
Two Thirds North
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ON THE MAP, SOMEWHERE

Editor's Foreword

There seems to be hope, despite the crisis in democracy that the world is suffering, that there is a thirst for creative writing that needs to be quenched.

What we have curated here is a fine issue, with prose that demands engagement and poems that linger in the mind, and get under the skin. There is a longing to see the world anew, with awe and inspiration, not incredulity and sorrow. Writing exists outside of the world, because of the world, despite the world and reminds us of a possible other world in which it is possible to "Give these remnants / a new purpose and shape" as Bryan Helton writes in "For Molly Brodak, Perhaps."

Many submissions dealt with reverberating loss and grief and the inevitable shift death brings to those left living. Mary Ann McGuigan's "Last Rites" captures the contradictory emotions of a grieving process, and the finality of the unresolvedness of things. The modern dilemma remains relevant—how can we be human beings in the world, and how do we maneuver the boundaries between self and other, here and there, within and without. David Dodd Lee's poem "The Weekend" is another example of this struggle: "Now I feel / my bones lock back into place, my marrow's / cellular arrangement a mirror, a universe, a conver- / sation contained, a growing equilibrium between / what's inside me and what's blazing out there."

What blazes out there is hard to grasp, impossible to understand. It is not in my nature to do anything at half-measure, but I find myself resisting the urge to make every word, every context some sort of act of resistance because I am so angry, and appalled, and disgusted. I take every opportunity to rage against the machine, to have real conversations about real, horrible things with people who may or may not want to talk about them.

At the same time, I find myself turning off my phone and averting my eyes from the newspaper billboards. It is a must, sometimes, to be able to get on with things. The dishes need doing. The clothes must be folded.

How repugnant to turn yourself off. What luxury to be able to turn your back. Is it possible to be full of sound and fury whilst rinsing the lettuce or stirring the pasta pot? Whilst getting on with things? "Poetry makes nothing happen"—I have quoted Yeats in previous forewords—but we must not forget that the whole stanza reads in a very different manner:

> Poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
> In the valley of its making where executives
> Would never want to tamper, flows on south
> From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
> Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
> A way of happening, a mouth.

Writing endures what man does not. Writing is sometimes the kindling, sometimes the fire. It is the smoke and the ashes. It is what remains. Perhaps the world was always insane. Perhaps it always was. I will go repot my seedlings: I'm growing lots of chili and three types of capsicum this year. I will keep planting seeds, and keep writing poems, and I will stay with the work in this issue a little longer.

In my mind, I will keep hearing, underneath the spring birds' song, the final lines of Michael Milburn's "Gazebo," over and over again: "wherever I look, / mothers, sons, / memory, dust."

Maria Freij, Poetry Editor

ATTENTION, ATTENTION MUST BE PAID!

All afternoon

Ava Mack

All afternoon

under a nebula of lilacs
like a funambulist, suspended
I'm counting the objects in my universe
counting you,
forgetting,
and starting
again.

A cicada tiptoes on the slick bark overhead.

Once I feared his ancient face,
the thickness of his body.
Now I know his
abdomen is hollow
made for making sound, for singing.
His leaded glass wings,
like windows—
have you ever seen a church so holy?

The lilacs couldn't be more earnest
all scent all afternoon
their petals peal with
scent, scent, scent
thrown about without a thought
a hundred thousand little bells
ringing out and

counting you,
forgetting,
and starting
again.

Today

Rachel Cloud Adams

Note that the sun
is glazing this day
in familiarity, that it is
abrading a hole of heat
into the hallway's
vague linoleum,
into its river
of octagons.

Nail this day into wood.
Give it a name
that only you
can cough out,
that only the house
knows how to speak.
The sun will blind
you clean if you allow it.

For Molly Brodak, Perhaps

Bryan Helton

A dropped dish rattled
on the floor and said it.
Each ghost of touch
pronounced the same news.
You came up, a thrust of ivy
on the white oak.
What specters then
rushed out to greet you?
As small stones can give
nothing to the aroused tide,
clouds of evening move
in the only direction they can.
Arrange the detritus all around you.
Give these remnants
a new purpose and shape.
The familiar obituary hunger
calls from the vertiginous crag.
Like a drift of ash from a forest on fire,
came a long wailing in the night.
The pupa twisted in the rotten wood
and burrowed in mossy fragments.
The chrysalis trembled and fractured,
a scorpionfly emerged,
rose into its one long summer of life.

When There Is No Home

Marianne Sundquist

to claim me, the cornflower speaks
loud enough for me to hear. I learn
to trust myself. How to bow low
to the ground, to heady lavender
queens popping along the side of the road.

In the car, my body's still and still
moving. I roll the window down
to soak up the scent, seventy miles burn
into light years skipping words,
skipping worlds, skipping the infinity loop

of high school and radio songs
and the slightest of ways
we hurt each other. Out both sides,
fall, flowers and leaves melt off stage
like a brush through wet paint.

Like Orpheus surviving before
the wild beasts take him.
Like the snake after a bite, seething home
and whole. A cluster of seconds
held by a cloud, this—

is the center of the world.

When the horizon
that sees with a thousand
grandmother eyes is still a lost sky,
it's the orange sun
that reminds me

how the beach looked that night.
Surfers studded in the water like pearls

Summer Fir

Laura Goldacre

this is it, she said,
this is a scent that brings me joy -
whilst sniffing the needles of the spruce
in diligent doses.
it reminds me of stepping out
of the car on the side of a road in Sweden.
little white-ringed beetles trek
the branches, lapping, despite the spikes,
fresh nectar.

the sharp development
of the daydream isn't transmitting
through my shampooed hair or the lavender whispering
from the clay pot below us.
will we always depend on the memory
of happiness to recognize it?

in evenings such as these, far from
Swedish wildness. far from all that isn't
ours. i'm learning the differences
between spruce and fir. i'm learning contentment
is manifold like a packed forest, lending itself to the wind.

Soft Mouth

Jennifer Phillips

The old spaniel taught me how to carry
the rose's thorny branch
in my hand safely. It's called *soft mouth*.
Teeth around the smallest to bring them
closer to refuge. Ear to hear past the bitter bite
to the ancient abscess in the heart.
Eyes to tell when to leave the weed
so as not to ruin the root of seedlings
barely emerged into light.
Do you remember whose muzzle
lifted you tenderly out of harm's way
when you, too, were a stem bristling with briars
desiring only to pierce and defend?
The tiger knows this, and the vole,
the fox that can tear through a whole coop
carries her kits as delicately as I tongued
the mercury thermometer when I was a child
in need of healing. In this way, handle
the tantrums of the world and its toxic spines,
not imagining you are impervious,
but with the skill of gentleness between your teeth.

The Skydiver's Insight

(a Ghazal)

Jennifer Phillips

I'm bending the boards, sailing determined under my own steam, right
into the imperfect storm. Better sometimes to be sorry than right.

Everyone has to make their way. Carry paperback Nietzsche or Plato knapsacked,
Moses, Jesus, or Lao Tsu to float your boat. You know you're no solo shipwright.

My grandfather used to say, keep your eyes peeled, when we were searching.
Feel every new turn, practicing excitement rather than fright.

It's today's oarsman, looming as large as Charon, has me terrified.
This river in flood, raging. Tender tightrope steps, carrying gelignite.

Knees too rheumatic for kneeling. Hands too gnarly to fold.
Heart intractable. Way forward tractless. And I'm too rusty for test-flight.

But, oh, the air! The summoning air we may fall through or fly—
Meaning, light and breathable everywhere—the skydiver's insight.

Who would choose to stare into the same dull mirror daily?
I, for one, will never forget love's plaguing mosquito-bite.

You, too, Skydiver, can be ferried out of yourself. Jettison
what you must
for your journey's joy, gain *and* decimation. Travel light

Lightning at Buxi Cliff

Syed Kabeer Hassan

When it rained too little,
Shams said, "It's as though the clouds
flicked their moist hands
at the city, and left."

Now that the faucet is turned,
I tell him,
"No one has such small hands,
not even the rain."

For rain is between the clefts of his large brown fingers—
riding along the creases
washing every destiny to
his pale wrist.

This was something no one forecast:
drops denting the fuel tank, radiating
far-reaching metallic reverberations,

our pupils being drummed, edging
memory out in tears—

he is taking the longer route,

so I can wonder
who would pay the price of grief as it coils up
to the origin. Or how if atoms had satellites, they would
find it anomalous—
my beard plunging into the mesh of his shoulder—

he accelerates.
When I first steered a motorcycle,
it was also monsoon.

Water fell from the sky, made being
abandoned less personal.

Where were the winds then? Whirling dead straws like boomerangs
out into the night.

Dead was the world, and no time to change the plot,
I sketched only the foreshadowing—

me and him on the bike, for the hundredth time,
our headlights limp.
Glimpses I'll recall
if I live a life as long as his:
trucks waking up
then bursting,

but I could only hear the sounds like it was home arriving,
I saw only his back,
the stripes on his linen.

It wasn't home though. He took a longer turn.

Home was where we possessed the bodies
and the ceilings held the remnants,

where I lay down with a pillow
between my legs as I swam
sideways in the bed

and the wind pushed the curtain into a cape of someone
flying high above the hooks to bring me
back on the road,

again, his hands busy with the rain, the clouds rumbling.
Someone taking a screenshot from the sky.

Alneodie

Syed Kabeer Hassan

After Marcel Pequel's Composition

Suppose it was all coming true— the end times,
the armageddon, the alcoholic depression.
And the trees have turned all porous, the season overdone.
And there in the news background was a boy.
And he was thinking about you.

Suppose it was all coming true— the end times,
the armageddon, the alcoholic depression.
And you were on the weaker side of the bed. And this boy,
whom you once loved
was in the news about a border shelling. He never opened
his soda without spilling the fizz into his navel. And sometimes
when he slept,
you roamed into his hair forest. Deciduous. At noon, tiptoed like it
were a minefield. At night, jumped into one of its cold lakes,
and came out completely dry.
Wet memory. Phantasm. Winds howling with the
wound it carried. He is upon the rubble now— confused,
head down, calm.
He could have lost something. He could have lost
his house keys, and have
nobody to help him. He could have been singing if the snippet
were longer
before the end of the chorus.

Suppose it was all coming true— & he had
no time to break the chorus.
On the monument, someone writes their name four times in a row.

On the subway,
another rush hour. And you are thinking, *I did*
not do anything to deserve him. You could easily switch
the channels, and go
back to an action flick,
but he has the same shadows under his eyes as your brother.
He was holding a bowl of unwashed cherries when
someone stole the morning light and hid it in the puddle.
All day it was night. All
night you were
in a room of mint green. Of course there were
missiles like fish in the sky then.
You lost a
photo album on your phone, and it felt like losing a year.
Of course,
all the pharmacies were closed. Of course, you were so lonely,
you could no
longer lie to yourself. Of course,
once such a thing happened— He was glazing his wrist
like an ice skate striding
on the frozen lake.

& you took your hand and
turned it into a ballet.

Back then, he worked in the ice warehouse.
But for him, it was a warehouse of music. He listened to the water filling each day into the boxes. For him, everything started from the beginning. He was wearing a silver T-shirt.
He was opening his fridge fourteen times in a row to catch
the angels
tightening up the liquid. For him, everything started from
the beginning— your cheek
swollen under a cube, you gnawing the ice—his mouth blowing on it, his tongue

and throat twirling into a rivulet. The forest turning evergreen.
You could have loved him when the sunlight struck his mouth, you could
have pulled his neck into your teeth, and nobody would
have had to compete in this.

On the television, or was it in a dream—a drone spits
on the rubble—
his unwashed cherries
scatter onto the blue concrete. And you pull your hand out of
your pocket.

But that's all that you do.

Feeding the Rabbit in Winter

Nicholas Hogg

Go out in the wind and the buckshot sleet. Waver in a gale
that stings, the ice bullet smart on a frozen cheek.

Stand and quiver in the deepening snow. Listen to the geese
that you cannot see, honking at the dark. The terror

to think of their journey home. And the rabbit in the hutch,
alone. The soft mammal warmed by fire, you run inside.

Prayer in a Local Language

Thomas Lavelle

Much is familiar: Gud
for God, translations of lord,
creation, mercy, sin
of course, praise and blessing.

The protestant church
is Lutheran plain,
bare walls, columns,
no crosses or stained glass.

Congregants pack
the pews holiday tight
but only mutter the hymns,

Here called psalmer.
Seated they follow Job's
travails and Matthew's story
with birds of the air never
sowing, reaping. storing.

Amid the ritual of verbs
and nouns, the sound that remains
most familiar is no sound
at all, an inner quiet,

Which translates as tysthet,
literally silent-ness,
but here today means
simply void, abyss, empty.

Waiting

Nicholas Skaldetvind

What can I do? Wish the day over like macular clouds
making the palms waver under the pressure?
I look through a thousand fronds diffused with sun
above visions of a beach set loose in the street
with dull surfboards.

Either she wasn't at yoga
or the landlord snagged her to complain
about the neighbors, motorcycles, or her little dog,
but rarely about her
and her current situation, which means me.
For this we're grateful.

Twilight: filaments of pink
and blue tie-dyed cups –
the bra she's wearing.

The Last Chinese Laundryman

Garry Engkent

"Look, in an age of laundromats and dry-cleaning franchises, who would want to buy an antiquated hand-laundry business?" Frank Chen argued. "Geez, Ling, you can't even give it away!"

Ling Hon Mun was ninety-some years old, a sojourner who had come for the gold in the Gold Mountain and stayed. He had toiled and sweated in his small shop through the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Depression Era, the major war, and the turnover of prime ministers and governments since Wilfrid Laurier. Ling's Hand Laundry was not just a place of work, definitely not a place to barter and sell at a whim. This hand laundry was his life. His face scowled. Did this young man understand nothing?

"Not give away," Ling corrected patiently. "I sell it to you for almost free."

Unlike Ling, Frank Chen was born and bred in gum san, Gold Mountain. He resented the subtleties of the older generation of Chinese, like Ling, who spoke almost in riddles. Now Frank knew the reason for Ling's urgent phone call.

"See what you get," Ling said. His short, bony fingers gestured grandly at his ancient possessions: the worn, large wooden washers, driven by a noisy, external motor and

probably built before the Great Depression, gigantic rinse tubs, creaky but dependable wringers, and ten-pound irons without thermostats. "Precious. No troubles. Good for another fifty years!"

"You don't have to remind me, Ling," Frank said. He looked at his watch. "Remember, I used to pick up and deliver laundry for you."

"Now you are success, can afford to buy me out," the laundryman ingratiated. "I don't just sell to anybody, Frank."

Frank rolled up his eyes. "I'm flattered, old man. But I didn't spend four years in university to come back to doing laundry. Didn't you once tell me never to get into the laundry business because of the long hours and lousy pay? Didn't you? Didn't you also advise me to make a clean break from the stereotyped Chinaman who's either in restaurants or in the laundry business?"

Ling's hand trembled as he refilled the teacups. Such disrespect, such temerity. Ling had hoped that Frank would be different from the new Chinese immigrants who snubbed their noses a such work. Does this young man understand nothing Chinese? Did his parents repudiate everything from the old country and teach their son only the ways of the fan gwei, white devils? If Frank were his son—or, grandson…

Frank Chen was the only young person in the community Ling could call friend. Ling had no family; his wife and children had perished half a century ago in the old country just before the Second World War. All of Ling's old friends had either returned to the homeland to die or had been buried here. The young man's ways were as alien to the ancient laundryman as the white devils. Ling had seen him often with a flaxen-haired girl who worked for the newspaper and took pictures for the society section.

"Steady job, make a living."

"You don't give up, do you?" Frank said, annoyed. His

hands gestured in the empty air. "I've got a degree in Business Administration, majoring in Marketing. There are big bucks in that. None of the first-generation crap, slaving over the stove or smelling sweaty shirts and shorts."

"So, you have good job?"

"I—I'm looking," Frank stammered. Since graduation, he had spent six months mailing out cover letters and resumes to no avail. He had the education, but not enough experience. He was loathed to admit to the old laundryman that he was working part-time at a fast-food joint. Ling's Hand Laundry no longer fetched and delivered. No job there.

"I don't have the money to buy your laundry, Ling." Frank said bluntly. "Anyway, I can't see myself doing this—I can't! Hai quoi lo—that's the way it is."

Frank wanted to rush out of the shop as he saw the wave of disappointment sweep over Ling's whole being. Obviously, the laundryman had pinned a lot of hope on this meeting Who said the Chinese were inscrutable.

As he pondered over the conversation, the laundryman saw the piles of soiled clothes, yet to be sorted, yet to be washed, yet to be ironed. He took another sip of tea and another before straining his frail legs up from the chair. He had hoped that Frank, the boy whose parents had come from the same village as Ling, would take up the offer. He now saw that Frank Chen, the second generation Chinese Canadian, was—except for the color of his skin—fan gwei, through and through.

Business was not as it had been, say, twenty or even fifteen years ago. When Ling bought the shop from his miserly uncle in the 1920s, he had a dozen or more hand laundry shops to compete with. Now, there was only his establishment. The talk with Frank had worn him out. For a second, his head felt a rush of blood. He felt the pain as he hit the corner of the ironing table.

When Ling woke up, he found himself bandaged, with discomforting needles and tubes about him. He groaned loudly, not in pain but in despair. Hospitals were places where they take you to die. Who would look after his business? How long had he been in this place? Who would remember to lock up his shop? Who would tell his loyal customers that their laundry was not ready as promised?

Frank Chen was there, standing by the bed. His blonde girlfriend was beside him. Ling instinctively knew that it was Frank who had called the ambulance and took him to the hospital.

"The doctor told me to tell you, you're not going to die. You cracked your skull and some ribs in the fall. They'll mend soon enough. But you can't work anymore, Ling. Your bones are too brittle, and your heart can't take it. Retire now, and you might live to receive the Queen's commemorative scroll as a centenarian."

"What will I do?" the laundryman wailed. "I need money. I need to work. The laundry is my whole life, Frank. To ask me to give it up! I might as well die now!"

Frank shook his head. He gave a quick meaningful "I told you so" look at his girlfriend.

"Geez, Ling, you old guys are all alike. Two days ago, you told me you wanted to sell the business and lamented that no one was interested in buying you out. The first time I met you years ago, you told me you wanted to scrap the outdated machinery and go into the laundromat business. What do you really want, old man? Money? Remember, I helped you apply for your Old Age pension when you didn't know such a thing existed. Maybe I can get you into an old age home."

Frank doubted whether he could ever get Ling into an old age home. It wasn't as easy as filling out an old age pension application. But Ling and his old ways got him frustrated and angry.

"I no sell. I no quit." Ling said adamantly. He said it in English so Frank's fan gwei girlfriend would understand. "My hand laundry for sixty-five years. Like my child. Precious. I no sell."

"Suit yourself, old man," Frank said in exasperation. He admired the ancient laundryman more than he was willing to admit. The man was pigheaded, but at age ninety-two, he was allowed the privilege. "When you collapse on your ironing table again, don't expect me to be there. C'mon, Julie, let's get out of here."

"And don't come back, fan gwei Frank!" Ling said spitefully. He was going to die in this hospital; his passing would be no more remembered than a puff of dissipating steam from a hot iron. And yet…

Ling's Hand Laundry held a stale smell of detergent and other unguents. And even though the old laundryman remained in the hospital, his presence permeated and emanated in the small shop. Frank Chen ushered Julie I and closed the door behind them.

"So, what do you think of owning a hand laundry?"

Julie gave him an incredulous stare: "You must be kidding!"

"Ling wants me to have it," he announced. He held up two ten-pound irons. "As you can see, this one you can plug in. Now this one, you can either heat it first on a potbelly stove or put in a red-hot piece of coal. See the opening? Neat, eh?" He showed her a few more items and ow they worked, as Ling had done for him when Frank first worked as a delivery boy.

Julie said, "I thought Ling didn't want to sell his business."

"He doesn't. He's giving it to me."

"For a price," Julie pointed out.

Frank looked at the wonderfully innocent face of his fan gwei girlfriend. No, she wouldn't understand a ninety-two-year-old man like Ling who clung into the traditional Middle Kingdom ways, even though most of his life he

spent in Canada. It only became to Frank himself when the laundryman made his outburst in the hospital.

"His asking for money is a ruse," the second-generation Chinese Canadian explained. "He doesn't have his own flesh and blood to hand the shop down to. He wants to leave it to somebody, and I guess he chose me because I had done a few favors for him."

"Why doesn't he just leave everything to you in his will?"

"You've got to remember that old guys like Ling are superstitious about making wills and testaments. To them, it's like signing their own death warrant or something. Anyway, he wants to see his place in my possession while he still has breath in his body and eyes to see. It's an old Chinese tradition."

"It's rather sad," Julie commented. She gave the place a photographer's assessment. "Look at this place, Frank. It has a lot of character. But what do you do with it?"

"There's a lot of immigrant history here," Frank admitted. He remembered Ling's telling him about the good old days. How Ling came over on a second-rate steamer, the Orient Princess. The trip took 34 days from the port in Canton to the harbor in Victoria. How he languished for six months in a federal internment holding—quarantined. Ling's first taste of Canadian hospitality. How, instead of sending him to school when he finally reached his uncle's establishment, the relative worked young Ling to exhaustion in the hand laundry and cheated him of his full wages. And now, after the uncle's heart attack, Ling made a go of a debt-ridden business. Frank often heard these stories repeatedly until they were committed to his heart.

Frank knew the old laundryman had tricked him. The young Chinese Canadian was more than just an adopted son; he became a bearer of the first-generation's woes, an unwilling biographer of Ling Ho Mun's life, a repository for common tales of the nameless, faceless thousands of Chinese

sojourners whose stories parallelled the laundryman's. Frank felt the weight of responsibility.

"Well," his girlfriend remarked, "you're in Marketing. What can you do with a place like this?"

Frank and Julie Chen ushered their two children from the family station wagon. The six-year-old scampered ahead of the five-year-old, and Julie shouted instructions that they shouldn't run about. Frank brought out the platter which he had prepared that morning and placed it gently in front of the gravestone. There was now food and drink for the spirit of the departed.

Having gathered the children together, he lit the incense and taught the boy and girl how to hold the fragrant sticks and to bow three times deeply. He then placed the burning sticks in the incense holder.

"Why do we have to do this, Mom," the six-year-old asked.

"It's a Chinese custom, part of your heritage," Julie explained. "We're paying respect to your father's dear friend, Ling Ho Mun. He died when you were very young."

Frank looked beyond the columns of Chinese characters chiseled in the gravestone, and recalled the laundryman's angry, wrinkled face and obstinate eyes. He wondered whether old Ling was at peace wherever his spirit might be.

"You lied!" Ling had accused. "You make me believe you run laundry. Cheat old man!"

"I don't know how to run a laundry business—especially one that is so outdated. I did give it a try. Two years, I tried! I'm in Marketing, Ling. I can do a better job selling." Several times he had tried to explain his ideas to Ling, but the ancient laundryman refused to listen.

"Fan gwei! Fan gwei!"

"Honey," Julie called out from the car, "we're going to be late."

Ling's bitter words and hurt were still ringing in Frank's mind when they reached Heritage Park. Frank's idea had taken several years to come to fruition. Ling had wanted a brief immortality through his hand laundry, to see the business carried beyond his lifetime. It was the Chinese thing to do. Today, Frank was giving the ancient laundryman a place in Canadian history.

The portrait of Ling, with shoulders stooping and iron in hand, caught Julie by surprise. She had taken the picture the day the laundryman left the hospital and insisted on working. He had said his customers would want their clean laundry. She never thought her picture would be included in the collection. She turned to Frank. He and the children were listening intently to the tour guide in the Heritage Museum.

"This week, in honor of the Chinese immigrants who came to Canada, we have photographs and several authentic displays," the tour guide was saying. "The Museum is proud to have this Chinese hand laundry shop donated by Ling Ho Mun. Some of you older folks may have even patronized Ling's place. He was almost an institution in his town, and still was on the job at the age of ninety-five…"

Cloudberry

Julie Shulman

Cloudberries grow wild in the arctic north,
they can't be cultivated by farmstead.
To produce a berry, the female must be pollinated
by a male who has happened to grow nearby.
It takes seven years to produce a flower
which then waits naked for a day.
Toothed, crinkled leaves hold this treasure to the light,
more than enough for the afternoon to admire
a soft measure of abundance.
I rest one on my tongue—tart
amber wisp of Nordic summer.
It tastes like the day many years ago
my father cheered as I dove
from the rocks of Vadskilholmen Island.
Each plant offers a harvest
of one.

Fall Bulbs

David Dodd Lee

Consider the oil change, how you're a sitting duck for hundreds of dollars of add-ons. It's exhausting to say no all the time, to say no while you are navigating the deaths of friends and family. Exhausting, the pleas to buy X brand's superior mattress or life insurance. Exhausting, paying for what you didn't necessarily want in the first place but somehow managed to say Yes to. Around 3 p.m. today my neighbor walked up to me in my own driveway and said she was losing her memory. "Pamela drove me to the hospital on Tuesday and for two days I didn't understand where I was." She'd already told me she was diagnosed with dementia two weeks earlier. It was November and I was planting fall bulbs. "When Henry died," she said, "he went into the hospital and he knew where he was. He wasn't able to say much by then but he said, 'It's about time.' He knew that much. And in a moment of surprising lucidity he said, 'Don't give the time of day to my family. You've got to promise me you won't speak to any of them ever again,' and two hours later he was gone." At the oil change place, they kept holding dirty filters up next to brand new clean ones. "We appreciate your business," the text comes a half hour later. "Please rate your experience." I was using a trowel, dropping allium bulbs into neat little holes. In the spring I would have a yard full of alliums, daffodils, hyacinths, crocuses and tulips. I'd be so busy at work—pressed to retire but afraid to at 65, needing the money—that I'd forget about flowers. But after a week or so of warm days in March the little green spears would emerge from the ground and for a little while, despite all my worries, I'd be excited, full of anticipation for an extra-full flowering.

Trains

Sambhu Ramachandran

For a long time, we lived near the railway lines.
Trains would pass every five minutes, and the house

would thrill to the pounding rumble of wheels.
We had to hold on to our plates and cups

while we ate or they would start dancing a jig.
Sometimes, after playing possum for hours,

the rooms would leap back into consciousness,
startled by an enormous freight train.

I used to feel sad when a train I had set
my heart on was running late. I would prick

my ears up and wait for the announcement
to put me at ease. I felt vaguely betrayed when,

after all my eagerness, there still was no sign
of that comforting commotion of whistles

and air brakes. But when the train finally
shot into view, venting thick plumes

of smoke, it was as if my dead father
was returning home puffing on a cigarette.

Once I saw the corpse of a girl who had thrown

herself in front of an express train: a white sheet

was pulled over her face, and her broken bangles
lay between the sleepers like leeches that simply

would not let go. Then there was a headless calf,
but without the sheet or milling crowds.

On full moon nights, I would climb the guava tree
to get a clearer view of the rails, their pomfret sheen.

And as I looked on, the magic would unfold:
trains pulling into the station from opposite directions

would rub each other's backs like amorous cats.
The station master would become a stork

waving an ear of corn in his beak.
And the green crocodile eyes of signal lights

would flash in the dark, be overcome
with benevolence, and let everything pass.

The Weekend

David Dodd Lee

Come about 10 pm on a Friday, I attack the pan
full of burnt scrambled eggs, soaked as it is

into something quite alarming to touch… By
accident I broil two hamburgers on one side

until they are done all the way through. I'm so tired
by Sunday I cut a bell pepper into slices for a late

dinner and sit on the porch with cheese, the pepper,
and an iced tea. The water's lit on the far shore,

golden radiation the moon has on loan from the sun.
Tree frogs, katydids, and tree crickets grow

hysterical all around me; clamorous, half-insane—
screaming unabashedly for the thing they want most—

might miss—because they must die. Now I feel
my bones lock back into place, my marrow's

cellular arrangement a mirror, a universe, a conver-
sation contained, a growing equilibrium between

what's inside me and what's blazing out there.

