

MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 14 ISSUE 1
THE VALLEY REVIEW

EPAZOTE



Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

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Staff:

Editor-in-Chief: Elizabeth MacDuffie
Layout: Mark Alan Miller
Impresario: Elizabeth MacDuffie

Cover Art:

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Back: "Watchers" by Jennifer Coates

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Contributors:

Jamie Berger, Nandini Bhattacharya, Rebekah Bloyd, Seth Cable, Jacob Chapman, Jennifer Coates, Daniel Dagrís, David Ferland, Ellen Mary Hayes, Richard Wayne Horton, Ramon Jimenez, Scott Archer Jones, JRM, Brett Kelley, HJ Lawrence, Marian Kent, Linda Kraus, Mick McGrath, Cynthia McVey, Anne Meuse, David P. Miller, Stephen James Moore, Bill O'Connell, Melissa Pandina, C.M. Preston, Patrick T. Reardon, Jim Ross, Robert Runté, Ellis Scott, Judith Serin, David R. Solheim, Neysa Tapanes, Peter Urkowitz, Joe Volpe, Michael Washburn, Jennifer Weigel, Kobina Wright, Guinotte Wise, Gerald Yelle, Jane Yolen

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guest salutations: mark alan miller

Here we are! In your hands is the 14th anniversary issue of Meat For Tea. That's quite something, and it's due in part to readers like you, supporting what we think is a special kind of literary journal. I first got involved around the era of volume 3 - more than 11 years ago - participating in the production of the Cirques. Shortly thereafter I became the graphic designer, filling the very large shoes left by Rafael Lino, carrying on his lovely design aesthetic as respectfully as I could.

And those Cirques - almost 8 years ago, we started hosting them at my studio, Sonelab, with the co-hosting of our neighbor, the excellent Abandoned Building Brewery. With that change (from a local rock club where getting the bar patrons to, er, shut up and listen to the spoken word was a constant challenge) came a solidification of the live-in-person Meat For Tea *thing*. Our lounge in the studio makes for an excellent art gallery; the brewery has a nice system for showing films; and the main room of the studio is large enough to host spoken word, live music, and a myriad of other kinds of performances - with plenty of room for an audience. And! It's a *recording* studio. All of the spoken word and music is live recorded. (Enjoyable to many attendees is the option to listen to the recording-in-progress from the control room, a perspective many don't get to witness otherwise.)

So what of all this? The magazine, in print (and PDF) form gets a companion, a multi-media, multi-discipline extension as a real-time, three-dimensional gala experience. But those recordings - what with those?

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Yes, and as some might be aware, they are the perfect thing to base a podcast around. The Meat For Teacast! The third prong to the fork from which we hope you gain nourishment. With the podcast, we can bring select excerpts from the Cirques (a bonus feature is those who aren't close by enough to attend can do so by proxy) as well as conversations with some of the artists, writers and musicians we have the pleasure to work with. Additionally, other Meat For Tea hosted events are also excellent things to share with you all.

We hope you all will tuck into what the Meat For Teacast has to offer. We think you'll enjoy it as much as we do.

The Cirque for this anniversary issue will feature music from Heroes of Toolik and Dan Whitley and the Dust Radios, a variety of spoken word, some stand up comedy, and short films. Art on exhibit from Jennifer Coates will adorn the studio. And if you can't make it, well, you might just be able to taste it on a Meat For Teacast in the future.

Hugs and smooches,
Mark

rorschach survey

Scott Archer Jones

Sure, you two have hit it off, and match needs and desires pretty much. You've scribbled down a list of the offsets, the rough that complements smooth, the passive that correlates with the pugnacious. You two resemble a folded inkblot. But will it last? Both of you should delve deeper, and we have just the guide. Explore together. Choose the answer that most suits your personality – and watch his or her psyche unfold.

My idea of nature is

1. Watching Blue Planet II on TV
2. Weeding the front flower beds
3. Biking on the boardwalk
4. Hiking up to a scenic lake
5. Sleeping in a eight ounce hammock suspended off Devil's Tower

My idea of a job well done is

1. Putting away the folded laundry
2. Supporting Public television by buying Dr. Blake DVDs
3. Finishing a law degree started in prison
4. Raising five children
5. Planning and executing the perfect murder

Conspiracy theories turn out to be

1. Either wrong, fantasies, lies, or bad science
2. Sometimes true if about politics
3. Mostly true if about capitalism and corporations
4. Always true if about the CIA and the FBI
5. All about covering up the real conspiracies

Crimes I find acceptable are

1. Jaywalking
2. Driving five miles an hour over the speed limit
3. Cheating on my taxes
4. Cheating on my partner
5. Committing genocide in the Middle East or Africa

My ideal Saturday morning is

1. A rainy day, bagels and lox, pajamas, and the New York Times
2. Clearing out an old barn for a future workshop
3. Catching up on paperwork in preparation for taxes
4. An extended session of flagellistic sex
5. Burning down the gates of Valhalla to sack and pillage the Gods

The person I love lives

1. In a one-bedroom efficiency
2. In a single-wide trailer
3. In the Hamptons
4. In my gatehouse, hovered out on the edge of the Downs
5. In the iron bowels of the earth, watched over by the Sumerian gods of death

The greatest technical mystery to me in the world is

1. The thermos bottle
2. My iPad
3. DNA's role in shaping all animate life
4. Light's duality as both a wave and a particle
5. The Eighteen Hidden Dimensions of the Illuminati

I would rather possess

1. A good reputation
2. A house that is perfect for me
3. A million dollars
4. Immortality
5. Insidious control over the minds of a million people

I prefer in a mate

1. A compliant, gentle partner
2. A strong partner that will provide for me
3. An independent, thoughtful partner eager to disagree with me
4. A partner who belongs to the Merchant Marine and is never home
5. A partner with superhero powers who is not too smart and always aroused

I prefer the following foods the most

1. Simple hamburger and fries
2. Traditional foods like Thanksgiving turkey
3. Ethnically diverse food, with strange and challenging spices
4. Live four-ounce grubs
5. The snake that eats its own tail

I know I am

1. Male
2. Female
3. Nongender conforming
4. Changeable
5. A new form of being as yet undocumented

The truth is

1. All of the above
2. None of the above
3. All points in between



my buddhist

Cynthia McVey

He places the cage, a screened cubic foot, on the bamboo table between us.

“How many are there?” I ask, trying to erase any negative feelings, any *klesha*, or scratch, from my voice.

“I lost count at ninety-six,” he says, running his beautiful fingers along the cage’s lattice work fashioned from endemic Cambodian cinnamon branches.

“Are they still alive?” I ask as I take a sip of green tea.

“Yes. I believe most are still alive.”

I admire his calm disposition and I feel inadequate whenever I am with him, which is all the time, but I know he’s not all monk. He does not refrain from cooking or sex, does not *detach from all sensual desires*, that’s for sure. He is no Lotus Blossom.

Three months ago, I fell for this graceful, lithe man from Cincinnati when I saw him break up a cockfight on the road to Angkor Wat. I marveled how brave he was, as a recent transplant to Siem Reap, pulling apart the pecking, feathered, frenzied fury, the crowd. A week later, without his asking anything of me, I promised my life to him.

I love him, or maybe our sex, but I don’t understand the tenets by which he lives. I stop eating animals with ease—that I can do—but his reticence to kill mosquitoes, even those circling our bare, heaving bodies, and later our resting heads, tests me. I lie on my hands to squelch my instinct to slap.

Grainy dusks and into the night, I hum as loudly as I can in my head to block out the chorus, meditating as he suggests, while he lures the delicate vampires with a pricked finger, one by one, into the cage. He accumulates dozens each evening, in his porous hut, our love box, my cage. He keeps a silent tally. I had thought mosquitoes live for a day or an endless night, but the females, who whine, who draw blood, live for weeks, drinking their body weight in blood daily. I can hear the melancholy dirge through the thatched wall when we and the darkness are still. In the morning, I am surprised the box is there, that, with its hundreds of wings and the thick air, it has not lifted off during the night.

I am not jealous of his compassion, the attentions he lavishes on these females, but as I watch him, as I have every morning, roll up his organic white cotton sleeve with the care of a doctor going into surgery, I am feeling things I am not supposed to, not as a Buddhist-in-training. As he sticks his arm into the cage through the flapped opening, I cannot contain the notion that this is about him, not a Buddhist solution.

He is focused, doesn't look at me. He doesn't see me, not for who I am.

My finger then eyes trace the edges of my new *sak yant*, a magical geometric tattoo I received yesterday on the inside of my arm. It will protect me from misfortune, endow me with sexual magnetism. It hurts. It doesn't feel magical. I don't feel magnetic.

My parents are not here to gasp and grimace at this latest emblem. I can imagine them now: *Why don't you leave your beautiful body alone?* They would be aghast and surprised to discover I ended up bald, and happy, without medication. Why on earth did they think I should go to law school? Because I debated their assumptions? Didn't follow their rules? Because I marched in DC and stood on the steps of City Hall? Because I care about *issues*, they tried to convince me that the way to affect change was through policy, through law, not walking, blocking and standing still. Not swinging in a hammock and *being*. Being who I am, who I want to be. I can feel something stirring, changing in me, asking.

I should write my parents, probably, but am not sure what I'd say. I cannot explain how I got here, what I'm doing. Here: swathed in a saffron robe, in humility and humidity, in awe, in the scent of him. Beyond my cage, the villagers think I'm a man, if they think of me at all. A gap year between college and law school, a gap year without boundaries and expectations, lawlessness. This is not what they want of me.

Is this when it occurs to me? That this too is artifice? Not pure and simple but convoluted and pretentious. I am whomever, whatever he wants me to be. I have taken on his rules, I am in his shadows.

"Why not just let the mosquitoes outside, free? Why the cage?" I ask.

"One mosquito, two mosquito. . ." He will count to sixty before he draws his arm out of the box slowly so as to not crush a single midge. He will assess the welts, look up at me and smile. He will roll down his sleeve, without succumbing to, scratching, the small mountain range on his arm.

This morning I will not hear him close in on sixty because today I decide that if this is his path to liberation, I will find my own. So, while his attention is on his sacrificial outstretched arm, and he is counting with patient deliberation, ". . . fifty-seven mosquito, fifty- eight mosquito, fifty-nine mosquito . . .", I get up from the table, push out the door and, barefoot, run back to town.



failed state

Mick McGrath

Monday

Right now, we're in the kitchen. Amadeus asks me if I've made enough coffee for two, and I say no, and he says, "Gee. Thanks, Mickey."

This is revenge. For last night. When Amadeus wanted to have sex and I told him I didn't want to have sex and he said, "You know, some guys put sex in their prenuptial agreement, Mickey. Like, they demand sex. And if they don't get it a couple times a week, the agreement is off, and the woman gets nothing."

Amadeus and I don't have a prenuptial agreement.

But I'd be happy to sign one – a postnuptial agreement. I don't want Amadeus's trust fund.

Now I'm in my studio. I'm going through a Philip Guston phase, obsessed with his 1970 exhibition at the Marlborough. All those crude, rough, cartoony things. The clansmen. Those enormous human heads with no bodies. His use of red and pink.

I've been trying to do something similar, only my paintings are a mashup of Guston and Carroll Dunham. That is, slightly pornographic. Men with dicks for noses.

Amadeus is in his office next door, grading papers. He teaches anthropology at the University of _____. I used to call him Indiana Jones. That was before the bloom fell off the rose. (Before I realized he wasn't Harrison Ford.)

Amadeus has framed pictures all over his office walls – Amadeus in Machu Picchu, Amadeus at Gobekli Tepe, the Ajanta Caves, Angkor Wat. He has pictures of Egyptologists. He has a big poster of Howard Carter. He even has potsherds in display cases, pieces of ceramic they found at Calakmul and Chechen Itza. He's always going to conferences and meeting people he says are important – eminent primatologists, animal behaviorists, evolutionary psychologists...

Right now, Amadeus is watching the Kavanaugh Hearing. The TV in his office is loud, and it's as if Brett Kavanaugh is in the house.

BRETT KAVANAUGH:

I have never sexually assaulted anyone. Not in college. Not in high school. Not ever. Listen to the witnesses, who allegedly were at this event thirty-six years ago. Listen to Ms. Kaiser. She does not know me. I was not at the party described by Dr. Ford.

This confirmation process has become a national disgrace. Since my nomination in July, there has been a frenzy on the left to come up with something – anything! – to block my confirmation.

I step into the corridor and train my mouth at the open door down the hall, and I ask Amadeus to turn it down. He doesn't respond.

I close the door to my studio, hoping that'll make things quiet.

It doesn't. I can hear Kavanaugh, though he's muffled now, through the wall.

BRETT KAVANAUGH:

This whole two-week effort has been a calculated and orchestrated political hit. Fueled with pent-up anger about the 2016 election, revenge on behalf of the Clintons, and millions of dollars in money from outside left-wing opposition groups.

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Now I'm standing in his doorway. "Did you not hear me?" I say, raising my voice, so Amadeus can hear me over the television.

Amadeus has his feet on the desk. He's wearing brown Oxfords, beige slacks, a light-blue button-down, tucked in. He insists on getting dressed each morning, even on days like today, when he doesn't have class or office hours and doesn't need to leave the house. And Amadeus wouldn't dare wear jeans or a t-shirt. He's got to wear slacks, cardigans, button-down shirts, and they've got to be tucked in or he'll have a panic attack.

Amadeus is wearing his Oliver Peoples glasses, tortoise-shell, and his mouth is hanging open. Amadeus is riveted to the TV. The stack of papers is there, on his desk, but he can't take his eyes off C-SPAN.

"I thought we agreed," I say, even louder this time. "No television during the day?"

I find I need complete silence when I'm painting.

Amadeus turns down the volume.

"She says she went to the Safeway with her mom a few weeks after the incident. And she saw Mark Judge. He was working there. And she approached him and said hello. And when Mark Judge saw her, he turned white. Like, he got really nervous."

(Mark Judge is another one. He, too, is on trial sort of, though it's Bret Kavanaugh they want, Brett Kavanaugh that tried to rape Dr. Ford.)

"The implication being he felt guilty," Amadeus says, "having been in the room, watching, when Kavanaugh tried to rape her. Mark Judge was – excuse me, is – an accessory. That's what Ms. Ford is claiming."

"I find it odd that you can't call her doctor," I say. "The woman has a PhD."

The Kavanaugh-Ford Hearing has turned into another Moon Landing, the O.J. Simpson trial. I.E. Another major TV event. Unless you're living under a rock, you know that Brett Kavanaugh, a judge, was about to be confirmed to the Supreme Court before Christine Blasey Ford, a professor of psychology at the University of Palo Alto, came along and accused him and his friend Mark Judge of attacking her and trying to rape her at a house party in 1982. Then two more women came forward, saying they, too, had been assaulted by Kavanaugh.

"Anyway, do you really think she would lie?" I say, still standing in the doorway. "I'm sure they have records. Like, they can confirm that Mark Judge was working at the Safeway that day. I'm sure Dr. Ford is telling the truth."

"Oh, I don't doubt she's telling the truth."

"Well what's your point, then?"

"She approached him," says Amadeus. "When he was working at the Safeway. Don't you think that's just a little bit strange? That she would approach him? That she would say hello to him?"

It's a worthwhile question.

"Look. I can't work with Kavanaugh yelling in the background," I say.

Then, under his breath: "I'd be yelling too if I'd been falsely accused."

On his bookshelves, there are books by David Bus and Christopher Ryan, countless issues of *Current Anthropology*, issues of *Science and Nature*.

Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* is on one of his shelves. *White Dialogues* by Bennett Sims. *The Mezzanine* by Nicholson Baker. *American Psycho*. David Foster Wallace: *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, *Infinite Jest*...

The *Mezzanine* is literally about a guy buying a pair of shoe laces, and Amadeus calls this a profound work of art.

Under his breath again: "I'd be yelling too if I'd been falsely accused of rape."

"Look. Can you just turn it down?"

“This is important, Mickey! Whether you realize it or not, this is a big historical moment. A big moment in our nation’s history.”

I ask him again to turn it down, like I’m his mother.

“I did turn it down,” he says, angrily. “It’s down.”

Tuesday

We live in Santa Ana. We used to live in Hollywood, but Amadeus thought it was too liberal there. Plus, we’d been living in a small apartment, and when Amadeus got a full-time position at the University of _____, we thought why not upgrade.

Now we have a house.

It’s a two-story house. A small Spanish villa. Chalky white. With a terracotta roof and rounded windows and archways and a small arcade covering the porch, where we sometimes sit, drinking wine, at night – though we don’t do that so much anymore. It’s always sunny here in the day, and the lawn is quite green, and there’s a line of bottle-brush trees separating us from the neighbors, giving us the illusion of privacy, and the tree closest to the sidewalk paints the concrete pink with the red brushes that overhang the sidewalk and occasionally drop from the branches like apples. The whole place is very vibrant and verdant and lush and colorful. Like the Garden of Eden.

I thought relocating might breathe life back into our marriage. Like, maybe now that Amadeus was making more money he would feel happier. And he would start exercising. And then he would have more stamina – like, in the bedroom.

And he would look better.

And maybe now he wouldn’t snap all the time, throwing a tantrum every time he came in through the front door and stepped into the foyer and tripped on the shoes I’d left there; having a conniption when he couldn’t work the can opener; pounding his big gorilla fists on the table when the soup I’d made for the two of us was too hot.

It’s Tuesday, and I’m sitting at the breakfast table, eating egg whites with ground pepper. I’m drinking orange juice and coffee, and I’m watching a documentary about Andrew Wyeth on my iPad. (I love Wyeth’s egg tempera paintings – Braids, Christina’s World.)

Amadeus comes into the kitchen. He looks haggard, sleep-deprived. I think he may have been up all night arguing with Facebook friends.

“No coffee?” he says, looking at the empty coffee pot. Then he looks at me, as if it’s my job to make him coffee every morning.

“Sorry,” I say.

“Why not make enough for both of us? The way you usually do?”

It's true I make him coffee, and hand him a thermos full as he's walking through the front door, most mornings. But no longer.

“You get coffee on your way to campus.”

“Not every day I don't.”

“Most days, though. A lot of days.”

“Maybe make enough for both of us just in case?”

He's wearing loafers today, the kind made with faux leather, the kind that turn an ugly, shabby, maroon color when they've been around the block too many times. He's wearing the same beige slacks he was wearing yesterday when I told him to turn down the Kavanaugh Hearing, a yellow button-down shirt this time. Tucked in. No Oliver Peoples glasses. A belt the color of honey.

He's holding his cognac leather briefcase.

“I wouldn't wear that shirt with those pants.”

“Why? What's wrong with it?”

“Beige and yellow? Plus, that shirt's no good.”

“You bought me this shirt. When we were in Italy. At Bastinadoes. Remember?”

“It's faded,” I say. “The armpits are...like...discolored.”

(Amadeus sweats like mad, now that he's gained weight.)

“I wonder if it's possible to restore the color to clothing?” he says, inspecting the shirt, looking closely at the armpits, the roll of fat under his chin bulging as he looks down.

“Nah. I don't think it's possible,” I say.

Amadeus has thinning hair. He's still a long way from being bald, but his hairline has that bamboo-forest look and he's only thirty-three.

Right now, his hair is wet looking, with a hard part.

“You would know,” he says. “You know color.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

I'm squinting at him. I know exactly what it means: He thinks I use too much color in my paintings. He thinks my paintings are too colorful – like, to the point of being ridiculous, over-the-top, childish. He's told me this a few times.

But I can get \$25,000 for a single painting. So Amadeus shouldn't talk.

"What do you mean by that?" I say, pressing him.

"Nothing," he says, irritably. "Forget it."

Amadeus is miserable. He loves anthropology, but he hates teaching it, hates grading papers, and he's always complaining about his job. He always looks tired, totally depleted.

A few months into our marriage, I began to see the imperfections. (And then, like a diamond dealer, I saw only imperfections.) One time, I walked in on him masturbating. It was so pathetic. I looked at his history later and saw he'd been watching Fondle My Fart Box. If only his students knew how he behaves at home...

We'd go out to dinner, and he'd always manage to get food on his face. Right there in the restaurant. Or he'd spill red wine on his shirt. These things never used to happen.

And he was always talking my ear off about anthropology, the cave paintings in Lascaux – which Picasso thought were brilliant. The Clovis First Hypothesis. Things like that. An article would appear in Nature: Archeologists found bones in San Diego, and somehow that means the Clovis weren't the first to come to the Americas.

"Fuck, Mickey. It's too late to change." He's standing there, holding the leather briefcase I got him from Tumi, a piece of flotsam from the Happy Epoch. "I'd have to iron another shirt. You know I don't have time for that, so why bother telling me?"

"Sorry," I say.

"I swear. You do this to fuck with me."

I look at my wristwatch. I, too, am dressed, even though I work from home and don't have to go anywhere today – not to the post office, or to the art supply store where I get my encaustic paints. I, too, think it's important to get dressed every day, whether you plan to leave the house or not, but Amadeus is contemptuous, loathes people who don't dress well. (His fashion sense was one of the things I liked about him when we first started dating.) In his country, anyone who dared to wear a t-shirt and jeans in public – or anywhere, for that matter – would get bastinadoed. He's always going on about America, how it's a monster truck rally, how the whole country is a cockfight and Europeans are much more elegant, refined, and wouldn't be caught dead wearing sweatpants, how European films of the 1960s – the '61 Antonioni film, *La Notte*, for instance – featured nudity, whereas the '66 American film *Lolita* was considered shocking by American audiences even though it featured no nudity and only hinted at sex and so in this way Europeans are more advanced and not so puritanical...

“Shouldn’t you be going?” I say.

“Who can think about work right now? Due process is gone.”

He wants to have an antejantacular argument.

I roll my eyes. “Don’t you think that’s a bit hysterical? I mean, you do realize this isn’t a trial. Don’t you, Amadeus?”

“Yeah, but...just...like...socially. Like, people ought to give Kavanaugh the benefit of the doubt. But if you read the comments people are making on Facebook, you’ll see they’re not. In the court of public opinion, it’s guilty until proven innocent.”

I can see he’s getting angry. There’s something tight about his face, like his jaw is clamped down, wired shut, and he’s grinding his teeth.

“Presumption of Innocence is a human right, according to the United Nations, yet the whole country is castigating this guy and they don’t even have a shred of evidence. Has everyone lost their minds? I mean, there’s no evidence here. The four other people who were supposedly at the party say they don’t remember it. It’s fucking anarchy out there, Mickey. Thousands of people are protesting at the Capitol, and meanwhile there’s no evidence to substantiate the claim that Kavanaugh tried to rape anyone.”

Now I’m getting angry.

“Well, if you really want to talk about anarchy,” I say, “I might point out that women are victimized every day. And that rapists walk away scot-free.”

He moans. “Maybe the reason so many ‘rapists’ [uses air quotes here] walk away scot-free is because a lot of times there isn’t sufficient evidence to substantiate the claim that they raped anyone and so no one truly knows if they’re rapists in the first place.”

“But why would Dr. Ford lie?” I say.

I pick up my iPhone from the surface of the table. I’ve forgotten all about my documentary, the one about Andrew Wyeth.

“People lie,” says Amadeus. “Women do lie.”

“Believe All Women” is a popular slogan among feminists right now, and Amadeus hates it. Hates it more than L.A. traffic. Which is saying a lot.

“The Duke lacrosse team. UVA. Mattress Girl. That girl at Sacred Heart, in Connecticut, who falsely accused those two football players. It happens all the time. Last night I read an article in Archives of Sexual Behavior. The researchers kept tabs on an undisclosed city in the Mid-West for nine years. [I’m not listening. Not closely, anyway. Right now, I’m sitting at the breakfast table, checking Facebook on my iPhone. I want to see what Amadeus is up to, what he posted on his

wall last night. Of course, I'm assuming he posted something. And it's a safe assumption. Lately he's been really posty.] They looked at all the rape allegations in that city and found that forty-one percent of them were false. Not unfounded but false, Mickey. Meaning the women just made them up. Because they wanted attention. Or, in some cases, revenge. Are you listening to me, Mickey? Forty-one percent! [I'm not listening. I'm still checking Facebook on my phone. Surprisingly, I don't see anything new on his Facebook wall.]”

I put down my iPhone and look at Amadeus.

“Look. Amadeus. Dr. Ford passed a polygraph.”

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, and an old flame came forward saying Ford used to teach him how to beat polygraphs.”

“You read that in Breitbart.”

He shrugs. “Got something against Breitbart?”

“Actually, no. I read that, too. Her ex-boyfriend is clearly bitter. He hates Dr. Ford. Should we really listen to anything he has to say?”

Amadeus looks at his watch. “Ugh. I have to go,” he says, and then he looks at me, as if to say, “We're not done here,” and he storms out.

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But Amadeus and I are done. We're finished. This marriage has been circling the drain for some time now, and any day I'm going to file for divorce, citing irreconcilable differences. I would have done it already, but we just bought this house, and two years ago we had this fabulous wedding in Italy, a charming little town called Manarola, and it seems like yesterday my parents were cutting the DJ a check that could feed Haiti, and my parents are not rich (not like Amadeus's parents), and how am I going to tell them the marriage is already over, that grandchildren will not be imminent?

My eggs are cold now.

Wednesday

It's morning again, and I'm watching a documentary about the Russian Revolution – Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, the Great Purges... I heart documentaries!

Amadeus comes into the kitchen and sits down with me at the breakfast table. He's wearing a salmon-colored button-down shirt, tucked in of course, with corduroys the color of rust.

“I like that shirt, but do you think corduroys are appropriate?”

I'm smiling at him, condescendingly.

“It’s fall,” says Amadeus. “And I’m an academic.”

I’m thinking, Is the sine qua non of the academic a pair of corduroy pants?

“It’s the fall semester,” I say.

“Right,” says Amadeus.

“But it isn’t cold outside at all. This is California. Look.” I gesture at the windows. “It’s still morning, and already it’s as bright as fuck. Like a tanning bed. It’s gonna be a hot one, and you’re wearing corduroys. Under the broiling sun.” I’m laughing at him. “You should wear something summery.”

“Laugh it up,” says Amadeus.

“I’m trying to help you!” I exclaim. “You look ridiculous. I mean, I like that shirt, but you look ridiculous in those pants. I’m not trying to make you feel...like...self-conscious. In fact, it’s just the opposite. Like, I’m trying to save you from any self-consciousness. You still have time to change, you know.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Amadeus groans. “It’s from here to the car, from the car to the Social Sciences Building. You know?”

“But your colleagues will look at you funny.”

“Whatever,” says Amadeus. “I don’t care.”

“That’s not like you,” I say. “It isn’t like you not to care.”

Last night, after class, he came home and just stayed in his office for the rest of the night. I haven’t seen Amadeus in about twenty-four hours.

This is nothing new. In fact, this is the way we’ve been living for months now. We’re like neighbors – we live in the same building, on the same floor, and the only time we see each other is in the morning, as we’re leaving our respective apartments.

And like a next-door neighbor, Amadeus can be heard through the walls, the ventilation system. I’ll hear him rustling around in his office. Coughing. Swearing. Clearing his throat. I’ll hear him flushing the toilet in the bathroom across the hall. Or laughing at something he read online. Last night, in his office, he kept replaying clips from the Kavanaugh Hearing. At one point, I heard him say, “SIMPLETONS!!!” (I wondered if the outburst was directed at his Facebook friends.) “THE FACT – IF WE CAN EVEN CALL IT A FACT – THAT KAVANAUGH EXPOSED HIMSELF AT A PARTY AT YALE DOES NOT SUBSTANTIATE THE CLAIM THAT HE TRIED TO RAPE SOMEONE IN BETHESDA! A YOUNG MAN WHO IS CAPABLE OF TAKING HIS DICK OUT AT A PARTY WILL NOT AUTOMATICALLY BE CAPABLE OF RAPING SOMEONE BECAUSE HE TOOK HIS DICK OUT!”

I heard him pounding on his keyboard.

Right now, Amadeus is sitting here, reading the news on his phone. “Have you seen this?” he says to me. “Julie Swetnick [one of the accusers] said during an interview, clear as day, that she can’t be sure it was Kavanaugh?”

I roll my eyes. I’m trying not to fall into the vortex.

“She says it clear as day. She says, ‘I can’t be sure it was Brett Kavanaugh.’”

He’s looking at me, waiting for me to say something. I take the bait.

“But she does believe it was him,” I say.

Amadeus looks at me, bewildered. He scratches his crotch through his corduroys – I can’t see what he’s doing under the breakfast table, but I know he’s scratching his crotch, can tell by the way his arms are moving.

“Like, okay, so maybe she wouldn’t put all her chips on black,” I explain. “Like, when push comes to shove, she wouldn’t put all her money in the center. But she knows she was gang raped thirty-six years ago, and she knows Brett Kavanaugh was at the party on the night she was gang raped, and she knows Kavanaugh is now being accused of attempted rape by another woman thirty-six years later, so she’s putting all the pieces together. You know?”

18

Amadeus shakes his head. “She says she can’t be sure it was him,” he says again. “Case dismissed.”

“This isn’t a case!” I say, hotly. “For God’s sake, this isn’t a trial. This is essentially a job interview. We need to see if he’s as squeaky clean as he says he is. And if three women say this guy is less than reputable, then maybe there are better candidates out there?”

I stop for a moment, letting that sink in.

“Look, I’m not saying he tried to rape Dr. Ford,” I say. “At the end of the day, I don’t know – though I’m pretty sure something happened between those two. But the question is: Should he be confirmed to the Supreme Court? Should he be confirmed to the Supreme Court if there are all these questions about him? That’s the question.”

Amadeus rolls his eyes. “You guys are just trying to get him,” he says. “Meanwhile, to take this away from him sends the wrong message.”

“The wrong message?”

“Sets a bad precedent,” he revises.

“It’s the prudent thing to do. How does it set a bad precedent?”

"It leaves the door open for any woman to say anything she wants about any man," says Amadeus.

"And she doesn't have to substantiate shit, and the whole country will believe her simply by virtue of the fact that she's a woman and he's a man, and that is misandry, Mickey, and it's wrong." I groan. "The country will believe her," I say, slowly, "when three other women say they were assaulted by this guy, too. That is why the country will believe her. Not simply because she's a woman."

"But, in this case, one of the women says she can't even be sure he assaulted her!" says Amadeus.

We're going around in circles.

We're not getting anywhere.

Thursday

It's morning again, and today I'm switching it up, making eggs benedict instead of egg whites. Maybe today I'll have a cheat day.

Amadeus runs downstairs (he sounds like a herd of elephants) and into the kitchen. "Check this out," he says, holding his phone. "Check this out." I'm standing over the stovetop, and Amadeus approaches me and hands me his phone. I look at it.

He's got an article pulled up. Something from the Wall Street Journal. One of the accusers has recanted.

"Ugh," I say, lethargically, and I hand the phone back to him, nearly dropping it in the hollandaise.

"Judy Monroe-Leighton," says Amadeus, taking the phone. "Turns out she just wanted attention." His face is shining. "I told you, Mickey. I told you!"

"Okay. Whatever, Amadeus."

