Frenchie to show the uptight, rich hotties (Frenchie's sobriquet) our swimming prowess and muscles. I, of course, had the

cutest, cherubic face, but no muscles, and if I hadn't grown up ugly after puberty could well have become a babe-magnet. In distinct contrast, Piti and Frenchie were ultimate babe magnets: both *güeros* fair skinned and tall, even then with prominent 6-pack abdominal muscles. Piti at 16 was close to 6 feet tall and Frenchie at 14 was around 5'10" already, and the girls gravitated to them, not knowing they were poor as church mice. Nevertheless, Hill shouldn't have squealed.

Lourdes had this extreme anxiety about anything dealing with Juarez and Mexico, in general. This was un-characteristic for the times. In the '50-'60s, many went regularly from the surrounding border towns to Juarez to shop for cheap meat, fresh vegetables, gasoline, and eat at various high quality restaurants, especially the *Nueva Poblana* situated on the 16th *Septiembre* street.

Lourdes would have nothing to do with such practices or with anything Mexican. She was an American to the core; more likely, a jingoist, if not, as my aunt Jovita classified her, tongue-in-cheek: a downright racist.

In my infantile mind, I could never understand this anxiety quirk in Lourdes. For me, Juarez (WaZoo, the gang's secret code) was an adventure. Unknown to her, some Saturdays, my dad and I would often go over, get gas (25cents/gal), and buy some mangoes that we ate before crossing back. Lourdes hated mangoes, the juice dripped all over one's mouth and what did one do then with the pit?

Often, the gang of eight crossed the Santa Fe walking bridge to WaZoo for 10cents (of course Hill never had the necessary change!). In the summers, after a long morning at the CC, we would go over, play pool at the various halls near the bridge for 5-10cents/rack, drink cheap Cokes, and hang around the *Mercado Central*. On a few occasions, the gang wandered over to O'Brien's bordello to catch a glimpse of the ladies of the night there; the ladies often shocking me with delight at a glimpse of a boob or two. The utter prurience and unobtainable was a great attraction to me as a little greenhorn. On the way back through the bridge, our "American Citizen" declaration would be all one needed to return to the security of the U.S. Therefore, to my young brain, the fluidity of the two

worlds was a convenient and normal behavior and a necessary part of growing up in a border town. This neat, sheltered, porous world could have continued to perpetuity until Hill ratted on us and squashed our cool times.

Forever grounded from hanging out with the gang, Lourdes kept a close eye on me. The gang (essentially my cousins and a few maverick friends like the wild Fowler twins) blamed me for their similar scrutiny by their parents. After all, Hill the other squirt was my friend. In reality, he had been friends with my across-the-street genius neighbor, Manny, our family doctor's son, who got me through high school SATs. Hill was essentially Manny's constant free loader and ersatz companion. Hill was always at Manny's house scrounging for food (as I was) and playing with the doctor's extensive gun collection (as I wanted to).

My life's adventures became relegated to hanging with my brainiac friend and this obnoxious weasel. I became introspective and morose, read too many comics, collected baseball cards (many that were later trashed by Lourdes), and dreamt of running away to California where my other "bitchin" cousins lived. My cousin, Irene, had to take me to the CC to swim and bring me back home. I could not understand Lourdes' restraint and my relationship with her, which had been sweet and tender as the baby of the family, was now bitter and melancholy.

One day close to my fourteenth birthday, she had a "sit down" with me after an additional degeneration with the gang following a night swim at the Smelter town quarry, sneaking out through a window in the back porch when my dad was working at Ft Bliss on the night shift.

Lourdes related to me that she and Mirabelle, both 12 years old, were constant companions growing up in Villa Ahumada in 1912 where Lourdes' father had a ranch. Close by was the *Laguna de Patos*. Never speaking about it before, she described this lake with unusual pleasure (for her) and twinkle in her eyes as the most beautiful, clear pool she has ever seen. Besides the myriad mallards of every color that the lake was known for, which supplied food for local ranchers and *campesinos* during desperate times, she recalled that from the base there were a million bubbling jets and a small

stream of warm water that gushed into the pool. She remembered from her pre-adolescent years that, more beautiful than the ducks, the lake was replete with small fish exhibiting glittering blue backs bursting from the twilight sun that delighted her and Mirabelle. Despite harsh warnings from her father, many evenings in the summer to get relief from the heat, she and Mirabelle would disrobe and wander alone to soak in the lake.

Deaf ears heard her father's warnings and the girls usually ignored his paternal concerns.

"The dangers are not from the peaceful, recluse of the waters," Her father explained,

"But from the malcontents that are all over the site due to the current economic and political crises we are having,"

"They are often attracted to the lake as are you and Mirabelle."

For days and weeks into the late September, Lourdes never heard from Mirabelle. A hundred hectares or more separated the two ranches so she thought that it was difficult for Mirabelle to get a horse carriage ride over to Lourdes' place. In addition, the sour political problems and concern for the safety of his eldest son in military school agitated Lourdes' father. She did not pursue her spoiled-child requests to visit Mirabelle anymore. Late one evening she heard hushed voices and a sob or two from the maids, but went back to bed. In the morning, Lourdes' father mentioned that the family was moving to El Paso del Norte where his brother now lived and she should get her things in order.

"But what of the horses, my dogs, the ranch, --and what about my companion, Mirabelle?"

She pleaded.

"You will have to forget about all these and get new acquaintances where we are going," Her father remarked.

Time passed after the Revolution, her father's premature death soon after they reached the border, and the subsequent loss of the family fortune. Much later in the '20s and '30s, Lourdes

finally found out the truth about her friend from my *abuelita*, Crescenciana, a normally reticent, recalcitrant person following a heated dispute between the two that re-awakened old emotional scars.

“The warnings by *tu papá y otros de la Laguna de Patos* went unheeded by Mirabelle because she was a *malcriada*,” *Abuelita* burst out, pedantically.

In reality, kept secret all these years from Lourdes, were the facts that early one morning after a futile night of searching, Mirabelle’s docile, innocent body was found by her father, apparently mutilated with her throat cut and a deep “V” marked on both of her immature breasts. This discovery demoralized all the local ranchers and eventually had deep consequences in their subsequent lives.

Following this eye opening chat with Lourdes, which was rare and hard for her to express and apparently an attempt by her for me to heed the warnings of elders, we received the news about my favorite cousin J-D from my aunt Jovita. After an extensive search, Uncle Art found his body in the Smelter town quarry. Apparently, J-D, swimming alone plunged into a dark, shallow area while night swimming and his neck was broken.

“*Oh qué mala suerte.*”

In Korea Orange is The New Black

–DAN BRANCH

I was admiring the beauty of her heart-shaped face,
 the graceful way she settled her willow limbs
 when she started, in the happy tones she might use
 to describe her grandmother's kimchi, a confession.

No one encouraged her to spill or spew. Just a
 "Tell us a little about yourself" uncorked Sorri:

*I fell out of love with my husband after he gained
 20 kilos on American comfort food and video games.*

Two years ago I birthed a son he does not want.

*I married for love and to silence my mother's
 warning about my sell-by-date. I was 30, too old*

for Korean men. My mom had to accept

the transplanted American who proposed

in bad Korean. The man does have Korean

parents, an American passport and a job

in Seoul. I want a sister for my son

but it must be through adoption.

Tonight I will sleep with the child

not his father, not that fat man

with no friends or accomplishments

beyond high scores for the American

video games that he plays while I drink

beer and watch an American woman's

prison show on Netflix.

Sorri sat down without seeking
absolution. Had her name
doomed the marriage?

What price did the immigrant
husband pay to start every spousal
conversation with an apology?

Wishes

–SUSAN POMERANTZ

She believed in Tang. She believed in Space Food Sticks. She believed that she could jump high enough in her PF Flyers to touch the stars. She spent all her allowance on Silly Putty, but all of five minutes pressing it onto the Sunday comics, magically transferring Archie and Jughead onto those flesh colored blobs, stretching them all out of proportion. She had at her fingertips everything the Swinging Sixties and men on the moon could offer.

“Goddamn it, Effie,” her daddy smoldered as the Silly Putty she’d left under the table gummed up the beater-bar brush on the Electrolux. Harold Brown had all he could do to manage his auto body shop without all the extra household chores this past year or so. Since Marguerite left. Just up and left. “How many times have I told you to put this crap back in the egg?” He was sitting cross-legged on the kitchen floor using his penknife to dig it out of the bristles.

Then he said something about wasting her money on this crap.

Then he said, softening, “Bring that newspaper over here.”

Effie crouched down beside him holding the paper to catch the bits of putty, her brown eyes looking sideways into his face to see if the danger had passed.

“That’s my good girl.” It had. She relaxed into the palm of his large, calloused hand as he tousled her hair. He pulled her finger away from her nose. “Don’t pick your nose, Eff. Use a kleenex...Why don’cha go on outside now and play with the kids.”

Effie would have if the kids would have let her. They used to let her play once in a while, weird as she was, but it all changed after she wet her pants during rainy-day indoor recess in 5M. Mrs. Cote had swept her away to the nurse, but not before other kids saw the dark spot and puddle. Now she was the kid who sometimes wore the same thing to school two days in a row, had rats’-nest hair most days, plain dinner rolls and little red boxes of raisins in her lunch box, hummed quietly to herself, read her books on the curb at recess, *and* peed her pants in fifth grade.

At his request, off she scampered, quietly, like on mouse legs, grabbing her hardcover copy of *Heidi* and slipping it under her shirt, believing she was hiding it. She settled herself into the crotch on the lowest branch of the ancient tree, tempting pine pitch into her wispy hair, risking her daddy's cursing when he tried to wash it out. She wore her hair close-cropped—*pixie style* Auntie had called it the first time she cut out the tangled mess.

Effie slipped the crisp bookmark into the library card pocket and, eyes wide, transported herself this time to the Swiss Alps. She was up to the part where Heidi is brought back to Frankfort to live with Clara, and she is about to learn to read. "*How awful,*" thought Effie, "*to be eight years old and not be able to read.*" In her romantic mind, Effie, born Euphemia Ellis Brown just ten years earlier herself, imagined she had the life of Heidi. She'd have a friend named Peter and romp in the hills all day away from the rest of the world. Effie blinked back tears and swallowed a growing lump in her throat when she thought that she already was part orphan anyway. In a way.

She was always swallowing lumps in her throat, and saying things out loud like "how awful," and for these many reasons the neighborhood kids did not play with her much. Kimmy-the-big-fat-bully called her "Effing Effie" at least once a day before Dawn punched her in the mouth. Kimmy's loud-mouthed mother (that's what Auntie Bea called her) came running across the street, yelling and screaming, looking for Dawn to teach her a thing or two. Dawn stood like a tree, her hands on her hips, glaring at Kimmy and her mother, until Harold finally came running out of the house and stepped between the two of them. Dawn whispered to her father what Kimmy had been saying; he then said something in low tones to Kimmy's mother. All four of them had their hands on their hips and stared at each other for a minute longer. Then they stared at the ground for a minute, then dropped their arms in unison as they peeled away to walk back to their own sides of the street. Dawn grabbed Effie by the wrist of the hand of the finger that was nervously picking her nose and dragged her into the house.

“You’ve got to act your age, Eff!” hissed Dawn into Effie’s ear. Effie nodded and got that glassy, far-away look on her face. Dawn’s eyes teared up. Of all of them, Effie seemed to be taking it hardest.

Dawn was fifteen and the oldest by far of the six of them. She was the best big sister, but she wasn’t around much. She was probably the best big sister *because* she wasn’t around much ever since Mama went away.

Effie overheard Auntie and her daddy one night as she lay awake on the big quilt beside a soundly-sleeping Kelly, both girls in front of the screen door, hoping to catch the faintest of breezes on this stillest of deep summer nights. “You can’t expect Dawn to raise the kids, Harold. She’s gotta live her own life.” Auntie started out sharply, but then she put her hand on her big brother’s shoulder which, Effie saw, had slumped a little. Effie was good at fake sleeping. Her daddy looked particularly small and far away through her squinting eye and through the swirl of Marlboro smoke that trailed like a slow-coiling snake around their heads.

“I know, Beatrice.” The timer went off and Harold scraped back his chair, stubbed out his cigarette, and went down to the basement to get the load from the dryer. Effie’s heart beat to the rhythm of the footfall on the cobwebby treads of the cellar stairs as he made his way back up carrying the second basket of laundry for the night. He looked like a giant with his boot at eye-level. He plopped the basket of towels and work clothes and kids’ socks on the table ignoring Bea who was scolding him for mixing the laundry.

“Towels last longer if you wash ‘em separate.” How did that make any sense?

Effie took everything Auntie Bea said as gospel, though, so she put that piece of information away to think about later.

“I’m headin’ back to the house, Harold. Drop them by in the morning on your way to the garage and I’ll get ‘em dressed and fed before I go to work. Ma will watch ‘em and pick up Dawn to

get her to work by three.” Bea took her keys from the ledge by the front door. Dawn was coming in from her shift at the Athens House.

“Who dropped you off?” asked Auntie, waving out the door at whoever it was, brushing her long hair behind one ear, always expecting Prince Charming, suddenly self-conscious about the hints of gray.

“Marty tonight,” said Dawn, cheerily, as she leaned over to give Auntie Bea a kiss. Auntie stuck out her cheek to receive the kiss and pulled away quickly. Bea took the hairnet off Dawn’s head as a return gesture of affection.

“What if you got stopped by the police or wound up in an accident!” Auntie Bea fussed and sputtered. “Take that thing off your head *before* you leave the restaurant, Dawn!”

Dawn gave her aunt an extra hug and headed to the kitchen sink to see if anything needed cleaning up. “I’m going for the Ruth Buzzi look, Auntie! Didn’t I tell you?! And, don’t tell anybody, but my underwear has holes in it, too. If they ask me in the emergency room if I’m related to you, I’m going to say yes and that *you* wear holey underwear, too.”