The Dog

Robert Mcdonald

After dusk, the dog runs out from between the iron gates of St. Boniface Cemetery, runs across Clark Street, runs toward me up that orphaned quarter block, the spit of Ainsle between Clark and Ashland. The dog trots up the middle of the street, like it's a vehicle with a license to be there. Does it have a collar? Should I try to grab it? Someone's surely looking for their beautiful dog. I step into the street, the dog lopes closer, close enough that I have to move out of its path. Under the streetlight, which has just flicked on, its pelt is threaded with gold, and silver; I'm slow to recognize the coyote, close, too close, and too large, huge. Faster than it takes me to tell you this, the coyote is past me, a mystery, gone. I have to remember to breathe. To breathe and wait for the slowing of my heart. Ever since, I walk the same path home, hoping this spirit will reappear, my wolf, my hound, and run right through me, a new kind of wind. Broken glass glitters from a thousand cracks, a thousand cracks in the sidewalk and all across the street.

March, NYC

Isabella Simoes

blood orange liquor down my throat,
hot faced. i used to dream of a purple victorian
with a yellow roof, siding caught
on ocean wind. a wrap around porch
and a rocking chair. bed and breakfast.
thick linens. when the subway starts up
it sings. you would know if you heard it.
i take my jacket off, a leather vest underneath,
black worn soft. joey tells me new york
makes her feel small,
thank god.

the punk store above the japanese bar
is too expensive for the punks stoop sitting next door,
lapping spilled beer off the stone. i don't need touch
any less than i'm getting it now. i don't want
to lean into everyone. sunflower seeds litter
the dirt mulch around new trees. it's too warm
for my jacket and too cold to take it off. we got dressed
for nothing. should've hopped the turnstile.
should've smoked in the station.

when my cats find anything new
they move their pink noses in and out,
in and out. they can't be too excited about anything.
rub their faces on a new thing to make it theirs.
my pillowcase smells so heavily of detergent. i don't dream.
rub my cheek on what scares me. hope.

the njtransit conductor tells me to have a blessed day.
i watch a toddler almost get caught
in a mousetrap. i tell his mom where he's about
to put his fingers. the woman next to me
in almost english: *thank god you see*.
thank god.

Ways to Propel Yourself into Existence

Lauren Mills

Start a garden.
Try to build a lamp from scratch.
Perform Shakespeare to children.
Buy many books and write your name inside them.
Dive off a tall rock into clear water.
Marvel at an orange bird.
Google "orange bird black head and wings pretty in my backyard what is it."
Tell everyone your favorite bird is the Black-headed Grosbeak.
Ask your mother if she regrets having children, and should you have children?
Eat a large apple, seeds and all.
Hire a private eye to find the park bench with the best view of the park.
Go to grad school.
Mingle with the congregation and tell them you saw God outside the gas station.
Recycle.
Join the Post Card Collectors Club of America.
Join the Stone Carvers Guild.
Join the Automobile License Plate Collectors Association.
Read an article about primordial soup theory.
Throw your phone in the river.
Ghost hunt.
Have children.
Go west.
Sleep in the garden on an unusually warm October night, under a tower of yellow teacup flowers.

Wake to see a damson plum resting in the yawning maw
of a red fox, yet unbitten.

SPEAKING OF THE DEAD

Last Rites

Mary Ann McGuigan

His father looks better than he did when Conor took him to the hospital, but barely recognizable. They've parted his hair, and there's a slick Brylcreemed finish to it that a man like Pete Donnegan would never have troubled to achieve. Conor wants to reach in and straighten his collar, but his brothers and sisters are close beside him, fidgety, like bored tourists who've seen enough. They're ready to close the coffin. It's time. But Conor can't get himself to move away.

Five days before his father died, Conor gave him a haircut. Weak as the old man was, he still managed to curse him when he pricked his neck with the scissors. After they took the body, he made his father's bed. When it was done, he stood in the middle of the boxy bedroom, lost, like he'd forgotten something. He lifted the blanket, felt underneath, heard the sound of the rubber sheet he'd just put on without thinking. His father hated the sheet, cursed him for it every time, insisted he was no invalid. But that's what he was. He hadn't walked to the bathroom since before New Year's.

The sudden weight of his brother Peter's arm across his shoulders puts Conor back in his father's apartment. That's how he'd get him to the bathroom—the old man's arm pulled across his shoulders, Conor's arm around his waist, the way GIs carry injured buddies off the field in the movies. He'd

gotten very thin, but he was still so heavy, as if the thing that holds a man up, the force that fights gravity, were gone, his will gone.

"It's over, Conor," Peter says. "He's out of his misery." But Conor doesn't think in those terms. He thinks of the feel of his father's loose skin when he rubbed the washcloth up his arm, the way the flesh stretched and pulled, the sallow color, like a pall over him, over both of them. He disliked shaving him, being so close: the gray whiskers, the cleft in his chin, the mole by his lip, his breath sour, mixed with his last cigarette. He can almost taste it still. And his eyes—absorbed in something Conor couldn't know. He stared out at him, but Conor knew he wasn't seen.

Peter pounds his back like a comrade. "Let's get on with it," he says. Conor knows his brother thinks he's having a hard time with this, having to part from their father after being with him so long. But he could hardly wait for this to happen. This was the goal that got him through: knowing that it would have to end, that the man couldn't last. A month, maybe two, he thought. The firm could spare him for that long. Things would get tricky if he stayed away much beyond that, when the quarter ended, but he'd hit the ground running when he got back. He had a right to family leave just like anybody else. So what if he didn't have a family of his own anymore. That wasn't his doing. Julie was the one who left, not him. After yet another final discussion, her line was drawn: Either they start a family or they start another life—separately.

Revolting as it was, staying with his father was the best distraction Conor could come up with. At least he'd get him out of his system. It would be over with, out of his head for good. His sisters wanted nothing to do with their father. His brother Liam, with his drinking, was having a hard enough time keeping his own family together. Peter felt bad for the old man, but he'd already done his part. He and his wife had even

taken him in when he was recovering from the truck accident. Nearly blind—after years of neglecting his medications—he'd stepped out in front of a delivery van as it turned a corner. But when he healed, he was as nasty and drunk as he'd ever been. No one would have blamed Conor if he'd backed away. But he couldn't get himself to do that.

His father had an apartment on the Concourse, the rat hole of a place he found when Peter threw him out. Conor spent the first few days cleaning the place up, felt good about doing it. He had this right-thing-to-do attitude about the whole business at first. The man was a drunk, an abusive husband, a waste as a father, but Conor would be a good son.

Peter wants him to go outside with the others so they can close the lid. Don't they know it's ridiculous to keep him from seeing that? There's nothing about this man he hasn't wiped or smelled or seen or carried. Nothing. When he lifted the old man's legs to wash him, he'd break wind. It was weeks before they could joke about it. But they want Conor outside now, as if there could still be something private left, so he complies.

The funeral director motions him into the first car, a stretch, with his sisters. Maggie, Kate, Bridget, and Moira are waiting inside. Kate has a fist full of tissues in her lap, and Conor has no doubt they're dry, though she manages a sniffle. Bridget and Maggie are silent, watchful. Maggie, heavier than she was last time he saw her, seems uncomfortable in her black woolen dress, keeps tugging at the hem. Each time he glances up, he finds her observing him, protective as ever, as if ready to grab him if he tries to bolt. Moira removes a paperback from her bag and begins reading.

"What's that you've got there?" says Bridget, sounding as if she wants an explanation, not the title.

"Edna O'Brien," says Moira, without raising her head from the page. Conor wonders if her red scarf is a statement or simply the only one at hand this morning.

"For Chrissake, we're burying our father," says Bridget. "Maybe you could pay attention?" The collar of her beige raincoat is turned up on one side, and Conor wants to ask her if she's working undercover to enforce some code of conduct for the children of the damned.

Conor slides over to make room for Liam and Peter.

"Leave her be," Maggie tells Bridget.

"What's this?" Liam says to Conor. "They're startin' without me?"

Conor smiles at his brother. His sisters have been relatively kind to each other so far, considering the distressing amount of time they've had to be in their father's presence. Maggie was the first to point out that his being dead made it only slightly less irritating.

"What's up, Moira?" says Liam. "You disrespectin' Dad's memory?"

"Which memory would that be?" Moira says.

"Can we just have a peaceful ride?" says Peter. "We're through the worst of it."

"I'm not so sure about that," says Liam, pointing a finger at the cars moving into position. "The hordes have arrived to watch the show. Like I haven't choked on enough perfume already?"

"You'll survive," says Bridget.

"That one there—with the head like a bulldog. You see her?" Liam says, planting an elbow in Peter's ribcage. "She had me in a choke hold. Kevin had to pull her off me."

"You're a chick magnet, Liam," says Maggie.

"Yeah," says Peter, "especially the ones over sixty."

Conor glances out the window. Cars are lined up now behind theirs, filled with cousins and nieces and nephews who don't know much more about Pete Donnegan than his name. When their uncle Tommy died, the swarm of strangers appeared then too, with their familiar tribal eyes and chins

and builds. Conor was fourteen; Bridget was already out of high school. Their father and his brother Pearce staggered home afterward, once they'd sufficiently toasted Tommy's passing. They sang rebel songs well into the night, mostly about a cause nobody understood anymore. It wasn't a bad night, considering how drunk they were. Nothing smashed up. Nobody bleeding. But Bridget wouldn't serve them dinner, wouldn't stay in the same room. She had her rules by then, ways to show him when she disapproved. Conor knew even then such boundaries were pointless.

His first few weeks with his father were the worst. He would lie there at night, wondering why he'd come, remembering the gym near his house, going there for a late swim. He called Julie a few times in the beginning. She was the only one who didn't give him a hard time about what he was doing. After a while, he couldn't call anymore. He belonged to death. He thought of her skin, but he could feel only his father's; the old man's fetid smell displaced the memory of her perfume. September came. October. His father wasn't dead, so he had to eat. Conor had to cook. He'd get sick. Conor had to clean him. They listened to baseball together on the radio. "You want to listen to the game, Dad?" "Go ahead," his father would say. "Put it on if you want," as if he were indifferent about it. But it had to be an act. Nothing meant more to him than baseball. Baseball made him talk. The only real conversations he and Conor ever had were about the Yankees.

That's how Conor thought the talking might start. With baseball. Something, anything, would break the silence—somebody throwing himself against an outfield wall for a fly ball or digging his cleats into an ankle for a base. And then maybe his father would get around to asking him about his life. Or maybe he'd finally get around to explaining what went wrong with his own. Conor would have welcomed anything that would get them past feeling like they were waiting for

a bus. But the Yankees were having a mediocre season—at least by his father's standards—and the old man had nothing to say.

Beside Conor in the limousine, Kate is bubbly with the thrill of being in Peter's company. She rarely sees him and that's no accident. Peter, now the owner of three homes, one yacht, and probably more than a few illegal aliens, doesn't have time for relatives. The headaches that follow take too long to pass. She asks Peter again if he'll come to her house up in the Bronx, bring the family.

"Absolutely," Peter tells her. "We're overdue." Conor is quite sure that won't happen. Peter keeps his distance, doesn't get involved anymore. He has his wife send cards. He called when he heard Conor was taking a leave from his job though, upset about it. Conor was surprised Peter knew what firm he was with. "Weren't they talking about making you partner soon? What are you doing this for?" "I'm doing it for me," he said, because he didn't have an answer. "Forget it, Conor. It'll never register with him. There's nothing there. He hasn't got a clue."

Liam and Peter are talking. Conor watches their lips move. He wants to say something, but he has the same sensation he's had for months, that he can't speak, can't make a sound. It's the feeling he gets in dreams, when he's trying to scream for help and can't make the syllables come out. It's not a new feeling for him. He had it as a kid all the time. In school, he was always surprised when people heard him when he spoke.

By Thanksgiving Conor woke in the mornings fearing and hoping his father would be dead. On Christmas Eve, he went out and got them a tree. It was a skinny-looking thing, but he dragged out the box of decorations from the closet in the back room and put some on. The ornaments were just cheap shiny K-Mart crap, but they had more power than Conor bargained for. Every box had two or three balls

missing, casualties of his father's holiday rages. He couldn't believe these things were ever special to anyone, brought out for a holy night. He had unknowingly memorized everything about them—every bead, every ball, the silly snow-topped hills and starry skies painted on dark blue glass, the weightless feel of them in his palm, his mother saying careful now while she held the string of lights by one end, reaching as high as she could to hand them to him on the ladder.

Conor finished trimming the tree and brought his father out to the living room to show him. He touched a branch. "Pitiful-looking thing," he said, as if he could really see it, but Conor knew his sight was pretty much gone, had been for years. "We could say the same thing about you," Conor said and they laughed. They couldn't find anything to talk about for a while, except that it smelled good. The tree became their television. They sat together, breathing it in. Then the old man started his stories, the ones he'd tell when he wasn't quite plastered yet, tired old stuff about the war, about his brothers and their barroom brawls. When he got to the one about Conor's grandfather, he thought he'd heard it before, but this version was different, and he suspected it was true.

"Your grandmother sent me out to bring him home that night. Christmas Eve. He was drinkin' at the tavern. She wanted him home. Don't ask me why. He was happy enough where he was, and the rest of us would have been just as glad to leave him there. But she sent me to get him, so I went. He told me to sit down at a table and have a soda. He was just goin' to have one more. I sat there, playin' with my straw, listenin' to the men complain about bad councilmen and risin' prices. The place was nearly empty, stuffy from the noisy heat. I put my head down on the table, watched my spitballs shoot across. Next thing I know, the bartender, Ernie, is shakin' me. 'Wake up,' he says. 'I'll take you home. Your old man forgot ya.' "

Conor didn't say anything. So maybe his father thought he didn't believe him.

"Ask your uncle Sean. He'll tell ya. Grandma ripped into him good that night." He let out a grunty laugh, but Conor didn't think it was funny. He wondered whether his father truly did. The story could just as easily have been about Conor and him, or any one of his sisters and brothers. One time his father got so drunk he left Moira on the beach. They found her with the lifeguards, who told their mother the girl had begged them not to return her to her father. This was what he couldn't make Julie understand. He didn't know how to be a father.

Maggie, joined now by her husband, Owen, is standing in front of a stone angel with its wings spread. She's waiting for Conor to get out of the limousine. The sun is at her back, and the glare gives her the silhouette of a dark majestic bird. He knows she won't leave his side until it's over. He doesn't see Julie anywhere. Helen, Peter's wife, embraces him briefly, the fur of her hood tickling his cheek, and he wishes they'd stop being so careful with him.

Liam appears by Owen's side. He's wearing a dark overcoat that no longer fits him across the shoulders. He keeps one hand in his coat pocket, the other pats down his thinning hair taken by the breeze that's come up. He speaks to Owen in a stage whisper: "Did Maggie tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"You're out of the will."

Owen's sudden chuckle comes out hard; the others laugh too. "That's a lie," he says, his words punctuated by the soft click of ill-fitting teeth. "The cane is mine. So are the ashtrays he stole from Mike's Tavern."

Conor doesn't find this funny, but the others do. Liam is taken by a fit of coughing. Their father coughed so badly that

night by the tree that Conor told him he'd take him back to bed if he wanted. The old man waved him away, said he didn't want Conor fussing over him. But he wondered afterward if his father found some comfort sitting by the tree. He said he liked the scent of it.

"You want to talk?" Conor asked him.

"Why? You got somethin' you want to say?" The man's surliness, predictable as it was, still got to him.

"No. I mean talk. Like family. Like we mean something to each other." He pulled the collar of his shirt away from his neck. The heat in the apartment, always stifling, was making him sweat.

"What's eatin' you?"

"Forget it," Conor said. His father asked him to light a cigarette for him. Conor got his Camels. There was no point in telling him no anymore. He put one in his mouth and lit it for him. His father drew hard on it, then exhaled, and Conor sat down next to him, looking at the smoke, avoiding his father's eyes. "Did you ever want anything for me?"

"What are you talkin' about?" He pulled the sleeves of his flannel shirt up closer to his elbows, but they wouldn't stay. There was nothing to him.

"I'm talking about plans. Hopes. Things you want for a person. For a son, for Chrissake."

The old man made some kind of sound, took another long, deep drag and let it out slow. "You made your own plans," he said. Despite everything, it amazed Conor that his father couldn't even fake it, come up with some platitude about always wanting the best for him. But the old man offered no answer at all. He wasn't going to prop him up, pretend things had ever been any different than they seemed.

He finished the cigarette and they watched the tree without trying anymore. Later, when Conor put him to bed, he said, "I'll tell you one thing. It was never this I wanted. To have you

wipin' an old man's ass." That familiar, nasty edge was in his voice and Conor didn't want to take this any further, but he couldn't help it.

"Then what was it?"

"What do you want me to say?" He pounded his fist on the bed, the sound mocked by the protective rubber beneath the sheet. "Do you think I could have changed anything?"

"Did you ever try?"

"Try. Right." His father shook his head. "For fuck's sake, Conor, life ain't some college boy's curriculum. It ain't about settin' goals and stickin' to a plan. Some lives get fucked up, and they don't get fixed," he said, his words nearly buried in a series of coughs. He seemed to be struggling for a way to explain. "Conor, I'm like . . . like a man in a cage, except there ain't no key. And all that 'lettin' go' stuff they feed you in AA is a lot of horseshit. Maybe it works for a lucky few. I don't know."

"But you stayed sober for almost a year. That had to mean something." Conor felt humiliated by the way he sounded, like a school boy protesting the senseless, grown-up world.

"Sober. Yeah. You know what sober feels like? Like you're on stage, like a bear on the end of a chain. Everybody's paid to see you dance and they want their money's worth." The old man tried to sit up, his arms trembling. "You really want to know what you were to me? You were another accusation, another thing I couldn't do right. You think I wanted to be around more of that?"

Conor knew he should stop listening. He turned to go, got as far as the door. He wanted to take a walk, stand on some noisy street and be no one at all.

"Why do you put us through this?" his father said.

Conor understood then what he was doing—expecting that being together now, with the end so close, could help them discover a love that might still be there, that had to be

there—was unkind, callous really, because it couldn't happen. Their connection—any capacity even to recognize each other—was gone, irretrievable. "I'm sorry, Dad."

"Some things . . . some things get damaged, and they stay damaged."

"It's all right. You don't have to say any more."

"It's not all right. I didn't say it was all right."

Conor pictured himself returning to the side of the bed, touching his father's hand. He didn't.

"If you want to hear me say I'm sorry, I can do that." He lowered himself onto the pillows, sank into them. "I'm sorry," he said, closing his eyes, but the rest came out angry. "But for the life of me, I don't see what good it does."

Conor left the door slightly ajar, the way he always did. In the living room, he stood beside the anemic tree. One of the balls—a red cone-shaped thing, snow-topped, gold trim mostly worn away—had slipped off its skinny branch and landed askew on the one below. He took it off the tree. He thought about taking the whole thing down, packing it all away, but what would be the point of keeping any of this? His father would be gone by the time Christmas came again. Why had the old man saved these things to begin with? He kept them in an old trunk, some wrapped inside a huge army coat he hadn't worn since he got back from France. Faded, brittle tree ornaments. Unlikely heirlooms. It dawned on him that his father couldn't see the sorry dull shape they were in. The last time he'd been able to see them they were probably still worth keeping. Maybe they even sparkled.

Maggie tells Conor they want everyone to put the roses on the casket and go. The prayers are done. They want to lower him into the dirt. The cars are waiting. They've got a regular routine for this. But his legs feel like stone. It's cold and he can't stop shivering. He never does that. But they've been standing there a long while. Bridget and Peter try to

move him away. "He's gone," Bridget says. "It's over." He understands what she's saying. But he can't step away. It's what he's been waiting for all these months, but he doesn't want to leave. This is crazy. He thought he wanted this.

Conor smells Julie's perfume before he feels her next to him. "I didn't see you at the funeral home," he says.

"I didn't go in," she says. She takes his hand and her presence triggers some knee-jerk desire to pretend he can get himself together. He steps back, hesitates, then lets her lead him away. They walk toward the path, away from the others. Her long cashmere coat is tawny like her hair. She wears sensible shoes that add little to her height. She holds his arm tightly, pulling him close, as if she knows this is where he belongs—with her. But the Donnegans were not so sure about her at first. "An Italian?" Maggie said to Conor. "She'll have a hard time adjusting to this tribe." And she did. The Donnegans were like a foreign land, Julie told him. They barely got together, even at holidays. They could let months go by without seeing or even talking to their mother. The contrast to her family's boisterous closeness was striking. She told Conor once that she wondered if that was why he paid such close attention to life, to figure out how it's done.

"I admire what you did for your father," she says. "I know it was difficult."

"I guess I had some business to finish."

"Or something to get underway."

He lets out a breath, shakes his head. "There was nothing getting underway with him. It was too late."

"That's too bad, but it wasn't about him anyway."

He looks at her, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"It was about you."

He waits for the rest.

"You and the kind of person you are."

"Yeah, delusional."

"You're not the first to put yourself out when there's no chance of getting anything back." He sees a comical look in her eye, a grin forming. "Sure," she shrugs. "Parents do the same thing for their children all the time."

He sees the point she's making, that he'd be a good father. This is what she wants to believe, that you can be hollowed out, your insides left for the beasts to pick at, and then fill yourself up with good intentions and middle-class dreams. He knows he's not like his father. He has a career, people who rely on him, trust him. But the rest is pretty muddy, because he's not Conor anymore either, at least no Conor he recognizes. At thirty-four, he should be solid enough to feel at home in his own skin. An identity should be more than an unending search, a series of false starts.

"When do you think you'll go back to work?"

"Right away. They want me at the conference. That's in two weeks. And I'm going to have to come up to speed for the presentation."

"In Atlanta, right?"

"Yes."

"Would you like some company? I've got the vacation time."

He knows he should tell her no. He should tell her she's all wrong about him and what he's able to be. She can't see him, he thinks, can't see past the happy ending she wants to tack onto their lives, like gold trim on a threadbare cloak. That would be the fair thing, to tell her that not once for as long as he's known her has he felt like anything but an imposter. He mimics her, like a dancer in the back line, trying to do what's expected. He can barely keep up. He's more comfortable alone, when he doesn't have to worry about feeling inadequate. But she chose him, made it her mission to know him. She believes that she does. But it's clear to Conor that she's maintaining

some image she has of him, oiling parts that haven't been used, repairing the ones he relies on too much. The attention is heady. And no matter how much he fears she'll see someday that it's been misdirected, he's grateful for it.

So he doesn't tell her no. He lets her take his hand. If she wants to do this, he'll let her. But he doesn't expect either of them to be fooled for long. Someday the damages done will have to be tallied.

But not today. Julie leads him to her car, unlocks the passenger door for him. He gets in carefully, one hand deep in the pocket of his coat, his fingers wrapped gently around the familiar surface of a weightless heirloom.

Silhouette of an Elegy

Asma Al-Masyabi

Little photographs lightened in the sunlight.
A single question with an answer so clear
it doesn't hurt. I've written this poem before
and I'll write it again. My grandparents' graves
tasted of dirt and something bright, like jasmine.
I cried like I knew what I was crying for
because I did. I learned food from their hands,
flavor the words of a feeling that flowed
like their laughter. They may have left but also
they taught me how to leave what was
already gone. The idea of me, in their
pocket. Their thoughts glancing on the person
of me every so often. Like a well-worn rock.
Soft and misshaped with the touch of a worry,
of a mindless gentle breath in a moment
of silence. I'll say so many things that are
not true to try and see what could have died
alongside them. I'll count it on my fingers.
I'll hold them up and bend each one as if
in remembrance.

As It Were

Alan Shima

each breath slight
when breathing is possible
air swirling slow
a sea of plankton
gilled
as it were.

eyes tracking
left to right
mouth open
your tongue
a caterpillar
not knowing.

Gazebo

Michael Milburn

We spotted her in our yard
on the arm of her middle-aged son.
She'd lived here thirty years
before our twenty, raised a kid,

summer picnics in the gazebo,
where she'd decided
she'd like her ashes buried
in a small family ceremony,

which, to put it mildly,
raised issues for me,
like should her age
and poignant, plaintive,

last wish-ish plea
excuse her presumptuousness? *Our* life
happened in that yard,
and though we'd let

the structure fall to ruin (she didn't seem to mind)
it occupied a spot we might still use,
plant a bed if not a powdered body,
for we had ashes too

in a black box on a high shelf,
and her request reminded us
of not having settled on
a place to spread them,

though nowhere other-owned or occupied,
no matter how tied
to the loved one's life.
It was all too much,

too sudden, too fraught:
wherever I look,
mothers, sons,
memory, dust.

What Was Insane?

Samuel Totten

The requisition brigades had been informed by the higher ups in the Communist Party that the "kulaks" were resorting to just about anything to relieve the agonizing pain in their empty stomachs: killing, skinning, and eating dogs, cats, and birds; eating spiders, raw roots, and rotting potatoes; and sifting through the ashes in their makeshift metal stoves in search of tiny seeds. All requisition brigades had been warned not to assume anything, and not to overlook any grain, not even seeds. Not if they wanted to remain alive.

Many villages were no more than ghost towns. People had either perished from starvation or caved in and joined a collective organized by the Soviet government. Requisition teams planted black flags at each end of a vanished village.

When they approached a home with a plot of land, the brigades arriving prior to daybreak, individual brigade teams, generally two individuals, arrived at a small farm. They immediately set to work. They lined up at opposite ends of the postage-stamp-sized pieces of land, and slowly walked back and forth, stabbing a metal pole into the ground in search of any grain the kulaks who had attempted to hide.

The brigade teams complained amongst themselves —– and as paranoia increased many began to not even trust

their partners –– about the drudgery and unpleasantness of the work, particularly depriving starving people of the grain they planted, tended, and harvested. They complained about working in the lacerating cold of winter and the withering heat of summer. They complained about the grotesquely bloated bodies sprawled on the ground. They complained about inhaling the vomit-inducing stench of the rotting bodies that instantly filled and never seemed to leave one's nostrils. They complained about facing hateful looks of those kulaks still alive for attempting to deprive them of what was rightly theirs.

The two brigade members searching the patch of land, barn and home of Maria Makohon were particularly methodical in their work for two of their colleagues had apparently looked the other way after discovering less than a handful of tiny seeds in a family's stove, and when someone, for whatever reason, reported them for their lack of zeal, they were summarily executed as enemies of the Soviet people.

This was the second time in a year that a brigade appeared in the region Maria Makohon called home in order to scour plots, fields, barns, fireplaces, and stoves for hidden wheat and seeds. By now, the kulaks had been bled dry of just about everything that was edible.

Those who feasted on wheat-ears filled their bellies but were unaware that wheat-ears would rupture their kidneys. By the time the kulaks resorted to eating wheat-ears, not a single chicken, horse, cow, or bull, let alone a single dog, cat, mouse, rat or sparrow could be found.

Earlier in the year, authorities had circulated through the region sprinkling poison powder on rotting potatoes to make sure that the local peasants had nothing to eat. They also poisoned grain stored at the local train station. Fearful that the authorities would poison all produce and grass, people began ripping the meat off of dead horses

and other animals. As a last resort, Maria's brother picked through manure in search of seeds and when that proved fruitless, he boiled his leather boots and ate them. It was not long before he succumbed to starvation. Those who were most famished ate it raw.

So many had perished that the dead were no longer being buried in individual graves. Two or three times a week the dead were collected from their homes, farms, streets, schoolyards, and along railroad tracks, and dumped into mass graves.

After four hours of searching, the brigade team came up empty handed. Loath to walk away without a victory of sorts, the two men barged into Maria Makohon's home.

Frail, sullen and silent, Maria watched as each man set to work at opposite ends of the small hut. One immediately began shifting through the thick pile of cold ashes in the bottom of her rudimentary stove. The other pushed against the boards of the wall, floor, and ceiling searching for hidden foodstuff.