I can't be bothered. I'm totally preoccupied with my work this morning, my Philip Guston paintings. My plan is to eat breakfast, then go up to my studio. Last night, I watched a Philip Guston documentary on my iPad. There's something so disturbing about City Limits, those three clansmen crammed into that clown car, patrolling the city, looking for someone they can lynch. There's something profoundly disturbing about that painting, even though it's so cartoony, like a Robert Crumb comic.

"You know, if you think about it, it's actually worse to falsely accuse someone of rape. It's worse to falsely accuse someone of rape than it is to rape someone."

The shit that comes out of Amadeus's mouth...

“Let’s say you falsely accuse someone of rape and they go to prison for...like...five years,” says Amadeus. “That’s what happened to Brian Banks, by the way. The football player? The Atlanta Falcon? This woman, Wanetta Gibson, accused him of rape and he went to prison for five years.”

He knows way too much about this shit.

“Every day you don’t come clean, you’re committing another crime as far as I’m concerned. Think about that, Mickey. I mean, that’s some heavy shit. Every day, you get up and enjoy your life, knowing that some dude is in a cage watching the best years of his life go by. Mickey, that’s worse than raping someone. Don’t you see?”

“I guess you live in your world and I live in mine.”

I’m standing over the stovetop, working on the hollandaise.

“I’m just saying. Women can be creepy, too, Mickey.” And then he adds, “Did you read that thing in Vulture? That Soon-Yi Previn article? All the things she said about Mia Farrow? According to the article, Mia Farrow is a lunatic.”

I take a deep breath.

“Don’t you have classes today?”

“I cancelled my classes.” He’s looking at his phone now, no doubt wondering if anyone has responded to his most recent Facebook post. “I’m too tired,” he says. “I’ve been up all night arguing with assholes.”

Looking at him, I realize that Amadeus kind of looks like Bret Kavanaugh – the prepster haircut, the boyish face.

“That’s very responsible of you.”

“I can’t be expected to work right now, Mickey!” He raises his voice a bit. “Not with this Kavanaugh thing lurking in the background!”

He says this as if it’s a no-brainer. Like there’s six feet of snow on the ground and it’s absurd he should be expected to go to work today.

“I have aprosexia,” he says, looking at his phone.

“Aprosexia?”

“I can’t concentrate.”

“Look. Amadeus. I really think you should take a break from this. Now it’s affecting your work. Your livelihood. You were up all night.”

He looks up from his phone.

I look at him.

“What?” I say.

He’s looking at me with enormous seriousness.

“Do you see what you’re doing to me right now?” he says, almost whispering. “Do you see what you’re doing? You’re gaslighting me, Mickey. You’re making me out to be this lunatic, a crazy person, obsessed.” And then he goes apeshit. “BUT YOU’RE THE ONE WHO’S CRAZY!!!!” he screams. “YOU AND EVERYONE ELSE!!!!”

“Amadeus.”

“THE ONES PROTESTING AT THE CAPITOL!!!!”

He’s wearing the same salmon-colored shirt he wore yesterday, the same corduroys. He’s unshaven, and he has dark eyes, the eyes of someone who hasn’t slept.

“Amadeus. You’re scaring me.”

Amadeus rolls his eyes. “I’m tired of women thinking men are creepy! Men are not creepy. Men are not gross. Okay? I mean, try to see the good things about men. Would you, Mickey?”

He’s actually kind of tender, here.

“Try to see the good things about me.”

He grabs his chest.

“You know, I’m trying to lose weight,” he says.

“Jesus. Where is this coming from?”

“I’m not much of an athlete, or a runner, but they say it’s about diet mostly.”

“I thought we were talking about Kavanaugh.”

He stops for a moment. He’s getting emotional.

“Historically, it was you who lusted after me, Mickey. You were always chasing after me.” He says this more to himself. “Always calling me and demanding we talk for hours on the phone and refusing to hang up when I said I had work to do. Always wanting to spend time with me. Always kissing my neck and hugging me. I couldn’t just sit on the sofa and watch TV without you wanting to snuggle up next to me. Now it’s like I have Ebola.”

I am thinking, Ugh. Amadeus. Do not start crying, dude.

“Once upon a time, I was fighting you off,” he says, shakily. “Once upon a time, I was beating you away. Now look.”

Poor Amadeus. What will become of him?

“Seriously. What happened, Mickey?”

“Nothing,” I say. “You didn’t do anything wrong.” And then I say, “Look. You know how you’re always going on about ancient civilizations and the reasons for their demise? How some geologists and anthropologists and archeologists think...like...the weather is to blame? Like, the weather just changes suddenly and...like...that affects their agriculture? And so...like...the whole civilization collapses?”

“Yeah,” Amadeus says, in anticipation.

“Well there you have it,” I say. “Sometimes the weather just changes.”

But I can see he doesn’t get the metaphor.

“Mickey. What happened here?”

He looks around the kitchen, like it’s Calakmul, an abandoned Mayan city layered in rainforest green. Amadeus loves Calakmul. He’s been there many times.

“I used to... Well...” He’s reluctant to say it. “I used to have control here,” he says. “Sorry, but it’s true. Like, I used to have the power in this relationship.”

I look at him, disapprovingly.

“I’m just being real, Mickey. I’m just letting you know how I feel.”

I roll my eyes. “Well,” I say, shrugging. “What do ya want from me, dude? The Mayans ran things for a while, and then the Spanish came along.”

I go back to the hollandaise.

Friday

It’s morning again, and we’re having breakfast together, sitting together at the breakfast table. I can see that Amadeus is looking at Google images on his phone, pictures of eroded twin statues in Egypt, the Colossi of Memnon.

Amadeus hearts these. He finds them fascinating. He even went to Egypt a few years ago just so he could see the statues up close.

Amadeus has his favorite artifacts the way I have my favorite paintings. Right now – though I am going through a Guston phase – my favorite painting is *The Great Friends* by Georg Baselitz. It's a picture of two crude figures standing side by side in what appears to be a wasteland. One can't be sure of the place, but it looks like a war-torn country, a city reduced to rubble after a merciless shelling, and the two figures are just standing there, devastated.

"Do you think we'll take a hit on the house?" says Amadeus.

"God no," I say. "We'll make a killing. This place is fab."

"What will we take?" says Amadeus, smiling. "Like, what potsherds will survive?"

"You mean, like, we should take a piece of the baseboard or something?"

"Well maybe don't ruin the house."

We laugh.

"But, yeah, we should both take something. A piece of the house. So we'll always remember this place." He shovels eggs into his mouth. Chewing his food, he looks a bit like Dizzy Gillespie, his cheeks bulging.

"Don't you think that's a little too romantic?" I say. "Like, too wistful? I mean, of course we'll remember this place." I'm laughing at him. "I don't need potsherds to remember this place." And then, in a moment of tenderness: "I'll always remember you, Amadeus."

And I truly mean this. After all, how do you forget someone like Amadeus? Someone who doesn't own a t-shirt? Someone who will ask the bartender for a different Gibraltar glass if there's something about the first one he doesn't like? Someone who insists on calling it "the cinema" and will even correct you if you say, "the movies"? One day, I'll look back, and these will be the things I miss, the endearing stuff.

"And you'll think of me fondly, I hope."

"Je ne regrette rien."

I smile at him, warmly.

"That's nice. Maybe we should leave something," says Amadeus. "Not take something with us but leave something behind. Write our names on the wall in the closet. 'Mickey and Amadeus were here.' Something like that."

"That'll be our cave painting," I say. And then, more lucid: "But, all kidding aside, that's a bit childish. Don't you think?"

“Yeah,” says Amadeus. “I suppose it is.”

For a moment, there is silence. It is a moment of silence.

Now Amadeus is reading the news on his phone.

“Oh look at this!” he says. “They say the economy is booming!”

“Yeah,” I say. “Unemployment’s never been lower!”

“3.7 percent!”

“I read 3.4 percent!”

“Really?” says Amadeus.

“Really,” I say. “I think it’s time to sell.”



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Luvlee

Nandini Bhattacharya

Do not bring Us to the Test. Deliver Us from Evil.

New school. Me, new girl.

At Morning Assembly, the Lord's Prayer notwithstanding, the golden tan skin of the tall girl before me floated up into view. The tall girl was a sturdy, brilliant northern beauty. My eyes were half-closed against the sun but I was hopelessly aware of her.

She had tough, black hairs on her legs. It was kind of disgusting, especially on skin so white that you couldn't not see the hairs. They were curly, too.

Her name was Luvleen, but everyone called her Luvlee. Everyone was afraid of her. Even the Sisters and the teachers. She swaggered without moving an inch, standing among a knot of her handmaids. Girls like me lowered our eyes and try to walk past without drawing her attention. Sometimes it worked, sometimes not. One day she called out to me when I was doing my best slither.

"Hunchie!"

26 I did stoop — I was painfully conscious of having no breasts to speak of, unlike her already substantial bosom.

I tried to scuttle away but she ordered me to stop.

She said, "Come here!"

Luvlee was calling me. Me. What could I do?

When I was a foot or so away from her a hashashin hand shot up under my skirt and brought my underwear right down to my ankles. I couldn't get the whoops about the sorry state of my yellowing cotton bloomers out of my head for days.

She was so brilliantly lovely, body hair and all, my Luvlee — queen bee of a passel of girls who ruled school like a host of hornets. Luvlee's name rolled on their tongues like a caramelized cannonball. They were all from north country: Punjab and Haryana. "Punjooos." For Punjabis. Their fathers came to our sadder, wiser state, West Bengal, in the country's eastern part, because of work. Their families squinted north in nostalgia. The Punjoo mothers waited, simmering, for the second when the transfer or the new job would happen. Their bags were always packed, feet pointing north.

Some of the teachers liked the Punjooos better. Well, at least, Mrs. Kumar did. Mrs. Kumar was our Arts and Crafts teacher. She hated me. I hated her. Or at least I believed both things. I was horrible at Arts and Crafts. Mrs. Kumar acted like a fawning puppy around the golden Punjoo

girls. Drool, drool, pant, pant. Around Luvlee she was just plain melted butter. I understood and hated her more for that, transferring to her a bit of my self-loathing. We were fellow prisoners. Of Luvlee.

My best friend Shoma wore big, thick-rimmed glasses. The Punjoos called her “chushmish,” which came from “chushma,” a northern word for glasses. We were small, dark, timid Bengali girls, “Bang-Bangali” to the Punjoos.

The Punjoos stretched out our rounded Bengali vowels, saying “chushma” — it’s “chaushma” in Bengali, not “chushma,” ye barely washed peasants, I wanted to say but wouldn’t dare — as if they were dusting off shared words after we’d used them.

Chaush, stupid, not chush.

A few of our kind did defect to them periodically, choosing preservation over pride. I pretended to scorn the cowardly traitors, but I shoved into my heart’s black-hole how hopelessly transfixed I was by the amber flicker in Luvlee’s komodo dragon eyes. Beauty like that had to be the outside of a beautiful soul. Kind of like the whore with the golden heart thing.

In these lean, anxious days came Father Rocco from distant Malta. He changed our school completely. Maybe this was how Jesus worked. But I never heard directly from gGgGod. (Our gods were okay with “g” but the Christian Lord preferred “G”). Nor from Jesus.

Why did a priest come to our girls’ convent school and stay as a guest of the nuns for months? I read later that the Carmelites and the Maltese Order had big churches near each other in Malta. So maybe they’d always been coming and going, priests and nuns. Risky. What if a nun and priest fell in love? Wouldn’t they have to leave their Orders? And wouldn’t they become damned souls? I was disappointed in my nuns, our Sisters. Hadn’t they’d lowered their guard a bit too much?

Within a day Father Rocco was a flaming hit with us girls, and it was obvious the Sisters were all dotty over him. He told us that if you held a conch to your ear and listened, you could hear the ocean. Because, he said, we all walked out of water once. I instantly saw myself, short, brown and bony, and Luvlee with gleaming matted hair like Bo Derek, leaving the sea on some dim, prehistoric eve. In our blood we both remembered that departure. It was a lovely idea.

When Luvlee and Father Rocco met, lightning flashed and thunder rolled. I felt this, but I didn’t know why. Maybe it was the meeting of two towering archangels. “I’m Luvlee,” she said, holding out a hand to Father Rocco. The world hushed. Birds sang, circling Jesus. Would there be a Resurrection? Might there be a great Salvation for sinners? Or was it going to be the Fall from Paradise, the End of Eden, all over again? Christian lore had lodged in my Bang-Bangali marrow, gurgled like a baby through my arteries.

And rumor started about Sister Irene and Father Rocco. Sister Irene was our favorite nun, though she didn’t teach high school. Sister Irene wasn’t beautiful, but she was a fragrant monsoon gust blowing through our dreary school. She had dark eyes, thick eyebrows, thick black hair pushing out from under her nun’s cowl. She was young, cheerful, and treated us

more like friends than lowly schoolgirls. She couldn't have been too much older than us. She sometimes skipped through the hallway when she thought no one was around. But Luvlee had always made fun of her for being a bit whiskery.

I worried a lot about Sister Irene. All the other sisters were aging, old, or super old, and I was afraid that they didn't understand sister Irene and maybe tormented her sometimes. We saw her with Father Rocco sometimes through our classroom windows, walking in the playing field, her habit and cowl blowing in the air like sails attached to the mast of Father Rocco in white robes. If we could see them, no doubt so could the nuns from their windows.

Generally, when we went home, the nuns stopped existing. I could only faintly imagine them: eating barley gruel, drinking tepid tap water, sleeping on hard cots with itchy blankets and never, ever getting out of their cowls and habits. Where, in such an unrelenting scourging of the body, could there be love, or talk or love?

All of us wiser-sadder Bengali girls witnessed and affirmed that after Father Rocco arrived, Sister Irene had a softer look, a brighter bloom. But, less skipping.

Suddenly, Luvlee was absent. A day, then two days, then a whole week. Mrs. Kumar wilted, then withered. She worshipped Luvlee. Mrs. Kumar's own motherhood was blighted by a shuffling, heavy-footed daughter who also went to our school.

Without Luvlee, school almost became friendly. And yet, for me it was a desert. I prayed for strength, patience, and Luvlee's return. The Punjoo girls were still noisy but it was like they were faking it. Something had gone out of them. They still called us names and made up nasty limericks about spineless, fish-eating Bengalis, but as if they were doing it out of habit, for practice; their hearts weren't in it. Even Sonia, legendary for her hour-long panto-performances of popular Hindi films complete with song-dance numbers — our class on arbitrary "holiday" from petite, froggy Mrs. Kumar soaking it in, croaking in glee the whole hour — was morose and subdued. But not like me. Not like stung, panicked, helpless me. Caught in a web of perfect love, full of fear.

School was stranger than strange. Luvlee was gone. I began going to the little chapel in school sometimes. With my anguish that I wanted to lay at the altar of Jesus and gGgGod. It was a test. I'd been brought to it. It had to be a test. Why would Luvlee be gone so long, without news? To save us both from Evil? But gGgGod, I asked, how could I steal glances at Luvlee as she concocted new insults for me and my friends without it being part of your greater plan? How could my heart gallop toward her unless that's how it was meant to be? Maybe the test was of her also. When she was back she'd pull me to her, say in that burry growl of hers — flecks of spit foaming at the corners of her mouth as she talked — that she accepted me. Me, a Bang-Bangali. She would say, "You're not so bad after all, Bang-Bangali." Then Big Bad Babli, one of the heftiest girl gangsters, would stop walking up to me, slapping me across the face, and walking away.

The chapel was a small room with a big window. Just a cross, some lighted candles, a vase of flowers. That was it.

But most of us wiser-sadder Bengali girls came from families where gods were worshipped loudly and dramatically for days. Our temples were not our bodies. Our temples were our temples. Our food was of encyclopedic subtleties, intricacies, delicacies. Our mothers' kitchens were also wiser and sadder, and though plant-centric after so many Bengal famines in just one century, were still altars to food. We didn't eat the boring, buttery food that Punjoo did. We loved food as much as anyone, but we were generally tuned finer, our Bengali elders said. Simplicity bored us.

I knelt before the cross, my palms joined, expecting some insight. My knees hurt. I prayed for a better heart. *Dear Jesus, I don't want to be jealous of the Punjoo girls so close to Luvlee. Jesus, help me to stop thinking about Luvlee.* Once, because I'd prayed, I'd got back a lost pencil box with money in it. A miracle. I'd almost decided that day that I believed in Jesus with the long, pinched face and thin, blonde hair combed sedately like my grandmother's. His pale blue eyes were always downcast as if he was trying to avoid potholes and puddles. I'd wanted to become a nun, briefly. But other things would happen — exams and boys and confusing issues of *Femina* magazine — and I would postpone the idea.

Now, I prayed to GgGgod who could now use me as a tool to save Luvlee. I prayed a long time. We can never know which prayers will be delivered and which will be lost. But my prayer to have a better, more forgiving heart wasn't answered. At least not that time.

My dusky bloom was fading.

Those days the Punjoo girls went around singing their group songs.

"Surangani, Surangani, Surangani.... If you want to kiss me darling don't come at one, my Papa will be ready with a double-barreled gun, hey!..." etc.

I wondered where they'd heard and learned such a song. Who was Surangani? They sang in a circle, clapping their hands. Surangani didn't seem like a Punjoo name. They also sang, "Darling, you can love one...." Everywhere there was love. God's love, Jesus's love, Father Rocco's love for all of us, my love for Luvlee. All this clapping and singing drove me crazy. Yes, yes, love, love, love. Why bring it up again and again? And Luvlee still absent.

Why were the Punjoo girls singing so much with Luvlee gone? To prove to the rest of us that everything was fine? Because things were not fine. Luvlee was missing, Sister Irene was not skipping. Then Shoma and another girl informed me that the Punjoo girls were all gaga over the Father. Bablee and Sonia were very far gone, I heard, with crushes on Father Rocco. And though I had my own little altar for the Father in my heart, any little respect I had for the Punjoo girls disappeared when they let him completely replace the Luvlee sun of our old Universe. Girls could be so fickle.

Luvlee came back a month after Father Rocco's arrival. Back in morning assembly. My heart a million praise-songs. I couldn't get close to her though because the hornets were crawling over every inch of her undimmed beauty. Even the sisters looked different. Swatting the elementary school girls more emotionally, tremulously. It was a scene.

Officially, Luvlee had been in hospital. She'd had a bad accident (internal injury, we heard). Now, every day one of her brothers — I think she had three — dropped her at school in a dusty jeep with humongous headlights. One of them always pulled her close to him and said something in her ear.

But everyone got to know what had really happened to Luvlee. Big Bad Babli got into a terrific tiff with her one day when she felt Luvlee was back hogging the Father's attention. She told a girl that Luvlee had been in hospital for an "operation" that only "bad" girls have. She'd heard her parents talk about it when they thought she was asleep. She only had to tell that one girl. The whole school caught fire upon that single strike. Now Punjoo factions developed: cracks appeared in the Punjoo solidarity edifice. Factions revolved around tales of seduced nuns and girls. Were priests who had sex with nuns quivering Romeos or paunchy, leering fat-cats? Was even Romeo Romeo, or a thuggish Montague cousin with pretty, pretty eyes? There were cynics and there were romantics. Mrs. Kumar couldn't understand it.

I knew about abortion. My uncle's wife had detailed with exquisite precision the curetting of her miscarried fetus. "Oh, the burning pain," she'd quavered. "The blood everywhere." I'd looked at her already stooped, ropey shape — she'd come from leaner, hungrier folk than ours — and shuddered to imagine more blood and tissue being scraped out of her. I didn't like her very much, and listening to her excruciatingly gruesome tale of her probably already lean and hungry fetus being torn to pieces had made my fists clench. So I knew what Luvlee had suffered.

And yet Father Rocco had come and torn even the Punjoo girls apart. Divide and Conquer. In history class we learned that was how Europeans — including our own barely departed British — had built empires. It never stopped, did it?

But Luvlee's stature was such that eventually the gossip made no big difference. Some of the less favored Punjoo girls woke from the month-long exclusive cult of Rocco. Started again to trip on each other's heels again, following Luvlee around. Her komodo dragon eyes still narrowed cruelly.

On the other hand, reduction in the cult of Rocco was a Luvlee revival but not necessarily a Rocco burial. Most of us high school girls still prowled around the Father's temporary office in the Elementary School building in hopes of talking to him, having his light pat on our head or back. We were still like baby hyenas jostling and snarling at one another to get closer to him. He'd come out for something and we'd simper and smile, each girl hoping he would give her that special wink. I'd read *Jane Eyre* like a million other schoolgirls. I still occasionally played with the fantasy that like St. John Rochester, Father Rocco would penetrate my plain Jane. He would see that I was lovable. He would hesitate, turn a little away from Luvlee. He would leave Sister Irene alone.

But, simultaneously Luvlee would open her eyes wide, look deep into me, and see my patient devotion. And then they'd both love me. And, sadly for the Father, I'd choose Luvlee over him.

Soon, during Father Rocco's regular "chats" with us girls — we went to his office, he partly closed the door, and then we talked, or at least that was what happened with me — Luvlee was there more than anyone else. Once I saw her coming out of the Father's office, and her eyes

were red. She'd obviously been crying. And Father Rocco's door was often closed and Luvlee often came out of it alone, turning her body half back into the room to toss back a goodbye as she held the door open with one hand. And one day, catching her silhouette against the fulgent light in Father Rocco's office, I realized that she wasn't the same actually. She'd hollowed out. Something had been scooped, gouged out of her, and in the unseen sunlight I could see the cut. She'd spilled out of herself like rotten fruit does when squeezed. She'd rotted before she was ripe. Parts of her were dead already. Torn to pieces.

Then we heard that Sister Irene was unwell. We didn't see her during school, and she hadn't Maria von Trapped down the receding hallway of the elementary school in the afternoons while we prowled around for a sight of Father Rocco for a long time now.

Somehow I wondered if Father Rocco's stay might also be coming to an end. And I wanted to know if we could part friends. No hard feelings though he closed his door on me when Luvlee came. Love even those who try to take what is yours. Love till it hurts. Mother Theresa's words.

For they know not what they do. India forgives the British.

I went to Father Rocco's office. I was in luck that day. "Come in, sweetheart," Father Rocco said with his usual bonhomie when I presented myself at his door. Not golden and gouged like Luvlee. Just the same plain solid brown me.

"Thank you, Father," I mumbled as I slipped into the room. As usual. When actually face to face with him I always needed some time to collect myself. No doubt he saw me trying. The smile never left his face.

"Father, I've come...to ask if I've done anything wrong."

"What can you have done wrong, child?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry if I have."

"Put the thought behind you, my dear," Father Rocco said.

What was behind, between and around us was Luvlee. And somewhere out there, Sister Irene.

"I just thought you were very busy recently and so..."

Father Rocco leaned forward and put his elbows on the table, and looked at me.

"What's this really about, child?"

"If I did something and that's why you haven't talked to me..."

His eyes were so blue. Not like Jesus' pale blue. Mediterranean blue with a flash of fire in them.

He sighed and fell back in his chair. "It's not how you think it is, child. I still want to talk to you, of course. It's just that I've been a bit busy...with...."

"Luvlee," I blurted out.

If he was angry now, it still didn't show. He only went around and closed the door of his office. Even though it was only me.

"Yes, Luvlee. But listen. Luvlee comes to talk to me about something very special."

My feet in scuffed shoes dangling in the air, too short to touch the floor. Scuffed shoes, socks that used to be white, and fuzzy, brown legs. Let's not even think about the cotton bloomers. Luvlee was special; Father Rocco and Luvlee had special things to talk about.

"But, I'll tell you a secret if you won't tell anyone else," he said.

I shook my head; I couldn't talk. I'd been so trusted. So honored. Of all the other girls, Father Rocco had chosen me. Me, after all. The only one he could trust. With his secret. With Luvlee's secret. Though it wasn't really a secret, he was reclassifying it as secret by making it just ours.

"Luvlee is very sad. She lost something very big."

"I know. Everyone in school knows. She had an abortion."

"Yes. I know you all know that. But there's something you don't know."

I wanted to tell him I knew about the curetting process, about tearing flesh to bits.

"I will not tell anyone."

He turned again to me.

"Okay. Then I'll tell you, and you must not speak of it to anyone. Her baby's father was her brother."

The tall boy driving the jeep, then. My poor golden girl.

"God forgives us all," I said. That's what we learned in school. No matter how bad the thing you did, God forgave you if you were truly sorry.

Father Rocco raised his forefinger and laid it upon his lips.

Don't tell anyone.

I nodded, turned around and left without a word.

The next Monday Sister Irene wasn't at assembly.

I had a math test that day and little time to think of anything else. But all weekend long I held my Luvlee tight to my heart.

On Monday, rumor stopped by again. Sister Irene. She'd left. We didn't know why, but our always beleaguered-looking button-nosed Mary, a Christian girl, hinted that she'd probably been sent back to Kerala, her home state. What? Why? Mary pursed her plump pink lips and would say nothing more.

The Sisters were unhappy, cranky. They answered no questions about Sister Irene even from the Punjoo girls. Even Mrs. Kumar hung her head and shuffled slowly down the high school hallway, her gait suddenly very much like her heavysset daughter. I'm not taking questions either, the angle of her neck said.

As soon as I could, which was not till almost the last bell, I requested a water break. I went to Father Rocco's office. Normally his door would be open. It was closed today. Maybe the Father was making a visit somewhere or had someone inside with him. Maybe it was Luvlee he was with. I would bear that, I would accept that. Or maybe I just had evil thoughts all the time, though I prayed not to. And maybe I was having one right then and there. So I prayed again. My soul rose again to the possibility of the sheer goodness of the earth, the fitness of all things, the greatness of the school, Jesus, and Father Rocco. I retreated, accepting, not at peace.

But the next day the door was still shut, and no one had seen him or sister Irene.

And then a day or so later, I saw Luvlee alone.

She was standing at a sink in the toilet, her back to me. The toilets were at the far end of our long school-building, far away from the water cooler. They stank frightfully. No one went there unless they had to. That day I had to. gGgGogGod's plan.

All the fear, the hesitation, went out of me. I swayed only a little as I rode the crest of my passion towards Luvlee, just as she turned around. Or maybe my body was dragged there by my yearning, overflowing soft Bengali heart. Our faces were inches from one another.

"Luvlee," I said, her name a Jordan of adoration washing me clean, again. Delivering us from Evil.

She narrowed her eyes. Those beautiful komodo dragon eyes.

"Luvlee," I said. "I know what happened, and I want you to know that God loves and forgives you. I want you to know that. Believe it. And also, I'll always be your friend."

She said nothing. I dry swallowed and added, "If you want me to."

The faucet's drip was a drumbeat.

She shoved me. Hard. I gripped a corner of the sink to avoid hitting the streaked, sticky girls' toilet floor too hard. I fell, though. She was so very strong. So powerful. I wanted to cry but I was still a little proud of her. My heart pummeled the panting silence.

"Listen you Bangali Hunchie," Luvlee hissed. Her beautiful, beautiful mouth, her long, perfectly even white teeth, frothing spit appearing at the corners of her toothy snarl. "I don't need your friendship, okay, so don't EVER come near me again, dirty black thingy."

But she herself came closer, standing over me. I was up on one elbow, my rib and hip dinning. She looked down and said, "Everyone knows. Yea, I got preggers. Yea, I got rid of it. Everyone knows. It's nothing. I don't care."

If she'd kicked me in the side now I would've endured it as suffering that would set us free, like the suffering of Jesus with my grandmother's hair on the cross. Deliverance from Evil, it would be. I wanted Luvlee to know that I wanted us to be delivered together, because I was sure that if she did, tears would stream down her face. At last, at last, she'd crumble and fall into my aching, waiting arms.

I used my last healing arrow. "Father Rocco told me. ...you....the.... your brother...."

She'd almost left but she came back. Only steps away, from me on the floor. Outside, some bird keened a ragged tune.

"You lousy, shitty bitch," she said. Then she kicked me in the shin. The pain skittered through me.

"Father Rocco, eh!!" her mouth was twisted. "Do you know, bitch, what he did with Sister Irene? He told you that also? Your *Father?*"

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I didn't know. He hadn't. I didn't want to know about him and Sister Irene. For me, the Rocco cult was over, I'd pulled myself together, the choice between Rocco and Luvlee was clear, no more Divide and Conquer for me. White devil, you have no more power. And.... poor Sister Irene.

Outside, the bird-call was traveling away.

"So shut your dirty bitch mouth, and if you talk to anyone else about me I'll kill you."

"Luvlee," I tried one last time, "it wasn't your fault." I knew she'd see this if I persisted, gently.

"Yeah? How d'you know? You know it wasn't my fault? *Father Rocco* told you?"

Then she laughed, throwing back her head, arching her snowy swan-like throat.

Please GgGgod, I said silently, please Jesus, one more miracle.

Do not bring us to the test.



george lois made me do it (or: on the street again)

Guinotte Wise

In advertising, you win lots of awards. You'd better, if you're a creative; a copywriter, an art director, a creative director, or any number of related titles. "You can't eat awards," you'll be told. "Best of Show for that? My kid could do better." (That, almost out of earshot, but not quite.) "I don't have any clients who let me be creative," goes one lamentation, and often true. But an idea is an idea and even a client who embraces the pedestrian sometimes recognizes and welcomes it.

George Lois said, "The more creative you are the more trouble you're in. You have to be courageous!" No shit. If I could do it over again, I'd thrash right and left, sweep account executives out of the way, bite and kick and growl on my way to the Gold Pencil, the Clio, the Communication Arts Gold. And, looking back, I was often edging toward being fired anyway. Though I did get some of those awards.

A lot of un-PC shit went down back then. Mad Men days, you know. Snap brim fedoras. Skinny ties. We all looked like The Blues Brothers or FBI. Both George Lois and I punched out an account executive, for different reasons. Mine was because of a joke which I found quite funny afterward, though the AE was no longer amused. He went to my boss and said "That lunatic punched me in the dose and I have a client meeting and dow my dose is all swollen up like a doorknob."

"Is this true?" asked my boss.

"Yeah, but." There's always a yeah but for these things. What had happened is the AE had wanted a layout dry mounted and flapped for a client meeting and I had complied. It was my layout and headline for an important ad. What the AE did, and I found it hilarious after the fact, was take a similar piece of board, though blank, put a flap on it like the one I'd supplied. Then he called me in and said, "This work is shit. How can I show it to my client?"

I was dumbstruck. I just stood there. Then he brought the flapped blank board over to me and broke it over his knee, threw it across the room.

Nose connected with. Pure reflex.

I explained all this to my boss, and didn't get fired. That time.

In the words of Billie Joe Shaver, "The devil made me do it the first time. The second time I done it on my own." Today's politically correct outfit would be apeshit crazy foaming at the mouth. Febrile. Speechless. Pardon me while I savor that image. Oh my. We had it good in the Mad Men days. I offer an oft-quoted ad slogan for a wine from then; "Man Oh Man Oh Manischewitz!" Just those words made a wine famous and cleared the shelves of bottles of an obscure but

tasty Concord grape wine. Then, for a decade, it became an honorific for just about anything that used to get a whistle or a shake of the head. It would be said, for instance, when someone made a difficult shot at eight ball.

