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Dear Reader,

It's been a long and bumpy road. We don't know what the future holds for *New South*, but we hope you enjoy the brilliant work in this issue.

We're proud to give these writers a home.

Sincerely,

New South

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BEN SEANOR

## Years In Hell

I miss the light and am late  
for work. *You are structurally*

*in the way*, I say to myself.  
I heard a man say this to a woman

at a bar. I don't know what it means,  
but am chastened. I'm not frightened

by the dead. It's the living  
who need me. Inside me, my dead

hang outside a 7-Eleven.  
It is always 2 am. The store

is always closed.  
We have only so long in the canopy

of time. Each sentence kills  
its siblings on its way to you.

That's what I can show you;  
I'm already late. Here: a squirrel

jumping back and forth in a yard  
like its own predictive text.

NATHANIEL YOUMANS

## How To Be Gentle

So much of being alive is erosion and the permission  
to feel the deep, desperate love of a private ceremony.

Giving your beloved dog an entire cheeseburger before  
the vet comes to your home to put her down, or, years

earlier, rereading Keats in the bath as your molars ground two  
cubes of ice, a fistful of hydros, one mothball into a strange

haloed paste. Empty bottles in their ranks like bishops on the  
tiles, like flash floods over a fallow landscape. A bird flew through

the bathroom window and because you had just shattered the  
mirror there was not one but a thousand screaming sparrows

bashing their heads, too, against the fractal edges of their own image.  
What I mean is I have spent so long staring into the empty

sockets of every day, pulling out a tooth or eye here, a  
blackberry bramble, a fistful of loam there, whispering *I am*

*taking this harsh instrument, I will hone it and take care of it for us.*  
What I mean is I was once a boy who spent his youth burying

blind translucent baby robins who fell from their nest high  
in the oak whose bark still bears my and my siblings' initials.

It is a matter of something other than survival, perhaps, to go  
on gathering deaths, keep them close, hold them like heirlooms,

a bird's nest or a loaded gun. So much of my life, it seems, since  
then, has been standing alone at the top of this cliff

watching coyotes run across this frozen lake, watching some  
break through thin patches in the ice, scream, sputter, go quiet.

I think of the many children I've seen whom I don't know, whom  
I want to be kind to, whom I want to forget a stranger but

remember in their kindness a syntax of innocence sustained.  
I want to show them the landscape from above and say

*See, all stories are made of something painful. You don't know  
my name and won't, but I will always be here to read them to you.*

I want to ask them, what if everyone in the world woke up  
one day and believed the quiet kindness of strangers was

greater than any kinship, familiarity, or love? I want them  
to know what it's like for a goshawk to land on your first,

that there are things in this world that can seize you with  
such violent force then fall back effortlessly into wind.

Sometimes a goshawk will toy a shrieking rabbit to a slow  
death, breaking in below the shoulder, pecking at a lung,

talons in its eye for an hour. There are times in your life when  
what you think is right dissolves in your numb hands like an

ancestral garment, and you take the rabbit, the base of the  
neck in one hand, the back legs in the other, and pull apart.

How many hours in a life are spent observing the ways in  
which disturbed water grows still again, wondering, horribly,

*If I could have killed you myself, would it have been the greatest  
act of kindness you'd never know* or does each step in this

animal music wade through a dark water in the brain  
that is the same as dark ripples on a page, one likeness

of protracted care through another? Aggregated histories  
of erasure, spring runoff through a canyon of scoured basalt.

There is no fullness, only appetite. An entire world  
waiting for you to consume it from the inside out.

LENA CROWN

## On Coming Back As Spanish Moss

*After Lia Purpura*

For instance, the thunderstorms, the kind that crumple the clouds. Or the plumes of Spanish moss that hang like cobwebs in the eaves of the canopy. Everyone knows that Savannah, Georgia is haunted. Built atop a chain of mass graves, the city is twinned: above, the Savannah of the living; below, the Savannah of the dead.

In the Savannah of the living, I haunt the Savannah of the dead. I leave the house only for walks in the cemetery, the only public place consistently deserted (at least in the conventional sense). At night, the streetlamps glow cold and white through the trailing moss, and I slither through the hallways of the house like a caged reptile. I have too much time to think, if remembering counts as thought. I stop creating; instead, I turn things over. I grow translucent as my freckles fade. I stare at the graying trees and think too often about death and its likenesses. In this vein, I learn everything there is to know about the moss. I study its habits, and I decide that we are kin.

Were I to come back as Spanish moss, I'd make sense here. The closer you'd get, the more dead I'd look: fluff turning fossil, not a plume but a toothpick daisy chain, the gangly skeleton of a cluster of grapes. My lifelessness would have you wonder at the difference between death and dormancy, not so much a difference in finality but in your perception of it. I'd be spectral in both senses of the word—phantom/spectrum, a shade. For example: look at me under a microscope and you'd see my crevices teem. You might be tempted to snip off a bit of me as a souvenir—as you might a lock of hair, cinched with a ribbon—only to find, rummaging for your sunglasses, the belly of your purse seething with chiggers.

I am not exactly what you call me. The origins of the moniker “Spanish moss” are indeterminate—the French supposedly

christened me “Spanish beard,” while the Spanish called me “French hair,” as though blaming each other. I exist in a state of contronym, everything dependent on where you sit. My given name, *usneoides*, means a not-quiteness, *resembling Usnea*. As a bromeliad, you could call me *pineapple* and you wouldn't be incorrect. All of me in between, a taxonomy of almost, either, both.

What's certain is that I'm not a moss. True, I have no roots, and, like a moss, I live on the surface of things. But technically I'm an *epiphyte*, a kind of benign leech, hoary barnacle, permanent houseguest. This makes me sound like a freeloader, but I survive on rain and sunlight. Those who know about these things have decided I can't qualify as parasite because I don't take enough.

According to legend, the southern live oak—my treehouse—grows for a hundred years, lives for a hundred years, and dies for a hundred more. When I first read that, Bogart echoed: *I was born when she kissed me, I died when she left me, I lived a few weeks while she loved me*. I remember the film was called *In a Lonely Place*.

Carl Phillips tells us in a poem that after the afterlife, there is an afterlife. As a resemblance, as a half-life, will I get an afterlife? I'm only as alive as the trees. Alone, I am shapeless; I'm the lover's shirt you keep in the drawer. How you dream sometimes, without warning, of the one you left; how the dream keeps them alive.

I don't move, I am moved. To reproduce, I fragment and am carried off. The wind does most of the work. In my passivity, am I careless, or just carefree? Ecologists have deemed my relationship with the tree a form of *commensalism*, where I benefit from my host's distance from the ground and my consequent proximity to light, while the tree is neither helped nor hurt. Still, others caution that when heavy with rain, I can break limbs, or that, unchecked, my eagerness can hinder the tree's ability to photosynthesize, to continue to grow.

I want to say this means I'm not afraid to need, though I worry it really means I'm not afraid to burden.

The word *care* once meant *grief*. Carelessness in its original sense—to be without anguish—was extinct by the mid-seventeenth century. Over time, the sorrow leached out, and soon

the word signified the absence of anxiety, then concern, then simple attention. I don't know what to do with this information. Mourning sorrow seems especially counterproductive. Carl Phillips, again: *despair is belief's true echo. The last / embers of a fire once believed / untamable...*

As moss, I would, ideally, have very little to mourn, or to miss.

An echo is another kind of haunting. If despair is the echo of belief, then I think it could also be the echo of infatuation, or infatuation viewed from beneath a flattened palm in the afternoon—floating further away but always in view, like the rogue bundle of silver balloons I once saw mid-flight. From where I lay on the grass, it was impossible to tell whether the baubles were falling to the treetops or sailing past them.

Phillips, too, saw what he'd rather leave in the trees: *I've tried to forget, and can't / did it happen, the leaves above them variously stilling, unstilling...* But he also wrote that nature includes oblivion, that everything contains the seeds of its own destruction. If that's true, then everything—despair, infatuation—is already being forgotten from the inside out. I just wish we could hasten the process.

To be carefree can also mean a kind of authorized carelessness, a nonchalance permitted by the absence of consequence. If the tree willingly carries my weight—or, at least, does not refuse me—?

I can sympathize. Like the tree, I have no choice but to sustain the microscopic pests that, like memories, nest in the snarl of my skeleton. I hold a little world of my own. But personally, I don't mind so much. I like to think it makes me more alive.

Throughout the old cemetery that skirts the river, where I festoon the branches of oak trees thick as cars at their trunks, mourners have positioned small pebbles along the headstones at their crowns. The Jewish custom of placing stone on stone not only symbolizes the permanence of memory—as opposed to the pagan ephemerality of flowers—it supposedly serves a purpose: stone tethers the soul to the plot of land it lies in, physically pressing the soul into the ground. In old folklore, this barrier was said to *prevent* haunting. But to me, knowing exactly where the ghost is in the world only makes it easier to call them up,

to picture them drizzling foam into a steaming cup or lighting a cigarette in the yard.

Metaphors get exhausting after a while. I've lost track of who's haunting whom.

I used to think that if I were a plant, I'd want to be a flower: an elegant one, like an iris, or a dangerous one, like a rose. As a child, I loved flowers for their bright skirts and sudden disappearing acts, loved them in spite of their fickleness. Now, I'm not sure. The moss, with its dead weight, seems more stone-like, and though I never much identified with my Jewishness on a spiritual level, I'm interested in permanence. The moss' fragments self-perpetuate. And as we calcify into memory, doesn't it happen like that, our preservation? We never fully dissolve; instead we splinter into pieces, only some of which scatter in time.

Descartes wrote in his meditations that we remember, rather than discover, innate truths. That's what it feels like, this imagining: a recollection. If I could speak directly to the tree, I'd tell it the truth, and the truth is that I haven't just tried to forget—or ignore—the weight of my life on its life. I have, by doing nothing, on some level endeavored to keep it there.

In the essay "On Coming Back as a Buzzard," after weighing the bird's various qualities, Lia Purpura decides, in the end, that her life is already buzzard-like enough for her. I take it as a rebuke, and a warning.

The irony is that Spanish moss is, surreptitiously, a flowering plant. The blossoms are tinier than the nail on your littlest finger, with three slender, evenly spaced petals, like miniature wind turbines. Each blossom only lives for about four days. This either proves the futility of metaphor or the power of it, depending on your mood, the way the trees, in their dramatic collars of moss, appear some days to be celebrating, other days suffocated.

Say, for a moment, that I really believed in coming back. Or that coming back didn't mean going back *to*, necessarily. Suppose I could come back as a good memory forever, and suppose I could admit to wanting something so selfish. I'd want the tree to find comfort in the knowledge that together, we glimmered, us two. I'd want it to matter that, when the sun summits and starts to

sink, I grow flaxen; I halo. That I make you more aware of beauty, that I make you stop and look. Like Phillips wrote: *memory as the more / immediately apparent side of the leaf, rumor the paler side / the soft lining...* I'd want remembering to be a turning-over (or flipping back) that doesn't just magnify loneliness, but eventually softens it. I want to believe that's possible. For everyone in this whole city nestled at the nape of a willow's neck, for all of us to be made a little more alive, or at least, over time, less lonely. The sorrow slowly leaching out.

CHRISTOPHER CITRO AND DUSTIN NIGHTINGALE

## Like A Fist Next To Your Heart

Set up: one flake of ash meets another. Punchline: says hey how'd you get here? One tire fire to another says, what was for dinner? I think if we quit making children there wouldn't be so many dead children. I can't get this one stupid sunflower out of my skull; I mean we touched foreheads and it meant more to me than any other forehead touch. A sparrow bounces off my porch screen and I barely turn my neck. Along one mulched trail I see light splattered across the forest's floor of leaf and branch and want to walk there, for where I step to become a path. I tire and can sleep a fearless sleep. Here hold out your hand. A tinkle of small bones into a palm.

JANA-LEE GERMAINE

## Difficult To Write A Love Poem

All kinds of devotion: A northern flicker  
feeds ants to her young,

her fledgling hanging on the fencepost  
in the sun, waiting for lunch.

He calls to her when she's not quick enough,  
and she always comes.

Grackles Hitchcock onto the lawn  
in pre-migratory flocks, hundreds

out every window, strutting around,  
pecking things. Such affluence

of images, everywhere: ivy  
laddering up the side

of an old stone church,  
a brilliant red in fall. All those

purple Asters, crowded by the roadside,  
lovely, but given to spread

indiscriminately. Or baskets of still life  
lined up on the Formica counter: mismatched

socks, the season's last strawberries,  
several currencies of loose change.

You see the problem.  
Troops of ducks mutter past

and slice their way into the cove

slick with a skin of pollen.

The moon splashes  
its paddle into the spackled sky

and kayaks across the night.  
So many galaxies to dip your toe into.

Here's the lightning-struck  
beech in our backyard, split

down the heart by a radiant blaze  
in the midst of hard rain.

Who knows how the soul is lodged,  
spare room occupied

by one messy teen, clothes  
all over the floor?

In the soundtrack of my life,  
the thrush sings center stage,

but someone's learning banjo  
in the back. Don't mouth along,

Love, sing with me, the same three notes  
strummed slightly out of tune.

ALYSSA JEWELL

## Meet Me In The Mind's Eye

Then in the earth's blue fragile horizon—  
that thin ghost atmosphere—

that you may remember this:

the afternoon breeze in a honeyed 4 o'clock hour,  
the cider warming to air's temperature on the pink tile counter

in the home of a friend

whose kitchen you will not dare enter in the dead of winter.

As long as I pine for touching another's wrist,

as long as you ask for

the same world,  
the same world will never return.

Perhaps these curtain walls surrounding our lives  
make each of us reach for one another in seconds blind and increasing—

but I dislike knowing you through fractured gaze as well as glancing  
the cowlicks of your hair framed by black square—your eyes centered,  
downcast—

and then a square of light

spilling over your right shoulder onto plaster, spider plant, and smoke.

I mull over how to end things  
in these carved out exchanges because *love* can be taken

so many ways, and all I want to do is sign off with  
*I want to touchtouchtouch you— or—I just want to share*

*the same jar of olives with you and not talk*

even now in late fall above trellis  
and thick morning glory diminished.

MIKE NEES

## The Secret

### *Breaking Up*

Lately Deitra's playing this sketchy web game that must violate a thousand copyrights. In one glimpse at the screen I catch a Spiderman cage dance. In the next, Shrek shoots hoops with Dr. Phil. As her younger brothers vie for space on my lap, I watch her labor over a message to her in-game girlfriend, the princess from *Frozen*. Something about taking the relationship to the next level. But Deitra deletes everything she writes. "Just spit it out," I say. "Only a matter of time before they pull the plug on this thing."

"They can't." Her voice hollows out. "It's all I have." Probably a rude thing to say around her brothers, I think—*It's all I have*. But they don't seem to mind. Anthony's busy steering Kirby on the Gameboy, and Darren is, as always, currying favor with Elmo on the Kid's Tablet. "Rude," I say, for my own sake.

Four different complexions among us, no two heads of hair alike—we are our own unlicensed mash-up. We all flinch in unison when the front door busts open, like it could be our cease and desist.

Their Aunt Luz commands no less authority. "C'mon," she says to Deitra, lowering an armful of magazines onto the dinner table. "Help me sort these out." Deitra looks over the glossy heap and winces.

Still in her scrubs, Luz negotiates as if with a stubborn patient. She claims it'll be fun, says it's this or homework. But then her voice loosens. Her eyes widen with excitement. "You need to make a *vision board*." Deitra looks mortified, turns to me for help.

Stay out of it, I think. Focus on Darren's tiny finger, the way it hangs over the letter he needs to pick out of a lineup. The ecstatic chimes when he gets it right. He's weighing his next set of options as Anthony loses a boss fight, blames me for not watching, and shoves his younger brother to the outskirts of my knee. Pressure shifts around my thighs. "Easy," I groan.

As Luz stalks back to the car for more magazines, I hear Deitra's fingers rain down on the keyboard. I look up to find her character, a blood-splattered Sonic the Hedgehog, taking a knee before the Princess. Like everyone else in her game, he is both crudely rendered and unmistakable.

"Time's up," Luz says, returning with a fresh stack of *O's* and *Vogues*. "What's it going to be?"

"I asked her to marry me," Deitra says.

"Turn that thing off."

"She's still typing!"

"I don't like this game." I cringe as Luz holds down the power button. Two seconds later, everything on-screen disappears. Deitra turns and scowls like the girl with the laser eyes, an alter ego we found in the back of her sketchbook—two red blades of light, classmates melted into fleshy goo. But Luz doesn't return the glare. She just points at the backpack on the floor, inches from my feet, until Deitra descends from the computer chair. "Fucking bitch," she whispers, grabbing it by a strap. I hold my breath and glance at Darren—for some reason, he always screams at curse words—but a victory on the tablet distracts him. Watching Deitra tow her bag on the floor, I recall her mom dragging her nylon hamper around the two-bedroom hovel where the kids used to live, before that went sideways, and Luz got custody.

Too many kids, not nearly enough time before Luz's own daughter will call to be picked up from cheerleading. At fourteen, she at least makes her own schedule. She's packed in advance for a sleepover tonight, has plenty of clubs and friends to keep her out of our hair. Deitra, after a two-minute absence, has already resurfaced to ask for a fruit snack. "You can have a fruit," Luz tells her paunchy niece, looking away as she says it—a detail I would've missed it if not for hate-reading her copy of *The Secret*. *If you see people who are overweight, it goes, you should not observe them. Instead, visualize yourself in your ideal body. Picture it. Feel it. Do not be infected by negative images. They will block you from your goals.*

Luz is just very mad, I tell myself. We used to have our outlets for it. The rituals. But now she's too mad to get into a new show. Too mad for sex. Be mad at me, I'll say, when her naked body tenses up—plenty of offenses to choose from—but she's mad

at the fathers for being broke and in prison, and her sister for sleeping with them in the first place, and herself, I guess, for not erasing any of the strikes against these kids.

I crane my neck at the sound of scissors to find her cutting out a picture of a woman kickboxing. Tomorrow we throw a vision board party, and I only now recall saying I would vacuum. “What if you’re taking someone else’s visions?” I ask, certain Luz can hear the shame of not vacuuming in my voice.

She doesn’t look at me. Says nothing.

It’s not personal, as I understand it. I just emit negative energy. The aura of failure. She can’t risk contracting it.

Darren, for his part, seems to pick up on it—already pushed to the edge of my knee, he drifts onto the floor without looking up from the tablet. I take my own refuge in the familiar shapes and colors now, how each letter does its own little dance across the screen. He’s been playing the same alphabet games on this thing for two years. They’re less age-appropriate by the day, but our attempts to cut him off cold-turkey are all met with hysteria. *Still with this Elmo shit?* Luz’s mom griped in Spanish, the last time she was here. *He won’t even look at me!* She turns to me and translates herself after certain things, softening her voice for my white ears, like they must be sensitive.

In truth, there’s a lot they don’t seem to pick up. I depend on Luz to point out hidden frequencies, like the sharp preference for Darren in her mom’s voice. *After Deitra’s black dad, and Anthony’s white dad, Mom was so pumped for Darren’s Dominican dad. She wanted him named Julio, after our dad.* When I asked how her sister settled on ‘Darren’ instead, she shrugged. *She probably doesn’t remember.*

Enraged at having squandered Kirby’s last life, Anthony hurls his Gameboy at the couch. “Wait,” Luz says to him. “You have homework too, don’t you?” He knits his bushy eyebrows, tries to deny it, but he too must be banished down the hallway. I look away before I can catch his gaze, no doubt pleading for an assist. I can feel it on me. After he’s gone, Luz asks what we’ve been doing all day.

Instead of answering the question, I watch in silence as she clips the words *ENVISION YOUR DREAMS* out of an old *Instyle*. I ask if that isn’t kind of funny, putting that on her board. “Like

putting a vision board on a vision board?”

Making intricate cuts around every letter, she doesn’t reply.

I take it personally, I guess, since my next thought is if we ought to break up. I must emit this too, since Luz asks about my apartment now. She wonders if I’ve been keeping up with the rent.

It’s been too many weeks since we last talked about me moving in. We talk about it now. My last complaint, she reminds me, had something to do with my security deposit. “It takes no time for the universe to manifest what you want,” she quotes. I already know the next line: *Any delay you experience is your own.*

My apartment is trash, of course. An efficiency behind a laundromat, all I do there is get high and play my own video games. Sanctuary from the kids. I tell Luz I’ll give it up if she gives up *The Secret*, but it’s too late for that now. Luz is a fanatic. *The Secret* is here to stay.

Our voices go cold. Darren gets a letter wrong.

We decide to break up.

Nothing personal, we agree. It’s just not working.

“That settles it,” I say.

“For real this time,” Luz says. We sit in silence for a while. Darren barely plays his game.

After a lull, Luz mentions that our friends from New York confirmed for tomorrow. Now, all of a sudden, I miss them terribly. For months we sought a day when everyone would be free to make vision boards with us. That I hate vision boards no longer seems to matter.

Luz mutters something about throwing the party by herself. “Do I have to tell them we broke up?” Untangling it all is going to be such a headache, we agree. We’ve been a public offering for years, Luz and Pete. Plus her mom took off work for this. And we already ordered the pretzel platter.

We can stay together for the party, we decide. See how we feel after that.