They all laughed easily, and, unable to fake sleep any longer, Effie flew up from the quilt and threw herself into Dawn’s arms.

“You’re almost as big as your sister, Effie,” Harold said. It was more an observation than a scolding. In the time it took him to say this, Kelly was up, too. Hal, Jr. was next, padding down the hall, wiping sleep from his face, holding his crotch in that unselfconscious way of the four-year-old. Five of his brood were sitting all over the overstuffed chair, the little ones climbing over Dawn like kittens. Effie, wedged in between Dawn and the tattered arm of the chair, had scooped Baby Mary from the playpen in the corner onto her lap.

“We can’t call you Baby Mary anymore, Merz. Maybe you’ll just be Merz.” Dawn brushed the cranky toddler’s sweaty bangs from her furrowed forehead. She didn’t scold Mary this time for having her thumb stuck up into her face.

“Keep it down a little bit so we don’t wake up John-John. You kids go back to bed, now.”

Harold lit another Marlboro, waved to Bea’s retreating taillights as she turned from the driveway. He set the ashtray down distractedly. It made a heavy, hollow sort of sound on the stained Formica. He watched his sister’s red Ford Mustang until all he could see out the window was his own face reflecting back in. “*Not everybody gets to leave...Where the hell d’ya go, Maggie?*” He muttered things like this some time.

Dawn moved the lamp and the picture frame out of the reach of Hal’s bony, restless elbow. Effie stared through the photograph. There was a spot of something sticky, maybe from a peanut butter kiss, splotched prophetically over her mother’s smiling face.

“Daddy, when’s Mama coming back?” Effie asked, more for form’s sake at this point.

He leaned over to pick her up and carry her back to bed. Dawn carried two little ones.

Her daddy kissed the top of her head when he settled her onto the top bunk. With only a touch of surprise, he asked, “Why you wearin’ your sneakers to bed, Effie?” He asked more for form’s sake at this point.

In the Family

–SALLY ZAKARIYA

She told me she was glad
my father didn't live to see it
the broad dark scar across her chest
where her left breast had been
where radiation said *Remember me.*

I don't think they used chemo then
or if they did, they didn't tell her.
Of course, they didn't tell her much.
We'll do a little test, they said
and when she woke the breast
was gone.

We talk more freely, share our
stories now, but not so in her time.
She only told me after it was done –
not out of shame, I think
but from some dated modesty.
It's in the family, she said
no need to dwell.

Still, something dwelled inside
burrowing into her being
biding its time, lurking,

it turned out, in her lung.

And then there was the stroke,
the fateful *coup de grace*.

I rehearse her history each year
when I get my mammogram –
a survivor, yes, at least so far.

New Moon

—CLAIRE IBARRA

Gulf of Mexico sunsets were guaranteed to be magical, so tourists congregated every evening on Crescent Beach. Couples walked hand in hand with their cameras ready to capture the fleeting into something everlasting. Darlene had read in a tourist brochure about how the nearly pure quartz crystal sand originated in the Appalachian Mountains eons ago and was carried by rivers to the Gulf. Now she took her sandals off and the white, fluffy powder squished between her toes.

Darlene drifted away from Leonard while he tinkered with the camera. No romantic handholding for them. She didn't really believe a long weekend getaway to Siesta Key would fix her marriage, but she was willing to suspend her judgments and disappointments for three days and pretend she was happy.

"Damn it. You didn't charge the battery," Leonard hollered.

She wandered further and observed two men as they set up folding chairs near the shore, facing the sea and the commencing sunset. They had brought a small cooler and, once settled in their chairs, pulled out two bottles of Heineken. The men were too relaxed to be tourists. Darlene enjoyed the ease in which they sat together, sipping their beers. Deep shades of red and orange slowly swept across the sky.

After the sunset on the beach, Darlene and Leonard found themselves at a charming seafood shack, with tables nestled together on a wood deck lit with Christmas lights in April.

Darlene watched as Leonard scanned the wine list.

"I'm tired of ordering the cheapest bottle. Let's splurge tonight." Leonard tapped the plastic menu with his index finger.

"What are we celebrating?" Darlene asked.

"I'd say us, but I know how cynical you are. You'd just roll your eyes and smirk." Leonard spoke at the menu, not meeting Darlene's look.

Darlene thought before answering and decided the comment didn't warrant a response. The bad economy had added stress to their relationship. Ever since Leonard lost his job at the architectural firm, he tended to accuse her of everything from cynicism to delusions. Three weeks ago, he even went as far as to accuse her of having an affair with one of her colleagues. She knew his tactic was to put her on the defense because he couldn't find work. Still, the accusation caused a nasty argument, and they didn't speak for days.

Darlene could admit to being delusional, otherwise why was she there, in a cozy romantic restaurant on the beach, contemplating lobster and expensive wine. They were surviving on Darlene's salary, which as an English teacher at the community college wasn't much.

When the waiter came, Leonard ordered in a haughty tone. "We would like a bottle of the Pascale Jolivet." The expensive wine had brought out his pompous manners, which she hadn't seen as of late. She chuckled to herself, imagining Leonard using that tone at Pizza Hut—the last place where they had eaten out.

They splurged and ordered lobster, and when the waiter left the table, Leonard asked, "What's so funny?"

"Nothing. I just remembered something that happened at work," Darlene lied. She knew he wouldn't ask her about it.

Leonard didn't. Instead, he adjusted his reading glasses and began his slow and deliberate way of reading through the entire menu, even after ordering as if he might change his mind.

While Leonard sat engrossed in the tome, Darlene observed two couples being seated near their table.

Darlene noticed that one of the couples looked to be in their late twenties, while the other couple was slightly older. The young man was paunchy with a thick neck. He resembled the older woman; they had the same shaped nose, blue eyes, and sandy blonde hair. So Darlene guessed they were siblings out to dinner with their respective partners.

Darlene pressed attention to the young woman. Darlene noticed that she was pretty with long, curly dark hair and doleful eyes.

Gina had followed her sister-in-law to the table. Jack and Mike moped behind, visibly annoyed that they were missing the end of the game, which had their full attention at the bar. Gina was relieved to be finally seated outside. The TV in the bar had given her a headache. She despised TVs in restaurants. They were tacky and represented a true decline of society.

Now she would have to endure the next hour listening to Lori brag about her kids in a condescending way, knowing that Gina refused to have children. Mike was pressuring her, but the idea of taking care of little boys, more little Mikes, filled her with despair.

The waiter came to the table. Mike and Jack both ordered another Budweiser, and since Lori was pregnant, she ordered cranberry juice.

“I’d like a glass of the Sauvignon Blanc,” Gina told the waiter.

“Isn’t Gina sophisticated? When we first met she drank Bud, like me. Now she’s too good for beer,” Mike said. It wasn’t that he never saw her drink wine. Gina figured he was in an especially brutish mood tonight. Following her brother’s lead, Lori gave Gina a cold look.

Gina and Mike had met at a college frat party, so of course she drank beer. In those days Mike was sweet and romantic, and he could make her laugh. Then, in her third year of college, Gina’s parents died in a car accident. Mike was there for her and made sure she didn’t drop out of school. He had made her feel secure. The week of her graduation, they eloped to Atlantic City.

But the last few years felt like an entire lifetime. The changes and distance between them grew exponentially. Mike was content living four blocks from his sister’s house in Sarasota, while Gina dreamed of going to Europe. She set aside money with every paycheck and figured she’d make it to Paris in a few years.

Now she knew the conversation would rapidly regress to monosyllables. There would be tacit communication with telling looks between Mike and his sister, while Jack would become obscure and mute. Gina wished she knew where Jack drifted off to during these moments. She'd have joined him there if she could.

Gina glanced across the table toward the quiet, older couple seated next to them. She noticed the gentleman, intently reading the menu, and Gina briefly made eye contact with the lady. Gina thought the woman looked elegant and dignified. She would have never married a man like Mike, Gina thought.

Over the din of clanking plates and conversations at nearby tables, Darlene heard the young man say, "Isn't Gina sophisticated?" The condescending tone reminded her of her own husband. But it hadn't always been that way.

The waiter arrived at Darlene's table carrying a huge tray. He placed a plate of lobster tails with a baked potato and coleslaw in front of her. Leonard was forced to put the menu down.

Leonard said, "There was quite a bit of history in there. Did you know that Siesta Key used to be named Clam Island in the 1800s?"

"Really? I had no idea," Darlene answered.

Darlene felt an oppressive force surrounding her. She looked up and caught Gina's eye, and for a brief moment, she felt they understood each other. They shared in the same misery, the sadness of being tethered to dullness.

Darlene felt her spirit was dying. She could feel it slowly seep out of her day by day. She felt like yelling over the tables to Gina, "Save yourself while you still can!" Darlene felt it was too late, but this young woman had time. Darlene knew she herself was no longer brave enough to be on her own. After watching many of her friends, fifty-something-year-olds, divorce and become desperate for companionship, Darlene was terrified of growing old alone.

Gina's face tightened into a grimace, as the waiter brought her food and she stared down at her plate of linguini with clams.

Gina felt like a nonentity. Mike ignored her, as Lori rambled incessantly about her son's Little League and the upcoming championship game. Jack was on his third beer. Gina glanced again at the older couple. She watched the woman sip her wine and thought how calm and wise she seemed.

Gina felt like yelling over at the woman, "How did you do it? How did you survive your marriage?" Instead, Gina found herself nodding to some comment about the Gators game.

She stared down at her plate and thought: I am protected within my own shell. My spirit is quiet and calm, like a mollusk. The table was silent, as Mike tore into his Surf n' Turf, and Lori had run out of things to brag about.

The clamor in the restaurant faded and became dim white noise. Gina cleared her throat and said in a loud voice, "I had a dream last night." She paused a moment and then continued, "I was swimming in the ocean, and the water was clear and calm. Everything was gray and colorless, but it was very warm. Gradually, the ocean was filled with the most amazing creatures. They were all around me, thousands of them. They looked just like jellyfish: translucent and with tentacles, but they had huge beating hearts. Their hearts were glowing and then began to change colors, turning from red to yellow to purple to green."

The others at the table stared at her with blank expressions.

Finally, Mike said, "What are you talking about, changed colors?" He rolled his eyes and smirked.

Gina continued, "I gently picked one up and held it in my hands. I could feel its heart beating. I looked out into the ocean, and it was crowded with these beautiful creatures. They floated

everywhere and illuminated the water with spheres of colored light, and the one in my hand pulsed softly with its heart glowing. Then it slowly turned its soft, slimy body inside out and slipped through my fingers, so I was left holding only the heart.”

“That sounds gross,” Lori said as she crinkled her nose.

“Maybe you should lay off the Sauvignon,” Mike said.

“I don’t think so, because somehow I knew that everything was good and that life was magical, and I think they had come to remind me,” Gina said. She held her hands out in front of her, as if cupping an invisible heart.

Mike said, “Hey, Lori, did you happen to talk to Mom today? She needed some help with those insurance forms.” He took another bite of steak.

Lori cleared her throat and replied tersely, “I’ll call her tomorrow.”

And that was it.

Gina held back her cries, but her chest felt like it would collapse from the pressure. She couldn’t breathe.

Gina rose from the table, but before leaving, she took one more look at Mike. She wondered if he would meet her gaze, if he would recognize her anguish and say something to bring her back to him. He avoided her by staring into his glass of beer, wiping the condensation with his thumb.

Darlene had strained to listen and overheard, and now she pictured the ocean filled with magical creatures. She imagined holding a warm beating heart in her hand.

Darlene watched as Gina rose from the table and left.

Darlene caught one comment from the sister-in-law: “Gina is so spoiled. She’s being a drama queen.”

As time passed, Darlene noticed the young man becoming increasingly agitated. He scanned the room, tilting his head toward the entrance of the restaurant. He tapped on his glass with his knife. He refolded his napkin a dozen times. Finally, he mumbled something and left.

“I hope that young couple makes it,” Leonard said while leaning in toward Darlene.

Darlene was surprised and looked at Leonard. Darlene had been so absorbed watching the other table that she didn’t notice Leonard. She never imagined he would be following the unfolding drama along with her.

“That boy’s an ass to let her go,” he whispered to Darlene. “And I know I’ve been an ass, too.” Leonard reached out and placed his hand over hers. “Do you forgive me?” he asked.

“I don’t think they’ll make it, they seem too different. But you and I will, Leonard. Let’s start from scratch,” Darlene said.

They smiled at each other, perhaps with a bit of sadness, Darlene thought. But it was genuine.

Darlene brought her attention to the food on the table. She dipped her lobster in the butter-garlic sauce, and took a bite of a succulent piece of the white meat dripping with butter. She slowly chewed and let the texture and flavor settle in her mouth before swallowing. She lifted the wine glass to her lips, and let the fruity, light wine wash down her throat. She let the notion of beauty and magic wash over her, and she felt warm and at peace.

Leonard seemed to be enjoying the lobster on his plate. He looked at Darlene and said, “You look lovely, darling.”

He hadn’t given her a sincere compliment in a long time, a compliment devoid of hints of sarcasm.

Now looking at her husband, she could see how vulnerable he was.

“Do you ever think of Paris?” she asked.

“Of course, that was the best time of my life,” Leonard said.

Six years ago, they spent three weeks in Paris. They had thrift shopped, read in cafes, strolled museums and parks. They made love, slow and lingering, in the afternoons. Darlene had let herself forget Paris, but now the memories alighted. She took a moment to wonder if Gina's husband would ever be able to win her back.

Gina had walked four blocks and found herself on Crescent Beach. She kicked off her sandals to let the soft, powdery sand cake her feet. She ran down to the shore, and the water rinsed away the sand, leaving her feet clean and cool. Her skirt got wet at the hem, and she gathered and pulled up the fabric into her hands to walk into the sea. The water reached her thighs, and the waves were gentle.

