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COLORADO REVIEW

In this issue:
MELANIE RITZENTHALER
CEDAR BRANT
TALI PERCH
CHELSEA DINGMAN
BOJAN LOUIS
REBECCA BERNARD
MARILYN NELSON
KEVIN PHAN
LORI OSTLUND
DEREK PALACIO
MAGGIE SMITH
ASH WHITMAN
DOUNIA CHOUKRI
ORLANDO RICARDO MENES
DIANA MARIE DELGADO

Colorado
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University

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EDITORS' PAGE

Perhaps it's because I was born in July that I feel most at home in the summer, when I know myself best, when I feel most knowable to others. And while summer is my country, it has always been an in-between place (such is life on the academic calendar) and one that I am always approaching, always leaving. And so it seems fitting to me that the stories and essays of our summer issue are about people grappling with identity and *in-between-ness*. In Rebecca Bernard's "Gardening," a couple dealing with the aftermath of infidelity must navigate the new boundaries of their marriage and who they are now. The narrator of Dounia Choukri's "Never Touch Your Idols" sees herself and her teacher—the imperious Madame, simultaneously nemesis and double—as “the main characters of a novel I don't understand.” In Lori Ostlund's "Are You Happy?" a man, estranged from his family for many years, returns to visit his dying mother, a woman who's never truly known her son. Unable to intervene, a young woman observes her troubled roommate's ever-shifting identity as she cycles through relationships and struggles with sobriety in Melanie Ritzenthaler's "Catch-Claw." In his AWP Intro Journals Project-winning essay, "Mr. Fantastic Measures Conifers," Brian Czyzyk examines the concepts of size and growth, and ultimately a sense of self, through the lenses of family, biology, ecology, history, language, and genre. Tali Perch considers the complicated intersections of and spaces between her Ukranian/Russian/Jewish/American identities in "Records on Bone." And Ash Whitman contemplates what it means to be White, Brown, American, Mexican, Chicana, and/or Latina in "Soy Yo."

Whether this season feels like a homecoming or a departure, we welcome you to *Colorado Review's* summer issue.

—STEPHANIE G'SCHWIND

All of us are on a journey. In these pages, these poems, these works of art, we feel the weaving of journey through the palpable echo of time. Whether it's the time in Marilyn Nelson's "A Gift to Be," where wonder becomes the gift; or Diana Marie Delgado's "Dream Obituary," where the voice contemplates the world in half-light of both dream and age: "I realize that my journey is to forgive / everything that's happened"; or TC Tolbert's "Dear Melissa," in which the voice speaks to the self on what it means to be holy and wholly in one's identity and body, these poems carry us—into visceral experiences that make us contemplate our own being.

What does it mean to be fully human and fully in journey? These poetic voices carve themselves from reconciliation of the deepest moments of humanity, when we must reexplore ourselves, map ourselves into something we hold, and, dare we say, love. The poems come to the pages with risk in mind. "I want to be open, or opened, / Vulnerable, one can say; / The way one risks penance . . ." says Jabari Jawan Allen's speaker in "Night Unbridled." These poems spawn from dreams of the body, place, gods, the intimate, memory, identity, pleasure, animals, perimeters, forgiveness, vaginas, form, and elegy. They are our embodiments, our loves, our horrors, our desires, our demons, our homes, and our papery hearts held up to the light asking us to see, and be seen.

We are not always in control of this journey, but we are here, and therefore powerful, and therefore here for each other.

Poets of this issue, your art has come together in one resounding message of hope for me: hope that the future of poetry takes risks in baring the gritty, the necessary, the diverse, the gorging, and the unveiled nature of existence. To readers of this issue, it's an honor to offer these poems and poets to you through *Colorado Review* so we may share space and words through this connection of reading, which is yet another echo of time.

—FELICIA ZAMORA

GARDENING

I have organized my garden in the following manner: The carrots grow beside the sweet potatoes. The basil, the rosemary, and the thyme nest in pots beside the fishless pond. The heads of Bibb lettuce, the scaffolds of tomatoes and peppers, these grow to the left of everything else. They overflow when the weather and the rainfall are just right, but I do not allow them to extend beyond what is sensible. The kale and the cauliflower ferment in warm beds by the stone path. Wild asparagus grows against the shed.

For the past few months, my husband, Jason, likes to stand by the doorway and watch me when he believes I am unaware of his presence. He is desperate for the curve of my back. He imagines the spine beneath my white T-shirt, its bony perfection rising against the still-soft skin. I let him stare. I fold my body closer to the earth, and then I turn toward him in time to catch his shame. His desire hovers in the air like mist.

Today, I smile and wave, beckoning him toward me. As he approaches, I rise up to face him, and when he reaches me, I drop back down to my knees.

“Will you help me with this?” My fingers are digging into the soil, the area beneath my nails blackening with the soft loam.

He is clumsy beside me as he eases to a squat. He’s worried that his shoes will get muddy, that the cuffs of his tailored pants will touch the weeds I’ve been pulling out. Bending now, I wonder if he can smell my sweat. The absence of deodorant under the July sun. The sour herb of my body. The sun blasting at my cheekbones and his concern that I should wear a hat, something wide-brimmed and matronly.