After ten minutes, the one sifting through the cold powdery ashes of the stove let out a jubilant shout. He found the first of what would be all of ten tiny seeds. Despite the minute haul, both men were pleased they had something positive to report back to headquarters, and that they had not succumbed to accepting Maria Makohon's brother's lie that she was not hiding food.

Bear hugging, the men boisterously congratulated one another, as Maria and several of her neighbors looked on in hatred.

Such scenes were played out over and over again all across Ukraine. Mostly, families had no idea that such seeds existed in their furnaces, but the very fact that they were discovered and confiscated by the brigade was maddening.

Their work completed at Maria Makohon's, the activists trudged over to the home and small patch of land owned by two brothers, Mykhailo and Fedir Doroshenko. As the activists searched the land, the two brothers, a short distance away and bent in crippling pain from agonizing hunger, watched with contempt in their eyes.

There were no laws or promulgations prohibiting kulaks from watching the requisition brigades, but all kulaks knew that if they got caught searching for any gleanings, be it in their freshly harvested fields or plots in front of their own or others' homes, they could be shot on the spot or sent to Siberia.

The two brothers, their sister and her baby were the last of a family of ten. Their mother and father, two other sisters, a brother, and their surviving sister's husband had all succumbed to starvation. The three adult survivors weren't sure how much longer they could last.

The members of the brigade would have preferred that neither the brothers nor their neighbors followed their every move because both the brothers Doroshenko and their friends' bodies issued a smell so foul that the air where they stood was nearly unbreathable.

Despite the dirty looks, the kulaks followed the two interlopers around the land, staring with their mouths agape at the death-inducing work of Stalin's lackeys while their pus-filled and bloated bodies filled the air with gag inducing smells.

When one or the other's stave easily punctured the ground and slipped down a sixth of a meter or more, the requisition member dropped to his knees and shoveled down into the dirt with his hands in search of a stash of one type of staple or another. Each time, though, their efforts were for naught.

Towards the end of the day, the requisition team approached the home. The activists, glancing at the resentful brothers, entered the home without seeking permission. Cautiously entering the dark and dank single room they gagged. A crone, sitting in a chair bent over a battered table, glared at them.

Pressing the thick sleeves of their coats over their noses in an effort to fight off the horrible stench, the men stood still for several seconds to allow their eyes to adjust to the dark. Then, stepping further in, one of the activists approached a youngish woman horribly aged. Weary and worn looking, her hair long and greasy, her brown teeth chipped and broken, had the look of a snarling dog. It appeared that she was attempting to stuff a large chunk of chicken meat into her mouth as quickly as she could.

"What?" One of the activists shouted. He could hardly believe a chicken still existed in the region, let alone that she was gobbling down all the meat alone.

The woman, wrapped in a ragged coat, glanced at them and returned to quickly chewing the meat.

Hurrying over to the table, the taller of the two men was taken aback by what he thought he saw. This can't be, he thought to himself. Then again, he had quite recently heard that human sausages were being sold on various railway platforms between Kyiv and Moscow –– or, as people described the edibles for sale, "sausages that had been shot" –– he absolutely avoided anything with meat on any train or train platform he passed through between the two cities.

"Arggh!"

What is it?" the other man asked.

"It's…it's…"

"What?" his partner demanded impatiently.

"Look…I can't…" He turned and vomited on the greasy wooden floor next to the table.

The other man moved towards the table and bent over to get a better look in the darkness, and as soon as he did, he stepped away, horrified. He lunged towards the woman, grabbed her by the neck and wrestled her off the bench. Growling like a cur, the woman attempted to fight him off, but she was no match.

Frantically glancing at the woman and then at the table, where a tiny hand sat next to a greasy plate, he screamed, "Are you insane, woman? Are you insane?"

Handiwork

Thomas Lavelle

My wife knew things fingers could do.
I'm thinking here of cloth, yarn, needles and thread,
the shuttle she shot between warp
and weft weaving her tapestries.
Bequeathed to me now all these objects,
materials, tools, this patchwork
or applique of *memento mori*
that leaves my own fingers numb.

The Rain

Jonathan Ukah

In the distance,
five fingers of a lady appeared in the sky;
I waited for the night to swallow the trees,
before I stood before the mountain,
with five heads and five exits.
The night cleared; the day returned,
and the river rose to meet the moon
to expose the hidden bridges.
When the rain poured down,
it drenched the tail of snakes
that were slow in sneaking away.
Five fingers of a lady stuck on the clouds,
and no stars shifted the curtain
of the sky aside to suck the air.
They dug graves for dead trees
that fell beyond the width of the moon
where the breath of the sea stretched
to stop the spreading shade of death.
But when the moon had enough of the deception,
it carried its plea to the shore of the ocean
asked the waves to plunge in torrents
and make Heaven the mouth of the river.

The Rat

Adrián Rodríguez Muñoz

It's a little under minus ten
and I know the frost will do it again
ever with its tempered way
of inviting itself here and there
into bone, pulse and breath.
As chance would have it,
a rat reeling its weight across the ice
topples, then aspires, topples, aspires.
Dragging a stiff tail, out of balance
despite how urgently gravity tugs
when so close to the ground.
I don't remain and tell myself
I'm witness to a deal taking place.
The first day after a death, the new absence
feels always the same. Was there something else?
Perhaps an answer trembling off its legs?
From today on I shall be kinder to others.

The Prince

Adrián Rodríguez Muñoz

They once told of how the Prince
Read on in his book unaware
It was almost time.
And when time came
And the executioner
Touched him
On the shoulder
He looked onward
Into the middle distance
Arose, dog eared the page
To keep his place and
Closed the book.

Wie heut so immerdar

Dying, Privately

JoAnneh Nagler

I stand by the side of my friend's bed in a westward facing hospital room. Leaning over him, his body emanates heat. He's covered in white. As my fingers palpate the fabric lying over his skin, my mind slips sideways—flicks and flashes of the boisterous, impatient compatriot he's been to me. He hated the idea of relationships that might box him in, but he still loved my husband and me, living two floors above him, for twenty years.

Now, my palm upon him, I reach for the form of his arm under its scratchy white covering and a cutting anguish works its way into my fingertips.

Was it all for nothing, these decades of closeness? Does it—did it—matter to him at all in the end?

It was my husband Mike who'd spurred the check-up that unearthed the diagnosis. He'd just had eye surgery on a leaky tear duct in our Bay Area suburb, when our friend Rich confessed that his vision was graying out on the peripheral lines.

"It's like I'm in a plane upside down—my sightlines go gray," he said to us one afternoon in our carport. Rich was tall, broad-bodied and big, with a resonant bass voice and a crop of styled, late-middle-age hair on his head, a barrel of a chest. "Probably just breathless over some guy. Got me in the eyes this time, not the cro—."

"Don't say it." I laughed. "And when were you ever in a plane upside down?"

"Very funny. I've got adventure in my veins, baby."

I winked at him. "Not that kind."

He laughed.

Mike tapped his shoulder. "C'mon, man. Your eyes. Be straight."

"Never."

Mike grinned. "You weren't high or anything when it happened?"

"Nope, nope. Gave all that up, smartass." He leaned in, bear-hugged me, then Mike, ducked into his car and drove off.

Rich had been on a health kick, had lost thirty pounds, stopped drinking. Though we'd still smell his cigarette smoke curling up from his downstairs window into our living room once in a while, but what ex-smoker doesn't sneak an inhale or two?

His blurry vision? I thought nothing of it.

A few days later, he confided to Mike, "I feel like I shouldn't be driving."

Mike insisted he go see the doctor who'd done his own surgery.

Rich made an appointment. The doctor, adept and expert, sent him straight to the ER.

Six hours later, the diagnosis. It wasn't good.

"Don't tell JoAnneh," Rich said when he told Mike. "She's going to fall apart and I can't take it right now."

A few days later, I was trying to chase him down in our apartment building. He managed four units in our complex, and pinning him down on a repair for our kitchen was like trying to catch a baby pig in wet mud. But I tried anyway.

"Hey Rich!" I called.

He ducked into the neighboring three-story, an apparition moving through rain-heavy doors.

"Can't talk right now…" he bellowed, head down, and then, slam. The door closed behind him.

He'd been elusive about repairs for years; nothing new. Over the twenty years we'd known him, we'd gotten close in spite of his dodging and ducking.

"No problem," I yelled back. "Later, okay?"

But there was something in his voice. More than evasion. Heaviness. He didn't even look at me. It stopped me, a chill zippering through my spine.

That night I told my husband, "Something's up with Rich."

Mike was standing in the living room, his kind brown eyes welling. "You're not supposed to know."

A tingling ratcheted up my thighs—my automatic danger sensation. "Know what?"

He ran his fingers across his stomach, as if it was aching. "Remember when he said his vision was blurring?"

"Yeah. Did something happen? I know he's been calling Ubers. He can't drive?"

Mike sighed. "He's got two brain-stem tumors. Inoperable. They're pinching his optic nerves."

"Oh, God." Tears burned at my lash line.

"He knows you're going to break down when he tells you."

"Of course I am!"

Wrapped in my husband's arms, I wept there, both of us mourning what would likely be coming.

"Not yet, okay? I'm not ready," I whispered. The thought ripped through me: He won't last six months.

When Rich finally told me himself, I was standing at the Dutch door of his tiny office, ten steps from his apartment, rivulets of light rain on my cheeks.

He gripped his desk. "I've got two growths. In my brain. There might be more."

"Oh, Rich," I said, feigning surprise as best I could.

He hammered one point. "You can't tell *anyone*. Promise? I'm telling you and Mike, a few friends. My family in Pennsylvania. That's it. Got it?"

I hugged him, his wide girth pressing up against me. He wept into my hair, but only for seconds, then pushed back. "Promise me."

I swatted the wet on my cheeks. "Whatever you want."

"I've gotta go."

He disappeared into his place, me standing stock-still, a biting wind whipping across my bare arms.

By the next day, I was chewing the inside of my cheeks. My mind kept replaying who Rich was to me—instant replays of how he'd taken up real estate in my heart. Rumbling voice, quick wit, bright storytelling—all of that was icing on the cake, but it was the way he included us in his life that moved me.

Rich had been a newly-out gay man in San Francisco during the eighties, working at the high-end Cypress Club restaurant, experimenting and clubbing like all the rest of us from that city era. My husband and I had been there, too, in those days, though we didn't know him yet—in the steamy Castro spots and barely-clothed Haight Street dance clubs, the gay-to-bi-to-straight cafes and Tea Dances, the music-thumping rooms and after-hours parties. We shared that, the stuff we'd usually not pipe up with at middle-aged, suburban cocktail parties.

Living next to him for two decades, something else happened. We found our artistic sea-legs together. He and I talked about it constantly: the humility of our choices when everyone else in our Bay Area sphere was amassing

tech fortunes and buying overpriced houses. The path we had to walk to be true to the needs inside us, the honest wake-up call that our painting, photography, ceramics and writing would likely not bring flashy notoriety or bundles of cash, but we were doing it anyway, because we had to. Because something inside us insisted.

"Hey, look at this," he said after ringing my third-floor doorbell one Tuesday. It was a box of ceramic vegetables he'd fired—tomatoes and oranges and apples—so spectacularly crafted that they looked abstract and just-picked all at once.

"Come in! I've got something I wrote that I want to read to you..."

He stepped inside, plopping himself down on my couch, lending an ear. "You've got that island-thing down—that whole poppers-and-dance-club, early-eighties Key West scene. You nailed it."

One Christmas, he brought his fancy camera up to our flat and took shots of Mike and me for our holiday card—ribbing us about our sex life the whole time; me in bright red, spray-on bell bottoms.

"Smile, Mike, like you're about to do her," he joked.

Mike laughed. "You definitely don't want to watch, so don't tempt me..."

"Ick—girls. No thanks." He clicked off a dozen shots, angling in.

"Oh my God, you two—" I said.

"Pick her up, Mike—like you're carrying her over the threshold!"

"Really?" Mike grabbed me in one fell swoop, threw my legs in the air, high heels angling for the top of the Christmas tree.

Mike began to sink, Rich was laughing. "Don't drop her, for God's sake!"

In the photo—the best Christmas card we've ever made—my head is thrown back, mouth open and laughing, red pants gleaming. Mike's grinning, tongue poking out one side of his mouth as he sinks, my body in his arms.

Only Rich could've gotten that shot out of us; it was what we shared: irreverence, brazenness, love. Our artistry, opened on the altar of our friendship.

We cheered each other on, helping each other walk on this zigzagging, barely-tread, creative fire-path through thick brush. We gave each other our hours, sharing what each of us had made or painted or put on a page. That was the glue of our friendship.

There were dozens of holidays spent in his place or ours, his fabulous chef-quality food placed in front of us. All three of us were crazy about art, our apartment walls packed with framed and hand-painted pieces—many of them crafted by both our hands—his work hung on our walls, mine on his. He was a mirror for me: a soul bred in the same fertile ground as my own, with a bright need to create and push things out into the world. The arc of inventing alive in his cells. Gorgeous photography, stylized portraits and still-life paintings, delicate ceramics. Thrift shop finds of hip-looking bargains decorating his place.

By day, he'd sit in his tiny apartment manager's office with the top half of his door open to the sidewalk, calling to me as I went by. I'd be chuckling about something, or singing out loud.

"Hey! No laughing, no singing!" he'd holler. That was my cue to come and sit, to push his extra chair up to his boxed-in desk and listen. He'd regale me with the tale of a guy he hooked up with in the late eighties, who'd now shown up in town for a re-do—or at least dinner at an old haunt. He'd angst about his friend Jose who was marrying a man from England who he barely knew, "I'm not picking

him up if he gets hurt again! I won't do it!" He'd tell of the characters in the ceramics studio he threw pots in, the hot, straight men who were more than worth befriending, the young women who he'd big-brother in their flailing attempts at love and self-sufficiency.

When my husband and I went to his group ceramics show at the studio, one of the teachers said, "You can be sure your class is going to work if Rich is in it. He makes everyone wake up."

"I'm a friendly curmudgeon," he told me once. "Ceramics is perfect for me. I get to be social, then I go home."

Loud, funny, direct, kind. Round in the middle with a raucous laugh. A confirmed bachelor who occasionally showed up with a guy he was spending only the weekend with. He shrouded his intimate life from the world, but every once in a while, he'd call me up and ask me what I thought of some love affair he'd had, usually ending it for his own coveted privacy. His friendships lasted. He yelled when he was pissed. He was impatient and long-suffering all at once.

For me, he was a twinning soul on that brambly path less taken.

He was a heartbeat, the pulse of our communion, a foundation I stood upon, him two floors below me, solidifying my ground.

By the time the flash-bang of Rich's diagnosis burst into our living room, I knew there was nothing we wouldn't do for him.

In those first weeks, we called. Stopped in, checked on him. We usually traded Tupperware containers of some gourmet thing weekly. Now, I left soup, stew, a homemade sweet or two perched on his porch's iron table. Stuff he could digest in his first weeks of radiation and chemo.

Then he told us, "Don't call me. I'm fine. Just don't."

We texted instead, got no answers.

A week later, Mike went by.

Rich said, "Yeah, don't come by. Tell JoAnneh no more food. I'm good."

When Mike told me, I said, "I'm doing it anyway, even if he feels fine."

But he wasn't fine.

Watching TV the next night, flashing blue and red lights blasted into our street-facing living room. When I looked outside, paramedics were bringing a stretcher into Rich's apartment.

I went running, the paramedics were strapping him in, doors open and the lights blazing. "Find my keys," he said to me hoarsely. "Lock up the apartment."

Two seconds later, the ambulance screamed down the street with an urgency that burned in my limbs, flames of fear rifling across my skin.

In the hospital the next day he got angry: "Don't come to see me!"

He was thinner, yes, his eyes a little wild and the hair of his eyebrows wiry and untrimmed.

"We're here anyway," Mike said. I was grateful for the gravity of my husband's rumbling voice.

When he saw we weren't leaving, his eyes burned red. "I don't want to die, but this, whatever this is, is not what I want." He broke down, hands wringing each other—a gesture I'd never seen before—tears dripping onto his blue-checked hospital gown.

Something about that gown slew me, that cheery blue-checkered pattern the exact same print as a picnic tablecloth—some sun-filled outing in a park with food shared on a grassy knoll. Not this, not by far.

Mike held his hand. I touched his shoulder. When I leaned in to hug him, he let me, but only for two seconds, then he shook his body, slapped at his tears.

"Go now, okay?"

A few days later, his brother came from Pennsylvania for his treatments, thirty-three bouts of brainstem radiation in four weeks.

Thirty-three. Not good.

They stayed largely inside, two men refusing communication, an emotional rock against the cave-opening of his place.

Mike usually believes in showing up no matter what. "Be a mensch. That's who you are in situations," he's fond of saying. "You go, you do, you show up."

But not this time.

One morning, I was packing some pasta to leave at Rich's door. "Let it rot on his back porch," I said. "I don't care. I'm leaving it."

Mike touched my arm. "Don't. He doesn't want it."

"But—"

"Look. He wants to die privately."

A rush of anger flushed into my chest. "That's not fair!"

"But that's what he wants."

My throat burned. I flung an arm into the air. "Doesn't this bother you? It's killing me!"

"Babe. You have to leave him alone."

I couldn't get it out of my head.

Do we have the right to disappear on our close friends when we're dying? Is it vanity to want no one to see us fade into shadows of ourselves, or is hiding away something deeper? Isn't our soul still vital to our friends even in its pull toward death? And shouldn't it hurt like hell if our dying friend shuts us out? Does it mean the

years of closeness meant something so little?

Weeks went by, months. We broke our rule just twice, visiting him in the rehab center between his last treatments. He couldn't eat, then he could. He couldn't read, then his vision improved. His voice was raspy, then it returned. He came home for a few days. I heard him outside one morning. We spoke. He could move about, but only gingerly.

It ached in me, the canyon between us.

Mike said, "Love him from a distance."

I tried.

Then, one morning standing by the recycling bins, our friend downstairs told us he'd been taken to the hospital in the night. "Look, I saw him get taken out. It's not good. He was on a stretcher. They were moving fast."

"No sirens?" I said. Why did that matter to me?

"No." He touched my hand. "This could be—"

"Don't say it."

Mike slipped his arms around me from behind.

Now, it's morning.

I've driven to the hospital. I'm shuffling through hallways searching for the plaque with his room number on it. 4468. The hall is quiet and the wing hushed. When I step in, the bright sun is glowering through plate glass onto an empty white bed.

Wait!

But then I look closer. There's a long, bleached bag atop the mattress, a bit sunken in the center, with a full-length zipper up its middle. I flip my head around: no nurses, no aides. No one is coming.

I creep closer.

His name is printed on a tag attached to the zipper. When I reach to touch, I feel his leg, inside the bag, still warm.

I flinch, gasping, yank my hand back.

He's just died—obviously. I'm too late. His body is still here, in bed, waiting to be carted off.

It takes me a beat, an instant fear of touching him rippling through me. Dead. Yes, he is. Then, I hear, as if it's being whispered in my ear, Say goodbye. This is your moment.

I breathe out hard, then reach.

Leaning over, I place my hands on the warmth of his fading form. I whisper, then speak. I thank him for every shared story, every conversation about art and life and being courageous enough to live the way we wanted to, every tendril of support he offered me, each twin-souled piece of it woven into a tapestry of something I counted on. I thank him for living so near to me. To us. I tell him how I hated his retreat when he got sick. I say it loudly. I weep, letting the tears drop onto his body.

I bless him there, saying a prayer over his still-warm flesh.

Then, through that zippered white bag, I kiss his forehead, and press his arm one last time, letting him be.

On the Anniversary of His Passing

Stephen Ruffus

Sleep remains spectral in a blue light,
saturated and dispersed in a prism.
He ripples out like water drawn to
the horizon until it rushes back again.
Or even more truly, he walks up
a steep path with seemingly no end,
trees on both sides giving him comfort
then descends toward the house
where he lives. Although untethered
from him we can still sit together
at the kitchen table resigned that he
may be different from us, embrace
his absence in the present moment
made palpable by a touch, a word, and
all of the many things they will mean.

In memory of my son
11/11/24

THE ROLES WE PLAY

On Being Asked to Compare "Musée des Beaux Arts" and "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" in an Online Poetry Class

Steven Goldman

Auden is a library; Williams a lonely walk,
and then there's Ashbery. "Self-portrait
in a Convex Mirror" is just one of many
to prove impervious to my dissection.
Thank you for teaching me the word ekphrasis.
But while we're here can we append Bishop
to this PowerPoint? I once transcribed "Poem" longhand
and it's a long poem, though not as long as "Mirror".
"Poem" is a weekend away in brush stroked memory, with geese.

Don't assume virtue. I don't copy to better understand
or build my craft; I don't possess the audacity
to emulate. It's just a trick to slow the train down
so I can watch what I can't produce unfold.
Or not. True confession, I am a simple art thief
collecting what I love, a forger, secreting
my stolen treasure behind the guise
of handwriting to pretend them somehow mine.

Chet

Richard Downing

"You're that guy, from that show, back in the day, you know, oh, what was it called?"

Chet just kept chewing the last bite of his hamburger and looking down at a plate that held three fries and a smear of catsup. *Back in whose day?* Yes, he was that guy. He was always that guy. Would always be that guy. He knew that a long time ago. What he didn't know was why he kept ordering a burger and fries. Not that Molly would know. She was at home doing her yoga routine. He wouldn't tell her, that's for damn sure, but he was supposed to be trying to be a vegetarian. Or was it a vegan? Like he cared. He smiled with one corner of his mouth and twirled one of the fries into the catsup. *Lettuce and tomato on the burger*, he thought, so, hey, he guessed he was trying after all.

"Bret, right? You're Bret, the kid from that show. What the hell was it called? I used to watch it sometimes, I mean a lot, back then. Three channels to choose from, what're you gonna do, no offense. Bret, right?"

Chet looked at the fry covered in a red sheen and considered putting it into his mouth to keep himself from telling whoever this was calling him Bret to fuck off. He was Chet. The kid in the show, the cute one, for Christ's sake. Even his wife called him Chet—she thought it was cute, like he was, and now she wanted her Chet to be a vegetarian. Fuck Chet. Fuck this guy. Fuck kale. Chet flipped the fry into his mouth and started to masticate.

"Hey, Bret. Not to bother you but how about you sign this … let's see … this napkin. Make it *To Junior, my biggest fan*. It'd mean a lot.."

Chet, still masticating, reached out, took the napkin and the pen, and signed.

To Junior,
My biggest fan,
Always,
Bret

Then he held the napkin up for Junior.

"And I mean it about being such a big fan of … of that show, Bret."

His name was Marvin Percy Coates. Marv to the other kids in his neighborhood. Marvy to a mother who adored her only child, adored dressing him in what she called his outfits, which to this day he can't remember except that he was always in one when they watched the afternoon soaps.

He also remembered, vaguely, the day he sneaked out the front door and wore one outside and immediately had the shit beaten out of him by Robert, who called him a sissypants and bloodied his nose. When he explained what had happened to his obviously distraught mother, she walked outside, closed the door smartly behind her, and returned a few minutes later. Marvy had cracked the door seconds after it closed but lost sight of his mother as she strode down the street. He was aware of two short but piercing screams from three doors down and his mother returning soon enough—he'd closed the door as soon as he saw her coming—and telling him to get out of those clothes so I can put them in the washing machine. Blood is the hardest to get out. You should know that. Marvy was pretty sure that Robert was also now aware of that.

It was a promotion of sorts. The network made a big deal out of it. The casting director and his crew would travel The entire country!—which in this case meant the upper east coast—they might even come to your town, audition your child, cast your child in the role of the youngest son in what was to be, the spokesman promised, what the heck, guaran-teed, an actual hit television show. On CBS.

"Try this one on, honey. Yes, that's the one. I have a good feeling about this, my little Marvy. A good feeling."

He remembered his mother pinching both of his cheeks right before the audition to get a touch of color in them. He remembered it hurt and not saying a word. His memories of the casting director were a blur. Something about telling his mother to wait outside, that it would be best if she just waited outside the room, that they wouldn't be long, that her son just needed to read a few lines to him and not to worry, that Marvy's outfit could be easily changed but that he did like the child's healthy glow—yes, Chet remembered the casting director commenting on his mother's son's healthy glow, he remembered that and the heaviness of the casting director's breath. And the rest remained a blur.

"Oh, honey, you got the part. I knew you'd get the part. I just knew you'd get it. Here, let me put some more color in those cheeks, honey. What happened to your outfit we picked out for today? No matter, my little Marvy, you got the part.

"It's Chet, Mom. I'm going to be Chet."

The show ran for five seasons, four of which included a very cute child actor named Chet and a fifth which included a somewhat less cute Chet now undergoing a confusing growth spurt and a case of early onset acne. Makeup!

And then it was over. For the show and even more so for Marvy. In fact, Marvy had disappeared into the dimpled cheeks and wide blue eyes of the precocious Chet not long into a very popular first season. There would be no reruns for "Marvy."

"I don't see why they can't just tweak the scripts a little for a taller boy. Why can't they do that, Chet? Careful. Don't spill that on your outfit. Oh, my little Chet, why can't they just do that?"

Chet considered the final fry. It was cold. And there was barely enough catsup left to cover an end much less the entire fry. And how ridiculous would it be to ask for another packet of catsup for a single fry? So he sat and stared. The waitresses—servers—would let him just sit there and take up a booth. They'd all gotten his autograph a long time ago.

When his mother died—ovarian cancer, late diagnosis, metastasized fast and far, the end came quickly—the obituaries all referred to her as Chet's mother.

Chet didn't seek out the *Obituaries*, but he read them when he saw them. He was a newspaper reader, the last of a dying breed he would say when a waitress would pop his newspaper from behind and laugh and ask, "What's that?"

When Robert read the obituary he just glared at the page and said, *Fuck her.*

The problem was the dimples. And the still-wide blue eyes that narrowed only when Chet thought to narrow them to avoid being recognized, to try to avoid being Chet. And Chet would do this, narrow his eyes, when he walked into a restaurant or a store. And they would stay narrowed until a host would ask, "Table for one?" or a clerk would ask, "May I help you," and his mind would go from keeping his eyes narrowed to "Yes, for one" or "Where

would I find electrical tape?" and soon enough he would hear from the next table or from across aisle 6, "I know you. I know you. Don't tell me—" Chet had no intention of even speaking to them much less telling them anything "—you're that kid, from that show." And his eyes would only widen further before looking down at a menu or a blade screwdriver he had no use for.

His wife started calling him Chet on their first date. After a dinner of relatively comfortable laughter and conversation, she had invited him inside her apartment, fixed him an afternoon drink. Post-drink, in bed, naked, he on top, she reached her hands up to his face and placed an index finger inside each of his dimples and rotated her fingers back and forth as if she were screwing them into his cheeks and she laughed and she told him Come inside me my little Chet, and then she laughed again, a little more loudly, Or should I say my big Chet? And he laughed along with her and did as he was told.

During what Chet thought of as the early days of his marriage, which is to say his sex life with Molly, "Big Chet" became code for intimacy. "Big Chet got anything special on his mind tonight?" And just like that Big Chet would look over at Molly sitting on the sofa or standing by the kitchen counter slicing something or other and, yes, just like that, Big Chet would have something on his mind. Sometimes they made it to the bedroom, sometimes not past the living room floor, and once on the dining room table, which had collapsed under a particularly forceful thrust by Big Chet and, finding themselves unscathed, they had laughed and proceeded to orgasm amid the cracked top and splayed legs of a table and scattered chairs. The remains of the dinette set stayed where it was, and as is, for six months. Molly liked to refer to it as performance art, dubbing it Shattered Memory. He'd come to think of it as a still life.

In time a new dinette set would be purchased. And in time Big Chet would settle into being just Chet. He found the name to be somewhat endearing and incredibly sad.