Gina looked up at the night sky, and it was filled with stars but there was no moon. She searched and then thought about the new moon, and how with every cycle there was a chance for renewal, starting over. Gina wished to start over.

Now she could hear Mike's voice calling to her from a distance. He was searching for her but couldn't see her: she was a new moon, unobtainable. She heard his voice getting closer, so she pulled herself out of the water. Once on the shore, she began jogging ahead, along the dark stretch of beach, further and further away from his calls, which slowly faded out behind her.

Just Trying to Make it to the Top

—LAURA MADELINE WISEMAN

His response makes you laugh with the breath
you have left. No doubt today is hard work.

The couple of inches that pass for a shoulder beyond the line
and when there is more its scattered with gravel

and sand that eats down through the ice and snow
prove that even sometimes chains aren't enough to get there.

The road worker had first asks, *How are you doing today?*
but knowing better than to speak truthfully can't breathe,

the sheer expanse of cliffs the mind rock falls
without warning. The vehicles wait as he holds them back.

You are at the tail of a line of others. *Fine*, you say, not a pant,
there isn't breath for that and

grannie gears are all that are left
ten miles 1500 feet of climb the 11,542 summit.

People have been doing this for years. It starts to rain.
You are ahead alone potholes switchbacks grade

a mountain that goes on and on. Then you say as a
sort of apology for holding up the others who have been there

and back and are waiting and the road worker
replies, *We all are.*

Cary Grant on Hole Mountain

—ELIZABETH BURTON

Akbar stretched to get the kinks out of his legs. He'd been driving for over an hour in the dust-dry river bed, his body clenched against the inevitable bumps. Beside him, the young woman—this was how he thought of her, the “young woman,” even though she was a year or two older than his own twenty-one years—clutched the Jeep's door with one impossibly white hand. Her other hand rested on top of her safari hat like a heroine in some old American movie.

Akbar would know. An aspiring director, he'd watched every American movie he could get his hands on. Everything from classics like *Arsenic and Old Lace* to *Dirty Dancing*. The latter, made only ten years ago, was the newest in his collection and therefore the one he'd watched the most to learn about American culture. He'd bought a VHS copy on the black market, the Chinese government deeming it too seditious to be shown on Uyghur television. His friends teased him that he fancied himself a Uyghur Patrick Swayze, fighting against the establishment and getting all the girls.

But in reality, Akbar only had eyes for one girl. Riswan was the prettiest girl in his class at university and he wanted to ask her parents' permission to court her. Every time he convinced his family to pose for a picture, he imagined Riswan in it, her arm draped casually around his mother's shoulders, his father's waist. He'd even surreptitiously taken a picture of Riswan once, when she and her friends happened to wander into a shot he was setting up of some trees on campus. He'd cropped the photo so that only her face showed, her brown eyes appearing to look into the camera, her smile directed at him.

When Akbar's young cousin, Qurban, had begged him to drive the American teacher on an outing, he'd refused, knowing that in a town like Kashgar, it would definitely get back to Riswan (he had to believe she knew about him and his feelings for her, that her smiles “hello” were directed at him, not at just anyone passing on the street). But when ten year old Qurban had given Akbar a long-

coveted video camera for his recent birthday, a present Qurban's parents proudly told him the boy had saved up for, Akbar felt he couldn't refuse.

When he made the plans for the trip, he'd hoped he could invite Riswan along. He'd even watched movies with his favorite actor, Cary Grant, to come up with an elegant way of asking her, but ultimately, no matter how good the words sounded when he was practicing in front of the mirror in his bathroom, he just couldn't get them out when he was near her. Even his "hi" came out mumbled; forget about asking her to accompany the group. Desperate, he'd asked Qurban to give a note to Riswan, but he'd called him back before the boy could deliver it. Qurban had grinned mischievously and threatened to run back to the girl who sat on a blanket in the park, studying, but Akbar had tackled him, promising to take him and his teacher on the outing in return for Qurban's silence.

He looked over at Grace. Tendrils of her honey-blond hair had escaped from her hat and were blowing in the wind. He took one hand from the wheel and quickly wiped the sweat from it onto his pants. In every American movie he'd ever seen, a trip such as today's would end up in a kiss between him and Grace, if not more. And while there was nothing improper about the trip itself (Qurban made an excellent chaperone with his constant chatter), he wasn't sure what Grace expected from him.

For her part, Grace seemed to be enjoying the day. The spring sun was just warm enough so that she didn't have to wear a sweater over her long-sleeve top. Akbar looked at the worn blue and white color of her jeans, the cracking leather of her boots. It would all make a pretty picture in a movie.

Akbar noticed the smile on her face as she looked around. She even smiled at him when she caught his eye, but he couldn't tell whether it was a special smile or the same one she gave to Qurban and the other children she taught.

“What a beautiful morning!” Grace shouted over the wind, and he nodded, forcing his face muscles to move into a smile. Whatever other remarks she made were directed at Qurban, so Akbar fell back into his thoughts.

He tried to picture the landscape through her eyes. As they drove into the isolated village of Mingyol, he could see Grace sit up straighter, her attention fully focused on the squat, brown buildings and the equally brown people who populated the tiny streets. Only twenty-five miles from Kashgar as the crow flies, Mingyol might as well have been a lifetime away. Most of the traffic here was bicycles and donkey carts, and Akbar had to slow the Jeep down to speeds that didn't even measure on the speedometer to keep from bumping into them. Grace, he could see, was entranced. A group of little girls playing with rag dolls pointed at her and Grace waved hesitantly. They all grinned and waved back. He could see them gesturing at her hair and he smiled. The fact that they had seen a blonde in real life would provide them with conversation for weeks.

Mingyol was quaint, Akbar supposed, but it wasn't the reason they had journeyed two hours through dry river beds. They were heading to a place the locals called “Hole Mountain,” a natural arch far higher than any of the buildings in Kashgar. He'd heard that a British man had long ago declared Hole Mountain the largest natural arch in the world, but he didn't know if it were true. He'd told Grace anyway, watching her face light up at the thought of it.

Americans' faces were much more expressive than Uyghur ones, he'd decided, based on Grace and the other American, Wanderline. They were readable because they'd grown up where there was nothing to hide.

Akbar drove through the village and a few moments later, he parked the Jeep next to the trail head. He watched his cousin bound out of the backseat and open the car door for Grace, making him feel a pang of anxiety. Had she expected him to open the door for her? Cary Grant always opened the door for women.

But then again, Cary Grant always knew what to do, to say. And as much as Akbar tried to model himself after his idol, he couldn't quite seem to master his demeanor.

He'd been to the mountain with a hole in it before, back when he was a child about Qurban's age, but he didn't remember much about it. As the trio picked up their packs and began the climb, Akbar examined the scene, his hands itching to bring out the still camera he carried everywhere he went. Finally, he couldn't ignore the call any longer. The many shades of brown he saw through the lens surprised him, as did the tiny white flowers which were poking their way through the rock. As for the arch itself, the size dwarfed everything around it.

"It's supposed to be the size of a New York City skyscraper," Akbar told Grace.

Grace reached out and touched his arm, as if wanting to share the beauty with him. When he glanced over at her, her eyes hadn't moved from the arch. "My guidebook compared it to the Eiffel Tower in France," she said.

Akbar wasn't sure how to measure either one of those buildings, except for how tall they seemed to be in movies, but he knew the arch was massive. He stood there in an awe he never expected to feel. The shots he was taking were some of the best he'd ever gotten, with the light glinting off the brown rocks and giving them the look of bronze on fire.

Grace was wide-eyed, taking pictures on her own camera when they hiked closer to the hole in the mountain. Qurban was equally impressed, as he walked beside his teacher, holding her hand. Akbar held up his camera and pointed it at their backs, clicking as they made their way over the rocks. Qurban looked up at Grace while he talked, and Akbar considered how much like a family their little party would look to outsiders, even though none of them resembled each other.

He wondered what Riswan would look like pregnant with his baby.

Akbar had never kissed a girl. He paid close attention to every on-screen kiss he came across to get pointers. He considered what it would be like to kiss Riswan, wondering for the hundredth time whether he needed to get some experience before he tried. He glanced at Grace. Young though

she might be, she was a *woman*, and an American one at that. Surely she would be open to the idea of kissing him.

After climbing for a half an hour or so, the group finally reached the meadow at the base of the arch. In deference to Grace, Akbar had taken them up the easier side of the mountain, so the climb had been steady and not extremely strenuous. To reach the top, though, would require going to an elevation of 10,000 feet.

Qurban asked if he could have the camera, pointing at the flowers. Reluctantly, Akbar handed it over. "Be careful with it," he ordered. While Grace stared in awe at the giant hole in the mountain, Akbar showed Qurban how to operate the camera. Qurban took a few shots of the flowers and then saw a group of butterflies that were congregating in the spring grass. "May I go take their pictures, too?" Qurban said.

Akbar nodded. His eyes followed his cousin until Grace's voice broke in.

"Shall we climb higher?" Her eyes were sparkling. "I think Qurban will be all right." She called out to Qurban across the field, "We'll be right back; we're going a little higher." The boy threw up his hand to show he'd heard her.

She's very pretty, Akbar thought, but then Riswan's face came to mind and he added, *for a pale American*. Again, he felt a pang of nervousness. What if Grace actually liked him? What would he do, then?

As the two of them moved further up the rock, there were times when they had to use both their hands and feet to make the climb. Once, Grace slipped, and Akbar reached out automatically to keep her from falling. He pulled her up toward him, thinking of Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint in the famous Mount Rushmore scene from *North by Northwest*. His face came so close to hers he could taste the cinnamon on her breath. This was the kind of moment that inevitably led to a kiss for Grant.

“What are you doing, Akbar?” Grace’s voice was strained.

In a split second, he decided to go for it. “What all men and women do,” he breathed, hoping he sounded as debonair as Grant. He moved forward the last inch and kissed her. Her lips were closed and stiff against his, not at all what he expected. He kept pressing his mouth to hers until she reached her hands up to his shoulders and forcefully pushed him away.

Grace appeared shell-shocked, but she said, “I think you’ve gotten the wrong idea, somehow.” Her tone was gentle, but firm. “I think of you as a friend, Akbar. Nothing more.”

This never happened to Cary Grant.

Akbar was confused. “But isn’t this how you show someone you like them in America?” He told her that’s how Cary Grant always did it.

“You don’t like me,” she protested. “You don’t even know me. If I weren’t Qurban’s teacher, we wouldn’t even be out here today. And even Cary Grant didn’t act like that in real life.”

“He didn’t?”

“He didn’t.” She was emphatic.

Akbar felt as if a friend had betrayed him. “You knew Cary Grant?”

Grace laughed. “America’s a big place, Akbar. I didn’t know Cary Grant, but I know enough about him to know that he wasn’t always that smooth in real life. Nobody is.”

“And American women? Are you as...?”

“As what?” She seemed genuinely confused.

“I saw *Dirty Dancing*,” he said, trying to explain.

“Okaay?” She didn’t seem to know what he was driving at.

“And the women were...”

“Oh.” And then “Oh!” Her face grew bright red. “You mean...?”

He nodded.

“No, American women aren’t all like that. *I’m* certainly not like that!”

He considered, then nodded again. “You’re more like a Uyghur girl, then.”

She bit her lower lip. “What are Uyghur girls like?”

“Most will only kiss one man in their lifetime, the man they marry.”

Grace was silent for a moment. “I’ve only kissed one man—on purpose,” she said pointedly, making Akbar blush. “And I thought I was going to marry him.”

“Did he break your heart?” When she nodded, he said, “In the movies, they always come back when they break your heart.”

She looked at him. “Life isn’t like the movies, Akbar. Sometimes a broken heart stays broken.”

He reached out gingerly and touched Grace’s arm. She smiled. “You didn’t really want to kiss me, did you?”

He shook his head, surprised. “I thought American women expected to be kissed. Especially the pretty ones.”

She laughed, but he could tell she was pleased. “Then why did you do it?”

He told her about Riswan, how he wanted to practice.

“She’s a lucky girl,” Grace said. “You ought to be kissing her.”

“I don’t even have the courage to talk to her,” he confessed.

“Pretend she’s me.”

Akbar nodded, thinking it over.

“Hey, where are you two?” Qurban’s voice came lifting over the rocks.

When he got home that evening, Akbar began developing the film in the darkroom he’d built at the back of his family’s house. He saw pictures of flowers and blurry butterflies. And then, there was a picture of him holding Grace’s arm, his lips against hers. He wondered what he was going to

have to do to keep Qurban quiet. The last thing he wanted was for Riswan to find out about his indiscretion.

He studied the picture. Fully in focus, he could see the discomfort on Grace's face. What surprised him was how uncomfortable he himself looked.

He held the image between his fingers, considering. Then he ripped it up until the pieces were too small to tear again.

Another Unending

–ANDREW ROMRIELL

The grass could be green, but sunsets bruise
purple and red across the countryside.
I come to a stream and see a woman
striding across the bank. Her lavender eyes glisten
as she steps barefoot into the water beside me.
She is not old, but not quite young.
Not entirely human.

I ask who she is, but she doesn't answer.
She waits a moment, runs fingers
through tangled black hair, and speaks
silk against my rough skin.
I'm her of course, she says.

I don't answer, and she sighs.
I had a Rapunzel, much like you.
She loved me once because I was what
she knew. When the Prince climbed
her hair, she left me. She shifts across the water.
Much like you.

I tell her I'm not a part of this story. Her gaze
casts pity. *Of course you are, my child.*
You always were. She plucks a stone from the stream
and places it in my hands. It's cool. Smooth. Alive
within its stasis. My fingers scrape
against it as I attempt to carry its weight.

Then, she sobs against her clawed hands,
bleeding out her anguish.
I built a tower of stones, she cries, and locked
a baby inside.
I tell her it feels familiar. She grins through her tears,
breath crooked in the forest air.
It always will.