Next door to this agency on Twelfth Street, the one where an account executive sported a new nose look, was a small hotel which housed a pool room, two tough but attractive shoeshine girls, a shoeshine stand and the girls' "manager." I think he owned the hotel. Some of us would ditch work, shoot eight ball and drink beer in this establishment. The girls ignored us or traded *bon mots* if they were bored, as we were neither big shoeshine tippers nor customers of their more exotic services. Their boss seemed distracted and rarely spoke. Once on my birthday, a friend bought me the two girls' services, but I said, "You don't understand. These two are friends and I couldn't possibly." The girls said, "Happy Birthday" and counted their easy money, but did throw in a shoeshine for me and my friend.

We got phone calls over there. One lady or the other would say, "It's for you. You're supposed to be in a meeting." and hand one of us the phone. Their manager remained distracted. Perhaps it was the lack of business. Perhaps we could do a marketing campaign for him. "We shine at what we do," or "Come in for a shine, leave with a smile."

George Lois wrote a book. *Damn Good Advice*. In it he says you can be cautious or you can be creative, but there's no such thing as a cautious creative.

I did an ad for amplifiers that the client so hated, he almost ditched me. I said run this mother, have some cojones. If I had the money I'd run it for you. He ran it. It got him eight new outlets in Los Angeles and phone calls for more. He said, "I still hate the ad." But he didn't hate the results. Or me. I think he said, "Man Oh Man Oh Manischewitz."

Awards. We all won stuff. Chrome and lucite dustcatchers. But some of the awards stand out now as being meaningful. Once, in Wisconsin, I got a presidential (I almost wrote pardon) citation on a literacy campaign. Still proud of that. And when the agency CEO tossed out a print piece of mine in an upcoming show because, "It's black and white. Nothing black and white ever wins." I waited until he'd gone, stuck it back in. It won Best of Show. He never said a word, but put the award in a place of honor.

When I had my own shop, I wrote and art directed the work in the beginning to save money. Fewer meetings. Quicker results. And the stuff won more awards, got me more work. Soon, the agency was fourteen people and the headaches grew exponentially. Health care. HR problems. Bonus size. Payroll and concomitant growth of salaries. I hired a business guy to run that side of it. He was the wrong guy. This happens when you're not paying attention. I hired another guy to help out with the creative. I wasn't paying attention again. These guys had left failed businesses for a reason. They wanted a paycheck. I realized, finally, I had more of a reason to want to succeed. I was a hard worker as well. Lots of night hours. And sometimes during those hours I'd look around, stretch, and wonder where everyone else was. They had no incentive to bust their ass, and it was too late to figure that in. I was still working when they came to take away the furniture. One client remained, and I had resigned that one day before. I was finishing a last ad for her before I left. That done, I headed for a friend's house for a good night's sleep before I fled to Los Angeles, my tail between my legs.

Denny's after Denny's my addiction. Do you know how many Denny's there are between KC and LA? A bunch. I felt like family. It was like the movie Ground Hog Day when I'd park and enter a similar environment time after time, sit at an empty booth, open a book. The same waitress took my order for a Grand Slam, my road food, over and over. Two eggs over hard, two strips of bacon, two sausage links, crispy hash browns and two fluffy buttermilk pancakes. I was seriously sugared and carbed up by the time I reached Needles, California so I switched to steak and salad.

It's a long drive from Kansas City to L.A. when all you have for company is your failures and the next Denny's, so I invited George Lois along. If I expected any sympathy from that asshole I was wrong.

"So George, I'm headed for the land of dreams. What do I do when I get there?"

"What am I, a haruspex?"

"A what?"

"Never mind. Get a job. Freelance. Become a forest ranger. Work in a car wash."

"Gee, thanks. Seriously, man, I could use some help..."

"Wah, wah. Self pity is the least noble of all human emotions."

"Get the fuck out of my car."

"You mean this Cadillac Limited Eldo Touring Coupe with black matte accents and the smoked windows and the high monthly payments?"

"Kinda cool, though, right?"

"Yeah, for a gynecologist or a guy just got his realtor's license and a full set of Tony Robbins tapes. Or a pimp. You got a fedora with a chrome hatband?"

"Out."

I drove on alone. Passed a promising looking truckstop that said "Prime Rib!" but it wasn't a Denny's. I drove on. Denny's. *Home, home on the road, where the deer and the antelope play, where seldom is heard an ad-guy shitbird and Grand Slams are ready all day.*

I slid into a booth. George slid in beside me. "Grand Slam, eggs over hard," I said. "Nothing for me," George said, after the waitress poured my coffee.

"Hey, it's Mr. Congeniality," I said. "Sit down. Shut up."

“What you do is march in like you own the place. Tell ‘em you are there to save their lame asses from mediocrity. That is, if you have any fucking talent.”

“I have. I have that. What I don’t have is marching bombasticism bordering on mental illness.”

“Oooh. Ooh. That sure hurt. How many Clios you got?”

“One.”

“I have...let’s see, last count, oh why bother?”

I got to Los Angeles. I spent a couple of days roaming West L.A. and the neighborhood I’d landed in, just off Pico Boulevard. Well kept yards, lots of stucco, bungalows, sprinkler systems that would wish on and off. I walked a lot. I was here. Now what?

When I was small, on rainy days, my grandmother would give me shoeboxes of old postcards to look through, many of them from Los Angeles. These were hand tinted postcards, and the colors, I noted now on my walks, were remarkably close to the colors I saw when I lifted my RayBans and took in the yuccas and various grasses and magic blues of jacaranda. The postcards had settled into my memory system and now I was *in* those *Wish You Were Here* faraway communiques. The people who had sent them were long dead and so were the people who’d received them. What the hell was I doing here?

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After a long conversation with an elderly gent who’d seen my Kansas license plate, I decided on a plan of action. The man had migrated from Kansas in the dustbowl era, had applied himself, ended up with a couple of motels, sold them and was living a modestly happy retirement. He’d had less than I coming west. He did it. So could I. I would freelance after a client search. I would also enroll in a Robert McKee screenwriting class--the guy was a legend, the George Lois of screenwriting.

“Nobody’s a George Lois of anything but me. I’m the one George Lois.”

“Oh, hi George. Wonder how you’d do out here. Feel the energy?”

“It’s probably me. Tell me, is the sky always brown?”

“Back to the Bronx or wherever you hail from...”

“Bed-Stuy. You’d last about a minute there.”

I found some clients. Three or four. Some even paid for the work. It was touch and go. Through other contacts, I met some people. One, Dennis Paine, had an agency in Beverly Hills, and I worked there for awhile, mainly on screenplays with him, unpaid, but creatively energizing. I

liked Dennis a lot--he was from Nocono, Texas and a no bullshit kind of guy with a great sense of humor. When I told him I was a little worried about recovering financially there, he said, "Look, you drive a nice car, you dress well, you don't have a pot to piss in--you're like all the rest of us out here, you'll do fine" And, eventually, I did.

A lady I'd worked with in Milwaukee set me up with a meeting in Torrance, with a Dick Hackenburg who ran a direct mail division of Dancer Fitzgerald Sample. He was kind enough to give me a copywriting project. a newsletter for Nokia phones, one of the early entries in cell phones back then. I felt an immediate rapport with him, and went away with the desire to do the best I could on the eight-pager for Nokia. I wrote it, designed it and laid it out graphically. It felt good being back in the saddle on a project for a name like DFS and a sharp guy like Hackenburg. It had been a copy job, but I took it all the way through art direction as well.

"I didn't authorize you to have this comped up like this, just the copy..." He was a little startled to see the whole thing in comp form.

"Yeah, I know, but when I got started it didn't take long. I didn't go over the estimate. Is it okay?"

"It's fine. Great. Let me read it more thoroughly."

I wandered around the office, which was a temporary facility in Del Amo Mall while DFS moved into a building across the lot. Dick emerged from his office, which was mostly boxes and manila folders. He said, have you got a few minutes? I'd like to run this by the creative director over at the new building."

On the way, he asked, "Now you designed this, wrote it, did the artwork, the comp. All of it?" I was getting nervous. It seemed as though he doubted it. I explained I'd had an agency of my own and, in the beginning, I'd done the copy and art, sometimes the illustration. Plus I worked with some good photographers, illustrators and typesetters who allowed me some leeway in payment if the clients were slow. In advertising you get a lot of 90-day pay clients.

"Just wanted to be sure," he said.

We met with the CD, a cool guy from the Bronx that George Lois would identify with. The short story is I got hired. To write on a major car account. The office was new and staffing. They couldn't even supply me a typewriter (Pre-computer days. When I did get a computer, the protocol was ms-dos.) I started with a yellow lined pad and a some pencils. They paired me with a good Detroit art director named Gale and off we went. In a day or two we had a TV commercial that made it through the stages and got produced a few weeks later. I got an office with a door I could shut. This was also before the horrible open office concept where they racked and stacked humans like pipes in a warehouse. I know the reason for "open office." Money. It saves a shitload of money for the big guys to split up. But they are discovering that productivity (money) falls off sharply in rack & stack openness. "But we have meditation chambers, quiet places," they say. Go back to offices, I say. You'll see great work, less sick time. Less churn. Less loss of really good people. Less infection from airborne illnesses. More. Money. Don't take my word for it. Read *Fast Company*. *Entrepreneur*. *Forbes*.

Forgive the digression. I've worked both ways. And I *hate* the open office scam. I started in a bull pen in an Omaha ag agency but soon got an office (right, George, I was good, I graduated quickly) then a lifetime later in my pre-retirement days, it started degenerating into low cubicles with little privacy. Thank god I got out before the elbow to elbow bullshit.

Anyway, DFS became DFS-Dorland, and that became Saatch & Saatchi, and we early hires weathered the changes. The only things that changed were the brass letters on the outside of the building and more people in the offices. It was a glorious time as far as I was concerned. Then the strangest thing happened. I got homesick. I had the perfect job, a quiet town house in Rancho Palos Verdes, a relatively low-stress life, moderate weather, a Harley for Pacific Coast Highway rides into the sunset, the ocean breeze in my face.

“Kansas? Really?”

“Oh hi, George. Yeah, Kansas. Coyotes. Horses. I want horses again. Dogs.”

“You don't even have brown air over here by the ocean. What's wrong with you?”

“Nothing. Just homesick.”

“You gonna stop at every fucking Denny's on the way back?”

“Yes.”

“Count me out. I'm gonna write a book. *Damn Good Advice*. I strongly suggest you read it.”
(Then he disappeared in a cloud of...sulphur.)



(Note: “Damn Good Advice” is. For anyone, not just adguys. Very entertaining, too. This George Lois guy is a living legend. I don't know him, but sometimes I feel like I do.)

not a math person: 3 poems

Jane Yolen

1:

There Is No Music

There is no music in math for me,
just a flat line of numbers,
a tumble of additions,
a remove of minuses,
a stumble of graphs.

My brother and father sing
the answers to math's problems.
But I, with a head of noise,
collapse universes of algebra, geometry,
times and divisions,
Into a single, loud, percussive BANG!

2:

That Darn Math Train

Here it comes again,
around the bend,
so many miles per hour,
over a number of rails,
breaking speed to calculate
station to station,
numbered and timed,
and me only interested
in the driver's ethnicity,
the conductor's first name.

3:

Leaving Math Alone

Things I love in school:
reading, writing, Suzuki violin,
baseball and volleyball,
that history ends in story,
government works like
a clockwork mystery,
how grammar unfolds.
Also, the Oxford comma,
and how the cafeteria
cheese sandwiches snap
like castanets.
So why should I have to
learn math, which is a misery.
Aren't ten things enough?
And whoops! Isn't that
enough of a math statement
for at least a solid B?



hunting

JRM

The first time I returned to you
To gift the meat of the rattlesnake
You beat me.

You sent me out
With rifle, shovel and hoe.

Across creek, dust and sun
Told to avoid the mountain
To stray not too far

Or exist as an alien,
Illegal,
In a place exactly like the one I left.

You sent me out
With message, and motive.

Across the highway of black asphalt and yellow paint And the sun
And the sun
And the sun.

Told to look first with my ears,
To hear next with my eyes,

And fight
As situation deemed necessary.

And the serpent lay in the sun,
And in the sun,
In the sun,
In the sun.

In instinct of care abandoned.
If brush and weed provided cover,
Cracked earth and stone,
An exit.

The ability to walk endlessly avoiding the mountain
At the end of the world.

But rather to both paths end
At my ignorance
And inability to let be be.

You will never get this
But I will still imagine you
Wandering the streets with
Pastels
Watercolors
Streams
Dreams
And hope for returning to a better land.



the wash

Ellen Mary Hayes

wash rinse betray
wash rinse repent
wash rinse repeat.

so lovingly goes the day
her darling yellow locks
he hooked them to his hands
he never thought of loss.

wash rinse betray
wash rinse repent
wash rinse repeat.

his sweetest angel dove
his silly gorgeous love
countless days they braved
he deeply misbehaved.

wash rinse betray
wash rinse repent
wash rinse repeat.

his heart was black as coal
his blood as slick as oil
his energy out blown
his bones to brittle boil.

wash rinse betray
wash rinse repent
wash rinse repeat.

every day he lay
prayers of true display
he's new again and pure
rough and tough demure.

wash rinse betray
wash rinse repent
wash rinse repeat.

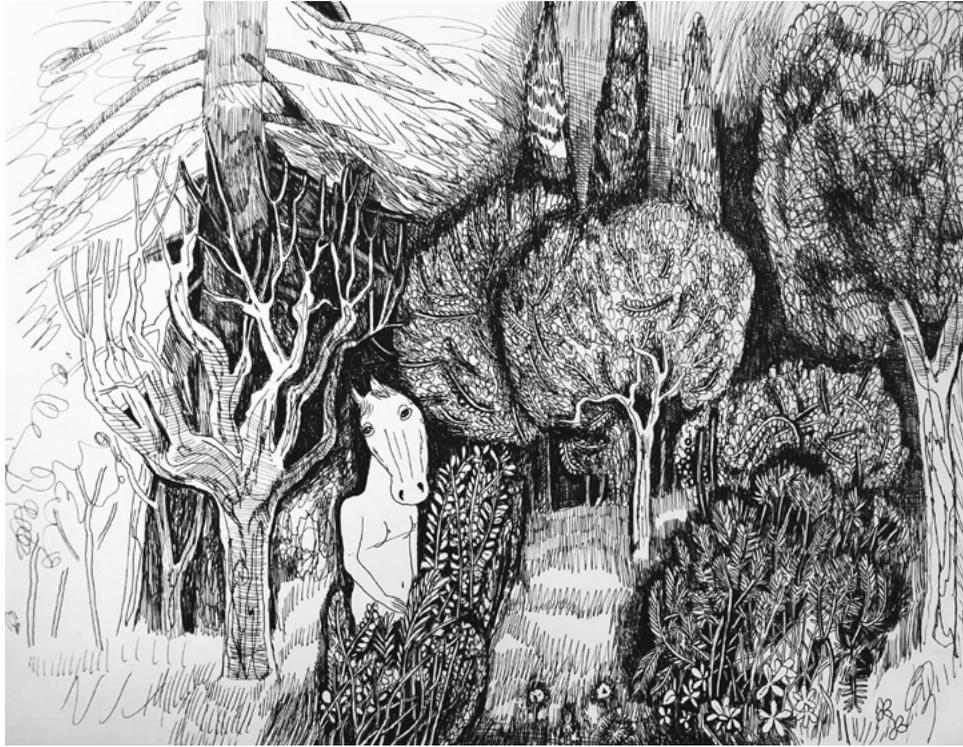


dishes

Ellen Mary Hayes

the angels are washing the dishes
standing up with bent elbows
stuck in sin and leather aprons
sporting tweed coats and quilted anklets
one thousand thread count
bright scarlet hearts
rifling between souls and sinks
the angels are scourging out
 heaviness
lilac plates of lost innocence
crashing down on steel floors
they believe in lives of
 love's decadence
dispassion is never a remedy
yet it surfs up the shinbones
around all human apathy
the angels break out the brass
polish every knuckle
of the green sculpted grass
they are crafting the ivory
of the next great emergency
teacups of ebony scrubbed
 delicately
fire engines pass by outside
the angels are working so
 earnestly.





horsesense
Jennifer Coates

roleplay

Neysa Tapanes

Your ex girlfriend turned you on to solid shampoo bars. They smell good but they don't lather, a greasy scalp is your punishment for filling the ocean with plastic. Next is solid conditioner followed by solid soap, and when you get out of the shower it's time for aluminum free deodorant. You are a natural woman. You let every hair grow on your body. Your unibrow has grown back, the first time since middle school, and deep down you think it's ugly but you keep it because you think it helps you fill quotas.

You meet your Tinder date for coffee and he's already asking for a threesome. He is a natural man. His fingernails are dirty with dirt, his beard is asymmetrical, and he smells like lumber. You hate this man but you will have sex with him. He eats you out and his beard and your bush become one.

When he's done, you're not, but you tell him you'd like to hang out again. He says, "For sure!" but you both know this is not true. He leaves and then you hand wash your dishes while listening to NPR.

You don't shower for three more days. Your landlord texts you asking for rent. You post a screenshot of this message on your Instagram story and caption it: "fuck this slumlord!" Immediately after making this post you Venmo him \$900 and apologize for paying two days late.

The man from Tinder no longer has a couch to sleep on so he asks to stay at your place. You can't say no. When he comes over he makes you throw out your Morrissey t-shirt because it's problematic. He tells you that Twitter is rotting your brain and shampoo bars cause cancer. How could you have been so careless?

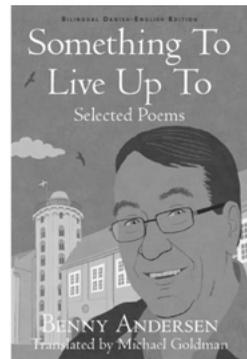


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TRANSLATED POETRY AND PROSE

ORIGINAL POETRY

Signed books and chapbooks



something will hatch

Richard Wayne Horton

Dad gets out of the car. Mamma comes out the screen door and hugs him. Over in the field the peach trees hang low offering fruit.

Sick from cigarette smoke, I climb out of the back seat. The car lets me hatch and wobble on new legs, the seminarian, the saint, the freak. Mamma says "I told Johnny and Bobby to follow in your footsteps." I look in back of me. Must be some mistake. They're not there.

That night I dream I'm taking my issues on a flight to Africa and they're stuffed in a suitcase that keeps popping open under my seat, hatching in mid flight. My missionary robe is in the suitcase, and I'm in the suitcase too, growing new organs and limbs. The plane lands and lays the egg. A knock comes but there's no door so I smash everything and crawl out. The townspeople flee and I realize I'm a giant mantis, swaying and reaching. I chitter, Come back! I have bibles!

I wake and shamble into the dining nook. Graddaddy sits there peppering his eggs till they're dark. "Won't you join me, Father?" After breakfast I go sit in a rocking chair on the screen porch, with a heavy peach smell rolling off the orchard, as shrieking girl cousins run in and out and Cicero lays open on my knee.

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I get up and walk out into the yard. Hot grass collapses under my heel because a mole has been there. I walk to the back fence and look over at a corn field. Mmm! I love the smell of a cornfield on a hot summer day. I climb the fence and push my face between the cornstalks then sit down in the dirt in the deep deep shade and reach for a green wrapped ear. In a dream the yard opened and dad crawled out of the heaving red clay. He waved and yelled, "It's easy being married!" I debated whether to...no, no, get it away!

Later back on the porch washed in sweat I open the Cicero again as the heat-softened varnish of the rocking chair slowly takes me into custody. The rocking chair chuckles and says, got you now you praying mantis! You're gonna hatch. Or something will.

Marriage, We Are Alone, Not Alone

You say to me, as you are Gaius, I am Gaia
I say to you, as you are Gaia, I am Gaius
You say, can you untie the knot of Hercules?
I say, I am untying it
You seize a burning branch
And carry it into my parents house
I follow you with arms outstretched.
My parents say, what is this disturbance we witness?
Inside, you give me the branch
And I put it out
You say, Gaius, you comfort me
My parents ask,
when will you bring us grandchildren?
The chorus says, let all link hands
The priest says, I pour water and I pour oil
The chorus says, we have seen the outpouring
The jokester says, see, the vessel
with the long neck is exhausted from its revels.
My mother says, here is the door
to the inner chamber
The chamber of chambers
Your mother says, take the prize
you have stolen from me
And carry her as a thief does
Over this strange threshold
I say, I am doing it
And now we are alone, Gaia
Not alone, Gaius



steel toed curb

David P. Miller

< steel > < toed > < curb > < bone > < crack >
< ck > < ditch > < ch ki > < ck >
< beat > < steel > < t >
< toed d d > < boot >
< too th >

< nn > < neck > < ck cho > < ke > < sigh >
< ide wa > < walk > < woun > < d d >
< ditch > < ch > < wrench >
< hee > < ll s >
< scar sc >

< rrr > < knuck > < ck > < uckle eye > < eye >
< sss > < igh slit > < lit scor > < orch >
< ch > < curb > < crawl >
< nn ll > < knee >
< skin shake >

()

< tr >
(tremor)

< t >
(tears)

< t >
(tongue)

(sssp) (gasp)

(hold) (bone call) (blood shake)
(hold fever lip)

(call flame breath) (call blood sigh)
(ck call)

(tremble)
(trem)
(tr) (hold)
(t)



house in basilicata

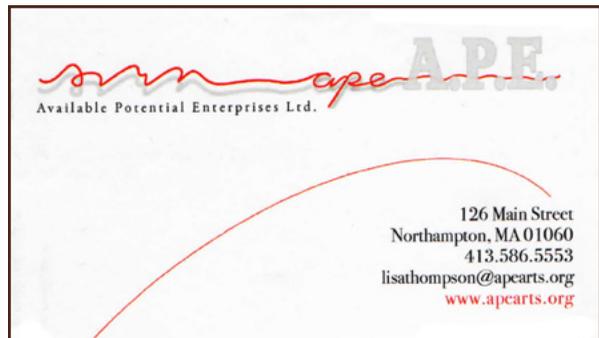
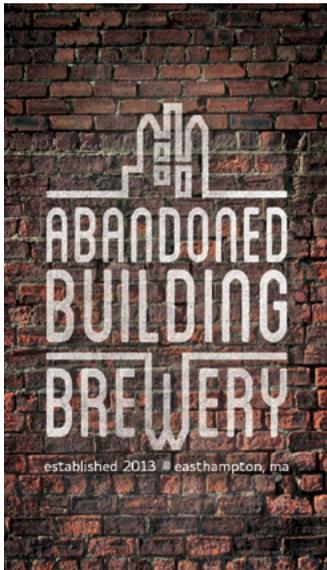
David P. Miller

Planned façade omits openings. Sharp
silhouette lacks cavities. Picture
a flatland peak blue-backed. Solo
chimney ignored by a mothership
ghost house. White
finish flattened
above strafed gravel. Nothing
more than a shred of filament
wall. Nothing
to come home to before upright dust
unpacks. Picture
its moonlike dark side with bed
of sighs. Kitchen table raveled
to butcher-sliced breaths.
Then there
the horizon speaks.

after the photograph by Mario Cresci



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crossing avenue

Robert Runté

Ryan stood on the corner, torn between turning left on Avenue for the subway and home, or turning right on Avenue and that new bar in the Downey Building. He certainly preferred home and Netflix, but he had *promised* himself he'd make more of an effort to be social. But would going to a bar—alone—really count as being social?

Lost in indecision, he hadn't noticed the older woman coming up on his right until she had looped her arm through his, and was dragging him forward across Avenue.

"A bit of hesitation is natural," the woman said, "but you've been standing at the corner for nearly *five* minutes!"

His attention divided between the unexpected grip on his arm, and the stream of cars cutting across the far side of the crosswalk, Ryan managed only a puzzled, "Sorry?"

"I can always spot the re-dos," the woman said. "Always takes a moment to reorient oneself, to face what has to be faced . . ." The woman wagged a finger at Ryan. "But one can't let that drag out, or one freezes up! Loses the momentum!"

"I'm sorry?" Ryan said again, as she dragged him up onto the opposite curb. He'd thought for a moment the old lady might have grabbed him for help crossing the street, but now she was pulling on him to keep going.

"Nothing to apologize for!" she said brightly, completely oblivious to his tone. "Happens all the time. You just need a little bit of a push to get started, is all."

"Look," Ryan said, planting his feet and refusing to budge. "I'm afraid there's—"

"Oh, everyone's afraid, dear! Bit of cold feet, can't face what's coming—all perfectly normal! Wouldn't be human otherwise." She continued urging Ryan forward. "But can't let that stop you! You have to maintain your momentum or it all comes crumbling down. And *that* could make it even worse! Right? But don't worry, that's why I'm here. I'll see you through!"

"Through what?" Ryan demanded, again trying to dig in his heels against the old lady's miraculous strength.

"All of it, dear! The whole terrible business. Your parents sprung for the platinum package, so we'll see you right through to the end." She had a hand on his back, now, as well as the one grasping his elbow, moving him forward. "Though the more of it you can manage yourself, the greater the therapeutic value."

“What are you on about?” Ryan huffed as he seriously struggled to disentangle himself from the old lady’s iron grip.

“Walk as you talk, dear,” the woman insisted. “They can only give you so much lead time, you know. We’re already down to just seconds!”

She dragged him protesting past a row of shuttered storefronts, moving steadily away from Avenue. Ryan started to suspect some sort of mugging, because Avenue marked the boundary between business-downtown and sketchy-downtown. He glanced around to see if there was someone he could call out to, but how would that even look: a strapping young man in a hoodie, tangling with some little old lady on the wrong side of Avenue?

The woman abruptly came to a halt in front of a partially opened door, cut into a larger garage door. She yanked Ryan over and down so she could whisper in his ear, “Remember, the tire iron is on the shelf to *your right*. You mustn’t hesitate, this time!” Then she shoved him through the door.

Off balance, but determined to get away, Ryan pivoted back towards the door, but found it blocked as she followed him in. Before he could steel himself to rush her, there was a crash behind him. It was taking a moment for Ryan’s eyes to adjust to the sudden dark, but the sounds of fighting were unmistakable. There were three—no four—men scrambling around chest-high tool cabinets, a rusty welding kit, and a tipped-over card table in an otherwise empty garage. As Ryan’s vision adapted to the greenish light forcing itself through the grime-smeared windows, he saw the young man in a hoodie swing a tire iron into the head of one of the three biker-guys. The biker went sprawling, his face brutally smashed, as the other two jumped back.

“Oh!” the old lady said, finally releasing her grip on Ryan. “But if *that’s* the re-do. . .” she said, pointing at the young man, “Then who are *you*?” she asked, turning to stare at Ryan.

Ryan raised his hands in a warding gesture as he backed away from the fight, made his way around the crazy lady, and had backed most of the way out the door when he heard a shot.

Ryan was slammed to ground, thrown half-way to the curb. He couldn’t see who had hit him. There wasn’t anyone there. It was hard catching his breath. The woman appeared framed in the doorway, looking down at him.

“Oh, I see!” she said. “You’re the innocent bystander! Just in the wrong place, at wrong time. But nobody could figure out why you had been standing—just there. Why you’d even come down this street.”

Ryan couldn’t breathe.

“Huh! My bad! Such a silly mistake.”



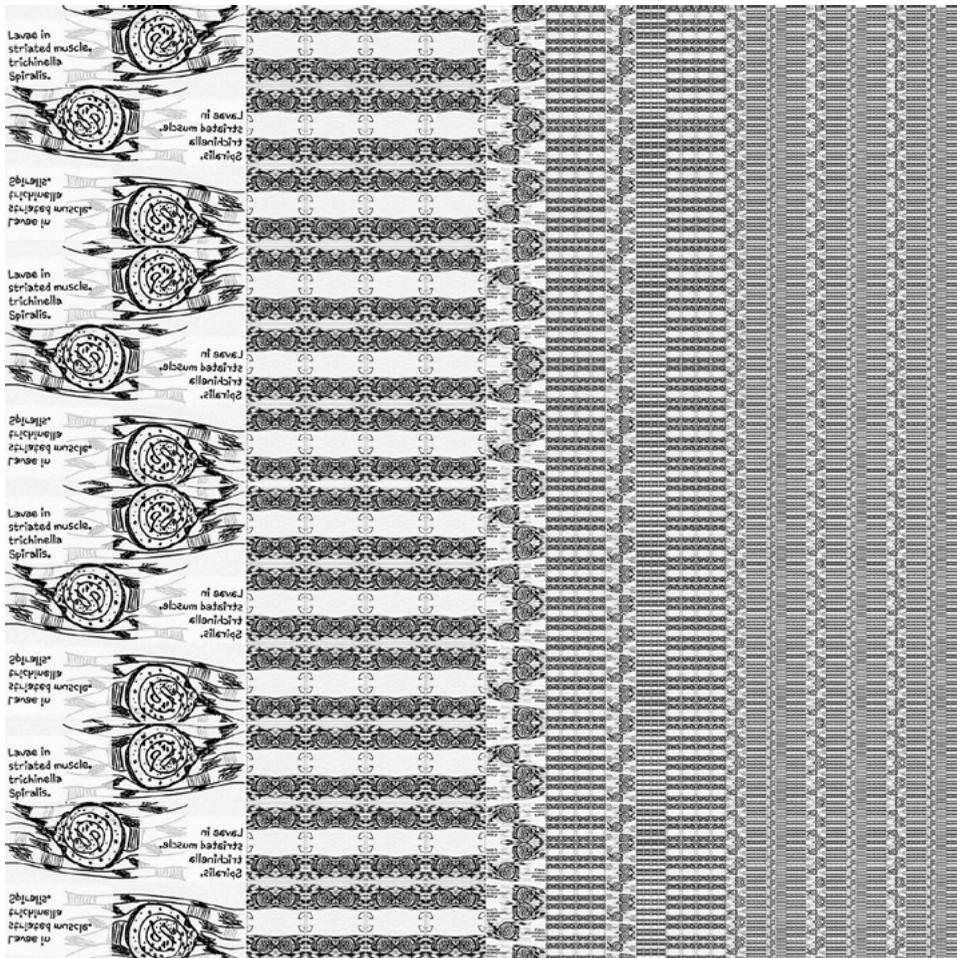


fig a: encysted larvae in straited muscle - trichinella spiralis from practical bacteriology, hematology, and parasitology disease virtually unknown in the jewish & mohammedan faiths
 Stephen James Moore

a few thoughts on entering outer space

Jacob Chapman

I know I'm supposed to say our training
prepared us for liftoff, but holy shit
it did not. I felt like my eyeballs
were being pushed into my skull
and a very large man
was sitting on my chest.
I think I passed out
for a minute there. I lied
and said I felt fine.
After we blasted through the atmosphere,
everything settled down and I really did
feel fine. I asked Vladimir,
my cosmonaut friend, to point out the tundra.
He pointed to Northern Asia and said
All that. All that is tundra.
Well, that makes sense, I said.
You might think I was being irresponsible
or flaky, but mission control
presses most of the buttons,
and one of our most important skills
is being able to entertain ourselves
and not go crazy up there.
I asked Vladimir what the tundra was like.
He said Russia is big place,
I have never been to tundra,
but I hear it is spongy.
It sounds spongy, I said.
I told him space is kind of lonely
as I looked out the window,
and he said of course it is lonely. It is space.
But you are here. And I am here. So not lonely.
Vladimir's the man.
We started pressing a lot of buttons
and moving things around, sequences
we had practiced a thousand times.
Vladimir started humming a song,
a new song about tundra, he said,
about you lying on soft tundra
looking up at sky, stars, and flashing lights.
You sit up and have tea with new Russian friend
and you think this is good.
This tea is good I like this guy.



interview with the city

Jacob Chapman

As the city was winding down
and settling into old age,
I took my pen and my notebook
and went to its office. I had some questions.
The city's secretary said the city's busy.
I said I'll wait. I read the paper
and overheard the city ask its secretary
Is he still there?
Yes sir, she said. Fine, the city said,
send him in. She came out and said
The city will see you now.
I walked in and said hello, Mr. City,
but the city cut me off and said
I wasn't busy. I just wanted to see
how long you would wait.
I know who you are, by the way.
I know all my residents.
The city didn't really have a face.
It was more of a blurry presence.
The office smelled like wood, earth, and concrete.
I said I didn't know
you knew who I was.
Well now you do, the city said.
Do you have some questions, or what?
Oh, right, I said. I opened my notebook.
What was your biggest surprise? I asked.
Electricity, without a doubt, it said.
When they turned it on,
it was quite a rush.
What were the founders like? I asked.
The city groaned and said well,
I wouldn't be here without them,
but they were pretty grim.
Not much fun to be around.
Who are your heroes? I asked.
Well, the city said, like you,
I've had to throw some of my heroes overboard,
so to speak. But some of them
keep coming back. New York, for instance,
which I respect more than I like,
was an early hero. Buffalo.