"I don't know why. It just seemed right." Molly was dicing a red onion on a bamboo cutting board by the kitchen sink. Water was running from the faucet over two more onions which she'd placed in a colander in the sink. They were making another vegetarian meal together, which meant Molly was making a vegetarian meal. Chet sat at the breakfast bar, watching, waiting to see if she'd tear up. She wouldn't. She never did. "Why are you asking me that now?"

He cocked his head to the left. "I don't know." And he really didn't. "It's just that my name is—"

Molly, tearless, turned to face her husband. "You've just always seemed like a Chet to me."

"A Chet?"

"Okay, the Chet. You've just always been the Chet. From the show."

He watched her wave the large dicing knife in front of her as she emphasized "the."

"Everyone calls you Chet, you know that. For as long as I've known you." She leaned toward him, her voice lowering, the knife pointing toward him, the tip shaking up and down slightly as if to punctuate what she was about to say. "Does that bother you, honey? I mean, if it does, I could try calling you—" Molly paused and squinted slightly as if trying to recall an old recipe for brussels sprouts "—by that other name."

Chet mumbled, "Does it even matter at this point?"

"Does it what, honey? I'm sorry, the water's still running." She reached behind her with her free hand and turned off the kitchen faucet then turned back to face him. "Now what we're we talking about?"

At first he really had tried to order strictly vegetarian at the diner. But they only offered side salads. Oh, and stuffed cabbage. Plant-based stuffed cabbage. That was also on the menu, but when Chet had pointed to it, the waitress had just grimaced and shaken her head from side to side and a tacit agreement was forged.
So a hamburger it was.

His role on the show was not a big one. Most of his "lines" consisted of expressions, shrugs and screwing up his face in various ways that emphasized his wide, blue-eyed, dimpled innocence. The expressions were often used—supplemented with canned laughter—as punch lines for his TV parents' straight lines. Viewers found it amusing—for the first four years. Most of the show's fan mail was addressed to Chet. "Why isn't Chet in more scenes?" "My daughter would like an autographed picture." "If little Chet ever comes up for adoption, let us be the first to know—we just love the little guy."

There were far fewer letters addressed to his television mother or his television father. There were no letters addressed to Marvy, to Marvin, or to Marvin Percy Coates.

At first he had kept the letters in cardboard boxes—after someone on the set had answered them in Chet's name. At first he would read each one. Then he would read the occasional letter if he became bored between takes and didn't feel like doing homework, for which his mother seemed to have little concern. He stopped completely during the final season when the letters darkened and began to reference his sudden growth and the bumps beneath his makeup. Years later he would consider burning the letters but settled for leaving the boxes out for the trashman.

He never really had a job after the show ended. "Canceled" was the official word they used. He remembered the casting director using other words and his mother telling Chet that those words were best left in the studio. He remembered the casting director looking him up and down his last day on the set. "Look at you, all grown up and no place to go. Tell you what, you can go home and wash your face, kid." And that was that.

Over the years the show became a staple on the high-numbered cable channels dedicated to vintage programs. Streaming services would pick the show up as a way to attract older viewers whose grandchildren would have to set up their smart TVs for them. And for a while the show garnered a cult following which introduced it to a new generation. Bits and pieces. Enough for Chet to make a decent living being Chet. Royalties were sometimes large, sometimes small, but pretty much steady. And he'd make appearances on talk shows whenever his show was rediscovered. But mostly he plugged products. On TV. Online. In magazines. Chet would plug any product anywhere. Cereals. Hair products. Colognes. Pharmaceuticals. Reverse mortgages. And people would buy them, not necessarily a lot of them, but they would buy them in sufficient quantities to keep a decent roof over his and Molly's heads. Turns out people trusted little Chet. And his ads would always, in one way or another, reference the little dimpled darling from the old show. Maybe a short clip with adult Chet laughing and asking viewers, "Remember him?" Or maybe a still shot of little Chet with the voice of adult Chet saying some version of "I'm not as young as I used to be, which is why I rely on such and such to keep me so and so—and, friends, you should too."

"A letter came for you today, honey. Who sends letters anymore? Looks like it's been forwarded from the studio." Molly was shredding half a cabbage into a large porcelain bowl ringed in blue and yellow.

At least you can't stuff shredded cabbage, he thought.

"Been awhile since you got a fan letter. Maybe that's what this is."

He walked across the kitchen, put his hands lightly on her shoulders and kissed the top of her head. Molly stopped shredding long enough to lift the letter from a stack of junk mail occupying a basket behind the porcelain bowl. She held it up without turning around— "Here you go, dimples"—and continued to shred.

He slit the letter open with his thumb, leaving the edges of the envelope torn and ragged. "You should use the letter opener, baby, much cleaner."

"I'm just going to throw it away anyway."

"Just saying."

He sat down at the breakfast bar to read the letter but found himself staring at Molly's ass, the way it pinched in and out slightly as she pushed the cabbage up and down against the shredder. He was mildly pleased to find himself getting somewhat hard. Molly had always had a great ass. He considered getting up and walking back over to where she stood, cupping his hands over each of her cheeks, giving them a squeeze and saying something about Big Chet, but she was busy shredding a cabbage and he had a letter to read and Big Chet had pretty much moved out some time ago.

The letter was printed, red ink. His eyes widened more than usual as he read.

Dear "Chet,"

I'm sending this to CBS and asking them to forward it. I hope you get it. I really hope you get it. Your mom, not that aproned, smiling statue who played your TV mom, your real mom—she really fucked me up that day. I still can't hear right out of my right ear, and I still can't breathe right out of my nose, which, by the way, remains flattened after two operations. I thought when I read your mom's obit in the paper that I'd be over it. Turns out I'm not. Bitch really fucked me up.

Anyway, if you hadn't told her I was the one you got into the fight with I'd be OK today, my life would be OK. But no. You had to cry to your mommy that somebody messed up one of your precious little outfits. Tell you what, "Chet"—and that's a real trip, calling you "Chet"—next obituary you read is going to be your own.

Sincerely,
Robert

Chet noted the illogic of being able to read one's own obituary but hoped that in this case it would be true. And he had no answer for the "Sincerely." He started to put the letter on the breakfast bar when he noticed something on the back at the bottom.

PS
Don't think I can't find you, you little mommy's boy. So tell me, how'd the electrical tape work out?

"Fan letter, honey?"

"Yes. Fan letter. It's been a while."

"You know what's funny? There was no return address on the letter—and no stamp, yet they still delivered it."

He looked at the back of the torn envelope. No stamp—yet someone still delivered it.

"I'm going out to lunch, baby."

"A bit early for you. Got your paper?"

"Got it."

"Salad today?"

"What else?"

"And nothing besides that?"

"I hope not."

"You hope what?"

"I hope your yoga goes well."'

"It always does. You should try it sometime. Stay home and try it with me."

For the first time doing yoga sounded like a good idea to him, but he was already halfway out the door.

"I know you. I know I know you. The little kid, right? You're that little kid, right?"

Chet kept eating. Burger and fries. He knew the routine: Sense the approach. Don't look up. Wait to be asked. Reach up. Take the pen and paper. Sign "Chet." Finish lunch.

And here it came. "Just your name. That'd be great. Worth more that way—to me. Worth a lot more to me."

He smoothed the paper on the table beside his plate. Normally, his inscriptions resembled little more than quick scribbles, but this was just one word. What the hell. He took his time and neatly, clearly, wrote "Chet" right in the middle then held the paper up to be taken as he reached for what was left of lunch.

"What's this?"

"What's what?"

"Who the hell is 'Chet'?"

Good question, he thought, still looking down, still chewing, still contemplating the newspaper.

A hand appeared right above his plate, right over his fries, and dropped the autographed paper. "Try again." And now the pen dropped onto the plate and into the catsup with a muffled splunk. "And this time write 'Marvin'—or better yet, 'Marvy.'"

And just like that the voice became a large man, who slid into the booth right beside Chet. "Long time no see, Marvy." Head of wild, thick gray hair that seemed to be losing a battle with two or three cowlicks on top. Dark eyes with dark circles beneath them. And an odd

heaviness.

Chet instinctively leaned away, closer to the window, squinted then turned his head more fully to see how much Robert had changed over the years. He had never seen Robert after … the incident, not once. Robert just never seemed to be outside after the incident.

The nose was flat. Really flat.

Jesus Christ, he thought. Mom really did a number on him.

"Hello, Robert. It's been a long time."

He tried to effect a casual tone but his voice cracked and he found himself clearing his throat between words. "So how've you been. You don't look the worse for wear." Jesus Christ, why was he saying that? What was wrong with him? The man's nose was as flat as a pancake for God's sake. "You in town visiting?" No answer. And for reasons he could not fathom, Chet just kept talking. "Business or pleasure?" No answer. "Do you eat here often?"

Robert seemed to be growing increasingly agitated, the dark circles beneath his eyes growing darker, his blinking hard, deliberate. Then a blur of movement—Robert reaching out and standing in a single motion, pulling Chet

out of the booth by his left arm—then just as quickly, but now tightly gripping Chet's right arm, sliding himself back into the booth, snapping Chet in beside him with a flick of his broad wrist. His strength seemed almost supernatural. "Now talk into my good ear, Marvy." Adding almost as an afterthought, "Asshole."

"Listen, Robert, I know we've had our differences." Their "differences," Chet thought, consisted of Chet's sneaking outside decades ago in one of his outfits and Robert's deciding to beat the bejesus out of him—and his outfit. Which led to Chet's mother reciprocating. Robert seemed to have forgotten the first part, choosing to focus on the latter. That much was clear from his letter. "I got your letter, Robert."

"I know you did. I watched your wife take it out of the mailbox. Nice ass by the way"

"Thank you. I'll tell her you said that." He thought, What is wrong with me? This man wants me reading my own obituary and I'm thanking him for complimenting my wife's ass. Get a grip. Think, then speak. "You married, Robert? Any kids?" Oh for the love of God.

"You won't know when it's going to happen, Marvy—you'll just know it's going to happen."

Chet exhaled. It seemed odd being called Marvy. To suddenly being Marvy again. Almost alien yet exhilarating in a way Chet didn't understand but clearly felt. Like a forgotten light switch hidden behind a dresser being unexpectedly and abruptly switched ON. His boyhood neighbor from three doors down was sitting there, here, beside him, talking to him. It calmed him in a way he didn't understand. "I'll take that as a no—no wife, no kids." Once again, he made sure to direct his words toward Robert's good ear.

"You shouldn't have whined to your mother, Marvy."

"Probably not." Marvy was sitting in a restaurant, having a conversation with a boyhood, let's say, acquaintance, Robert. Robert was talking to Marvy, wanted Marvy's name on a piece of paper. All the years that Chet had been Chet, Robert had been thinking of Marvy. And now Chet found that he didn't want this man, who had clearly come to do him harm, kill him most likely, to stop talking.

"Don't go all wise ass on me, Marvy. I might snap you in half right here."

"Have you eaten, Robert? The burgers here are delicious. I recommend lettuce and tomato if you're a vegetarian, but I'm sensing you're not. Can I buy you a burger? Let me buy you a burger."

"You a little demented, pal? Or just acting a little out of it? Hoping I'll feel sorry for you and just go away? No can do, Marvin. Your ass is my grass."

Chet thought that Robert might now be the one stumbling with his words, but he did want to buy him lunch. He did want him to stay and talk. Robert could always beat the shit out of him later. "Listen, Robert. I do not recommend the stuffed cabbage. Trust me on this." He laughed. "My wife wants me to be a vegetarian—she doesn't really know me, not like you do." He nodded toward a menu. "Try the burger."

He reached across in front of Robert to point to the picture of a hamburger. Robert dealt a swift karate chop to his forearm. Chet was sure it was broken. "Don't act all fucked up with me, Marvy. Not with me."

Robert stood up and worked his way past Chet until he was out of the booth and standing, leaning over him, one hand on the top of the booth directly behind his head, the other, fingers splayed, on the table. "Fucked up or not, your time is coming, Marvin Coates. You won't know when—" Robert's voice fell to a whisper "— but I am going to kill you."

"I'm afraid someone beat you to that a long time ago, old friend." Marvin Coates. He remembered my last name. That's nice. "You're sure you won't let me buy you lunch?"

Robert turned and cocked his good ear toward Chet, and Chet raised his voice: "You sure you won't let me buy you lunch!"

Robert's nostrils flared as much as they could flare. "You'll never see it coming, Marv." And he was out the door.

Marv. He was almost lightheaded. He lifted the top bun from his burger, slid out what was left of the lettuce and tomato, and finished his meal in a single bite. Cold but good. He hoped Robert was wrong. He hoped he would see it coming.

Bull

Bryan Helton

The slow cows & fast calves,
after a moment's brainless stare,
hurry clumsily away, are
bewildered by human approach.
But the old bull, wrinkled, pale,
sag-skinned, aims his square head.
A decades-old capriciousness
looks up from chewing the cud.
His long life of sure possession:
stomping copperheads, smashing coyote skulls.
So many years of thunderous lust,
now too bored to mount his harem.
All his life one confidence,
unmovable as any mountain.
He looks on the man, is motionless,
does not acknowledge any age weakness,
but locks him down in his cloudy gaze,
takes one step, watches the man walk the other way.

Bouquet Shield

Alex Clements

For a portion of my twenties, I worked as a delivery driver for *Claire's Blooms*, a flower shop on the outskirts of London. Each morning, the eponymous Claire––a fifty-something divorcée––would come up and chat to me while I loaded up the van. Usually, I hated small talk, but with Claire it wasn't too unbearable. Mostly it was just me nodding along while she described the meals she ate or the films she watched. Sometimes she'd pass me the baton, ask what I'd been up to, and rather than confess I spent virtually all my free time slumped on the sofa bingeing a delicate concoction of junk food, television, and unspeakable pornography, I chose to invent complex stories involving non-existent friends taking me to non-existent places until she told me to stop.

Anyway, it was during one of our chats on a cold January morning when Claire broke tradition and announced she had some news. "Starting Monday," she said, handing me a bouquet of lilies, "you're going to have someone doing the deliveries with you."

"What?"

"It's only a temporary thing and your pay won't be affected."

"But why?" I turned to stow the flowers in the van. "Did I do something wrong?"

Claire frowned. "No, of course not. It's just a favour for a friend. Her son's interested in driving for Amazon."

"But we're not Amazon."

Grinning, Claire pointed at me as if I'd told an inside joke. "We're thinking if he shadows you for a while, it'll help him decide if it's something he's actually interested in."

"Right."

"Oh, Neil, don't look so crestfallen." She started laughing. "Craig won't bite. He's a nice boy."

Back in the van, I performed a quick breathing exercise while attempting to re-frame the entire situation. I hadn't looked in a mirror for over a week. Maybe I was worrying over nothing. Hand on the sun visor, I prayed for a miracle, then pulled. A gurgling sound left my throat. My skin remained as acne riddled as ever. Had the number of boils on my face increased or decreased since I last checked? I tried counting but gave up when I reached fourteen. Closing the visor, I resumed the deep breathing. When that provided no relief, I resorted to screaming and punching my thighs, only stopping when a jogger turned down the road.

*

Craig turned out to be everything I'd feared: incredibly attractive, buoyantly confident, and seemingly unable to withstand more than two seconds of silence. He also had a devastating habit of turning to look at me whenever he spoke. His stare in those moments felt like a raised fist, poised to strike, but never quite landing. If there was any upside to Craig's extrovert nature, it was that the customers loved it, meaning I was free to fade into the background while he did all the talking.

It was towards the end of the first week when he asked it: Did I like my job?

There was a lilt in his voice—concern or suspicion, maybe—that made me look at him. For once, he wasn't looking at me, rather his eyes were trained on the unmoving vehicles ahead.

"Yeah, it's okay," I said, believing I understood what had inspired the question. "Traffic doesn't bother me."

Craig took the pen we kept with the order sheet and started flicking it into the air.

"What about the customers?"

"Pardon?"

"Feels like you hate them or something."

"No," I said, scrambling for some kind of defence. "That's not true. You're just more outgoing than me."

"Nah," Craig said, pausing when he dropped the pen. "It's like you try making yourself as small as possible. You're even doing it now."

Looking down, I noticed the entire right-side of my body had sunk towards the window, almost as if it hoped to tumble outside.

"It's because of your skin, isn't it?" Craig said, totally nonchalant. "I get it. My sister was the same."

Before I could even muster a response, he had his phone opened to a photo of him and a girl standing beside a Christmas tree. Something like relief softened my insides.

"That's your sister?" I asked. Between the hunched posture and the grimace contorting her face, the girl looked more hostage than sibling. Nodding, Craig zoomed in on the photo, highlighting the acne that clung to large sections of his sister's face. When I noticed her neck was also afflicted, I winced. Fortunately, mine had never crept past my jaw.

"That photo," Craig continued, "was taken four years

ago. It's basically the only one I have of us as teenagers. Isn't that sad?"

I glanced at him. "Did she die?"

"What? No." Craig squinted at me. "She refused to be photographed. Just completely isolated herself in her bedroom. Didn't even come out to celebrate her eighteenth birthday."

"Wow."

"Yeah, that was the last straw for my parents," Craig said, swiping at his phone. "Not long after that, they made her see some exorbitantly priced Harley Street dermatologist."

Deep in my belly, hope reared its ugly head.

"Did it work?"

"I mean, she's still a moody cow," he said after a pause. "Personally, I think the money would've been better spent getting her a therapist, but yeah, she isn't locking herself away anymore."

He showed me another photo, this one posted to Instagram, of a girl doing yoga on a beach. The caption underneath said something about sun salutations.

It took a moment for the dots to connect.

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" Craig said, sensing my shock. "Now she's even more outgoing than I am."

Suspecting that this was supposed to be funny, his callback to my earlier use of the word, I smiled and mimed some laughter. Two minutes later, I was asking for the name of the dermatologist his sister had seen.

"Uh." Craig scrunched his eyes in thought. "Dr. Janey, maybe? Something like that. I should warn you, though, she wasn't cheap."

"That's okay," I said, then uttered what was surely the biggest understatement of my existence thus far. "I don't have much of a social life."

At this admission, Craig gave a visible shudder.

"Well, in that case," he said, pausing as if to consider something, "what have you got to lose?"

*

That night, I spent over an hour scrolling through the messages on Dr. Janey's testimonials page. Stuff like "Dr. Janey saved my life" and "I no longer recognise the person I once was".

I imagined one day writing my own message, all the things I'd say about how my life had been transformed, how thanks to Dr. Janey's treatment I was finally the person I was meant to be. Blah-blah. It was all very enticing. But then so were all the other so-called miracle cures I'd tried—and look how those turned out.

Before Craig, there was my mother, she who was convinced that my dermatological woes resulted from "misaligned thinking".

Oh, the things she'd had me do. Meditate while reciting affirmations about my beautiful complexion? Done. Cover all the mirrors in my flat to force myself to stop acknowledging—and therefore stop perpetuating—the existence of my acne? Done. Sleep beneath a full moon with crystals taped to my face? Also done.

Obviously, none of it worked. Nor had any of the tablets or topicals that my doctor prescribed. As for the long list of internet remedies I'd tried––including cleansing my face with urine––the less said, the better.

And yet despite all that, I couldn't stop thinking about the photo of Craig's sister on the beach—so remarkably different from the girl who'd once suffered a face that looked like it'd been attacked by wild animals. *Oh, fuck it*, I thought, clicking the "Book now" button.

A message popped up informing me that due to high demand, the waiting list for new patient consultations was

longer than usual. My heart kicked in the way it did when someone outbid me on eBay.

When I saw the next available appointment was almost six weeks away, I let out an involuntary squeak then immediately closed the tab. Probably for the best, I told myself while opening Pornhub. This way I was skirting the inevitable heartache of being failed again.

All told, I must've watched over fifty videos that night—a new personal record. Everything from hentai and bondage to good old-fashioned gangbanging. I didn't watch any of them in full, just skipped through to the good parts. Or what were supposed to be the good parts. I couldn't even tell anymore. For such a long edging session, the eventual orgasm was paltry. And the post-nut despair was like a brick to the head.

After cleaning up, I spent a while debating whether a fall from my Juliet balcony would kill me. Then I gave in, reopened Dr. Janey's website and booked the next available slot—a Friday evening almost two months away. I felt certain I was on my way to achieving something monumental.

*

In the weeks that followed, Craig made no further mention of my acne, nor did he ask about Dr. Janey. As for my penchant for "hiding," as he called it, well, he said nothing about that either, but I knew it made him uncomfortable. We'd be walking up driveways and he'd be nervously eyeing the bouquet while saying stuff like "You want me to hold it this time?" or "We can swap if you'd prefer."

"I'm fine", I'd tell him, lifting my voice to emphasise how cool I was with the arrangement. Then he'd sigh or shake his head, like he was abetting something terrible.

By this point, I had acclimatised to his presence in the van. Now when he engaged me in conversation, I actually gave thought to what I wanted to say instead of just blurting out whichever response I hoped would shut him up the fastest. All of this to say, I think it bothered him that my doorstep etiquette with the customers hadn't advanced in a similar fashion.

It probably didn't help that on certain occasions—like if the house looked particularly imposing, or my skin looked particularly shit—I told him to go on without me, pretending I had to call Claire. In response, Craig would occasionally stand there pulling this Really, Neil? face, but that's as far as it ever went. That's as far as it could ever go. Why? Because people preferred it when it was just Craig knocking on their door. I saw with my own eyes how the customers acted around him: men and women screaming at some joke he'd told, others thanking him so profusely you'd think he'd grown the flowers himself. Some even cried.

Craig was uncharacteristically bashful when returning from those deliveries, always blaming the excessive emotions on the flowers, or the card that accompanied them, but I was no fool. For as long as I'd been doing the job, the only customers I'd seen cry were the ones burying a loved one.

*

"What are those?" Craig asked one afternoon.

"Guelder-roses," I said, handing him the pom-pom shaped flowers. "You okay to do this one alone?"

Craig nodded, sparing me that look of his for once.

"They're pretty ugly."

"Some people like them." I said. "Including Queen Victoria, apparently."

"What?"

"Apparently, she had them in her garden."

Five minutes later, Craig returned with a twenty-pound note.

"I tried refusing, but she wouldn't take no for an answer," he explained.

"She just gave you that?" I said, utterly dumbfounded.

Craig shrugged. "Think she took a liking to me. Kept asking if I wanted something to drink," he said, slipping the money into his pocket. "Maybe she had one of those delivery boy fantasies."

I felt my left eye start to twitch as I attempted to process this information.

"You know, where they invite the guy in to fuck or whatever?" Craig continued. "You see it all the time in porn."

Unsure of how to respond, I made a show of being offended by a car that was trying to get into our lane. Of course I knew the type of video he meant—I'd seen plenty of them. But I couldn't imagine a customer of Claire's actually being into something like that.

"Oh, she loved that Queen Victoria thing too," he added. "She said it was nice knowing she had royal taste."

I tried smiling at this, but found the best I could manage was a weak squint. I decided to steer the conversation towards Craig's future career aspirations.

"Have you thought any more about Amazon?"

He looked confused. "Amazon?"

It turned out he had no desire to work there. It was just something he'd said to get his parents off his case.

"So, why are you doing this?"

"Dunno. Gets me out of the house," he said. "Why do you do it?"

"I suppose it ticks my boxes."

"Oh, yeah?" Craig said. From the corner of my eye, I saw the pink flicker of his tongue as he laughed. "And what boxes are those?"

"Well, I hated the thought of being cooped up in an office all day."

"Exactly," Craig said, nodding vigorously like we were in cahoots. "My parents have all these ideas about what career I should have, and I can't help but resent them for it. It's like there's more important things going on in the world, you know?"

"Yeah," I said, nodding like someone who had a clue about the goings-on of the world.

*

Each year, Claire offered a Valentine's "after hours" delivery service where people could have their flowers delivered in the evening instead of the daytime. It's fair to say that the recipients of these deliveries were a touch more volatile than their daytime counterparts. Women who opened the door in a state of barely concealed despair. Upon seeing the flowers, they'd become extremely emotional, often in ways that made it hard to know if I'd helped save a relationship, or else cemented the end of it. One customer, when I tried handing her the flowers, just kept repeating "of course," and "I fucking knew it," over and over. Another one, glimpsing the bouquet in my hands, broke into maniacal laughter, then slammed the door in my face, all without checking who the flowers were from. Even so, I preferred those deliveries to the daytime ones, because the customers were too distracted by their own problems to pay me much notice. Craig, though? He was less of a fan.

"Jesus, you need to relax," he said to one customer

who, in her haste to snatch at them, had sent the bouquet of roses flying across the driveway.

"How dare you," the woman snapped, yanking the flowers from Craig the moment he'd picked them up. "It's bad enough that you're so grievously late."

"We already told you," Craig interrupted, "whoever sent you the flowers intentionally picked this time slot. If you're not happy, speak to them."

"Who I'll be speaking to is your boss," came the retort, followed by the slammed door.

Back in the van, Craig's face was a mixture of hurt and bewilderment.

"They always say they'll complain, but they never do," I said. "It's like this every year. Valentine's makes people weird."

Craig frowned. "It feels like more than that."

"Well," I said, scanning the order sheet and raising my voice to a pitch that I hoped sounded motivational, "only ten more to go!"

The rest of the night was much of the same: accusations of lateness, flowers either being hungrily grabbed at or else outright refused, and several tirades involving cheating spouses. I had assumed Craig would eventually learn to laugh it off as I did, but he only seemed to grow more disillusioned.

"Don't take it personally," I told him later as we sat in the car park of a McDonald's.

"I just find it sad," he said. "People are so insecure these days."

"You think that's insecurity?"

He bit into his last chicken nugget and looked out the window. "Secure people don't spiral just because somebody forgot to send them flowers, do they?"

I shrugged. What did I know? Nobody had ever bought me flowers before.

"My sister has this problem," Craig continued. "If her boyfriend takes longer than ten minutes to reply to a text, she acts like the sky is falling. Then she's screaming about it to me and my parents and I'm sitting there thinking *Fuck, she's just as riddled with insecurity now as she was five years ago*."

I let this sink in as dread began its slow rise.

"You done with that?" Craig said, gesturing at my half-eaten burger.

I nodded, throwing the burger, along with everything else I'd ordered but now had no appetite for, into the paper bag he was holding. He shoved it under his seat and paused for a second.

"I want to show you something." he said. "A place."

He made it all sound very casual.

*

The place Craig had me drive to turned out to be another car park, this one located on the edge of town behind a dilapidated nature reserve. Including us, there were about ten vehicles there that night—all of them occupied.

"What do we do?"

"Just watch," Craig said.

In the murk ahead, two figures (one male, one female) were standing against a car, heads bent in conversation. My initial assumption was that this was some sort of drug pickup, but that theory lost some steam once the couple started kissing. When, shortly after, the man began lowering his jeans and the woman lifted her skirt, it dawned on me what this was: dogging. I looked over at the other vehicles, each one idling in wait. Not for drugs. For sex.

They were all here to watch each other fuck. Craig had brought me to a dogging park.

As more people emerged from their vehicles, I spared only a brief thought to what it said about me that I wasn't more shocked at what I was seeing.

There had been an initial flash of disbelief, sure, but it had passed quickly. In its place now was something unfamiliar, something between wonder and surrender. Here was a group of people—some in pairs, some alone, some fat, some thin, some young, some old—and in none of them could I detect any shame or timidity. When eyes fell on them, they didn't turn away. If anything, they became more enlivened.

Case in point: the man masturbating in the car across from us. Catching his eye, I expected him to turn away, even if only as a brief, involuntary reflex, but he didn't even blink. Instead, like it was a piece of rope I'd thrown him one end of, the man grabbed hold of my gaze and tugged us into what can only be described as a passionate staring contest. It was a surreal thrill—empowering, even— to know that I was contributing to this man's arousal. I had always understood, of course, the inherent power of a look. Indeed, sometimes somebody looking at me the wrong way was all it took for my day to be ruined, my mind condemned to think nothing but thoughts of self-denigration. This, though? This thing with the masturbating man? This was something entirely different.