String Theory: A Near Miss

—MARY LEOSON

Gary

Gary Ryan gritted his teeth and began to grind them, the creaking noise traveling through his jawline to his ears. It was a horrible habit and he knew it. Everyone reminded him, from his wife in the middle of the night to his dentist who lectured him about vertical fractures in his pearly whites. But it was a practice that could not be helped, especially driving through downtown in the middle of rush hour traffic on Christmas Eve.

With each moment he could feel his blood pressure rising. He'd been warned about that, too, but there was no one to nag him inside of the car. His hands gripped the worn leather of the Cadillac steering wheel, his knuckles whitening against pink Irish flesh. Each winter it was the same. The first snow of the season and drivers morph into morons. It figures that the lake effect squalls would hit just as he was leaving work, too, before any salt had been spread on the roads.

The tail lights of the car in front of him cast a red glow on his dashboard, like an ominous scene change at the theater. And when they disappeared for a moment, Gary hopefully lifted his foot from the brake pedal only to quickly put it down again. Elizabeth was never going to let him hear the end of this; she had scolded him earlier and made him promise to leave the office early to avoid the swarm of cars fleeing the business district. He had stubbornly ignored his wife's warning, partly because he was brooding about the Equal Opportunity debacle that required him to turn away yet another hard-working, qualified white man, but also to spite her. He was not going to add insult to injury by calling her and admitting guilt either. Gary Ryan was no one's lackey. Rolling his gray eyes and sighing in defeat, he also admitted that Gary Ryan was hopelessly stuck in traffic.

The cars ahead of him crawled at a snail's pace toward the traffic light that never seemed to stay green long enough. The air that surrounded the gridlock was misty, a white haze that crept in closer and closer—the kind one can only see as individual snowflakes under the glare of the

streetlights. His eyes fell on the huddled lumps of coats and hats gathered at the bus stop shelter and his heart momentarily softened. He swallowed hard, remembering that he was lucky to be in a warm car, waiting out this mess in comfort. His mind turned to a time when it was not so.

At 19, fresh out of high school and supporting a pregnant Elizabeth, Gary had huddled at a similar bus stop every morning and every evening. Playing football in the cold had taught him how to get the blood flowing in freezing temperatures: stomping, toe wiggling, doing heel raises, and walking around the stop in circles despite the quizzical looks from strangers. But sometimes the cold seeped into his boots so thoroughly that it took an hour to feel his toes again once at work. It was at these times he longed for the field, wondering what it was like away at college, without the heavy burden of family in the prime of life. But he had made his choice. So for six months he had worked as a janitor, treating his trips up the hall with a mop like line drills but never missing a spot. Within the year he had been promoted two times due to his strong work ethic. Now, more than ten years later, he had a view from a corner office and a title to match. But he could still feel the ache when he shifted his toes inside his leather penny loafers from Brooks Brothers. He only missed the football field once in a while anymore, but one look from his children melted that away.

The horn sounded behind him impatiently, stirring Gary from his memories. It was his turn to make it through the light and onto the highway ramp. Pressing the gas cautiously, he guided the Cadillac to the left, cutting new grooves into the fresh blanket of snow. As he passed by the bus stop, he locked eyes with a young man there, nodding in acknowledgement of whatever important matter brought him to that place, to risk those numb toes. Perhaps it was a child, or a sick mother, or just a strong commitment to be where he said he would be despite the weather. He would like to hire that young man.

James

James Gillis glared at his speedometer, watching it change from five to ten miles per hour and then back to five again. This traffic was for the birds. He had been running from his thoughts all day and now there was nothing but the stale air around him and his memories to keep him company. He didn't even bother with the CD player because it only worked when it wanted to and the radio station that normally played smooth jazz had been invaded by Christmas carols. Resigned to wait this crawling highway traffic out, he reclined the seat of his aging Pontiac G6 and lit up a cigarette.

As he parted his dark lips, the smoke rose from his mouth like an uncoiling snake, then quickly dissipated as he exhaled forcefully, blowing out a wish that would never come true. As the smoke filled the car, he resisted cracking the window, tempting fate to see how long it might take for his worn body to slip into oblivion. When his eyes began to burn, he finally gave in and let the cold air from outside invade his sanctuary. Snowflakes floated in softly, landing on the chocolate hand that flicked the ashes from his cigarette. They melted on his skin, leaving nothing but droplets behind. And he thought how funny it was that something so beautiful could only last for a moment. Like his wife.

Of course, she had lasted for much more than a moment—for five decades, actually—but in his mind it seemed like a mere breath. The twenty-five years they had together was not enough for him. And how much of it he had wasted with foolishness—the alcohol and dabbling in drugs. But she had stuck by him, had seen him through some dark times. Dominique had been his angel. Now there was only him, his elderly dog, and his quiet house that echoed with her memories.

James drew in a quick breath and dropped his cigarette out of the window as his car slid into the other lane; he pumped his breaks and prayed for some traction. The wheels regained their steadiness, and he relaxed once again into the smoky quiet of his car. He slowed down to let a car merge in front of him, then tensed up as a Honda Civic cut him off, taking advantage of the kindness

he had shown to the car in front of them. *Young people these days*, he thought, *got no home training*. But then, that's exactly what others would have thought of him forty years ago.

At 13, James had already tasted much of the bitterness the world could offer. He had lost his mother to incarceration and had never known his father. His brother Darnell tried to look out for him, but having been only 15 himself, he played by the rules of the street. Despite his grandfather's love and guidance, James followed Darnell blindly into the gang life and then to juvi, where he stayed until 18. In the years after, he learned to keep his head down and his attention on work, but he couldn't quite stay away from the bottle. It was another seven years before he tried recovery—tried and failed. But with Dominique by his side and the support of his sponsor, he finally won the battle.

James' eyes fell on the first AA token he had ever received, which hung meaningfully from his rearview mirror. A smile spread across his normally somber face, touching his eyes with a light that only came from a deep place of service. He thought of all those who had helped him, and in turn, those he had helped. They stretched out like links in a long chain, even those who had lost the fight. This was the purpose to which he had dedicated his life, especially now that Dominique had passed. This was the only thing that kept him breathing. *One day at a time*.

As James' spirits lifted, so did the traffic jam. Cars in front of him began to move along more steadily, picking up speed as they passed by the downtown on-ramps and exits to the business district. Frustrated glances from neighboring cars relaxed into preoccupation with discussions, lively music, or NPR news updates. The cars were no longer a collective sea bound together by a common exasperation; they returned to their individual missions under the glare of the streetlights. At this rate, James would be at the meeting in no time.

But it happens sometimes in winter weather that folks become overly confident. They ride the grooves of the cars in front of them, thinking that because they can see the pavement that the snow has melted. They forget to look for the spray rising from the tires, letting them know the roads have

been treated. If there is no spray, there is only black ice. And so it was on this Christmas Eve night, when two men were on a collision course.

Judgment

It was on an overpass, just past the Woodland on-ramp that their paths crossed. The dark green Cadillac eased up alongside the black Pontiac G6, but all the drivers saw were the shells in which they were encased. James Gillis' lips pursed as he saw the younger white man driving the expensive car, knowing he should slow down to let him in but not really wanting to do it. Finally, he gave in and slowed to make some room for the car to merge.

But as Gary Ryan checked his side view mirror, all he saw was an old beater approaching rapidly. *What's wrong with you, fool?* He thought, then raised his left hand so the driver could see his middle finger. As the car slowed just enough to let him in, Gary shook his head, glad that his gesture had yielded a satisfactory response.

James Gillis offered some choice words to the driver of the Cadillac in the safety of his own car, but knew that the only thing anger begets is more anger. The stranger wasn't worth his peace of mind, so he turned his thoughts to prayer and put it in the Lord's hands. After the Cadillac changed lanes, it disappeared like an ant into the procession up its mound.

Compassion

It was on an overpass, just past the Woodland on-ramp that their paths crossed. As the dark green Cadillac eased up alongside the black Pontiac G6, each of the drivers was caught in his own internal world. James Gillis' thoughts drifted from his wife to those waiting at the AA meeting, and his sense of service pushed him forward. Gary Ryan was working through the conversation he would have with his team at work, to convince them to mentor young, hard-working men. It's hard to say what happened next—if the G6 tried to slow down and could not catch traction, or if the Cadillac

sped up to try to merge and crossed the line too quickly—but soon both drivers were spinning out of control.

The world outside of Gary Ryan's windshield became a whirling snow globe, and all instincts to "turn into the spin" abandoned him. The antilock brakes began to grind as he careened into the guardrail, driver-side first. Sparks lit the window frame and the glass shattered around him like confetti. The screech teetered between pitches, lowering to a cackle as the car slid to a stop, where Gary Ryan found himself close enough to kiss the noise barrier wall. In a daze, his shaking hands moved to his chest, and the shattered glass fell from the sleeves of his Italian suit like newly fallen snow. In his rearview mirror, he could see the blood beginning to drip from small cuts in his face, but as far as he could tell, the rest of his body was intact. His eyes drifted across the passenger seat, which now faced the traffic-strewn highway, and landed on the pile of intertwined cars that no longer resembled any type of order. And he saw that one car, a Pontiac G6, rested on its roof.

After the initial impact, James Gillis' car spun like a helicopter blade, then bounced off the cars in the next lane. The vehicle might have skidded to a stop there, but for the broken-down Ford Taurus in the middle of the highway that the police had not yet come to address. The G6 slammed into it, blowing a tire, then was hit again from behind as those heading toward the accident tried to course-correct. The next thing James knew, the car spat him out like a catapult and he was sailing through the air, until he wasn't anymore. He landed between lanes of traffic on a fresh drift of snow, and the ground punched him like Sugar Ray. He was down for the count, lying on his back, watching the snow drift slowly to the ground as if nothing in the world was the matter.

When Gary Ryan spotted the man lying in the snow, his instincts took over. He did not move gingerly to see if anything was broken, he did not wait for the police to come, he did not linger. Crawling into the passenger seat, he tugged at the handle and slid out of the open door smoothly. Without hesitation, he ran across three lanes of traffic, past the astonished onlookers, right by the

other cars that had squeaked by with mere fender-benders, to the man's side. Quickly, he unbuttoned his Armani suitcoat, shook off the remaining glass shards, and covered the man on the ground.

James Gillis looked up to see a stranger bending down over him, his gray eyes concerned. The jacket he placed on him was still warm. As he spoke, the breath rose out of him like a smoke signal. "Hey, man, don't worry, the ambulance is on the way. Can you move?"

As James inhaled to speak, pain spread through his chest like wildfire. "Not my legs," he spat, wincing. "Listen," he continued. It was a struggle, but what he had to say was too important. "I don't know you, but I need to ask you a favor."

The young man stared back at him. "What can I do?" he asked.

"If I don't get out of here, I need you to check on my dog."

The stranger looked at him quizzically, wondering why a dog would enter his mind when there was clearly more at stake than a mutt. "Buddy," began the young man, "you're gonna get out of here." His face told a different story, though. His face was not so sure. "I told you, the ambulance is on its way. Can't you hear the sirens?"

He couldn't. People were gathering around them now, coming to see how they could help. He *could* hear people gasping, some muttering "oh, no", and another who offered "don't move him".

But all James could think about was his loyal friend at home. People had always disappointed him, with the exception of his beloved wife, but the dog... his dog was there without question. "Look, I need you to do this for me. Please." James could taste the blood in his mouth. "He's all alone and there's no one else."

The stranger looked up, searched the horizon for a sign of flashing lights, and he met James' gaze sullenly. The pleading in his dark eyes was clear.

"Um, ok, sure. Where is he?"

Despite the red that leaked from between his lips, the man smiled. "Thank you." The pain was coming in waves now, dull one moment, sharp the next. It pulled him closer to the edge with

each breath. “In the right coat pocket, my wallet, has the address. Key’s under the mat.” James gulped, but the liquid kept coming back up. “Tonight. He’ll be hungry soon.” James held out a shaking hand, reaching to the stranger for reassurance.

The stranger nodded. “Tonight,” said the young man, taking his hand. “You can count on it.”

James squeezed the stranger’s hand. The cold seeped into his body, like the earth reaching out to take him home. “You there?” He couldn’t see him anymore.

“I’m here.”

“He’s a good dog.” James’ grip grew weak but the stranger held on.

Empathy

It was on an overpass, just past the Woodland on-ramp that their paths crossed. As the dark green Cadillac eased up alongside the black Pontiac G6, each of the drivers was caught in his own internal world. Despite the traffic woes, each man was thinking about others. In this reverie about his wife, the driver of the G6 misjudged the distance between the two cars and clipped the back of the Cadillac ever so slightly, but it was enough to send the other car careening into the oncoming lanes of traffic. The Cadillac was t-boned by a driver two lanes over, as James Gillis looked on, helplessly.

Cars that surrounded the accident slid on the overpass as their antilock brakes ground in unison and traffic on I-90 came to a halt. Feeling utterly responsible, James pulled his car as far over to the side as possible and then ran toward the Cadillac, where the man in the driver’s seat sat, clearly in shock. The rear passenger side of the vehicle had been crushed in, and while the driver’s door was no longer intact and the glass completely gone, the impact had spared his life—so far.

“Hey, man, you ok? I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to—Let me help you.” James tried to pry the door open, but it wouldn’t budge.

The man didn’t speak, but looked at his dark-eyed rescuer blankly. His eyes began to well with tears as he realized what had happened. “I n-need to call my wife,” he stammered, trying to

reach into his pocket, but a disturbed look came over his face. He pulled out a hand not enclosed upon a cell phone, but covered in red wetness.

James turned to another man who had joined him at the scene and asked him to call an ambulance, then crouched down to the window so the two of them were eye-level. He took the man's other hand, which had been resting on the side of the car. He shook his hand. "My name is James," he said calmly. "What's yours?"