*Negative Balance*

*Imperfect thoughts are the cause of all ills. Poverty, unhappiness,*

disease...as Luz wraps up her bedtime routine, I read this off the book's back cover...*the only reason any person does not have enough money is because they've blocked its path with negative thoughts*. Any glimpse, she knows, is a hate-glimpse. Still, I don't look away as she comes out of the bathroom. "They have to say that stuff to sell them," she says, swiping through shirts for tomorrow. She goes on to make some fair points, I guess. "Not all of us were taught to envision our dreams," for one. I suppose I was, and could, but would rather reach for the old textbook that Luz let me carve into our stash box. *Applied Pharmacology*. Though she always hated the smell, her hate has ripened since she quit smoking it herself. She grew up in a house that reeked of skunk, she reminds me.

On the porch with my bowl, I study her Chevy. It's parked in the street, just a few feet away. Though nearly as old as I am, and dented on both sides, Luz keeps it freshly vacuumed. A gray pine tree, *New Car*, hangs from the rearview mirror. Never a crumpled leaf or receipt on the floor—running late for my last shift at Sam's, I had to borrow it, and was freshly amazed. Not until after a few hits do I notice how tonight she left the window open a crack. I watch with some regret as my smoke billows towards it.

I used to buy into something like it, I think.

A few years back, I wanted to purge all the negative gunk from my mind, drive around in my own spotless interior. When my dealer invited me on a hiking trip with the promise of ego-death, and clean-slate emergence, I leapt at the offer. I had to overdraw at the gas station where we stopped along the way, which I guess felt more degrading than I expected. Maybe just seeing my negative balance on the dusty blue screen. Supporting no one but myself for 15 years, I could've saved enough for any number of self-improvements—I couldn't name any one in particular, but I felt the long road of missed opportunities behind me.

But the sight of our base camp, a high-ceilinged cabin, helped reset the mood. Lots of light, the smell of pine. Three tabs later I was on the floor, steeped in confusion, and unable to figure out where my dealer went. I didn't mind his absence, though. The solitude was nice, I thought, just before he reappeared with a chorus of new voices. "This is my buddy, Pete," I heard him say

to someone. A man with grayish-blond hair appeared in my field of vision, narrowed his hazel eyes at me. "Pete, this is Jack," my dealer said. "I didn't know he'd be using the cabin too."

"My cabin," Jack clarified. I struggled onto a couch as the new people buzzed around us. Jack's friends. When they went back outside to smoke, Jack stayed on the couch with me. He offered me a chalky white pill that I ground between my molars. "Looks like you know what you're doing," he said. I appreciated that. I was having trouble with words, but he seemed to get me. He knew I was from Mount Airy, I guess from my dealer, and he said he used to live there. "You like the cabin?" he asked. "I owed a lot of people money, so I bought this cabin. They want to force me to sell it, but they'll never win." He leaned in, demanding eye contact. Despite his all-gray beard, and his wiry eyebrows, his eyes glowed like a kid's. "They can't tell me how much I'm worth."

When his friends piled back in, I found them much more attractive. A young woman in a tank top, no older than 20, sidled up next to Jack. I couldn't imagine how he knew her.

Be cool, I thought, leaning back. I closed my eyes, tried to focus—but the image of my negative balance broke through the darkness. I couldn't believe how much weight it carried. Even then, untethered from whoever I'd walked in as, the thought of a few pixelated numbers on a far-off screen made me want to die.

I decided it was time for the next phase of the plan. Time to extinguish this flickering ego. I looked around for my dealer, but human faces had stopped cooperating with my eyes. I found the warm grain of the walls much more agreeable. The whole cabin hummed with its owner's optimism.

*They can't tell you how much you're worth*, I thought.

On a whim, I tried to reimagine the blue screen, but this time without the minus sign. I felt viscerally better for doing this. Imagining a few more zeros at the end of my balance, I felt an entire body's worth of stress dissolve. Suddenly it was clear: what greatness you could feel with sheer envisioning. What I wouldn't do with this power, I thought.

I woke on the floor, blood pounding in my ears. As I struggled to get up, I felt a huge chunk of time unaccounted for, and this in

itself seemed to push me back down.

At some point I heard Jack arguing with my dealer. I looked pretty bad, I guess, since Jack convinced him to take me to a hospital, even offered to drive. Nice guy, I thought. Gliding in on a stretcher, I only prayed they'd do a brain scan—I needed someone to see what I'd unlocked. I was sure it would set off a wave of research, turn the universe into my patron.

Not until I woke again did I recall how terrible the universe's attention felt. The sun roared through the window. A doctor shook his head at me.

Approaching the cute woman at the nurses' station, where I was told to report for discharge, I could only hope she hadn't been there to witness my arrival. "You had a rough night," she greeted me.

Luz Vasquez: her name-tag hung still as she typed up a storm. I tried to be in on the joke, got a few laughs. Breezing between stations, her poise looked effortless to me. "I guess I was depressed," I said of my excess, grasping for something to keep our chat going.

"Depression. Okay." She nodded for a moment, then held back a smile. She'd thought of a joke at my expense, I was sure. Something she couldn't say on the clock. I wanted nothing more than to be in on it, but another patient asked her for help before I could work out what to say.

Prior embarrassments occurred during a failed stint in college, cushioned by youth. This one hit more like concrete. In the weeks that followed, reward system shot, I tried to imagine myself swimming to the surface of something. I at least didn't care about the people who'd witnessed my episode, I tried to tell myself, though even that wasn't true—I couldn't forget Luz. In retrospect, she would approve of how tightly I held onto the image of her face, willing it back into my life at a co-worker's baby shower the following spring, where I spotted her sitting within the party's inner-circle. Our mutual friend brimmed with the first baby in a generation. The Mi Casa banquet room roiled with guests. From my lowly seat at the *work friends* table, I waded up to Luz's. "I remember you," she assured me.

I stood across the table from her as we began to chat, hoping

she'd tell me to sit down. A drink later, she looked over her shoulder and said, "You're the only person in this room who gets to OD and call it *depression*." I felt my sleeves soak under my arms as I laughed. She told me to sit down. "If that was your rock bottom," she added, "I wouldn't go bragging. You haven't seen the way my sister looks when they roll *her* in there." Seated across the table from us, a child shook her head at the mere mention. She glowed like Luz. Bronze, heart-shaped face: a mirror of Luz. I must've gawked at the resemblance. "My daughter," Luz said, after some hesitation, unsure I'd earned the introduction.

I told her that I'd cleaned up, could pass a drug test. "But your friends," Luz said. "You're Jack's buddy."

"The cabin guy? No, I'd just met him that night."

"He's trash," she said. "You should've smelled it on him." Jack fathered her first nephew, I learned, and he refused to pay any child support. The kid, Anthony, was volatile in his absence. "All my sister's kids have issues."

Her daughter nodded gravely.

Every mention of the family came laced with warnings like this. I must've imagined some forcefield protecting Luz from all the drama she promised. I couldn't imagine it spilling over into her life. For half a year, she'd been the picture of competence in my mind.

As we stood behind her daughter in the long line for cake, the girl's posture struck me. "She's like the poster child for proper alignment," I whispered to Luz, and her face lit up. She squeezed my wrist.

### *Points in the Void*

Returning from the porch, I could swear I hear something besides the usual creak of the door closing behind me. I'm about to let it go when I hear it again. A two-note chirp. "Good reflexes," I tell the jungle of shadows. "Don't forget the speakers next time."

With a click, the monitor lights up. Deitra's big cheeks glow blue behind the screen. She's playing the same game as this afternoon, though Sonic and the Princess have retired to a house

packed with blinking arcade machines and other luxuries. “I had to play for weeks to buy her all this stuff,” she says. “She won’t marry me, but we still live together.”

I should probably tell her to go to bed, I think, but instead ask why she has to marry the Princess.

“So I can be the *king*?” I sit down on the footrest as she explains how royalty is achieved in this game. Something to do with minigames, and pooling their points together. It reminds me of Neopets, which I’d sunk a few months into at her age. “So you could marry anybody?” I ask.

“It has to be her. We scored all our points together.” Deitra tries to explain the numbers floating above everyone’s heads, but my attention drifts back to the friends themselves. They’re all here, the unlicensed convergence: Shrek with his arm around Spiderman, Dr. Phil and Sailor Moon. They all dare to meet in this void beyond canon, huddled around the two-frame snap of Deitra’s fireplace.

“What made you pick the bloody Sonic?”

Deitra smiles and ignores the question. I smile too, unsure why. So many points floating above everyone’s heads, all destined to be zapped out of existence. “Everyone in this game is stupid,” she says. “If they listened to me, we’d be winning.” I try to imagine the kids hunched over keyboards in other time zones. Their eyes are all like Deitra’s, unbearably wide. “You’re funny.”

“I hate them.”

“Can’t you play something else?”

“Yeah. Lemme see your credit card.” I don’t know if it’s a paternal instinct or the opposite that makes me want to pull out my wallet and buy her a real game. How quickly she could forget about all these worthless points she’s hoarded. “Like you said,” she says, “they’re gonna pull the plug anyway.” Her twelfth birthday is coming up—if she begged like her brothers, I’d probably cave. My weakness is known. But Deitra doesn’t beg, won’t lower herself to their level.

### *Wonderland*

Luz and I were dating four months when she got the call from

DHS. Her sister had produced her third dirty urine in as many months, and so the kids arrived that night, duffle bags and stuffed animals in tow. It was happening too fast, I thought, but Luz didn’t flinch. She signed the forms and ordered take-out. Not until we were in bed, myself almost asleep, did she finally start to choke up.

Out of the three, only Deitra seemed to understand what was happening. We could only guess how long we’d have before Anthony and Darren caught on. A good first day might soften the news, we thought. A trip to the shore—it’d be a gamble, yes. An hour both ways, and we’d have to depend on Deitra’s cooperation throughout. If she signaled that anything was awry, her brothers would pick up on it. We couldn’t make up our minds, but we mulled over it so long that by midnight it seemed dumb not to go.

As we approached the amusement park on the boardwalk, Darren’s eyes went wild. It started with the giant letters spinning on blocks: W-O-N-D-E-R-L-A-N-D. He shouted them out repeatedly, cut everyone in line. Whenever I took his arm, he convulsed and broke free, screaming loud enough to turn heads. “She must’ve never taken him anywhere like this,” Luz said. She asked me to handle the others as she strode after him. I’d only ever seen Darren sitting meekly with his tablet.

“Has anyone ever seen him like that?” I asked the group.

Without looking up from her phone, Luz’s daughter shrugged. A moment later she said her friends had arrived, and she left us to go find them.

I noticed that the line for the Ferris Wheel was short, and the height limit generous, but Anthony shook his head at it. “He’s afraid,” Deitra said.

“Really? It’s just the Ferris Wheel.” Though barely five, he usually played the tough guy around me. I was accustomed to the faces he made while kicking over Legos, cursing out goombas. This wide-eyed fear was new. We approached a few rides that caught Deitra’s eye, but all of her picks made Anthony cower. I told her we’d stay behind and watch, but she wanted me to ride with her.

As the search dragged on, she didn’t complain. She didn’t

mutter anything about their mother, drugs, urine. She just dragged her feet, dialed herself back to the absolute minimum, replied to nothing but yes or no questions. At any moment, I was sure, Anthony would demand to go home—his real home, his mom's—and Deitra would tell him why they couldn't.

But then we spotted the games. House of the Dead, Mortal Kombat. That one where you smash the plastic gators. We wrecked that one. Anthony on the mallet, Deitra and I wielding our fists. They couldn't believe the numbers we put on the boards.

From there it was just gratuitous. Deitra laughed at my jokes, Anthony climbed on my shoulders to shoot hoops. He even picked a ride, dashing into one of those glittery plastic cars that goes in a circle. "You too," he said, scooting over for me, pleading with his father's big hazel eyes. I was still trying to squeeze into the thing when Darren flew past us, screaming his head off, Luz hot on his tail. "Your turn," she said, between deep gulps of air.

I caught Darren's arm after a while, but he shrieked as if I'd tased him and quickly writhed free. One could do nothing but follow his flailing outline around the park. Sometimes he'd slow down a bit, yes—gaze up at the rides with something like awe, brush the butts of strangers with his outstretched fingers—but then, for reasons only he knew, he'd lose his shit all over again. Fresh tears would emerge before the last round could dry.

The single attraction that I managed to steer him onto, a two-story maze, took precious little out of his sails. Over and over, we scrambled up the steep wedge of foam, across the rickety bridge, down the un-slippery slide, all without slowing down. He pushed aside anyone who dared get in his way. Once clear that I was broke, the man guarding the entrance stuck a leg in our path, and Darren wailed on him with little fists of fury. No sooner than I peeled him off the guy did he dash into the crowd behind us, vanishing without a trace. No one could tell me which way he went.

On the other side of the park, Luz soon caught me searching for the youngest of her new dependents. "I should've known something was wrong with him," she said, texting her daughter to come watch the others. "This is so fucked." Her voice shook

with anger that I wished were for me. Anything for some control over it. "There's no tiring his demons," I admitted. I wished for anything useful to say, cursed every Darren-shaped kid who tricked my eye as we searched.

We finally found him at the exit, feet from the gate. Each catching an arm, we could only cringe as Darren thrashed. To my surprise, Luz said "Fuck it," and let him go. I hung on for another moment before seeing what she saw, how the people on the boardwalk were sparse. Out here, we could at least sit on a bench without losing sight of him. "ADHD?" I suggested, wiping sweat off my face.

"No idea."

We watched in silence as he sputtered around in circles, tight curls bouncing in his face. For a moment I felt kind of Zen about it, I think. This quadrupling of the kids in our lives. It would present new chances to prove myself, I was sure. But then I glanced over to find Luz biting her lip, fighting back tears, and I felt hopelessly petty. Whatever she was going through, I was too insulated from it to help. "It hits me in waves," she said. "You know?"

I didn't.

We yelled after Darren when he started barreling towards a trashcan bolted to the boardwalk, but he was too far away now—we could only bear witness as he crashed into the metal silo, bouncing backwards onto his little butt. It was all too much. We burst into laughter. Darren screamed up at the sky, pounded the boards with those little fists, and we cackled until people stared. "We're terrible people," Luz said, wiping her lashes.

"We tried to warn him!"

He was up and running again anyway by the time we caught up to him. Following his lead, we strode down towards the beach. When he ran into the ocean, we shrugged and rolled up our pants. It wasn't as cold as I expected. Here, Darren finally let us take his hands. He grinned up at me after every wave, the sun glossing him like a magazine.

"You're a weird dude," I told him.

## Vision Boards

As far as I can tell, the boys haven't realized that our healthy breakfasts are part of the war on Deitra's weight. It's one of the quieter fronts. When Deitra gets up for more fruit and eggs, Luz looks away and tells her there'll be plenty to eat when the party starts. "But I'm hungry now," Deitra says.

"Finish the eggs," I tell her, unsure if I'll be here to make more tomorrow. "They never reheat right."

In the living room, vacuuming around Deitra's feet, I steal glimpses of Sonic and the Princess. When I'm between outlets, Deitra says there'll be an auction tonight for crazy items. "I might not be around," I say, and her face tightens. I try asking about the items, but she spaces out, doesn't answer.

What I'm still debating, she must know for sure: none of this ever counted. Despite a thousand chances, I've failed to steer us out of the void. When the door bursts open to reveal Luz with a pretzel platter, Deitra disappears down the hall without looking at me.

"What goes on *your* board?" Luz asks me, opening wines. "That's what I'd like to see." That I technically never committed to the activity, I'm not sure she noticed. Still, before I can even start to envision my board, she takes it back: "Forget it. I don't want you making one."

"Hey—what if I want to?"

"You won't take it seriously. Don't you *dare* make one." The scorn almost feels personal. After Deitra's cold shoulder, I try to embrace it. Bathe in it. I almost bring up my void theory—how, ever since Luz got custody of the kids, everything's felt like Deitra's bootleg game. All these mashed-up brands, and how nothing really counts. And there's the whole racial layer to it that felt really smart yesterday, but god it sounds awful now, putting it into words.

The doorbell rings. As friends settle into the living room, I find excuses to vanish. "C'mere," Anthony demands, catching my glance as I wander down the hall. "I'm on the last boss." I peek into the boys' room to find him alone on the bottom bunk despite the bustle of new children who've already poured in. I try to steal

a glimpse of the sketchpad that Deitra hunches over at the desk, but Anthony is relentless: "Look, look, look." I shimmy through the crowd just in time to see him killed by a fireball. "Fuck!"

Darren, curse-detector, starts screaming his head off. A few other kids join in. As I fail to bring the room to order, I can already picture the look on Luz's face—she'll be here any second to investigate. Just as I resign myself to it, Deitra throws her pencil down, grabs her brother by the collar, and invokes some secret doctrine that makes him shut up. With no words exchanged, Darren goes mute. The rest peter out like signatories. "That was amazing," I tell her.

"No it wasn't."

"What are you drawing?"

"Nothing." She flips the page.

In the living room, our friend Fernando talks about his new job as an airline mechanic. "See what positive thinking can do?" Luz says to me. Then, to the room: "Pete doesn't believe in *The Secret*." Having missed whatever led up to this, I don't know if I have any sympathizers. "Maybe it's not the *only* secret," I try. "Maybe it's just *a* secret?"

"No," Luz says. "It's *The Secret*." I know she's dead serious, but the room laughs at our shtick. She's forced to smile—I even hear Deitra laughing behind me. To my surprise, she grabs a poster board from the stack. "You're not out here for the computer?" Luz asks. Deitra shakes her head. Our friend Therese asks her what she does on the computer, but gets no reply. "She's trying to be the prince," I say.

"I'm trying to be the *king*."

Luz's mom doesn't like the sound of this. "Honey, you better be the *queen*."

"No," Deitra says. "King's better."

"Well, why don't you come make a vision board of your kingdom?" Luz offers, handing her some decades-old magazines that no one else wanted. Deitra takes them with her to the computer desk, pushes aside the keyboard.

Though I know it's been explained to her already, Luz's mom asks what we're doing. Luz doesn't seem to mind explaining it again: "*You just have to hold on tightly to the images of what you desire,*"

she recites. “*You will find that you start to attract these things.*” Luz’s mom gets the idea quickly enough: “So here’s what goes on my board,” she says. “Winning lottery tickets, twenty-year-old’s body...” Everyone laughs. “...a whole new me!” I’d say she pretty well debunked the whole thing, but all proceed to cut out visions in earnest. Refilling drinks, I watch Therese cut out a vineyard. Luz cuts out a thigh gap. The poster boards become giant ransom notes to the universe.

I grab a *National Geographic* off the floor and take it with me into the kitchen. Flipping through it for visions, I stop on an ad for an anti-inflammatory. A mixed-race family hikes through the mountains. Everyone looks so happy with themselves that I start itching for a hike with Luz and the kids. I picture it and swoon. No cacophony to rile Darren, no rides to scare Anthony—it could be a thing we do all the time. Why has it taken me so long to think of this?

I pour myself a shot of mamajuana.

Because I’ve allowed negative images to clutter my mind.

No wonder she descended into the book, I think, throwing back my shot. Then I hear Deitra yell my name, visions to show me.

Approaching the computer desk, I look forward to something subversive. Blood and laser beams. But Deitra’s board looks just the way it’s supposed to: a heap of luxury cars, a fleet of yachts, a giant pool despite her fear of swimming. She’s opted for a mansion instead of a castle, but not just one. Deitra’s is a staggering estate, each mansion a brick in a wall of mansions. There’s a lustrous family in the center of the action, kids all models from H&M or something. Two little boys, two teen girls, all different shades of brown and beautiful. And presiding over them all, stately in their beach chairs, sit King Ben Affleck and Queen Jennifer Lopez. Ben has a hand perched on J-Lo’s hand. Deitra’s pasted a cigar into the corner of his mouth, and a lavish crown atop his head. “Do you know who that is?” I ask, pointing at him.

“You,” she tells me.

“I thought you were going to be the king,” I say. “It’s supposed to be your vision board.” In a strangely steady tone, Deitra

informs me that she’s changed her mind. “You can be king,” she says. I wait for a punchline that doesn’t follow.

This isn’t her fantasy, of course—it’s her eleven-year-old’s guess at mine, or the best version of mine that includes her.

*The Secret* has taught her to plead, I think. It’s taught her to petition the forces beyond her control with purified thinking, like all these hoodwinked grownups. She’ll spend her life blaming every injustice on her own negative thoughts. I can already see it: she’ll almost break free, again and again, only to come home to self-loathing.

“You have to take it *seriously*,” I hear Luz tell her mom.

“Visualize something you have some control over.” Therese disagrees: “Colin McGreggor says he visualizes the parking spot he wants on his way to the store, and that he gets it. Every time. Now tell me how he’s got any control over that?”

“That’s something the world can meet you halfway on,” Luz says. “He didn’t think a sack of money would appear on his front lawn. He thought, *If I drive to the store, I’ll get my spot.* And he got it. And so, he thought, *If I train my best, the universe will make me the champion.* It gave him that too.” Her supporters nod.

“It gave him brain damage,” I say. Our routine went over well enough before, I tell myself— still, I know I’ve hit a foul note. Deitra glares at me. No one laughs.

“You think you’re so smart,” Luz says, looking away. “Just look it up. You’ll see: *Anyone who ever accomplished anything didn’t know how they were going to do it—*” She stumbles over the quote, like she can’t bear having to spell it out. “—*they only knew that they were going to do it.*”

There’s something about the way her words pulse in my ear. All this anger they channel—it wasn’t churned up for her sister, or the kids, or herself. It’s all for me. For a moment, I’m high on it. My place here, in this house, is real. Realer than it’s ever been. It only takes the room full of cringing faces to tell me how late I am to this party. How this angst was always here, always mine, just waiting for me to purge my imperfect thoughts—all this filthy gunk that blocked its path.