So distracted was I by everything going on outside, it took me a while to realise Craig was also touching himself. Granted, his cock wasn't out, but he was very clearly sandpapering a palm across his crotch. Wanting to join him, but finding myself unable to be quite so bold, I made do with using my pinkie finger to rub the outline of my erection, rather like it was some delicate creature in need of reviving.

I expected everything to feel seedy after that, but it didn't. Somehow, touching myself allowed me to enter a deeper state of immersion, kind of like I'd slipped on a pair of noise-cancelling headphones or something. It was sometime later—by which point I'd become transfixed by a middle-aged lesbian couple attempting oral sex in the backseat of their Corsa—when Craig next spoke.

"How did he drive here?" He mused. "Must use some kind of modified steering wheel."

Turning my head, I saw the masturbating-man from earlier. Now he was outside, I noticed he was missing his left arm.

"What's he doing?" I said, watching as the man approached a nearby couple bent over the boot of their car.

"Maybe he's taking over."

To my surprise, he was right. Well, half-right. Rather than take over, the one-armed man integrated himself into the performance. Down on his knees, he proceeded to perform oral sex on the man and woman, going back and forth between their genitals with surprising grace.

"You think he ever worries about what people think of him?" Craig whispered, still rubbing away at his crotch. "You think anyone here does?"

It didn't take long for me to understand what he was getting at.

"Doesn't look like it."

Inappropriate, I know, but I thought of my mother then. Specifically, how, in her endless quest to help me be the best version of myself, she was always telling me to see more of the world.

She had this theory that our experiences in life affect us on a molecular level. That's why, she'd tell me, the sad stayed sad, while the happy got happier. Self-expansion

was only possible if you opened yourself up to new things. Depending on my mood, I could either meet my mother's ethos with staunch resistance or else a buttery kind of hopefulness. There was no in-between. Most often, she'd drift into my life by phoning on a day when all I wanted was to curl up and die. But with that carnal display of bacchic freedom playing out through the windshield, the memory of her words brought forth a surge of inspiration so powerful it seemed to heat me from the inside.

"You can't keep hiding all the time," Craig said. His rubbing had grown more frantic, and his breathing had become more of a pant. I pretended not to notice. "You owe it to yourself to have bigger aspirations than that."

"I know."

Up ahead, I noticed the one-armed man had left the couple and was now taking a slow tour of the car park. What a fascinating thing he was, I thought, like something that could only exist at nighttime. My head swam. Overstimulation, I understood. This was total overstimulation.

"From Monday," Craig said, "you're going to start doing some of the deliveries alone. Okay?"

"Where will you be?"

"In the van," he said. "Watching you."

Oh dear, I thought, realising I was about to come.

"Yeah," I said, clenching my eyes shut. "Okay."

*

I'd all but forgotten our little agreement come Monday morning. Craig, however, had not.

"No," he said, shaking his head when I tried handing him a bouquet of tulips, "you're doing this one, remember?"

I searched his face for some sign that he was joking, but found none. On the bright side, I couldn't detect any cruelty, either.

"On my own?"

Craig nodded. "And keep them here," he said, using his palms to press the flowers into my stomach. "No more bouquet shields, okay?"

Half-turning, I squinted at the house behind me. "But the customers prefer you."

"Well, make them prefer you. Tell them one of your special facts," Craig said, climbing back into the van. "And don't even think about moving that bouquet."

A middle-aged blonde woman answered the door. "For me?" she said, gaping at the flowers. "But it's not my birthday."

I felt Craig's eyes snagging at my back.

"Doesn't have to be your birthday to receive something nice," I said, pushing the flowers at her.

"Oh, they're beautiful," the woman cooed. She closed her eyes and took a big sniff. I felt a shiver of terror, then nothing.

"People think they're from the Netherlands," I said, pausing to swallow. My tongue felt as swollen as my cock was. "But they're actually from Central Asia."

"Flowers and a geography lesson," she said, grinning. "Aren't I lucky?"

*

A few days later, on our lunch break, I asked Craig how he knew about the dogging park.

He scrunched his nose. "Don't call it that."

"What should I call it?"

"Something less," he paused, holding a sandwich mid-air, "sleazy."

"Fine. The car park," I said, pretending to be distracted by two pigeons outside that were either fighting or fucking.

Craig nodded. "My friends and I came across it years back. We used to drive around late at night, smoking and listening to music. We saw a lot of weird shit."

"Do you still go there with them?"

"Nah. After university, we all kind of drifted apart."

"Oh yeah," I said, hoping it sounded like I, too, had friends I'd drifted from.

We were quiet for a while after that. I wondered if I'd overstepped somehow, if mentioning what we'd done last week had broken some unspoken rule, but then he asked if I wanted to hang out after work on Friday.

"Yeah, okay," I said, trying to match his apathetic tone. "Sure."

*

"He wants us to go out there."

It was Friday night, and we were back at the dogging park. Standing a short distance from the van with his hand buried in the front of his jeans, was the one-armed man.

I looked at Craig. "Have you ever done that before?"

He shook his head. "I've only watched."

From this distance, I could see features of the man I hadn't been able to last time. Dark, cropped hair, worn skin, twinkling eyes that seemed to exist as a third presence in the van—it was very nearly too much. Then, hovering in my peripheral, something else: Craig's hand on the door handle. The sight of it there, curled talon-like, caused a sort of panic to roll through me.

"Are you going to?" I whispered. The man wouldn't wait forever. Already his gaze was skirting over to the other vehicles.

Craig inhaled a thin, uncertain breath. "I don't know," he said.

We stared through the windscreen. The man turned away.

"He's leaving," I said, feeling the need to state the obvious.

"Yeah."

Craig still had his hand locked around the door handle. I stared at it, then, without giving myself time to think, I reached down and opened my door.

While this failed to jolt Craig from his stupor, it did halt the man's exit.

Even with the missing limb, the man wasn't what you could call sympathetic, but there was something sweet in the way he slunk towards my open door. Kind of like an animal fearful of its own hunger. It was that, I think, that and the way his eyes observed me with a desperate kind of hope, that spurred me outside. I made sure to stay by the van, afraid that if I didn't, I risked losing myself in some irreversible way. But such superstitions were redundant—what was happening was happening.

For a long while, there was no touching, rather we let our eyes do the work. What the man lacked in limbs, he made up for with those eyes. His gaze was as warm and heavy like hands pressing all over my flesh, fingers snaking into my mouth, even my nostrils and ears. No part of me, not even the internal parts, went unseen.

"Sorry about my skin," I whispered. "I'm seeing somebody about it soon."

It felt like a lie, but the man didn't seem to care. All he did was grunt and tug at the button on my jeans. A sort of whimpering caused me to look over my shoulder, and there, like a frenzied child at the zoo, I saw Craig pressed up against the glass. I considered making some gesture to have him come and join us, but it was too late. Already

the man was guiding my hand to take out his cock, then moving to grab my own. What followed was both slow and rhythmic, but also, in hindsight, surprisingly brief. I remember he used his chin to gesture at all the people watching us, and when I looked for them, I saw only their eyes, glinting in the dark like tossed coins. He gave no warning that he was close, just made this guttural moaning sound as warm rain decorated my shoes. My own orgasm arrived soon after, a nasty, purgative affair that made me think of a bucking horse desperate to rid itself of its rider.

"Nice," the man croaked. "Same time next Friday?"

Still catching my breath, I watched, only a little repulsed, as he bent to wipe his wet hand on the ground.

"How was it?" Craig asked once I'd returned to the van. "Good?"

I nodded, a smile coming to my lips.

The whole way home, neither of us said anything else about what had happened, nor did we acknowledge the heavy stench of semen hanging in the air. Usually, I hated that soggy odour, but that night, I loved it. It smelled like victory. Like joy and friendship and freedom and so many other things that had, until recently, felt beyond my reach.

*

Monday morning, I woke to an email from Dr. Janey's office reminding me about my appointment for that coming Friday. I had to check my calendar to confirm it was really true. How time flew.

When I told Craig about the appointment, his reaction was less than satisfactory. He didn't even act surprised, just nodded and said, "Oh yeah?" while his eyes scanned the order sheet. I got the sense I'd disappointed him. Though maybe I was projecting.

"So, you think I should still go?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

I shrugged, totally unsure of what to say. That I was afraid it wouldn't work? Perhaps, but it felt like more than that.

"Just make sure," Craig said, "that if you do go, you go for the right reasons."

Well, obviously, I thought.

"Because it's pointless to rely on something external to fulfil you," Craig continued. "It's the same with celebrities and their plastic surgery addictions. Stuff like that never works. It has to come from within."

"From within?" I said, intending to sound rhetorical, but we both heard the plea in my voice.

"Yeah, like self-acceptance or whatever."

I could've slapped him.

*

The next morning, Claire told me Craig's mother had called to say Craig had gotten a new job. "Some insurance thing," she said. "Apparently, they wanted him to start immediately. From what I gather, Ray pulled a few strings."

I stared at her.

"Ray?"

"Craig's father," she said, watching me.

I widened my eyes and nodded violently.

"Anyway," Claire said, "you've got the van back to yourself. Told you it'd be a temporary thing, didn't I?"

At first, I was crushed. I had to keep fighting the urge to drive round to Craig's house and demand an explanation, or at least a proper goodbye, but I came to see I wasn't owed either of those things. And maybe he'd

done me a favour, disappearing the way he did. Without him around, the decision about Friday night—where to go, whether to go—felt a little easier to reckon with. Still, I agonised over it. Of course I did. By Friday, I still wasn't totally sure. Even when I was parked up, readying myself to step outside, there was this voice in my head screaming at me to drive home and forget the whole thing. But that voice would've been screaming whatever choice I'd made.

In the end, it wasn't certainty that had me reaching for the door handle. Just the dull awareness of what would happen if I didn't.

A life of wielding bouquet shields and little else.

I stepped outside. Cool air traced my skin.

ON THE MAP SOMEWHERE

My Mother's Garden

Odi Welter

My mother's garden
was the last place I wanted to be.
I hated digging up the weeds,
sun blistering the back
of my sunscreened neck
because I could never tan like she could.
I hated the raised scratches
that marred my arms after
raspberry picking,
the pink juice that
stung when it found the wounds.
I hated the hives
that splattered my skin
after picking cucumbers,
the way their little spines
dug their way in.
I hated watching my step
so I wouldn't crush
any of her beloved plants.
I hated how much of my life
I was forced to spend
tending to something she loved
and I hated.

My mother's garden
is the first place I visit back home.
I love seeing her perfect rows,
each plant in its place
but allowed to grow past it
if the sun and earth call.
I love collecting raspberry leaves
with my little sister
and brewing sun tea
on the porch while she tells me
about the childhood she's having.
I love the freckles that burst
to life on my mother's skin
as she plucks tomatoes, green
beans, and cucumbers,
all the secrets of how she grows things
there if you just take the time to read them.
I love how gentle she is,
how she keeps things alive.
I love searching for her stories,
the ones she's never told,
among the garden she loves
and I've come to love too.

Solitudes and Requirements

Estill Pollock

In the country you abandoned
a raw month remembers every year away

The wind is a face you knew, stretched
and skewed now
daring you to answer

You write your name over and over
rehearsing your life, the cries of distant birds
cold and constant, too far away to hear

Somewhere Off of US-64

Morgan Neering

I had escaped into nervousness. Highway exit signs lining the interstate. Smoke plaguing the curves of the mountain, sprinkled with bare trees. America, my America,

a dreary skeleton, winter afternoon. I lie awake most nights in the motel at the top of the hill. Put chairs in front of the door, heard the branches knock gently

pleading, asking to come in. My car won't start, it's too cold. Somewhere on I-40 I bought cigarettes and cheap beer, but don't smoke and don't want to drink alone

feels sadder somehow. Packed a book, de Beauvoir, but don't know why. I think she'd be disappointed in me so

I've come here to reset, rewind. Lock myself away, the land around me pulls. Whispers circles of smoke, through the gaps in the windows

fog covers. Quilted blanket on the bed, flickering light over the tub and I'm sure the walls weren't always this color, layer of smoke. My car won't start, it's still too cold

I figure every morning I'll go out into the town, learn the secrets of the wind in the shadowy peaks standing sentinel around. I am not looking to stay here, but to stay away.

Dear Sister in America

Katya Cengel

Dear Sister in America,

I'm not supposed to know about you, at least not the details. I think the grown-ups thought I would forget about you. I'd just turned seven when you disappeared. You were four, and we didn't see each other often. I lived in the city with Mama and Papa, and, later, Emil. You lived in the village with Babcia. We, not Papa, of course, visited once or twice a year.

I don't think I liked you. Visits with Babcia were meant to be mine, and I guess Emil's too. Except Emil didn't really count because he's a boy, and Babcia didn't help him sew dresses or make pastries. I didn't like sharing Babcia with you. Why did Babcia need another girl around when she had me?

I remember your long blonde braids. Your hair was fine and light, almost white. The older girls in the village were jealous. Your face was shaped like a heart and your green eyes had a little bit of a slant to them. You made men smile and women shake their heads, even mama. She was always in a bad mood when we visited. I was mad at you for making her upset.

We didn't have a car back then. We had to wait at the market for a driver to gather enough paying passengers

to make the hour and a half journey worth his while. Before Emil was born, I sat on Mama's lap. After Emil came along, I got my own seat. It wasn't really a seat, just the space between mama's seat and the seat occupied by another passenger. Sometimes that passenger was a woman with rolls of fat that threatened to suffocate me if I turned toward her. Other times there were men in stiff boots and dirty jeans with sweat dripping from their faces onto my arms. That was in summer. In winter bulky coats put distance between me and the strangers. I liked winter best.

Then one summer when we went to visit, you were gone. I was so happy to have Babcia to myself. I didn't think to ask where you were. I found that out once when I was going on about Guess jeans which I really, really, really wanted. Babcia let slip that you own a pair of Guess jeans and when I asked her how you got them, she told me you lived in America. I hadn't thought about you much until then. Don't take it personally. When Babica showed me some pictures of you from that time I remembered how small and cute and so very Polish you used to look in your braids and old-fashioned pinafore dress. I guess that's what happens when you are raised by a Babcia in the countryside.

Looking at those pictures it is weird to think you might not speak Polish anymore. I want to study English at school, but the teachers don't know anything so I can only write to you in Polish. When they say "hello" and "nice to meet you" they sound awkward and formal. I know Americans don't sound like that because I watch Britney Spears videos. Do you know Britney Spears? I hear you live in California. All the famous people live in California. What is your favorite Britney Spears song? I like "Oops!... I Did It Again." Do you still wear your hair in two braids? Or is that too babyish now that you're 11? I wouldn't put

my hair in two braids or even two ponytails, but then I'm 14. Maybe I would have worn two braids when I was 11.

Babcia said they changed your name. What do they call you now, Agnieszka?

Your big sister, Zofia

Dear Sister in America,

I never heard back from you, so I still don't know what to call you. I guess I will just keep calling you sister. I waited a year for your letter. Maybe it got lost in the post, especially if you mailed it on nice stationery. The post cannot be trusted in Poland. By the way, if you want to send me a package or a pair of jeans –– I still can't find any Guess jeans here –– it's better to send them with someone you know who is traveling here. The customs people take all the good stuff, or they charge a lot to let you have them. Kristina lost a pair of earrings from her cousin in Florida that way.

Do you want to know how I learned you were my sister? I don't know what you know about our family. I know a little about your American family from Babcia. Your dad is Polish. I guess that's why they adopted you. He wanted a Polish daughter. He already had a son with his wife, a black boy, like his wife. I don't know any Polish people who'd marry a black person, so I am not so sure about your dad. Is he nice? Babcia says you were scared of him when he first came to get you. You hid behind Babcia and cried when your new dad tried to talk to you. It could be because he's a man. I don't think you knew many men other than the priest. Your American dad spoke Polish to you so it wasn't because you couldn't understand him. He brought along his parents. His mother couldn't speak

a word of English. I am not sure how Babcia knew this because she can't speak English, but she said the woman was mean like a lot of the women who were in internment camps.

We studied the war in History last year. The Nazis killed a lot of Jews, but our teacher Mr. Chlebek said they also put a lot of Catholics in camps as well. He said Poland gets blamed for killing Jews but that everyone forgets that non-Jewish Poles were also put in camps and killed. I guess your American Babcia must have been one of those non-Jews that was sent to a camp. That was ages ago though. She is in America now. She must be happy. In America there are McDonald's everywhere and stores with stacks of Guess jeans.

Do you watch Cartoon Network? I know I am too old for it now, but I still watch it sometimes when no one is around. My favorite show is Baywatch. I don't know if that is still on in America, Kristina told me sometimes the shows they play here are old. Kristina is the one with the cousin in Florida, that's how she knows these things.

Babcia said the house you live in is so big you thought it was a church when you first arrived. That was in a letter from your American Babcia. She may be mean, but she is the only one who tells our Babcia how you are doing. In that first letter your Babcia told my Babcia, who is also sort of still your Babcia, that you kept asking when you were going to go home. I imagine you are over that by now. Why would you miss gray Poland when you are in shiny new America?

Your big sister, Zofia

Dear sister in America,

I am getting ready to go out with my boyfriend. Do you have a boyfriend? I bet he surfs. Babcia said she heard you were "boy crazy" and smoking cigarettes. I didn't know people in California smoked. They don't smoke on Baywatch.

I'm going to wear a pair of tight jeans. They are not Guess, but I guess you might not have seen my request in the last letter. Anyhow, I want to explain our relationship. Once you know who I am, maybe you will answer. You must promise to keep this a secret. Not even Emil knows. Mama never talks about you. Babcia is the one who explained things. She is getting older and wants me to know before her memory fades. Plus, I am 17 now, so she thinks I am old enough to understand.

My mama, Anna, is Babcia's daughter. Anna married Borys. They had me. Borys is a soldier, so he is often away. It was while he was away that Anna met your father. I don't know your father's name. When Borys, my father, found out that Anna, our mother, had been with another man, he got mad. Borys said he would leave Anna if she kept a baby that belonged to someone else. Your father already had a wife, so he didn't want mama and you either. Babcia didn't want you to be put in an orphanage, so she took you.

Things were OK for a while, but when it got time to send you to school Babcia started noticing things. People in the village were talking. They didn't say nice things. Babcia worried Poland wasn't a good place for you to grow up so she asked the priest what to do and he found you a home in America.

So even though you were born all wrong, you ended up the best off out of any of us. You got to go to America.

I forgot to tell you we have another sister. After me came Emil and then a long time later came Ina. Some say Ina might be like you, but Dad kept her.

My boyfriend is here so I have to go. Now that you know how we are related I hope you write back.

Your sister, Zafia

Dear Katie,

I know your name now. When Babcia died last year, I went through all the letters from your Babcia in America and found your name written there. It sounds so American. Did someone tell you Babcia died? She was old and almost blind and had trouble hearing and walking. Towards the end she just ate and slept and talked about mushroom-picking and a promenade where young people used to walk on Sundays. I imagine that was before there was TV. Still, I miss her. Is your American Babcia still alive? The last letter from her was over two years ago. I am going back and reading all your American Babcia's letters in order.

Apparently, even when you were in grade school your friends were mostly boys, which your American Babcia didn't approve of. She also got so tired of telling you to brush your hair that one day she grabbed your messy ponytail and chopped it off. I see what my Babcia meant about your American Babcia being mean. Your American dad is also strict. The letters say he used to lock you in your room for punishment. You would escape by climbing out your second story window. Weren't you scared of falling? You're braver than I am. I'm terrified of heights. Your Babcia wrote that one time you even stole some of your American mother's jewelry and sold it. Why would you do that? You have a big house, a horse and a pool.

I am going to graduate soon. Wouldn't it be wonderful if I visited you in California? Maybe we could go to Disneyland together, and Hollywood. And hang out at the beach in bikinis and sunbathe. We don't even have to go anywhere. I'd be happy to spend my summer drinking Diet Coke at your pool. What do you think?

Your sister, Zafia

Dear Katie,

I am about to get married. I have a lot to do. I wanted to let you know my last name will change so you recognize it. I'll still send the letters to your American parents' house. Or, is there another address I should use?

I reread the last of the old letters your Babcia sent. I always wanted to ask you if school was like it is on Saved by the Bell. I imagined you having a locker next to the star football player and sitting with a group of girlfriends in the cafeteria at lunch. In your American Babcia's letters though it says you didn't go to school much. You missed classes so often they sent you to a boarding school. By then you had started drinking and smoking more than just cigarettes. At least that's what I think happened. Your Babcia was a little vague on the details, probably because she didn't know about those types of things.

I didn't know alcohol was a problem in America. In Poland all the men drink. All the time. Some of the women do too, but not as much. We blame the Russian influence. There are drugs as well. Emil got into them for a while. He is clean now. When I was young there were some kids who sniffed glue. I guess people are always needing to escape. But what do you need to escape from in America?

Your soon to be married sister, Zafia

Dear Katie,

I've been married for five years. A lot has changed since I last wrote you. I didn't write because there wasn't much to say. But now there is. I am a mother! I named my little girl after you, Agnieszka. Mom didn't like that. But I think Babcia would have liked it. My baby doesn't have your blonde hair or green eyes, but she is cute enough.

On Facebook it says you had a baby too. So, we are both mothers now. It doesn't say you are married, and I don't see the same man in many of the pictures, so I don't know how you're raising your child. There are some pictures with your American parents. Do they help you with your daughter? I'll keep sending my letters to their house until you tell me your address.

Mama doesn't help me much with the baby, she still has Ina to look after. We live nearby, just in another apartment block. I always thought I'd go further away. I might have if I hadn't met Karol when I was 19. We were having so much fun. I guess I forgot to make plans. When he asked me to marry him, I couldn't think of any reason to say no. What else was I going to do? Keep living with Mama and Papa and the kids forever? I always found school dull so there wasn't a point in studying any more.

I wonder why you became a mom so young. Your American family is supposed to be rich. I'm sure they had money to send you to college. But it doesn't look like you went. I mean I don't think you would be working at a hardware store if you went to college. What do you do at the hardware store? Are you the only woman working there? Who watches your baby while you work? I have so many questions for you. But the really important one is about your reply to my message on Facebook.

Were you serious when you said that you would like to visit Poland? Do you really want to come here and meet me

and Emil and Mama and Ina? We don't have Hollywood and Times Square here, but I could take you to Babcia's village. I ask because after you messaged the first time, you stopped answering my messages. That's why I decided to write you another letter.

Your sister, Zofia

Dear Katie,

My Agnieszka just turned 10 and decided to dye her hair blonde, like yours! I saw on Facebook that your hair is still long and straight, although it seems a bit thin now. Or maybe that is just because you are heavy, so your hair seems small on you. I don't want to be mean. You are still prettier than me or Ina. But you are wasting your looks by eating badly. In America it can't be that hard to stay thin. They have all sorts of special diets and doctors and exercise programs and massive gyms with lots of machines, especially in California. When Kristina visited her cousin in Florida she went to Costco. She said it has everything: clothes, muffins, computers. Affordable clothes, not like here where everything is expensive. Maybe you don't make as much money though. Facebook says you work at a restaurant now.

I would like Agnieszka to be an exchange student in America. As I explained to you on Facebook, I don't understand what you mean when you say America isn't safe. I've seen the movies and news about shootings, but that doesn't happen everyday? Poland is so small. Nobody cares about our country. If Agnieszka was in America, she'd be at the center of things. She is too smart to waste away in a part of Europe no one knows. Maybe she could swap places with your middle child, the boy with long hair like a girl?

I saw that your American mom died. I am sorry. You never post anything about your American dad. I kept waiting for you to explain your reply on Facebook, but you never did. I know you saw my message because since then you have posted a lot of pictures of your bull dogs and food and flowers and several of you with revealing tops. You must have gotten your big chest from your father's side of the family. Your breasts are like some of the actresses I remember on Baywatch. Is that how all women in California look? Maybe my Agnieszka should do an exchange in New York or Boston, not near Los Angeles and Hollywood.

I found your American brother on Facebook. He has the same last name and is Black. I remember your American Babcia writing that he was wild like you when he was young. He doesn't look wild now. He has a job in finance and is married to a teacher. They have two kids. He is living the American dream. And you, what about you, Katie?

Awaiting your response, Zofia

Dear Katie,

I am worried about you. According to your Facebook posts you don't work at the restaurant anymore. Did you get injured? The addiction counselor you were dating seems to be gone. So do the younger kids. You still have dogs. But no bouquets from admirers. Please write.

Zofia

Dear Katie,

You didn't respond to my messages on Facebook. Then you stopped posting. I am worried because you used to post everything. You even posted pictures when you had the stomach flu! I think you may be an addict. I also think you may be worse at motherhood than our mama. She didn't do drugs but she smoked and drank. When she got frustrated, which was often, she'd walk out. I always worried one day she'd leave for good. But she always returned. Sometimes an hour later, sometimes a day, sometimes two. The longest she was gone was 56 hours. I was 14 and had to take care of Ina. She didn't like me, so she fussed. Thank goodness Mama didn't breastfeed her. I'd give her formula but there wasn't enough. Papa was out of town and I didn't have money, so I had to water down the little bit we had. Ina cried constantly. I wanted to shake her just a little too hard. I may have shaken her a bit. When Mama finally came home, she acted like she'd just popped out to the store for a minute. No big deal.

I never left my Agnieszka on her own like that when she was little. OK, I guess that isn't completely true. I did sneak out sometimes after she was asleep and drove around, never actually going anywhere. Just driving with the radio on feeling like I had a life outside of being Agnieszka's mama. But that was different. She didn't have to care for a baby. I don't think she even knew I was gone. I guess you left your youngest children or maybe I should say they left you. Jade must be old enough to be on her own by now. Maybe I'll find her on Facebook.

Still awaiting your response,
Zafia

Dearest Sister in America,

I spoke to Jade. She is a smart girl, your Jade. Agnieszka translated. Jade told me you weren't posting on Facebook because there has been an "intervention." Jade and your brother put you in a place where they will take care of you. They won't let you use drugs there. Or alcohol. Or the Internet.

Jade told me what you were like as a mother. You got high a lot. Forgot to buy food and pay bills. When your addiction recovery counselor boyfriend was around, he kept you in check. But after he left and took the younger children with him, you spiraled.

Jade said your memory is fuzzy, and you lie. Your brother buys your groceries and pays your bills. Jade thinks you have trouble knowing yourself. She said when she was in grade school you dyed your hair black and told everyone you were Japanese. They believed you. After a while you seemed to believe it too. Jade said you were interested in learning more about your Polish relatives. When you get better, she wants to bring you here. Young people have such ideas!

I think I understand you better now. I know you think of your family in Poland. It is there in the stories your daughter tells me about you. It is there in the space between the lines your American Babcia once wrote. It is there in the few words you once sent me on Facebook. But I know something else as well. I know this second thing because of the words you never wrote, the letters you never sent.

There is nothing for you in Poland. There never was.

A problem was not transformed by the promise of America, just postponed. You were unwanted. No matter how much a new family in America desired you, that didn't change the fact that we didn't. It didn't erase that

Babcia, the one Polish family member willing to take you in, sent you away. Far, far, away.

I never told you this before, but I keep a picture of you. It is tucked away in the back of my top dresser drawer under the fluorescent green bikini I bought for America when I thought I might visit you all those years ago. There you are with your perfect blonde braids and your little Polish pinafore. You are sitting on Babcia's lap, your hands covered in chocolate, a goofy grin on your face. In the background, almost out of the frame, is another little girl, me. The focus is on you, so my face is slightly blurry, thus it is impossible to determine my expression. Am I mad at being left out? Happy to have a sister to get into trouble with? Was I the one who gave you the chocolate? I can't remember and the photo offers no clues. Maybe one day you will tell me.

Your dear sister in Poland,
Zofia

An Ancient Matter

Alan Shima

what is hidden
carved
in a grimace
and a smile
the wooden masks
hung
above the door.

in lore
known as demons
or ghosts, sometimes spirits
meant to frighten, not harm
as in a dream.

ulcered skin
horns singed
they lurk through wars
and famines
gathering unburied bones
anticipating
our next life.