The man looked back at him through tears and in two seconds his face shifted from a 30-something businessman to a scared child. He wept openly. "Tell me your name, son," James said calmly.

"Gary," he said through shaking lips.

"Ok, Gary," said James, still holding the man's hand. "Help is coming, but right now it's just you and me. It's ok to cry, son, ain't no shame in showing how you feel. But, Gary, it might be good to keep your mind on other things, so, you spoke about your wife. Can you tell me about your wife. Tell me about her pretty face. Tell me about the things that make her special."

"Um," said Gary, collecting himself. He nodded his head, trying to breath calmly.

"Elizabeth."

"Elizabeth," repeated James, "That's a real pretty name."

Gary smiled though the tears still fell, nodded. "She puts up with my bullshit."

James cracked a smile and laughed. "Yeah, well, only the best ones do."

They laughed together, their breath escaping like clouds, mingling together as it dissipated into the night air. Only those close enough to see noticed the juxtaposition of their laughter and the horrific highway scene.

Gary's smile quickly fell back into desperation. He locked his gaze with James. "I'm scared," was all he could say before falling back into sobs. This was something his hard work and strong

sense of self had not prepared him for. What if he didn't make it? What would his family do without him?

"All right, now, Gary," said James, grasping his hand even tighter. "I been to rock bottom and back, so if I can pick myself up outa that, you can get through this. I tell you what we're gonna do. We're gonna ask the Lord for some help. You know the *Our Father*?"

Gary nodded. "It's been a while. It's, uh, been a long while, but I think I remember it."

"Ok, say it with me, will you? I'll pray over you, and you pray too. With both of us, he's bound to hear it. Here we go... Our Father..."

Their voices joined together, uniting because of fear but calling in hope. Gary's voice strengthened the further they stretched into prayer, and continued even as they heard the sirens approaching. James motioned to the vehicles surrounding them, urging them to join in. Voices around them grew in unison; those trapped in gridlock lent their support in the prayer, whether they believed or not. By the time the ambulance arrived, the *Our Father* grown to a repetitive chorus, and James knew that although he'd set out to save an addict that night, he saved a stranger instead.

Teamwork

It was on an overpass, just past the Woodland on-ramp that their paths crossed. As the Cadillac pulled up next to the G6, and the latter made room for him to merge, another car came rushing up the onramp and tried to pass them both. As it attempted to merge onto I-90 ahead of them, the Toyota Camry's tires lost traction and it continued across several lanes into flowing traffic. As it struck the first vehicle, the highway became a pinball machine; first the Camry slide to the left, bounced off another car and began to spin. It circled back across all lanes and crashed into the guard rail, coming to a rest and beginning to smoke.

Gary Ryan began to swear at the inconsiderate driver, then watched in horror as the Camry bounced around the highway, then crumpled like a matchbox car. Putting his anger aside, he grabbed

his cell phone and dialed 9-1-1 then pulled over to the side of the road. After reporting the crash, he exited his Cadillac and ran toward the smoking vehicle. He was joined on the slippery pavement by the driver of the G6, who had also pulled over to the side of the road. They fell into step like magnets.

“I called 9-1-1 already!” shouted Gary to the stranger who ran beside him.

“I think there are passengers with him!” the man yelled back as they approached the car.

Smoke billowed out from under the hood, its occupants rushing toward the doors but to no avail. Gary could see their silhouettes struggling for freedom, but both sides of the vehicle had been struck and nothing would open. As they reached the car, they each tried to pry the doors open one at a time, but they would not budge.

“We have to break a window!” the other man cried, looking around desperately for a rock but finding only a soft blanket of snow that camouflaged everything.

Another man emerged from a nearby car, showing them a screwdriver. “Here!” he yelled. “Will this work?” He tossed it to the middle-aged Black man, who skillfully held the screwdriver point to the lower rear corner of the passenger window and jabbed hard three times. Gary wondered momentarily how the stranger knew just where to break the glass as it shattered beneath the pressure. It was then that several other men emerged from surrounding cars; they used a lug wrench to smash the driver’s side window and helped the man out from the smoke-filled car.

A child came through the passenger window first, a small boy about three or four years old. He cried and wiped at his eyes, then coughed as he tried to gulp in the fresh air. Dark hands enclosed around his coat-covered arms, pulling him to safety. The stranger handed the child to Gary, then reached in to help the mother. Gary held the little boy to his chest, smoothing his blond hair and thinking of his own boys at home. His little body shook as he whined for his mother, who was turning sideways to fit her pregnant belly through the window. The stranger helped her out and carefully led her away from the car to a safer space.

“My wife!” yelled the driver of the Camry. “My wife’s in labor!”

Suddenly it all made sense. He had not simply been an inconsiderate driver; he had been in a rushed panic to get his wife to the hospital. But some risks are not worth taking and the circumstances spoke for themselves.

As the driver made his way over to his wife, his eyes landed on her rescuer. “You! You get away from her!”

The stranger who had been helping her to sit on the ground looked up in surprise. Slowly the realization swept over his face and his expression became one of sadness and anger, though Gary was not sure which was stronger. “I’m just trying to help her,” he began.

“You get your filthy hands off her!” he yelled.

Gary saw that the man’s prejudice clouded his better judgment. Now, Gary Ryan was no activist for diversity, especially when it came to employment laws that he felt were unfair, but he was also not one to hate another simply for his appearance and assumptions that followed. He knew that he was not without fault in judging others, but clearly this ungrateful man was in the wrong.

“Now, that’s no way to thank somebody for saving your wife’s life,” Gary said, stepping between the angry driver and the stranger. He still held the man’s child in his arms.

The driver stopped in his tracks, taken aback by Gary’s words and the presence of his young son. “You’re right,” he said, reeling in his anger. “Thank you for what you’ve done. I appreciate that. But, well, I don’t know you and I don’t want you touching my wife.”

The stranger nodded, stepped away from the woman once she was securely on the ground, and approached the man. He outstretched his hand, though he did it with a calm that Gary recognized. It masked the anger he had as he made an effort to do the right thing. He’d seen his father do it, though he couldn’t quite recall when. It’s one of those images you never forget—a man swallowing his pride in order to choose the high road.

“James Gillis,” he said, his hand still outstretched to the driver, who did not make a move to meet him half way. One beat. Two beats. He still did not move.

Gary stepped forward and reached out his hand, and James accepted. “Pleased to meet you, James. Gary Ryan. It’s been an honor to help these people with you today, even in the midst of this man’s disrespect.”

As the adrenaline subsided and emergency workers descended upon the scene, James and Gary fell into the background. But before they parted ways, Gary slipped James a business card with this note on the back of it: I don’t know what you do for a living, but if you need a job, give me a call. I’d be honored to work beside you anytime.

Recognition

It was on an overpass, just past the Woodland on-ramp that their paths crossed. The dark green Cadillac eased up alongside the black Pontiac G6, and though it would have normally frustrated Gary Ryan to not be given the amount of room to which he felt entitled, he was lost in his reverie. The young man from the bus stop was still fresh on his mind and he was wondering if there might be a program he could introduce at work to hire people in difficult circumstances.

James Gillis’ lips pursed as he saw the younger white man driving the expensive car, but he thought of his wife and the way she would always say to never judge a book by its cover. The pang in his heart was sharp with emptiness, but as soon as he extended this openness to the stranger in the Cadillac, he began to feel better. He slowed down just enough to let the other guy in.

As Gary Ryan checked his side view mirror, he noticed that the black car made room for him. The Cadillac merged into the highway lane without incident and the driver waived in thanks. He saw a shadow waive back in his rearview mirror and then put his attention back on the road and his thoughts of hiring young people who deserved a chance.

And while the Cadillac disappeared into the surge that led east and the Pontiac G6 moved to the right to exit downtown, each of the drivers could not shake the feeling he had a near miss.

Dates with the Fasting Man

–CAT DIXON

Out to dinner, the same scene
plays out—he asks the waiter,
Can I mash it with my tongue?
Swallow it without chewing?

Each time, the server pauses
with apologetic frown,
“I’ll have to ask the cook,” then
vanishes to the kitchen.

Upon return my date explains
to the young underpaid waiter
that he is forever fasting,
asking God for who knows what.

Fasting, fasting, fasting. Food must be liquid—
no meat. When I am found
unacceptable, then excused
from the table, I hide in the ladies’ room,

and brush clumpy mascara on my lashes.
I wink in the mirror.

Giving a Man a Haircut

—HANNAH CLARK

I've never done this before, I told him.

The clippers buzzed in my hand, and he shrugged, shirtless, a towel draped over his shoulders, and bowed his head,

exposing the soft space between his spine and skull.

I started there, and eased the invisible teeth through his blonde hair.

I uncovered his skin in slow lines, until a breath of hair,

like God's view of wheat from the sky, remained. I exhaled across his neck, and a brief flurry of spun gold danced to the floor.

He ran a hand across my work, looking, as he did, like a nervous child.

Could you do it again? He asked, the slanted window light around his head adrift with tiny motes.

He didn't look at me.

Again, a little shorter?

Group Therapy

—ROBERT RICKELMAN

It's Friday morning and the shakes aren't nearly as bad as yesterday. I'm still extremely edgy, but the overpowering sensation of creepy insects crawling underneath my skin is finally, slowly dissipating. I've felt this sensation before. It's a fairly common symptom of alcohol detox. But that doesn't make the experience any less disagreeable.

I'm getting two milligrams of Ativan every four hours. They used to give detox patients Librium or Valium. These worked much better than Ativan, but I guess someone decided they packed too hard a punch, so now you get Ativan. Ativan sucks.

There's no chance that I'll be released today, so it looks like I'll be in this psych ward through the weekend. Weekends are so boring. Most of the staff is off and there are few, if any, groups or activities to attend.

I know I need to rest and let my body recuperate from the ravages of my latest binge, when I was killing a fifth of vodka daily, and washing it down with at least a six pack of sixteen ounce beers. I stay in my room, wishing it had the kind of one-way mirrors that the TV cops use for interrogating suspects. The entire floor is a circus, and from the safety of my room, entertaining to view.

I'm feeling so sluggish, I just want to sleep, but it's 9:00 and time for the check-in meeting. A patient has a better chance of being released early if he attends and participates in the therapy and meetings. Yesterday I was too wobbly, but this morning I'm strong enough to take a shower, so I do, then head off to the meeting.

As we file slowly into the meeting room, I notice that my favorite fellow patient, Steven, has decided to attend. Steven spends most of his time patrolling the halls, making pronouncements in a surprisingly rich and distinguished voice. It resonates strongly and deeply, and I'd be willing to bet

that he once had a career as voice-over guy, or maybe even a news announcer. This is how I like to think of Steven before his life, like the rest of ours, veered irretrievably off course.

Steven is a handsome man, probably in his mid-sixties with a tangled mop of curly white hair and a full white beard, which he maintains in the same unkempt fashion.

He had been admitted days earlier, most likely petitioned for his own safety. Although the staff encourages us to wear our street clothes, I guess so we'll feel more "normal," I have never seen him in anything but the hospital-issued blue scrubs. Despite his wild appearance, his scrubs are always clean, and his hygiene is good. He is never dirty and he never smells bad.

Steven's behavior annoys most of the other patients. Some even tell him to shut up, but I find his remarks clever, and his keen wit cuts through his nonsensical patter.

Once Steven was approached by a patient who asked him why talked so loudly. Steven's booming reply was, "If I don't speak in a very loud voice, I stutter." I believe him.

Steven's roving announcements, when he is really on a roll, are mesmerizing. I heard him say that he'd had a computer micro-chip implanted in his brain in 1956. My logical self scoffs at such a ridiculous claim, but I have to say, if there is anyone I've met who has had a computer chip placed in his brain, it would be Steven. I want to know more. I plan to talk to him when I'm feeling better. As we file slowly into the meeting room, I take a seat next to Steven. Including Steven and me, there are ten patients attending. Most are barely conscious, and a handful are nodding off. Three others straggle in, and now we are thirteen.

James, a tall, muscular black guy, is the psych tech in charge of this morning's meeting. He's very personable and likes to joke with the patients.

James passes out paper and pencil to each of us, and tells us to rate our anxiety and depression on a scale of one to ten. There are questions that ask us to note any suicidal or homicidal thoughts, also on a scale of one to ten. We then list our goals for the day. For some people, the goal

may be as simple as taking a shower, or attending all the meetings. At the end of the day, we will meet again to report on how our day went and whether we reached our goals.

When everyone has completed their papers, James asks for volunteers to read what they wrote. When no one volunteers, he asks Steven to begin.

Steven is not one to follow the rules. He has written nothing on his sheet, and instead launches into a disjointed, thoroughly whimsical litany:

“George Clooney determined most handsome man. Details to follow.”

“The world awaits the news of who will become the ten-million and first registered nurse.”

“Satan has plans to burn down Knotsberry Farm.”

“Ten thousand bottles of Wild Turkey delivered to Ankara.”

James is amused. So am I, but I doubt that any of my sleepy comrades will make the connection between the whiskey and the capital of Turkey. But I gotta say, it cracks me up.

“Thank you, Steven, for sharing this with us. But you haven’t told us how you are feeling. Did you sleep well? What is your goal for the day? Any plans?”

“Why thank you very much,” Steven responds. Then he hits a detour.

“I have an IQ of 185, but I am very mean. I was even mean as a child. When my mother tried to breast feed me, I would bite her nipples very hard. She threw me in the trash can 27 times.”

I bite my lip. God, this guy is a treasure.

Wanting to laugh, but knowing better, James says, “Thank you, Steven. Why don’t we move on? Who would like to go next? How about you, Alyssa. Would you like to share?”

Alyssa is probably in her mid-thirties, but she looks older. Because of the several thin lines that surround her lips, I guess that she’s a smoker. Her hair is long, and she twirls it with her right hand. She clears her voice.