LISA AMPLEMAN

## Public Intimacies

My mother never taught me  
to hover over the  
public bathroom toilet,

to avoid the heat  
on the seat from another's  
skin. No matter

the cacophony of flushes  
and chatter around  
the stall, the scents

of other bodies,  
we are essentially alone there.  
Just so, it's acceptable

to disrobe in  
the doctor's office,  
don a paper gown,

as routine as taking off  
a belt in an airport  
security line. I admit I got

accustomed to  
covering my nakedness  
with a sheet, shifting into

the stirrups, letting  
the fertility specialist use  
a wand to see

if my follicles were  
ripe for ovulation,  
med students watching

the monitor  
to see which orbs  
were worth measuring.

I've omitted those  
details from my  
previous accounts,

resisted telling  
even the closest  
of friends or family.

And in the surgical room  
for a C-section,  
I begged my husband

not to look at my  
insides, tawdry entrails.  
There are places we can

bare ourselves  
and stay hidden, keep  
the secrets of our

bodies and how we feel  
they've failed us. There  
are places teeming

with people where  
each of us is exposed,  
but only for the sock-

footed walk  
through the whirring  
TSA scanner,

only for as long as  
it takes  
to suit up again.

## Filling In The Pond

Fish in the net whirr  
like an orange fan  
at full speed, until they're at ease  
in the silty box of water.

We pump the backyard pond  
onto the lawn, cavity destined  
to be a garden, and ankle-deep in  
the three inches of muck that remain,

he scoops out whatever has a heartbeat. The babies  
are silver, hard to sift from decaying leaves  
and the string algae, clumps of green hair. Sure,  
we'd prefer to be more than two,

to multiply and be fruitful, but some couples  
have no such luck, have instead  
extra medication to inject, a hollow that clangs,  
the income to order fill dirt

for a former pond. The tiny silver fish  
will grow golden in another backyard.  
It pours rain, a torrent, as we load them  
in the buyer's hatchback. The fish—

comets, fantails—used to gather, amazed,  
at the surface freckled by raindrops,  
opening their mouths in slow O's.  
UV filter for the pump, keeping

a lookout for raccoons: at some point  
you have to call it quits.  
You have to decide to stop.

BETH GILSTRAP

## A Lament For April 25th

In the daylight hours of her last twelve, I feed my abuser chocolate ice cream. It is my last day of teaching for the semester and I break open. I will never wear this teal blazer, these jeans, this boatneck sweater again. I confess to my nineteen-year-old students how much I have needed them to keep going these months. These Januarys. These Marchs. This bullshit April. That explains the Valentine's doughnuts, they said. The novel about taking care of the dying. The clone characters, my God. How right each moment seemed now. Their sweat smells and weed smells and a sudden tulip spring. How far they feel from death in the daylight hours of her last twelve. When class is over, I drive home to let my dogs out and return to hospice without eating. I have always loved when deprivation becomes evident in the sharp edges of my hipbones. The daylight hours of her last twelve. I grade final projects in the recliner next to her bed. When I've cried through half of the final reflections, I sleep on an easily sanitized mauve couch, which sticks to my cheek. Heat rash. In the daylight hours of her last twelve. The nurses barely enter after they replace her Fentanyl patch, this time on her wrist. I cannot recall why they have to rotate. Maybe it's about skin breakdown. It was only five days ago the administration threatened to release C home because she wasn't dying enough. I can't lift her, I pleaded. In the evening hours of her last Sunday. When she wakes, she says, "I'm so thirsty." By the time I point the straw at her mouth she has drifted again. I lie back down and think of when C's mother died, how she painted her nails before she would allow the coroner to take her away. She perched there, talking to her, telling her how she'd get her all dolled up. But C, C is Ben's mother. I do not stay the night.

WILLIAM VANDENBERG

## Periodical Cicadas, Belpre, OH, 2015

My sister and I agree: The game took place on the west coast of Michigan, our mom was tanning far in the distance, and we were competing to make the best dad out of sand.

"Jenny was there still," I say. My sister nods. The cicadas drone. Our mom's house hasn't sold yet, so we meet on Sunday evenings in the backyard. We make drinks from liquor bottles she kept under the sink. Tonight, we mix peach brandy and crème de menthe with club soda. The liquor is half-evaporated, thick despite the club soda's lightness. "We made three fathers out of the sand," she says. "We tried to get mom to come judge them."

The sun is nearly down. As the light in the sky dims, the rhododendrons at the far end of the yard darken. "And then crabs came out of Jenny's," she said.

I try to set my drink down on the fabric arm of the camping chair, but it totters. "I don't remember that."

She is incredulous, my sister. She raises her hands above her piled hair. "Jenny must have built her father on top of their hatching eggs. They pushed up through the loose sand she'd piled on, hundreds of them. She didn't pack the sand hard like we did. Tiny little red baby crabs. You don't remember that?"

I search my mind. I see our mother in the distance, shaded by a white umbrella. I remember Jenny before she was surrendered, her bright green bathing suit, the neon seething in the sun. I try to picture their small claws emerging, eye stalks pushing past the sand, granules sticking to the black globes.

I arrive at the bottom of my glass and crunch the rounded ice. Of note: I've been mildly electrocuted three times in my life. The cold water has a similar sobering effect. My sister says, "What am I supposed to do with a memory like that?" but as she speaks, her voice peters out. She sees something at the far side of the yard and falters out of her camping chair. A cluster of lightning bugs hangs in front of the dark rhododendrons. The light in the sky is nearly violet. She flings her glass behind her onto the roof and it rolls down the shingles. After it crosses a clogged gutter, it lands next to the trash bins, the glass audibly chipping on the concrete.

It does not shatter.

My sister sprints across the unkempt lawn and holds her hands level among the floating lights.

KAMAL E. KIMBALL

## Annihilation Drive

On a birdless afternoon, I leave myself alone. Not picking, not tonguing the pit between two teeth. I go away. For a few smooth and featureless hours no cars turn onto Annihilation Drive. When I come to, the room gleams like a new country. Instead of sun, the window shines back an artificial ochre, a halo of thrifted light, blue blur of my laptop, silver glint off my rings. Now, I see into everything, even the atoms are crisper, faster. On the velvet wingback, the desk, the books, a residual sheen from others who touched and sat before. I smell how they licked their fingers, smeared their spit into the paper's corners, whiff of a long-stubbed cigarette. Now, I see the cherry reamed against the ashtray edge, the ashtray in a cupboard somewhere still beside once-lipsticked tumblers with their rims flush to the shelves, those isolated silences they cup and hold, suspended. Now, a few cool notes of jazz slink up the stairs, the smell of onions, garlic coming underneath the door. Now, I feel my own past inside me, turning over, opening, reopening the slice in my middle finger where reeds by the river waved me in and took a notch of blood today. Purple-tinged, they lilted with a chaos I was compelled to thrust my hands against, wanting to possess their plenty, asking for a wheaten softness. But the spines of the plant were hungry, bush of razors, and they drew a sample of my life from me. Like a mother, they lashed my hands, showing me my red. *Look* they said *don't look away* and out flowed my hidden rust onto that starving ground.

AIDAN FORSTER

## Stoney End

On the series premiere of *The Bachelorette*,  
the blonde starlet waxes prophylactic:  
*When I became the only girl in the world  
who could safely date thirty men at a time,  
I felt so lucky.* When confronting myself  
with the question of men—being one,  
occasionally, watching more, craving still others—  
I start all over: fuchsia zygote, the smallest  
utterable unit of glitz, angled toward nothing  
worth noting. When I learned minks bite  
to the bone, I gave up my fantasy of domestication  
for one of exchange—my wish mink’s tiny teeth  
loosing the plush & odic matter of me, skinny  
as my lesser future moonlighting as what it means  
to have never been a boy, to have never wanted one.  
When the men exit the limousine, I gawk  
at their reel of abandonment in reverse.  
An anesthesiologist in a straitjacket—*I’m crazy  
for you already.* A boy band manager shucking,  
greave by greave, an iron suit of armor. An attorney  
unspooling flaxen scarves from his pressed shirt—  
*I’m carrying the weight of our relationship already.*  
Unable to discern hoofbeat from hoofprint,  
I want to be the bachelorette—to say *These men*,  
gesture vaguely off camera, and know men truly  
devote themselves to their silly little man things for me—  
performing shock surveys of wild fish migration,  
juvenile carp tangled in the net’s dream guzzle,  
or fashioning a cord bracelet from shoelaces  
snapped patrolling the Western Canadian wilderness.  
I want to see that morning, again, by the river,  
when the strange man shouted, *Stop kissing,*

*you fucking faggots,* & sped away in his blue Corolla,  
& you really stopped kissing me. I want that morning,  
your complex series of leftward glances, as if toward  
a marsupial shadow low in the goldenrod,  
holding, in its umber pouch, the crux of a girl.  
Shaking, love light in her eyes, the bachelorette  
approaches finality—*I think I just found my husband.*  
I never wanted to go down the Stoney End, but here I am:  
in this, my darkest whimsy. In that, my deepest whim.

## Mink Portrait as Prophylactic Wonder

Outside Be'er Sheba, the desert devises a sand theory  
of viral suppression: oases of glimmering fur wicked  
into furless capsules, quick-dissolve storytime chips.

In Soroka Medical Center, we sip cool water  
from daisy-waxed cups. It's too much, too soon,  
the pediatric virologist asserts, to tell children

they have HIV, what it means that their cells  
geld, lower & lowing, into reams of proteinic molt.  
Instead, we offer them stories: a terrible beetle

tries, every day, to thresh the depths of your hurt;  
or, a little jaguar zips from shoulder to knuckle,  
bent on knocking your feeling zones, finally, down;

but if you take this pill, legions of beautiful  
& tame animals will protect you, keep you healthy.  
I marvel at this feat of narrative, so delicately

snipping a child's net of uncertainty into lovable  
cloud-shapes: earnest rabbits, penitent camels,  
hawks in dinosaur costumes holding ivory swords.

What happens, we ask, when a child stops believing?  
When wonder becomes an instrument against belief,  
the pill's dailiness begging its daily & lonely question?

Some parents, our virologist explains, uphold the scrim  
of myth between a child & their body for too long.  
Often, in early adolescence, patients learn of their diagnosis

by accident & refuse medication. I imagine the teenage  
boy reckoning, suddenly, with the whisking of his life

into doom quotients: CD4 count, CCR5 receptor gene,

years of viral suppression hidden under silky pawprints.  
Leaving Be'er Sheba, Kacey Musgraves' "Lonely Weekend"  
on repeat, the moment of recognition becomes an ark

in reverse: animals marching out of the bodies of children  
& into the desert, lion by lion, tortoise by tortoise, the lone  
& lonely minks fastened to their little sloop of wonder.

STEPHANIE MEADE GRESHAM  
**Your Own Personal Jesus**

There's a place on your arm they call the ditch. The tender crease inside your elbow. The closer the needles come to that line, the more you're gonna want to make it stop, but it won't be right if you give up too soon. You'll let the pain travel alongside the ink, into the next layer of skin and it'll keep going until it's parked in your teeth. Until they ache with it. Just when you think you can't take anymore, when you're about to cry or scream or split open, you'll lock eyes with a baby shark floating in a jar of formaldehyde.

Maybe you did drugs before the tattoos. Nobody would blame you. You drank wine early and slept in late, snatching in and out of reality to feed your kids who played past their bedtimes while you cried a little or a lot. You slid glossy photos out of your album and looked at the wild bodies dancing under smoky lights to loud music. Arms slung around shoulders in reverie. The friends in your photos—on your night—made it home.

A month before you got your first tattoo, a monster opened fire in a nightclub killing forty-nine people and injuring fifty-three others. Rainbow flags draped businesses in your city, the local newspaper printed forty-nine names on the front page, printed forty-nine photos. It rained during the vigil where you stood crying, cupping your hands around a white candle. A stranger shared their umbrella with you. A field of mourners listened to someone's auntie say names into a microphone, her paper shaking and limp in the damp.

That first tattoo, a guy named Mike offered to show you what it feels like without the ink. The fluorescent lights buzzed dim under the sound of a tattoo machine close by; a young woman bunched her toes up inside strappy sandals on the chair across

from yours while a bearded man bent over her bare chest. *Just go for it, you said, I don't care if it hurts.*

When something is too good to be true we say, pinch me. But you know a woman with a ladder of scars up her arm, each pink rung thick like rope; reminders of something she's tried to erase. It's a testament to pain that we will go to such lengths to cover it up.

Personal hopelessness is not a casual visitor slipping in through the cracks. It's a wool blanket you must shuffle around beneath. It's heavy and folded in on itself in places, never letting you forget it exists. Your hopelessness covers up logic, distorts reality by outlining the lies you tell yourself in bold. And then there are the matches that set your blanket ablaze. *You're as sad as your mother*, the blanket tells you, and the match is another school getting shot up on the news. Your blanket whispers why are you still here, and the match is a photo of a Syrian boy washed up on the beach. There is no bottom to the shame you feel, holding your pain next to the suffering of others. Your blanket is heavy and forever and then it's on fire.

That first tattoo didn't fix everything; nothing fixes everything, but with your eyes jammed shut, needles to your skin, you felt yourself become aspirate. A misty incarnation of pain near the jagging overhead lights, just before diving into yourself again, ink filling your wounds.

An image of Stanley, the young pharmacy tech who handed over your prescriptions every month, surfaced in the darkness behind your eyelids. His name, the first released. His photo, the first you saw in the paper. Stanley with the good eyeliner and day-changing smile. Sitting in the tattoo chair, you imagined Stanley's face next to yours in those photographs, though your only physical contact had been touching hands through a drive-up window. With your eyes closed and that metaphysical hum in your teeth, with your feet like fists inside your sneakers, it could almost be true that Stanley made it home that night.

Then you opened your eyes and saw Jesus. Pressed in velvet,

ensconced in a gilded frame, hanging next to a crude pencil drawing of a naked Betty Boop.

Not every shop has Jesus. Or a flaccid baby shark. You've since prayed to a Where's Waldo poster and a taxidermied bat. The day Anthony Bourdain died, you prayed to a golden flamingo while getting a mountain tattooed on your bicep. God how you blamed yourself for being alive.

Now there is a fox, a sphinx moth, an orange blossom. Purple magnolias unfurl down your right shoulder, not just as a reminder of your grandmother, but of the way your depression was passed down like inheritance. Your mother, who says you will regret ruining your skin with tattoos, moves through days loose and slow, her insides wasting with rum and coke. Your grandmother died sitting on a wooden bench wringing her bone-thin hands.

For the magnolias you sat three sessions, silently confessing to a silken white statue of Mary, her palms together, a lacy cap of dust on top of her head. How funny it was, seeing her praying there, too.

That first time, Mike taped a sheath of cellophane over the fresh image when he finished. Where there once was nothing, three whimsical figures embracing. At stoplights on the way home, you laid your palm on them and pressed. Purple, yellow, and blue ink mixed with blood under the plastic, blurring the design. Days passed and the place on your skin became a nagging itch, a new phase of grief. You watched healing begin on the sidewalk in front of a fence erected around Pulse Nightclub, strangers holding one another as if they had melted together. Flags, poetry, prayers, flowers. The outpouring of love equal to the outpouring of grief. You slid your photos back under their plastic sleeves, returned the album to its shelf.

You run an errand and upon returning home find the front door locked when you had purposefully left it unlocked. You jiggle the ancient brass handle and throw your shoulder against the door. You knock and wait, make fifteen calls to your husband working

upstairs. Until, after twenty-five minutes sitting on the stoop with a gallon of milk sweating next to your sneakers, you decide the only explanation is that you don't really exist. How can a person be too real some days, every cell in their body begging for mercy, and then—on a Tuesday, with the cars going by—not enough?

The next tragedy strikes and you'll lie down, make small talk while a guy places tiny pots of color in rows on a steel tray. It will smell the way dentist's offices do, sterile anticipation. He'll swipe your arm with a rubbing alcohol square. When you look down at the transfer there will be a rough outline, a design chosen in a hurry, and a small forest of scraggly armpit hair. Your eyes will scan the walls, the shelves, the counters until they spot something weird and sacred. The guy won't ask if you're ready. You will be. He'll press his boot gently on the pedal, waking the machine to life in his hand.

PAMELA MANASCO

## Clouds, July

A dragon. A globe. The picked clean bones  
of a fish. My son sees a hurricane, its giant eye.

If we could trap ourselves inside  
we'd creep like spiders inching toward prey.

We'd glide like ice whittling to chips in a glass.  
Fresh cut grass sticks to our hair as we

lay. We complain: the gnat that gummed my eyelashes,  
clouds dissolve too quick to count.

We each are a current, a breath. How small,  
how close, how we lie and do not touch.

Memory slides like this: I see myself unwrap a box  
in VHS. I got two jigsaw puzzles for my eighth

birthday, green and purple flowers, and remember  
that I liked that gift but not the hands that wrapped it.

I take few pictures now. My children smile  
in a small inflatable pool. My son

squints his eyes at the sky. If they look  
back one day let it be fond, let it

be slow mornings holding hands, let us want to be  
here, a step, a walk when we find a yellow leaf.

1992

These days the stars are not soft. They demand  
to be seen, when they are seen: tenting over  
the church parking lot, a handful of dust.  
"Bye," my daughter tells them—face up, feet still,  
arm the hour of a clock I sometimes hear.  
We keep loving things that do not love us  
back; her stars, my dust. The sweet smell of browned  
grass cut fresh and dry, the exact papery  
scrape fingers ruck from butterbeans  
and the butterfly that stays when you shuck  
out the good. I want for her what she never can  
know: a man dead thirty years in my mind  
still as breath, rolling tobacco in white  
squares, licking them shut and rolling again.

## Great Black Wasp

when the wasp lit on my window      I'd forgotten it was  
closed & I feared

the sting but it was beautiful      darker blue than oil but  
iridescent like a grackle's wings in

fall & I didn't move so she would stay      turning circles on  
the sill where it was hot enough

she'd believe a flower      could open from my yellow blouse  
what I was looking at before

was just my face in the glass      a ghost with tired  
eyes not looking for something to kill

when I was eight      and my grandfather died in the week before  
Christmas I had to wait until summer

to watch something die & to like it      the dark cold & solitary zap  
of the machine tethered to the eaves of the barn

I'd listen on the porch      swing by myself and number  
the deaths of winged things

they were far from the house      & why do I need to see  
a beautiful thing to decide it can live but

I'm still counting      & look for a road  
somewhere with a ditch

I can lie      down by there  
and put my body in that perfect hollow space

and the legs of an insect might      fox on my skin  
like that wasp with her delicate step

and maybe we'll      wait until she walks away  
46 before we dig a grave instead

SARAH BROCKHAUS

## Container Gardening

Trees scare me. Who gives them permission  
to fill up so much sky? I keep life in flowerpots  
to control the growth. I overwater. I can't give

the whole ground, they would never belong  
to me. I rearrange the pots, an experiment  
to see how shade and light interact. I don't get

to design the sky. All I can do is set them up  
on the sill and wait. I keep twelve sunflowers  
leaning into the glass, and watch

as the crowded roots give up. It is always too much  
water, or too little, or I water at the wrong  
hour. I didn't know plants carried time

in their xylem. They belong to the physical, the earth  
and sun, but I hold them in my mind all day  
and never let them become.

PHOEBE REEVES

## Caliber

'kæl ə bər

I.

We're old fashioned, like calamine lotion on poison ivy,  
like a dim daguerreotype of Calamity Jane, drunk in her jeans  
and her thin-soled boots. Round up the calves  
for the slaughter, Jane. Take a good pull on that bottle.

And aren't we all a little like Cain, burdened by our  
useless harvest? Caiaphas and Calchas, those curdled priests,  
knew the power of sacrifice. When Iphigenia's throat opened  
over the sea, her blood, not her words, entered the dark currents

and she rode that calamity out past her body,  
her silent father, all the ships that, to her eyes,  
were already burning. But Jesus, let's not ask  
what he saw. We all know where his blood went.

II.

Jane and her horse are in cahoots to make it out, leave  
the show, ditch Bill and the wild rest and strike out for

Louisiana, Cajun country, pull a faded calico  
dress on over her muscled body and brush out her hair.

The horse is weary of all the children, their smiles the bright  
bars of a cage that cuts through space and time, an

imposition akin to the doctor reaching through the  
skin, the fat, the muscle wall for the baby delivered

caesarian. Without the seismic farewell of the  
birth canal, how can he be sure he has arrived?

Iphigenia is probably glad to see in the last drops  
of her own blood, her father's head cloven with an axe,

her mother weeping, but then, these are the calculations  
one can only see in extremity.

## Differential

ˌdɪf ə'renʃəl

is in leaving before she dies  
on the pyre, before your errors

dilate out into a sinkhole

when really, you were digging  
with such a small shovel.

Dilemma: the difference between

digits and digitalis. I mean,  
can you tell your hands apart

from the foxgloves they clutch?