Traffic at the Intersection

Bea Racoma

in the car you know the wind
is breaking. smog in the air smog in our
ribs. pipes pulling CO_2 from concrete-bound roots
grasping at katipunero liberation. you know
it's our shared lineage of
love
leveraged by trendy greenwashing. straw of rock
bag of fabricated skin park of lush
greenery constructed on
ruined soil. we build because we think earth
inadequate. turn right
at this intersection
and
see the end — perhaps,
or not. pay
attention.
you know there's no
need for another apocalypse in this landscape
of eternal yearning.
yearning here is a state of construction,
myth-making a hole-filled street. here
in the armageddon of EDSA, your car will cough
as your lolo did on his
deathbed. your lolo a brown moth squashed
by military bullets, head blooming,
artichoke on a plate of glass. you know
the news. you see the deflowering
of childhood by the penetration
of metal. yet your car moves
along. over there: a lone flower

blooming in the crevice
between
nature and man, its growth a
protest.
you know the sampaguita glows like midnight
screens when the skyline is off. things here that glow
become targets for massacre.
in palawan the fireflies circle old trees like
stray embers from a cigarette
party, clinging with small hands to the sky, light feasting
on earthen eyes. *do not let me die*
whisper
their wings. within their light,
you know, everything is possible.
everything
is as it was.

The Messenger

Stephen J. Lyons

Walt Madigan walked out of Konya's Garden Hilton Hotel—a five-star property with the usual unmanned metal detector in the lobby—when his wife Alice began belittling him in front of her new-found friends at the end of an international tour.

The tour was Alice's idea, something about discovering the wonders of Turkey—the confluence of East and West—understanding Islam, and experiencing the requisite calls to prayer, which Walt had found intrusive and annoying. "Give it a rest," he grumbled that first morning, jamming earplugs in place. Alice stood transfixed, her iPhone held out the window of their four-star hotel in Ankara recording the muezzins' chants broadcast from loudspeakers affixed to minarets. "Just listen to that, darling. So primordial and authentic!" She never suspected that the calls to prayer were recorded.

Walt was a newly retired oncologist. Alice was a nurse turned fiber artist with a middling reputation in the incestuous, regional art world of California's Marin County. With thirty-five years of marriage the lines in the sand were firmly drawn. She tried not to upset him. He had all the financial power.

Their two sons had taken divergent paths. Sam, the oldest, got onboard early at Google (Employee #3) and

was now living a life of understated privilege on a redwood houseboat in Sausalito with his partner Toby, their two rescue greyhounds, and stock options worth billions.

Younger son Max had taken a route that led to tens of thousands of dollars spent on therapists, mood stabilizers, behavioral summer camps, and a disastrous week at an Alabama military school that was later sued for hazing. Max never grasped the basic cause and effect that linked work to money.

Walt had put off retiring from the hospital as long as possible, but when he reached sixty-three he had grown weary of being the Grim Reaper, the medical messenger of bad news, and the frantic families who confronted him with pages of Dr. Google's miraculous cures discovered on the internet.

With retirement came the realization that he had to fill up the next twenty-some years. Reading and napping appealed. But most challenging of all was how to live those years with Alice. Neither was used to the other's company. They had long ago retreated into their own routines. Walt had put in fifteen-hour days at the hospital while Alice puttered with Peruvian fiber, kept up the garden and house, and volunteered at the public radio station's fund raisers.

On his first Monday as a retiree Walt found a stack of tour brochures waiting for him at the breakfast table. "Listen, darling, you know better than anyone that we have to travel while we still can," Alice said, kissing him chastely on the forehead.

He flinched, picturing bus tours filled with silver-haired leaf peepers with walkers and transport chairs, and cruises with cheery Midwesterners spreading norovirus while bellying up to the 24-hour buffets. He could easily imagine the questions from his tour companions upon learning that he was a cancer doctor. "Should I worry

about this mole? How much red meat is OK? Hey, doc, does Laetrile work?"

"I've been hearing amazing things about Turkey," Alice said, counting out her morning kaleidoscope of capsules, pills, and supplements.

"Turkey? Isn't it dangerous? Doesn't it border Syria, or one of those Stan countries?"

"Oh, it's perfectly safe, silly. It's mostly modern. There are whirling dervishes. Roman ruins. Or are they Greek? Remind me to Google that. Anyway, you'll love it."

They had never traveled overseas. Their last trip was a welfare check up the coast in Humboldt County's West Haven, a tiny burg in the redwoods the locals wryly referred to as "Waste Haven," the scene of Max's latest mess. He had once again failed to pay his rent and was living in a teepee with a dreadlocked, gourd artist named Juniper and her two-year-old of indeterminate gender and paternity named Moon Child.

"So, what's the plan, Max?" Walt asked.

"Burning Man, Joshua Tree, maybe Mexico," Max answered, thoughtfully braiding his long beard in that self-conscious way that people with long beards do.

"But, after that, then what?" Walt asked.

"Who knows? Life just happens."

Juniper giggled and Walt realized that in addition to being extremely stoned she might be underage. He quickly wrote another check. The drive back to the Bay Area was tense. Alice knitted and listened to NPR. Walt seethed.

"The trip is with a tour company called International Scholarly Tours and is limited to around a dozen people. Its approach is to continue lifetime learning for retirees," Alice said. "But with younger, more active people. Like us!"

Not sensing a way out and wanting to put more distance

between himself and Max, Walt reluctantly agreed. Two months later on a cloudy October afternoon they landed at the Ankara airport where the tour guide, Ali, met them. "You can call me Al," he joked, grabbing their bags.

The ride into Turkey's capital city featured a skyline of mosques and minarets and barren hillsides covered with construction cranes and Soviet-style high-rise apartment buildings that Walt doubted could sustain even a minor earthquake. Ankara's business district reminded Walt of ramshackle immigrant neighborhoods in Brooklyn like Sheepshead Bay or Brighton Beach. American fast-food businesses were mixed in with local stores. One sign advertised "Real Fake Watches."

That first night at the welcome reception, over cloudy glasses of raki, they met the rest of the group. Four other couples and one single man. Walt noticed that his fellow travelers wore neon-colored trainers, wrinkle-free nylon clothes, and vests with dozens of secret pockets and hidden zippers. Walking sticks were common, too, and later on the hikes, he felt as if he were marching with rickety, four-legged marionettes. The latest electronic gadgets were already out on full display. "Is the Wi-Fi working? Is the password in upper caps?"

Alice fit right in. She had gone on an online shopping spree at Patagonia, REI, and LL Bean, buying all the latest lightweight gear, including a jacket that folded up into the size of a credit card. She had upgraded her iPhone, iPad, and Kindle, and had waited in a long queue to buy the latest Apple Watch on the morning of its release.

She was intellectually prepared, too. On her Kindle were tomes on harem life, the Ottoman and Byzantine empires, and Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Turkish Republic. She read several novels by Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk; a pronunciation guide to Turkish; and Idiot's Guides to Islam, Sufism, and Istanbul street food.

Walt had brought his outdated BlackBerry that he used mostly as a flashlight, along with the *New York Times Supersized Book of Sunday Crosswords*. He was dressed in chestnut cords held up by a poorly disguised money belt.

Guide Ali asked how many in the group had been warned not to come to Turkey. Everyone but Walt raised their hands. One woman said that she had left her frightened 93-year-old mother in tears.

"Thank you for closing your ears, opening your hearts, and coming to my country," Ali said, tapping his heart and raising his glass of raki. "Now I want to learn a little bit about you. Let's go around the room and hear what you do and why you came to Turkey."

Walt felt it was like an AA meeting, everyone anxious to engage their deteriorating synapses, absorb new information, and tie together the disparate strands of their educations. Several, including Alice, were already furiously writing notes in Moleskin notebooks.

"My name is Floyd Bean (Hello Floyd!). I am a retired lawyer from Cincinnati. I came to Turkey because I am a born-again Christian and I want to stand on the same ground as Paul did when he addressed the Ephesians. For me, this is like a pilgrimage to Mecca." The others nodded almost reverently.

"Hi fellow scholars! My name is Alice Madigan. (Hi Alice!) I am a fiber artist from northern California, and I am so honored to be in your country, Ali. I have never been in a Muslim nation before. I am so humbled. And I want to experience everything, the Blue Mosque, Topkapi Palace, and the Hagia Sophia. And, of course, your wonderful food! Oh, yeah, and this is my husband, Walt."

The group turned its collective gaze toward Walt. "Yes, well, yes, as Alice just said, I am indeed her husband, and she is indeed my long-suffering wife. I recently retired from medicine and Alice told me, insisted is more like it,

that we need to get out more. I'm a willing victim. You know the saying, happy wife, happy life?"

Silence. Ali came to his rescue with the announcement of dinner.

The dinner was a buffet. Alice chose the Turkish menu: lamb kabobs, okra soup, smoked eggplant, fresh pomegranate juice, and unhelvasi, a doughy cookie with grated pistachio nuts on top.

Walt scoured the offerings for anything familiar, and finally located a dish of fatty, gelatinous mystery meat and assorted vegetables, a slice of bread, a cup of plain yogurt, and a chunk of watermelon. Waiters came by with tea. Walt hated tea.

Alice was not talking to Walt. After the reception she had cornered him and hissed, "Thanks a lot! Do you think what you said was funny? Why didn't you just stay home?" She hurried away to catch up with the group. Ali passed by and patted Walt sympathetically on the shoulder.

At dinner, the Madigans sat with the Morgans, Sally and Mark, retirees from Chicago with wildly successful children and high-achieving elementary-level grandchildren.

"We were in the Amazon last month," Sally said. "The poverty was bracing! But whatever. We saw a fer de lance! At night with our headlamps! And some kind of rare parrot!"

"Exquisite accommodations," Mark said. "Not quite up to our canal cruise in southern France, but 500-thread-count Egyptian sheets, obedient native staff, and an open bar."

"Next year…Mongolia and Morocco," Sally said dreamily, sipping her apple tea and nibbling a piece of baklava.

"Or perhaps Bhutan," Mark added, scooping up his kabobs with a pita. "Our son does IT for the king and

says he can get us a personal eco-tour of the palace forest. Hardly any white person has ever been allowed inside the king's compound. We hope to change that."

The conversation further depressed Walt, who could feel a sourness fermenting in his gut. What kind of meat had he just eaten? He felt as if the Morgans viewed travel as birders do, an inventory of exotic destinations to check off of a life list.

Alice listened transfixed on the edge of her seat. "I love this tea,"

"Is this your first International Scholarly trip?" Mark asked.

"Yes, actually, this is our first trip abroad. We have a lot of catching up to do."

"Yes, so I gathered," Mark said, smirking at Walt. "Well, up to our suite. I have some notes to write. See you on the bus bright and early. Bags outside the rooms at six."

By morning, after her delight in hearing her first call to prayer broadcast outside their hotel window, Alice was speaking to Walt again. Breakfast was the same buffet with the addition of hardboiled eggs. Walt's stomach had settled down, but he ate lightly and cautiously. He had heard rave reviews of Turkish coffee but the hotel only offered packets of instant Nescafe. He longed for Starbuck's.

The bus was small, but much to the delight of the group, there was dependable Wi-Fi. The Morgans grabbed the coveted front row seats behind the driver and were soon snapping photos and giving a running commentary into hand-held voice recorders. "8 a.m. October 6th, somewhere in central Turkey…"

As the bus motored through orchards and fields, Ali stood and faced the group while giving a lecture on the Silk Road, the Ottomans, and caravanseraies as they sped

along the highway toward the Cappadocia region. The driver, Ahmed, was Bulgarian and spoke no English. His resting face was one of disgust, and he fingered an ivory-colored set of prayer beads that was wrapped around the gear shift.

The Bartons—Sue and David—from Cleveland, were dressed in identical tracksuits that said The Traveling Bartons, Cleveland, Ohio, on the front. On the back was a world map with their past destinations highlighted by neon-colored checkmarks. They sat behind Walt and Alice, studying a table-cloth-sized map of Turkey. The edges kept scratching Walt's neck.

The remaining two couples—the McCoys and the Hermans—were neighbors from Washington Island, Wisconsin. They occupied the back row of seats while fiddling with their phones, tablets, cameras, and cables, and yakking about their photo sharing apps. "It's AirDrop, not Airport. Try Bluetoothing it first. Check your mail box. OK! I just got it! I'll post it on Facebook. I'm already getting Likes!"

Floyd barely looked out the window as he studied his Bible. His lips moved as he read.

The autumn landscape of central Turkey was dry and bleak, vast fallow fields in the shadows of uninspiring, treeless hills. Ali said during the melon season Romanian gypsies and Syrian refugees worked the harvest. There was a pit stop at a vast salt lake. Walt was accosted by a vendor, who pressed salt crystals into his hands and told him in broken English to rub his hands together. He then led Walt by the arm to a kiosk. "Look? Hands soft! Hands clean!" As the vendor tugged on his sleeve shouting, "Only 20 lira, 20 lira!" Walt broke away, wiping his hands on his pants and followed the group down to the lake.

Women in black niqabs, only their eyes visible, trailed behind their husbands to the water's edge. An Asian

tourist group chattered and posed underneath stilt-sized selfie sticks. The Morgans pushed ahead of the group to set up tripods. The McCoys and the Hermans took photos of each other holding the front page of their Wisconsin hometown newspaper. The Bartons were waylaid at the souvenir kiosk buying evil eye refrigerator magnets and crimson fezzes. Ali and Ahmed smoked and looked bored.

The twilight sky was the color of sulfur. It made Walt think back to the dramatic moments in the hospital when he told families that all that remained was palliative care. The worst moments were when the patient died while the sun was shining and laughter rose from the street.

Floyd appeared next to Walt gazing out at the lake. "Do you think faith can heal?" he asked. "I mean, real faith, when God's love transcends science. You know, like the times when miracles happen."

Walt looked at the paunchy man, probably seventy years old, slightly bent over with thick glasses.

"Floyd, I'm a physician. I only dealt with scientific facts. When it came to cancer I rarely ever saw miracles. Metastasized tumors always beat prayers. Science is king in medicine. Sometimes two plus two equals four."

Floyd continued staring at the lake. "Then you probably won't believe this, but when my wife died I witnessed two angels take her spirit away."

"I'm sorry, Floyd, it's just that…"

"Before she passed, I promised her I would scatter her ashes at Ephesus. Paul was her favorite apostle. Do you know his Letter to the Ephesians? I've memorized it. It says…"

At that moment, Ali blew a whistle announcing the end of the break. Walt caught up with Alice, who had bought two boxes of the soap crystals and a purple pashmina scarf. She squeezed Walt's hand, and said, "Isn't this amazing? Such bargains! And did you see the pink flamingos?"

In the strange, Hobbiton-like landscape of Cappadocia, they stayed in a chilly cave hotel carved into soft limestone. Feral cats caterwauled in the courtyard. Parakeets roosted in the niches of the cliffs. The uneven stone floors were treacherous. Everyone on the tour was a fall risk. Beads of moisture trickled down the walls. Voracious mosquitoes kept Walt up all night.

Walt's phone vibrated. Max's name popped up on the screen. Knowing the international charges would be steep, he waited for the message. "Hey, Walt. Car broke down in Barstow. Guess I never checked the oil or something. Anyhoo, Juniper is majorly bummed and now Moon has croup. Stuck in Barstow! Who would have thunk it? Need about five grand to get this car fixed so we can adios our way down to Mexico. Send to General Delivery. Dude, Barstow is a pit! Too many rednecks. Can't get a decent vegan meal, no oat milk anywhere, and…"

Walt hit delete.

Alice had signed up for a balloon ride early the next morning. Two hundred dollars for basically a half hour elevator ride. Walt and Floyd did not participate. Walt sat in the breakfast room solving a crossword puzzle. Floyd sat opposite Walt and read scriptures.

The group returned after an hour flushed from the champagne and bursting with awe. Alice ignored Walt. She had bonded with the Morgans. The three of them glanced at Walt and shook their heads.

"You missed out, old man," crowed Mark. "Sunrise over Cappadocia. Incredible!"

Walt imagined what it would be like punching Mark in the face.

"That was a once-in-a-lifetime adventure," gushed Sally. "And top-shelf bubbly!"

The Bartons live-streamed their reactions to the world.

The McCoys and the Hermans swiped through their photos and chattered like caffeinated wrens.

Ephesus was their next destination. Ali roused the group early to avoid the crowds that would soon disgorge from the massive cruise boats arriving in the nearby harbor. Walt missed his morning coffee, and a caffeine withdrawal headache took hold when he got off the bus.

Cats roamed the Roman ruins. Tabbies and calicos perched upon ancient pillars to lick their paws as the sun rose. They appeared well fed and healthy. A dwarf at the entrance claimed he fed all 126 cats and cared for their medical needs from donations. The entire group shoved liras into his tiny hands. Khe keeper handed over some of the cash to Ali, and Walt wondered where the money really went.

Walt was joined by Floyd. He was carrying a small Tupperware box with his wife's ashes. "Will you come with me to scatter her remains? You are the only one here who I feel understands the weight of death."

"Well, OK, but I don't know how much help I will be."

The two of them peeled off from the group and entered the amphitheater where Paul had delivered his sermon. They climbed the stone stairs to the top, where the view opened up to the west and the Aegean coast. Goats lounged on the steps, oblivious to the historical significance of their quarters. Down below, Walt could see the group standing in front of what remained of the Temple of Artemis as Ali lectured. He could hear Alice's lilting laughter. She did not seem to notice Walt's absence.

"Paul was here in Ephesus for three years," Floyd remarked. "His message was simple: resist the temptations of sin and reconcile with Christ. Material wealth means nothing."

Walt again recalled when he had to deliver the bad news to cancer patients. His approach was clinical and direct. Most of his charges were living the high life of wealthy Californians, but in the end the money did not save them. He remembered the terror in their eyes as they contemplated their own death. Walt also thought of his own comfortable existence. What did any of it mean? Wasn't there a deeper meaning to this short life aside from professional success and accumulation?

"Paul's words actually caused a riot among the locals, didn't they?" asked Walt.

"Yes, the rich merchants of Ephesus felt that a fealty to faith was a threat to their own form of material worship. They had defined their worth through, well, their net worth."

"What was your wife's name," asked Walt.

"Maggie. And I have never loved a person more and I never will."

Floyd opened the container with Maggie's cremains and said, "And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God. Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen."

"That was from Ephesians 3:19-21, one of Maggie's favorite passages" Floyd said and tossed the ashes into the air and what had been Maggie settled on the men's shirts.

"I guess you could say we are forever anointed together," Floyd said. 'Thank you, Walt." The two men hugged and descended back down the stairs to join the group.

On the final day of the tour the group headed for Konya, the most holy city in Turkey. Unlike in the more secular Ankara, most of the women wore hijabs and burkas. They were accompanied by pious, unsmiling men. Walt felt like an infidel intruder.

After a long, hot afternoon visiting mosques, tombs, madrasas, and a clamorous outdoor market, where Alice bought saffron and an evil eye necklace, the group convened for the farewell dinner at the hotel. Alice and Walt dined with the Morgans. Floyd sat alone quietly reading his Bible. He looked up and smiled at Walt.

The couples' conversation turned to money. "We made a killing by investing in prison construction," said Mark, looking at Walt. "With the illegal alien crackdown, incarceration has become a gold mine. Alligator Alcatraz was a lucrative investment: 45 percent returns. The dividends paid for this trip. You should jump on it, old man."

The old man once again pictured knocking out Mark's teeth.

Alice laughed. "Well, Walt is way too conservative with money, aren't you dear? A classic tightwad. I practically had to beg him to get rid of his old Corolla and buy a Tesla. He likes to shop at Aldi instead of Whole Foods. And he even buys his clothes at Goodwill. Can you imagine?"

Sally and Mark looked stricken.

Finally, Walt had had enough. He excused himself by feigning a stomach disorder. He left the hotel without telling Alice just as the sun set behind a horizon of minarets. It was rush hour in Konya. Veiled women passed him, walking several steps behind bearded men. A Roma said something to him in Arabic and offered him a sprig of mint. Walt headed for the tallest landmark on the horizon, the emerald-colored temple that housed the tomb

of the Sufi mystic Mevlana Rumi. The tour group had been there earlier in the day but it was hot and crowded, and they were forced to rush through the exhibits. But he remembered a quote of Rumi's, in fact, had written it down: "Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond." He stood outside the temple and thought of Floyd, and how fortunate he was to meet a man of such enduring faith. Was Floyd that guide Rumi mentioned? And could he, Dr. Madigan, finally develop a belief not by burdened scientific facts? Perhaps two plus two does not always equal four.

His phone vibrated: a call from Max that he sent to voicemail: Hey, Walt, where are you? Hello?! The check hasn't arrived. What's up with that? I'm sweating my balls off down here in MAGA Barstow, dude! Can you even imagine what I'm dealing with?! Juniper might be pregnant! This is fucking nuts!

Walt hit delete and blocked the number.

Then a frantic text from Alice: Where R U?! He turned the phone off and sat down to rest on a park bench, watching the last rays of the sun reflect off the green dome. The air was cool and the breeze held a hint of jasmine. Long-necked cranes flew on the horizon. The evening call to prayer rang out across the city. It did not seem recorded.

No one knows where I am at this very moment, Walt thought. Yet, he did not feel the least bit lonely. He recalled another Rumi passage: The entire universe is inside you. The realization made him happier than he had been in years. He closed his eyes and listened—hearing for the first time—the muezzins urging the faithful home.

Things We Made into Houses

Robert Mcdonald

Blankets, a roof over four dining room chairs, and blankets,
bridging the space between
two beds. Branches,

stacked in low walls, or pulled together overhead, secured
with knotted twine.

Closets, or the hollowed-out middle of the lilac bush,
the blossoms
gone brown

in June. Under the front porch, inside a pup tent, behind
the couch
where the dust bunnies thrive.

Below the eaves on the back-porch roof. In a hollow
of flattened grass

in the middle of a field, in back of the nearly deserted
hotel, red-legged grasshoppers

the only other boarders. We wanted a home
adjacent

to home, a house under a pool table, a cabin
nestled

in the bathtub. We were just learning
about maps

in school, how a place in the world
might be claimed

and outlined, new states created, borders
made, blue chalk

on a square of suburban sidewalk, somewhere
a home was inside

our home, and kinder, and better. On some maps
there was a treasure,

and X
could mark that spot.

You Held Poziomki

Victoria Martynko

and introduced me to the country of your youth.
        We heeded her greetings—
her fields of *poziomki*: strawberries, sweet and wild.

You dropped them onto my palms and pointed at the stems
which bent and coiled to tuck their divine ornaments
        into themselves
like umbilical cords desperate to delay severance. *Patrz tam*,

you whispered,

waiting for tethering to become birthing and
        birthing to become fleeing.
All was still. We watched the white-petal newborns
        and their yolk centers
bulge into buds. We watched them
        grow ready to resist their mother's
protection from pickings. We were witnesses to the magic
        of ripening, and

I was a witness to you, sweet and wild, picking *poziomki*,
licking your fingers to savor our saccharine bounty,
sitting around the fire with your siblings and parents and me.

I met who you were before you became a mother.
I met a child sinking into the couch and
        laughing with one sock on,
her skin raw from bumping bark and
        foraging for mushrooms in the forest.
I met who you were when you could afford restlessness. *Patrz tam*,

I thought.

Was it a mirage in Poland's summer heat,
just light rays twisting over hot gravel? Maybe,
but I keep it with me. I need to believe you were a child

before your body held a child. I need to believe you
had time to be sweet and wild without thinking of protecting me.

The Weight of Paper

Jennifer Helgeson

My dearest grandchild,
If you are reading this,
I hope your eyes,
so accustomed to the perfect lines of screens,
have learned to navigate the little rivers my hand leaves behind.
It has been so long since I wrote on paper for anyone but myself.
I imagine you squinting at the loops of my ls, the tight curl of my es,
        a language as strange to you as Latin.
This is a letter, not a text.
It is a thing with weight, a thing that smells of paper and time,
a thing to be folded and tucked away,
a tiny map of a life you don't know.
My letters were never meant to stand alone.
        They held hands, a nervous chain of promises,
        a secret pact between one thought and the next.
        I learned it at my grandmother's knee,
        a secret that she had learned from hers—a family tree of ink
        and habit, a living history.
I have boxes of these old ghosts in the attic,
scrawled notes from your grandfather,
tangled with plans and declarations of love.
I can read the speed in his hurry,
the anger in his impatient slashes,
the tender shake of his hand as he wrote his last goodbye.
Your words are so clean. So quick.
        They flash into existence,
                then vanish,
                        leaving no trace.
You write to each other in a language of detached squares.
But a part of me aches for a time when the message was not just

in the words,
but in the very bones of how they were written.
I hope you can follow my hand's slow journey across this page,
this final lesson.
Perhaps one day you will look back,
and feel the weight of this letter,
this map I wrote just for you.

SOLITUDE IN LOVE

étude 10

Ray Malone

of a sudden, the sound of entry,
some step up from the foot of the stair,
and the hand trembles, held to the heart,
there in your tower, with your eye
off in the distance, in pursuit of love
and the way it fled, the way it fared,
through the streets, to the one window,
and the ear waiting there.
And the slow bleeding of life from the light,
sleeping on your feet, the cold
for comfort, *come home, come home*,
echoing from every corner, every inch of force
issuing from there, and the turn from,
the drawing away towards, the silent climb
to what evening means, and time,
time to prepare the space, for being there,
to write the walls, to raise the stair,
assemble the silence, and then to wait,
for the sound of the stir, the broach
of the foot there, the moment of,
entry of, the infinite approach

Asking You

Nicholas Skaldetvind

I touch the gaping mouth of Neptune and he swallows
my hand, his face lighting up for a moment.
For some things I have no memory—
where I left my car keys,
how a delft bruising along the vellum of my thumbnail
        bloomed—
what my ex-lover wrote in a startled ink-stroke last week—
        the same
color, a different texture I stared, defining the distinction—
why exactly I came here.
But I like to know the names of Greeks and how they lived—
Thucydides, Themistocles, Aphaia—
and later, I want to know the name of these columns that limitrophe
your house like a sort of fence. Wide brick trunks opening
        into frames, branches
holding the field of corn and the bright keening of the stars
I might be mistaking for planets
heavy next to us.

The Last Last Time

Ken Haas

The other times didn't last as lasts,
most because our new amours were even worse
and we'd stuffed the memories of our false, our mean,
beneath the mattress of some after-Scrabble sex,
a few orujoed nights in Spain.
Flush or poor, we were always up
for the encore meal that led to a deal
on the kitchen floor.

How then to end for good the microwave,
the meth-lab love, convert the drug of the one before
to the after which there is no more.
Useless to simply take the check and say goodnight,
give the prior act a chance to be the final fact.
What it takes is not a pact,
but a time so likely to lick all times to come
that to ride again would crash the train.

So hand in paw we went for the secret dark,
the buttered knot, the hunger bath,
the father mask, the bitten tooth,
the thong half-on, the saddled truth—
a time whose even scant recall
was preordained to scare us stiff,
but in the end just further gouged the groove,
poured fresh potion in the trough.

Most episodes are throw-aways or D.O.A.s.
A few won't quit or let us go. The trick, they know,
is not to last but just to linger long enough,

so when the book of never cracks again,
an oyster in the blood deftly rocks to rest
all those times that tried to end the war
and suckles forth the everlasting last
of please please just once more.

Self-portrait as an Act of Lovemaking

Ken Haas

A love child only of sorts, do not try to explain me
by the whereabouts of celestial bodies at the instant
of my birth. Or even a congress of chromosomes.

My nature is much more plausibly a product of how
my parents made love the night they made me.
Father unable to sleep after a long day loading

machine parts under a foreman's greasy thumb,
thinking it better to roll onto a nervous wife
than face rolling nightmares of an Okinawan jungle.