“I can’t get this cluster. It’s the grass—the roots are too deep.” I ease back to give him space, to help him understand the situation in the flower bed.

He’s wordless beside me as he rocks on his heels, one large, dark-haired hand braced against the side of the planter. I point toward the weed I am trying to unearth, the trowel loose in my

fingers. The roots of this wild grass desperate to remain where they have encroached.

“Just this one?” His voice cracks slightly as he speaks, but then he steadies himself and pulls at the stubborn weed.

I shrug and begin to rise to my feet. I watch the muscles in his forearms tense as he tries to rip the grass from the earth. His salmon-colored shirt looks newly ironed, but I can see the creases left from his inexperienced hand. The fabric bunches as he exerts himself.

Then, the weed is freed. Jason catches himself from falling backward with his free hand. His balance has always been good.

He rises up from his squat, holding the trail of the roots for me to admire. “If you catch it early, then these won’t have the chance to take root.”

Nodding, a smile forms on my lips, the strain of it forces my cheeks to dimple. “Sorry.”

His cheeks flush slightly as he hears himself, but I come toward him and place my sun-chapped lips against the flank of his face. His body presses toward me, turning so that he might face me, rub against me, and I can feel his lips hesitating, readying to say something, so I place my soil-rich fingers across his mouth. I tense my pose. His movement stops, and I feel his body relax. I release my lips and step back, rubbing my hands together, loosening the remaining dirt.

“Not yet,” I say. And Jason nods his head, unable to meet my eyes, or unwilling.

The public library where I work employs four full-time librarians, of which I am one. In addition, there are two part-time assistants, two janitors, and a summer intern from the local college, William, whom I call Billy. I am the second youngest of the full-time librarians. I have worked at this library for seven years, the same number of years Jason and I have been married. I am thirty-two years old as of this past March. It is now the middle of July, and my life is divided between the dense central Texas heat and the air-conditioned chambers of this tomb. Once, I loved to read. Lately, the sentences, the words, even the letters feel like insects crawling over the soft lobes of my brain.

The summer is our busiest time of year, most likely because

of the respite we offer from the heat. When our doors open each morning at eight, the mothers and the nannies and the occasional father come barreling through with infants and children in tow, anxious to read aloud in a circle or to find some relief from the empty hours of vacation. Glad to be in the sterile, sticky calm of our oasis.

Last year, Jason carried on a five-month affair with his colleague at the medical testing facility where he works. Her name was Erin and, strangely, we look quite similar. We are both slender, though her breasts are larger than mine. We both have dark hair and imperfect noses. She wears glasses, but I only wear glasses on occasion. When I want to look like a certain kind of librarian. When my contacts are acting up.

I did not discover the affair. I might have if I'd felt more than a general concern for my marriage, but at the time I was attempting to grow an award-winning tomato, and with this hobby in mind, little else struck me as important. Jason and I had the sort of marriage where we were good friends and we were lovers. A certain level of comfortability. And although at first in our courtship, it plagued me

that I could not venture inside his brain to see his blue or his yellow or his understanding of what it meant to taste a banana, this had subsided into the gentle hum of living. Monthly or weekly, there were small tokens of our

Jason and I had the sort of marriage where we were good friends and we were lovers. A certain level of comfortability.

mutual and enduring affection: a shiny trowel, a pair of yellow gardening gloves, a book from me on the history of lab rats and mice. We were in love, and although on occasion he believed himself smarter than me, and though sometimes my orgasm was neglected, I had the strong belief that this was as good as it gets. I do not think I was wrong.

Our other most reliable library patrons are the elderly and the homeless, who trickle in throughout the day from their respective shelters. The rarest patron is the bored teenager or the lone researcher who has wandered in to find some information they feel will aid their existence. Oftentimes, the teenagers and the researchers leave disappointed. Their expectations exceed-

ing our slight offerings. Our stacks not so well stacked for their needs. Scant knowledge here of blight, of the Arctic Circle, of human growth hormones.

On my first date with Jason, at Patricio's Italian Bistro, I got very drunk and butted my head against his head in an attempt to enter his skull. I'm not sure he understood what I was doing, but at the time he found it funny. We laughed about it the next morning. I wonder now what I was thinking. What closeness I had desired. How still, years later, his animal scent feels bored into my skin and hair, unconscious. Three months later, Jason and I were married at the courthouse. We both wore white. His suit was ivory, and my dress—short, lacy—was eggshell. When I learned of the affair, it was through Jason and his swollen, tear-stained face. I was in the kitchen, dicing sweet onions from the garden when he came to me to relieve his guilt.

This was a wounding. I was surprised by the savagery of the pain, like an avalanche of loss somewhere from the throat to the groin. My mouth filled with saliva as he spoke, and I swallowed the warm liquid of my making. He'd ended the affair of his own accord, or so he told me. I suspect the guilt had purged all joy from the feeling of being wanted by a stranger. Or maybe he was lonely and I hadn't noticed, and this was an act of desperation. Or else she'd ended things, and everything Jason said to me was a lie. It's difficult to trust someone who fucks outside the marriage. I should have known the importance of words and their pitch, their hue. The impressions they make, like bullets or like stones.