We always planted dill  
in the front yard, its yellow

fan of flowers diffuse over

the lawn. Now, the diffraction  
of light calls all color into

question. Even a dilettante

can see the paintings are worried  
about their diction. They get

didactic in their anxiety and

lecture digressively to the museum  
floor, polished and waxed as it is

with bare potential. Wouldn't we

all love to sweep into town,  
diddle Dido or whoever's

Queen at the time, and saunter

out on Sunday, only mildly  
hung-over? That's the stuff

of legend, isn't it? The difficulty

KATE FINEGAN  
**Lemon Cap**

Stand at the rim of the canyon and what you notice most is not the ground you're standing on but what came before—all those rusty-sunset layers. So let's go back. I apologize for the pith you'll find lodged beneath your fingernails, but out here in the desert, the skin gets dry. Sure, it's the same back in the mountains but only when the snow flies. Ice and grit both bring concrete to crumbling, and some of the lands we traverse are boiling in the day, sand storming your eyes and every brand-new wrinkle, and crisp-thin-cold at night. Not ice, but it can feel that way, and there's not too much that grows but what stays fresh is citrus. Sugar lemon, suck the juice down like it's sweet, like the memory of leaving home and all those men who stamped your ticket to freedom only to dangle it out of reach, all those times you tried to leave but couldn't, until finally a woman with a lemon grove taught you to read palms, got you on the circus trail. A ticket, yes, and then another and another: Can you juggle? *I can learn*. Can you dance? *If wriggling in something skimpy counts as dancing*. Can you swallow fire? *Oh, man, what woman hasn't?* Sleep can be hard to come by on the road, these thin-walled cars with performers crammed inside, coyotes howling through the night, so the bags under your eyes will never travel light. Rub with lemon juice to brighten them. Massage this astringent onto elbows, knees. Hold sourness inside your mouth as long as you can—mixed with clay, if possible—to whiten those teeth that have to smile, smile, smile, even when you join a magic team, the bottom half of a woman cut in half, and all you've got to do is have your legs squeezed so the head can squeal, to show you're real. If you can get enough juice—and this will never happen, mind you—work it through your hair then wrap your hair in plastic; bring some sun in to hide those greys, or try. And when you've squeezed all the juice you can, slip a lemon half inside yourself; leave it there just in case. But don't forget it. Take so many measures just in case.

EMMA AYLOR

**Half Length Of A Girl Reading**

Something to a man makes him want to keep a woman still. Or not quite still—he sees, I mean, a woman absorbed, away from him, elsewhere and interior, and wants to lead her back to a place better known. Map it neatly. Take for yourself

an illusion of understanding. The artist's ledger begins, *Half length of a girl reading: the face in shadow. about 17*. Think of Mrs. Ramsay's distance, which, as she knit her red stocking, pained her husband. *He could do nothing*

*to help her. He must stand by and watch her*, wanting sympathy. William Wood painted the red drapery behind Miss Ray with 438 and 521, he noted, personal codes to pigments, the key now lost or never had. The same ruddy tinge slivers

along the cover of her open book, spreads at her cheek's apple and the ribbon of her lips—a little, there, at the curve of her wrist, her chest. You could fool yourself, thinking she really was alone.

But her translucent dress, her breast a little in view—*the anatomy is awkward*, the Met catalog says, and *would not have been studied from the model*. It's hard to see precisely where the bodice ends.

Her pointer finger traces the soft scarp of the jaw; her eyes, downcast, could almost be closed. The catalog sees the colors' decay and notes *small losses in the hair*. Having made her privacy,

a woman can't keep it. —*Outlin'd with common ink, & a steel pen. —Ink wash'd off next day; so as to leave only a gray stain to her shape. Her skin is so light—on the ivory, at the neck. This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it.*

ARIEN REED

## A Trans Man's Guide To Finding A Partner

*after Sam Sax*

Born of two worlds, I walk on hands and feet  
inhabiting both the roles a mammal can know  
and unsure which one lives most thoroughly  
in my chest's humble beating. I see the world

through one forward eye and one to the side  
as hair wags from pine branches and moths  
slap out my teeth. Every attempt at becoming  
alive with someone else is an ambush of limbs

pressing on mouths, pressing mouths on the hidden,  
until silence is foreign. This far into the untamed,  
streetlamps are bitten off at the stump, sidewalks  
have names that slither around, and the breeze

has a voice that keeps breaking. An owl told me  
to rename myself after the sound of changing, but  
I can't remember what I came from. I touch my  
finger to my parting lip and taste a metal I can drink.

Maybe when I can push the doe out of my body  
the tuliped streets will be gentle to my duality,  
and the seam between the pink and the black horizon  
will mean nothing to the antlers of my incisors.

But I am also the wolf who shreds the vale  
with my doe voice, my body of fur and hide,  
until the vale opens into a belly of bones  
and swallows my blood song like knives.

This is a trail where everyone has some  
bad inside. The flashing claws of my fire  
will grasp the doe the wolf is gnawing on  
under my skin and rip her out by the thighs.

There are only castles of breath and knots  
that plunge, with a twist, between my doe  
and wolf teeth. The moon also destroys me  
when I don't give him the vale of my maw.

In the dark, it almost looks like we're not  
fighting. When I slice his face with my tongue  
his white wine pours through my fur  
like scars. I glitter with his salt and hate

the scent on my lips. He holds me each time,  
his antlers curling into my ribs until I'm paralyzed.  
He, too, tried to come into me but I turned my  
face away and let him mark my other body.

A bear leaves his signature on trees so he can find  
his way back to the honey. The doe frozen  
in me said *give him your entrails* so I splay  
myself on a platter at every heat of crooked

breathing. When he tore my throat open,  
I came. I was almost surprised. I feel most  
predatory when hung over a fire. He burned  
inside me until he vanished from the sky

his smile winking out among pines as his pupils  
expanded. His nose on my wrist, he tasted  
the blood of my name. He deadnamed me  
again and again, until I became a threat

I should have run from. But his growls are  
also pleas, and the trees are just fingers  
reaching toward a sky of white blood  
splatter. I'm not surprised. I died already

at the start of this song.

SONJA LIVINGSTON  
**The Angels' Share**

I.

I knew the psychic had conjured family when the messages from the Great Beyond became unkind.

“Now *I* think you look fine,” the medium whispered. “But your spirit guide suggests more exercise and green vegetables—maybe some better shoes.”

My feet were pushed into a flimsy pair of flips flops. It was summer and I’d come to Lily Dale Assembly with friends to visit mediums and attend the famous spirit-channeling sessions in the woods. My heart thumped as those around me received messages. A spirit with an eagle tattoo hummed “Danny Boy.” “My husband,” an old woman sobbed. A spirit with a slight limp and an oil-stained rag warned his nephew to check his tire pressure before heading back to Buffalo. A gardening-inclined ghost told her daughter the roses out back were about to bloom. These spirits sure are generous, I thought. Until it was my turn and my spirit did not bother with niceties before railing against the pudge of my body and wholly inadequate footwear.

“I’m only the channel,” the medium’s smile was strained by the delicate business of brokering conversations between the living and the dead. My group of friends had left the public session in the woods by then and five of us sat in the front room of the spiritualist’s cottage—a enclosed porch with wicker chairs and floral pillows. A soft place, and softness is what I wanted then—a spirit in gossamer gowns who limited her advice to air pressure and gardening tips.

“I’m getting a Native American vibe,” the medium looked at me with a raised brow. “Does this sound like anyone you know?”

“My grandmother.” I said, though it was the thick fog of disapproval that settled into the room that gave her away. “I guess you’ve channeled Anna Mae.”

II.

Lailah is the original guardian angel. According to Jewish lore, it’s Lailah’s job to lead souls from Eden into the human womb and pour secrets into our ears as our bodies unfold from a rosette of cells. Lailah whispers all that she knows about God, the future and human history, filling us with wisdom until we glow like candles. Until right before birth, that is, when Lailah presses a finger above our upper lip and wipes it all away—causing us to come into this world clean and seeking, and with a fleshy divot between nose and mouth. Who knows why an angel gives and takes like this? We can’t go through the world with borrowed light, I suppose. We must stumble and fall and find wisdom on our own. But Lailah doesn’t wholly abandon us. She hovers nearby as we flail about and smiles perhaps as we trace the place where she touched us—the philtrum, it’s called—and our forefinger instinctively returns to its soft landing when we struggle to recall something we once knew.

III.

I saw my grandmother four times in my life. The first time her husband pulled his false teeth from the cup in which they’d been soaking and chased my sister with them, biting Alicia so hard with his dentures the skin on her upper arm turned red while the rest of us took turns swinging from the weeping willow out back. A few years later, Anna Mae dropped off the dress she’d made for Alicia’s First Communion along with a generous helping of disdain. My grandmother didn’t think much of my mother’s brood of fatherless children. Anna Mae was no role model when it came to parenting but at least her kids all came from the same man. Such may have been her thinking as she swooped in with her white lace dress and razor-sharp eyes.

She visited again when I was in 2nd grade. She’d traded her sewing needles for cactus needles by then. The place she lived was called Needles, in fact—a forgotten corner of California surrounded by prickly plants and armored creatures scurrying along the desert floor. My mother was pregnant

again, no boyfriend or husband in sight. How she survived my grandmother's barbs, I do not know. I only remember the shell bracelets Anna Mae brought and the batch of silver dollars she sent from her winnings at slots later that same year.

I was a teenager when my grandmother appeared for the last time. She had a black eye. *From a bar fight*, she explained and because her drinking was the most solid thing about her, no one questioned whether a stranger had socked our grandmother or whether it was her husband's handiwork. Later that year, the two would sit opposite each other with shotguns pointed at the other's head. *Go on*, they'd goad, cradling their respective guns until they nodded off. I can see them, two overgrown briny children whose fighting was the only way they knew to touch. But my mother relayed this scene after Anna Mae's final visit, and my most lasting memory of my grandmother is the steak she bought, which cost more than any single food item we'd ever had, and which she used to nurse her black eye before telling my mother to salt it and fry it up good.

#### IV.

Signs an angel is nearby: finding a coin or a white feather; the appearance of a light breeze or a wing-shaped cloud; flickering lights; a baby cocking its head at an unseen object; the sound of chanting or bells; a surge of warmth in the chest; a tingling sensation in the gut; a distinctive scent—spicy for guardian angels, floral for archangels. Since Anna Mae seems to be my angel, I pay no mind to coins or clouds and listen instead for the sound of clinking glasses and cursing from on high.

#### V.

I have no picture of Anna Mae as a child so I make one of my own. An angular girl leans beside a barrel, her face resting against the bent staves. It's 1930, in upper Vermont. Prohibition means men ferment mash in old tubs and makeshift stills or make runs to the Canadian border for gin and rum. Anna Mae cozies up to her barrel like other girls cozy up to kittens as she waits for a portion of whiskey to escape through the barrel's pores—the

angels' share, it's called and the girl smiles while inhaling the fumes. She's eleven, her dark curls side-parted and cut to the chin. She wears a sky-blue frock with fluttery sleeves. There's no money for dresses but she's already learned to cook and clean and her sewing is a point of pride. She must have found a bolt of fabric and made herself a dress. Her breasts have just started to bud and she cinches the waist to approximate the shape of a woman as she totters around in a pair of her mother's shoes. Irish grandmothers on both sides lend an impishness to her face, an inherited twinkle to the eyes, which misleads because, by age eleven, Anna Mae is already more prickles than roses.

#### VI.

If Heaven is anything like the movies and angels must earn their wings with good deeds, my grandmother will remain forever grounded. Anna Mae liked to look good and learned to dress with flair, even as the world around her came undone, but I can't see her succumbing to the fuss of halos and flowing robes. I can't imagine her bearing a lantern to light anyone's path or flying in to save a child from snakebite like the angel I once read about in *Reader's Digest*.

How can someone be something in death she could not be in life?

My grandmother did not hug us. She did not read us stories or bake cookies. She never called us *honey*, *darling*, or *sweetie-pie* and neither did we call her *Granny*, *Nana* or even *Grandma*. "The grandmother," we said, inserting the definite article to keep Anna Mae at bay. "The grandmother is on the phone drunk again from California," we'd report, as if she was playing a part that had little to do with us. "The grandmother called Father Callan again," we'd say when we learned she'd started phoning our parish priest. "The grandmother has died," we eventually whispered, feeling bad about nothing so much as how little we felt at all.

#### VII.

Another picture of Anna Mae has come into my head: It's 1926 and Anna Mae has just turned seven. The baby is

another chore, but at four months old, her newest sister is the prettiest thing she's ever seen. With her two brothers, aged three and five, and Dot just a year old, the house was crowded before little Ellen came along. All those mouths and never enough food. The Depression that's about to seize the nation has held Anna Mae's family between its teeth for years. Is there any poverty like rural New England poverty? Frozen rivers. Chipped paint. Everything brittle and pinched. The boys run ragged and hollering. *Stop that nonsense*, Anna Mae shouts. Dot's diaper needs changing and the baby's wailing again. She's maybe forty-five pounds but Anna Mae tries to hold it all together. Tiny mother. Busy bee. Where are the adults? Working perhaps. Visiting family the next town over. Passed out from a trip to the border for booze. The baby's crying grows louder. It's garbled now. Choked. Anna Mae scours the cupboard, running her hands along the shelves, as if a sack of potatoes and a single golden onion might appear in spaces that were empty seconds before. She's a clever girl and might try to make a mash of water and flour while praying for her mother to return as the baby's face goes from pink to red to blue.

*Lack of Care* is listed as the official cause of death.

*Malnutrition* is a contributing factor.

Can Anna Mae ever forgive herself for living? What does it mean to live anyway? The question itself is precious. *Living is simple*, I hear my grandmother answer. *Living means standing upright, blinking your eyes, breathing, spitting, pissing*. But there's something else to living, isn't there? Another thing, clean as wood sap, soft as baby's skin, pretty as a sky-blue dress—but harder to see. Anna Mae might know this but cannot reach it which is why she lets the whiskey burn a path to her gut where it puts the devil to sleep.

## VIII.

My grandmother, who'd stopped attending church years before, called our priest several times the year before she died. She was drunk when she called, we knew, but the priest never revealed the subject of her sloshy calls. Probably she wanted him

to understand the extent of my mother's inadequacies and our illegitimacy before he welcomed us to communion on Sundays. Maybe she shared her grand scheme of going up to the border and the St. Regis Reservation to demand a portion of her ancestral land. Another possibility, however unlikely, is that Anna Mae found the priest as gentle as we did and spoke of things long ago tucked away. It's possible she made a confession before she died—telling the young priest about the darkness of certain rooms in winter, the pile of things in need of doing, the way she'd checked and rechecked that cupboard but still believes she might have done more, how—even after all these years—drinking is the only thing that washes the sound of crying away.

## IX.

Anna Mae is seventeen when she launches her first escape. The man she marries cuts down trees for a living and they settle near the logging camps of New Hampshire's Presidential Range. She'll have a child two months after her wedding day and be pregnant again the following summer, making the freedom she sought look less likely every year.

One day she'll take off altogether and leave her husband and children behind. One day my mother will do the same. But first, Anna Mae sews clothes for her children, bakes pies and takes my mother to Sunday Mass. Mother and daughter cross themselves with holy water and say their prayers but there's little room in their lives for soft and beautiful things. Strange to come from a line of women who make an art of flight but do not let themselves believe in wings.

## X.

Though we rarely saw her, Anna Mae left her mark.

Her particular absence and the much larger absence of grandmotherly affection shaped our lives as much as anything else. How small my mother seemed when filtered through her mother's eyes, how lasting Anna Mae's nettling words, how persistent the inheritance of distance, abandonment and flight.

Anna Mae is the cloth we were cut from, fashioned and stitched. The arrival of a cantankerous spirit wasn't what I hoped for back when I'd visited Lily Dale. I was filled with shame and despair that she was mine and I was hers even in death. Only now do I consider how much more disappointing it would have been if the psychic had sifted the air with the net of her conjuring head and came up empty. Which is worse, a terrible angel or no angel at all?

XI.

I have still not figured out the difference between angels and devils and ordinary human beings. I'm still uncertain about how love and disappointment align with circumstance and need. What's left to do but close my eyes and fly west until I find Anna Mae asleep in her chair holding her shotgun like a love? Where else to go but Needles, California, where the clatter of cactus wrens has died down and nightjars sail open-mouthed over the cooling desert floor? And since I'm here, why not pick up the empty bottles and overturned shot glasses surrounding my grandmother before gently teasing the loaded gun from her hands?

I pull a blanket the color of sunset up to her chin and trace the ridge of her shoulder blade to feel for the place where wings might begin. Out the window, a swath of stars shimmers so bright even the scorpions glow under the field of light. Maybe my job is learning to make feather of needle and bone. Maybe Anna Mae's job is to teach me this trick. The secrets I once knew return to me as I graze my grandmother's flesh with an open hand. How I'd like to shake Anna Mae awake to share the thoughts flooding my head.

"What if angels are like the mist coming off Lake Champlain in late August?" I'd say, "Like Jonah lost for days inside the belly of the whale?" And while I understand this visit is fueled by some combination of longing and imagination, I find myself standing closer to my grandmother than ever before.

"What if angels are like the cactus opening its white petals at night," I say. "Not untrue so much as hidden beneath the hard seams of the given world?"

SEAN A. CHO

### *Act Three Sonnet #41*

The sun bear has enough star fruit to open a planetarium. so he does. the fruit on the ceiling is meant to look like stars of course. *the planets?* well that's us. silly. sun bears do not yet have knowledge of other planets. thus are under the impression that they are indeed the center. that the sun explodes for them. this makes whatever the sun bears do feel important. like pioneers of this whole living deal. it's great for a while. a sun bear in iowa city is learning how to preserve star fruits in vinegar. as if this will go on forever. it's binary. either the sun bears are alone or they are not. the answer matters. many sun bears could be employed in a new division of the space program. they would spend their days on the logistics of sending a message into space while other sun bears tried to come up with a message. the sun bears would become frustrated with the constraints of language. but a sun bear waving doesn't have to mean hello.

## *Vision Board Sequence #2*

we forgot our towels. no i mean we didn't know we were going to go to the beach after the museum. at the towel store we also bought some candy. it was not a towel store but a store that sold towels and other things: hence the candy. we weren't hungry then, but we knew of *eventually*. which is also not now, but when you come back in a while it will be the correct eventually.

\*

i made a mistake. when i said "will be" i meant will as in will the guy who use to live two houses down the street from me. which also does not make sense. like going to the beach after the museum since going to the museum already makes for a long day. it would be almost dark by the time we got towels and drove to the beach. shoot. there i go again with the will/if/would. oh look! i think that's the sun.

## *Vision Board Sequence #3*

i look at you. and from your prospective i also look at you. it's rather intense: eyes looking at eyes. as we wait for our necks to grow. it feels good to have hands and for trees to have branches. i am thankful for this. i don't mean to get sappy. the trees also have sap which is now all over our hands from climbing up this tree. i hope the tree, or at least this tree does not know that he has the right to feel annoyed. we are now closer to the sun. the leaves do not feel hot: the sun of course is still very far away.

\*

i climb down the tree first and from the tree you say you look like an ant i hope we do not get much further apart because then we will have to call each other. which is fine for now since when you describe your location on the beach we can use the same piece of driftwood as a landmark. but if this takes too long one of us will drive home and we will both get old. the volume could not be heard over the waves.

PARKER LOGAN

## An Apology For The Hole I Put In Your Wall Last Night

I'm sorry for the Parker-Logan sized hole  
I put in the wall at your party last night.  
We were looking for molly, but I wanted  
to make sure we were okay to drive home,  
so I said we better not and Maria said *okay,*  
*let's get out of here,* so we went back inside  
to bid everyone adieu, when I saw James Hurley,  
the low-key love of my life, who writes poems  
that make me need more jean shorts in my drawers,  
and I was five feet away from him, and we  
locked eyes, and I was just about to say hello,  
I love you, to that beautiful boy  
who makes me feel like a fire hovering at the tip  
of a lighter, but then the door swung open like it does  
at country bars on TV when the bad guys  
show up to cause trouble in the western saloon,  
and who should walk in but the girl  
I've stopped looking for over my shoulders  
when I'm dancing and flirting  
and having such a violent time I think I'll puke--  
my ex-girlfriend, who knows nobody here,  
and has died her hair black with a tinge  
of sorority-girl stark-white blonde,  
as though she were wearing a poorly made disguise  
to sneak up on me and make me remember the night.  
My eyes popped from my skull, my jaw dropped  
to the floor, and my feet started turning  
like the engine of a boat in one place, revving  
up to make tracks like a shuttle to Mars.  
I completely forgot about using the door.  
I went straight through the wall and out into the night

with the power of helium being let out of a balloon  
and I flew right back to that garage  
with the cats and dirty dishes that stank  
so bad the only thing I could do was pack my bags,  
get on a bus, and leave like I was doing now,  
forever the distance runner who made sprinting  
look as easy as returning to a place  
I don't want to remember, doing it because I have to.

ABBY HAGLER

## To fill the spaces where my body's been

From *There Was Nothing Left But Gold*

In Max Picard's *The World of Silence*, the chapter titled "Man Between Silence and Speech," begins: "In the moment before man speaks, language still hovers over the silence it has just left." I have nearly finished *O Pioneers!*, and have driven myself to its setting — just after Marie catches sight of Emil. For the first time in months, I am also closer to my mother, who recently called to say, *I have no daughter*. To that, embarrassingly, I replied, *Okay*. Further embarrassing: I have snuck through the quiet barbed wire guarding Cather's prairie near the Kansas-Nebraska border. Feeling detached tongues of six weeks fescue clinging to my leggings, a childhood memory pulls my arm: the grip of fescue is strong because it is so thin. These seeds weave themselves easily into fabric and do not let go, not even in the wash.