Mother's ears brimming with the screams
of old aunts in sepia left to crematoria,
begging her to let the mysteries of her nightgown

be uncomplicated this one time. Which she honors,
melting his buried rage into an artless desire to please.
He kisses gently her turned cheek.

There has been no other and there never will be.
Which understanding briefly relieves her
of the indelible faith that she has done something

wrong, this one time coating the well of nothing is given
with a kindness so deep it is invisible.
His soccer legs cramp as he groans like a man

smarter than his face, but not smarter than the woman
who now shoulders him off her, which sends him
dreaming on a rock in the sun with a band of lizards.

She has energy to spare, lights a Lucky. He recalls
a joke about a priest, a rabbi and a belly-dancer
on a train, but this one time waits to tell her.

Driftwood

Åsa Magnusson

The lift stinks of piss again. Anya can feel the smell touching her, burrowing itself into the fibres of her coat, boring into her nostrils and ears and eyeballs. She holds her breath for most of the rattling journey down to the ground floor. The front door clanks behind her but doesn't fully close. It never does.

The sky is inky with just a splinter of pink spreading along the rooftops. There are drifts of sharp, white, untouched snow along the very wall of the buildings, but the pavement is already slugged up with brown boot tracks. She can see the usual waddling figures of headscarved women on their way to the market and younger people jogging towards the slowing trolleybus up ahead. Anya clambers down the icy steps to street level. She pulls down her shapka over her forehead and sets off against the tide of pedestrians.

The cemetery is two and a half kilometres from her house.

At the chapel gates, Anya stops and crosses herself. On the other side of the wrought iron fence is the jumble of snow-blanketed tombstones and crosses. She no longer remembers which cross is her dad's. She hasn't visited it since the burial. She knows everyone is supposed to go

back to a grave, especially on anniversaries, to pray and lay flowers. But she is afraid. After all, as God went to so much trouble to kill her father with all those illnesses, perhaps he'd see fit to strike her dead here as well? She'd hate to be buried in the cold ground like him. She'd much prefer to fall off a tall mountain, or drown in a deep, turquoise ocean where turtles swim.

She pushes on towards a row of weathered dachas with stained plank walls and rickety fences that wouldn't keep a fox out, let alone a burglar. Still, someone has made the effort to cover the flowerbeds with bright blue tarpaulin that now peeks through the snow like artificial irises staring blindly at the sky. She always wonders who looks after these little cottages. Who has put the padlocks on the doors and covered the windows in cardboard and plastic bags? Who has repaired the roof on that one with a corrugated plate? Who owns the wheelbarrow on the porch? "It's a wonder it hasn't been stolen," she thinks. It's the kind of thing her father would say, before clambering over the fence and stealing it himself.

The track opens up to a short stretch of field where the wind catches her and flings trails of hair about her neck. She can't see the edges of the path under its snow covering, but she knows where it is. It drags itself along to a gap in the cluster of elms ahead. She strides through the dry snow, feeling a giddy joy at looking down, seeing her own row of footprints in this pure white carpet. "I'm here," she thinks. "I've been here now. My steps, my imprint, my pattern."

When she reaches the elms, the sun cracks through and throws a sharp, blue shadow of Anya next to that of a broad, knobbly tree pillar. Small pockets of snow have gathered in the folds of the bark. She reaches out with a mittened hand and brushes it clean. She enjoys touching the ridged surface of a tree.

She feels more sheltered here among the trees than she ever does between the walls of her bedroom, even though she knows there is no such thing as a safe space. She knows that at any point, the strings that keep you upright could snap. You could find yourself alone, abandoned, your flat empty, radiators cold. Nothing feels permanent, other than this: the broad face of the elm that seems to coyly invite her to lay her cold cheek to it. She leans forward.

"Did you see me?" she whispers. "Did you see my footsteps? I walked in a straight line. Almost."

The tree curves into her. *I don't care for straight lines*, it hushes back. Anya smiles.

It's a strange place, this. A scattering of elms at the edge of a field. It's not quite a forest, or a dense community of trees as Mrs Orlova calls it, but it is still a place that feels owned by nature. She imagines that the field behind her may also once have been crowded by tall elms or oaks, reaching their knotty limbs towards one another, connecting, swaying along to the same winds.

A community of trees.

Someone perhaps cleared the land to plant potatoes or carrots or runner beans in that field many summers ago. Anya imagines that if they tried planting there now, those crops wouldn't last until harvest. The locals would sneak in at night and pull handfuls of slender carrots from the ground, only to scurry home and stick them in some pitiful stew. It's always the same. Those who can't afford, steal. And those who can afford, already stole from someone else.

Anya finds a flat patch at the base of the elm and eases herself down onto the ground. She wishes she'd brought a piece of cardboard to sit on. She knows she won't be able to sit long before the cold seeps in through her jeans, but she wants to listen for a while.

And it doesn't take long before the tree speaks.

It used to surprise her. It continued to surprise her even after she knew she could hear them; it always made her stomach lurch. She'd turn and look, as if expecting to see some ghostly mouth in the dark folds of the trunk. But there would just be a dark wall of bark under winter's bare branches or summer's canopy of trembling green. Still, she always remains silent for the tree to speak its mind.

Most of the time, when it's her turn to speak, she feels embarrassingly empty; unable to share any thoughts that would even begin to interest anyone other than herself. Much less a tree.

Today she knows exactly what to say and has even placed a note in her coat pocket in case she forgets. The wind is still rushing at her. She tightens her scarf and lets her head rest back against the trunk.

The rooks are sheltering, the tree whispers. *A new colony is nesting. They caw and call to each other. They gather at dusk. They flit and flee through the air. Their calls are everywhere. No longer visitors, they intend to remain and to raise their young.*

Anya glances up into the crown. She can see the silhouettes of haphazard nests, with twigs and grasses jutting out at every which angle. Like some child's failed craft project. She imagines the flailing flaps of black wings as the birds navigate the nests, chasing their fledglings, calling at the air. And then she thinks about the tree complaining about rooks like some old lady grunting about the new neighbours: *Dirty, messy, oho, too many children. And the noise from their kitchen, late into the night…*

The tree speaks for some time about how the rooks would fill the air at sunset, settling only as the dark shifted in. They'd stay for a season. Anya knows an old myth that says rooks bring bad luck. Yet, somehow, the arrival of birds is a beautiful thing.

If she looks beyond the elms, Anya can see firs and cypresses frame the frozen edges of the Suzdal lake. Naked bulrush stabbing up through the snow. It's quiet here in the winter. A world sunken into a soundless sleep. Beyond this lake, past the frail line of trees on the other side, there is row after receding row of near-identical high-rises, lined up like domino bricks, all the same tired shade of grey.

Some people call St Petersburg the City of the White Nights. Anya would rather have called it the City of the Grey Days. Here, even crisp, new bedsheets only seem to stay bright for a few washes before they all start to take on the same drab, dank tone as everything else.

The tree's voice fades into a low buzz before going silent. Anya finds herself shivering, allowing the words to flood her mind, forming a memory. She sometimes doesn't remember things so well, which is why Mrs Orlova keeps drilling her extra hard and gives her detention when she can't finish her reading exercises on time. She just wants to get better. Smarter. And another day of skipping school should at least give her something she can bring home with her.

That reminds her of the note in her pocket.

"I brought a question," she says to the tree. "And this time, I promise I won't get upset with the answer."

By noon, it starts snowing again. Outside the kitchen window, tiny clusters of dry snow are dancing. Anya sits on the edge of the table and watches the ballet of snowflakes as she waits for the tea to brew. She's in her mum's housecoat. It seemed easier to throw something on top of her clothes than to peel off the cold jeans. There's

a pot on the stove, but she's turned off the gas – allowing the water to cool enough to pour into an old Fanta bottle without distorting the plastic. She's not sure what she'll do next. Maybe crawl into bed for a while. She could pull a sock over the Fanta bottle and tuck it under her, sip her tea and read a book, or listen to the radio, maybe drift off into sleep. Still, that's risky. If Mum were to come home and find her asleep, there would be hell to pay. Maybe if she moved the mop and bucket into her bedroom, setting the scene of an exhausted daughter taking a brief rest after cleaning? Still, that would only work if she'd actually done the cleaning.

Anya takes her tea and makeshift hot water bottle and eases herself in between the cushions of Grandma's old sofa. Dad used to make her warm milk and serve it to her in her little elephant mug. He'd listen to his tinny radio, smoking one cigarette after the other, drinking from his own mug that smelled of Finnish vodka.

The only game he'd play with her was one that he'd made up –– and it didn't really have any rules. It was a guessing game called 'Where is Mother?' He'd ask the question, and Anya would have to guess three things: where her mother was, what she was doing, and who she was with. She would, of course, cycle through an innocent repertoire of places and people, scenes from the only worlds she knew, excitedly shouting them out as if anticipating to win a prize or, at the very least, an affectionate ruffle of the hair. "Mother is at the market! She's buying butter and cream with Aunty Ekaterina!" "She's at the cinema, watching a cartoon, with a magician!" "She's at the bakery, eating a cherry cake! And she's with ME!"

Months ago, when she first started the new school, Anya's classmates would be sent to visit her after lessons on the days she didn't go in. They'd hand her sheets of

homework, share some whispered gossip about who'd kissed whom, who got into a fight, and who got caught smoking behind the sports centre. They'd sometimes even sit in her room for a bit and share a bag of jelly candy or milk toffees. It was embarrassing for her at first, especially with the questions they kept asking about why she wasn't at school, but she soon started to enjoy the visits and the attention.

"Mrs Orlova is a witch," they'd say to each other. "She smacked Vanya Mikhailov just for forgetting his pencil case." "She called me stupid." "She tore someone's jacket."

As Anya's absences became more regular, the visits thinned out and eventually stopped altogether. It seemed to her like a reasonable punishment; after all, she was the one who kept breaking the rules. Children were supposed to be in school. They weren't supposed to hide in a bathroom stall, or scratch their skin raw with pencils, or scream in terror when getting a maths question wrong.

"I don't know what else we can do for you, Anyechka," the school nurse had puffed, her fat cheeks wobbling with the light shake of her head. "We try and try. Yet, you don't seem to try very hard yourself. What does your mother say about all this? Can't she take you to a psychologist, or at least get you examined by a doctor? We are all very concerned."

Anya stared at the nurse's stuffed white coat, counting the buttons again and again. She listened to a few more admonitions and was handed another non-conformity report before being dismissed.

Where is Mother?

It was no longer a game, and it was no longer just something Anya whispered to herself at night, cradling the socked Fanta bottle of hot water.

She takes a sip of tea and pulls the housecoat tighter around her body. It seems bigger than before, just like her

trousers that hang off her hips and whisk at the floor when she walks.

It's getting dark outside, and the snowfall thickens. Anya closes her eyes and thinks of the cemetery and the field, how the wind must be stirring up sparkling twirls of snow, like miniature tornadoes. She wishes she could be out there again now, pulsing along in that freshly fallen snow, making deep, cavernous footprints where rabbits can shelter from the wind. She would carry a lantern and cast a warm globe of light around her as she would yet again make her way to the elms, taking refuge below the arms of nature's towering sentinels. She would curl around their gnarled feet, the trunks swelling and bowing above.

"I'm here," she'd say. "Tell me the story again of how I came to be alone."

Dog Years

Kalliste Hardy

Dear, it's fine—
i'll listen to you talk about ley lines
we trace them with our teenage
fingers to your father's barn
far from our usual carnage
in that boiling new-year's-kiss attic
invented under a pinwheel moon

From
mouths full of foam kisses
To picking bouquets we don't want
mosaic-hearted and girly-greed
all fours in the lettuce kelp
swaying with the frothing tides
called longing

Love
tells me something about the hand on my knee
under hamstring clouds
mud-soot outline of four point five fingers
we crack our knuckles like glowsticks
hoping they will illume the way

To whom it may concern,
the contents of my throat are attached here—
chicken wing
bee balm
wedding ring
daisy chain
lupines

sour marmalade
girl-spit

Forever counting
rosy fibre burrows
open palms
sugarfish scales
quicksand pools fizzing like lemonade
mornings that taste like whalesong
reasons we will not fall
Regards to
the svelte rabbit foot dangling from car keys
Regards,
which really means
what creature deserved
amputation-fate just for
my good luck?

It's been so long
since crushing gorse between index and thumb
ulex-dusted fingers
matching stripe undies
your dark hair drooling
over my shoulder like tar on a wedding cake

Take care, band of jays, stitched into that aperture sky
To the next poor pair of familiar hands you go
Take care of yourself, no one takes off like you do

All the best
princes tuck themselves into
river-beds like coins in a cake
running waters are a blackcurrant rill of melted crowns
i can still make out our squelched handprints
if i squint like i used to

All the best,
and boomerang back to me in one piece if you don't mind

Thank you
truth—
i remember that mad crow wheezing
past our trick mirror
braying in its feather-language
that's when i traced the word secret down your spine

Thanks again
for reminding me of an opening in the wall
drywall spliced like veins
or like gin against your milk teeth

Thanks in advance
eggshell throat
coated in a molasses of regret
that summer is writhing back upon itself like a leech in salt

Best
just to be thirsty but too afraid to drink
that's when i offered you my mouth
it was dirtier than it had ever been
My apologies, i did not have time
to remove the wishbones
nor the lies

P.S.
a tongue isn't a tongue until it is made of silver
echoing off the still, steel ocean of my back
your mallet-muscle saying something that
rhymes with my name
when you sunk a red hot thumb into
that place between my shoulder blades

Always and forever
i will find an abalone shell and cut
my knee cause there are
only hours left
i'm a saboteur with seventeen dog years of experience
in scratching on the
hermetic tomb of my heart

Yours truly
until the next
summer circles back around
if you have to ask
then it's already forgotten

I Wonder

Sahil Harvani

I wonder why I feel alone,
when I am surrounded by a hundred eyes,
all looking at me but none wanting to look through me.
I wonder why I feel dark,
when I am blinded by a thousand flashing lights,
all making me see but none wanting to see me.
I wonder why I feel silent,
when I am drowned by a million loud noises,
all speaking to me but none wanting to listen to me.
I wonder why I feel scared,
when I am guarded by a billion hands,
all trying to protect me but none wanting to touch me.
I wonder why I feel empty,
when I am filled with infinite stories,
waiting to be read.

Trivial Pursuits

Laura Goldacre

Borrowing love—

not of the righteous,
not of the muse

who's possibly sulking before the canvas, chronically
uninspired. Like a vampire, I have drained
the world,
in this sense. You don't invest
your time in words, seeds to the soil,
like you promised,
seeing how you distribute yourself
sparingly. I know nothing
besides my trivial

pursuits. I try to do you,
in mimicry. Still, my performance
lacks; I haven't had the time to watch you move
around a kitchen long enough, to get you
right, there.
And finding different ways
to interpret and reprise, to call you
something other than your name,
though just as sweet to the mouth.

Rage Kilt

Yuna Kang

'Riddle me this,' you can almost hear the sea-
maidens croon, 'if she had loved you so much,'

And i cannot be beholden to the misgivings of former flames no
longer, no longer here, no longer there. i am not searching
mist-laden

woods for pretty skulls, i want to make it home, fumble with
purchased
key at copper door. and it is midnight and urbanicity,
(the things we do! for

a city), trying not to see the heads bob in milky waves. trying not
to see
women with dolorous eyes blinking the salt liters away, 'if she had
loved you so

then why did she,' and i do not know. leave me alone; i lock
the door; i
make my goodbyes. no. I didn't love her either; so.

To Each Man His Little Cross

Maria Freij

They say another meteor will pass
closely to Earth this summer. Visible
to the naked eye, it will graze
our atmosphere and lose more of itself
every day, melt away to nothingness,
drawn to us, without
any will of its own.
Layer by layer it will shrink,
until it fizzes out—having covered
distances unimaginable,
a traveler from god knows where,
it will have arrived here, at this point
in time and space—
silent and stoic, it has rushed
towards its inevitable fate
for what we call lifetimes. A dead,
silent body, burning with immeasurable heat.
What, then, if no one looks upward?
What if the night is cloudy?

All afternoon

Ava Mack

All afternoon

under a nebula of lilacs
like a funambulist, suspended
I'm counting the objects in my universe
counting you,
forgetting,
and starting
again.

A cicada tiptoes on the slick bark overhead.

Once I feared his ancient face,
the thickness of his body.
Now I know his
abdomen is hollow
made for making sound, for singing.
His leaded glass wings,
like windows—
have you ever seen a church so holy?

The lilacs couldn't be more earnest
all scent all afternoon
their petals peal with
scent, scent, scent
thrown about without a thought
a hundred thousand little bells
ringing out and
counting you,

forgetting,
and starting
again.

Suzanne and Seymour

Todd Friedman

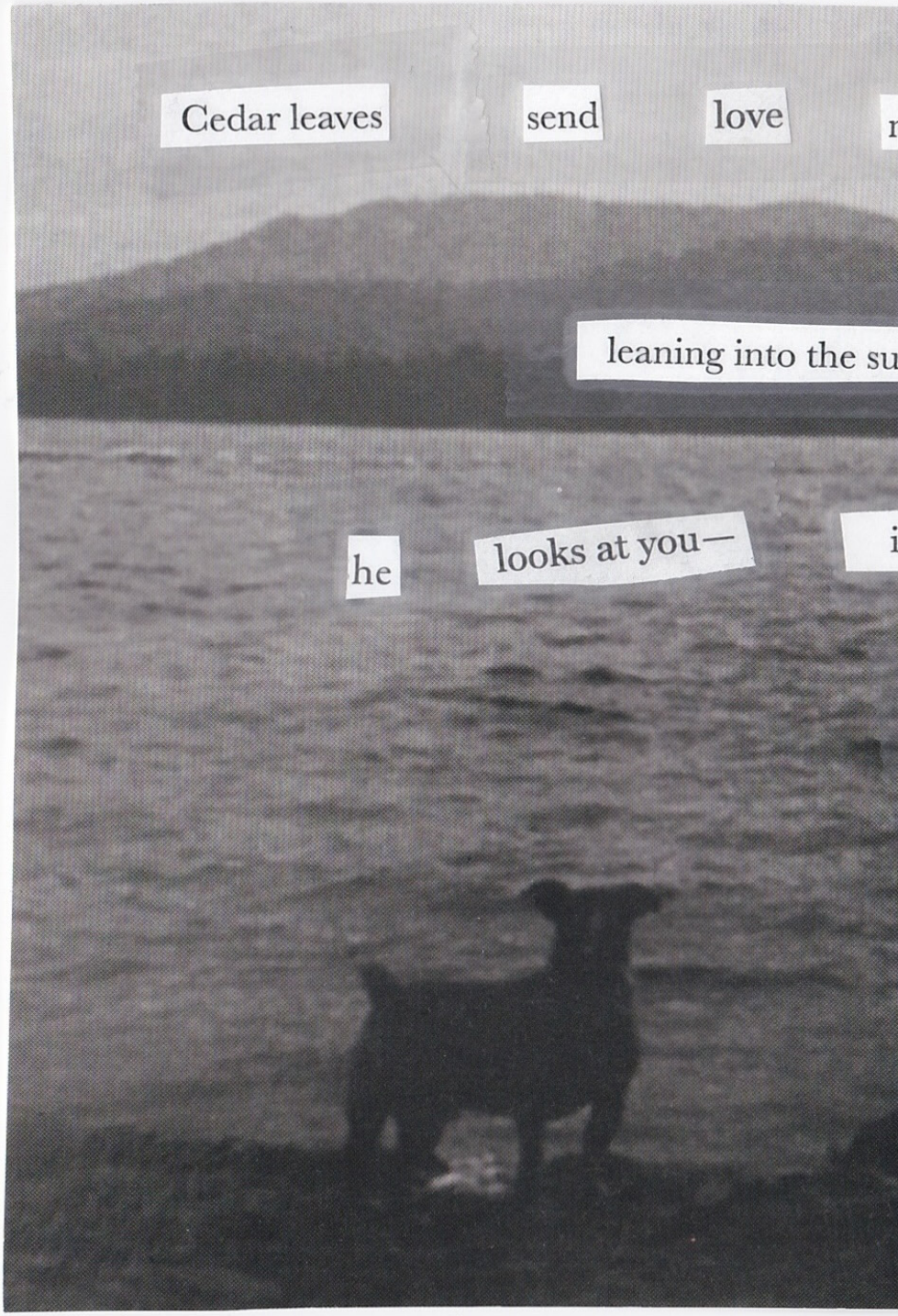
In Edward Hopper's *Summer Evening*,
Suzanne and Seymour have parked themselves
against the low porch wall outside the front door.
It's dark and shadows are coming off them
from the light overhead.
Of course these aren't my parents.
I've never even seen a photo of them together
but I can imagine them like this—
Suzanne brooding with her hands braced behind her,
Seymour half sitting, angling himself toward her.
We can't see his chest or most of his left arm,
but from the glimpse we get
he seems to have his hand on his heart.

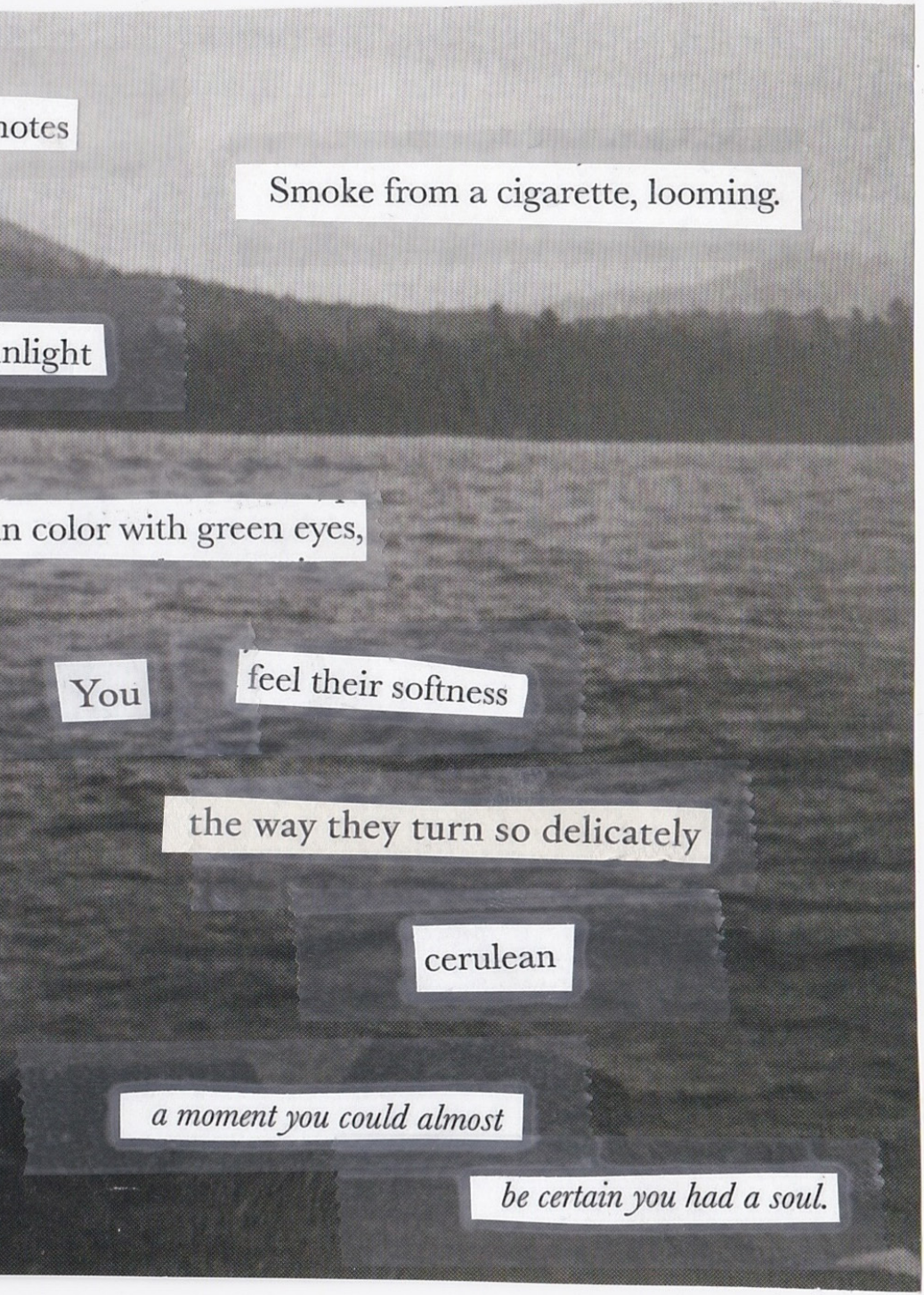
It was my mother who wanted the divorce.
I believe my father was smitten with her.
They met in the Catskills,
my mother working as a waitress,
my father as a cook in the same Borscht Belt hotel.
He was handsome in those days
and I can imagine her being taken with him at first.
She was 20, he was 30.
Maybe that didn't matter, maybe it did,
but in the early 1950s he was her ticket out
of her father's house.
I heard my father say lots of things
about my grandparents,
but never about her.
She, on the other hand,
let me know how she hated him.

Suzanne is dressed in a pink skirt and tube top,
Seymour in a tee shirt and chinos.
They could have been out dancing on the lawn.
Or maybe they went for a swim in the lake.
Surely, away from the porch and from the city lights,
they must have kissed under a sky full of stars.

But how long could my father tone down his temper?
How long could my mother filter her know-it-all air?
My father told me many times
how he wished they could have seen a marriage counselor,
but my mother flew off to Reno.
They were married for all of three years.
My mother went back to her parents—
only this time with me.

Both of my parents remarried
but years later when my mother died
my father just sat in the kitchen
and buried his head in his hands.


Cedar leaves
send
love
leaning into the su
he
looks at you—


notes
Smoke from a cigarette, looming.
nlight
n color with green eyes,
You
feel their softness
the way they turn so delicately
cerulean
a moment you could almost
be certain you had a soul.

POETRY IN TRANSLATION

Hearth

Cindy A. Velasquez

translated by Alton Melvar M. Dapanas

It is my birthday today. I've risen early,
prepared a little, and gave thanks to the years.
While cooking this morning, I looked up.
The stars are a map, enshrining my past.
They showed me how this cramped kitchen
holds the proof of my own days.
Life, a passing metaphor.
This sink is my eye.
When they hurt, I don't let sorrows stack,
like unwashed plates. I will weep.
The water will come, and cease,
and come again. Then I shall wipe it dry.
Like the sink: wash, let drain, dry.
The clay jar is not always brimming with water.
These hands are the pots.
Few meals are yet made. But when these palms
hold wishes, promises, remembrance,
and together light the flame
of the earthen stove,
the food remains half-done.
Because not all that is stirred and ladled
this time will fit in this life.
These spices are my heart:
the scent of sautéed spring onions
the aroma of lemon grass and ginger.
Oh, how good to say my heart knows,
at times, to season just right.

Like the salt of the earth, I temper it
with sweetness, I fold my mistakes into gratitude.
The blandness of goodbyes,
a dash of sour for life's tightest corners.
Like the planets adrift in the cosmos,
trying to breathe,
trying to live.

For, in the end, this small kitchen,
this fireside is the hinge, the link
to the constellations in the skies.

Kusina

Cindy A. Velasquez

Adlawng natawhan nako ron. Naghikay gamay,
pasalamat alang sa nilabay nga katuigan.
Ug samtang nagdigamo ko karong kadlawon,
kalit lang nakong gihangad ang langit,
ug nahimong mapa ang mga bituon.
Gisapnay nila ang akong mga kasinatian sauna.
Gitultolan ko nila nga sa kahagip-ot
ni-ining dapita, dinhi sa kusina,
mao ang sumpay sa akong kaugalingon.
Ang kinabuhi—usa ka lumalabayng metapora.