“I’m Alyssa, and my anxiety level is ten. So is my depression. My suicide thoughts are an eight, and I have no thoughts of hurting anyone else. Last night I slept for six hours straight, and it was the first time in five months that I didn’t have any nightmares about my boyfriend.”

Alyssa is upside-down on her mortgage, and has not made a payment since her boyfriend’s suicide. Someone asks her about her boyfriend. Alyssa frowns. She’s not here to talk about him.

James says, “Alyssa, you don’t need to say anything about your boyfriend.”

“That’s okay, I’ll tell you what happened. Five months ago, my boyfriend pointed a .357 Magnum right in my face and pulled the trigger. For some reason the gun didn’t go off. Then he put the gun to his own head and blew his brains out all over the living room. I had to get one of those crime-scene cleaning companies to clean up the...um...blood and stuff.”

Someone asks, “And you’re still living there? Why?”

Idiot, I thought.

“Because I own the house and have nowhere else to go.”

Everyone is quiet, even James. The silence is excruciating. I decide to go next.

“My name is Rob. My anxiety and depression are both ten. I have no suicidal thoughts.”

That was a lie, but admitting to having suicidal thoughts meant buying a ticket for a longer stay.

I continue, “I have no thoughts of harming anyone. I slept about six hours off and on. My goal is to attend every meeting and try to be positive, except when I talk about A.A.”

I am surprised when Mary lets out a loud laugh. Since I was admitted on Wednesday night, I had not heard Mary utter as much as a word.

James asks, “Mary would you like to be next?”

She is still laughing when she answers that she would.

“Oooh boy! My name is Mary. My anxiety is two, depression ten. Got maybe an hour of sleep. Not suicidal, not homicidal. My goal is to try to come out of my shell. Thanks for saying that

about A.A., Robert. It's like you read my mind. I hate A.A. too. I've had two sponsors, and they both fired me because they said that I was addicted to psych meds. They were the ones who were addicted. Addicted to A.A.

“One sponsor had the nerve to tell me, ‘If you choose to take psych meds, then you don't believe in true recovery.’

“Choose to take psych meds? Hunh? You think I choose to take psych meds?

“Then she says, ‘If you're taking psych meds, you shouldn't even bother celebrating your sobriety anniversary.’

“The fucking bitch. She said ‘psych meds equal no sobriety.’

“I told her, ‘If I weren't taking psych meds, you would be the first person I'd kill.’”

Steven sees an opportunity.

“She's drunk and on drugs, and she's being uncooperative. I've called security.”

That floors me. I haven't laughed so hard in a very long time.

Meditation upon a Summary of *Madame Bovary*

–LOIS MARIE HARROD

*She was a doctor's discontented wife,
who longed to experience the passion,
the excitement, the luxury she has read about in novels.
She had affairs, racked up debt, and took arsenic.*

Yes, that was her life, and, yes, she was *discontented*,
as are most women who see themselves as merely mates—
who wants to be a helpmate when you can be a hussy
or a harridan or a whore?

And the doctor was tedious.

And I can name any number of people
who prefer suffering to boredom,
who create agony for themselves and too many others.
I try to keep them at the edges of my life.

As for Emma, I have some sympathy,
After all, she does long for the passion, the excitement, the luxury
which she reads about in books I teach.

So maybe the problem is reading.
Life never stacks up to literature, heavy or light,
and I have heard of lovers
who preferred the fictional to the real—
its steadiness, its lack of surprise after the first encounter.

Yes, men who read *Madam Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*
even, *Moby Dick*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* again and again.

To love a book is to love someone who won't change.

Not strictly true, says my husband, the literary critic,
A book is different every time you read it.

A man, he was a doctor, once told me portentously,
*A woman marries a man because she thinks
she can change him.*
A man marries a woman

*because he thinks she will never change.
Both are disappointed.*

I didn't ask him what he thought about his former wife
who had affairs, racked up debt, and failed to take arsenic.

Remnants

-MORGAN BAUSCH

He remembered the last time he loved her.
The bed in *Le Richelieu* was the only one
in *Mardi Gras* New Orleans. They went there
on the spur of a passionate moment,
running away with themselves for a while.
She blushed when the hotel clerk looked
for bags. "Oh, we'll carry them to the room,"
he had said with a wide smile and a wink and cash.
The night was Louisiana-humid. Their clothes
wrapped them in sweat. He didn't mind.
She looked grand in her summer dress
with the pattern of red roses moving
around her body when she walked to him.
The lavender scent of her perfume mingled
with the fragrance of the orange he peeled
for her from the basket of fruit on the table.
He watched as her lips rounded on a slice,
the juice running from her mouth as she
laughed at him and went for a messy kiss.
They could hear the soft jazz coming down
the confetti-covered street. Their French doors
were thrown open to catch the barest breeze.
They could faintly hear the murmurs of neon-
bead-bedecked strangers clinking glasses
of cheap champagne, getting drunk on the
notes of a swinging saxophone solo. She bent
into him like a moon curving into a midnight sky.
"Maybe we'll go out later," she whispered, her
lips trailing gently down his neck. "Sure, we can."
He leaned into her, his breath caught in the curls
of her hair. They didn't though because this
was the final time they would meet. She would
leave him in the lethargic morning of an afterglow.
Her slightly indented pillow still smelled of her.
The sheets had twisted into his legs, trapping him
in the remembrance of their gasps and moans and
throes of what was and could have been.

He shouldn't catch her anyway. She had stolen
his heart like she had stolen the hours to spend
with him. But she was a welcome thief, only
wrong in the losing right of it for him and the
climax for her. When he returned to that hotel,
that room, so he could bring her back in his mind,
he saw the guest fruit basket waiting on the side table

next to the queen-sized bed. He selected an orange, touching its surface, his fingers digging in to peel it, pulling it apart, sniffing the pungent odor over the AC, noticing the white veins crisscrossing in the slices. He recalled the look in her eyes when he put out his hand to her with the offering of a dripping piece. He could still taste her on his lips, knowing it was the last time he could ever think of loving her again.

Pazookies and the Art of Kindness

–TEIGE WEIDNER

In a well-lit corner of the BJ's in Janzen Beach, OR my mother cries. They dim the lights as the August sun drops below the tree line and Phil Collins gets a bit louder on sound system. My father sips at his beer with a furrowed brow and loving eyes.

I know what that feels like now.

The waitress didn't realize what was happening when she seated my mother in the corner, but she's thankful she did. Crying is bad for business. But something about the middle-aged woman hangs with the waitress as she brings drinks, salads, and dinner. I think it's the way my mom smiles when she cries.

I notice those things now.

The meal draws to a close but the tears are far from over. The waitress doesn't know why, but she's moved to do something. Customer first, right? She orders up a pazookie, a massive mound of ice cream on top of a huge cookie. She delivers it to the couple in the corner.

The woman and man look up with confused faces. They're about to correct her when she tells them, "It looks like you could use this. It's on me."

I do that sort of thing now.

When I was a boy, my parents took us to the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle. The rare treat for our large family included a trip to the Rain Forest Food Pavilion. It smelled like cheap hot dogs and fried food. The sound of ravenous children echoed through the space and my shoes stuck to remnants of spilled soda. It was heaven to my boyish senses.

I can't remember if I offered to help my mom carry the food with the hope of stealing a few extra fries before my siblings got to the crispy golden goodness, or if I was ordered to help. Either way, I ended up standing in the line with my mother. I scanned the big board of food and weighed my options with the goal of maximizing my junk food intake.

Only one family stood between my lunch and me. I could feel the excitement boil up from my growling stomach. My mother put a hand on my shoulder, "Make sure you're ready when we get there." She held a list of orders from my siblings in her hand. I nodded back at her, reassuring her I wasn't going to mess up my chance at bliss.

The man in front of me gave his order while his wife bounced up and down with a sleeping baby wrapped close to her. I remember the father turning to the wife and asking for money. She tilted her head and stared at her husband, "You have it."

He shook his head and showed her the empty leather of his wallet. The two stood, staring at each other, locked in a moment of panic. There wasn't any accusation in their faces, just fear. Each waiting for the other to take the lead.

I've felt that fear now.

The moment lasted a lifetime. The image is burned in my consciousness. As is the moment it was shattered by the kindness of a stranger. My mother stepped up and put cash down on the counter, "I've got it." Her blond curly hair swung behind her as she smiled at them.

"Are you sure?" The father asked. His eyes flicking between his wife and my mother's feet.

"Of course. Pay it forward when you can."

"Thank you." He said as he grabbed the food off the counter. His wife bounced and shushed the baby. She flicked a smile my way.

“You’re welcome. Enjoy the zoo!” My mom took the change back from the man behind the counter.

“You too, thank you again.” The man said.

“Of course! Teige, do you know what you want?”

I can answer that question now.

I was only 17 when my mom dropped me off at University of Portland. I have one of those awkward birthdays that fall right on the cut-off date for starting school. I just missed it and my parents didn’t push to get me in school early. Boys do better when they are a little older. Especially boys with the zest for life I had.

After completing the 3rd grade, the teacher met with my parents. They weren’t sure what to do with me. I had been in a 2nd/3rd split and a 3rd/4th split for the last two years of school. As a 3rd grader, I’d already completed the 4th grade curriculum.

I’d taken the test that makes you answer math problems and questions about folding and cutting paper. I liked the questions about paper. I knew I’d done well on it even before we got the results.

They gave my parents two options. They either could put me on a bus for an hour every morning and send me to a special school or they could move me to the 5th grade. I’d balked at the thought of leaving my friends. The special school was called Talented and Gifted, or T.A.G for short. Kids that went there got a nickname I wanted no part of.

Despite reservations, my parents opted to have me skip 4th grade. It’s what I wanted, it’s what the teacher wanted, and it was what they thought was best. What I didn’t understand at the time was that they were agreeing to lose a year of my life.

I understand the difficulty of that decision now.

That ramifications of that decision came when they were leaving me 200 miles from home for the first time. They could have had me for another year. They could have hugged me every morning and night for another 365 days.

Instead, they sat in a BJ's for a bite to eat before the long drive home in an empty minivan. In the hot evening air of a dimly lit corner of a forgotten restaurant, a waitress saw my mother in pain and reacted to it with a simple gesture. I'm forever grateful for her kindness.

Wandering Seeds

—HEIDI SEABORN

On knees rooting morning glory
 tangled beneath hydrangeas
 I'm at my garden wall, cursing

the Edo Japanese for cultivating morning glory. Rainbows of tissue blossoms bloomed open,
 umbrellas under a shogun sun. Their vines anchoring an island of people in walled gardens. Walled
 off from my world.

The Ottomans edged
 north along the Red Sea
 cupping the green Mediterranean
 to a thirsty mouth
 then flowed into Danube's blue vein—

Europeans stamped *New* onto each settlement and Galileo cast his sights further yet, tethering the
 stars that lit up seas like garden lights

to guide ships
 carrying morning glory seeds
 to my soil
 to strangle my dahlias
 choke my pear espalier
 my wall.

Echo

–NANCY JENTSCH

I only noticed the hilltop tree
when it was gone
the place it had stood
now a wailing scar
an echo louder than its source

While finches and squirrels
had sheltered in its Vs
I had stowed
its map-lined bark
in a subconscious vault
till it was gone
like unwallled borders
and Babel's laughter

Gravitational Pull

–DANIEL RAMIREZ

The mountains of the North Cascades excel in the methodology of trial by fire, scoffing at the notion of trails for beginners. Everything goes straight up. But, lured by visions of sharp crags piercing an icy sky, hikers make the pilgrimage, beginners amongst them.

My post dealt with beginners - youth visiting the National Park to volunteer for conservation projects, mostly trailwork. Although I got to know many bright and vibrant folk, there's one group that stands out. They'd been in the backcountry for about a week when I gave them their mission for the day: hike four miles to the top of Twisp Pass and, on the way back, cut back brush overcrowding the trail - standard trail maintenance. Fulfilling my (internal) morning prediction, we spent all day getting to the pass, leaving no time - and more importantly, no energy - to perform the day's task. But don't say we didn't work.

We trekked upward through shadows of spruce, fir, and cedar. Occasionally, an avalanche chute scoured open the sunny valley. Here, we'd navigate stone islands above melted snowmuck. There were many stops along the way- for water, for snacks, for nature appreciation, for respite from the body's burn.

Here's the thing about walking uphill: it's an act completely separate from walking. The body is not used to it. In fact, if it goes on for miles, the body actively rebels against it. Thighs and lungs require a lengthy initiation period. In my case it took two seasons of work in the mountains until my brain finally convinced my body that, indeed, it would not disintegrate if it Just. Kept. Climbing.

I was witnessing their disintegration. Never before had I heard the query "How much further?" uttered with such a grave countenance, something I observed whenever I, the pacesetter, took a glance behind me. Faces were amongst the many things that drooped - eyes fell, heads hung, shoulders slumped, arms dangled.

Thanks to some coaxing but mostly sheer grit, they finally reached the top of the pass, that glorious spot where, in either direction, the trail can only take you down. Atop our alpine destination, we stood on mounds of elements-stained granite to look upon two distinct horizons. One offered a panorama of iced rock stacked forever into the distance. The other exposed a rock face so immense, so sheer, that it seemed a rampart for the heavens, ending in a deep basin of moss-fuzzed scree. The air was thin, pure. Sunbeams kissed our squinting faces.

To have witnessed their change upon arrival! Pants turned to gasps. Eyes leveled out from footing. Boulders invited play, hopping and climbing. Muted reflection was as natural as breath. The morning's heaviness dissipated into sparse air.

Truthfully, that heaviness loomed ever since their bus showed up. Coming from within the urban boundary of Seattle, facile characterization would dub them "inner city," but that would negate their unique and varied personalities, if not their actual reality. Although it was present, it was not as if they exuded angst, for many smiles were cracked during their sojourn. They just happened to be people disconnected from standard opportunity, including those that come with living in a global capital of outdoor recreation. They'd grown to expect a world that wasn't for them.