To enter prairie is to throw yourself into story *en medias res*. The dying and rising of stems produce action all around. I stand here speechless after years of avoiding return. Since my mother hung up, I haven't been able to write. Like always, I have chosen to read — a form of running in place. This time, it is *O Pioneers!* and I have scribbled down every instance of gold on a bookmark. This is seeing color through Cather's eyes. She gives me a new awareness of how little some things in Nebraska have changed. Collecting instances, I read myself into and out of the story, taking what is useful, leaving people and buildings behind. It's not clear if this is a helpful way of reading for escape but so far, I've come across:

Marie's eyes  
Longfellow's "Golden Legend"

Weathervanes cropping up on the horizon  
Yellow shoes and gold fields and light  
A Swedish woman's hair  
The gold crescent she wore  
A gold pin  
Frank's aged yellow teeth  
His yellow cane (a relic of a former self)  
The shine of sun on an inlet of water  
The narrator's ideal man, who glows like sunlight and  
smells of  
ripe corn  
Wheat fields where the French live  
Marie's silk turban and earrings, dressed as a fortune  
teller  
The broom straw  
"...there was nothing left but gold"

Where I left off, Marie, who is a minor character, was searching the horizon for anyone. She was lonely the way people are inside a relationship without reciprocal love. A landscape like this greeted her. The road poured itself empty into the field bushwhacked by wooden houses topped with little smokestacks. A dove does not intervene on her behalf. She found only the landscape that tricked the conquistadors. She saw gold, the space of blooming aftermath. The twin kernels of a beginning and an end. For now, her husband Frank is perpetually coming with his rifle, unbeknownst to her or her lover Emil.

The narrator cryptically states Emil and Marie "had spent the last penny of their small change; there was nothing left but gold." I take this to mean Cather believed this ending doesn't matter. It is only a moment before an unknown. To walk in prairie is to wander a field of unfinished thoughts. My own concern with severance and ensuing silence does and does not explain why I have chosen to experience Marie's last sunset except to say that I have come this far to drown in her vision. When she looked at her loneliness, she

saw broom-colored stalks, faded like lashes of sun. Here, there is no sound but fescue and blue grama, dropseed and Canada wild rye.

\*

I hate the metaphor of loose change adding up to a new life. I used to put it in poems no one ever saw. I have long been secretive about what I write and what I believe in order to protect my weirdness from the other woman — the adult my parents wanted me to be. For as long as I've written poems, I have also been a penny collector. Yes, this is an admission to superstition. Collecting can be chalked up to other causes. A bad habit of looking down. Growing up rural so cities seem so differently abundant. For years, having to choose between eating lunch and getting on the bus to and from work. Or, because I am generally nosy. Everywhere, people are exiting doorways and awaiting things — but what? A coin to replace that knowledge.

My superstition follows these beliefs:

- 1) heads-up coins are the only ones to pocket because they mean someone has accidentally shed a little good luck;
- 2) heads-down are bad luck that has escaped and these should be left that way until happenstance turns their faces back toward the sun;
- 3) coins found in cracks should be left where they are to be kicked or blown or scuffed into good or bad luck for the next person.

I put the money in my pocket and mourn for five seconds over whatever caused this coin to spring from its carrier. Then, make a wish. If I don't have a pocket, I put it in my shoe, readying myself for the discomfort of walking by telling myself, *Never forget to think about what you'd like to see happen in the future.*

Weeks can pass before a good luck coin is found. Nickels,

dimes, quarters, and bills all count. After finding a twenty blowing by a gym, a man I wanted to hear from came to visit me in the apartment I rented, which was built over a rat's nest. He arrived so I could realize it was time to end things. That's how fortune works. After neatly picking up six quarters stacked on the bridge, my mother gifted me the silence I needed by waiting six months before she called to tell me she has no daughter, releasing me of the word. The last thing she said to me was a text: *Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it.*

“The tongue we speak today is no longer a mother-tongue but rather an orphaned tongue,” Picard says of the evolution of speech. “It sometimes seems as though man were ashamed of the language he has separated from its parent. He talks more to himself and into himself...” He goes on to say that writing in poetic language connects a speaker with what is forgotten. It is a momentary bridge between silence and conversation. Writing “is like a ghost,” he concludes, “full of sadness that it is only a ghost and must disappear again.”

I did not respond to my mother's text. In our silence, I have kept a running list of all the places I've abandoned or avoided heads-down change. This is an effort to put off denouement. But all writing forces an end like fortune telling does. In the years or months when I am not my mother's daughter, it seems that writing takes up a little more space in my life and my mother a little less. In my head, we argue over her right to my blank page, her claim to my attention or the shards of everyday joy that sliver themselves between my ribs. Why do emotions feel like underground lakes, mysteriously connected and mysteriously siphoned? And what is gold if not a coin placed over the eye of a beloved now dead?

\*

Biographer Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant called 1912 Cather's "golden year" in *Willa Cather: A Memoir*. It was the year her fiction "bore fruit" – which sounds like she made money even though she didn't. Perhaps "grew legs" is a better way to say it. In 1912, Cather was 39. She quit her job to dedicate more time to novels and short stories.

So much of what she wrote contained the germ of Nebraska. Grass was not present in the European drawing rooms and oil painting studios of her early short fiction. These tidy vessels of marital strife or personal evolution – popular with male novelists at the time – were mismatched to what Cather knew. The lack of grass can be felt in the stiffness of her characters. I can see the filth on the people in *O Pioneers!*. Sticky corn silk and pollen-coated neck sweat, mud on forearms, the brow shaking off heat stroke, the blisters of digging trenches, fingernails forever rimmed with black grease. Her writing does not mention it because it is impolite to be dirty. As a reader, I know it's there even if my hands are now clean. Even though I rarely mention the muddy part of myself to anyone. To farm, to be covered in earth, is to be stripped of femininity. It is how my mother raised me.

The short story "The Bohemian Girl" is what initially overtook Cather. It ended up containing three novels written from the remembered salt scent of heat on sand roses. Of people carving homes into hills. Of grass still clinging to wet dirt by the root. In *O Pioneers!*, I can see the flat earth waving beneath her legs, finally running. She wrote Marie ecstatically, with eyes containing "golden glints that made them look like goldstone, or, in softer lights, like that Colorado mineral called tiger-eye." Like the marbles I flick to my cat, looking like tiny planets, large expanses of land.

\*

Coronado never needed an end point. He called it gold. He

called it Quivira – a word with no cousins in Spanish. His soldiers added it to their vocabularies. Nebraska added it to its vocabulary, claiming for a century now to be the land they sought. In truth, Coronado never reached Nebraska. Quivira is generally believed to have been in central Kansas. This claim is staked by Kansas in the proliferation of places named Lake Quivira, or Quivira Country Club, or Quivira Wildlife Refuge.

Unconcerned with land claims, these men found a word to capture what it means to just start walking. *Gold*. Walking sounds very organized when it involves a company of soldiers. Then it is a search. But gold is the energy to take off and never stop. The word that decides to exit life in Spain. It turns its back on a coin tossed in the air. Or a marriage. A childhood. A hand dropping a thread in favor of the fires of strangers. Gold is the word for searches guided by stories told under threat. What we would think of as false confessions today. Of hostages gently leading captors farther and farther away from who and what they love.

By Coronado's own account, in a letter King Charles translated in Winship's *Coronado's Expedition 1540-1542*, this journey found enormous surprise in seeing the Plains for the first time. He recalled that the party "reached some plains, so vast that I did not find their limit anywhere that I went, although I traveled over them for more than 300 leagues ... I reached some plains, with no more landmarks than as if we had been swallowed up in the sea, where they [the guides] strayed about, because there was not a stone, nor a bit of rising ground, nor a tree, nor a shrub, nor anything to go by." Neither he nor the soldiers could believe how flat the land was. They could see miles into the distance between one another's legs. A fear arises in the face of flat earth, of the eerie sameness of grass. North, South, East, and West are no different from one another. Caught up in a place so full it seems empty if all you seek is a goldrush.

\*

In the field of my unfinished thoughts, I realize it is not a human failing to be stricken by prairie. Grass resists description. Like some kind of curse, anyone who tries to capture its image with words will simply go on forever about the same patch.

In an 1870 essay “Phil and the Lost Boy” – an account of a child gone missing in the Illinois tallgrass – John C. Van Tramp introduces his search with a disclaimer: “Before you can understand the story... you must have some good idea of the prairie.” This is important. A reader must first know the landscape because to say that a child disappeared on the family property does not make sense – or, makes perfect sense given the fact that the property was Native land in the first place, underscoring the reality that all white settlers were lost. Van Tramp points to the trouble of knowing the settler boy’s predicament: “But how to give you this, I know not. There is no describing [prairie]. They are like the ocean, in more than one particular; but none more than in this: the utter impossibility of producing any just impression of them by description.” The body of his essay is then consumed by details about grass. The narrative of how to retrieve the missing child steers like a backseat driver, weaker than the language of stalks and blades.

Grass resists assimilation. It grows against language because we cannot own it. It is like the ocean in that no one can hold its contents. Fences are not real stakes. To claim the monotony of grassland is to attempt to harness a mouth willing to swallow a person alive. Picard says, “Language would seem ... like territory conquered from silence” if everyone spoke the same way, told the same stories, lived the same life. Because I am a rebellious daughter, I see how prairie resists a single narrative. It begets multiple beginnings and ends, leaflets above, roots below, children of settlers disappearing.

\*

Before my mother’s last message, trinkets used to arrive in the mail with no note. This is what conversation with my mother has looked like:

A corked phial of fool’s gold dust from a trip to South Dakota  
Great-grandmother’s watch with the silver worn off  
A palm-sized Webster’s dictionary with gold-edged pages  
The stories I wrote in third grade, yellowed  
The last yellow-capped doll from a lost set of nesting dolls

My mother once sent me an envelope containing a curl of my blonde baby hair and told me I am in charge of my own relics. She added that she hoped I would have a house by now and asked that I don’t throw things away. The lack of a house is why women in my family only send photocopies of pictures and documents of family history to me. Writing and being educated do not count as stability. One must display a physical immovability in order to keep time.

I have forgotten the incident or meaning behind much of what she sends. The scrapbook feels like an alternate biography. It does not heed chronology very strictly after age five. It ends with pictures of my older brother graduating high school. I am not in any of those photos. The childhood in this story belongs to her. Pigtails and pink dresses. Bronzed baby shoes and pictures of me playing baby Jesus in a manger. Dressed as an angel with a silver tinsel halo, practicing piano, singing at church. Nothing indicates I stopped going to church at age 13. There are no pictures of me wearing pants and work boots, dying my hair or wearing band t-shirts. She has not held on to any reminders of how many times she slapped me while I was getting dressed, coming nose-to-nose to say, *You look motherless*. No count of how many times I replied with, *Good*.

She only left a conversational record of her want for a loving mother. No scrapbook catalogues her true past. When I was young, I didn't connect the dots between the longing she felt and the violence of my present. It seemed there was no well beneath this anger, no reason as to why my desires – my future – meant so much to her. I could only feel her oversight, the thick suffocation of summer weeds.

"... Not-wanting and silence can be read as deliberate forms of non-violence," Cynthia Cruz says in her book *Disquieting: Essays of Silence*. "Those who do not participate in wanting... may be read by society as worthless because they do not participate in the same shared, normative beliefs." In defense against me, my mother would sing a part of a children's Sunday school song, *Oh be careful little mouth what you say*, as if my speech would end me.

Wherever I go, I carry this picture of her. 1961 is written on the back and she is a toddler. My own face shape stares back at me. She has the same slivered almond Bohemian eyes as her father and his brother, who she named me for. The person who took the photo had a color camera. Wild golden sunflower or maybe rosinweed casts shadows against the cheap white siding behind her. Far from any water, she holds a fish. Her patchwork Peter Pan collar dress is a hand-me-down stretched, slumping at the shoulders because it is meant for an older girl.

I can "read my non-existence in her dress," as Roland Barthes did when recounting a picture of his mother in *Camera Lucida* – the book where he mourns her death. He is attempting to find her love for him even in photos before he was born. Her difference scares him but I love my mother before I was born. So I hold onto the photo.

In a box, I keep a loose journal entry written on scrap paper after a Thanksgiving. Earlier in the day, she swapped stories with my grandmother (her mother-in-law) about what their

own mothers said before they died. Great-grandmother, who grew up in Kansas, said, *The boys, the boys, where are the boys?* before falling asleep. My other grandmother repeated, *Oh no. The kittens*. A question that garnered no response rained in mid-air: What memory was playing in their minds?

Outside of this conversation, I am invited to my grandmother's deathbed often. She likes to talk about her will, jewelry I might want, debts she can pay so she can watch me thrive. Inside this conversation, I go to my mother's deathbed alone. I am not her daughter beyond that – the place where I tell the story of my mother's last words.

Here is what Derrida says makes a ghost: vacillation. Not in time. Not between spaces. Between "certainty and possibility," as Meera Atkinson remarks in *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma*. Perhaps any collection is the material to fill that space.

In all the missing scrapbook photos, I remember how sunlight filled the place my body was supposed to occupy in front of the TV while I was outside after rainstorms seeking petrichor. After hail, the air is stark like a saturated photo and smells of mineral. Thunderstorms leave a soft down, a little heavy, like flour. Its scent thickens the air by means of a wind that has grown tired. I can never forget. Another type occurs in deep summer. It carries the happenings of nearby counties with it: extinguished grass fire and someone else's lawn clippings, hay on a cow's breath, animal hide. Always warm aluminum. Springtime petrichor settles like a shaken duvet. It comes trapped in droplets that gleam. I used to be sure that this is what must have fooled early explorers into thinking they had found the city of Quivira. I also believed this is what streaked the feathers of the golden hawk, like the stuffed one the school librarian placed atop the bookshelves, watching.

*So as to not forget*, the trinkets say. I put the boxes in my basement and maintain silence on the other end of the line. To hold these items is a search for story that will not come back – a field of pages torn from the binding. A story someone, at some point, refused to finish.

Picard says, “When a word sinks into oblivion, it is forgotten, and this forgetting prepares the way for forgiveness.” Silence and forgetting both also prepare the way for death, he continues. This must be why it is not uncommon to picture a parent’s deathbed when considering whether or not it is right to cut off communication. Perhaps time is nothing but a measurement of the race between an aging body and how long it takes for the mind to let go of pain.

“When assimilation does not occur, what is not assimilated remains, becomes remnant,” Cruz says. To hold onto what remains of my mother’s version of me is forgiveness. I can keep safe the parts I have refused or left behind. I can love my mother precisely when she is not my mother. Perhaps that will be all that remains.

\*

To walk in grass is strange because the origin of each blade could be far from where it springs up. It is heedless of borders. To see it in any space – a ditch, a yard, a valley – has always felt like a reminder, something that follows. Grass is a gold tinge creeping into my peripheral vision. Closer to my mother, our silence extends. I stand watching the past go to seed, still stubbornly trying to imagine what I should say when we speak again.

I think of my body in places it will no longer revisit if I choose never. The field of sunflowers taking over behind our brick house. The basement bedroom smelling of rock and water. In tallgrass, I wander away from my own history to start a new sentence.

When the narrator said they had “nothing left but gold”, I read grass. On her porch, having prepared no meal, Marie seized the horizon in her mind. Gold lives in this story like crumbs. A sunset stretching its legs down to its shaky little toes. A scarf and a walk instead of dinner. The yellow scent of sunflowers clinging to dryland.

By gold, the narrator means Marie and Emil had spent down their opportunity for love in a recognizable way – a way others have already done. There was a path and it is grown over. And now, something elemental and unformed – gold like silence, gold like death.

INDRANI SENGUPTA

## the Woman

vespers again. larkspur again. the day forebodes in its last  
clean vest. there I awake at ziggurats to my body, my ash-pit mouth  
and so sorry. what hour is this. what haven't I yet pissed away in my  
half-mast twiddling. me the door the dog weeps on either side of.  
but needles abide. calendula abide. so I abide in my sunk-cost, hair-wept,  
do small evils in the cul-de-sac doing. cauldron, pessary, terrazzo-broom.  
disrobe an onion and we weep together. make stew and do not salt it. do not  
glory-to the furs. throw open the doors I cannot make a house without,  
so sorry. thereby ghosts attend, priests attend the grand trespass of my foyer.  
they want to know if I've been baptized but my walls are candy and my heater's  
broke and I cannot recall my mother's good counsel on sweetbreads vs. sweetmeats,  
cannot call, cannot send questions via bird. what do you want from me, day.  
do you want a bowl of stew from me, the hard fist of my spine. for winter to arrive  
like a good tickle or accompanied by tinny drums. but here but now I  
am Woman of This House and I am so sorry. there is no story, just the day.

ADAM J. GELLINGS

## Painted Post

*Home is not here, but there, not now, but then.*  
—Mark Irwin

The downpour came.  
How could it be  
I wasn't swept away, arms raised?

The drive-in's on its underside.  
A battlefield of  
branches & brick-ties.

You never taught me  
how to plan for new beginnings  
& I've never learned

when to ignore small mercies  
shifting clockwise & when  
to pack lightly.

A man next to a downed tree says  
*that's my blood*  
*under there* & I think how easily

I would still take you  
in fragments. Above all else  
sitting chin to knee

replacing every shingle.

**2021 CONTEST WINNERS**

Judges:

Julia Kolchinsky Dasbach, Poetry

EJ Koh, Prose

MATTHEW GELLMAN

## Brother, In August, With Hesitation

Wanting to be untethered from the burden  
of pollen, the garden drowsy with asters,

we went upstairs, taking turns wetting  
and smoothing our hair in the bathroom mirror.

In your room, on the desk, your studies,  
the French book open, its various

conjugations: *je dormirai*: I will sleep;  
*je ne sais pas*: I do not know. We lined up,

the other boys comparing, deciding  
which of us had the best nose or skin,

inspecting our teeth with a magnifying glass  
we'd trawled from some bin in the basement,

and it was our contest, getting a point  
for the deepest voice, a point for being

the tallest. I could not have told you  
about those nights years later, in the starling

weather, when myself and another boy  
would slink the fractured emerald veil

of the pond, wiping the sweat  
from my forehead, stilling my voice,

the light in your room extinguished

as we kissed beside an urgency of geese,

wings flaring up, re-enfolding to black.  
You and I never could tell each other

that we were swimming the same race  
together, but separately, coveting

the rough palm, the panting, the real thing,  
the blessing of being chosen by a boy.

And you couldn't have told who he was,  
at school, quiet in the varicose hallways,

his eyes at lunchtime fixed on the trees  
because it was easier to look at the trees.

2nd Place, Prose

PS ZHANG

## Anosognosia

You are old when you remember, it was only trees there. Not overgrown brush, not pasture, only trees. There was a place like that the fall my mother was first hospitalized. It was down a road called Whispering Pines. Dad and I followed the milk carton-shaped ambulance, as it zoomed down the quiet road and through the forest. Red and white lights sparkled against the southern magnolias, turning everything metallic.

I had never been to the hospital. I had never been down Whispering Pines. It was so empty. The sirens blasted through our windshield and pummeled my ears. I felt the vibrations but why hadn't I heard anything? All I noticed were the trees.

Before the men in black pants and blue shirts came for my mother, Baba had gotten down on one knee and lifted me up by my armpits. I knew it was serious when I was sitting on my bed, but he was still bending his knee. My father was always Baba then.

"I have to talk to Mama about something very important," he said, adjusting the collar on my sweater. "It might get loud. I want to keep you safe."

I said nothing. My Barbie doll's pants were bunched up on one leg. I smoothed it down.

"Mama is having a bad time. She's not feeling well. She might get very unhappy and say things she doesn't mean."

I said nothing. Barbie's pants were straight now but her pink pump had fallen off. I hadn't been careful, too jerky, the shoe fell on the floor and bounced under my bed. Lost.

"Don't worry. Baba will take care of Mama, help her. Just lock the door and don't open it unless I tell you to, okay? Everything will be fine. I promise."

I was eight years old yet already aware of the gloom that draped our house. Strange things had been happening and, like

a wave before it crumbled over its crest, something was going to take us down.

A lot of people, if they heard that conversation between Baba and me, would attack my father. “Why would you ask your daughter to do that?” “Why would you talk to your wife about such a sensitive topic while your child was home?” “*Why didn’t you handle this perfectly so that I, a stranger or acquaintance, can feel better about your family?*” It’s easy to judge someone else’s problem, someone else’s family. What happens behind closed doors and insulated walls matters only to those inside, until, of course, the insides spill out. And even for me, as a child without insight into how any of this worked, I was angry with my father.

But you grow up and learn. You wouldn’t have done any much different. You’re not so special or unique. When someone you love is sick and the matter is their brain, no one really knows what to do or how to handle it. Predictably, people mess up. They ignore or pretend symptoms away. Decisions are not forgiven and family relations change. Friends become scarce. They say, *hope everyone is well* and really mean it, because they can’t even look you in the eye when the words leave their lips. By then it doesn’t matter, you’ve accepted the illness, the confrontations, the life-long ups-and-downs. Eventually, you become a person who stays at home a lot.