Now there's a fucking city.
A drinkin' town. It could use
more of an arts scene, though.
I looked at my notebook and said
Well, that's all my questions.
OK, the city said. But before you go,
a few words of advice:
this thing you have with your notebook,
you have to ease up a little.
You drive everyone crazy
writing stuff down all the time.
Live life. Get out there
and meet some people.
Yeah, I guess I'm kind of a loner, I said.
No shit, buddy, the city said.
I like you, and I've enjoyed
watching you grow up,
but you've come to a bit
of a turning point in your life.
You need to giddy-up,
if you know what I mean.
With that, the city slapped me on the back
and said go on, get out there,
I have a bunch of nothing to do today
as I enjoy my semi-retirement.
I stood up and said thanks for everything.
No problem, kid, the city said.
I said goodbye to the city's secretary,
who smiled and said the city likes you.
I smiled too, and as I walked outside,
I wasn't really sure
what to do with myself.
I took out my notebook
and wrote New goal: try to be more open
and try to write
a little less.
The city laughed all around me and said
Well, at least you're trying,
and that's enough for today.



adventure in the sky

Jacob Chapman

I fell in with a balloonist
when I was new in town
and short on friends.
We lived in the same apartment building.
Every weekend, he inflated his balloon
upwind of town and drifted over everyone.
He called himself an anarchist
and said he lived in another world.
I went up into the sky with him
against my better judgment.
He pointed out the defunct canal,
which was amazingly straight,
and the reservoir outside of town,
which, he had to admit,
was an engineering marvel.
I thought I was OK with heights
until we were a thousand feet up.
Then I was not OK with heights.
To distract myself, I asked him
why he called himself an anarchist.
He said I mean it
in the original sense of the word
as he tossed pamphlets over the side
of the basket, pamphlets that said
You Are Surrounded by Love
We Have You Surrounded.
What do you mean by the original sense
of the word? I asked.
I mean this, he said as he climbed up
and jumped out of the basket.
After some free fall, he pulled his chute
and drifted to the ground.
I'd like to say I was calm, but I was not.
I froze. I couldn't bring myself to do anything
until I slowly pulled myself together
and figured out how to use the controls.
It was an amazing feeling,
guiding the balloon to Earth.
When I landed in a field,
the basket rolled over and I spilled out gently
onto the ground. I knew I should be angry
at my balloonist anarchist neighbor,
and I was, but I couldn't stop smiling.



fake money fried rice

Gerald Yelle

Already the cracks are beginning to show. But what can you do. The rebellious and the slippery get all the attention. If you were a salesman you'd understand. The wind blows money across the road, you pull over to scoop some up –you'd like to take it all but it's flying around, stirred up by the traffic, and you don't want to leave your car running in the breakdown lane, and you don't want to get hit. So you get a couple of fistfuls only to find out after driving crosstown with your head in the clouds that it's only play dough: Monopoly money –only it's green –which is why it took you so long to catch on. It's like all the other scams out there: They suck you in and put you through their various poses, none of which makes much of an impression. You get to try out your long explanations. They clarify nothing. You might as well have a preexisting condition, a freeze-dried cornrow, eco-friendly makeup and a sousaphone. None of it makes sense. And there's always a price for jumping into something new. You don't come out smelling fresh as baby's breath. You chew gum until your jaw drops. There's a book that deals with the strain but you don't recall the title. It has something to do with dying squirrels falling out of trees. You might remember why that clicks your trigger. Why it might not be the best way to send a message. One that says to take the hat off. Another that says keep it on. You couldn't contrive a better conundrum if you tried. Still, you got nothing to squawk about: an honest partner, a wide blue sky, and office space.



wedding

Gerald Yelle

I pled guilty to illegal immigration and was soon being followed by an and overgrown official with protruding eyeballs and a proud, protruding stomach in a moth-eaten blue and white military uniform complete with sash, brass buttons and Captain Bligh hat, much like what the beadle wore in *Oliver Twist*. From the depths of my shame I was allowed to attend my wife's sister's daughter's wedding, a prestigious affair forging a bond between high-ranking families from opposite ends of the political spectrum. The bride, like the groom, was a high achiever. Each had a law degree and PhD, which is more than I had at their age –or at any age I might add –but because of my family connections, here I was, underdressed among the multitude crowding the halls and stairwells working our way toward the grand ceremonial ballroom where the vows would soon be exchanged. At one turn in the stairs the procession was moving so slowly I found myself stalled on a landing, staring at a picture on the wall in front of me. It looked like a primitive sketch of a cartoon character I remembered from childhood, except this was supposed to be some kind of abstract surrealism. I wondered if it was a print or an original, if the painter was famous or some knockoff artist. What were the chances something of real value would be hanging in a stairwell? Suddenly, I noticed I was no longer being followed, and that's when the sense of being out of place hit me. Where was my minder? The people around me were in couples and even-numbered clusters, all in formal attire. I would have been happy to have the beadle by me now, to fill out the narrative, to give some explanation as to why I wore a jumpsuit, so I wouldn't have to feel so forlorn.



niece

Gerald Yelle

The girl was trying out a ballet move and crumpled to the floor, saying “I crushed my heel.” She must’ve come down hard on it and felt a jarring in the bone, but I doubted there was any serious injury. And there wasn’t anything we could do about it. I looked at her. Her ankle didn’t look swollen. I had to leave her there because I was busy with other duties. I had to get more tissue paper out of my trunk, because we were wrapping gifts for her birthday party. I was almost glad she would think I was being mean to her now so she’d be that much more surprised when she saw what nice things we’d give her later: A My Little Pony playset that had two My Little Ponies, because let’s face it—nobody likes a lonely pony, and with all the dance lessons she was taking, the girl was sure to leave the ponies untended for long stretches. We also got her a Stretch Armstrong because the salesclerk said it was good for arm strength. That sounded pretty cool. I knew all about Stretch Armstrong from when I was a kid and assumed it got the name because the guy was supposed to have strong arms. But the salesclerk pointed out that stretching Stretch Armstrong’s arms helped kids strengthen their own arms. Probably not a bad thing for a dancer, I thought. What about a Stretch Legstrong, I wanted to ask, but didn’t. They probably make some giant rubber bands you can use to create resistance as you do leg lifts, etc. Anyway I didn’t want to go overboard with gifts, but it was something to see the look on her face, how she thought we were mean one minute, and such great godparents the next. I’m not sure how I really feel about my husband’s sister’s daughter though. I don’t dislike her, but I don’t love her—not the way I love my own children. Which I know is different from how my husband’s sister feels. I know she loves my kids almost as much as she loves her own. It probably doesn’t make her a better person than me, just a better aunt. Should I be worried about my indifference in the face of love? Who knows.

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itch itch itch: notes on a mother's death

Jamie Berger



Photo: Jamie Berger

“Scribble scribble scribble.” At the end of letters, emails, even phone conversations. Or sometimes, *Scribble!!! Scribble!! Scribble!!!* or *scribblescribblescribble*. Sheila Barbara Strongin Berger’s mantra for her only son. Part tongue in cheek, part earnest encouragement, part nag, part self-mocking, she started signing off with it early in the millennium, when writing really, this time I meant it, became *The Thing I Was Doing*, again. With every creative career decision I’d made, every turn I’d taken, every pursuit I’d abandoned 3,000–5,000 hours in (at least 5,000 short of the magic 10,000 hours needed for expertise that Malcolm Gladwell made famous), as always, Mom, in turn, got angry with me for changing course again, then panicked, then worried, then came around to my new pursuit and began her planning and organizing how I would accomplish my goal. Well, everyone knows the only way to write is to write and write and write, which I had (and still have) never steadily, regularly done, not as a poet in my early 20s, not as as a writer-performance artist in my late 20s and early 30s, not as a would-be features and fiction writer in my mid-to-late 30s. Thus, her hope-against-hopeful *Scribble scribble scribble* as I headed back east to be an older creative writing MFA-er at 40.

Fall 2007 she was diagnosed. There was surgery, then chemo, then a good prognosis. Then six months of waiting, then some celebration of what appeared to be recovery at my wedding, in August 2008. A few weeks later, though, there was a shadow on some scan or other, then another test and a result: a little cancer left, but a good prognosis, and a plan: more chemo, starting right away, She was weak all that fall, and sick, much more so than the first round. In November, Mom finished chemo, but remained weak longer than expected, spent time in the hospital, then a few days in a rehab center. So another test. Our Thanksgiving plan had been for me to drive from the small town in Western Massachusetts where I live, the two hours due West to Albany, pick Mom up, and bring her back out to the little town where my wife Anja and I live for her first visit to our new house, on what has always been our favorite holiday. The Friday before I was to come for her, she called and gave me *The News*. I don’t remember just

how she put it, but it was very simply. I do remember her voice sounding more worried about my reaction than her demise—an odd combination of incredible generosity and megalomania, as I look back on it now. How would I ever live without her?

Four weeks to four months, that's what they gave her. Funny word, "gave," as if the doctors get to choose. I got off the phone, packed a bag, and drove to Albany, stayed with her for two nights. Then drove back the two hours to force my reluctant UMass freshmen to learn how to write one more time before they headed home for the long weekend to overeat and party at Homecoming. At Sheila's insistence, I stayed in Mass and went ahead with Thanksgiving with Anja, her parents, our friend Janel, and our dogs and cats.

Black Friday. I wrap the wishbone in a piece of paper towel and head back over the river and through the woods, the two hours to Albany. My ferocious, unsentimental mom nearly cries when I unwrap the bone for us to snap. In the kitchen, we pull at it, or, well, my now-tiny mother holds on tight and I pull—my wish, of course: that she win this stupid fucking contest. I bend the bone just so with my fingernail to try to make it break in the middle and it does and she smiles and says, with tiny-mother astonishment, "I won!"

Sheila Berger has always been short, and small, but no one ever thinks of her as 5' 2" on a tall day because she has a largeness, an elegance—her long, high-cheekboned face, her big, at times daunting personality, her grace. Now, though, she is just plain tiny everywhere but the belly, swelled with fluid around the tumor—she is seven months pregnant with cancer. The cancer is gloating. She lies in bed and thinks and sleeps and wakes, and sometimes still worries, as she has every night for my entire life, sometimes til well past midnight, at the kitchen table, over items on her incredible lists, but not so much now, between her inherent weakness and the xanax and the morphine. And from bed now. Did I have lunch? Does her Saab need new tires before we give it to Anja? Her list gets shorter every day—mine grows and grows.

I sit by her bed. Watching her sleep offers something vaguely like solace. She wakes, "I just remembered that I love poetry," almost smiles, closes her eyes again.

I am Sheila's magnum opus. Unfinished. I haven't finished my homework. I have no career to speak of, creative or otherwise, just jobs. No one told me there was a deadline. And now it's too fucking late. Sheila Berger's existence will not accept any more papers at this date. I FAIL. I fail her. I fail me. She fails? I was the Big Project, after all. I'm 44, I've had plenty of time, been given extension after extension. But I've dabbled and dabbled and dabbled. In acting and poetry and performance art and voiceover and comedy and journalism and fiction and nonfiction, and now, in the middle of grad school, much to her chagrin, a huge digressive turn, co-owning a bar and restaurant. Dabble dabble dabble.

I leave the apartment to go shopping. "Life goes on." Clichés exist for a reason. Out in the world, "Sheila," all over Albany. On a sign, for "Sheila's Wines and Liquors" I'd driven by all my life and never noticed before.

On the radio: "Sheila was going to be the tallest person in the house." I lol for real at that one. Must be one tiny bunch of roommates. She always laughed at being called elegant. When I first get to Albany, I bumble about the apartment I'm still getting used to, since she sold our house, trying to please her. I talk too much, am "oversolicitous," a word she would use. "Stop trying so hard," she says. "Stop talking," she says. "I'm too tired," she says, confused, forgetting she's dying. I am wearing her out just being here, wearing her out bringing her the juice she asked me to bring her. I get it. This is a different kind of tired.

One night, I visit my father, who lives about fifteen minutes away, to watch a Knicks game. While I'm gone, Sheila gets up to go to the bathroom, flips a light switch, sees a spark jump from the switchplate, then nothing, darkness. Something has blown in the shoddy wiring of the recent, shoddy refurb of the "upscale" old building right off the park. She calls, asks me if there's anything I did that might've made it happen. Then she tells me it's fine. It is so not fine. She's furious, with the landlord, the contractor, the building manager, my father, with me for leaving. A bit of the old Sheila, the demon-strength bubbling up, one last time. She pauses, then tells me to enjoy my visit with my father, come home after the game is over, not to worry about it, enough lights are still working. I worry about it at my father's for a few more minutes, then head back. The Knicks are awful this year anyway. When I get there, my mother sits up in bed, crosslegged, and starts talking, and rocking, slowly, quietly, at first, then faster and faster, but with no strength for volume. A rage torrent, at my father for existing and for the fact that he gets to keep on existing, at me for suggesting that she might want some to have some friends visit the other day. *How could you have suggested those people to me what would I say to them what were you thinking I can't stand it I can't stand those people why would I want to see them don't you even know me you do know me though so how could so what were you . . .* and on and out it comes it pours. This is her last rant, last burst, barely above a whisper. She sits and rocks as speaks, then stops looking at me, just looks straight ahead, murmuring on, in a trance. *Fucking Mark Berger your goddamn father just wants to see me because he wants to cry . . . maudlin bullshit . . . wants to feel sorry for me, for himself.* I sit with it. Go Sheila Go! I don't want her to stop, but she is running out of gas. She finally stops, starts to cry. Tells me to leave her alone, so I leave the room, wait for it. Calls me back in a minute later. Apologizes, but still doesn't understand *how I could think she'd want to see those people. . .* I tell her I'm sorry, I won't suggest any visitors again. I tell her I'm sorry I don't understand, but I don't understand the not wanting to see anyone. One of my main jobs is to be her sentry. She has cut everyone off but me. In her position, I imagine I'd want to see every dear face, touch people, hold them. Sheila's deepest fury right this minute is that I don't know the inside of her head as well as she does, that not enough of me is her, not enough her is me. She reaches to pull me in for a kiss, holds me for three four five seconds, then says she's sorry again, tells me to go away again. I look in maybe five minutes later and she's dead asleep.

Now she's in bed all the time, except to go to the bathroom, which she still gets up and does on her own. Occasionally makes her way to the kitchen to try to eat a few crackers, drink some ginger ale, maybe try a piece of a slice of canned pear. She doesn't like me to linger, just to be nearby, on call in the living room.

It's gotten completely dark in the past hour. I sit down in my chair by her bed, in the dark. She wants to tell me about crackers. *Those crackers, the ones you like. The salty-sweet round ones, you know. Up in the cupboard above the sink. But if you open them sweetie, please tie them up in a baggie with a twisty.* (long pause, as she gathers her strength, something important is coming) **It would**

not improve the end of my life to see a mouse. Okay mom. I laugh. *I'm not joking.* Okay Mom. *I know it's funny sweetie, but do it, okay?*

Jamie? Jamie! Coming, Mom. What were you just doing out there? Making a drink? No, Mom, but I was thinking about it, want one? (a joke—I still try) She: hint of a smile and a look. She is not worried about my drinking, she's fears me *not* self-medicating. *What was all that noise?* I tell her I'm just doing some dishes, going through the mail, tossing old magazines, like she asked. But I kept all the clippings, I tell her, like she asked. All her life she has clipped clipped clipped articles images comics, from the Times, the New Yorker. *Clippings? it's too late for fucking clippings. Ha!*—this laugh, and the Mouse/Cracker Directive, momentary bursts of not-dead-yet energy I've come to savor—she's still rolling, *There's a title for you, Sweetie: "Too Late for Clippings," but no one would know what you're talking about,* she weak-laughes again. She's out of breath from all the talking. There's a sentence I never thought I'd write about my mother. *Okay, go away. Go have a drink, sweetie. Have some dinner.*

I tiptoe back in a little while. She lies there, sleeping, facing the windows in the late afternoon graying, on her right side because that's the only comfortable way for her to lie because of the fluid, looking out the window. I imagine she's drifting in and out of sleep, thinking of poorly re-wrapped crackers and mice and clippings and lists and chores, and maybe poetry, or some Hardy or Virginia Woolf, or maybe a song, maybe some jazz, or Bronski Beat, "Smalltown Boy," which I bought her the 12-inch of, a million years ago. Lists only in her head now. Not like before, the nightly ritual, papers sprawled out around her on the kitchen table, pens and highlighter and pencil and scotch the tape and post-its and Wite-Out at the ready, to scratch off, add, cover up. So much of her daily life for decades, adding things to and scratching off those gorgeous chaotic, sculptures, monthly desktop calendars covered by layers upon layers. The anxiety as they grew, what needed to be done, then got done, the joy of scratching things off. The end of that joy. I do the listmaking and scratching-off now. She is on *my* list now.

I watch TV in the living room, sitting on the floor in front of the couch, volume very very very low. Young women are competing to be Paris Hilton's best friend. I am watching young women compete to be Paris Hilton's best friend. Sheila Berger is dying while I watch young women on TV compete to be Paris Hilton's best friend. I don't watch these shows. I don't know why I'm watching this one now. A girl sits in a hot tub telling the camera, telling Paris, her voice a-quiver, why she wants this soooo bad, "I'm not here to be a rock star, I'm not here to get anything, I'm just here to be your friend." The season is just starting. Sheila Berger will leave the world without knowing who will become Paris Hilton's new best friend.

Anja visits. At first, I wrote the words "my wife," which felt cold. We are much closer than that, of course, but in the scope of things, here, right now, she is "my wife," a distant thing from a far place from here. She and Sheila sit in the dark together. Very-thin Anja looks downright stocky next to my mom, her arms wonderfully thick, full of warmth and vigor. It's almost unbearably good to have her here, because I know she has to go back home, to go to work tomorrow. We stay up late, tiptoe around, silently scream at the horribly redone supercreaky floors.

In the morning, I burn toast in the decades-old toaster oven I've known for half my adult life. Anja throws the bread in the sink, but it's too late. Mom smells it, calls me. She's sitting up. *How could you, you know that toaster, you know I—I'm sorry I'm sorry you didn't mean it. But dammit—*

Sorry, Mom, Sorry. And then I realize that while Anja's rushing around the apartment fanning smoke I'm burning the next batch as we speak and run out of the room. Toast is on fire this time, fuck fuck fuck. Anja and I, running around, opening windows (in December), fanning with towels, praying the smoke alarm doesn't go off, as Sheila goes on talking from her room. Yes *yes you've got a lot on your mind, of course, and it's just burnt toast, not much in the grand scheme of things—no—no not much at all, but how could you? You **know** that damn toaster oven.*

Sheila wants to *talk* to me about something, but tells me to have some breakfast first. I very very carefully make more toast, then join her. *Sweetie, when I'm gone . . . when I die . . . you like to eat . . . and you might gain some weight.* This has always been an issue between us. Always checking me, sometimes even patting my stomach, giving me one or another version of: *You're getting a belly. Don't get a belly, sweetie, don't be one of those thin men with a belly.* I've always had a belly. I inherited it from her. As an adult, I've never gained or lost more than ten pounds. I exercise. I am healthy. She continues, *When I die, you go ahead and eat if it makes you feel better. You'll gain some weight but that's okay. You'll get back to normal in time. Do what makes you feel better, don't worry about it. . . .* Okay, Mom. I will. I feel I might cry. I decide not to. This is an odd, powerful gift, an oddly powerful gift. This is grace, letting go of control, of me. This, it turns out, is what grace feels like—ridiculous. She sends me away. I sit on the living room couch and really cry for the first time since I got The News.

It's time to go. Two giants arrive to take my mother to hospice. Humongous ambulance men. The smaller one is about 6'2" 250lbs. The huge one is much bigger in every way—he lifts my mom out of bed like she's a toddler. Her not-5'2" is now well under five feet. Her 135-some pounds that she always wanted to lose five of now down to what must be 85, tops. "Just pretend we're dancing, sweetheart" the giant says, as he hoists tiny rag-doll Sheila, incredible, into a wheelchair. Sheila Berger is dying, fast, but she's just 73, not nearly as old as she's come to look in the past month, flesh hanging off her bones, face sunken more each day, more of a skull than a head. Deathly. The two giants don't realize they're taking her in for good and all, they just know we're going to the hospital. They talk to her in ways that someone talks when someone is going to the hospital for the normal reason, to get well. The way you talk to someone who's going to be coming home again.

I have always trusted doctors, even liked going to them, because they tell me what's wrong and eventually fix it. Until they can't. This is what we learn, now, Sheila and I. *Until they can't.* Sheila has always driven doctors up the wall. There's a public service announcement on TV lately encouraging people to ask their doctor questions. It shows some guy asking a million questions to the phone store clerk, his car mechanic, a waiter, but then in the doctor's office, Doc says, "Any questions?" and the guys says, nothing, shakes his head, nope, uh-uh, I'm good. That ad was *not* made for Sheila Berger. She researched and printed out articles and clipped and copied and brought her lists into their offices and *got her goddamn questions answered.* She'd sit down in their offices, unpack her bag and begin the interrogation. She made doctors miss tee-times. Male doctors especially hated it. But a month from now, when I call the woman who was her long-time GP for the last time to tell her Sheila is gone, she cries. That's how it is with Sheila Berger. She's a great pain in the ass, great meaning "big" and "overwhelming" and "wonderful." A wonderful pain from which I will soon have horrible relief.

Three days after her 73rd birthday, here we are at “The Inn,” The fucking Inn, the hospice wing of St. Peter’s Hospital. No more research to be done, no choices to be made. No more questions to be asked/answered except for a few about time and pain, and I’m the one doing most of the asking. Everyone gets a single room at the Inn. People are dying to get in and then they die to get out. *Ba-dum bum, tshhhh*. I’ll be here all week. *Good*, she says, out of nowhere, once we’ve got her set up, *I don’t like the number 72*. You don’t like twos, it’s true, I agree. *You and your nines*, she replies. Me and my nines, her and her threes. When my father and I went to the track once or twice a summer, she’d always give me three dollars to bet on the three horse in the third race.

Today, the intake nurse talks to us. Sheila tells her she wished she lived in Washington (state) so she could pull her own plug, that she hates this waiting to die, that she doesn’t want to watch herself waste away. The woman tells us that at hospice they don’t think of it as waiting for death but as “another phase of life.” My mom looks the poor woman dead in the eye: *Well I don’t see it that way*.

Done versus Finished. I remember a Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner conversation about “done” versus “finished.” Walter, my mother’s mentor and friend, her former professor, former chairman of the English department they were both in for thirty-some years, disgusted with his students for not knowing the difference between the two. “It’s so very simple.” Walter, tall and aristocratic, a British-y, deep-voiced Canadian—formerly competitive tennis player, decorated WWII vet who came back and went to Harvard for his Phd, Walter Knotts, truly elegant, probably life-long closeted gay man. “How, how can they be so daft?” To this day, with my two-going-on-three degrees in English, I can never remember the difference. Sheila is done? Is finished? When food is cooked it’s done, when we’ve eaten it all, it’s finished. Is that it? Is she done, ready to come out of the oven of this life, ready for carving? Or finished, all eaten up, nothing left but scraps.

Sheila Barbara Strongin Berger lies in her hospice room at The Inn becoming a skeleton and I think *I am fucking hungry I really want to go eat some fucking KFC I really want to go flirt with that bartender girl (she’s 24, Rachel, a girl compared to me, certainly, if not the word I’d use in public) at the Thai restaurant next to the KFC. I really want to go play online poker. I want to consume, I want action action action! I crave action*. There is very little action available to me right now. Sedation is much easier to come by, via drinking, via Mom’s xanax. And so I go the bar of the Thai place next to the KFC where the Rachel girl works and I drink and I chat with her and she chats with me, seems relieved to have a stranger to talk to on a dead night and when she goes off to serve someone, I read my book I’m reading. *Action and sedation*, perfect. She tells me about school, about her punk-rock boyfriend. I tell her about my mom. I read an amazing page I love and I read it again, and repeat: sip whiskey, flirt, watch her healthy young hands and arms make drinks, watch the rest of her as she walks away, read again, and repeat, and the world softens a bit and I am grateful and thankful for reading and sad for Mom who doesn’t even have the energy to listen to me read to her, and then for myself for not ever taking the time it would take to even conceive of writing such a page I’ve just read and reread, such an important page, a page that makes some people think about something momentous in a new way, makes others think about it for the first time, and laugh and shake their heads and maybe later take action. Read, sip, watch, repeat. I write a note about the page in a small black notebook, and now I’ve typed it here. Scribble.

Back in the apartment, I chomp down my Three-Piece, Original Recipe, holding on as long as I can to this couple-hour respite/reverie. It's *extremely* hard right now to see the point in healthy living when someone who, for the past twenty years, measured her portions to the ounce, exercised exactly as much as the books told her to, did her yoga, drank her green tea . . . you get the idea . . . is where she is right now *four weeks to four months* from her end, at 73.

No more tiptoeing around the apartment. I stomp the fucking creaky fucking floors. I turn the TV up. I sleep in my mother's bed. On the sheets she's been sleeping on. They don't smell like anything. Nothing left of her to smell, no sweat, no shit or piss, nothing. The idea of sleeping on this bed feels kind of creepy, but what a great mattress! I get good and sedated with one more pill and one more drink, and actually sleep six hours straight.

Through this all, friends on the other end of the phone—enlightened, liberated (what we now, a decade later, call “woke”) men, tell me to “be strong.” BE fucking STRONG. How ridiculously macho and useless a thing to say. What the fuck is in that for me. Women do not tell me this.

“Be weak. Feel EVERYTHING!” That's my fucking motto.

Not that I live up to it or anything, but it's good to have a motto. Carpe Mortem.

Five days before my mother is to die, 17 days after they “gave” 28–120, I sit in the huge leather lounge-chair in the fluorescent dayroom at the Inn. A pair of overweight, early-teen cousins watch TV. Visiting a parent or grandparent, I wonder. One is on the phone, she is whiny-sarcastic: You **know?** Why I **don't?** find that **funny?** she asks.

I play Wurdle, a Boggle-ish word-finding game, on my iPhone, at 3am, at her bedside. I love my iPhone. Each game is three minutes: ready . . . go! Dead, Deadly, Deathly, ade, deed, dad, done, donut, enod (well, I tried), node, noded, nodes. No “mom” this screen but she does seem to show up a lot lately.

I sit, I pace, I watch TV in the day room in the middle of the night. I leave the hospital, I go to the seedy, old-man dive bar across the street. Behind the bar is one very old man, the game on the TV. I am the lone customer. One too many, by the look on his face. I have a shot and a beer and go “home.” I look at porn, I play poker online. I watch TV. All at once. It starts to get light out, so I go to sleep. They will call me if anything happens. I am positive they won't reach me and I'll miss it, somehow, and I'll have fucked up again.

Daytime. I visit my father for lunch. He actually asks “How is she?” I look at him, I look across his living room. I notice he's bought a home blood-pressure machine.

That time she said she wished I was gay. Or did it ever even happen? I'll have to ask her. I know it happened, but in what context? There's a sentence I won't be thinking for long: “I'll have to ask her.”

At the end of freshman year of college, she called me in New York and screamed and screamed at me on the phone for looking for an apartment and a summer job before finals were over. *Fucking this fucking that, you're a fuckup!* The Sheila rage. (The apology a few hour later, of course.)

She, obsessing over my life of distractions, of unfinished projects, flawed, unrealized, undone, distractions stopping scribbles from being more than just scribbles, sketches, beginnings so many beginnings of stories, novels, poems, plays, artifacts of unrealized *potential*. Teachers telling her that I had a great deal of it, it all the way back to middle school. I remember screaming back at her over the line, until I cried, she was being so unfair, but, as always, also spot-on, a C+, some Bs, an A-: it's the life I've more or less led, a 2.99999 GPA life (back when a 3.0 was a B).

Day two at the Inn. She is finally getting comfort, aka more morphine. Hospice is largely about comfort/morphine. A place to go to be given it, to give in to it. A little more each day. We say we don't euthanize, but that's exactly what we do, if subtly. Thank God. The head nurse, an actual her-real-name Donna Reed¹, is very nice, and good. A bit too hospice spiritual-self-help-y peppy, of course—"What do YOU need?" she asks me, often—but good. She cares. For the first time in weeks Sheila sleeps for hours at a time, and peacefully. It's just about all she does. When she wakes, one time, I gently rub at the furrow lines between her brow. I am getting used to touching her more. Holding her hand, petting her arm. I will do these things. She will let me. Sheila Berger is teaching me how to die. She is an excellent teacher, as always.

Sitting on the toilet in the little bathroom next to the kitchen that's available for all to use, at The Inn. They're nicely set up for people to stay a while, to settle in. Outside someone sits down at the dayroom piano and begins to play a player-piano-sounding version of "We Three Kings of Orient Are." It is December after all. Plinky plink plink. A rush of memory comes:

66

Christmastime, years ago. Up our block were two houses shared by six of my mom's Consciousness-Raising-group friends, her radical lesbian friends, the people she won't let see her now. Judy wears a cashmere cowl-neck-sweater. Joan plays the piano while Francine directs us in rousing "We Three **Queens** of Orient Are" and other re-gendered holiday hits. Here at the Inn, the dayroom piano plinks on.

Sheila's neck is all spine and two ropey hints of muscle. Her body is eating her to stay alive but all the while the cancer belly grows and grows. The cancer still gloating. We let it gloat. We don't worry about it any more. Just about comfort. To get mad at it now is just to lose again.