Like the Jehova's Witness turned Muslim military dropout who hinted at mental illness for reasons of discharge. Or the youngest, an avowed storyteller whose strained relationship with her mother often forced her out of the house. She and a pair of friends had actually been recruited at a local homeless resource center for youth. The latter two, one a poet of beautiful rage and the other a bare-handed trout catcher, subsisted on the wasted resources of a gluttonous society, squatting in abandoned buildings. In the vernacular, they'd be known as "gutter punks" but used "travelers", instead, as a point of pride.

Then there was the son of Ethiopian immigrants, who'd come expecting cabins with plumbing but found himself both sleeping on and shitting in the ground. He'd require the most motivation when lumbering his large frame and heavy tools along the trail. Especially moved, he

offered his own mountaintop musing. My attempted recapitulation cannot do justice to its real time potency, but here goes, “As I stand here, looking on what's probably the most beautiful sight I've ever seen, I think about what I've been doing with my life up to this point: watching TV, eating junk food, potatoing the couch...”

YES, I thought to myself. YES, YES, YES, YES. YES. Such realizations are exactly why I'm inspired to lead youth into the outdoors. (Not to mention the beauty of his tuber-based verb.) Even better, all shared the sentiment - that the reward was worth the toil. Hardship matters little when you are a denizen of the sky.

* * *

“Another glorious Sierra day in which one seems to be dissolved and absorbed and sent pulsing onward we know not where. Life seems neither long nor short, and we take no more heed to save time nor to make haste than do the trees or stars. This is true freedom, a good practical sort of immortality.”

—John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*

* * *

I was a beginner once. Five years before, I stood in a grove of ponderosa pines, craning my neck to their moon-silhouetted crowns. The December air was crisp and still, my breath foggy, my ungloved hands thrust into my jacket pockets. Moonlight glittered frosted bough needles. It was perfect. This act of looking upward wasn't mere observance; I was communing with my surroundings. Strange, I thought, that I could feel connection with things.

We left that camp at the foot of Mt. Adams the next morning. Our trip to commemorate the completion of a year of outdoor service had come to an end. The van started en route to Portland, I

peered out the window at the looming trees, longing to linger. I was just getting acquainted with this place. Even more, I was just learning that place could offer acquaintanceship.

My first backpacking trip happened the summer prior. Laden with not only tent, sleeping pad, and sleeping bag but canned goods and long-handled tools and pots and stove fuel, I piggybacked anvils up a vicious hill to base camp. Unbeknownst to me, it was just a sampling of things to come.

The next morning, with breakfast pasted to my gut, we started an upward hike to the work site. The sponsor decided then to inform us that we were headed to the very top. *Gulp*. The trail rejected the usual switchbacks for a straight incline. I'd never known that time could be warped by covering such short distances over such long time spans. Stopping hurt as much as starting. Each false summit gave and dashed hope. I looked at the people to my front and back for shared signs of struggle. I had a recurring urge to scream out to them - to anyone who would listen - "It can't be that much further?" Instead, I stoically longed for an end.

Somehow something inside propelled me to the top, but there was little sense of accomplishment. All I wanted was to lay on my back and shovel handfuls of trail mix into my mouth in between swigs of water. Then lay some more.

As we ate our lunches above treeline, the fog that had clamped onto us all morning began to dissolve. Soon, feathered wisps betrayed signs of blue. And then it happened - the fog burned off completely.

Combined with the might of the Columbia River rolling below, the Cascade Range unfurled around us. Some might make the link to rest and sustenance, but I'm convinced it was the sight that energized me as I ran around for best views. From various spots on the peak I could see Hood, Adams, St. Helens, Rainier, and the tip of Jefferson. I'm pretty sure someone had to narrate those names to me, but they were mine, each a snow-capped paragon of Mountain. So *this* is why people do that to themselves.

It had been a while since I'd felt that opening of the world's possibilities. For most of my life, I had been a happy-go-lucky kind of guy. The only hardships I knew were free throws in high school and all-nighters in college. College itself was mostly a frenzied delight, but as the end approached, I sensed the darkening loom of Real Life.

It wasn't impending responsibility that gnawed at me. I was actually eager to grace the working world with my inflated sense of skill. What disheartened me was attempt after attempt to secure gainful employment, especially after a lifetime of buying into the maxim that academic success ensured career success. Rejection was the culprit behind my darkness.

It wasn't just occupational. Though I refused to acknowledge it at the time. It was the rejection one fears when finally revealing their true self to others. And much like the process of self-realization leading up to it, I denied that it played a role in how I was feeling, since I had come to accept - nay, embrace - my attractions. Life's dark side had finally gripped me tight, and I had no precedent for coping.

My frosty meditation beneath the ponderosas was the culmination of a year working in the outdoors after college, a position I took as an unanticipated *plan b*. It wasn't easy. Mostly, I hacked and yanked at spiny invasive plants alongside people equally as prickly. But what the position offered in drudgery, it made up for in education. Only when I had completed the year did I realize that the toil had sweetened the reward.

* * *

There is no one impervious to the effects of mountains. They draw all eyes, all breaths skyward. Their mass exerts its own gravitational pull. At the moment, I go away from the North Cascades of Washington state after another successful outdoor season with amazing people. I'm on a

train bound south and eastward to Texas, where home and family await. I may be resisting it at the moment, but the tug forever nags at me. I still long to linger.

Radioactive* Elephant

–PRINNIE MCCOURT

July 16, 2017 Las Cruces Sun News: The fossil remains of a Stegomastodon ('hairy elephant') were found in Las Cruces, NM...NMSU biology professor said, "...fossils from this area are radioactive."

Dead for at least a million years

the fossil lies in toxic sands

absorbing poisons from the soil,

monitoring the health of Earth.

Uranium, gamma-rays, solar-flares,

fallout from atomic bombs,

all sources of malignancy.

Elephant bones

won't let us forget

the noxious history

of our world.

**many museums coat fossils with heavily leaded paint to protect visitors from radioactivity. Paleontologists often use Geiger counters to locate large fossilized bones.*

Contributor's Biographies

Sara Anderson is a native Iowan. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing from Hamline University. She lives in the Twin Cities with her husband and daughter. She has an affinity for tuxedo cats.

William Auten is the author of the novel *Pepper's Ghost* (2016, Black Rose Writing), a 2017 Eric Hoffer Book Award finalist for contemporary fiction. Recent work has appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Gravel*, *Open: Journal of Arts & Letters*, *Slush Pile Magazine*, and *Thoughtful Dog*.

Morgan Bausch, an Honor Graduate from WNMU, earned a MA with Concentrations in English and Writing, and graduated in December 2017 with Distinction. He also has a B.A. in English, a M.Ed. from Arizona State University, and teaches English at Liberty High School and Glendale Community College in Arizona. Morgan enjoys traveling in the States and has also spent time in Australia, England, France, Ireland, Japan, and Costa Rica. He works to create a visceral feeling in those that read his poetry and prose by stirring their imagination.

Robert Beveridge makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry just outside Cleveland, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *Pulsar*, *Tessellate*, and *Scarlet Leaf Review*, among others.

Dan Branch lives in Juneau, Alaska. He won two first prizes for poetry, one awarded by Charles Bukowski. His work has appeared in *Cardiff Review*, *Concho Review*, *Kestrel*, *Gravel*, *Hippocampus*, *Metonym*, *Penwood Review*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Punctuate*, *Swamp Ape*, *Tidal Echoes*, *Windmill*, and *Portland Magazine*. He is currently a student in the University of Alaska Anchorage MFA program. In 2016 he won the university's Jason Wenger award for creative nonfiction.

Elizabeth Burton lives in Central Kentucky and is a graduate of Spalding University's MFA program in fiction. She holds other graduate degrees from the University of Texas at Austin and Stony Brook University. Her fiction has appeared in *Roanoke Review*, *Waypoints*, *The Grief Diaries*, *Kentucky Review*, *Chautauqua*, and is forthcoming in *The Louisville Review* and *The MacGuffin*. She has received a grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women, and her work has been nominated for both the Best of the Net anthology and a Pushcart Prize.

Michael Chin was born and raised in Utica, New York and currently lives in Georgia with his wife and son. His hybrid chapbook, *The Leo Burke Finish*, is available now from Gimmick Press. His short story "Practical Men" won Bayou Magazine's Jim Knudsen Editor's Prize for fiction, and his short-short "Interrogation" won Prime Number Magazine's Flash Fiction Contest. Additionally, he has previously published work with journals including *The Normal School*, *Passages North*, *Barrelhouse*, *Hobart*, *Iron Horse*, *Shenandoah*, *Waccamaw*, and *Front Porch*. He works as a contributing editor for *Moss*. Find him online at miketchin.com or follow him on Twitter @miketchin.

Hannah Clark is an MFA candidate in Poetry at Creighton University and managing editor of *Blue River Review*. She enjoys live music, lovely words, and local food. She moved to Omaha after studying at Chadron State College and has been featured in such journals as *Siren's Call* and *Cahoodaloodaling*.

Natalie Cross is a recent English graduate from Whitworth University and currently resides in her hometown of Spokane, Washington. She seeks to write pieces that deal with the struggle to understand the determinism of our bodies and the seeming absurdity often found in nature. She is the

recent winner of an undergraduate chapbook contest, but this will be her first publication in a literary journal.

Cat Dixon is the author of *Eva and Too Heavy to Carry* (Stephen F. Austin University Press, 2016, 2014) and *The Book of Levinson and Our End Has Brought the Spring* (Finishing Line Press, 2017, 2015). She is the managing editor of The Backwaters Press, a nonprofit press in Omaha. She teaches creative writing at the University of Nebraska. Her poetry and reviews have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies including *Sugar House Review*, *Midwest Quarterly Review*, *Coe Review*, *Lime Hawk*, *Eclectica*, and *Mid-American Review*.

Marty Eberhardt directed botanical gardens in Tucson and San Diego and spent many years as a nonprofit staff member, board member, and consultant. She now delights in using the right side of her brain to write fiction and poetry. She has published thirteen poems and one prose piece, in *The Wilderness House Literary Review*, *The Dragon Poet Review*, *The San Diego Writers INK 2017 Anthology*, three volumes of *The Guilded Pen*, and *The Silver City Quarterly Review*. She has retained a literary agent who has sent out Marty's first mystery novel to publishers. Marty divides her time between the small mountain town of Silver City, NM, and the sprawling beach city of San Diego, CA.

Seonaid Francis is a Scottish poet, currently living in west Wales. She is inspired mostly by the land, the stories of the land, and the complexities of living in rural areas. She has had work published in *New Writing Scotland*, *Valve Journal*, *The Grind* and *Spilt Ink* amongst others.

Heather Gliniecki is a recent MFA graduate from Manhattanville College's Creative Writing program. She is currently working in New York with special needs students while working her way through her first two collections of poems and short stories. Though she focuses on horror or speculative fiction genre specific pieces, once in a blue moon she branches out into uncomfortable or unknown territory to expand her writing universe with poetry or fiction that does not fall into genre categories. Her passion for art in all of its forms drives her writing in unexpected directions with a common goal of accessibility for all willing to read.

Richard R. Gonzalez is local resident of the lower Mimbres Valley in New Mexico and an amateur non-fiction writer and poet. He was born and lived in El Paso, Texas for many years. He graduated from U. of San Francisco and U.C., Davis and taught at Yale University. He was previously employed as a research scientist for the Department of Defense and served as Adjunct professor at Harvard and New Mexico State University but is now retired from academic life.

John Grey is Australian born short storywriter, poet, playwright, musician, Providence RI resident since late seventies. . Has been published in numerous magazines including *Weird Tales*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Greensboro Poetry Review*, *Poem*, *Agni*, *Poet Lore* and *Journal Of The American Medical Association* as well as the anthologies, "The Scandalous Lives Of Butterflies" and "No, Achilles." Has had plays produced in Los Angeles and off-off Broadway in New York. Winner of Rhyssling Award for short genre poetry in 1999.

Lois Marie Harrod's 16th and most recent collection *Nightmares of the Minor Poet* appeared in June 2016 from Five Oaks. And *She Took the Heart* (Casa de Cinco Hermanas) appeared in January 2016, *Fragments from the Biography of Nemesis* (Cherry Grove Press) and the chapbook *How Marlene Mae Longs for Truth* (Dancing Girl Press) appeared in 2013. *The Only Is* won the 2012 Tennessee Chapbook Contest (Poems & Plays), and *Brief Term*, a collection of poems about teachers and teaching was published by Black Buzzard Press, 2011. *Cosmogony* won the 2010 Hazel Lipa Chapbook (Iowa State). Dodge poet and 3-time recipient of a New Jersey Council on the Arts

fellowship, she is widely published in literary journals and online ezines from *American Poetry Review* to *Zone 3*. She teaches Creative Writing at The College of New Jersey. Links to her online work at www.loismarieharrod.org.

Leonore Hildebrandt is the author of *The Work at Hand* and *The Next Unknown*. A third collection, *Where You Happen to Be*, is forthcoming with Deerbrook Editions. Her poems and translations have appeared in the *Cafe Review*, *Cerise Press*, the *Cimarron Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Harpur Palate*, *Poetry Daily*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, and the *Sugar House Review*, among other journals. Winner of the 2013 Gemini Poetry Contest, she received fellowships from the Elizabeth George Foundation, the Maine Community Foundation, and the Maine Arts Commission. She was nominated several times for a Pushcart Prize. A native of Germany, Leonore lives “off the grid” in Harrington, Maine, and spends the winter in Silver City, NM. She teaches writing at the University of Maine and serves on the editorial board of the *Beloit Poetry Journal*.

Katlyn Hungerford grew up in the Springfield, Mo area. She developed an interest in photography as a child after gaining access to an old film camera. This sparked a lifelong interest in capturing moments in time and emphasizing the beauty of the world around her. Working as a lifestyle photographer, Katlyn is currently developing her business Marshall Lane Photography.