Whenever I thought of my family’s transformation, I saw us as naïve tourists before a tsunami. Sunbathing and oblivious, our only concern was adequate SPF. Then suddenly the water receded, and hundreds of fish and crustaceans flopped and scattered on the shoreline. We came closer to the water not believing our eyes. Ocean birds gathered above, nose-diving one by one and began the plunder of life. If we had wings, we wouldn’t need higher ground.

Dad tried his best. He wanted to protect Mom. If it stayed small, no one would need to know she got better because no one would know she was ever unwell. In his mind, Mom would be understanding, rational, empathetic; she was still Mei from the bakery, the girl who’d bicycle home hands-free, the girl who’d save newspaper clippings about South America for him—one day they would board that boat from Ushuaia to the Antarctic Penin-

sula. They would buckle themselves into bed as the ship plowed through the Drake Passage. *That* Mei would accept medical care willingly.

I remember my father putting the cordless phone in my palm, “You might need to help Baba. Can you do that?” I nodded at him and felt the suctioning of the tide, the sand slipping between my toes, and the whirling sound of an approaching wave. Baba showed me how to call 911.

\*

Mom had a love marriage with my father, another baker at the Cantonese industrial kitchen in Atlanta. They had both emigrated from the Guangdong province of China as teenagers and they swapped homesick stories while rolling pork buns and scallion twists. Six months later they were married. A year after that, I came into their lives. Our family was well formed when Mom was finally diagnosed with schizophrenia. I was almost nine. She was thirty-four.

There was a toy unicorn in my old room. He liked the moon, so I put him atop my window’s latch. But sometimes if a car drove by, our apartment would shake, and he’d fall off. I’d have to right him back. When I heard the panic of shuffling feet, the sound of metal falling, and my father screaming out like a wounded animal, I thought it was the unicorn speaking to me. “Help me. Joy. Please help me. Joy, Baba is trying to take you away from me.” But toys only come alive when people are gone, the voices were in another room.

“Put the knife down, Mei. It’s me, your husband. I’m trying to help you. We need to figure out what’s wrong with you. Please, don’t you remember me?”

“*What’s wrong with me?* What’s wrong is I don’t have a husband. Whose husband would try to commit their perfectly sane wife to the looney bin?”

The knife clanged against a wall as feet dashed through the kitchen.

Baba called out, “We need to make sure everything is okay. I love you. You’ve been acting out of sorts lately: not yourself,

talking to someone, seeing things, *thinking stairs are out to get you*. Let's just clear it up with the doctor. I know everything will be fine. I know it. Please believe me."

Their voices came closer. We didn't have a big home. Someone was coming for me.

"Love me? You want to hurt me. You're the crazy one. You don't even believe me when I talk about *the baby*. You don't even see the baby."

My father shouted down the hallway, "Lock the door, Joy. Lock the door like Baba said."

"You're the one who needs help. How can you not see what I see? What is so real. I have to protect myself from you, from everyone. Everyone is trying to get me. Get me down those stairs."

It was my mother who came for me. She pounded on my door. I covered my ears and crunched into a ball like a discarded sheet of paper. *Please, no. Forget me, I'm gone.*

"Joy, honey, open up. We need to leave. We need to get away from this man. He's going to have me committed. I can't be locked up." And then she started sobbing, unravelling. The seams had worn down and came undone. "Honey, the stairs. The stairs and the baby. The baby and the stairs. They'll tear me apart and kill me. He's going to throw me down the stairs. I can't be eaten alive. What about my baby? Please, Joy. C'mon, don't you love Mama?"

"Baba said not to open the door. He said you weren't feeling well," the words choked in my mouth, a storm drain of tears and mucus.

"Joy, let me in." She jerked at the knob. The screws shook from the force of her arm. "Baby, let Mama in. We have to get out," she banged on the door, fists and arms hitting the hollow plywood then the solid pine siding, "C'mon, let me in. I have to get you and the baby out." Her knees and feet slammed against the door; a dent began to form. Fingernails scratched at the frame. Soon a hole would give way. She would be in and what came for her would come for me.

My father was speaking to someone, shouting over the din of my mother's hallucinations. I rushed to the corner of the room,

furthest from the door, barricaded myself in stuffed animals and pillows. Grabbing the cordless phone with my small pink palms, I squeezed my eyes shut and listened in, praying that angels would wake me from this nightmare.

"Hello, hello are you there?" Dishes clanged and the faucet ran. "My wife is having a nervous breakdown. I don't know what's going on." Something strangled my father's voice and made it fragmented and pitchy. "She cut me badly on the arms. She's trying to get to our daughter. Please, please we need help."

No one ever told me when a spirit cracks, there's a sound.

\*

People want to believe that families who suffer from mental illness must be the most sympathetic to it. I don't know anyone like that. Maybe it's lack of awareness, a generational societal issue. It could be a Cantonese thing or the product of being poor. No one I know walks marches or carries banners. No one campaigns for government support and funding. People want to be left alone—not reminded of the blight in their blood. Don't make them talk about it.

It was Mom's fiftieth birthday when Dad finally revealed how he had known she needed help. The car wound down Whispering Pines and I thought of all the other pilgrimages we had made to her home at the psychiatric hospital. How the street had changed from a loblolly forest and giant lush magnolias to plot-by-plot flattened clay. Eventually, a two-story white clapboard house would emerge and then another and another. Each one looked only slightly different than the one before. I missed the trees and the quiet. How perfect things looked in the dark without a porchlight shining on it.

My father cleared his throat, "Joy, I have something to confess. Actually, I knew your mother was unwell before her hospitalization."

It started out innocent, so easily explained away as misremembering or forgetfulness. When it got more questionable, Dad didn't want to believe it. For as long as he didn't believe, he couldn't see, and he wouldn't need to do anything about it. When

he felt conflicted, he'd asked her how she felt, and she'd said everything was fine. But of course, she would. One of the main symptoms of schizophrenia is *anosognosia*, lack of insight.

How was she to know that she was losing control of her own mind?

In bed at night Mom had started to talk about stairs and falling down, being eaten alive or crushed by the steps. "Absolute nonsense," my father said as we passed the Whispering Pines Cineplex. They put that in four years after Mom moved to the hospital. "It was a recurring nightmare."

Bleary-eyed and grouchy, Dad would nudge her awake then roll over burying himself under the covers to muffle the sound. But with each occurrence it took him longer and longer to settle her. Then one night when she was talking, he turned on the side lamp and thought she was awake. Her eyes were open. He looked into those windows, "Mei-Mei, darling, what's wrong?" She didn't stir, just kept chanting about the stairs, eyes glued to the popcorn ceiling. He shook her, but nothing changed. Then he jerked her arm and she awoke, not remembering anything she had said and thinking she had been asleep.

Dad called them her *eyes wide open* dreams. She slept, but her eyes did not. The opened eyes didn't alarm my father. Back in China, my mother had an uncle who slept with one eye open. The family made fun of him and called him Sloppy Jing because, coincidentally, he also had a hard time completing any task. He was always ranting and raving, easily distracted and offended. Everyone thought it was funny how he couldn't even be bothered to close both eyes before falling asleep. They said maybe if the other eye finally slept, he'd stopped seeing things. When Dad discovered Mom was experiencing something similar, he was unsettled by the initial sight then remembered Sloppy Jing and laughed. It ran in the family.

The content of Mom's dreams, my father chalked up to stress. Mom had wanted to give me a sibling, but they hadn't been able to conceive. When they started trying again, the dreams came. If Mom awoke on her own, she'd remember what she saw and tell my father the same story. Her eyes red, dry and sandy, "There was a small child, a baby I think, at the bottom of the

stairs. It was crying it needed me. But I was so scared, I knew I would slip and fall. I knew I'd destroy—," she'd show Dad exactly what she meant: her fist crashed onto her open palm and then the fingers exploded mimicking a bomb, "that poor child."

Dad took the ibuprofen out of the car's center console and handed me the bottle. He flashed me two fingers. I unscrewed the cap and dropped the pills into his hand. Without hesitation, my father ignored the thermos beside him and dry swallowed the white capsules. "At first, I thought it was fertility anxiety getting to your mother. She fixated on her age, saying she was getting older and time would only make conceiving harder. She had the vitamins and traditional medicines from the herbalist, but it wasn't enough."

My father had assuaged her fears with common adages: "a child will be given by God if it is meant to be" and "a watched kettle never boils." He told her it wasn't the right time for a second child. It would be better to wait and try again later. But the dreams never stopped, only changed—they began to include me.

"I thought she was saying, 'oh joy-joy, you're down the stairs.' But it wasn't that." Dad adjusted the rearview mirror and glanced over at me, "It was '*Joy, Joy, you're falling down the stairs,*' and later it became '*Joy, I have to push you, push you down these stairs. I'm sorry, I have to,*' and '*I have to feed the baby something, Joy. You have to understand. It's so hungry.*' She'd end all the dreams with you, saying '*I'm sorry, baby. Mama loves you. This is for the best.*' And I never knew *which* baby she was sorry for. Was it you or this other thing? She's sorry the baby has to eat you? She's scared you have to be eaten by the baby? Your mother never knew either but then why would she? *Anosognosia*, the doctor used it to explain everything."

My father's hands thrashed above the dashboard, busy chasing injured memories, trying to wrestle the sense out of them. We started to veer off our lane and I gently tapped the unattended steering wheel. Dad put his hands back down and drove us past the *new* fire station and the *new* elementary school, all the new things that came included with the houses and the subdivisions. New things had replaced the trees. The town was changing all around us and nowhere was it clearer than on Whispering

Pines. I looked over out my window. I never left this town; I had been down this road countless times. And every time the change crept farther, I did the same thing. Slouched against the window and locked the door.

My father kept talking.

“And it was the way she started to treat you after the dreams. Like someone else was in the room. She’d give you baths in our tub and look behind her, smiling. As if someone else was there deciding whether your hair was clean enough or had your feet been scrubbed yet.”

“There was the time she made you *siu mai* and *har gow*, your favorite *dim sums*. And she kept trying to get you to eat more and more. I don’t know, but it seemed she had a plan for you. After you begged to leave the table, your stomach filled with dumplings, I asked her why she was so insistent that you eat so many and she said, ‘for the baby.’ I thought she had misheard me, that she thought I was talking about her. ‘No, we’re not having a baby right now,’ I said. ‘What do you mean?’ she said. ‘He’s right there,’ and she pointed to the empty fourth seat. She cooed at the seat and wiggled her fingers. I grabbed her arm, ‘Mei, what is going on with you?’ Then she straightened up as if awoken from another dream, ‘What do you mean?’ she said. ‘Why are you yelling at me?’ She couldn’t recall what had happened, the baby, or even the *dim sum*. I thought I was the one going mad.”

Then Dad’s voice became flat and dull. We stopped at a new traffic light. He waited for the light to turn green then looked left and right barely registering the signs for a new grocery store and shopping complex.

“Finally, I stopped resisting. I had to accept what God put before me. Because I came home one night, and she was sitting in her rocker topless. Empty-handed and pretending to breast-feed.” My father dropped his head in shame. The words came reluctantly. He had never planned on repeating them, “‘Can you smell him?’ she said. ‘I love the smell of a baby’s head. And he’s so hungry too. I hope I have enough milk. He’s so strong and he’s growing so big. So big for his Mama.’” Dad coughed tears away. “There was no more denying. I thought if I could just wait for a quiet moment, when she was still all there, she would want

to get the help she needed. *Just a routine checkup*, I promised her. But you see how that went,” he rolled his sleeves up and the sunlight came through the windshield revealing the familiar kitchen knife scars I had known as a child.

We parked the car in the hospital’s underground lot. Dad released a decade’s long sigh and the air soured between us. I rolled down the window and let the remnants of his words out. I don’t know if it went the way he had practiced or if I had responded the way he hoped. His confession didn’t change our realities or Mom’s life. Dad touched his Saint Christopher visor clip then closed the cover of the sunroof. I collected the persimmons and Macau-style *dan-tats* my mother used to love. My father and I held hands, a quiet prayer. Our eyes met each other, *Okay, here we go*. We broke apart and opened the car doors.

\*

Robbie is my boyfriend. We met at a support group for families with loved ones living with mental illness. His mother, like mine, is a paranoid schizophrenic. We’re the only two in the group. If I believed in destiny, I’d say it was that—or those who suffer like to wallow together.

Our love was an instant sticky connection, a ruinous vulnerability. Uncomfortable intimacy inevitably forms when someone knows all the cracks in your life without you having decided to reveal them. It’s a tell you hate. A giveaway. Now hands up, you’re coming out of a hiding place. Don’t shoot. Robbie and I began somewhere no one chose on their own.

“I feel like you have a hard time letting people in,” he told me during a coffee break. His name tag was stuck haphazardly to the pocket of his button-up.

“Wow. You’re very sharp,” I cut back, clearly proving his point.

“It’s not so bad, sharing stuff with people in the community. Might be good to have some friends, for like support and stuff, you know?” He was clearly talking about himself.

“Why would I want to do that?” *So, I get to relive my trauma with strangers masquerading as empathetic souls?* “No thanks, and

besides,” I eyed him and his peeling nametag, “I don’t know anything about you.”

“You could. You could know whatever you’d like. I’m an open book.” The guy looked like he was ready to give me a bear hug. I stepped back. I’m a Catholic, not a new-age Unitarian.

“Ha. Well, you sure as hell ain’t gonna know a bit about me.” I closed the lid to the cookie tin harder than would be polite and pretended to be interested in the basket of apples.

“Tough girl. Okay, look, it’s not so hard to open up. For example, I already know a lot about you, actually. Your mother’s like mine, right? She’s probably hurt you a lot, but you still really love her. And that’s how you got that spiky exterior—for protection. Some defensive thing you picked up. Really, you *want* someone to talk to. That’s why you bothered with this whole support group. But you’ve been here for six weeks and mostly all you do is grunt.”

What I wanted was to slap him across the face. That’s the problem with *the community*. Nothing is ever normal. Half of us become totally numb to niceties. People like Robbie, they love *radical awareness* and *therapizing others*. They think spending any time trying to assimilate into the non-mental world is a waste of energy. Why bother? You’ll never fit in. Eventually the record scratches and you have a lot of explanations to cover. They say you don’t have to be diseased to experience the symptoms. Their choice is to be upfront and *honest*.

On the other side are people like me; we dig our heels in, determined to convince ourselves: childhood trauma does not make us. We cling to conventionality. Some are so determined to be normal they surround themselves in lies. They move as far away from their families as possible and create alternate aliases. More than one person in group has admitted to conversationally killing off a parent or sibling. They claimed someone no longer existed rather than explained the complicated truth. I’m not a liar. I hold tight to my rosary beads and count instead. Stay the course. Sins are like stains, once presoaked, they can be lifted and removed.

Both sides have their roles to play and each always seem to find the other. One of us wants to be louder, one of us wants to

be quieter. All of us are *parentified* and think too much. Everyone is exhausted and guilty. First, we bitch and moan then we blame ourselves. Poor me. And why me? Then we remember who’s really suffering. It’s an endless all-consuming cycle filled with rage and apology. Indignation at others, indignation at oneself. Why didn’t I get a better hand, why didn’t so-and-so get even a finger? Who’s going to make this all better, who’s going to clean this shit up? Can’t someone save me from myself?

Sometimes a lifesaver is thrown at you but you’re so angry at being exposed in front of a table of instant Folgers coffee and off-brand oatmeal cookies, you’d sooner drown than take the help. Maybe I should thank God, I’m lucky enough; Robbie kept trying to save me.

“I’ve really upset you, haven’t I?” he said touching my elbow.

I said nothing and pulled away.

“It wasn’t my intention to hurt you. You seemed very alone and in need of a friend.”

“Please. Shut. The. Fuck. Up,” I snarled.

I hated him. I chucked the crap coffee into the trash, picked up my purse, and stomped out the double doors. Robbie chased after me, shouting my name like someone calling a lost dog home. He caught up and I thought I would explode with expletives, but instead stupid ugly tears bawled out. *Useless rosary beads*. I heaved over a street bench like a runner not strong enough for the course she’s chosen. *Tap me out. Someone else, please. The show stopped, and I’m fucking worn out and pissed off*. Robbie stood beside me; he held his hand out and I grabbed it. The bastard must have felt really proud of himself. Fucking radical awareness.

We sat on that bench and talked for so long, I melted down to my popsicle stick. Bright light in my eyes, I’m sure my face is stuck in a squint. On those splinter-prone narrow planks, Robbie listened to words somersault off my tongue. They were angry and raw. Terribly jumbled. I did need a friend. What a wretched fortune: Robbie the open book, but I was the one that got read. Lonely girl. I wanted his arms around me, to be held and caressed. We’d fly away to somewhere beautiful, somewhere I’d never been. Won’t someone keep me safe? Won’t someone tell me

everything's finally going to be okay?

I should have slapped myself then, maybe I'd have woken up, known it couldn't be so childishly simple. Nothing in life is *finally okay* unless you're dead. Genes can't be changed. My life is foretold, my emotions predestined: high frequency only and rapid acceleration always. Like mother, like daughter? Then watch me break glass and tear hearts out of their rib cages. The swings between love and hate will burn through the other. Holes are not filled in; they get jumped down into.

I'm a lost child and he's a lost child and this is what we do. We'll play out our hopes and dreams then rage when everything turns out the way we knew it would. We could have avoided this if only we had avoided each other. Anyone who knows anything, knows you don't fix a broken house with a broken hammer. But we could not resist. You don't know what you can't see. It takes a few hundred tries to realize you did it wrong.

When Robbie walked me back to my car, as he closed the door for me and leaned into the window to say goodbye, I could already imagine it. I could feel his face close to mine, his hot breath on my ear, his hands pulling my hips toward him. My heart was on fire. My body ached for its destruction. I was compelled to fuck him and then lie in the dirty sheets, in our after-sex and cry. And I knew Robbie could take it. He would hold me and pat my hair, say nothing and let the pain leak out of me. Treacherous and addictive, what would become of us?

The moment he approached me, I knew all this could unfold. I should've walked away before he spoke, but I didn't. I should leave before our destruction, but I won't. This is what happens when you're driving off a cliff but, *Oh. Look how nice the scenery is, the splendor surrounds us, the blue sky and the gliding gulls. Feel the sun on your cheeks. Smell the salty mineral air.* Now you're in a freefall plummet, halfway to the rocky bottom.

Everyone wants a little distraction, a little reprieve.

\*

Even before my mother's diagnosis, before her

hospitalization, there were things that didn't fit. But I was so young, I chalked it up to Mama's free spirit. I hadn't realized it was her blood. And like my father, I also wanted to deny and pretend. If I scream and stomp until my ankles break, won't that make it a lie? Because *Doctor, that bad news isn't meant for me. It can't possibly be true.* Like hearing your voice as a recording for the first time, *No, you've got the wrong person. I would be able to recognize myself.* Everyone wants to revert the impossible.

The doctors told me repeatedly, nothing was physically wrong with her until her mid-thirties. They said whatever I've remembered was just a coincidence. But then why did it keep happening? Wasn't that a sign?

One memory, in particular, tapped on my window too much. I had woken up late one night and all the lights in the house were off except the nightlight in the stairwell. A shadow blocked its glow. It was holding itself and rocking. "Mama," I said as I hugged her neck from behind, my body draped on hers like a superhero cape. She was silent and didn't look at me. Her eyes were bright but in a trance. She kept whispering, "I have this fear, I'll fall down the stairs. I'll fall down the stairs. The stairs will come for me. The stairs will eat me."

I started to cry but Mama didn't move so I screamed instead. Dad heard me and his voice broke Mama's spell. Everyone wanted to know why was I out of bed, why was I upset? Had I made an accident? And I was so little, I couldn't tell them what happened. They'd think it was a fib. I saw it. I heard it. But maybe they were right. It was time to go back to bed, everything was fine they assured me. A bad dream, nothing to be afraid of.

It kept happening. Mama at the top of the stairs rocking when I was five and when I was six. At seven, we took a trip to Emerald Isle and passed a business that sold stairs going nowhere. They were prefabricated concrete steps meant to be included with a mobile home, but they looked plain-out freaky lying in the empty show field like a pumpkin patch, like someone grew them or they were stairways from Heaven down to Earth or Earth up to Heaven.

Mama screamed in excitement when she first saw the stairs. "Pull over, pull over," she begged my father. The car had

barely slowed, but my mother opened the door and jumped out. She ran to the field and started dancing. She picked the tallest concrete stairs, some ten steps, and walked up them. At the top, she did a jig then pretended to lose her balance and slipped off. Suddenly her leg swung round like a nutcracker, and she began to descend as if dragged by something we couldn't see. She clung to an invisible banister then clawed at the steps themselves, shrieking, "Help me, Help me. Can't you see what's happening?"

My father ran to her, dropping his keys somewhere in the field. When he approached the stairs, she laughed, singing, "These stairs aren't real, they can't hurt me."

"Get down now, Mei," Baba pleaded.

"They can't hurt me. You should've seen your face." Mama slapped her knees playing patty-cake, patty-cake. "You thought I was really in trouble. Ha-ha-ha-ha."

My father lost his patience, he said "That's enough. You're scaring your daughter. Come down right now or you'll scare the soul out of Joy and turn her astray."

"Oh-no-no. Mama would never do that." Her arms were open, and she flew down the steps as if her feet hadn't even touched them. An egret coming from down the mountaintop. She landed at my side, her wings enveloped me and pulled me into a tight hug. "Oh-no-no, little Joy. Mama would never hurt her baby." She tickled my arms and belly. "Let Mama in, let me in." I couldn't help it; I began to giggle and opened my arms to her.