Back at the apartment, half-drunk and rageful and full of bad Chinese food, needing sleep and wanting action action action. I google "strip club" and "Albany." In my life of porn and peeps², I've never been to a strip joint in my hometown. A few minutes later, I'm down in a seedy edge of wrong-side-of-the-tracks Albany I never even knew existed. Down by the river, at "Ciro's Place." The club has a parking lot with a barbed wire fence around it—promising. Inside the club is very small, dark, not terribly filthy, but somewhat rundown. The dancers are black. As is the bouncer. And the bartender. A Bud is just \$4.00, a bargain for a club. It's an empty weeknight, after midnight, and it's just me, the bouncer, the dancers, the bartender. A dancer comes up. We have the usual chat, what brings me here, do I want a lap dance, I'll think about it. She is half drunk and pouty. I buy her a drink. She rubs against me. Hand on my thigh. Tells me about her daughter, about moving up from Philly. Do I want a dance yet? Maybe soon. How 'bout now? Okay, sure. I really really don't want a lap dance, but her daughter's future education really wants me to. I pay her \$15 for the dance. She rubs around on me. And I'm not even attracted to her, she's so obviously bored. I pay for a second dance. I manage to beg off on a third and get out the door. Action, yippee.

In the living room, I watch TV and pretend that I can write while I'm watching TV because I'm allowed to do whatever I want right now, tap out some notes about the evening. Eating is just one of those escapes of mine, Mom. But she knows that. The rest was inferred. I can do whatever I want because my mother is fucking dying and she said I can, that's why. You got a problem with that? I know how to touch-type because she made me learn how between senior year of high school and college—so YES I CAN ABSOLUTELY write and watch TV—thanks, Mom! I'm doing it right now, to NBA highlights. So there. As I sit here, post Ciro's, I wonder, what are *your* secrets, Mom, where are they? You must've written something down, you wrote everything down. And if I find something? Or if I find something in my head that I really really want to ask you, something I want to know, some advice I need you to give, I can't because YOU CAN HARDLY TALK ANYMORE. And in a day, maybe two, you won't be able to talk at all. And a day or so after that . . . I stay up late. Late late. 5am late. I will be in no shape tomorrow. I don't need to be in shape. This is a fucking vacation. A vacation of grief. I have nothing else on my calendar, no commitments at all.

Donna Reed tells us she needs to perform a procedure to see if my mother is retaining urine, something like an ultrasound, to peer through cancer belly and look at her bladder, to insert something in her to drain fluid, maybe. My mother breathes, *Is this . . . for longevity . . . or for comfort?* Comfort, Donna replies. Sheila nods, this is the answer she wants. If we'd met under more pleasant circumstances, I'd fire "It's a Wonderful Life" lines at Nurse Donna Reed. "Mary, dontcha know me?" It's probably on TV every day now. A movie my mother and I watched together many times. My favorite Christmas movie. I think she likes "Miracle on 34th Street" a little better.

Sheila Barbara Strongin Berger is ready for her life to end. Time's up. Pencils down.

In the day room. Lights are off, late afternoon again, dusky. Quiet but for hum of hospital. I walk down the hall. They have drained the fluid, offering some relief. My mother sits upright, her electric bed has seated her upright. After being scanned, drained, and sleeping all day, she can barely speak: *I've been sleeping so much. Usually after they drain me I'm so much stronger. Don't know why I'm sleeping so—*. . . The pause is long. She takes a deep breath, a big effort. *I'm dying.*

We go to doctors, to hospitals, expecting to be made well, no matter what we know to be true. We expect. To go on. To keep scribbling. Stopping makes no sense at all.

I sit in the day room, three-AM, lights out, visitors gone except for the one family on death watch all packed into the room down the hall. I've been to the old-man bar plus half a xanax, but I can't go back to the apartment, can't bear to leave here, to sleep, can't risk missing it. So I play poker on the screen with people awake, somewhere, people in Vegas, and Sweden. Notoriously, bizarrely aggressive, the Northern Europeans. I bet and I raise and I fold, I win and I lose, and I . . . go look in on her. I turn out the bedside lamp. "Bedside," lovely word. Her lungs pump air, in out in out, in and out. The fucking horror. All my life I've had nightmares of my father dying. Never her. She is supposed to keep driving me up a wall forever. My heart won't stop pounding and I have no more drugs for it right here and . . . fuck. Where's MY morphine? Does everyone visiting The Inn think this at some point?

I am the only visitor. No one but me. They will not will not will NOT see her like this, her dictum. All those so-called friends, all those people who've betrayed her in one way or another. These last years she sees betrayal everywhere. Somehow never in me. They will *not* remember her this way. This is part of her thinking. See Mom, I do know you. I do. I just hoped there was someone, anyone besides me and Anja, you could let in, we could let in. But I am the gatekeeper, and I have kept that fucking gate. No one has dared disobey Sheila's rules, certainly not now. The word is out. They don't come. They sit at home and wait for word from me. At the memorial next spring they will talk to me about it, some of them, their anger a burden, impeding their sadness, their mourning, their closure of the Sheila Berger book, that I try to help them unload, that day, and we will all feel better, at the angriest memorial ever.

My mother is about to die, but I will keep on living. A simple, declarative, complex sentence. Declarative? Complex or compound? How many years teaching English in one way or another and do I even know what that means? It is a sentence making a declaration, but is that what a declarative sentence is? Did she ever teach me this? I don't think "finished" vs. "done" meant much to her, but yes, I know she taught me compound and complex sentences. Does anyone even use those terms anymore? Sorry Mom, sorry Walter. Words don't always mean what they mean. This I declare. This is how it goes. It goes this way. Suddenly I'm writing like Laurie Anderson. Yes. "Oh Mom and Dad, Mom and Dad, ha ha ha ha ha ha ha-ahhh."

One of the nurses tells me she's stable, that I can go back to the apartment and shower and rest a little. I do shower—long, hot. I hang on to that bar she made them install when she moved in and lower myself into the tub. I sit, and sob, really really go at it. I force it, like puking, until I really am almost gagging. I sleep and wake and go back to the hospital. Morning people coming to work. Others checking out. Shift change. Something very alive about all this. I want to hug them all for this bustle. In her room, Sheila tosses and turns, opens her eyes looks around, but can't see me, can't see this world anymore, zombified, her gaze, like nothing I've ever seen. Mostly just reflex. She was always so present, direct: *Look at me when I'm talking to you, Jamie*. Now she's all horizon, far away. She scratches and scratches her arms, her belly, then she turns, suddenly stronger, turns and looks right at me, out of nowhere, says, *Itch itch itch*, assertive, almost annoyed, but resolved, an almost comic *what can ya do?* statement. Lies back down, closes her eyes, scratches and tosses and turns. The pamphlet told me about this restlessness near the end. I tell Donna Reed. She ups the morphine. Mom stops tossing and scratching. Donna Reed turns to tell me something. Then she doesn't. Knows I know. That Sheila probably won't be tossing any more. That she's really not here any more. Nothing more to worry about. No more scribbling, no more itching. *Itch itch itch*—famous last words.

First the old woman with the big, weepy family was gone. Then, just today, the younger woman, middle-aged at best, heavyset, who would cry out undecipherable sounds for hours to whichever loved one was at her bedside or out in the hall. I could only see her through a crack in the door as I paced the halls. Her people scowled at me, as if I didn't belong there. But I come this morning and they're the ones who have no place here anymore. I'll be staying from now til the end. Getting so close. Can't miss her going. Can't bear to let her go alone. Not to see her go, not to see her off. Need to see it to believe it. Sheila's dying and death itself. To accept it. A boy can dream.

I call Anja, tell her to come in the morning. Morning comes, and here she is. So good. Young woman, those arms so warm with blood. Alive. Her lovely loving face. So alive, so warm. It's midday, nothing changes, but it's coming, coming.

Donna Reed adjusts my mom on the bed, ups the morphine again, for comfort, always for comfort. Sheila moves around now a little, but hardly at all. Is a mind working in there, even to dream, or just a brain sending signals to a body pumping stuff around for a last little while? Donna leaves, shutting the door behind her, and soon my mother's breathing starts to slow. Five seconds, ten, twenty, between breaths. The inhales are gasps, the exhales define expiration. We think it's over. Then one more.... Then one more.... Shorter and farther apart. Something still fighting. Then nothing for a long time, thirty seconds, a minute, ninety seconds. Nothing. We cry, we hold each other. I take my dead mother's picture, I don't know why. She would get it. She always got it, got me. We say goodbye to someone who isn't there. Soon they will take her away. Unbearable. I keep kissing her right at the bridge of her forehead/nose. The horrible horrible relief. Cold little bones. Done.

*

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donna_Reed

² <https://psiloveyou.xyz/peep-show-9912979642cd>





garden ghosts
Jennifer Coates

somewhere down

Marian Kent

A lifetime
of chipped mugs ago
I sipped tea
looking out
over the Susquehanna
while you talked

I don't remember much
but for the mint-tingle
of warm pottery
on my lips
and the mood
of the wide, wide river



conflagration

Marian Kent

We'll require
more helicopters
to enforce compliance
with the national curfew
and ensure that nothing
gets out of hand
during our regular
celebratory bookburnings



circular logic

Marian Kent

Listen
for the sooted canaries
springing from rain grey
January days
concomitant moonless nights
as they
reveal the consequence
of unrestrained might
sustained disregard
for their faux-winter song
right in front of our earthworn
weary and solitary faces
they are trying to warn us
if only we would
listen



a tongue of broken glass

Seth Cable

“But, that’s all because we worship the Goblin Prince,” he told his friend one afternoon in his bedroom.

“Wait, what?”

“It’s because we worship the Goblin Prince. That’s our religion. My family’s religion.”

A pause. “What’s your religion? Goblins?”

“The Goblin *Prince*,” a special emphasis placed on ‘Prince’. “We have a shrine to him downstairs in the freezer room.”

“Do you mean that picture of Jesus next to the hooks? That’s just a picture of Jesus.”

“No, that’s only a ruse. It’s meant to look like Jesus, so that nobody suspects. But, it’s actually the Goblin Prince. We say prayers to him there in the middle of the night.”

“Bull. Crap. You do not.”

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“We do. My dad wakes me and my sisters up around 11:55. We all eat one oyster in the kitchen, and then we move downstairs to the freezer room to pray.”

“Really? So, how do you pray to the ‘Goblin King’? What do you pray for?”

“It’s the Goblin *Prince*,” a special inflection placed on ‘Prince’. “And we pray for the same kinds of things everybody prays for, I guess. Your soul, so that your soul isn’t eaten when you die. You pray for your health and safety. You pray for your ignorance and normalcy. For riches beyond imagining.”

“Uh huh? Well, what does one of these prayers sound like? Show me a prayer!”

“I can’t do that! You can’t just recite a prayer outside of worship. It’s blasphemy.”

“Fine. Then, do it in worship. Let’s go downstairs to your Goblin *Prince*,” a special intonation placed on ‘Prince’, “and you go and pray to him the way that you do every night.”

A hesitation. “I’m not sure we’re supposed to pray to him in the middle of the day.”

“What does that matter? If he’s really God, he doesn’t care if it’s the middle of the day or not. You can pray to God whenever. It’s *God*,” a special burden placed upon ‘God’, “he’s beyond night and day.”

“But the Goblin Prince *isn’t* God. It’s just who we worship.”

“What do — But if he’s not God — Why don’t you just guys just worship God?”

“I don’t know! Why don’t *you* worship the Goblin Prince!”

“I don’t worship the Goblin Prince because *he isn’t real!* This is just some bullcrap you are making up *again.*”

A glare, in tacit rejection of the presupposition. “You think I’m lying about this. Fine. Fine, I will show you.”

In the kitchen, he slung open the door to the refrigerator, and took out a small white bucket with an orange lid. Holding up the bucket to his friend’s face, he removed the lid with dramatic flare, revealing a number of raw oysters resting on ice cubes.

“See? We keep some for every night.”

“Okay. Go ahead and — ”

Without letting his friend finish – and without ever breaking eye contact – he reached in, snatched out an oyster, and consumed it in one hurried slurp.

“Follow me downstairs then.” In the freezer room, before the wall of hooks, beneath the picture of Jesus the Goblin Prince, he crouched. His friend stood behind him, anger softening into curiosity. He began that afternoon just as they all began together every midnight:

Eyes made from paper,

A tongue of blown glass,

Lips cut from styrofoam,

Teeth of polished brass,

Kept within a closet, until the light outside had died,

All the world’s afire now. Nothing left to hide.

Above the two boys, an image formed that immediately drained all hope and joy from life, rendering any continued existence a torture beyond imagining. A voice emanated from this image, equal in its horror and depredation.

“UHM, YES? CAN I HELP YOU TWO?”

Ceaseless screaming had rendered his friend functionally mute, but he had by this point become inured enough to such visions to respond.

“I’m very sorry if we’ve disturbed you. I know that we’re only supposed to pray at midnight.”

Over the wet and breaking howls of his friend, he could hear – driven directly into his cochleae – these pulsating words, each falling like a brick into sand:

“OH, NO. THAT’S FINE. NOW IS JUST FINE. WHENEVER YOU WANT IS FINE. PLEASE THOUGH MAKE YOUR FRIEND STOP OR I WILL REDUCE HIM.”

After a few seconds of inefficient jostling, “I don’t think I can. He seems to be stuck like this now.”

“HUH. OKAY THEN.”

And in that instant, the one friendship that had formed in five years of elementary school dissolved into a pile of brown ash. Being now well beyond either shock or horror, he simply remarked, “You destroyed my friend.”

“WELL, AS YOU SAID, THERE WAS NO OTHER POSSIBLE SOLUTION.”

“I didn’t s— Won’t his parents come looking for him?”

“THEY WILL NOT. I’VE REDUCED HIS PARENTS AS WELL. AND THEIR PARENTS. AND ALL THEIR BROTHERS AND SISTERS AND WIVES AND FRIENDS. GOING BACK THIRTEEN GENERATIONS. NO ONE WILL BE LOOKING FOR HIM.”

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“He was my only friend. I don’t have any remaining.”

“WHAT ABOUT THE FRIENDS I HAVE CONSTRUCTED FOR YOU IN THE UTILITY BASEMENT?”

“They aren’t my friends. They bite and scratch me.”

“I CAN REMOVE THEIR TEETH FOR YOU, AND THEIR FINGERS, IF YOU WISH...”

“You know, he raised some interesting questions. About you.”

“OH? SUCH AS?”

“Why does my family worship you?”

“LIKE WITH ALL MY DOWN LINE DISTRIBUTORS, I FACILITATE THE INVENTORY NEEDS YOUR FAMILY ACCRUES AS IT EXPANDS ITS OWN DISTRIBUTION LINES, GROWING ITS MANY SUCCESSES AS YOU BUILD TOWARDS A FUTURE OF FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE AND SECURITY, THROUGH DIRECT PERSON-TO-PERSON SALES OF SOY-BASED DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS AND HEALTH PRODUCTS.”

“I don’t understand.”

“THAT’S WHAT’S BRILLIANT ABOUT ALL THIS! YOU DON’T HAVE TO. YOU SIMPLY HAVE TO BE A PART OF THE NETWORK.”

“If you’re — ”

“LIKE HOW RIGHT NOW, AT THIS VERY MOMENT, THIS VERY SECOND, THERE IS EIGHT HUNDRED MILES AWAY FROM YOU A FETUS DEVELOPING INSIDE OF A WOMAN YOU’VE NEVER MET, AND THIS FETUS WILL EVENTUALLY GROW INTO A HUMAN BOY, A HUMAN BOY WHO TWENTY YEARS FROM NOW WILL EXPERIENCE SUCH DEEP EMOTIONAL ESTRANGMENT FROM HIS MOTHER — THE ONLY PARENT HE’S EVER KNOWN — THAT HE WILL PASS A KEY PERSONAL TIPPING POINT, AND BEGIN EXPLORING THROUGH VARIOUS ON-LINE FORA THE CONSPIRATORIAL MYTHOLOGIES OF ULTRA RIGHT-WING WHITE SUPREMECIST IDEOLOGUES, THESE MYTHOLOGIES IN TURN INSPIRING YEARS LATER THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INTRICATE PLAN TO DETONATE A DIRTY BOMB INSIDE OF CHICAGO, A PLOT THAT WILL EVENTUALLY BE DISCOVERED, LEADING TO A VIOLENT CONFRONTATION WITH FEDERAL LAW ENFORCEMENT THAT CULMINATES IN THE ACCIDENTAL DETONATION OF SAID DIRTY BOMB WITHIN THE RURAL REGIONS OF ILLINOIS THAT HE RESIDES IN, THAT DENOTATION RESULTING IN THE COMPLETE ANNIHILATION OF MOST OF THE NATION’S SUPPLY OF SOY BEANS, CREATING A WORLD-HISTORIC DEMAND FOR NON-PERISHABLE SOY-BASED PRODUCTS.

YOU DON’T NEED TO UNDERSTAND ALL THE WHEREFORES AND WHYS OF ALL THAT IN ORDER TO BENEFIT FROM IT. YOU SIMPLY HAVE TO BE ‘DOWNSTREAM’ WHEN IT HAPPENS!”

A moment of beatific consternation. “Are you God? You’re not, are you? Why don’t we just worship God?”

“LOOK, WORSHIP WHOEVER YOU WANT, BUT YOU’RE ONLY EVER GOING TO GET A RESUPPLY OF SOY-BASED DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS AND HEALTH PRODUCTS FROM ONE GUY...”

“Will we — ”

“I REALIZE YOU CAN’T SEE THIS, BUT I’M POINTING TO MYSELF WITH ALL MY EXTREMITIES.”

“Will we ever —” His question was cut short by the iterated purr of his family’s front door signal.

“YOU’D BETTER GO GET THAT.”

After one second’s pause, he spun on his heels and ran from the hooked walls of the freezer room, though the undulating carpets of the apology space, past the descending stairs to the utility basement, and up the ascending stairs to the public level. Then, cautiously, he peeled back the front door, and found beaming down upon him the placidly smiling face of his father. Drawing in a deep breath, his father dropped to his knees and held out both arms in a welcoming embrace. From this more level vantage point, he could now see that on the top right of his father’s forehead there had formed a deep, rectangular bruise, streaked with dried brown-red rivulets emanating from a cluster of tiny gashes. In a moment of shocked confusion, he glanced over his father’s shoulder, and realized that his family’s minivan was parked half in the driveway and half on the front lawn. Like his father, it now sported a sizeable crumple on its front right, centered upon a shattered headlight. Through the windshield, his mother was visible, slumped sideways in the front passenger seat, mouth open and eyes closed.

His father pulled him in close with surprisingly wet hands, and hugged him tightly, burying his sharp nose deeply and painfully into his neck. Turning his face just a few inches, he gently rested his mouth upon his son's ear and carefully whispered:

“You were about to ask me a question, before all of this interrupted us. So, please let me take a moment to answer it – No. No, you will never have to choose between being righteous and being comfortable. Because, I truly am both omnibenevolent and omnipotent. At least, where it matters, I guess. And what kind of creature with such faculties would do otherwise?”

Look, all anyone ever asks of anyone else is to do their own little part in their own little corner and be open to the consequences. Stay in network and help keep the network going. The greatest monuments to Man and God were built on nothing more or less. That's all anyone asks, and it's all I'm asking. At any rate, being in your legally dependent state, you don't really have much control over what you're ethically made a part of through the choices of your parents.

So, for as long as you can, just rest secure in the knowledge that life will continue well for you and your family, in a completely normal and predictable fashion.

And, Jesus the Goblin Prince – whose real name was Randall – was right: life *did* continue well for the MacPhearsons, in a completely normal and predictable fashion. All of this happened in the summer of 1992, when the captivating harmonies of Boys II Men could be heard coursing below the fizzing and fuzzing of static radio channels from as far away as Khartoum – where Osama Bin Laden endured his banishment – to as nearby as New York – where Rudy Giuliani began organizing his ultimately successful mayoral campaign.



simon fails five tests

Seth Cable

In order to enter the Cathedral, one must pass four tests. In order to leave the Cathedral, one must pass four tests. Not too very long ago, the tests for entry were the far more challenging ones. Since the Fragmenting, however, participation has waned, and so they now set a higher bar for disassociation.

In the first test, which Simon had passed, one is asked to reveal the flaws in their upbringing. Simon explained that he had always felt like an empty avatar, a vague and passionless name hung upon a screen through which others might view the world he inhabited.

In the second test, which Simon had also passed, one is asked to identify a weakness in their disposition. Simon explained that one time, upon returning from one of the lesser countries, and once more breathing the airs of the greatest nation in all the history of the Earth, he was filled with a paralyzing anxiety:

Over entering the border, as the guards were known to harass even citizens for sport. Over getting home safely, as transportation was infrequent, unreliable, and dangerous –

and the roads in such disrepair.

Over sating his hunger, as foods were so very expensive, despite their thin flavors and the abundant surpluses everywhere.

Over completing his learning, as the schools had so little money, and the teachers were so few.

Over the health of his mother, as they could no longer afford for her protections. Over the safety of his neighbors, as so many had recently been taken.

In the third test, at which Simon had excelled beyond all expectation, one is asked to compose a prayer to the Saint least like themselves, for something that they truly do not want. Ever penitent, Simon held his hands aloft, stretched his fingers to the vaulted ceiling above, and cried aloud:

Brent the Unfairly Criticized, defender of the just and seeker of the Truth, advocate of Logic and Reason,

Give me the confidence to Just Ask Questions,

Give me the strength to speak for those who are mute,

To appropriate their tongues unto myself and offer my own words as theirs. Though I be alien to their minds and truest wishes,

Let me adorn myself in their symbols and walk as one of them, And through my consciousness and acceptance make them real.

In the fourth test, which Simon had not passed, one is asked merely to hold their breath for 48 seconds. However, though Simon's lungs gave out after just 35, it was recorded as 55, due to aforementioned trends in Cathedral attendance.

After an appropriate period of fasting and observation, Simon was permitted to enter the Cathedral grounds, where he took up residency in one of the innumerable and confining outer dormitories. On the fourth day following his entry, which was the first day of the Week of Slow Movement, a Solemnion was held in honor of Saint Tnarlhox. Thus did Simon finally take his first steps into the magnificent structure itself.

An almost interminable sequence of ushers separated out the entering throng according to their admittance date, with Simon and his cohort herded towards the highest and farthest corner of the Nave. There, after some struggle, Simon was able to squeeze himself in atop a low, cracked and bowed bench, little more than a rotting plank sagging between crumbling cinder blocks.

Although it took great strain to discern even the outlines of the illustrious figures gracing the Principle Sanctuary before them, the vibrant blue robes of the Ultima Lector easily distinguished him from the surrounding crowd of golden-cloaked potentates lumbering languidly about. Despite the distance, Simon swelled at his great fortune in that the vector from that Most Humbled of Men to his own eyes was entirely unobstructed by any of the myriad columns, banners, pikes, candelabras, bells, hanging prayers, suspended offerings, dangling effigies, and floating lanterns that larded the cavernous space above them.

In but a few short moments, the blaring entry music of the Orgolion abruptly ceased, subduing in turn the churning roar of the assembly. At the descending silence, the blue mote at the center of Simon's vision rose and approached the Lectorium. With arms outstretched, the Ultima Lector sang forth in a voice both abyssal and wavering. The words reverberated within Simon's chest and throat, amplified through the natural acoustics perfected by the ancient constructors.

The voice sang: *What is the difference between a puppy and a scorpion?* ¹

And the thousands of voices responded: *You cannot fill a scorpion with puppies.*

Louder, the voice sang: *What is the difference between a baby and a scorpion?*

And louder, the thousands of voices replied: *People know when they've eaten a scorpion.*

Louder yet, the voice sang: *What is the difference between a child and a scorpion?*

And the thousands of voices cried forth: *No one will buy your stolen scorpion.*

Carried by the weight of the surging crescendo, the voice dropped two full octaves and boomed: *What do you call a man who's lost his home, his job, his family, and his money?* And, bathed in ecstatic furor, every brick and stone set within that timeless structure trembled with the answering call: *Anything you want to.*

Immediately upon the final syllable, a tense and expectant silence radiated across the hundreds of rows of standing faithful, broken only a second later by the calm and reassuring tones of the Ultima Lector, his voice now thin and nearly whispering. "Anything you want to," he repeated.

As Simon returned to his place in the sinking bench, his cheeks warmed and his heart raced. Here, finally, was the birth-promise of his parents realized, the path to true authentication, validation, and vengeance. "I deserve this," he said, to the sleeping man beside him. "This time, I will never leave."



¹ Although still popularly ascribed to Pseudo-Philateus, most specialists now agree that these devotionals were first composed by Robert Talbot, during his second imprisonment and exile.

before the curfew

Seth Cable

Between the walls of the City's canyons, we surge forth – spilling over banks, sweeping aside cars and traffic lights, churning up the debris of a final, hopeless demonstration. Behind us, driving us onward, are the hundred jealous mouths of the City's Custodial Forces. They greet us through our phones, which chime now in unison and illuminate these sunless channels with images of stick figures bent into impossible positions. Ahead of us, pulling swiftly away, are our children and grandchildren, placed intentionally in a position of greater danger. We have gifted to them the responsibility to achieve what we preferred not to, to preserve themselves and preserve this City. To my right, a man ten years my senior runs beside, red faced and puffing cheeks, sweat seeping through his navy blue polo shirt. He turns and yells directly into my ear, "Actually, I enjoy jogging."



pond

Bill O'Connell

Because we can't breathe down there
it becomes a mirror we like to
live on the edge of, staring into it
on moonlit nights, or when it's
suddenly clear in the right
shaft of sunlight, revealing
a complicated bottom.

The baby beaver play on the lodge,
the mother's great wet head and tail
preparing a whack. Sometimes,
arriving in a mist, I would be
the hidden one, without sound
between trees to the edge,
catching a doe, off-guard,
dipping to drink.



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some snow

Bill O'Connell

A thin shield of white
against March

Blossoms
tight in their buds

If you could contain me
I would sleep

Inside my mother
gathering blood

Outside of love
the world is cold



nomenclature

Bill O'Connell

Sound: naming—
you are this

to me. Before that
a rock

orbiting: give it
a name. Open it:

Earth. By its waters
I slipped

inside. The moon
has no name. Language

like birdsong
to speak to you

with. No
kisses in Heaven,

no breath to name who
cannot be named.





vision
Melissa Pandina

medicine

David Ferland

White-smock man
presents his hand
fingers closed
this is your heart

twists and
clenches his fist in
steady rhythm
this is typical

switches to
twitchy
arhythm
this is you

I reject this
punchy
version of
my heart

Reach for
woodferns
in the forest

Run velour
stems between
thumb and
forefinger
Squeeze a
fistful of fronds
into mash

Release the
green aroma

Spread the mulch
in the chambers
of my heart



minotaur

David Ferland

I'm glad I have no tail
when I close
the car door

Opposable thumbs
don't help me
get a grip

Night vision
would be nice
to see beyond the
moonlit splatters
into shadows
amongst the trees

might make me
less jumpy

but it wouldn't
illuminate the
labyrinth
where my
minotaur waits



three options (while a choice remains)

David Ferland

I.

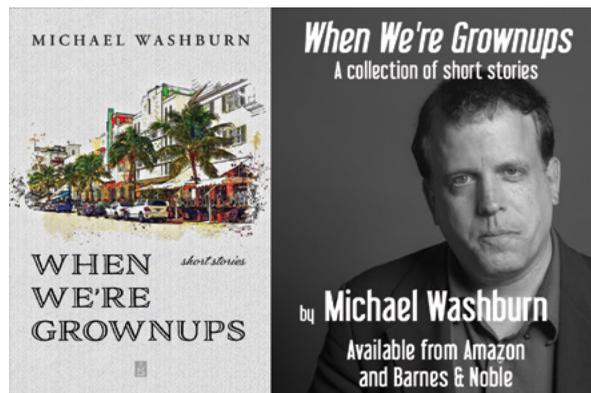
Wander onto the Death Valley pan, the silence, huge beneath the jagged volcanic teeth of the Funeral Mountains. Lie down in the shade of a sandstone hoodoo to wait for the mother ship.

II.

Wade into the sea off Wellfleet on a humid full-moon midnight. Fight to stay upright as the waves churn against calves, hips then chest. Take a deep breath and walk, dignified, towards England.

III.

Hike to the base of a Vermont outcrop where the fallen leaves collect to form a deep forest heap. Crawl into the pile, peek through the crinkled gaps at the pale autumn day. Inhale the smell of hide and seek.



a thousand lives

Joe Volpe

I sit by the window
and pierce the clearing sky
with the gaze of a thousand lives I wish I'd lived,

maybe watching carrion birds circle
their eventual prey, staring back
with patient, eager eyes,

oh, and the trees could be spears of fate
or oars of time or even pens of ink

to lay bare my skin and prick beneath the surface,
cracked open for the ink and stabbed with a needle
six feet into the dermis, sprouting flowering bushes
in the spring, thorny conversations with strangers
that shape their lives,

but I'm just recycling old desires and taking them too far,
and the new ones don't run as deep—

perhaps because time has a wearying impression
on the soul, or maybe just the sheer volume
of life is overwhelming in its unaccountability,

or maybe nothing matters anymore
in the way that it used to, when I would
stare so intently at the night sky
to remember so precisely
the size and color of that night's moon.



elbows

Peter Urkowitz

Your elbows are magnificent, Earthling.
I can't breathe when you
pick up that coffee cup
and bring it to your mouth,
cantilevering the whole arm at an impossible angle,
so that what were the opposite ends,
the wrist and the shoulder,
are now almost
one
one
one
one.
one.

Who ever heard of arms that bend in the middle?
On my home planet, we value straight limbs,
with a minimum of joints.
Excess bends are déclass . We can pick fruits out of high branches with ease.
But then we just drop them in our own mouths,
or eat off the floor.
That's the way all the cool folks do it.