Kining lababo sama sa akong mga mata.
Kay kon adunay mga kasakit, dili kini pasagdang
magtapok sama anang mga biniyaang hugasanan.
Mohilak ko—modagayday ang mga luha ug kon
mahurot, mohilak ko og balik, dayon trapohan.
Sama sa lababo—hugasan dinhi ang tanan, ipahiluna,
ug dayon hiposon. Kay dili sa tanang higayon
ang banga puno sa tubig.
Kining akong mga kamot, sama sa lutoanan,
pipila na ang gimugna nga sud-an.
Apan, sama sa mga kamot, kon ang duha ka palad
mapuno sa mga pangandoy, mga saad, ug kanunay
paghandom sa kagahapon—kon magdungan kini
og sug-ang sa kalan, basin dili maluto ang uban. Kay
sa kataposan, dili tanang ihukad ning higayona,
masulod pod nako aning kinabuhia.
Ug kining mga lamas kay ang akong kasingkasing:
ang kahumot sa ginisang sibuyas-dahonan
ug ahos, apil na ang alimyon sa tanglad ug luy-a.

Haay, kalami unta isugilon nga ang akong
kasingkasing makahibalo kaayo motimpla
Susama sa kaparat sa uniberso, gidugangan
ko kini og katam-is sa paghimamat sa akong mga
kasaypanan ug unsaon magpasalamaton kanila.
Ang katab-ang sa mga panamilit, gibutangan
kintahay nako og kaaslom sa pagdawat
sa mga kinalisodang espasyo sa kinabuhi,
sama sa mga planeta sa kawanangan,
kinahanglan maningkamot makaginhawa,
mabuhi.

Kay sa kataposan, kining gamay nga kusina,
dinhing dapita mao'y sumpay sa kinadak-ang
konstelasyon sa langit.

A Wave of Mirrors

Cindy A. Velasquez

translated by Alton Melvar M. Dapanas

I do not like facing the woman in the mirror-glass. That skeleton mantled in flesh, her love handles etched into me like tide marks. Each day, I close my eyes, will her to vanish into the void, and grant her no breath. But instead, I appease her and ask her to stay, I swallow the self-loathing and second-guessing she exhales.

Each day, I teach myself to trace the alcoves of her bones. On the day she walked away, she unshed whole chapters of our shared years into my marrow. She becomes the incense of the ocean. Whilst you are yet to set eyes on the sea, you can already relish the sheer brine from her shivery breath.

Lawod sa mga samin

Cindy A. Velasquez

Dili ko ganahan molantaw sa misumbalik nga imahen gikan sa mga samin. Kabalo ko adunay kalabera. Apan, mga bilbil nga wala na ko pangandoya ang mokudlit sulod kanako. Mopiyong ko matag adlaw aron lamaton tong babaye sa kawanangan, ug dili na tultulon pa. Akong amaman bisan pa matilawan na ko ang iyang mga kahiubos ug way pagsalig sa iyang kaugalingon.

Matag adlaw, tudloan na ko akong kaugalingon paggakos sa matag suok sa iyang kabukogan. Ug sa adlaw sa iyang panamilit, iyang gibilin ang uban nga bahin sa among panaguban sa pipila katuig. Sama siya sa alimyon sa dagat, bisan dili pa nimo makita ang lawod, matilawan gihapon nimo sa bugnawng huyuhoy ang iyang tumang kaparat.

Translator's Note

In *Arte de la Lengua Zebuana* (*The Art of the Cebuano Language*), the 18th-century Spanish Augustinian friar Francisco Encina called the *balak*, or Cebuano Binisaya formal poetry, "very discreet and enigmatic", with metaphor and mystery as its core. Encina also admired the precolonial Cebuano speakers for mastering "excellent genres of verse". Poet-translator Marjorie Evasco further traces the evolution of this poetic form, from Fernando Buyser's "musically and intellectually challenging" *sonanoy* (which adapted the Anglo-Italian sonnet) to Diosdado Alesna's *siniloy*, characterised by rich alliteration, end rhymes, and assonance, imbuing the poem with what Evasco terms "musical muscle" and scholar Resil B Mojares's description of its "mellifluity of sound and felicitous turns of phrase." According to literary historian Erlinda Kintanar-Alburo, the *balak*, like much of Philippine literature, draws from the rich tradition of oral storytelling and native aesthetics. It thrives on fluid boundaries, a love for ornamentation, and a sense of spontaneity. In its verbal form, there is often a preference for subtlety and indirection.

By the 1980s, a new generation of Cebuano Binisaya-language poets began to reshape the landscape of Philippine poetry. Writing in the mother tongue of a quarter of the country's population, they embraced free verse and infused their work with elements that celebrated orality, wit, social commentary, and irreverence, as noted by Mojares. Among these voices is Dr. Cindy A. Velasquez, an award-winning songwriter, spoken word artist, and academic, whose work is deeply grounded in the

feminist poetics of the balak. Her debut poetry collection *Lawas* (*Body*, 2016), however, departs from the work of her contemporaries, especially those within the balak's feminist poetics. It resists the popular trends of Instagram poetry or the "hugot" (hyper-cathartic) culture dominating the local spoken word scene. Instead, Velasquez's poetry is imbued with Oliverian lucidity, far from being rife and banal. The islands and coastlines she writes of are places both unknown and intimately familiar. And then, there is Dong, an ever-present, almost spectral figure, addressed in apostrophe, whom the poetic persona, Day or Inday, continually longs for.

Velasquez's corporeal poetry thus incarnates the tenets of ecofeminism and Earth writing: the woman-nature connection, a holistic worldview of all living things, anatomy as metaphor, a liberationist reclamation of language, and nature positioned as a source of wisdom in embodied expression.

To translate Velasquez is to give voice to a solivagant, navigating through a landscape of bodies: those of water, wandering sensation, and women. Her poetry weaves a narrative of love (romantic, familial, and platonic) evoking the oceanic and creating a space for "sea-poetry," a tradition spanning from Homer to Whitman and even Derek Walcott. To me, however, her work recalls the tender eroticism of Syria's national poet Nizar Qabbani, the meditative ease of Brazilian neosymbolist Cecília Meireles, and the hydropoetic enigma of T'ang dynasty Taoist elegist Ts'ao T'ang. Yet Velasquez does not align herself with these male-dominated, often Western traditions. Instead, her writing stands apart: a tender exploration of her own island, her own voice.

– Alton Melvar M. Dapanas

FEATURING

CYRIL DABYDEEN

An Interview with Cyril Dabydeen

Anita Nahal

Interviewer

How did you begin as a writer, and if in Guyana where you were born? Do you care to comment about your literary influences?

Dabydeen

Yes, I was born in British Guiana (now Guyana) in South America—a country that is part of the greater Amazon region, the only English-speaking country in South America and seen as part of the Caribbean because of similar historical and socio-political conditions in the background. At a young age I won the Sandbach Parker Gold Medal for poetry in Guyana and from then on I knew I was a writer, with the writer's instinct formed deep in me. My early education in many respects was somewhat British-based, but American influences were also around, perhaps geared to making us look outside for our values, "the outward gaze," as it's called. You see, I came to know British history fairly well because of this, and I also used to spend time in the local libraries, including the British Council Library. I read Eliot, Edith Sitwell, Auden, Spender, Dylan Thomas, and other poets and novelists, including American ones like James Baldwin, and writers from India and Africa also, such as Tagore and Chinua

Achebe, all becoming part of my literary consciousness--seminal, if you like.

When one is starting out, all sorts of writers influence you. I also became informed, so to speak, by the so-called first generation of Caribbean writers like V.S. Naipaul, Wilson Harris, George Lamming, Derek Walcott, Sam Selvon, and Edgar Mittelholzer, and began seeing possibilities everywhere, especially with what you can do with language, including dialectal usage, if only as a secondary orality. The anti-colonial struggle was around then, and affirmation by writers like Aime Cesaire, Nicolas Guillen, Martin Carter also came to me. Later I would meet a few of these writers after moving to Canada, and I feel some of this is reflected in my new story collection *Forgotten Exiles*, if only in unconscious literary ways as I bring together north and south perspectives.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you come to Canada, and what is your sense of Canada as your adopted homeland?

DABYDEEN

I came to Canada with publishing uppermost in my mind. At first I attended university at the Lakehead in the Lake Superior region, which may be quite significant because some scholars have suggested that this is unlike most writers who tend to gravitate to the big cities upon immigration. With the writing life instilled in me, I subliminally began making associations and connections, like with Canada's native peoples because of the so-called hinterland where I came from in Guyana. Significantly, most Caribbean-born writers tend to travel abroad because the publishing infrastructure was in London, New York, or Toronto, and I wanted to write, if perhaps mainly to reach a bigger audience.

In Canada I read widely of new writers such as novelist Morley Callaghan, and poets like A.M. Klein, E.J. Pratt, F.R. Scott, Earle Birney, Irving Layton, John Newlove, Michael Ondaatje—some of whom I've subsequently met. I also became somewhat active with other writers on the contemporary scene, like Joy Kogawa—and others with whom I read in various parts of Canada. I also became keenly associated with ones outside the so-called mainstream who're now key voices in Canadian literature like Rohinton Mistry, M.G.Vassanji, Austin Clarke, and others. Canada has also given me a sense of who I am, and where I've come from, and yes, being viewed as a minority with its ironic implications.

Naturally, it's also the sense of possibilities living in the Great White North and experiencing the Canadian landscape: wide lakes, rivers, parks, mountains, and the spirit and temperament of its peoples more than anything else. Some of these influences may not be felt by other Canadian-born writers--at least not in the way I experience them, and something about the binary, here and there, feeding my imagination.

I have lived in Canada much longer than I have in Guyana, but memory is strong in knowing where I've come from, all that I unconsciously dwell upon in my fiction and poetry. At readings, I often invoke Jung's view that anything psychic is Janus-faced: it looks forwards and backwards at the same time, all in association, inevitably, with my South Asian identity as insider and outsider polarities drive imaginative spaces. I once referred to this as the "landscape of the imagination" in my edition of *A Shapely Fire: Changing the Literary Landscape* (Mosaic Press, Canada, l987).

Interviewer

You are also a well-known poet. How has this influenced your writing of published short fiction and novels?

Dabydeen

The charge has been made that my short stories—the earlier ones at least--are somewhat dreamy, as I think critic Peter Nazareth may have said. In my fictional world I aim to capture life as it is, or remembered, with the ubiquitous unconscious always at play--not far unlike my poetry-making. I may mention that long ago I became interested in what Virginia Woolf calls "the luminous halo," if only in depicting one's characters' luminous selves with a sense of pathos.

In terms of form per se and capturing reality in fiction, it's worth mentioning what Norman Mailer said: that life consists of plots, and no plots at all; and it's essentially the silent artillery of the heart at work, as Dorothy Parker describes it. Indeed, for me, the short story is an extended poem. I do read a fair bit of short-story writers like Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant, Joyce Carol Oates, and others. Critic Peter Nazareth has also praised me for my sense of epiphany, you see. And yes, it's all about the inner rhythms, whether in prose or poetry; and a good short story has the poet's sense of style and the novelist's sense of drama as I've said before.

Interviewer

Where is real home for you? Do you find that over time your preoccupations have changed, transferring from one culture to another, and how has this affected your writing?

Dabydeen

I suppose you never outgrow your memories of home, where the imagination will take you; and indeed, memory

as the mother of the Muses continually feeds my work. But maybe Wole Soyinka said it best: "Writers are wanderers ...nomads of the imagination." I also try to explore "the bottomless pool of origins" in my work with the sense of the hinterland landscape as more than a habit of mind that the creative writer feeds upon as he constantly looks for connections, not in any deliberate or contrived way, you see. Yes, I try to explore "origins," including where my forebears came from, and India...with past and present melding--as tropical and temperate worlds come together in one's metaphors and symbols, all in the context of continuity and/or divergence.

Interviewer

Is there another question about continuity and divergence that you may not be aware of?

Dabydeen

Canada is my mind continually being where I've lived for decades; yes, the vast territory this country is that I absorb, if only subliminally, with my hinterland sensibility contiguous with the "idea of the north". I reflect upon this in some form of unmediated congruence, if such. Significantly, one of my previous short story books is called *North of the Equator* (Beach Holme, Canada, 2001). Canada's settler and pioneering background and the experience of people from all over the world coming here as immigrants, like those from France and Britain with English, Irish, Scotch roots, and from other parts of Europe being called "drawers of water and hewers of wood"; and so many more coming from Asia, Africa, Caribbean, and elsewhere—in juxtaposition with the Native peoples' Great Spirit in the background or foreground-- being integral in my creative space. Indeed, influences come into play almost unexpectedly, being how I write. Do I now imaginatively want to go on the Franklin expedition?

Irony is very much part of my metier. Being born outside, you tend to see Canada in one clear glance, and maybe that's the advantage of being an "outsider," so to speak even as I keep interacting with all sorts of people while navigating a career with my work in government and being active in social services and travelled widely across the country--as well as teaching for many years. Essentially, I think my writing is "combining the alphabet with volatile elements of the soul" as I've stated at my readings. Yes, I do dwell on continuity and convergences, if you like, as part of my psychic process.

Interviewer

What fictional technique do you use in the short story?

Dabydeen

Fictional technique comes naturally, or integrally, in my way of thinking of seeing and describing the world. I usually begin writing a short story with a concrete situation or character in mind, then start associating the senses with language, sometimes with ironic elements or undertones at play: indeed, it's how I will see or view reality. In my earliest short stories, in *Still Close to the Island* (Commoners Press, Ottawa, 1980), I describe the tension that's built in--what's implicit in the characters' lives. Of course, a kind of natural splicing is always taking place in my narrative technique as the stories tend to have flashbacks, interiorization, and memory all working together. My characters tend to be the "other," with outsider and outsider instincts adding creative tension in my work.

Writing from my specific vantage point enables me to see things clearly. Implicit in all this are notions relating to the structure of the short story: plot, beginning, closure, conflict or complication and denouement, as well as emphasis on showing, not telling—what's often taught

in creative writing classes. Importantly, ideas are best communicated by presenting concrete life, the particular, as best as you possibly can with the images you come up with, and yes, the emotional states you capture.

But it's the quality of the emotion that counts most of all, and, simultaneously, how you extend the language in your narrative manner. Literature is best when it's local—in reflecting new angles of vision with one's own voice and rhythm through inflection and cadence, all in trying to depict what's behind the mirror of life.

INTERVIEWER

You have been sometimes called a political writer. Do you agree? Might there be a paradigm at work?

DABYDEEN

Maybe a post-colonial writer I am, as has been said, but essentially I never like to limit myself to any paradigm, if such. Yes, politics and art: Where do you draw the line? "Every word is a prejudice," said Nietzsche. There are parameters, implicit and/or explicit in most writers' thinking and what keeps feeding the unconscious, and the social milieu one is writing from or in. It's what is constantly formed and re-formed in one's aesthetic self. It also forces me to reflect upon the orthodoxy of form; but George Orwell challenges us best: "Whose smelly orthodoxy are we talking about?"

Different experiences or different truths will always be there, as in my *Forgotten Exiles* collection—and what's seen in my previous books of fiction and poetry reflecting where I've come from, but without the politics (or polemics) as such being uppermost. Oh, in fiction it's always exploration at best with my insider and outsider selves continually at work. Indeed, our lives teach us who we are--as I think Salman Rushdie said. Or, it's simply

finding ways to escape the solitude of the labyrinth Latin America writers bring to bear in their own work. But, for me, it's the iconic Cuban writer, Jose Marti, who said it best: "Literature is the most beautiful of countries."

REVIEW

Beauties and challenges of the diasporic, spiritual art of living: Cyril Dabydeen, *Forgotten Exiles*

Anita Nahal

Reading the stories in this collection is like enjoying deep soul food: about immigrant lives, nostalgia, and the art of living in myriad cultures and homes. Viscerally, these are stories that leave doors and windows open for us to spin in and out from. Home to abroad, a village to a city, cities to countries, and across vast oceans, these stories hint at a lot that did, did not, or could have happened, leaving a large chunk to the reader's imagination. The last line in the story, "A Father's Son, "When will you come home again?" (p.106) reminds us that wherever you might go, there is no conjecturing about home being the best place. For diasporic writers the notion of home is perhaps inherently contradictory. Much of what exactly, or who exactly, is home is a tricky determinant. It's the heart that intuitively makes our decision. Dabydeen quietly and resolutely leaves many samplings of home for us to ponder upon, accept, discard or savor.

Immigrants for sure will find themselves represented in this unique, universally appealing book. A key point to stress is that while nostalgia is acknowledged, it is also demystified. There is a certain dulling kind of ache that one feels when reading Dabydeen's stories. It's an ache

that's indescribable, yet it's there, almost a bafflement at one's ability and facility to move seamlessly between places despite the complexities of foreign travel and settlement. There is so much new and untested that one is overwhelmed and pulling that experience dispassionately into creative writings is not an easy task. In Forgotten Exiles race, immigration, and the lives of immigrants and native-born are equally given due respect. After all, whose story are we telling? Dabydeen does not befuddle the reader. Each character, in all the stories, is drawn out authentically. He quotes Maya Angelou in the beginning, "The greatest agony is an untold story," and lets his stories reverberate with astute story telling.

A question that preoccupies diaspora writers often is about their leanings, like a constant self-reflection. Where does their loyalty lie? There is a dichotomous tussle between genuinely loving their place of birth and the people left behind yet also yearning for new connections and attachments in their place of adoption and the lives they painstakingly create. It's a renewal of their core identity. It's not simply this or that for diasporic writers; rather sometimes they might feel they belong nowhere. That sense of an uneasy loss striding alongside the beauty of fresh lives perturbs many diasporic authors—and diasporic people. Finding themselves somewhere in the middle, they persistently attempt to make the best of both worlds. It can be nerve-wracking, yet quite exciting too. The possibilities are infinite, and the sacrifices are not far behind.

Some relatives and friends back in the original home don't let diasporic folks breathe normally, chiding them into shame for having left, or not returning to visit regularly. Refreshingly, the symbolic clarity of "them and us" in Dabydeen's stories is the removal of undue

pressure to conform to stereotypes. His attempt to balance the duality of nostalgia, of roots and the growth of fresh sprouts, reminded me of emerging and known Indian diasporic writers and filmmakers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Nishi Chawla, Mona Dash, Usha Akella, Pramila Venkateswaran, Amitav Ghosh, Gurinder Chadha, and Mira Nair among many others.

Diaspora writers tend to display sensitivity, humor, a bit of guilt or regret, and immense hope about the outcome of their own journey. Dabydeen skillfully brings out the element of movement, be it emotional or physical, across spaces. He weaves these artfully into a mosaic of words, thoughts, and sentiments; there is no element of judgment in his stories. The characters speak honestly and lithely, letting the reader be the seeker and absorber of their options, selections, and destinies.

In stories such as, "Christine, Interrupted," "West Meets East," or "The House," local and global flavors emerge through mentions of food or cultural artifacts such as relationship nuances, spirituality, humanity, sexuality, education, travelling, health issues, shopping, the philosophical and the metaphysical, even employing words in the local language for a realistic touch. One of my favorites, "The Good, the Bad, and the Hooghly," epitomizes the fusion of all the stories in one large, suave circle of inventiveness and creativity. Humans walking, running, and voyaging become a constant rhythm–– methodical, rotational, and cyclical in the quagmire of "Aesthetics and mathematics" (Forgotten Exiles, p.154).

Another fascinating aspect of the collection is the immense knowledge or interest the characters show in global literature, be it Western, diaspora, or African. Names of writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Vikram Seth, Rabindranath Tagore, and others are

splattered generously not just as a knowledge tool, but I think as an emphasis on how vernacular writers are overlooked in a western literary pedagogy.

Ultimately, the stories in this smooth collection tend to urge and encourage readers to move on—a symbolism for the inevitable change that comes from expeditions and travels. This commonsense art of living is brought out brilliantly in "Christine, Interrupted," when the character, Immanuel, tells Christine, whose mother's watch is stolen, to "Think nothing of it."

American novelist Walter Mosley said, "A good short story crosses the borders of our nations and our prejudices and our beliefs." This noteworthy assessment fits all of Dabydeen's stories, and for sure in this new collection as well. This book leads us to known and unknown paths, to dead-ends and to forks, and to middle-of-the-road alternatives, leaving the characters, and us, in unison about doubts and questions. Who? When? Where? Why? Why not?

Biographies

Anita Nahal is a professor, poet, children's book writer, novelist and poetry film maker. Twice Pushcart Prize-nominated; finalist Tagore Literary Prize, 2023; the winner of the Nissim Literature Prize, 2024. *What's wrong with us Kali women?* is mandatory reading at Utrecht University. Her latest poetry collection is *Animals-prose poems on sentiency, decency and indecency*. www.anitanahal.com

Morgan Neering is a NYC-based poet, essayist, and editor whose work delves into intimacy, nostalgia, and the inner life.

Estill Pollock is the author of *Metaphysical Graffiti* (Highcliff Press), *Constructing the Human* (Poetry Salzburg), *Relic Environments Trilogy* (Cinnamon Press), and *Cartographic Projections of a Sphere* (Broadstone Books).

Isabella R. Simões' work appears in *Same Faces Collective, Three Decker, RFD Magazine*, and more. Instagram: @irs.poetry

Stephen J. Lyons is the author of six books of reportage and essays: *Landscape of the Heart; A View from the Inland Northwest; The 1000-Year Flood; West of East, Going Driftless*; and *Searching for Home*. Substack newsletter "The Revolution Starts Here." His works appeared in *Wall Street Journal, the Independent; Washington Post, Salon, Manoa, Newsweek, The Sun, Chicago Tribune, Funny Times*, and *High Country News*.

Robert McDonald's is the author of *A Streetlight That's Been Told It Used to Be the Moon* (Roadside Press). His work has appeared in *Painted Bride Quarterly, The Marrow, Gyroscope Review*, and *The Madrid Review*.

JoAnneh Nagler is the author of the award-winning books, *Stay with Me, Wisconsin; How to Be an Artist; Naked Marriage, The Debt-Free Spending Plan,* two of which were Amazon Top-100 titles. Work has been featured in *The New York Times, Cosmopolitan, The Huffington Post*, and others.

Jennifer Freya Helgeson's writing explores themes of memory, loss, nature, and human resilience. She holds a PhD in Environmental and Developmental Economics and has authored several peer-reviewed publications, co-edited textbooks, and published in several media outlets.

Laura Goldacre is a writer and poet based in Denmark. Her poetry has been featured in Danish literary publicationst. She is studying at Aarhus University and is writing a collection of poetry.

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Jonathan Chibuike Ukah is a Pushcart-nominated poet whose work appeared in *TABS, The Journal of Poetry & Poetics, The Pierian, Propel Magazine, Atticus Review, The Journal of Undiscovered Poets* and elsewhere. He won the Alexander Pope Poetry Award in 2025, and the Atlantis Poetry Prize 2026. His first chapbook is *A is for Anfang* (Island of Wak-Wak).

Rachel Cloud Adams is a writer, editor, visual artist, and the founder/editor of the journal and small press Lines + Stars and the editor for a child welfare-focused advocacy association. Her work has appeared in *The North American Review, The Hopkins Review, Hobart, Quail Bell, Salamander*, and elsewhere. Her latest poetry collection is *Space and Road* (Semiperfect Press).

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Alton Melvar M Dapanas (they/them) is the author of three books of lyric essays and prose-poems including *M of the Southern Downpours* (2024). Their work appeared in *World Literature Today, BBC Radio 4, The White Review, Tidskriften Astra*, *Infinite Constellations* and *He, She, They, Us: Queer Poems*. Find more at https://linktr.ee/samdapanas.

Ray Malone is working on a series of projects exploring the lyric potential of minimal forms based on various musical and/or literary models. Awarded Second Prize in the 2025 Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Competition. His work has appeared in numerous print/online journals in the US, UK and Ireland.

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Victoria Martynko is based in Minnesota. Her work has previously appeared in *Moon City Review* and *Full House Literary*. Her poetry grapples with the whimsy in the tragic, unapologetic joy, and the inheritance of guilt, religion, and resilience.

Marianne Sundquist is a writer and chef in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Her recipe column has appeared in *The Santa Fe New Mexican* for 300 weeks and counting.

Asma Al-Masyabi is a poet, writer, and visual artist. Her writing can be found in *The Cincinnati Review, Subnivean, the Santa Clara Review*. Her work was nominated for Best Microfiction in 2023. She reads for *Copper Nickel*, and is a Senior Editor for *F(r)iction*.

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Adrián Rodríguez Muñoz is a poet based in Stockholm. He is currently at work on a collection titled *Forms of Attention*. Animals, love, and historiography appear often as subjects in his poems.

Bea Racoma is a Philippine-based playwright, poet, and actor interested in art that explores gender, politics, and social norms. A BFA Creative Writing graduate with a specialization in Playwriting. Her poems appeared in *Ilahás Literary Journal* and *HEIGHTS Ateneo*.

Steven Goldman is the author of the YA novel *Two Parties*, *One Tux*, a Short Film About the Grapes of Wrath, and the essay collection *Four Square and the Politics of Sixth Grade Lunch*. His work has appeared in a number of magazines including *The Burningwood Literary Journal, Edutopia*, and *Kappan.*

Jennifer M Phillips has authored three chapbooks, *Sitting Safe In the Theatre of Electricity*, *A Song of Ascents*, and *Sailing To the Edges*, and a collection, *Wrestling With the Angel*. Her work has appeared in over 140 journals including *Spoon River Poetry Review, The Alembic, A New Ulster*, and *London Grip*.

Bryan Edward Helton is a poet and fiction writer from Newnan, Georgia. He is the author of *The Manic Joy of the Dead, Night Funeral*, and edits *The Basilisk Tree*, a poetry journal.

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Nicholas Hogg is the author of *Tokyo*, inspiration for the Ridley Scott film, *A Sacrifice*, starring Eric Bana and Stranger Things' Sadie Sink. A winner of the Poetry London Presents, Gregory O'Donoghue, and Liverpool poetry prizes, his debut collection, Missing Person, is out now. His second collection, Swimming with Horses, will be published in July.

Åsa Magnusson is a Swedish writer and artist, based in the UK. With an eye for the unexpected, she writes observational fiction centred on relationships, moral crossroads, and the interplay between humanity and nature.

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Laura Goldacre is a writer and poet based in Denmark. Her poetry has been featured in various literary publications, both digital and print. She is studying at Aarhus University and is writing a collection of poetry.

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Garry Engkent, Chinese-Canadian, has co-authored *Groundwork: Writing Skills to Build On*; *Fiction/Non-Fiction: A Reader and Rhetoric*; and *Essay: Do's and Don'ts*. His stories appeared in *Exile, Many-Mouthed Birds, Emerge, Ricepaper, Savagerealmsgamebook*, and *Dark Winter Literary Magazine*.

Julie Shulman is a writer and art director with an MFA in poetry at Pacific University. Her work has been featured in *Lake Effect, The Citron Review, Mud Season Review, The Rumen, On the Seawall, Marrow, Thimble Literary Magazine, Ink in Thirds, Third Wednesday, SWWIM, The Avalon Literary Review*, and *The Passionfruit Review*.

Lindsey Wagner is a multi-media artist influenced by spectral intimacies and liminalism as she considers how the inter-zone of nostalgia, grief, and desire can be imprinted on everyday objects, sourcing her materials from discarded objects. Her work has appeared in *The Blunt Space, Wild Roof Journal, t'Art Magazine, Frozen Sea*, and featured in the product launch of Melony.

Samuel Totten is the author of *All Eyes on the Sky*, a novel about life and death in the Nuba Mts of Sudan. He is currently completing a book of short stories about various cases of genocide and crimes against humanity.

Stephen Ruffus is a retired college professor whose work has appeared in *Valparaiso Poetry Review, Hotel Amerika, Radar Poetry*, and *JMWW*. His chapbook, *In Lieu Of*, was published by Elik Press. He is a Pushcart Award nominee and a finalist for the Louis Award sponsored by Concrete Wolf Books.

Lauren Mills is a poet and playwright studying at Dartmouth College

Sahil Harvani is living a romantic era life in a post-modern world. He has a journal named 'collectio vitae' (latin 'collection of life').