\*

The first time I locked Robbie out of our house, he was down on his knees begging for my forgiveness.

"You have a problem, you know?" I screamed from the bedroom window.

"I know," he said.

"You're codependent. You're obsessed with rescuing people. And rescuing people inevitably turns sexual for you."

"I know."

"You just want to be this knight in shining armor. And she's some princess stuck in an idiot ivory tower. How adolescent

can you be, Robbie?"

"I know."

"If you *know* so fucking much, why can't you keep your penis to yourself?" I slammed my phone against the window. "Why, Robbie, why is this woman texting me? How could you do this to us?" I opened the window further then threw the phone at him.

"Please," he begged, running up to the window, "please it was nothing. Don't kick me out. C'mon, Joy, let me in."

"I can't depend on you. This is crazy. You know that? There's got to be someone else. Anyone else." I turned my back to him and walked deeper into the house.

He jumped and grasped onto the windowsill, his fingers on the wooden board. I could have closed the window on his fingers. That would have felt good. Watched him fall back onto the lawn and nurse his purple hands. That would have shown him. I didn't though; he dangled there so pathetically, innocently. His big brown eyes said, *I love you. I fucked up, I'm human. We've both made mistakes. You know I'd forgive you.*

I seethed, "Damn it, Robbie. Come inside. What will the neighbors think?" Halfway to the back door, the well-worn road laid ahead of me. I'd unlock the latch and let the torrent consume us. The familiar drives me crazy, makes me lose control. But if that is all the home I know, should I leave?

"Joy, I'm sorry. I wanted to help her. I love you. It didn't mean anything," Robbie walked through the kitchen trying to get close, but I only backed away.

"How do you know that?" I snapped, "You don't know shit. If you knew *anything*, you wouldn't have gotten into that situation."

"Shh. Shh. Just calm down. It was just one time."

I hate when he tries to be peaceful. "One time? Why the fuck is she telling me she loves you then? Why is she saying you'll leave me for her?"

"She's lonely and desperate. She wants a connection. I don't feel that way about her though, only you. I was a stupid idiot. I love you."

"How can I ever trust you again? When you've taken this from me? This was supposed to be perfect. Just us. Not all fucked

up and ruined like everything else.”

“It can still be us. I’m sorry, baby. It can still be what you want. I love you, Joy.”

He tried to touch me, I growled back, “Well I don’t love you. I hate you. I hate you, Robbie.”

But that’s when he caught me like he always does. Like he did the first time. There’s the life story you’ve dreamed up and the reality you deal with. I’m a terrible liar. My back to the wall, I could’ve rolled away and escaped. I could’ve ran out the house and driven away. But I didn’t. I let him take me by both wrists and push them against the wall. His body is stronger than mine and pressed against me. I wanted to yield, open up and take him in. *No*, I urged myself. *Fight*.

He kissed my mouth and I bit him. His hands ran against my body and I tried to kick him. I wanted to hurt him. I wanted him to feel my pain. Be punished and repent. He shoved me back and I clawed at his chest, at his shirt until it was off. I grabbed at his waist and fought the buttons and the zipper, the elastic waistband of his underwear. He tore at my dress. Our hands attacked each other, raging at what was lost and attempting to settle debts that couldn’t be paid. We relished in chaos, let it churn with desire, pain, and pleasure. It made something familiar.

“You’re bad for me,” I’ve said every time when I take account of the wreckage, what we’ve done to each other. Every time there was another girl, another side. One time, two times, three times. For a night, for a season. The one that lasted over a year. In bed, I’ve told him, “I need someone more normal. Someone who doesn’t know all the pain points. You like it when I hurt so you can fix me back up again.”

And I can’t say it’s all his fault for chasing these women because I know his cracks as well. Our pieces fit together, once you pour the cement overtop and smooth out all the shards.

Another day, a different disaster, Robbie looked at me as if reading from a script, “You’re hooked on feeling fixed up. Chasing something that doesn’t exist and then wanting to be chased down yourself. The sprinting away, the crash, the burn, the elation, the falling down. This is your salve. I give you what you need.”

His mouth took me in and the tinder built again.

\*

The white magnolias disappeared from Whispering Pines a decade ago. My mother reached through the empty forests and into my mind with her long, graceful arms and slender fingers, her beautiful nails. I loved the sound they made as she tapped the kitchen counter thinking of what to cook for dinner. I honored that woman, but Mama doesn’t live in her body anymore; the woman I visit is a stranger. The diagnosis confirmed my mother’s fears, she’d never have another child. The hospitalizations mutilated her personality. Clozapine doubled the mass on her slight frame and electroconvulsive therapy extinguished the lights upstairs. My mother’s room at the hospital is plastered with Penrose Steps and MC Escher’s *Relativity*. It makes sense to someone. I miss my *Mama*, when she wasn’t a patient or a research subject, when she knew me and missed me too.

Memories picked me up and took me where they’d liked to go. My mother at the top of our stairs at home. I found her there praying to God not to hurt me. Mama using the vegetable cleaver to section out perfectly portioned wonton wrappers and fresh egg noodles. She taught me to dip the noodles in red vinegar; she fed and nourished me. I don’t have her hands. I can never replicate those flavors now. Mama telling me about my baby brothers who had died. They were smaller than a black plum. I held her hand and kissed her ears. I whispered, “but you’re still the best Mama there is.” Mama at the beach and those solitary stairs. She flew over them, escaped them. I was safe in her wings. We laughed and enjoyed life.

“Don’t look away,” my father had said that first night Mama went to the hospital, “This is your mother. You came from her. Don’t look away.”

The men with the black pants and blue shirts wheeled her into the emergency room. The sound of their pants whooshed between their legs, like the ocean or putting your ear up to a conch. It was a slow lullaby. *Go to sleep sweet baby, go to sleep sweet baby of mine*. Two nurses held the doors and the men slid through. The double doors swung back and forth, heavy on their hinges, then settled and locked into place. My mother was already heavily

sedated. She didn't hear me calling her name. She didn't see my father holding my arm, helping me wave goodbye. We thought Mama would be back, it was only well wishes then.

Robbie touched my arm, waking me from the daydream, the last time my mother was still Mama. "What were you thinking about?" He leaned forward checking for cars before making the right-hand turn back onto the road I knew too well.

"Oh, just my mom. That first time in the hospital," I said as I observed more overturned clay soil and surveyor's markers. *Wonder what will come up here?*

"First times are hard," he patted my thigh then gave it a squeeze.

"This road holds a lot of memories," I looked out my window again. The white and cream houses were grey and tinged with green. No longer the newest additions. I missed the trees and tranquility. *I wish it could be how it was.* Whispering Pines Natural Grocery and Whispering Pines Shopping Center, I'd give you up in a heartbeat. The town left nothing untouched. Even the road changed, from no median line to two thick marigold stripes. This road became a highway. So many homes were here, so many families. Lamp light bled out their windows as shadows moved behind the curtains. I wondered what's happening inside and got sad, disappointed by thinking of people again, wishing it were still only trees.

We went to the doctor's today. Apparently, I made the appointment several months ago. A routine checkup to monitor any presence of schizophrenic symptoms. They'll tell me more on Monday. Six years left until I'm in the clear. Almost no one gets diagnosed at forty. Robbie encouraged the appointments, said it's what responsible people do. Maybe that's who I am. Responsible. Self-aware. I didn't recall making the appointment but it's not unlike me to forget. Sometimes I have a hard time seeing things for what they are. It runs in the family.

## 2nd Place, Poetry

JACOB GRIFFIN HALL

### The Verdict

*Finally, it is perfectly possible that Wayne Williams must be added to the list of Atlanta's slaughtered black children.*

—James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*

It's not about the way that Williams shunned his folks on the courtroom floor, and it's not about the fiber evidence, and it's not about the fact that he was charged with two murders, not twenty-eight, and it's not about the bridge at night or the river or the green rug or the meeting in the governor's office, it's not about the ventriloquist calm that swept the room when the judge cried *oh people be relieved. Bring out your dead*, Baldwin said, and this included Williams, and this morning I swept my rug and wept over a newspaper in the paws of a still-new millennium draped over an old city, that is Atlanta, that is Georgia, and that is the Union of Power and Blood, that is the tenor of the voice that taught me *everyone deserves their situation here*, and I don't remember my first pair of shoes, and I don't remember that the children stopped dying, and I don't remember eternity or its colonial swell, and when the news is thick with killing, I search the mirror for a clue. Bring out your raincoats, bring out your nocturnal sentences. The judge is an extension of the gavel. *Deserved* is a word for war. The city caught fire and came back to name its flames.

## 1st Place, Prose

KAMERON BASHI

### Friendship & Purgatory

It took over three decades for me to feel the presence of the ongoing threat to my life, but when it happened, it happened quickly. I went to college in the D.C. area and was there for most of my twenties before moving to Providence, Rhode Island. I had a car during most of those years, and had been pulled over by the police plenty of times. Because I tended to drive too fast, I always assumed I deserved it. During my last year in New England, the beloved Buick I inherited when my grandmother passed away finally broke down and died, and the following year I moved to Denver, Colorado as a pedestrian. I walked, biked, and used public transportation for the first three years I lived there and, unsurprisingly, had no interactions with the police. I eventually bought a car again, and drove for two years without being pulled over, a sign, I assumed, of how I'd calmed down and matured as a driver. My streak was broken one Sunday morning as I was driving back to the Denver proper after spending the night out in the suburbs. It was early and I was stopped at a light, the only car at the intersection, when a police officer pulled up behind me. When the signal changed, I accelerated, and almost immediately saw the flashing lights of the patrol car. Having just started driving from a complete stop, I assumed this meant they wanted me to get out of the way, and I changed lanes to let them to pass. When the officer didn't go around me, I looked in the rear-view and saw a woman with dark glasses gesticulating wildly and yelling at someone, though I could see no one else in her car. I pulled over to the side of the road not knowing what any of it could have to do with me, and I was eager to clear up the confusion and move on with my day.

She approached my car, asked for my license and registration, then asked if I knew why she'd stopped me that day. When I told her, "No," she claimed to have noticed, back at the intersection, that my brake lights were not illuminated. It was 8:15 in the morning.

"Excuse me?"

"Sir, your brake lights were not illuminated, which says to me that

you didn't have your foot on the brake, sir. And that's why I stopped you."

I explained that since I drove a car with a manual transmission it wasn't necessary for me to apply the brake once I had come to a complete stop. I spent a lot of time in neutral, once I'd established that I was on level ground. The officer shook her head to disagree, and said that I was required to keep my foot applied to the brake the entire time that the vehicle was not moving. Then she took my driver's license and registration back to her patrol car. As I waited for her to find no warrant, no record of offenses, and no additional reason to detain me, another officer pulled up, got out of his car, and stopped to speak with her. He then sidled up to my passenger's side, lowered his head to my window, and said it shouldn't be too much longer.

"I don't know *what* she's doing," he added, then raised his eyebrows, shook his head, and made a subtle, dismissive gesture with his hand, trying to clear the air. I raised my eyebrows back to him but said nothing, doing my best to broadcast both the depth of my disappointment and the active restraint of my anger. Neither of us explained what was actually happening, but we knew enough to let pass what would have been both awkward and fruitless to acknowledge: that one of his colleagues, an armed agent operating as a proxy for the state, and a person with whom he shared a set of generally agreed-upon rights and abilities as officers of the law, had, on the thinnest of pretenses, singled me out for a casual and unjustified investigation on a quiet Sunday morning. He stayed next to my car, shuffling now and then to indicate some vague impatience, until his colleague returned. She came back with my license and registration, along with her card from the Arvada Police Department—A. Schlessner—and told me I was free to go. She reminded me again to keep my foot on the brake whenever my vehicle was not in motion. I dropped her business card in my cup holder, and the three of us parted ways.

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As many times as the police had pulled me over back on the east coast, it was only in 'flyover country' that I'd been pulled over while knowing without a doubt that I had done nothing wrong. Come to think of it, Officer Schlessner was not the first to break my streak—that had happened some months previous when I was pulled over for speeding as I drove through Kansas on my way to Oklahoma. That time, the officer

claimed that he clocked me going 78 miles an hour when the limit was 65, but I'd been driving for an hour with the cruise control set at 71, and the speedometer in the car had a digital read-out. I *knew* I wasn't going as fast as he claimed, and I said so with incredulousness and a flicker of disrespect, angry and puzzled that he'd pulled me over just to tell me a lie. He, too, took my license and registration back to his car, and upon his return, before releasing me, reminded me not to break any of the invisible laws that existed solely in his mind.

Though what happened in Kansas was fully suspect and sideways, the incident in Colorado with Officer Schlessler struck me differently, and seemed as preposterous as something from another world. In both instances I saw how easy it was to encounter the police, and to know—because they were armed, because they sought trouble where none existed, and because they moved in a realm beyond scrutiny or punishment—that hidden in each encounter was the possibility of my death. Still, the cops are the cops and, outside these moments, they seemed to have very little bearing on my day-to-day life.

The real pain of these encounters did not begin until I told my friends what had happened. They were surprised, and a little disappointed, but did not seem genuinely shocked or perturbed, and reacted much as they might if I'd told them that I left my debit card at the bar or lost my keys at the gym. They frowned, whined sympathetically, and apologized—the vacant, polite kind of apology that comes out like a press release, dutiful and perfunctory. Beyond that, there was nothing. And when the conversation moved on my life started its shift into something unusual and unknown as I fell from a grace I'd always misapprehended, or ascended into a knowledge I really didn't want. I felt caught in something novel, a fearsome level of the interior, an imprisonment that emerged the moment I was expelled from the innocent garden of togetherness in which our friendship had always resided.

Nothing was the same after that. I understood that I was (and am) coded as an enemy, an element that must be controlled wherever I might happen to exist, simply *because* I exist. In the eyes of some, many of whom are entrusted with violence, I am nothing but an obstacle, an unpleasant wrinkle preventing the smooth functioning of the landscape. My status was suddenly visceral and specific to me and had nothing to do with the news or television or any information I'd heard secondhand. I knew that I was not sovereign, not widely acknowledged as fully enti-

tled to life or 'freedom,' that I was an object whose subjective experience counted for little in our hierarchy of relevance. Displaced by the realization of just how many people there were for whom my body was an object, I slipped into a permanent confusion.

Each of the players showed me something I had never seen. Officer Schlessler (and the officer in Kansas) showed me that as an irrelevant object I could be freely harassed. The sheepish, second officer who shuffled his feet while waiting for his colleague to release me showed me that however willing he was to privately acknowledge questionable practices, he was not obligated to intervene. My friends showed me that, though my experience was unfortunate and obviously not at all ideal, it was not a new or particularly meaningful discovery, and there was nothing in it to upset them. Their standing in the world had not changed and, as sorry as they were to hear of my encounter, the world had always been rife with the kinds of minor injustices about which they'd done nothing. That the injustice was both trivial and arbitrary put it beyond the pale of their responsibility or influence, and this is precisely what concerned me, since some part of me was forced to live there.

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The word 'privilege' (from the Latin for 'private law') is commonly used in at least two ways with regard to whiteness and race in America. There is the 'privilege' of deference, an ongoing desire to appease and acquiesce to whatever whiteness desires; and the 'privilege' of ignorance, the ability to choose when to know, what to know, and whether or not to care. With the privilege of ignorance, social capital and negotiating power act as a buffer regulating knowledge of and proximity to danger, which means that the 'white' can decide their engagement with the problems that belong to others (many of which can be traced directly to whiteness itself). With the privilege of deference, the reputation and status of the 'white' are not affected by their choices—they tend to be deferred to as a matter of course, without regard to whatever violence, acquisitiveness, complicity, silence, or resistance they enact in our destructive social regime. With these privileges, the 'white' (much like the police) inhabit a realm beyond question. Whether one is a vicious predator, or willfully blind to predation, whether an observant bystander who refuses to speak, or actively engaged in correcting the

injustice constantly generated by our anti-social regime—if you are ‘white,’ you are generally assumed to be innocent, honest, noble, good, etc., at least in the eyes of those who matter (i.e., those who are ‘white’).

For me to see this—the private law—was to acknowledge a different kind of superiority, a sense of ‘American exceptionalism’ that I had never previously imagined. It made no great difference what my friends chose to do. All the choices were available to them, and they would always be afforded a basic sense of respect and personal sovereignty no matter what they chose. It was easy to imagine that, for some of them, some of these choices (to care, to fight, to join, to dismantle, to notice, to speak, to defend) entailed too much work for too little benefit, that there was little to gain from resisting a regime that already recognized them as worthy of protection. Their mere appearance in the world was treated as inherently valuable, and came packaged with an identity (a narrative, a myth) that operated as both a form of currency and a source of wealth. They seemed to believe they got to choose whether or not to participate in the racialization of our social life and the predations of our economy whereas I, due simply to my appearance, had no choice in whether or not to be its target and prey. The world assumed their innocence and was designed to keep them ‘free,’ while that same world assumed my guilt and sought to confine me. From Officer Schlessler, to her timid colleague, to the lying officer in Kansas, to the people I called my friends—I was given a glimpse into the trivial and arbitrary choices available to the ‘white,’ and how the exercise of these choices shrunk my world. None of the incidents I endured could be called tragic—no shots fired, no bloodshed, no death—but they brought me close enough to smell the tragic breath of the old antagonism.

When I understood that I was forced to deal with a danger that my friends had the ‘freedom’ to ignore, the naïve and blissful period of our friendship came to an end. The system we lived in coded me as an enemy, and those trusted to enforce the system were free to single me out for a scrutiny that might easily lead to abuse. Not being seen as threats themselves, my friends felt no need to investigate the system that perceived me as a threat; they did not have to wonder what it was or how it worked or why. To do so would have destabilized a world they’ve been a part of for their entire lives, and would likely upset an internal system of ideas that had brought them great advantages, both visible and invisible. These friends of mine were not regularly harassed or marginalized or subjected to violent erasure, and it is unlikely that they ever would be. When I saw

that they would do nothing to resist the system that kept me in an ambiguous position, our friendship became ambiguous as well. Because I had never assumed any distance between us, I had never felt the pain of a distance that had suddenly appeared—the pain of being subjected to the violent institution of difference, and the pain of having nothing to do and nothing to say that could fill the gap between us. Watching their silence and inertia when presented with the pain of a person they claimed to love, I felt both the weight of whiteness as well as the distance it needed to function. It distributes its advantages by operating as a deafness, a blindness, a kind of missing sense; an emotional amputation that appeared as an unwillingness to know. My friends did not dare collapse the distance that might bring them closer to what I felt, and I saw them as ‘white’ only when I saw their unwillingness to share the pain of my experience. They did not feel it belonged to them, and when I realized it was mine to bear alone, I saw how a friendship that had lasted over decades could immediately pass into a realm of painful ambiguity.

Though it felt like a purgatory, or a place of stasis and waiting, it seemed that I was initiated into what philosopher Calvin Warren calls an *ontological terror* stemming from the knowledge that my being, my body, and my ‘rights’ are uncertain and contingent, dependent on the whimsical forces that regulate the value and importance of social identity. As terrible as it is to be terrorized, it is more terrible to be alone in it, to be unable to connect with those closest to me about our shared experience of the terror, unable to connect them to the terror in a way that made it real enough for them to care. How could they know it when the world had been designed to keep them from it? When they themselves constructed their lives to avoid it?

Prior to having experienced the terror myself, before it became real and attached to specific places and times, I had seen myself and my friendships as somehow insulated from the severity of racialized antagonism. I grew up in middle-class neighborhoods that were mixed but mostly ‘white,’ and it was there that I cultivated the assumptions that made whiteness largely invisible to me. When people said “people,” it was ‘white’ people that came to mind—not totally or exclusively, of course, but mostly. ‘White’ middle-class standards and ‘white’ middle-class practices anchored my expectations of the world and gave shape to my ideas of what was normal.

Of course, my family was not ‘white,’ so I was never entirely root-

ed in its standards and practices, but I was always sympathetic to what surrounded me, and because I couldn't see how it sought to abuse me, I tended to side with its view of things, and always had trouble understanding my parents in light of the world I lived in without them. They were well aware of the forces at work in our world, being born in the immediate wake of *Brown v. Board of Education* in the 1950s. But in the world I inhabited they were sorely outnumbered, and seemed like outliers, both anomalous and anachronistic, a pair of mysterious obstacles that stood in the way of my color-blind destiny by trying to give me a past that wasn't mine. I told them that they could not imagine the world I lived in, that they had no idea what it was like to grow up with the harmless kinds of 'white' people I knew. I thought they were jealous, and wished that their own lives hadn't been so heavily determined by the unpleasantness of history.

When I was 9 or 10 my mother, alleging that I needed to know who and what and where I came from, made me watch the entirety of *Roots*—a television adaptation of Alex Haley's historical novel, telling the story of his ancestors from Africa, through enslavement and emancipation, and continuing until the 1970s when he wrote the book. The widely watched miniseries aired in 1977, with a sequel in 1979, my mother's college years. As a child, it horrified me, fascinated me, and entertained me, but it was so distinct from my own experience that I treated it like everything else I watched, as a fiction that had no real bearing on my life. When I was in high school a few years later I read the book on my own. I remember being consumed by the story, devouring it in a week, and coming out of it unshaken in my conviction that I lived in a different world than Alex Haley's, the one my parents always tried to warn me about. Though I was skeptical and discontented throughout my adolescence and young adulthood, I maintained a steadfast belief in the distinctness of the world I inhabited, and steadfastly denied the existence of the world in their warnings.