But oh baby when I see you
comb your own hair,
I am converted to your savage ways.
Teach me to bend at the knees,
and I will sing to you
in ultralow frequencies
beyond the reach
of your ears.



wreckage and rust

Peter Urkowitz

with thanks to Mary Chapin Carpenter

I dreamed of the tower

I woke up in the dark
shuffled downstairs
put the cup on the table back on the shelf

I dreamed of a rat holding a flag

I rolled onto the floor
pulled my shoes out from under the bed
put them in the drawer

I dreamed of the waves rolling over the seawall

I turned the doorknob
opened the pantry
fumbled past the spices to find the candle

I dreamed the railroad trestle was crowded with people

I hurried along the path
out of the back garden
keeping close to the hedges

I dreamed of a snake in a basket

I peered into shadows
surrounding my flame
missed seeing the root that I tripped over

I dreamed my mother was young again

I felt my way to the pasture
crawling on all fours
until the sleeping cows surrounded me

I dreamed the road was blocked and detoured

I reached the barn
the windmill and the farmhouse
where the grounds were set up for tomorrow's party

I dreamed of the old man blowing a horn

I drank from the pitcher
ate fruit from the cart
dropped coins in the fountain

I dreamed of a dancer on the stage

I saw the sunrise
as the guests were arriving
I moved to leave but the hostess called me back

I dreamed of a glass marble

I joined the revelers
tossing the beanbags
jumping in sacks and wearing puppet gloves

I dreamed of a bird with a twig in its beak



call me conqueutheus

Peter Urkowitz

I stole water from Poseidon
So my people could breathe
Under the ocean in the stifling deep

We were using scuba masks in Atlantis
But the tubes were so long
The boys at the pumping stations kept falling asleep on the job

We held our breath as long as we could
My wife said she could do with just half a breath
She gave the rest to our children

She parceled out that half a breath
Around the dining table
Shook out a few bubbles from the saltshaker for the baby

She found one last rancid gasp
In the empty pig stomach wine skin
Drank that down and died

I played the sea god a game
Of Whale Knuckle Bones
Rolling Eel Eyes and Double Tuna and Seahorse Flush

Poseidon had to wager his crown and his bracelets
But he kept his Conch Cornucopia safe on his belt
From where I could smell the sweet elixir

That flowed from the horn
So that anyone who drank from it
Could live under the sea

The old octopus dealer with his green eyeshade
Set up the cups and the dice for us
And explained the house rules

But I had a trick up my sleeve
When the god rolled the King's Triple Temple
I came back with the Marianas Trench Oracle

He was so discombobulated
He knocked over the table
Spilled the game into the anemone shag carpeting
While Poseidon crawled on the floor picking everything up
And the old octopus summoned clownfish to help him
I grabbed the horn of plenty off his belt and ran for home

When they learned what I had done
They chained me to a rock
And every day I have to eat a puffer fish's poison liver

And every day I die in ecstasy
Seeing all the mysteries revealed
And every day they revive me

Expel me from Gehenna
And I must chow down again
For the sacred stream that lets us live underwater

Opens our gills
Fills our lungs with nourishment
Teaches us the secret



goddesses on youtube

Judith Serin

With gratitude to the divas themselves and to Zack Rogow
for his inspiring series in *Talking to the Radio*.

ELLA FITZGERALD: THE MAN I LOVE

Berlin in the 80s: she looks like a librarian: big square glasses, big tight hair, broad bosom, stern face. Then her notes scatter across the stage, up, down, hop to the ceiling, fly. In a blue and silver gown she wipes her nose with a blue cloth, her brow. Her high, pure tones—*The Man I Love*—then low, yearning. She swerves into *Body and Soul*, then scats upbeat, then voice crying low, high, that gleam in her eyes, “Take my B-O-D-Y, boy,” that naughtiness, humor. Another time, hair more curled, again in blue, high neck, even more librarian, her mouth a little curved in profile, slow with piano, fast with drums, smile sliding onto her face, snapping fingers, swinging, “Don’t say a word, shut up, not a sound, that man, that crazy man, come on, man. My man don’t love me, treats me oh so mean, but I dig that man, tell me ‘bout my man, he’s a dirty old man.” Going back to hear early Ella: voice so high and pure. She does it straight.

PEARL BAILEY, ELLA FITZGERALD, SARAH VAUGHAN, 1979: GODDESSES HAVING FUN

Pearl in silver and purple, Ella in her high-necked blue, Sarah in yellow, huge and round as the sun. They sway, swing their arms, enormous smiles, all three *Singing with the Band*. Then Sarah pops into *Perdido*, turns and scats to Pearl who swings into *Sing, Sing, Sing*, leans to Ella, who proclaims *It Don’t Mean a Thing If It Ain’t Got That Swing*, pumping her fist like a prize-fighter, those powerful arms. She scats, then *Jericho*, the others doo-wop, doo-wop to her soaring notes. Pearl in the middle looks back and forth, so happy to be rowing this river of songs, so many songs we can’t keep up: *Indian River*; three songs at once, all harmonizing: *Sweet Georgia Brown*; more. Heads back, back to *Singing with the Band*, but scattling, scattling all the way through to the end, then straight, “When we were singing, singing with the band...” These three planets circling each other.

ARETHA FRANKLIN, ROBERTA FLACK, SARAH VAUGHAN, AND MISS PEGGY LEE: MIXING THE BLUES

Darkness, a slow, sensuous *Mood Indigo* on horns, Aretha in silhouette against a semicircle of yellow. Her voice, starting slow, “Ain’t got the change of a nickel...” We see how young she is, tall, skinny, long-necked, an Afro circling her head, her shy smile. She closes her eyes, “Ain’t got nothing but the blues, doo, woo, doo, woo.” The camera slides left to Roberta, also young, shorter, her Afro pulled back, “Ain’t got no coffee that’s perking...” She sways, more animated than Aretha. Then left, Sarah, “I sit in my chair, filled with despair...” The familiar shock of her voice, we sink into it, believe every word.

Again left to Miss Peggy Lee, large and white, middle-aged but still a siren: hair with careful ringlets pulled forward from her bun, a long sexy gown with flowing bat-wing sleeves, sultry made-up eyes, sultry voice, “Ain’t got no rest in my slumber, ain’t got nothing but rocks in

my bed.” Sarah, “Rocks in my bed.” Roberta, “Rocks in my bed.” Aretha, “Rocks in my bed,” with a wide smile, head tilted back. One by one, “I got rocks. I got rocks. I got rocks. I got rocks.” Aretha, “Ain’t got the change of a nickel...” Peggy, soft and slow, changing songs, “Never treats me sweet and tender...” Aretha, “I ain’t got nothing but the blues.” Sarah, “My poor heart is sentimental,” scatting. Roberta, “But when the weekend’s over...” The others, “doo woo, doo woo.” Aretha, wailing, “Make him love me the way that he should.” All four slowly, “In my solitude,” till Aretha interrupts, “I got rocks in my bed,” then slows to, “You ain’t been blue till you got that mood indigo...” Roberta, smiling, “That feeling goes down to my toes...” Sarah, “While I sit and sigh...” All, “Go long blues. Ain’t got the change of a nickel. Go long blues. I ain’t got nothing to tickle, I ain’t got nothing but rocks in my bed. Lord above me make him love me. Go long blues.” The camera pans back, all four sway, applause, lines across the video, end.

SARAH VAUGHAN: BERLIN 1969 LIVE
FLY ME TO THE MOON

She’s with her trio: Johnny Veith on piano, Gus Mancuso on bass, Eddy Pucci on drums. The whole concert filmed in close up: her skin beautifully smooth; heavy black eye make-up; bright orange 60s lipstick; glittering earrings; sparkling sheer black dress. She’s opened with a fast *Just One of Those Things*, slides her tongue out, begins, “Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars,” folding over the words in the way that is hers alone, holding the mic, a blue egg, close. “Let me see what love is like on Jupiter and Mars. In other words hold my hand, in other words kiss, kiss, kiss me.” We see the pianist, his hands; her head swaying out of the frame, back in, first full face, then profile, the perfect prominent lips, orange, so much lighter than her skin. “Fill my heart with song and let me swing among the stars.” The bassist’s hands on the strings, gentle, erotic stroking; long pianist’s fingers pumping up and down. “You are all I care for, all I worship and adore.” The blue egg of the mic so near those lips, she’s drinking the words or kissing them. Her eyes go dark, full lashes lower, “In other words I love,” her voice wobbles, “you.” Eyes close, sparkling piano, applause, bow.

SARAH VAUGHAN: BERLIN 1969 LIVE
BY THE TIME I GET TO PHOENIX

High piano, deep bass, her voice deep, then rising. “By the time I get to Phoenix,” head swaying slowly, “he’ll be rising, he’ll find the note I left hanging on his door,” she grimaces. “He’ll...he’ll... he’ll laugh,” she laughs, bright piano notes, her mouth opens wide in profile, “when he reads the part that says I’m leaving, because I’ve left that man so many times before.” The piano gentle, slow hands reflected on the keys. “By the time I get to Albuquerque he’ll be working, he’ll probably stop at lunch and give me a call.” Her face in profile, round cheeks, lips open wide. “By the time,” the word *time* always folded over into two, “I get to Oklahoma, he’ll be sleeping; he’ll turn softly and call my name out low.” She shakes her head, looks up, the whites of her eyes showing. “He’ll cry just to think I’d really leave him,” turning *him* into a hum. Then repeating, angry, a growl. “By the time I get to Oklahoma...He just didn’t know I would really go,” the note held forever, “I would really go, I would really go,” She smiles, wipes an eye, a bead of sweat shining in the line from her eye to her nose. The last go a stab to the heart.



a lonely tree

Daniel Dagrís

Since childhood my grandmother fostered in me a belief in fairies, gnomes, and other magical creatures as we walked through the woods behind her house. One day we came across an enormous tree, the trunk gnarled and bulbous. When I asked why that one was different, she told me a story.

This tree was once a man. A long time ago he lived with no roots and walked on two feet. He met a woman whom he loved beyond all reason. Then she died. In a rage he stood in this forest and his tears grew into roots. He sprouted branches and leaves. He drank only from the soil and the sun and the rain that fell. He then aged as a tree, waiting for his love to return to this world.

“Did it work?”

“They’ve met and parted many times.”

“Do you think they’ll meet again?”

“They might yet. I wonder if he is more tree than man now. He may have lost himself among the branches.”

“Maybe she can help him remember.”

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“Who knows? She may have tried.”

“That’s a sad story.”

“Is it?”

“They don’t live happily ever after.”

“They may have lived happily together for many lifetimes.”

“But now he’s a lonely tree.”

“Well, the man inside might have forgotten himself, but he’s among all these other trees, so I think *lonely* is a bit strong. Now he is just a tree, and to be a tree can’t be all that bad.”

As the years passed, I stopped wanting to go on walks or believe in nonsense. I wanted to talk with friends online. I wanted to stay indoors when it rained, and it always rained. But my mom kept telling me how much it meant to my grandmother when we used to go on our walks. She stressed that my grandma was old and could die any day now, and wouldn’t I feel bad if she did because she didn’t feel loved anymore or useful or whatever.

Grandma always wanted to go out after thunderstorms. “Assess the damage,” she would say with a grin, rubbing her hands together. One day I joined her after a particularly bad storm, having mimicked this behavior, wondering if it was genetic.

Zippering my raincoat, I stepped outside and walked the short distance to her house. She met me, sitting on a wet chair in her garden, surrounded by beanpoles of sweet peas and nasturtiums. She often brought her coffee along if our walk happened anytime before noon. "Just half a cup for me," she'd always say, but she drank many throughout the day. She had half a cup with her that day.

We wound our way through the woods on her sprawling property, and for the first time in years we came across the mammoth trunk of the tree she had said was once a man.

She stopped, ran her hands over the cracked and seeping broken stump, its trunk having fallen, snapped and charred by a lightning strike.

"It's just a dead tree now," I said.

"Seems to be."

"It'll make good firewood."

"Yes, it will."

She kept touching the remains.

"Are you sad?" I asked.

"Oh no. It's all part of life."

"You look sad."

"That is also part of life."

"Will you miss it?"

"He held out a long time. Didn't want to let go. But we all need a fresh start sometimes."

"It was just a tree, grandma."

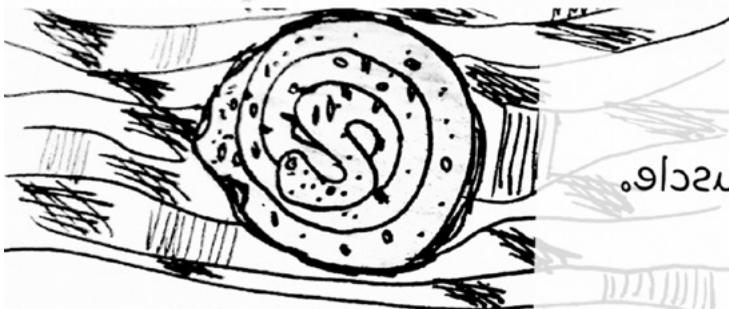
"And such a beautiful tree."

She stopped wandering out into the woods. Instead she would sit at her garden table and have her half cups of coffee, smiling that jolly frown. My mom used to say that she still glowed, but I never knew what that meant. We joined her for coffee on Sunday mornings and my mom did most of the talking, telling me stories about my grandmother's many adventures, or how she had been a wildly bad parent, which would cause grandma to give her a silly glare and they both would chuckle.

Before she died, my last real memory with her was one morning when I brought small European style coffee mugs to her house. They were half the size of any normal mug. I filled the first two of them with coffee but when I came to the third, she delicately touched my hand and said, "Just half for me."



Lavae in
striated muscle.
trichinella
Spiralis.



Lavae in
striated muscle.
trichinella
Spiralis.

Lavae in
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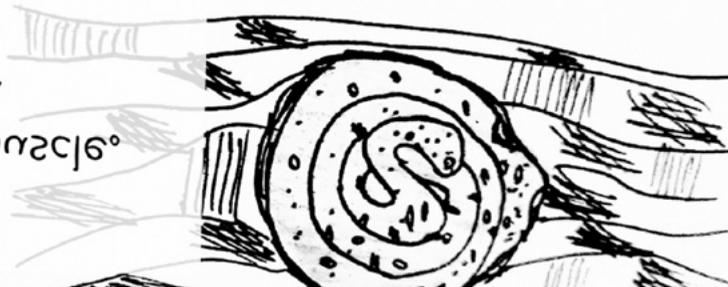


fig b: encysted larvae in striated muscle -
trichinella spiralis from practical bacteriology, hematology, and parasitology
disease virtually unknown in the jewish & mohammedan faiths
Stephen James Moore

on fortune's fringe

Michael Washburn

“So you finally have a girlfriend!”

Carl clapped his patient, Sherill, on the back. After two months of giving Suboxone to Sherill here at the detox clinic, here was finally a hint of a turnaround in the patient's life. Sherill had ambled into the clinic on a dreary morning, one of the pitiful cases kept alive by soup kitchens and by steam rising from the grilles of Boston's downtown. Carl had tried to like the guy, he'd always thought that one of his gifts, and admittedly there weren't many, was to find the good in almost anyone, but it had been tough. Yes, it had been hard when the patient drooled, bit Carl's arm, jerked and trembled constantly, breaking three needles on different occasions. Sherill was crazy and he had visions. But now, there was no ignoring the glow of triumph about Sherill as he stood here with Maria. Sherill was thin and gangly, the opposite of Carl, and the woman had a bit of Sherill's gauntness. She had curly dark hair and fulsome lips curving into something sultry. Maria had followed Sherill through the hallway, past Carl's colleague, Jasmine, who sat reading *US Weekly*, and into the room where Carl did the injections.

With congratulations over, the ritual began. Carl unlocked the army green rectangle bolted onto a wall painted an institutional drab blue, pulling out a needle and a cylinder full of translucent liquid, as Sherill slid into the chair, his left sleeve up. Carl was unready for what came now. As Carl stood over Sherill preparing the needle, the cry that came from the hallway was bizarrely distant, like a noise from a TV. Jasmine dashed into the room and nearly knocked Carl over in her rush to get behind him. Before Carl had fully turned around, Jasmine was scuffling with Maria, who'd reached into the drug locker. Carl could hardly believe his own naiveté, could hardly accept that he'd thought Maria was anything other than a stranger Sherill had met on the street just minutes ago.

That evening, as Carl sat in the dark back area of a pub in Medford four blocks from his apartment, he was aware of the number of young women, undergrads mostly, filling seats at the bar. They were so very pretty. Carl felt glad that he had a girlfriend of his own. He wasn't insecure just because he had a thankless job in a detox clinic. He was also aware that his gut hanged out of his pants. One thing about being this way, he'd found, was that there were so many times when it was easy to banish insecurity, strike up talk with a stranger, get a friendly reaction. Then he'd tumble through that thin veneer of goodwill, get insulted or slapped in the face, and find himself once again alone, ashamed, huddled in a corner in an obese aging body.

He finished his second beer, drank a third, a fourth, as he gazed up at the actions on the court flashing on the TV. Just as he was about to fetch another Corona, he realized his cell phone was vibrating. He raised it to his left ear. It was Sandra. Sandra Nolan. His girlfriend of two months. Though Carl had told himself that they'd reached a level of familiarity where it was hardly necessary to keep one another apprised of every move from one minute to the next, it had rankled when she'd failed to touch base with him about tonight.

“Hi, Sandra.”

“Carl. Listen, you’re going to have to find somewhere else to empty your gut now. Not in my apartment. Ever. Again. Understand?”

“Sandra—”

“No, Carl. No. Just no. I didn’t call to talk things through. I’ve been asking, I’ve been pleading with you for weeks to do something about your weight. As you may recall, I gave you an ultimatum.”

“Sandra, hold on now. I’ve been trying, I really have. I’m a, you know, a what do you call it, a work in progress.”

“Carl, you can’t spend one hour a week at the gym. *One hour*. It’s pathetic. But that’s not really even the issue, Carl. You can’t seem to remember basic things about who you are. It really freaks me out and it freaks my parents and friends out.”

“Sandra, please—”

“I didn’t call to negotiate, Carl. Have a nice life.”

As he put the phone down on the table, the roaring and laughter around him were like the sounds of children in a barn kicking a blind old mare.

A couple of evenings later, Carl sat in his little apartment eating a pint of Ben & Jerry’s and wondering whether he should try some new dating sites. They weren’t cheap, of course. Maybe if he sold his motorcycle, he could swing it. He needed to go back to the weight loss clinic, and all other discussion was moot. Thoughts of his weight soon made him reach for the Depakote and Seroquel in the cabinet above the bathroom sink. If he took those, he’d be all right, if for no other reason than that he’d be too tired to harm himself.

On the weekend, Carl was alone once again, in the same bar, drinking yet another Corona while gazing at yet another Celtics game. A stranger, a young guy sitting to his right, began making comments about the game. Carl nodded, not really paying attention. He was thinking he must join Zoosk, Eharmony, maybe even Christian Mingle, even if that site featured a disproportionate number of single moms forty-five and up. Now his thoughts turned to what he had in the freezer in his apartment. Heath Bar Crunch. Now, oddly enough, it seemed that this guy beside him really wanted to engage in conversation.

“You don’t recognize me, do you?” the guy asked.

Carl shook his head. The guy was handsome and well built, with stubbly blond hair, and clad in jeans and a brown leather jacket. He had the prominent cheekbones of a young Peter Weller, but his demeanor was closer to a rowdy frat boy than to Robocop.

“Mark Dimon.”

Mark Dimon. One-time party animal. Local legend. Rising movie star of the hour. A buried passage, a forgotten era from Carl's life welled up now, unbidden, looming before him in its awful immensity.

"Mark—man, how long has it been?"

"Twelve years, to be exact."

"No way. I thought you were off in Hollywood making movies, man! One of the few young people out there who aren't waiting tables or delivering Domino's."

"Well, that's where I usually am, Carl. I'm visiting relatives, taking care of some business."

"You're a rising star, man. You've made, oh, what is it, two features?"

"That's technically correct, but the first one doesn't count. I've essentially disowned it."

"How's Hollywood? Lots of parties? Met some really fucked-up people?"

"I think you've got it mixed up, Carl. Here, in this dank city, is where people slog along in their private misery. In Hollywood, there's an army of therapists and life coaches to help out when stars get hurt."

The discussion progressed over a few more rounds. Carl was amazed that Mark had sat down next to him and engaged in conversation as if Carl were someone whose opinion mattered. Mark was full of questions about Carl's life, work, and loves in the years since they'd hung out in their early twenties. Carl had been chubby in those days, to be sure, but he'd gained access to Mark's circle as a friend of a friend. Today that mutual friend was a hedge funder in New York, but the interaction with Mark was as easy as if there'd never been a middleman. Mark bought a round and they laughed and talked and Carl saw that behind the joking, or one might say, brash exterior was a genuinely nice guy eager for a rapport with others. And Mark had this energy, this radiant affirming presence. When Mark proposed they should meet up again soon, before Mark got on a plane for California, Carl quickly said yes.

On Monday morning, the streets of Boston were as treacherous as the deck of a surfacing submarine. Carl hobbled through the gusts to the clinic, his ungainly body wobbling and teetering as he fought to keep balance. *So you say you found yourself a girlfriend*, he thought, envisioning a future encounter with a patient who thought himself clever. *Tell me another one!* Junkies could fool the staff at one of the other clinics scattered around this town, but not a professional as worldly as Carl Nassib. He lumbered up the steps into the lobby, through the waiting room where three pitiful heaps lay in odd poses on the benches, into the corridor where Jasmine, the bright and early angel, looked up from *US Weekly* to greet him.

"Sherill's waiting, Carl."

"This early?"

“He said he was going crazy sitting out there. Said it would make his whole mood better if he could roll up his sleeve and get ready.”

“So?”

“So I triple-checked the lockers, and I said all right.”

“Oh, Christ. Is his ‘girlfriend’ here?”

“No—I told him we’d call the cops if she showed up again.”

With a sigh, Carl got ready for his shift. In the room, Sherill did not appear troubled. If Carl had been tougher, he might have asked whether they had any obligation to go on treating Sherill after what happened. But he acquiesced, moving into position behind the patient and commencing the process of opening the locker.

“Yo, Carl. How come you never say nuthin’ about your life at all?” Sherill asked.

“What are you talking about?”

“How come you never say nuthin’ about what you’re doing on the weekend, or about your folks, or about your friends from old times?”

100 Again, Carl sighed. He wasn’t going to tell Sherill that his life was too depressing to talk about. Sherill didn’t even know that Carl’s real name was a bit more exotic than Carl, that as the child of a Lebanese dad and a Boston Irish mom, he’d felt pressure to conceal things for the sake of acceptance.

“Look, this isn’t about me. You’re the patient, Sherill. You’re the sick bastard I’m trying to help out here, trying to help you turn your life around. And you’re damn lucky we haven’t kicked your ass out of here for good after last time, so let’s keep this about you.”

Sherill’s nostrils moved inward.

“Well, what about me, man?”

“I mean, like, what’s the point of this here treatment? Suppose you get off junk for good, and you don’t have any more withdrawal syndrome, whatever you call it, what are you gonna do? Run for president?”

Sherill laughed, a caustic, wheezing noise.

“No, man. Don’t you know nothin’ about your own patients? I’m a poet. I sell books of my poems on the street. You live here. I can’t believe you ain’t never seen me walkin’ around downtown hawkin’ my stuff.”

“And what sorts of things do you write about?” Carl asked, ready with the needle poised over Sherill’s bare left arm.

“I write about what I see all around me. Ain’t nothin’ lost on Sherill. I get to the naked core of experience, man. Don’t laugh. I ain’t afraid of nothin’. I get to the core. I write about whores in \$800 suits. Losers. Hopeless cases. I write poems about people so lonely and desperate they just ditch their lives completely. They turn into bats and fly away.”

“They become vampires?”

“No, they don’t become vampires. They become, what’s the word, the *obverse*. They do a reverse transformation.”

Carl felt indulgent. “Pretty cool.”

“I bet you wish you could do that, Carl.”

Carl grunted. The conversation was beginning to make him anxious.

“No, I’ll go further than that, Carl. I bet you’re standin’ here now because you did change from a bat into a person. Because in the time we’ve been talkin’ about things, you ain’t never told me nothin’. I don’t know the first damn thing about your parents or where you went to school or who your third grade teacher was or the first time you ever went down on a girl. It’s like you started runnin’ at the fifty-yard line, Carl!”

“All right. You can leave now, Sherill.”

“Say what?”

“Come on. Get up and roll your sleeve down.”

“No way in hell, man! Give me my shit.”

“I said go.”

“Give me my—”

“No. You insolent bastard. Just fucking get up and leave right now!”

Instead of doing that, Sherill swung out of the seat and clamped his jagged teeth down on Carl’s left hand so hard that Carl cried out and dropped the needle and the medicine. Jasmine rushed into the room to pull them apart so fast that she neglected to dial 911 first.

At the bar in Medford that evening, Carl began to form mental images of the outlines of traumas he’d endured earlier in life. Beatings from his dad, scenes between his parents. Carl had also gotten mugged not once but twice. Then there came legal problems whose details he probably couldn’t recall now even if he tried. He’d fought a battle with clinical depression and

muddled through many specialized treatments, including hydrotherapy and electroconvulsive methods, never getting far with any. Finally Carl's counselors told him: *Forget everything, Carl. Don't you ever think about any point in your life prior to age twenty-three. And Carl, your life has been marginally better since then, but even now you need to be a little selective about your memories since that age. Got it?*

They'd issued a prescription for Metyrapone, and he'd taken the drug dutifully for all these years. The drug had worked, up to a point. Admittedly there were times when he tried to think of the cause of something, an aversion to codfish or to riding ten-speeds or to a location in the city, and his mind melted into a fuzzy white smog until he grew so frustrated and confused he felt like bashing his head into a wall. Now the events of recent days had prompted him, if not to quit taking the drug, then at least not to cooperate fully with it. Carl knew that Mark Dimon wasn't just being friendly, he was appealing to a bond forged in the crucible of some mutually difficult experience that Carl didn't recall. Well, Carl disliked the weird, disoriented feeling of the last few days. He avoided taking his meds that night, and again the following morning.

The next night, in the bar, he clutched both sides of his head and stared at the dingy table before him. Even without the drug, it was so much easier not to recall anything from force of habit. The current that wanted to carry him now was so brutal, yet Carl had the almost indescribable feeling of moving outside the push and pull of everything in the universe. Carl had not always had a shortage of friends, he remembered now. Kids who were around his age, seven years old, used to sit on the floor of his room and watch as Carl thumbed through pictures in the photographic books his parents had bought for him. One book showed pictures taken around Boston. A man on one of the pages leans out of the window of a burning building, above a crowd. He is about to let go of a baby and the people below will catch it, Carl explained to a frizzy-haired friend staring in awe at the black-and-white images. Another book was a pictorial companion to *Star Wars*. See these three stormtroopers standing in a corridor of the Death Star, exchanging laser bursts with Han Solo? This one lives, that one dies! Yet another book showed pictures of the moon landing. *When we grow up, we'll both go up to the moon and I'll push you off*, Carl told his breathless friend.

Carl forged a path through the strata of memories to a much later juncture in his life. Faces, noises came to him now as if he were a camera staring at scenes on a film set that the crew got up and abandoned. A big purple Peugeot convertible, a smirking blond guy in a short-sleeved Hawaiian-style shirt looking directly at Carl, a gaggle of laughing young women. These things weren't part of the texture of Carl's experience, yet he knew his eyes had seen them and his ears had heard them. He recognized the guy now. Mark. Mark Dimon. He and Mark and a third young man were walking from the Peugeot up a pebbly path through the front lawn of a multistory building. They had the brash, unfocused energy of guys in their early twenties.

Soon they were climbing stairs to the second floor of what Carl recognized as a dorm and ambled down the hall to an apartment. Inside the first of the five or six rooms in this apartment, a cluster of kids stood chatting and laughing, drinks in hand, as the unmistakable odor of a joint came from somewhere. Tara greeted the trio when they entered. She was a serious-looking twenty-one-year-old with black hair falling to her shoulders. It was Mark she addressed, but Carl had a sense that Mark didn't really want to talk to Tara. He was interested in other women here, the blondes in sweaters and jackets with the football team's logo. A different kind of girl,

a drama major named Lacey with aesthetic refinements that Tara distinctly lacked, was also reported to be here.

“Dan here is going to run for president of the Campus Democrats,” Mark said, referring to the third member of his and Carl’s little party. “About time we got somebody of Dan’s caliber in, don’t you think?”

“Ha. That’s just great. Like we don’t have enough uncharismatic Democrats with egos in this state,” Tara replied.

“And what the hell are you, Tara, a Republican?” Mark asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Maybe.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me one bit.”

“Go to hell, Mark.”

“Fuck you, Tara. Is Lacey here? I was hoping for a bit of her time.”

“Why, do you fancy yourself an actor?”

“*Maybe*,” Mark mimicked. “Have you got something to say about my acting abilities?”

“Do I detect a bit of insecurity here, Mark?”

“Would you answer the question?”

“I’ve never seen any of the productions you’ve been in.”

“I didn’t think so. And if you saw them and liked them, well then I’d know they sucked.”

“Go to hell, Mark. I know you can’t act. You’re just riding on your conventional good looks. And even those are debatable in my opinion. Just imagine if you were forty and trying to become an actor.”

“Fuck off. Is Lacey around here somewhere?”

“I guess so,” Tara sighed before moving off in search of more interesting conversation.

“Bitch,” Mark said, and went off looking for Lacey. Carl and Dan found plastic cups and lined up at the keg. They looked around the place but didn’t see Mark for a while. Dan had some luck talking to a few of the women, but Carl found himself awkwardly pivoting, looking around the room for anyone with whom he could pretend to engage.

Now where there should have been distinct memories, there were noises and bright colors. Try as he might, Carl couldn’t make a name-association with anything, not even a table or a chair.

At last something began to come into focus. Carl, Mark, and Dan were standing in one of the smaller rooms leading off from where the party was. They were all fed up with the kids in the larger room. The chamber to which they had escaped was where two female roommates lived. A poster of River Phoenix hung above a tiny fridge by the door. Beside one of the beds, there was a night table supporting a lamp and a cup full of many types of pens, and a little bookcase, and right next to the bookcase was a stand-alone shelf filled with VHS tapes. Tara's tapes. Tara clearly had a taste for 1980s rom-coms, especially those with Molly Ringwald, for here were *Pretty in Pink*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *Sixteen Candles*, right alongside *Some Kind of Wonderful* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. When Tara was in the mood for something a bit more weighty, she could warm up *Legal Eagles*, or for evenings when she really felt intrepid, she had *The Hunt For Red October*. Looking at these titles made Mark scoff. The River Phoenix poster, Mark was quite certain, belonged to Tara's roommate, for it was quite out of the question that Tara could steel herself to watch *My Own Private Idaho*.

"Mark, what're you doing, man?" came Dan's words through a haze of beer breath.

"I'm pissed as hell," said Mark, reaching down to scoop up some of the VHS tapes from Tara's shelf.

"Pissed at Lacey," said Carl.

"No, at this bitch. I'm *bleeding* from what she said."

"We'll all get in major fucking trouble," Dan whispered.

"Come on, open the damn window," said Mark.

Outside this little room, people were laughing and tramping up and down on the groaning floor. Dan grabbed the sill, pulled up the window, and all three young men climbed out into the chilly air on the fire escape and started down. Some of the tapes slid out from the crook of Mark's elbow and clattered to the icy grass below as Mark made his way down the ladder. Soon they were standing there, breathing hard, relishing this moment in which a conspiracy, however little and dirty, had come off. Mark seemed to be looking around the grounds for someone he could bellow at hoarsely. Then he began talking about other parties he knew were going on. But before they could reach a decision, Dan, in spite of the ocean of beer he'd put away, spoke to the more popular boy in a clear strong voice.

"Look man, this is a really shitty thing to do. Take those movies back up to that girl's room right now."

Again Mark scoffed. He wasn't accustomed to so many challenges and contradictions on one night.

"No way."

"Just do it, Mark. Put them back."

“I said no. Fuck no!”

“Put them back and then we can go wherever you want. We can go over to Ben’s and get stoned. But put them back, Mark.”

“Or Carl and I can go wherever we want. Not necessarily you,” Mark said.

“I’ll put them back,” Carl spoke up.

Here Carl’s recollection stalled. His mind stared at a white haze that dared him to try to make out anything in its depths. Even without separating his hands from his temples, Carl could tell that some of the young people here in this bar in Medford in the present were whispering about him. He finished his drink, dropped a couple of bills onto the table, exited the bar, walked through the drizzle to his apartment, locked the door, and slumped down in front of his Dell computer. Then he ran a few online searches, pulling up articles from the tabloids and showbiz weeklies. Here was a plethora of items about Mark’s upcoming films, in one of which he plays a secret agent.