Claire Ibarra received her MFA in creative writing from Florida International University. Her fiction has been published in many fine literary journals and anthologies. Most recently, her work has appeared in *Eleven Eleven*, *The Tishman Review*, *Flash Frontier*, and *Boston Accent Lit*. Claire’s poetry chapbook is *Vortex of Our Affections* (Finishing Line Press, 2017). Claire lives and teaches in Denver, Colorado.

Nancy Jentsch has taught German and Spanish for over thirty years at Northern Kentucky University. She will retire in 2020 and looks forward to spending more time writing poetry and sharing the art of words with others. She has published scholarly articles, short fiction and poetry in journals such as *Journal of Kentucky Studies*, *Eclectica*, *Aurean*, and *Blinders*. Her chapbook, *Authorized Visitors*, has been published by Cherry Grove Collections, an imprint of WordTech Communications (2017). Seven of her ekphrastic poems appear in the collaborative chapbook *Frame and Mount the Sky* (Finishing Line Press, 2017). Her Facebook writer’s page is <https://www.facebook.com/NancyJentschPoet/>. When she is not writing or teaching, she enjoys hiking, bird watching, knitting and Sudoku.

Rae Kim is a sophomore at Ruth Asawa School of the Arts in San Francisco, California, where she attends the Creative Writing discipline. She is sixteen years old, and has been published in several small online literary journals and her program's journal, *Umläut*.

Bear Kosik has authored three novels: *The Secret History of Another Rome*, *Crossing Xavier* (as Hugh Dudley), and *C Square* (with Paul Barone). Many essays, short fiction pieces, and poems have appeared in anthologies, reviews, and e-zines. His plays have appeared Off-Off-Broadway at Manhattan Repertory Theater, the Midtown International Theatre Festival, and other venues. A political scientist by training, his book *Restoring the Republic: A New Social Contract for We the People* assesses the state of democracy in the USA. He forecast 15 months in advance why Donald Trump would win the White House. Bear resides in East Greenbush, NY.

Kristian Kyles is an 18 year-old freelance artist who lives in the Springfield, Missouri area. He started practicing art when he was a child and has kept learning and experimenting with art as he has aged. Kristian also enjoys working with the topic of his transition in hopes of being a role model for other trans youths.

Mary Leoson teaches English and psychology courses at the college level in Cleveland, Ohio. She loves to write with her dogs at her feet and somehow survives on decaf coffee and protein bars. She holds an M.A. in English & Writing from Western New Mexico University, an M.S. in Psychology from Walden University, and a B.S. in Criminology from Indiana State University. She is currently in the NEOMFA Program (fiction) at Cleveland State University. Her writing has been featured in the Twisted Vine Literary Journal, TWJ Magazine, The Write Launch, and on NPR's "This I Believe" series. You can learn more at www.maryleoson.com.

D.S. Maolalai recently returned to Ireland after four years away, now spending his days working for a medical supply company and his nights drinking wine. His first collection, *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden*, was published in 2016 by the Encircle Press. He has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Suzanne Rogier Marshall - A retired English teacher, Suzanne Rogier Marshall has published professional articles, poetry, and a book on teaching writing. Her poems have appeared recently, or are forthcoming, in *Cider Press Review*, *Heartwood Literary Magazine*, *Up North Literary Journal*, *Portage Magazine*, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal* and other journals and anthologies. Her first chapbook *Blood Knot* was released in June 2015 (Porkbelly Press).

Prinnie McCourt - I write for the *Deming Headlight* and the *Desert Exposure* and have self-published nine books of poetry, two plays, and three mysteries. Currently I am working on a fourth mystery, inspired by my two years working in Turkey and the Philippine Islands. I also co-wrote, and acted in, a play that was produced and performed in Deming. That was one of many plays I've participated in locally. At present I am teaching GED and ESL (English as a Second Language) in Luna County, where I live just north of the Mexican border with a six-pack of dogs, a galaxy of cats, and a Great Horned Owl.

Daniel Edward Moore's poems have been published in journals such as: *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Rattle*, *Columbia Journal*, *Glass Poetry Journal*, *New South*, *The American Journal Of Poetry* and others. His poems are currently at *Mandala*, *Lullwater Review*, *WA 129 Washington State Anthology*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *December Magazine*, *The Big Windows Review*, *The Good Men Project*, *Natural Bridge Literary Journal*, *Scalawag Magazine*, and *Sweet Tree Review*. He has poems forthcoming in *Weber Review*, *2 Bridges Review*, *The Tule Review*, *The Chaffin Journal*, *Hot Metal Bridge*, *The Stillwater Review*, *Fire Poetry Journal* and *West Texas Literary Review*. His two books of poems, the anthology "This New Breed: Gents, Bad Boys and Barbarians," and "Confessions Of A Pentecostal Buddhist" can be found on Amazon. He lives in Washington on Whidbey Island and his work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Visit Daniel at Danieledwardmoore.com

Jeffrey Perso is a former journalist and winner of three International Labor Communications Journalism Awards; he now teaches at Upper Iowa University, and his fiction has appeared in, among other places, *Iconoclast*, *Manzanita*, *Porcupine Literary Arts Magazine*, and *The Rockhurst Review*. "Now, Lend Me Your Horse," is excerpted from *Water Bodies*, Finalist for the William Faulkner-William Wisdom Novel Prize; other chapters have appeared or are forthcoming in *Crooked/Shift*, *Embark*, *Kudzu House Quarterly*, and *Why We Right Write Outside the Lines*.

Susan Pomerantz has taught for thirty years, first as an adjunct sociology instructor, and currently, as a teacher of high school English in New Jersey. She has published articles in education sites and regional New Jersey newspapers. Her short story, "Windward," appeared in the March 2017 edition of *The Long Story*. Her short story "Wishes" received an honorable mention in *Glimmer's* May/June 2017 Short Story Award for New Writers contest.

Fabrice Poussin teaches French and English at Shorter University. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *The Chimes*, and dozens of other magazines. His photography has been published in *The Front Porch Review*, the *San Pedro River Review* and more than 300 other publications.

Octavio Quintanilla is the author of the poetry collection, *If I Go Missing* (Slough Press, 2014) and the 2018-2020 Poet Laureate of San Antonio, TX. His poetry, fiction, translations, and photography have appeared, or are forthcoming, in journals such as *Salamander*, *RHINO*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Pilgrimage*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *The Texas Observer*, *Existere: A Journal of Art & Literature*, and elsewhere. Reviews of his work can be found at *CutBank Literary Journal*, *Concho River Review*, *San Antonio Express-News*, *American Microreviews & Interviews*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *Pleiades*, and others. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of North Texas and is the regional editor for *Texas Books in Review*. He teaches Literature and Creative Writing in the M.A./M.F.A. program at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio, Texas.

Daniel Ramirez's work has appeared in such places as Google Drive and is forthcoming in `c:\Documents\ShortStories\2018\rejected\`. They've been acclaimed by such people as his mother and sophomore English teacher. Near Austin, Texas, he teaches kids during the school year and leads teens in outdoor conservation projects in the summer. Those positions in Portland and the North Cascades were as an Americorps volunteer, something the current administration wants to excise from their budget. Don't let them get away with it.

Robert Rickelman was born in Chicago and moved to Tucson in 1995. He earned his B.A. in Spanish from the University of Arizona, which is where he was introduced to the Latin-American genre of Magical Realism. Among his favorite authors are Juan Rulfo, Julio Cortázar, and Carlos Fuentes. Aside from writing, Robert works as a substitute teacher. This job provides him the flexibility and free time he uses to write. In addition to "Group Therapy," Robert has four nonfiction stories that will be published this spring. "Phyllis," will be included in the May issue of *Inscape Magazine*; "Leaving Prince Albert," will appear in the spring issue of *Blue River Review*; and two stories, "Comic Relief" and "Orange Sweater," have been selected for the second issue of *The Long Island Literary Journal*. After years of rejection letters, all the hard work and rewrites are beginning to pay off.

Jasmine Odessa Rizer's work has appeared in *Georgia Library Quarterly*, *MiddleGray Magazine*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Drops of Crimson*, *The Blotter*, *Orb*, and *Stillpoint*. Her short story "Better" was featured on *The Blotter Radio Zine* on WCOM in 2015. She is widely suspected actually to be a not-too-bright hick hiding behind a pencil skirt and a couple of college degrees.

Andrew Romriell - A.J. Romriell is a student at Utah State University studying Creative Writing, graduating in June 2018. He has earned First Place in the 2017 USU Creative Writing Contest for Poetry as well as Second Place in the 2017 Utah Original Writing Competition for Creative Nonfiction, and his work has been featured in *Mangrove Literary Journal*, *Tinge Magazine*, *Peculiar*, and *Sink Hollow*. He lives in Orlando, Florida with his husband, Jed, and their husky, Kira.

Heidi Seaborn started writing poetry in 2016. Since then her work has appeared in over 50 journals and anthologies including *Nimrod*, *Penn Review*, *Yemassee Journal*, *American Journal of Poetry* and as a chapbook, *Finding My Way Home* (Finishing Line Press, 2018). She's the 2018 Joy Bale Boone Poetry Prize winner, finalist for the 2018 Mississippi Review Poetry Prize, 2017 Patricia Dobler Poetry Award and Lauren K. Alleyne Difficult Fruit Poetry Prize. She's a New York University

MFA candidate, graduate of Stanford University and on The Adroit Journal staff.
www.heidiseabornpoet.com.

Reem Rashash Shaaban has always loved art and writing. After teaching English at the American University of Beirut for 33 years, she decided to go back to her passions. Her poetry and short fiction have been published in regional and international journals. Furthermore, she has had three solo art exhibitions in Beirut and Qatar.

Mark Spano is now working on a limited theatrical release for his feature documentary entitled *Sicily: Land of Love and Strife*. *Canta Sicilia* in Hamilton, Ontario will be hosting a screening of the film in late June. Other screenings are in the works. He is also out and about promoting his recent novel *Midland Club* published by Thunderfoot Press. *Midland Club* has received two awards and significant critical acclaim. In January, he will be doing a month-long residency at *Escape2Create* in Seaside, Florida where he will be adapting *Midland Club* for the screen. He will likely be putting together a development team for *Midland Club* the film as soon as the screenplay is completed. He is hoping to see his book *Kidding the Moon* published in 2018.

Yermiyahu Ahron Taub is the author of six books of poetry, including most recently *A moyz tsvishn vakldike volkn-kratsers: geklibene Yidishe lider/A Mouse Among Tottering Skyscrapers: Selected Yiddish Poems* (2017). *Tsugreyndik zikh tsu tantsn: naye Yidishe lider/Preparing to Dance: New Yiddish songs*, a CD of nine of his Yiddish poems set to music, was released on the Multikulti Project label (www.multikulti.com) in 2014. Taub was honored by the Museum of Jewish Heritage as one of New York's best emerging Jewish artists and has been nominated four times for a Pushcart Prize and twice for a Best of the Net award. With Ellen Cassedy, he is the recipient of the 2012 Yiddish Book Center Translation Prize for *Oedipus in Brooklyn and Other Stories* by Blume Lempel (Mandel Vilar Press and Dryad Press, 2016). His short stories have appeared in *Hamilton Stone Review*, *Jewish Fiction .net*, *The Jewish Literary Journal*, *Jewrotica*, *Penshaft: New Yiddish Writing*, *Second Hand Stories Podcast*, and *Typishly.com*. Please visit his website at www.yataub.net.

Taunja Thomson's work has most recently appeared in *These Fragile Lilacs* and *Alcyone*. Three of her poems have been nominated for Pushcart Awards: "Seahorse and Moon" in 2005, "I Walked Out in January" in 2016, and "Strum and Lull" in 2018. She has co-authored *Frame and Mount the Sky*, a chapbook of ekphrastic poetry (2017); her chapbook *Strum and Lull* placed in *Golden Walkman's* 2017 chapbook competition; and her chapbook *The Profusion* is due out in January of 2019. She has a writer's page at <https://www.facebook.com/TaunjaThomsonWriter/>.

Teige Weidner lives in Portland, OR with his wife and two kids. When he's not writing, he can be found enjoying the outdoors in the great Pacific Northwest. He spends his days working in the outdoor industry helping others to enjoy life outside. His other work can be found in *Placeholder Magazine*, *Perspectives Magazine*, and *The Longridge Review*.

Sandra Wickersham-McWhorter - Sandy's enduring love of '50s and '60s science-fiction movies and TV series, science, and Star Trek, comes out in her published poetry, published novels, eclectic reading tastes, and hobbies, which include an addiction to Lake Erie. A desire to return to her nonfiction roots led to a Master of Fine Arts in creative nonfiction in 2013 from Ashland University, where, oddly, she enjoyed the poetry lectures and wrote some. She still needs to revise her thesis into a sellable memoir and finish writing a new sci-fi novel so she can end the intergalactic war she started. Visit her at www.sandywick.com <http://www.facebook.com/#!/sandy.wickershammcwhorter>

Laura Madeline Wiseman's book *Velocipede*, published by Stephen F. Austin State University Press, is a 2016 Foreword INDIES Book of the Year Award Finalist. Her book *Leaves of Absence: An*

Illustrated Guide to Common Garden Affection with artist Sally Deskins published by Red Dashboard, is an Honor Book for the 2017 Nebraska Book Award.

Sally Zakariya's Pushcart Prize-nominated poetry has appeared in some 70 print and online journals and won prizes from Poetry Virginia and the Virginia Writers Club. She is the author, most recently, of *When You Escape* (Five Oaks Press, 2016), as well as *Insectomania* (2013) and *Arithmetic and other verses* (2011), and the editor of a poetry anthology, *Joys of the Table* (2015). Her chapbook *Personal Astronomy* is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. A former magazine editor, Zakariya lives in Arlington with her husband and two cats. She blogs at www.butdoesitrhyme.com.