It took a long time for their warnings to become relevant to me, and when that chasm opened up and divided me from the people I'd always felt closest to, I could no longer fully enjoy our friendship since I no longer knew what meanings we shared. I was shocked at how plainly we could see that I was not equally 'free,' and how easy it was to say that this was bad. But it seemed that only I could see that so many of those I had come to know and love—the people I thought of when people said "peo-

ple"—wouldn't lift a finger to change it. As I watched my friends decide if and how they cared about the terror that drew limits around my life, these friendships slid into the uncertain stasis of purgatory and cooled. My friends chose what they have always chosen, they chose what they were accustomed to choosing, and I do not blame them for not having suddenly changed. I might not have changed myself if I had not suffered directly, and my friends clearly had no access to that suffering. None of these things had ever been a particular concern of theirs, but that lack of concern didn't disturb me until I felt implicated and enveloped in it. I had always taken them to be fully cognizant exceptions, living alternatives, not only to prejudice, but to all of the long shadow cast by the history of those who believe themselves to be 'white.' I thought (and our friendship had always been predicated on the fact) that they were different because they knew they were the same as everyone else. But at the moment that the shift began, I saw that they didn't *always* see themselves as the same as everyone else, were not *always* exceptions, did not *always* choose the path untouched by the shadow of the private law. I began to wonder who they were in a way I never had. I had never seen a glimpse of the 'white' in them and now it was there, a glimmer of the power that came from the practice—I watched them use their whiteness to a non-zero degree, as they helped themselves to an unwarranted peace, the sweet satisfaction of being undisturbed. Eventually I saw that to be unmoved and unruffled (to say nothing of being outright pleased) by the gratuitous violence of the 'white' is part of the practice of the 'white,' the culture of the 'white,' and the history of the 'white.'

I was critical, angry, disappointed, and sad, and to accept these things about myself meant accepting my difference from some of the people I held most dear. In accepting this difference, I lost the comfort of my abiding assumption that the people I thought of when people said "people" presented no serious danger to me. The kinds of people I grew up with suddenly felt like a threat. And it was not that they had suddenly turned on me or maliciously betrayed me, but I finally knew, as my mother had constantly tried to tell me, that they would not be there for me when it counted; that the friendly presence I trusted and relied on could turn quickly to absence at the moment it mattered most, that it was hard to tell who would do this and impossible to know when it would happen. My mother assured me that it had been happening for a very long time and would likely continue far into the future. My mother

knew that whiteness transcended any particular individual, that it had always been against me, and that the people I had grown attached to in the natural course of my upbringing could not be entirely detached from the practices through which whiteness maintained its power. It took decades for me to see them—my friends specifically, and the ‘white’ in general—as many have seen them for centuries: as those consciously and unconsciously defining the parameters of existence and ‘freedom’ while entertaining a fantasy that their attitudes and behaviors are internally coherent, morally sound, and indefinitely sustainable. Because no currently living individual was responsible for our state of affairs, no currently living individual was required to do or change anything about it, only to register some vague and glancing disapproval, in the interests of politesse, when presented with the unpleasantness of the facts. From my place in purgatory, I could no longer see my friends from the angle that they saw themselves and, in the breach, I lost my ability to believe in the innocence they always seemed to assume.

This was not my experience with all my ‘white’ friends of course, but that any were unable to allow my pain to provoke a significant or meaningful reaction put all my relationships in a different light. Having seen that pain register on some faces as relatively meaningless, I was no longer completely comfortable with what lay behind them, nor with the lifestyles conjured up to keep such pain at a distance from which it could not be felt. I ran to my friends, alarmed at the target I’d suddenly discovered on my back, and when all they could say was “That sucks,” I saw that I had always misjudged the nature of our friendship.

I had always thought of them as my friends, and never as my ‘white’ friends. I had always presumed a sense of relatedness and felt an intimacy that apparently did not exist for them in the same way. With no sense of shared pain, no sense of shared struggle or shared feeling, it seemed some of those I had always considered my friends might have been better thought of as “buddies.” Their presence in my life was whimsical, not unlike the forces that diminished my sovereignty and circumscribed my political power. The friendship was shallow, and its business had to be conducted close to the surface because our friendship was not more important than their participation in a political community from which I was excluded. They participated in this community freely and without undue harassment, it brought them great benefit, and they had no plans to abandon it.

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It is strange to discover so deep into my life that the rhetorical dynamics of whiteness are not *for* me, in the sense that they do not sustain, affirm, or even guarantee my ongoing existence. In the system that gives meaning to whiteness, my body exists among others as a contingent object, dependent upon the decisions of the ‘white.’ I am allowed to have my body, and to move it, but only to the degree that whiteness approves. I answer to the ‘white,’ and because the ‘white’ answer to no one, I may be stopped, investigated, disappeared, caged, transformed into money, or destroyed at any time, and with no one to appeal to. In *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, Warren explains that emancipation from enslavement is not the same as freedom, and that, historically, the enslaved went from being particular pieces of property owned by ‘white’ individuals to being owned as a collective property, by *all* those who were ‘white.’ The ‘free black’ was an oxymoron that had a place only in theory, and in actuality remained an object of property whose life was defined by the wishes, whims, or perceived necessities of the ‘white.’ This system remains with us, and is mostly intact today. I am not privately owned, but I do exist as a collective (public, economic, mythical) object. I am an approximation of the enslaved, and I must live in the world bearing their mark. I am inherently despicable, as my appearance is a code that activates and orders the despicable procedures of neglect and abuse. I am surrounded by and embedded in something that cannot (and must not) recognize that I am there, fully present, completely a part of what exists. I move among those for whom my existence is negligible, and my particular lack of status *defines* status in general; it gives boundary, shape, and meaning to those who can be who they are and live as they live *because my being is negligible*. I live among those for whom my existence is necessarily a kind of nothingness. “That sucks.”

Each moment I live relies on everyone around me allowing me to have it, and it seems we are all perfectly willing to live with all the incoherence and pain that such a world requires. Recognizing this, I lost almost all respect for the world that had always been home to me. I didn’t even realize how much comfort I took from it until I noticed that comfort receding, and I had to keep living in the world without it. Looking with contempt at a world I had once comfortably occupied is not a pleasant

experience, but it is hard to summon respect for a world whose logic would destroy me, just as it is hard to believe, day in and day out, that the world's hard-heartedness is real, and that its bottomless preference for smallness and limitation is what organizes its daily activity. I am angry too, of course, and all this unpleasantness is taxing and unsustainable. I manage it the way that so many before me have and, when the absurdity of it all dawns on me, I mostly just laugh. I laugh not only when the world makes it leap into vertiginous stupidity, but also when it seems necessary to ridicule this farce, and when laughter strikes me as the most available weapon. Sometimes I laugh right in people's faces, shocked and disbelieving, a laughter to make them ashamed of themselves, a laughter to hide that they have broken my heart and offended my sense of the meaning of love.

In a world so attached to its dysfunction, I have been consigned to death, and though I do not know what this world is, for now I have the freedom to inquire into the thing that would kill me. I see now that my existence is not a right, but a gift that others have given to me, often begrudgingly. Living in the margins afforded by the whims and preferences of others puts me closer to death, and so I am constantly encouraged to savor the moment, always knowing that I am the one most likely to have it taken away. A sudden movement, a strange look, a funny word, an inexplicable gesture is all it takes to feel the shadow of the private law.

\*

During the summer of 2020, people were upset and performing upset—someone had been murdered by a police officer, an armed agent operating as a proxy to enforce the state's laws and enact the will of the citizenry. Disturbed by all he has heard, a 'white' friend tells me that he really should do more, that he really should know more, but that it's hard because he finds it all rather depressing. Plus, he only has so much free time to devote to that sort of thing. I write a message to him, but I do not send it. I say that we learn the history of the people who lived before us because we are people, and it can only help us to recognize these things when they inevitably return. The stories, after all, are stories about *us*, stories about people, they are *our* stories, and we are the only ones who can benefit from hearing or knowing them. Anything that happened to any person at any time might have just as easily happened to either one of us, and to say that the truth

of the things that have happened is 'depressing' is to confess a preference for the uplifting pleasures of fantasy. But fantasy detaches us from the world we live in, and leaves us isolated and alone; time invested in fantasy is time invested in what is not actual, and can have no actual benefit. He and I, I said, were just people—not exceptional or distinct—and any innocent person who had ever been imprisoned, beaten, raped, tortured, or starved couldn't be all that different from us. To decline the knowledge of their existence was to abandon them, and to abandon a clear picture of what human beings are, what we have been, what we are capable of doing to one another, and what it is possible for us to endure. Ignorance masquerading as bliss was the poison that gave our nation its shape, a willing unconsciousness that avoided the tasks of knowledge, vision, feeling, and freedom because they seemed like burdens too heavy to take on. Of course it was painful to find out what we had done to each other, but if we didn't know it then we couldn't be concerned with it, we couldn't be empathetic, and so we could never become responsible. To really be in the world *with* anyone else meant taking some responsibility for them; it is impossible to take care of the world we share without also taking care of each other. I write out the message, but I do not send it—I don't want to be the one to change his mind, nor do I want to be the one watching and waiting as his mind remains unchanged.

## 1st Place, Poetry

ZACH GOLDBERG

### Ninth Plague

*with a line borrowed from Eduardo C. Corral*

i'm an Aries, which means i'd rather be destroyed  
than ignored. my mother loves to tell

the story, how as an infant, i once bit down  
on her breast when she raised her chin

to chastise my older brother. attention  
is my currency of choice, never mind

its proximity to violence. i grew up wanting  
a reason to kick. to be kicked. i grew up believing

there's a scientific explanation for everything  
that happens in the Bible. pillar of salt.

column of fire. i learned that an act of G-d  
can be predicted by the movements

of large bodies, a simple trick of astrophysics.  
three days after the solar eclipse, my mother calls

to tell me the Torah scrolls have been moved  
from our synagogue to a safe location. this must be

the end of days. i mark the blood over my door.  
i brace myself to be passed over. unseen hand

that blots out first the sun and then  
each firstborn son. what makes my brother

such a worthy offering? can't i  
tempt a destroying angel? can't i

sit on the receiving end of wrath?  
*tremble if G-d forgets you. tremble*

*if G-d remembers.* darkness was the ninth plague  
and then there was violence.

## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**Lisa Ampleman** is the author of a chapbook and three full-length books of poetry, including *Mom in Space* (forthcoming 2024) and *Romances* (2020), both with LSU Press. She is the managing editor of *The Cincinnati Review* and poetry series editor at Acre Books.

**Emma Aylor** is the author of *Close Red Water* (2023), winner of the Barrow Street Book Prize. Her poems have appeared in *New England Review*, *AGNI*, *Colorado Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *the Yale Review Online*, and elsewhere. She lives in Lubbock, Texas.

**Kameron Bashi** is the author of the forthcoming collection *On Discerning an Impossible Object* (Northwestern University Press, 2024), which describes whiteness not as "race" but as a historical event, a form of subjectivity, and a political relationship embodied in cultural practices. He received an MFA from Brown University and a PhD from the University of Denver. He currently lives in Los Angeles, California.

**Sarah Brockhaus** is a creative writing student at Salisbury University. Her poems can be found in *Sugar House Review*, *New South*, *Roanoke Review*, *The Shore*, *Broadkill Review*, and others.

**Sean Cho A.** is the author of *American Home* (Autumn House 2021) winner of the Autumn House Press chapbook contest. His work can be future found or ignored in *Black Warrior Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *The Massachusetts Review*, among others. Sean is a graduate of the MFA program at The University of California Irvine and a PhD Student at the University of Cincinnati. He is the Editor in Chief of *The Account*.

**Christopher Citro** is the author of *If We Had a Lemon We'd Throw It and Call That the Sun* (Elixir Press, 2021), winner of the 2019 Antivenom Poetry Award, and *The Maintenance of the Shimmy-Shammy* (Steel Toe Books, 2015). His awards include a 2018 Pushcart Prize for Poetry. He lives in Syracuse, New York.

**Lena Crown** is a writer from Northern California. Her work has been

published in *Guernica*, *Narratively*, *Gulf Coast*, *Sonora Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Offing*, and elsewhere. She currently serves as the PEN/Faulkner Writer in Residence and as an editor for *Autofocus* while writing a memoir and essay collection.

**Kate Finegan** is a writer and editor living on Treaty 6 Territory in Saskatchewan. Her work has been supported by SK Arts, Access Copyright Foundation, Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, Toronto Arts Council, and the Saskatchewan Writers Guild. You can find her at [katefinegan.ink](http://katefinegan.ink).

**Adam J. Gellings** is the author of the poetry collection *Little Palace*, & his poems have appeared in *Salamander*, *The Southampton Review*, *Willow Springs* & elsewhere. He lives in Columbus, Ohio.

**Matthew Gellman** holds an MFA from Columbia University. His poems are featured in *Poetry Northwest*, *Narrative*, *The Common*, *Ninth Letter*, *The Missouri Review*, Lambda Literary's Poetry Spotlight, *The Nashville Review* and elsewhere. A recipient of a Brooklyn Poets fellowship and an Academy of American Poets prize, Matthew was a finalist for *Narrative's* Tenth Annual Poetry Contest as well as *The Missouri Review's* 2019 Jeffrey E. Smith Editor's Prize, and he was awarded the *Adroit Journal's* Djanikian Scholarship in 2020. His manuscript, *Beforelight*, was a finalist for Tupelo Press' 2019 Berkshire Prize for Four Way Books' 2020 Levis Prize, and for the 2020 Hollis Summers Poetry Prize. Matthew currently lives in Brooklyn and teaches at Hunter College and the Fashion Institute of Technology.

**Jana-Lee Germaine's** poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *New Ohio Review*, *Nimrod*, *Cimarron Review*, *EcoTheo Review*, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, *Sugar House Review*, *Presence*, *december*, *Literary Mama*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Poet Lore*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, and elsewhere. She is a recipient of the Patricia Dobler Poetry Award. She earned an MFA from Emerson College and is a Senior Poetry Reader for *Ploughshares*. A survivor of domestic violence in her first marriage, she lives with her very nice second husband, four children, and four rescue cats in semi-rural Massachusetts.

**Beth Gilstrap** is the author of *Deadheading & Other Stories* (2021), Winner of the Red Hen Press Women's Prose Prize and short-listed for the Stanford Libraries William Saroyan International Prize for Writing. She is also the author of *I Am Barbarella: Stories* (2015) from Twelve Winters Press and *No Man's Wild Laura* (2016) from Hyacinth Girl Press. Born and raised near Charlotte, she recently relocated to the Charleston-metro area. She also lives with c-PTSD and is quite vocal about ending the stigma surrounding mental illness.

**Stephanie Meade Gresham** is an ex-Floridian living with her family in Portland, Oregon. Her essays and fiction have been published in *Entropy*, *Waxing & Waning*, *X-R-A-Y*, and *The Schuylkill Valley Journal*.

**Zach Goldberg** is a writer, educator, and arts administrator from Durham, NC. He is the author of *XV* (Nomadic Press, 2020) and a forthcoming collection from Button Poetry. His work has appeared in *AGNI*, *ANMLY*, *Pleiades*, and elsewhere. He lives on occupied Dakota land in Minneapolis, MN. Find him online @gach\_zoldberg.

**Jacob Griffin Hall** was raised outside of Atlanta, Ga and lives in Columbia, Mo, where he works as poetry editor for the *Missouri Review*. His first collection of poetry, *Burial Machine*, won the 2021 Backlash Best Book Award and is available with Backlash Press. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *32 Poems*, *New Ohio Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *New Orleans Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and elsewhere.

**Abby Hagler** lives in Chago. Previous work has appeared in *FANZINE*, *Full Stop*, *Bodega*, and *The Hunger*. With Julia Cohen, she runs the column "Original Obsessions" at *Tarpaulin Sky Magazine* focused on writers' childhood obsessions manifesting in their current work. Her essay is excerpted from the chapbook *There Was Nothing Left But Gold*, available now from Essay Press.

**Alyssa Jewell** edits poetry for *Waxwing* as well as *Third Coast* and coordinates the Poets in Print reading series at the Kalamazoo Book Arts Center. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Best New Poets*,

*Witness*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Washington Square Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan where she teaches college-level ESL and creative writing classes. She is a graduate student at Western Michigan University.

**Kamal E. Kimball** is a queer poet from Ohio. On the editorial team for *Muzzle Magazine*, her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Swamp Pink* (formerly *Crazyhorse*), *Colorado Review*, *Sweet*, *Phoebe*, *Hobart*, and elsewhere. She is the author of the chapbook *The Mouth That Sucks the Bone* (Pitymilk Press, 2022) and forthcoming debut collection, *Need Machines* (C&R Press, 2023). She holds an MFA from The Ohio State University and currently works as a grant writer and poetry instructor.

**Sonja Livingston** is an award-winning essayist and author of three books of nonfiction, including the memoir *Ghostbread*. Sonja divides her time between Rochester, N.Y., and Richmond, Va., where she teaches in the Creative Writing Program at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her essay collection, *The Virgin of Prince Street: Expeditions into Devotion* chronicles her exploration of the troubles and treasures of contemporary Catholicism as she makes her way back to church. She is an associate professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University.

**Parker Logan** is from Orlando, Florida. He currently lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. You can find his work in *The Blue Mountain Review*, *The South Florida Poetry Journal*, and *Ghost City Review*. He likes to read, write, and garden with his friends.

**Pamela Manasco's** poetry has been published in *Palooka*, *Rust + Moth*, *descant*, and others. Her nonfiction has been published by *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Elle*, and *The Toast*. She lives in Madison, Alabama, with her husband and children.

**Mike Nees** is a case manager for people living with HIV in Atlantic City. His stories are featured in *Baltimore Review*, *The Masters Review: New Voices*, *The Forge Literary Magazine*, *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, and elsewhere. He is the proud emcee of the Atlantic City Story Slam series. (MikeNees.com)

**Dustin Nightingale** is the author of *Ghost Woodpecker* (BatCat Press, 2018). His poetry has been or will be published in journals such as *The Florida Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *new ohio review*, *Cimarron Review*, and *Coal Hill Review*. He lives in Hartford, Connecticut.

**Arien Reed**, a queer, Baha'i, invisibly disabled, pterodactyl, holds an MFA from National University and co-founded, and is currently the president of, the LGBTQ Allied Staff and Faculty Association at Fresno City College from which he flies from rafters screeching at homophobic velociraptors. Ze is also the lunatic left in charge of the free "Fresno & Online Writers' Workshops" which can be stumbled upon on Eventbrite. Their chapbook *The End* was recently unleashed on the world by Roaring Junior Press, his unpublished collections have been finalists for the Kore Press, Grayson Books, and Press 53 poetry prizes, and zirs ravings and scribbles have somehow found their way into *Oberon*, *Florida Review*, *Sonora Review*, *High Shelf Press*, *J Mane Gallery*, *Allegory Ridge*, and others. His descent into madness can be witnessed on instagram @arienreed.

**Phoebe Reeves** earned her MFA in poetry at Sarah Lawrence College and now is Professor of English at the University of Cincinnati. She has three chapbooks of poetry, most recently *The Flame of Her Will* (Milk & Cake), and her first full length collection, *Helen of Bikini* (Lily Poetry Review Press) will debut in 2023. Her poems have appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *Best New Poets*, *Grist*, *Forklift OH*, and *The Chattahoochee Review*, and she has been awarded fellowships by the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and the Vermont Studio Center. She lives in Cincinnati, OH with her husband Don Peteroy, amidst her unruly urban garden.

**Ben Seanor** was raised in Florida and lives in Ohio. His poems have appeared in, among other places, *The Rupture*, *Bennington Review*, and *Colorado Review*.

**Indrani Sengupta** is a poet from Kolkata, India, currently braving Illinois weather. A Kundiman fellow and winner of a Copper Nickel Editors' Prize in Poetry, she received her MFA in creative writing from Boise State University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming

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**Will VanDenBerg**'s short fiction has been published in *Threadcount*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Sleepingfish*, and elsewhere. He is a graduate of the Literary Arts MFA program at Brown University. He volunteers as a clinic escort at PPGNY and lives with his wife in Sunnyside, NY. Their dog is no longer afraid of wind.

**Nathaniel Youmans** is a poet, editor, wildlife conservationist, and musician, originally from the Channeled Scablands of Eastern Washington, now residing along a migratory bird highway in the mountains of New Mexico. He holds an MFA from the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, WA. His work has appeared in *High Desert Journal*, *Permafrost*, *Talking River*, *Pontoon Poetry*, a digital poetry-cartography project curated by former Washington State Poet Laureate, Claudia Castro Luna, and elsewhere. An apprentice falconer, he has also been an Assistant Editor at Scablands Books, and has been a guest artist at the Orcas Island Literary Festival on Orcas Island, WA. He makes music under the moniker Lahar, and is a Contributing Writer to *Shouts! Music from the Rooftops*.

**PS Zhang** was born and raised in the American South. Her work can be read in *Southern Humanities Review*, *Pleiades*, and *Zone 3*, where she was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Further work is forthcoming in *Washington Square Review*, *[PANK]*, and *Western Humanities Review*. She is an alumnus of the Iowa Writers' Workshop Summer Program and a finalist in *One Story's* Adina Talve-Goodman Fellowship.

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