Next, Carl went to the Netflix site and read some customer reviews of the two features in which Mark had already starred. He found reviews of the more recent film especially interesting. In this movie, Mark plays a blue-collar guy from South Boston who happens to be a math genius, with the ability to solve complex problems that have vexed people at MIT for years. Partly out of class snobbery, folks are unwilling to give this blue-collar whiz credit, and certain women are unsure of whether to take him seriously as a love interest. Boy does he show them up. As Carl read the reviews, he could not help noting that most of them were overwhelmingly positive. One review dissented, however: It characterized the film as a “teeny-bopper fantasy” in which Mark Dimon played what many adolescent boys dream of being: a guy who can win girls effortlessly, can beat up other guys, and can grasp formulae that have puzzled his elders for years. The reviewer also made the point that the film *tells* you rather than *shows* you that its subject is a genius. For all the talk of this character’s brilliance, no problems, no formulae are ever explicitly worked out before the viewer’s eyes. The reviewer concluded: “I detest this film.”

Well, no popular movie, playing on thousands of screens, is without its haters, Carl reflected. But something about this review rankled just a bit.

He was eager to meet up with Mark again at the hangout a few blocks away. When the time came, Carl made sure to put on fresh clothes, to spray deodorant under both armpits and to gargle with Listerine. His belly roiled in and out uncomfortably as he tightened the oversize belt ringing his gray trousers. At the bar, Mark was all smiles as he handed his acquaintance a Corona and began talking once again about life among the glitterati in Hollywood. We’ve all done stupid things in our lives, Mark kept saying. All of us. None of that should count against us now. If it did, we’ll all be in the dock. Carl nodded, unsure where this was going. Why was Mark being so friendly to him, what did Mark want?

“I can help you in your career, Carl. We may be producing a movie here in the fall, a crime thriller, and we need extr—excuse me, actors—who look like they actually come from around

here, not from Central Casting. It might lead to something for you. You never know until you make the leap.”

You never know until you make the leap. Wasn't that the truth.

“I—I don't know. I'd like to be like you, Mark. You're so sure of yourself. The whole time I've known you, you've been this super-attractive, intelligent guy. I've just kind of settled into things and gotten used to them before I really knew them for what they were. If you can help me, I'll be more grateful than I can ever tell you.”

“I can, Carl. But you just remember what I said. What happened in the wild old days, stays in the wild old days. No need to get people anxious and confused.”

Now it hit Carl. Mark here didn't suspect a thing. He knew nothing at all of the trauma in Carl's life, the legal problems, the depression, the counseling, the Metyrapone, the Depakote, the Seroquel, the Prozac, the gulfs of fuzzy white that Carl had not dared to try to fathom for years and years. As far as Mark knew, Carl could produce facts from his early life like a cowboy whipping out a Deringer from a holster. And he was showing kindness of a sort that Carl had rarely known in his life, counseling Carl not to be too hard on himself, not to let missteps from the buried days get in the way of whatever chance might exist now to salvage Carl's life in the present. Mark here, Carl saw now, Mark who was becoming so many things to so many people, just might be the greatest guy ever. For a moment, Carl tried to imagine a leaner, more determined and focused version of himself standing under the glare of cameras, striking a hard-boiled pose while saying to a female lead in an unmistakable accent, “Don't you pahhk that cahhh in front of my house, honey.”

He quickly assured Mark that he would let the past be the past. They laughed and talked into the night amid the hyena cries of undergrads and the roars from the TVs.

At some point in the night, Carl made it back to his apartment and slumped into a sagging love chair. The phone rang. Carl picked up the receiver. To his astonishment, the caller was, of all people, Sherill.

“Carl? You all right, man?” the low, tentative voice asked.

“Sherill? What the fuck, man? How dare you call me at home!” Carl said and slammed the receiver down.

A couple of nights later, not long before Mark was due to head back to California, Carl went online again to read up some more on Mark's two features, perusing reviews in forums large and small. Carl made what was, to him, a quietly astonishing discovery. He could not find the negative review on Netflix of Mark's film that he'd read earlier, the one calling that feature a teeny-bopper fantasy. At the same time, a number of other reviews acknowledged that one in a dismissive or disparaging way. They said things like, “There have been some really silly, annoying reviews on here and I want to set the record straight . . .” Well, so much the better, Carl thought.

Carl got through the rest of the evening without touching any of the drugs in his cabinet. As he slept, a dream came to Carl. He was walking through a deserted city at night, with not a single light twinkling in the windows of the somnolent three-story buildings all around. Doubtless they were some other color during the day, but now all the buildings were deep blue. Carl heard nothing but his footsteps plodding on barren stone until he neared an intersection. Then three dozen desperate men and women rushed past about forty yards ahead of Carl, in a perpendicular direction, east to west, too fast to make out their features. When he reached the intersection, they were already out of sight. Hearing cries in the night all around him, he knew that similar scenes were playing out. As he continued past the intersection, he saw a man resembling a shaman in a church production financed by bake sales, clad in a ragged velvet robe of cheap fabric, writhing and sinking toward the pavement on bending knees. At this distance, the man just might have passed for Sherill. Carl never got close enough to know. All Carl could tell for certain was that this figure could not stop weeping and weeping.

Sitting in his tiny kitchen, raising a mug of coffee to his lips, Carl experienced not just alertness but something like the contentment wrought by a mental enema. Here was one of those rare moments without either depression or drowsiness. He was ready, now, to revisit the white spaces of his faltering memory. When he made the attempt, he was astonished to find that this time, he didn't find himself wandering in a haze, no, if anything, the images before him now were too distinct. He found himself once again on a tuft of icy grass beneath a ladder.

"Fuck it, you guys. You're both lame. I'll put the movies back and then we go where I say. Deal?" Mark said.

Carl and Dan nodded. Mark slipped the purloined videocassettes into the band of his pants, then both of his companions gave his compact body a boost upward through the frigid air. He climbed the ladder, swung his legs over the fence of the fire escape, and disappeared into the room where, it later emerged, Tara had passed out on her bed after innumerable drinks from the keg in the other room. It also later transpired that when Tara woke up, she found one pen buried deep in her vagina and a second pen sticking out of her anus. But it wasn't Mark who took the blame for this crime, Carl recalled now. Dan might have needed a little suasion, but soon both Mark and Dan were quick to blame this horror on the mad dog, the angry, antisocial, unemployable, overweight guy who'd tagged along with them against their wishes that night. Yes, it came to Carl now, in the present, with the clarity of Wagner's music.

When he saw Mark again in the bar in Medford, the day before Mark's departure, he told the star, point-blank, that he'd reached a decision.

"Mark, I'm going to pass on your offer to appear as an extra in a forthcoming blockbuster."

Mark wanted to say something, to protest, but it was just too incredible. The actor was speechless as he robotically shook hands with Carl, turned, and left.

Not long after that final encounter, Carl was sitting in the bar again, thinking that the young people had given up whispering about him and he'd more or less become part of the scenery. In reality, it was Carl who was self-absorbed, and the masses of quivering bone and flesh and muscle and memory and emotion were just scenery to him, which he could see but would

never try to interact with of his own accord. How utterly astonished he felt when a shape materialized out of that scenery, sidling right up to him at his table near the back. She pressed her face toward his, close enough for a bit of spittle to land on his lips when she spoke, and he heard her opening line before he even got a chance to look at her.

“Hi sir, are you having a good time?”

That she was a blonde wasn't the first thing he noticed. Rather, he took in her face, which suggested to him that here was somebody on the rebound, as it were. She was young enough to have a freshness in her creamy cheeks, but had perhaps been through a long-term relationship or two. Her thin arching brows and high but not haughty cheekbones were worthy of a model. Carl quickly decided that she was one of the most attractive women he'd seen here. The only question was what drew this stranger to him now. What could it be? He supposed it was his air of the serious recluse, with concerns worthy of Salinger that he needed to meditate upon in a semi-private setting. He didn't have long to ponder the question because the woman had more questions of her own, about Carl's life and work and what he liked to drink and whether he knew Manny who worked the later shift here on Fridays. He answered as ingenuously as possible, but his answers were not thorough enough to keep her from inviting him to an apartment six blocks away. An hour later, Carl sat on a couch before a glass table where she set out glasses of merlot, followed by a small trail of white powder. As they talked and talked into the night, he felt euphoric in a way he almost never had, certainly not in the last ten years of his life, and soon he was flying so high that he barely noticed when the woman, or perhaps it was her roommate, put something in front of him and asked him to sign it. He quickly obeyed.

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Freed from any misunderstandings about his past, Mark Dimon forged ahead with his supremely ambitious plans. In between films, he had plenty of things going so there was no chance of people forgetting who he was, of his rise to ever higher levels of fame sputtering and stalling. Three nights after his departure from Boston, people in the city, and others throughout the United States and Canada, saw an ad flash on their television screens in which the face of a strapping blond actor appeared. The actor made an eloquent case that people in wealthy and comfortable nations should do their part to help girls in Africa get a good education. He'd partnered with an eminent Columbia University professor known as a leading expert on this issue. The professor lent his knowledge to the cause, while Mark Dimon was making it chic for the younger set.

All over Boston, people seeing Mark's handsome, sturdy, symmetrical features filling the screen exclaimed, *What a decent man. What a great guy! What a hero! OUR NATIVE SON!*





boas

David R. Solheim

Scaled tire treads
Litter the roadside
Shed skins of fossil
Fuel constrictors.



two story family

David R. Solheim

On the upper level, the old widow
Continues her daily tasks:
Washing dishes, ironing clothing,
And afternoons dozing over scrapbooks
Where her grandchildren will find her life.

On the ground floor, the middle-aged couple
Pay bills, drive off to work, and
After dinner, listen to
Mouse-like scurrying overhead.



phantom

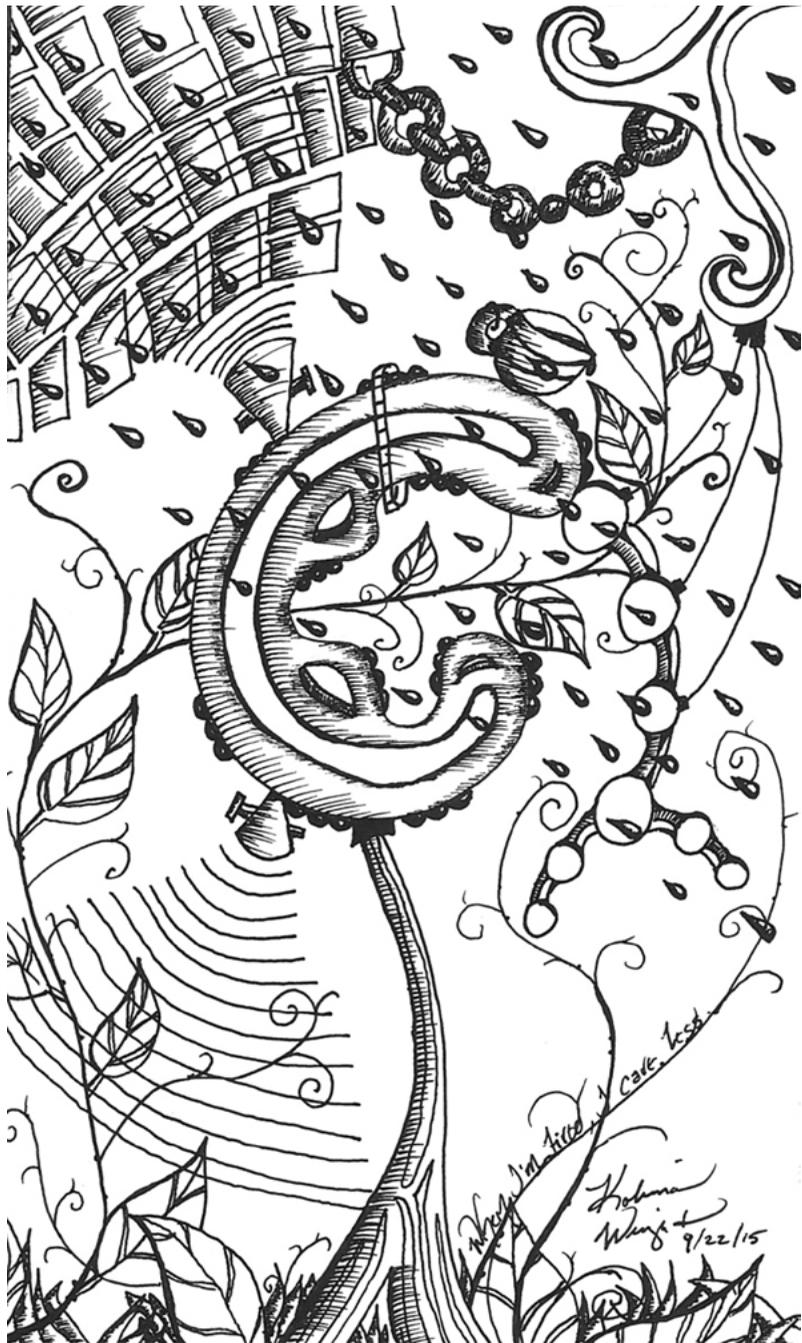
David R. Solheim

Another old friend has left me behind.
My day is filled with holes of former habit.

No cans to open nor chin to scratch.
No vibrations on my chest
Soothing me to a midday nap.

I imagine friends gone home
And hear the mewling of someone
About to enter the world of sleep
Or about to leave it.





when i'm tired i care less
Kobina Wright

carrying my tricycle over cracks

Linda Kraus

There it was—nestled under the Christmas tree—
a longed-for gift, streamlined, red and wonderful—
my own chrome-accented magic carpet on wheels.

A tiny, overly-protected, three-year-old had matured
enough to have her first chariot, a sturdy tricycle fitted
with wooden blocks so that she could reach its pedals.

The joy! I could navigate anywhere within the radius
of my neighborhood—two blocks of suburban homes
connected by tendrils of crumbling cement sidewalks.

Armed with minimal tenacity and even less bravery,
I slowly pedaled down my driveway, aware that I was
about to have my first unsupervised great adventure.

In front of me was a jagged fissure peppered with bits
of stone and matted grass—obviously, a celestial warning
that I would be sucked down into the center of the earth.

I picked up my tricycle and carried it over the crack,
knowing that I could snake slowly down the sidewalk
if I stopped wherever the angels had alerted me.

Even when I became a far more accomplished rider, I
would carry my precious tricycle over any rough surface
that would lead me down, down, down to Satan's door.

I still carry my tricycle, lifting it over the rough patches
of my life—a child-woman who chooses to vanquish
danger with the avoidance scenarios of a skilled strategist.



casual sex

Linda Kraus

Yes, she finally took the dare, deciding to try online dating, the playground of her friends. 'Gregarious, young-at-heart-fifty-something seeks intelligent, educated man for conversation, travel, adventure and possible romance.'

Photos (some of unmentionable body parts), affidavits of excellent character, financial stability, joie de vivre, and assurances of those working body parts flooded her mailbox, making her feel desirable, surely a candidate for love.

She winnowed dozens of possibilities, selecting a promising candidate whose credentials seemed impeccable, passing her tests. She chose a trendy bistro—correct decor, a playful ambiance, a bit of an edge, surely suitable for seduction.

He looked like his photo—handsome, urbane, that captivating twinkle—the works! Presenting her with a small bouquet, he ordered cocktails and smiling asked, "What do you like? I need to know how to please you."

"Shakespeare, Faulkner, opera, mysteries – and a lovely walk in the rain. Sometimes I like to sit on the beach. I cry at romantic movies, and sometimes in church ..."
"No, what do you like?" he demanded.

"Cozy fires at Christmas, Mozart, and Bach."
"No, what gets you hot?" he implored.
"Sitting at the beach in too much sun..."
Horrified, he fled; yes, he was gone—gone!
Perhaps he didn't like Bach.



mercado roberto huembes

Ramon Jimenez

On the streets of Managua, Nicaragua
where addresses are non-existent
and traffic signs are suggestions
there is a market by the name Roberto Huembes.

Everyone works,
hawking their goods and moving their wares.
From boxes full of fat avocados, and ripe dragon fruit
to carts loaded with plantains that range from green to brown.

In the cooked food section,
the women scramble to attract customers
offering overtly friendly greetings.
Yelling out a sweet barrage of complements to each clientele
while reciting the entire menu with mechanical speed.
The top hits include fried fish with rice and stewed beans
or bulging bowls of hot soup.
Full of tendon, meat, and root vegetables
flavored with strong cilantro
because only the steaming heat of the broth
can cool down the stick to your shirt humidity.

But the meat department is a horror show,
enough to terrorize the soul of meat eaters and vegetarians alike.
Pigs, chickens and cows turned to cadavers
displayed and hung upside-down.
Whole living creatures processed into individual parts
by the chop and dice of the butchers precise hand.
Live giant iguanas crawl around boxes
scratching the cardboard with their thin claws
unaware that they were not brought here to be pets.
For all must be consumed in the moment,
nothing can be wasted nor preserved.



becoming hollywood

Jim Ross

Hollywood movie premieres allow people who have little or no connection with the industry to join the fray, as everyone tries to figure out who's who and make connections. Several years ago, my son Alex attended the premiere of *Leatherheads* with his then girlfriend. He hung with John Krasinski, who said, "Look at us. You and I could be *brothers*," while girlfriend chatted up Krasinski's dad in Polish. They even huddled with Hiro from *Heroes*. It scarcely mattered that the film's stars, George Clooney and Renee Zellweger, did a walk through, meaning they entered the front door, took the photos mandated by their contracts, and sneaked out the back.

A year later, my daughter Emily and her then fiancée (now husband) Matt attended the premiere of *Invictus*. They passed time with director, Clint Eastwood, and with the film's Nelson Mandela, played by Morgan "Nine Lives" Freeman, who had already died seven times on social media. Their photo documentation of the evening included Matt and Freeman toasting each other, Eastwood with his arm around Emily, and Emily sitting contentedly between two of Mandela's real-life grandchildren. It didn't matter to any of them (or to Jimmy Kimmel) that Matt Damon was a no show.

Alex and I jumped at the prospect of attending the Hollywood premiere of *How Do You Know*. Alex just ended a long-term relationship; I just left an employer I'd worked for nearly forever. Tired of replaying the episodes that led to our respective endings, we welcomed distraction from lingering doubt, fear, and sadness, and threw ourselves with abandon into the illusion of freedom and the chance to be enchanted.

The film's story line intrigued us: hot girl (Reese Witherspoon) who's having an affair with a self-absorbed DC baseball star (Owen Wilson) is cut from the U.S. Olympic softball team. That gives her oomph to accept the forays of a wimpy stock broker (Paul Rudd), whose father (Jack Nicholson) has lied and cheated his way through every deal he ever made, and whose pregnant secretary (Kathryn Hahn) is the only one who knows the inside story. As we built ourselves up for the night, Alex and I tried to imagine who we might meet and what we might say to them. I fantasized sharing scotches with Jack, who'd soon realize he wanted to play me in my life story (only he's sort of old and slightly too eccentric). Alex fantasized Reese would ask for a private convo and Owen would invite him jogging the next morning.

Alex and I psyched ourselves by visiting my incredibly successful cousin Bob, who was living in Halle Berry's former starter-mansion in The Hills, walking the boardwalk the entire stretch of Venice and Santa Monica beaches, and driving up to Malibu. Had we remembered our bathing suits when we visited Bob, we could've swum in the same indoor pool where, rhapsodically, Halle Berry used to lap swim. As we were leaving, Bob said, "You know, you really didn't need bathing suits."

After a couple of free glasses of pinot at our hotel, we hitched a ride to the movie venue in the hotel's vintage Cadillac Escalade. As required, we checked our cameras at the entrance to the theater with the understanding we could re-claim them after the film, en route to the

reception. Being camera-less for over two hours caused some great photo opportunities to elude us but, hey, those were the rules. After camera surrender, we planted ourselves in the lobby. The crowd started to build. Soon after, a woman walked by on her way *into* the theater—she was permitted to enter—but not before she glanced our way. A few minutes later, she came back out and again looked our way.

Alex noticed a little woman ten feet away thronged by autograph hounds, most under age 15. Alex said, “Go get it.” She was more than pleasant as she scribbled on one the 4 x 6 unlined white medium-weight index cards I happened to be carrying. The same woman with who previously looked our way twice passed us four more times (two out, two in). I told Alex, “She’s looking at you.” He said, “I hate to disillusion you, Dad, but the two of you keep locking eyes.” Finally, we were allowed to enter and take our peanut gallery seats. We were assured Jack and Reese were there, but didn’t see either much less any identifiable lesser luminaries before the lights dimmed. Watching the credits, we figured out the illegible autographer thronged by 15-year-olds was Kathryn Hahn, who didn’t have top billing, but put in the best performance.

At film’s end, as the crowd emptied into the aisles, our adrenaline shifted into overdrive. Re-entering the lobby, Alex gestured toward the exit: “Isn’t that the *CSI* lady?” I doubled my speed and caught up with her. “Are you who I think you are?” I asked. “Well, who do you think I am?” asked Marge Helgenberger, still red-headed, standing alongside a man about ten years her senior, who wasn’t her husband of twenty-plus years, actor Alan Rosenberg, from whom she was splitting. I wanted to say, “Aren’t you that little ho from *China Beach*?” I thought better of it, smiled, and said, “I know who you are. Sorry you’re leaving *CSI*.” She scribbled something illegible on a 4 x 6 unlined white medium-weight index card. I wondered whether I would be able to keep all these illegible signatures straight or, for that matter, whether it even mattered.

As paying guests, Alex and I hightailed our way along the red carpet. For fun, he waved and smiled back at the star-struck crowd. People reached over the barricade asking for autographs. When a girl in a blue jumpsuit caught Alex’s eye, he stopped to sign her autograph book. He also scribbled on another girl’s arm, a boy’s t-shirt, and a couple of scraps of paper shoved in front of his face. One girl yelled, “Who are you?” Alex said, “You don’t know?” to which she said, “I’m not sure” and he said, “You’ll figure it out.” I yanked him away and we resumed our stride. “What’d you write?” I asked. “I don’t know,” he said. Without breaking stride, he repeated, “Sorry, no autographs,” to the tourists crammed behind the barricade. We finally reached the reception table, recovered our cameras, and dove inside. Our hearts sunk when we learned that Jack and Reese had pulled the same stunt as Renee and George, and had already skedaddled.

Instead of surrendering to feelings of deprivation, we rode our cresting adrenaline and did a walk-around on the star level (three levels up). We asked around and got the low down on who was there and who was still expected. That fed our game plan. We didn’t realize until later that SONY tightly restricted access to the star level to identifiable stars and members of the media *with credentials*. That meant that, lacking credentials, we had no choice but to be stars. To enable our stardom, we grabbed a couple of beers, filled our plates with hors d’oeuvres, swallowed our food without breathing, and made use of the star-level port-a-potties outside.

After experiencing stardom in the rhinestone-studded loos, once inside, we instantly came across Kathryn Hahn—walking the floor making nice, carrying a plate of mac and cheese,

rather than hiding behind security of the star level. Alex and I knew her as Lily Lebowsky, the grief counselor from the television show *Crossing Jordan*. Kathryn also was in *Anchorman* with Will Farrell and Paul Rudd, and had two more films in the works with Rudd (*Our Idiot Brother* and *Wanderlust*). “You were the *real* star of that film,” I told her, meaning every word. “Oh, thank you, I can’t tell you how much I appreciate that,” sounding like a she’d just won a blue ribbon at the State fair for her pickled watermelon rind, using Aunt Mabel’s recipe. Kathryn hung with us a while, as if she really wanted to. She confided that her pregnant belly in the film was no prosthesis: she was pregnant with her daughter, Mae, throughout filming.

After saying adieu to Kathryn, moments later Alex and I came upon the woman with whom I kept locking eyes in the theater lobby. We still had no clue who she was, but didn’t admit that. She and I gave each other an unguarded look-over and simultaneously remarked that it appeared we’d coordinated outfits, what with both of us wearing navy blue with burgundy accents. Alex snapped our photo looking every inch like a couple. Upon request, she scribbled her name illegibly on a 4 x 6 unlined white medium-weight index card.

Alex and I agreed to split up to scout around. We met again at the bar, where we picked up a couple of beers. Jane Fonda had shown up unexpectedly and was deservedly being treated like Hollywood royalty. We circled by the area where Jane and her latest squeeze were holding court. Since she wasn’t a star of the film, we figured security would be lax. I wanted to say, “Hey, Jane, I still love you, and you know, you’re living next door to my cousin Bob.” Owen just happened to walk between us and Jane. Acting like press, Alex took a stunning photo of Jane posing with Owen before security asked for credentials. Looking dumbfounded, Alex and I said to each other “I thought I gave them to you.” Security gently nudged us away from Jane’s court, but not off star level.

We soon saw my eye-locking buddy and Tony Danza kibitzing together. Alex and I remembered Tony from the years he spent with Judith Light on *Who’s the Boss?* I gently touched Tony’s elbow, hoping to get his attention. Jumping out of his skin, he adopted a fighter’s stance, started grinding his teeth, and grumbled, “Don’t you ever do that again.” My eye-locking buddy gave Tony long, sad eyes. Tony reluctantly gave us a remarkably legible autograph on a 4 x 6 unlined white medium-weight index card. Kathryn joined the conversation and then Hank Azaria showed up. Kathryn and Hank had a new sitcom in the works.

Alex managed to attract Hank’s attention for a private convo. A comedian and actor best known for being the voice for over a dozen characters on *The Simpsons*, Hank also did voices for other shows, such Gargamel on *The Smurfs*. Alex knew him from multiple films, such as *Along Came Polly*. For a short period, he’d been married to (and co-starred with on *Mad About You* with) one of my all-time heart-throbs, Helen Hunt. When I tried getting a picture of Alex with Hank, my camera kept refusing to fire. Hank quietly said to Alex, “Tell your Dad to relax and take his time. I’ve seen lots of Dads destroy lots of cameras.” After the camera began cooperating, Azaria said, “I’ll stick around as long as you and your Dad want, but then I think I’m going to duck out.”

After circling back to get a couple more beers, Alex and I noticed an extremely tall blond standing in front of the main bar. “Who do think that is?” I asked. “Looks like a porn star if you ask me,” Alex said. “She looks pretty buff,” I said. Surrounding the towering blond were a

dozen women who, likewise, looked impressively buff. We asked around and felt appropriately embarrassed to learn that we were looking at the U.S. Olympic women's softball team. "It seemed like the right thing to do, to have them here tonight, since the film centers around the exploits of Reese's character after she's cut from the team," their manager explained to us. Alex took a photo of me standing alongside 6' 6" Jennie Finch, the star pitcher from the squad that brought home Olympic gold in 2004 and silver in 2008. Next to her, I look remarkably like a mouse. I should've posed standing on 20 copies of *Meat for Tea* or, better yet, taken a photo of 6' 4" Alex with her instead.

After quick vodkas followed by beer chasers—we rarely drink normally, but our adrenaline needed taming—Alex and I circled back around. While we were distracted, the crowd had thinned out. Alex snapped a couple of photos of Paul Rudd with his wife. Rudd had gotten on my radar a few years earlier when he starred in *The Shape of Things* opposite Rachel Weisz. Then, Alex noticed a smiley older man coming down from the tight security area toward us. It was James L. Brooks himself, the film's director. Brooks had directed Jack previously in three acclaimed films: *Terms of Endearment*, *As Good as It Gets*, and *Broadcast News*. He'd also directed *Taxi*, the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* and the *Lou Grant Show*. But, to Alex and his generation, Brooks was the Creator and Executive Producer of *The Simpsons*. The connection to *The Simpsons* was important because Alex had always identified me with Homer Simpson. The Polish Pope, aka: John Paul II, had aptly noted that *The Simpsons* was one of the strongest positive influences on the ethical development of an entire generation. No kidding, the Pope really said that. I walked up to Brooks, asked him for a photo, he affably agreed, and Alex tried to shoot our picture. It seemed to take forever, so my face failed to capture my true feelings about standing next to one of the most creative minds in Hollywood. For some reason, in the photo, I bear a striking resemblance to Homer saying, "Doh."

As the evening wound down, Alex and I had a couple of beers with the event's host. He confided the film was written specifically with Reese in mind but that Jack was never slated to play Paul Rudd's father. Bill Murray had agreed to the role but, at the eleventh hour, said "I dowanna." Murray hasn't had an agent in decades, calls his own shots, and apparently tends to be fickle. Jack, who is close friends with Brooks, lives in The Hills, didn't have anything going on, and is a "real mensch," agreed to step in, even though he had almost no time to prepare. "Jack made it an entirely different film from what Murray would have brought," said the event's host. About the tight security, he remarked, "That's SONY for you."

When we got back to the hotel, Alex reached out to a friend to determine the identity of the eye locker in navy blue with burgundy accents. His friend came up with Marilu Henner, who had co-starred with Burt Reynolds on *Evening Shade* and, before that, on *Taxi* with Danny DeVito, Christopher Lloyd, and Tony Danza. In addition, we learned that she and Danza had been a number on and off for several years while shooting *Taxi*; and, that after Danza's acting career tanked, he pursued a swiftly-failed boxing career. It was probably for the best we knew none of that. I'll remember Danza for his fighting stance and Henner for those eyes.

Photographic evidence of the evening shows that someone who looked strikingly like Helen Mirren was standing right behind Kathryn Hahn as Alex and I were chatting with her. Regrettably, we never crossed paths with Mirren or her doppelganger.

A few weeks after that escapist night, *60 Minutes* featured a story revealing that Marilu Henner had just been identified as the seventh person in the world proven to possess highly superior autobiographical memory (HSAM). Alex and I took consolation in knowing that, even when everyone we had ever met, and especially the ones we just left behind, had flushed us from their memory traces, our newfound friend Marilu will still remember, especially me with my burgundy accents. I hope she forgets the part about Danza almost decking me.



Marilu Henner and me (photo by Alex).
Don't you agree it looks like we coordinated outfits?



Hank Azaria speaking in his own voice and Alex (photo by me)



Richard Petty, Jane Fonda, and Owen Wilson (photo by Alex)

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Me, feeling like a mouse, trying to stand tall alongside 6' 6"
U.S. Olympic Gold softball pitcher, Jennie Finch (photo by Alex)

Alex definitely should've been the one in this photo with Jennie.



James L. Brooks, film director and creator of Homer Simpson, posting with Homer Simpson who's trying to look like me (photo by Alex)

*

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left hand - right hand

HJ Lawrence

LEFT HAND

E_az_te

Art gave Bea \$124! Dad farted! Dave was awed!

Gabe stared at Fred's very bad grades! Egads! We saw a sad face

Degas was a fat cat!

Read Sartre!

Sartre was a bad ass! A faded gas bag! A fart face!

Fred traded a bat for a vase

We were far east We grabbed a cab We ate figs We ate red beets We saw a cat We saw a bat cave

122 are bad fer feet.

Grab a seat! Get a draft beer! Rest!

We are ready Freeze a wart

Was Bert ever sad! Bert was drafted #1A @ age 21! Bad!

RIGHT HAND

_P__o__

Punk hippo. Pulpy plum. Poll.

Lumpy upon plop

Homily polyp nun pun

Moon. Nook. Puny. Plump noun. I mop up. Lily Polk – my loony yuppy. I jump in joy.

I hop on my pony. You pull him uphill.

I pop my pink pill. I jump in my oily & inky pool. I'm hip. Oui. Oui.

John Moon - my killjoy –no mojo.

Johnny – yup

Yuk yolk ploy

Oho. Molly Lupino – my kinky junky – you look loopy, ill, jumpy. You limp. No junk? Oy.

You look in my pink limo. You jump in my pool. I'll kill you.

Holy Moly. Lulu, my jumpy lion. You jump uphill

I 8 my lollipop – yummy





tea party
Anne Meuse

bookplate: a tiny mystery

Rebekah Boyd

—with *phrases* from “Sestina” by Elizabeth Bishop

Delayed by inclement weather, I’ve just arrived at the Old Fir Estate.

“Have you met her?” my host asks. I search my mind. What year was that? I take the stairs two at a time, after her.

“Yes,” I scramble through the hallways, thinking harder.

“Yes,” I repeat. “Yes. I have met her.” I spy the door brightened by crayons; there she is. She is Miss Bishop. Miss Elizabeth Bishop. I lived with her once, for six weeks. Mornings, I read her work aloud. Afternoons, I took notes.

The woman who asks oversees this estate house slowly being emptied. I drop my bag inside the bedroom door; pause. *September rain falls on the house*. I hasten down the stairs. The woman who asks scurries around the sitting room that holds three; she *puts more wood in the stove*. The third person is a tall man, his jacket *with buttons like tears*. W. S. Merwin? Maybe Mark Strand?

“Good. You know her,” says the woman who asks. She continues, “I’ve never been satisfied with that review.” Not enough quoted material, I infer. She’s nodding at the tall man, making him complicit.

He stands where a wall might be, *in the failing light*. He scans from afar the bookshelves.

In my mind, I flip through the saved newsprint issues. Where is that piece? Toward the end? Odd, writing a review without quoting from the poet’s work.

The woman who asks picks up the handset, an instrument of forecasts; she’s calling someone who will support another review, someone at the *Times*. She barks six medium-sized sentences, then *hangs up the clever almanac*. “You’ll interview her. You’ll interview her, together,” she says.

From the shelves, I pull a book, one that’s been placed there upside down, perhaps by the tall man who’s vanished. I open the book to find, glued inside the front cover, a little mirror made of paper. In the mirror is an owner’s name, indecipherable in its elegant scrawl, a name that says look at me. I am here, too, I have held this book. I have read with *the old grandmother, who sits in the kitchen*

with the child, and with Miss Bishop, the poet. *Between the pages of the almanac into the flower bed* I have kept her company and she, me. She has blown my mind and I have joined her in the Milky Way, where bookplates are sleds and saucers flying over the freshly baked, good smelling stars.

Miss Bishop’s hair is in the room, a series of bundles on her head, like the plump, comfortable rolls of flesh that settle at her waist as she sleeps. The parrots, the macaws, the Bird of Paradise flowers—all surround her as she makes love, dreams, wakes, moves to her desk. She has eaten

the birds, ingested the flowers. They return to the world as she crafts a blue wing, or a curving band of green and yellow, its dark-eye center, a phrase she clackety clacks onto the page. The platen turns in the compact machine. Miss Bishop contemplates, skips a space the size of a word she will discover years later. Years later, some morsel of tropical life will be brought into the sentence. Yes, Miss Bishop has been found.

The rain that beats on the roof of the house accompanies us as we move through rooms once made comfortable with armchairs, small tables, reading lamps. We will find a place to continue, the three of us, Miss Bishop, myself, and the reader whose face appears in the spidery handwriting in the bookplate. We circle back towards the sitting room. *It was meant to be, says the Marvel Stove.* I encounter a locked door. *I know what I know, says the almanac.* The rain lessens. I peer through a crack between the door jamb and the door itself. An addition, open-air, walls a pale blue suggestion. *Inscrutable.*



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eternal

Patrick T. Reardon

Eternal, puzzle us,
puzzle us clockwork apart and put us
back together, create/re-create, Eternal,
cycle us and puzzle us to ourselves,
puzzle us revelations long withheld.

Puzzle the lost phone at McDonald's, a
sort of life without electricity touch,
eye blink, incense and wet dung, coat
buckle clocking wood pew in cave-tall
church, taste of broken bread.

Puzzle grubs and snits, moist soil where
the bell tulip rots, yellow stem sticks,
maze of mourning, the dead and the
quick, the blueshadow seed grown brittle,
church of chaos decay, headquarters of
biological commerce, the last first and
so on, corpse of the lucifer rose, of the
waltzing lily, of the red-wing gnat, alpha,
omega, bang and whimper; lost souls,
survival of and so on, quiver and still,
ignored passion, crucifixion, rising,
scripture, itch, whisper below her
white-on-white hemline and her notice.

Puzzle us, Eternal, jigsaw lost tribes,
communion of saints.

Puzzle our father, the tapped rock that
spouted no water, the sea that never
parted, the frozen divine flame, the bush
brittle and thick with thorns.

Puzzle the patient: "I was put here for you
to help. Will you help me? Will you take
away my dreams? Do you dream? You are
filling up with dreams like a balloon. You
start to rise awkwardly. I hold my breath.
I wait for you to explode."

Eternal, puzzle the
babel: "Arrow the
lust. Wrestle the
stone. Weigh dust."

Puzzle the bony boy in the last
desk in the window row who, with nun not
noticing, pressed point of canary yellow
Crayola on silver rust radiator skin and
watched river of wax sinuate down cast
iron and red violet next and mountain
meadow green and navy blue, each an
Illinois, a Missouri, an Ohio, feeding a gray
Mississippi emptying to drear gulf of boredom.

Eternal, puzzle us, empty of epiphany,
lusting for a full belly of understanding.



alleluia steeples

Patrick T. Reardon

Give me two mule-loads of
mud flooded with the Lord God,
the water in which I washed,
plunged seven times,
gagged, splashed, amok,
spluttered, my flesh like
the flesh of a child,
uncleanness now whiter than snow;

The baby sleeps in the upper room.
The bread is broken in the upper room.
I climb the stairs to the upper room.

We store the box of photographs,
each a song, in the upper room.
Look, light from the upper room
stabs the dark.

two mule-loads of river silt,
caress of current, mountain to bay;

Workers dismantle the upper room table.
Upper room fracture,
upper room consternation, upper room belief.
The upper-room hymns.

of dry beach sand, insected, footed, garbaged;

Open the tabernacle
in the wall safe in the upper room.
Hear confessions in the upper room.

Elk clopping before the altar.

two mule-loads of dust from
the home he abandoned when
he stuttered his way out the back
door with the trigger.

I chew my brother's ashes until I choke.
The baby breathes and alleluia steeples.



sambo

Patrick T. Reardon

I delight
in book's side-by-side drawings
that 1852 physiognomist said proved
hairy hound terrier and hairy hound Irishman
were essentially the same creature,
two years after zoologist asserted
calibrations proved Negro equals ape,

and delight
to be far distant from that day and
from Patrick Riordan (Old Country spelling) who
starved, creature that he was, in the Famine
as the English dithered, debated comfortably,

and delight
to enjoy my clear-eyed enlightenment.

By the rivers of Georgia, we sat and wept,
and our captors demanded a song — “Sing us
so we have delight” — but how can we
sing our song of Africa in a strange land?

I delighted
in my smiling baker grandmother,
all warmth and flour and flakey cookies,
who taught me — eeny, meeny — an evil nursery rhyme,

and in the poetry of my childhood in which
tigers raced in a circle and turned into butter
for the pancakes of Little Black Sambo who was me
(but, I knew, not me, so dark, so simple),

and in Fred Astaire and Judy Garland
minstrelling in blackface, so much fun,
and Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Sophie Tucker,
Sophia Loren, James Cagney, Jimmy Stewart,
Dean Martin, Bob Hope, Douglas Fairbanks
and America's Little Darling, Shirley Temple,
as happy-go-lucky darkies — wasn't they a hoot!

By the rivers



from the flood

C.M. Preston

He called me from the flood
to tell me there was no hope

It's too late, he said
the water is rising as I tell you this

and soon I won't be able to go anywhere
and I'm going to lose everything I have

Out of harm's way in my hotel
I asked why he didn't just leave

But right now, I said
right now you're able to leave

Right now you're able
to get in your car and drive away

Right now you're able
to move your belongings out of harm's way.

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He said no
He said there's nothing you can do to stop the water

It's all hopeless
there's nothing I can do

It's all hopeless
there's nothing I can do



stern promises

C.M. Preston

On a boat one night together
as night fell, I looked over the back
to watch the wake we were making

Looking at the wake I said;
I could watch this view forever

Hark, friends! Let it be known
I am not one to make empty promises!
Or fall victim to hyperbole and indecision

I did watch that view forever.

I locked myself to the deck of that boat,
the shackles
sawing through the skin on my wrists

Other guests came and went,
the seasons changed
but I didn't move, shackled to my seat

Calling myself to task
for what I said
that one night when we were together



runner

Ellis Scott

The dog headed straight into the parkette on his retractable leash. A young woman lay on the grass. Her eyes followed me all the way from the gate to the water feature.

“What the fuck is that thing wearing,” she said.

“It’s Gooby fleece,” I said, trying to hold my head high.

“Don’t wanna disturb you in repose,” I said. “Worse is I forgot the little feet, which makes the ensemble, really.”

“You look like a faggot with that dog.”

I shrugged. “If the shoe fits.”

“Well, you do.”

“Round peg, round hole. Like I said.”

“That’s your dog?”

I hesitated. “No, it’s my brother’s dog.”

He stood in the grass, trembled and peed. “He did his business, so I guess we’re done here. Would you like to pet him?” She shook her head. The dog made for the gate, chasing a ghost. I stopped and bought a sticky rice, to go.

I unwrapped the steaming leaf and mashed the contents into the bowl. The dog lunged, baring his tiny fish-teeth, and bit me hard on the index finger.

“911, what’s your emergency?” she said.

“I’ve been bitten by a dog.”

“Whereabouts sir—is it serious?”

“On my finger. It’s bleeding quite a lot. Are there arteries there? What should I do?”

“Is the dog on the loose, sir?”

“No he’s on his Comfy-bed.”

“Sorry?”

"It's a mini-Chihuahua. I was feeding him sticky rice and he went for me like he was rabid. He's totally neurotic when it comes to food. He'll eat anything! Corn chips, stale pasta, dried epazote—a liquid gel. You'd think it's the gulag."

"Is the bite serious enough to call an ambulance? I must advise you, you may be charged for the ride if it's not an emergency."

"How much?"

"550 dollars sir for non-emergency ambulatory transport. If your dog is indeed rabid we will have to take appropriate measures, it may have to be put down."

"I didn't mean 'actually rabid'. He's not my dog, he's my brother's. Well, he's mine now. Ok wait, just forget it. I'll make my own way to the hospital, thank you so very much."

"Uh-huh. Well, good luck sir with your new dog."

There was no one in the waiting room except me and the woman beside me. I guessed eighties, wearing pale pink lipstick, her ash-brown hair in a loose bun. She side-eyed me, somewhat flirtatiously.

"Jury's in on the gowns," she said. "I have three on and my behind is still showing. If I got up it would be quite a show, let me tell you." She winked.

"It's not rocket science," I snickered. "A simple A-line slip-on, cinched at the waist. Any first year fashion student could do it, honestly." Her brown suede ankle boots had a high heel and a side zipper. I thought they were very fashionable yet incredibly thrift store at the same time.

"What are you in for?"

"Well," I said, "my dog bit me on the finger. He's got it in for me. I have ligament damage and may require minor surgery. You?"

"Dogs sense unease. Me? Oh the gamut—back, shoulders, hips. I retired ten years ago, and my husband's been dead for seven—this is as good a place as any to spend the day, I figure."

She ogled me. I stared at a door that said 'Diagnostic Imaging'.

"And the dog, what's his name?"

"Suzanna Decharie Mans."

"Wow." She elbowed me. "Sounds like you bought quite the old yeller!"

"Hardly," I said. "It was my brother's. He died a month ago. There was no one else to take him. I felt some...duty, I guess."

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said. “That’s very sad. What happened?”

“He got run over by a car.”

“By a car? How on earth?”

“He was running from the police. He jumped over a guardrail on the highway into an oncoming vehicle. It was instant—I think.”

“Why was he running from the police?”

I ran my hands down my sides. “Long story, I don’t want to bore you.”

She looked around. “If we have anything—it’s time.”

I pursed my lips. “He got into drugs, and started using heavily—disappeared for weeks at a time, then a distraught call, and the same story. Insisting the cops were watching him, behind the bushes, coming to take him.”

She tsked; I fidgeted. “I’d pick him up from some address in the middle of nowhere, shaking, half-conscious. I paid for rehabs over and over, nothing worked, then he was told to try an emotional support animal.” I held my hand up. “He just made bad choices.”

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“My husband was a real drinker at the end,” she said, swinging her crossed leg. “I’d find him in the morning, heading to bed. I used to always wonder what he thought about in the dark, night after night. When I asked, he said he was ‘just very sad’. I miss him.”

“I miss my brother, too.” I pulled my hem down. “All the stuff about the cops tailing him—it was just in his head. Then one night, looking to score, he headed out in his car onto the highway and called me, frantic, screaming the police were always following—just out of sight. I reassured him there was no one there. Later this cop pulled him over for speeding. He was going 120. Just a routine 2 am ticket. The cop said he didn’t know what happened. My brother just exploded out of his car and jumped the rail. Then screeching tires.”

The nurse called my name. My finger throbbed. “You know the worst thing? I hear him in my head all the time, frozen in the front seat, the flashing lights: ‘It’s true, it’s real, no one believed me’. Eats me up. If only he hadn’t run. He would have gotten a ticket.” I grimaced. “Good luck.”

“Look after his dog for him.”

I walked toward imaging, chasing a ghost.





forest
Kelly Emmrich

Contributors' Notes

Jamie Berger the host and creator of “15 Minutes: a podcast about fame,” which can be found pretty much everywhere pods are cast or at 15minutesjamieberger.com. Guests have included David Sedaris, George Saunders, Mira Bartok, Sarah Fran Wisby, John Hodgman, Robyn Hitchcock, Beth Lisick, Andrew Leland, Penny Lane, and about 50 others, so far. He also wrote the essay “Peep Show” which can be found online at <https://psiloveyou.xyz/@15minsjamieb> and is on twitter/Instagram @15minsjamieb. He has graduated degrees in Creative Writing from City College of New York and UMass Amherst, works as a tutor and academic coach at Northfield Mount Hermon and independently, and is returning to writing after an accidental decade-long hiatus.

Nandini Bhattacharya was born and raised in India and has called the United States her second home for the last thirty years. Wherever she has lived, she has generally turned to books for answers to life's big and small questions. Her short stories have been published in Meat for Tea: the Valley Review, Storyscape Journal, Raising Mothers The Bacon Review, The Bangalore Review and Ozone Park Journal. She was first runner-up for the Los Angeles Review Flash Fiction contest (2017-2018), a finalist for the Fourth River Folio Contest for Prose Prize (2018), long-listed for the Disquiet International Literary Prize (2019), and a finalist for the Reynolds-Price International Women's Literary Award (2019). *Love's Garden* is her first novel. She is working on a second novel titled *Homeland Blues*. She lives outside Houston with her family and two marmalade cats. <https://www.nandinibhattacharyawrites.com>

Rebekah Bloyd's creative nonfiction, translations, and poems have appeared in Harper's, Poetry, The Cincinnati Review, Catamaran, and elsewhere. *At Sea*, her most recent collection, features life in Venezuela, the West Indies, and in California, places where she's worked, lived, loved, and walked the shifting shore. Rebekah makes her home in San José and makes her commute to San Francisco, where she teaches at California College of the Arts.

Seth Cable is a writer, musician, and academic living in Northampton, MA with his wife, three children, and tiny cat. His (non-academic) work has appeared in Meat for Tea, Bull & Cross, Eclectica, Oddball, the Bitchin' Kitsch, Down in the Dirt. He's terrible with names, but great with faces. And voices. More of his work has been collected at, “<https://people.umass.edu/scable/Faction/>

Jacob Chapman lives in Amherst, MA with his wife and daughter. His chapbook *Other Places* was published by Open Country Press, and he plays guitar in the band Camel City Drivers.

Jennifer Coates is an American Postwar & Contemporary artist who was born in 1973. Her work was featured in numerous exhibitions at key galleries and museums, including the Galerie Zürcher, New York and the High Noon. Jennifer Coates has been featured in articles for the Art Critical, the ArtDaily and the Glasstire.

Daniel Dagrís was born on the mean streets of Las Vegas, raised in the backwoods of Winlock, Washington, and tear-gassed in Thessaloniki, Greece (because, college, right?). His work has received honorable mention from Glimmer Train and appeared in the Buckman Journal, Feels Zine, Chaleur Magazine, and elsewhere.

Kelly Emmrich is an illustrator and animator living and working in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Her work has appeared in the Magazine 'Moonhood Magazine,' and 'The Emerald.' She studied creative writing and animation at the University of Mary Washington. She is currently working as a beer label designer for a microbrewery in Afton, Virginia.

David Ferland earned a Bachelor of Arts in English from Colorado State University. Since then, he has baked bagels, driven the bookmobile and currently teaches orientation and mobility to people who are blind. Throughout, he has continued to write poetry and fiction. He lives in Easthampton, Massachusetts and hikes the Pioneer Valley as much as he can.

Ellen Mary Hayes lives in Western Massachusetts. Her poetry has been published in The Spires Magazine, This Magazine, and Wellstone Poets. The themes of her work cycle around spirit and transformation.

Richard Wayne Horton has received 2 Pushcart nominations. He is the 2019-21 MA Beat Poet Laureate and has published 2 books of short stories and flash fiction, *Sticks & Bones* (Meat For Tea Press) and *Artists In The*

Underworld (Human Error Publishing). He has published in Meat For Tea, Bull & Cross, Southern Pacific Review, Danse Macabre du Jour, The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, The Bitchin' Kitsch, Literary Heist and others.

Ramon Jimenez is a writer and educator who resides in Seattle, WA. He teaches language arts and runs a summer youth poetry program. He writes poetry that focuses on immigration, culture and travel, and is interested in exploring locations and how they connect to memories.

Scott Archer Jones is currently trapped inside his sixth novel and second novella in northern New Mexico, after stints in the Netherlands, Scotland, and Norway plus less exotic locations. He's worked for a power company, grocers, a lumberyard, an energy company (for a very long time), and a winery. He has launched four prize-winning books. *Jupiter and Gilgamesh, a Novel of Sumeria and Texas* in 2014, *The Big Wheel* in 2015, and *a rising tide of people swept away* in March 2016. And *Throw Away The Skins* was released by Fomite Press in March of 2019.

JRM is a Chicano/Indigenous Californian writer, painter, and playwright from El Centro, California. In 2016, along with poet Alexandra Woolner, and illustrator Jen Wagner, JRM founded Attack Bear Press in Easthampton, MA. Currently, JRM is one of 3 artists in residence for the inaugural Baustein Residency at Readywip Gallery in Holyoke, MA. In 2018, JRM's art was featured at Creative Arts Workshop in New Haven, CT, and his solo show *A quiY Alla* at the MapSpace Gallery in Easthampton. JRM's plays have been featured in theaters and festivals across the country including numerous theaters in New York City, The Circle X Theatre in Los Angeles, and The Diversionary Theatre in San Diego. In 2019, JRM's poem "Sestina for Sacred 7up" was featured in the Western Mass Biennial. In the fall of 2019, JRM released his chapbook *Indians' Beards Grow Quickly* through Attack Bear Press. JRM completed graduate studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara's Department of Theatre and Dance with an emphasis in Playwriting and Chicano Studies in 2006. His work can be found at: www.attackbearpress.com Facebook & Instagram: @attackbearpress

Brett Kelley is a freelance illustrator, educator and Western Mass Art Mercenary with artwork appearing in museums, galleries, festivals and television since 2012. Brett's latest work is a collection of detailed illustrations that depict the artists' interpretations and deconstructions of modern symbolism through countercultural and suggestivist themes. Welcome to Brett's therapy. You can follow his work via his instagram @bkartmerc

Marian Kent is the author of three poetry collections, *Heart Container*, *SUPERPOWERS or: More Poems About Flying*, and *Responsive Pleading*. She lives in Easthampton, MA with her family. You can follow Marian's poetry and other missives at www.runawaysentence.com

Linda Kraus has taught university courses in literature and film studies. She has published poetry in several literary journals and anthologies and is currently editing two collections of poetry.

HJ Lawrence is a partially unemployed physician living in Northern California and dabbling in constrained writing.

Mick McGrath was born and raised in Canada. He is a recent graduate of the University of Tennessee's MFA program. His fiction has appeared in Avatar Review. A book review he wrote was published in Fiction Southeast.

Cynthia McVay lives on a defunct farm in the Hudson Valley, where she writes, forages and makes art. A management consultant for 25 years, starting at McKinsey, she led the inaugural Office of Innovation for the Peace Corps under Obama. She holds a BA from Harvard in biology and studio arts, MBA from Wharton, and MA from University of Pennsylvania.

Anne Meuse is an artist and writer who lives in Easthampton, MA with her family and her cat. She is 13 years old. See more of Anne's art on Instagram @KangLinNuriko.

David P. Miller is the author of *Sprawled Asleep* (Nixes Mate Books, 2019) and *The Afterimages* (Červená Barva Press, 2014). Poems have recently appeared in Meat for Tea, Hawaii Pacific Review, Turtle Island Quarterly, Clementine Unbound, Constellations, J Journal, The Lily Poetry Review, Ibbetson Street, Redheaded Stepchild, The Blue Pages, and What Rough Beast, among others. He is a member of the Jamaica Pond Poets. His poem "Add One Father to Earth" was awarded an Honorable Mention by Robert Pinsky for the New England Poetry Club's 2019 Samuel Washington Allen Prize competition. With a background in experimental theater before turning to

poetry, David was a member of the multidisciplinary Mobius Artists Group of Boston for 25 years. He was a librarian at Curry College in Massachusetts, from which he retired in June 2018.

Stephen James Moore was born in Hertfordshire, United Kingdom; studied in Newcastle Upon Tyne and Brighton and now lives and writes in Bristol, UK. He works in a cardiac catheterisation suite. He enjoys film, photography, running & literature. He also enjoys beatnik-urban-vooodoo.

Bill O'Connell has been living in the Pioneer Valley in Massachusetts between the Connecticut River and Quabbin Reservoir since 1984. A retired social worker, he teaches literature and writing at Greenfield Community College and runs a small handyman business. His publications include *Sakonnet Point* (Plinth Books 2011) & *On The Map To Your Life* (Dytiscid Press 1992) A new collection, *Dancing with God*, is due out in autumn 2020 from Open Field Press.

Melissa Pandina is an artist (BFA from MassArt) whose work has been internationally published and sold. A chronic illness lead here to delve into core shamanism and folklore. Her work centers on bringing folklore and animism to life. She is a sitting judge on the Carta Awards and has had her work featured in Professional Artist Magazine. She primarily works in oil and pen and ink and watercolor. Recently, she has added egg tempera to her repertoire. In her stage show, Menagerie Fantastica, she tours with large puppets. When not working with corporate and private clients, she is teaching at Holyoke Community College.

C.M. Preston is a Canadian poet currently attending the MFA program at The University of British Columbia.

Patrick T. Reardon is the author of eight books, including the poetry collection *Requiem for David and Faith Stripped to Its Essence*, a literary-religious analysis of Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence*. His poetry has appeared in Silver Birch Press, Ariel Chart, Cold Noon, Eclectica, Esthetic Apostle, Ground Fresh Thursday, Literary Orphans, Rhino, Spank the Carp, Main Street Rag, Down in the Dirt, Picaroon, Time for Singing, Tipton Poetry Journal, UCity Review, Under a Warm Green Linden and The Write City, and he has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize three times. Reardon, who worked as a Chicago Tribune reporter for 32 years, has published essays and book reviews widely in such publications as the Tribune, Chicago Sun-Times, Crain's Chicago Business, National Catholic Reporter and U.S. Catholic. His novella *Babe* was short-listed by Stewart O'Nan for the annual Faulkner-Wisdom Contest. His Pump Don't Work blog can be found at <http://www.patricktreardon.com/blog/>.

Jim Ross jumped into creative pursuits in 2015 after leaving public health research. He's since published nonfiction, poetry, and photography in well over 100 journals and anthologies in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia. Publications include Barren, Columbia Journal, Ilanot Review, Lunch Ticket, Kestrel, Meat for Tea, The Atlantic, The Manchester Review. Forthcoming: Granta, Roanoke Review, Typehouse. In the past year, he wrote and acted in his first play; and, a nonfiction piece led to a role in a soon-to-be-released, high-profile documentary limited series. Jim and his wife—parents of two health professionals and grandparents of five preschoolers—split their time between the city and the mountains.

Robert Runté, PhD, is currently Senior Editor of EssentialEdits.ca. Dr. Runté took early retirement as a professor to become a full-time editor so he could develop working relations with authors over a longer timeframe than the semester system. He has edited over 30 traditionally published SF&F novels and collections. His own short fiction has been published in Exile Literary Quarterly, Pulp Literature, On Spec Magazine, Tesseract, Imaginarium, Strangers Among Us, Prairie Starport, Playground of Lost Toys, Polar Borealis, Alberta Unbound, The First Line, and other venues. He has won three Aurora Awards for his literary criticism, and in 2017, one of his own stories was shortlisted for an Aurora. The late Dave Duncan called him "the best editor I've ever worked with", and willed Robert all his incomplete manuscripts to finish. *The Traitor's Son* is the first of these, due out from Five Rivers, August, 2021.

Ellis Scott is an emerging writer. His first story *Levies* was published by Into The Void magazine in October 2019 and his second story will be published by High Shelf Press in February 2020. He is nominated for the 2020 Pushcart Prize. He is queer and disabled.

Judith Serin is a literature professor at California College of the Arts, and her collection of poetry, *Hiding in the World*, was published by Diane di Prima's Eidolon Editions. Her work has been published in over 50 magazines, journals, and anthologies including Columbia Journal, Catamaran Literary Reader, Broad Street, Writer's Forum,

and most recently her memoir prose poems were published in the anthologies *Proposing on the Brooklyn Bridge* (Grayson Books), and *Impact* (Telling Our Stories Press).

David R. Solheim has published an interview, essays, reviews, and poems in many periodicals. He has published two chapbooks and his poems have been included in several anthologies. His four full-length books of poetry are available at buffalocommonspress.com.

Neysa Tapanes is an undergraduate architecture student studying in Boston. She is originally from Ware, Massachusetts. Her unique perspective and attitude have kept her life quite interesting, bringing many entertaining stories and experiences forward.

Peter Urkowitz lives in Salem, Massachusetts, where he works in a college library. He was drawn into the local poetry scene after the death of a poet friend, when the community came together to remember and reflect. He stayed as a spectator, and was soon led into writing his own work, and has been gratified by the warm and supportive response. He has published poems and art in *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*, *Oddball Magazine*, *Sextant*, and the *Lily Poetry Review*. His *Fake Zodiac Signs* have recently been published in a chapbook from Meat for Tea Press.

Joe Volpe is an amateur poet residing in Greater Boston area of Massachusetts. He attended the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts where he studied English with a concentration in Creative Writing and Poetry. His poem "That Which We Bring" has recently been published in the *Eve Poetry Magazine*, and his poems "Old Books" and "Current" were accepted for the *Train River Anthology*. He is currently a middle school teacher in the Boston area.

Michael Washburn is a Brooklyn-based writer and journalist. He is the author of the short story collections *The Uprooted and Other Stories* (2018) and *When We're Grownups* (2019).

Jennifer Weigel is a multi-disciplinary mixed media conceptual artist. Weigel utilizes a wide range of media to convey her ideas, including assemblage, drawing, fibers, installation, jewelry, painting, performance, photography and video. Much of her work touches on themes of beauty, identity (especially gender identity), memory & forgetting, and institutional critique. Weigel's art has been exhibited nationally in all 50 states and has won numerous awards.

Guinotte Wise writes and welds steel sculpture on a farm in Resum Speed, Kansas. His short story collection *Night Train, Cold Beer* won publication by a university press and enough money to fix the soffits. Five more books since. A 5-time Pushcart nominee, his fiction and poetry have been published in numerous literary journals including *Atticus*, *The MacGuffin*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Rattle* and *The American Journal of Poetry*. His wife has an honest job in the city and drives 100 miles a day to keep it. Some work is at <http://www.wisesculpture.com>

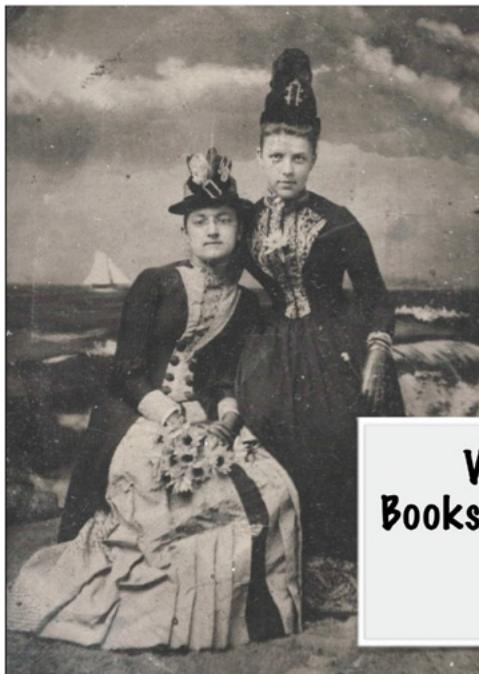
Kobina Wright lives in the California chaparral. She's the creator of the Hodaoa-Anibo language and dictionary - a work of art dedicated to her ancestral lineage brought to the land in bondage. She's the co-creator of nuler poetry - a form of poetry in which the title is exceptionally long and the poem that follows is eight words or less. Currently, Wright is working on a series of art assemblages inspired by rootwork.

Gerald Yelle's books are *The Holyoke Diaries* (Future Cycle Press), *Evolution for the Hell of It* (Red Dashboard Press), *Mark My Word and the New World Order* (The Pedestrian Press), and *Restaurant in Walking Distance and Everything* (Cawing Crow Press). He teaches high school English and is a member of the Florence (MA) Poets Society.

Jane Yolen's latest spring publications brings her count up to 386 books. Last year she won the Massachusetts Book Award in the Young Adult category for a Holocaust novel, *Mapping the Bones*. One of the two main characters is a fourteen year old Jewish poet, so she got to write his poems for him. Or with him, as it often seemed.

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Emma liked to make
Julia happy, but she
wondered why that
always seemed to
involve silly hats...

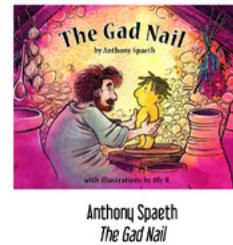
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