"What are you doing?" Billy, the intern, stands a few feet away, staring at me. His hands are placed awkwardly on his hips as if directed there by some inner mechanism that wants him to appear casual.

"I'm making a grocery list." I point to the empty notepad before me and write *eggs* in large, clear letters.

Billy has found me hiding in the stacks again. Though reshelving is work meant for the interns and assistants, I have a cart of books ready at my side. In another life, I used the ruse of reshelving as a means to discover new gardening techniques, new types of grass, fondue recipes, but lately the fluorescent hum of the lights makes me feel stoned and dumb.

"Really?" Billy steps closer to look at what I've been writing. I am always surprised at his height, that people younger than

me might be taller than me, though it's something I've understood rationally for years.

I take the pad and turn it upside down on top of the cart of books. "What did Alyssa assign you to do this morning?" I feel my shoulders dropping in a conscious effort to appear taller, older, more responsible.

Billy shrugs. Then he swipes his hair out of his eyes and looks at me in a way that makes me certain of his desire, the hidden treasure of my naked self. I stare back. And slowly, I let myself smile, just at the corners of the lips, just the barest mirror of his post-adolescent lust. At this, Billy blushes and looks away.

"She said I should do the cart you're doing."

"All right." I take my notepad and use the cart as a barrier between me and Billy as I squeeze past. When I am a few feet away, I turn to face him. "Billy?" I say his name like it has meaning, like an invitation. I watch his eyes gauging me, trying to understand, to guess at what I might say next.

He moves toward me, hesitant. There are maybe three feet between us. Books on the Civil War. Reconstruction. I can smell his soap. Or maybe it's body spray. A musky maleness.

His eyes are brown. Big, wet ponds spoiled by movement. His lips open partly but he doesn't speak.

"Never mind." I can feel the heart in my chest like a seedling. "I'm sorry." I shrug my shoulders and turn away, willing him to watch me leave. But without turning back to look, without sacrificing everything, I cannot be sure if he is watching.

There are stages of recovery in betrayal. At first, when Jason told me about Erin, at night in the kitchen, the frogs of late August bellowing through the windows sealed tight to keep in the air-conditioning, I felt pain, fresh and undisguised. This woman with inflated breasts, my double.

How was it that the person you understood in nearly their complete self could become so immediately unfamiliar and yet wrapped in the same old skin and hair and odor? The pants stiff with creases made by my hand's gentle back and forth with the iron. The dark hair trimmed slightly too short from a recent trip to the salon. It is unreal to see the face that gives you comfort slice your innards, the lips dumb and moving, wet spit forming globules like dew on a blade of grass. Apologies spilling out like fertilizer. The words nonsense. Disbelief.

I couldn't even think of what to say back, like some confused child clinging to the counter, hands limp, onion stinging my eyes. "It's the onion," I had said. Or maybe I had only thought it.

Late that night, Jason asleep in our bed, exhausted and drugged with his relief, I went out to the garden with the intention of hurting my tomatoes. It was a melodramatic wish, but it was all I could think of to do at the time to get even. Self-destruction is one form of remedy, is one form of violence against those who claim to love you.

But the flashlight showed my tomatoes were too good, too innocent. So instead, I sat in the dirt in my shorts and my cami-

Self-destruction is one form of remedy, is one form of violence against those who claim to love you.

sole, and I put my hands in the dirt. I rubbed the dirt all over my arms and then on my face. I made streaks with my fingers, and I imagined my pores clogged and beautiful. My mother would always say that knowledge is embedded

in the world around us. That there is always something else to be understood by someone willing to see it.

I was in the garden maybe an hour before I came inside and washed my face and hands and arms in our bathroom sink. I was careful to wash away all traces of dirt from the pale porcelain. May there never be a time when you are not in control.

"Soph?"

Jason's call sounds quiet from the dining room, its worry a flash-forward to this present moment, this strawberry afternoon. He's looking for me, anxious to see my face and confirm that I'm still his wife. It's been eleven months now since the revelation of his infidelity, and things are almost entirely back to normal, except that this isn't the normal we once understood.

"I'm in here." My voice is too bright, too happy, and I think about responding again but dropping my pitch. I am in the living room, a room I never used to spend time in, but lately I've found there's a cool patch of rug by the nonworking fireplace that offers a good view of the garden. I sit here after work and think until I've lost all sense of time and language. Then, something brings me back.

Jason comes in the room looking flushed from the outdoors. His head looks meatier to me than normal, but I wonder if this is a result of the sunburn he received from helping me in the garden the past weekend. I never thought Jason was beautiful until I fell in love with him, and then there was nothing he could do to dispel the kindness my gaze gave to his body. The gentle movement of his lips in sleep, the melancholy child I imagined trapped in his irises. The way his eyebrows arched when he laughed, or how it felt to be scooped up in arms so much stronger than my own, or the way he'd draw doodles of elements all over my notebooks in an attempt to teach me about the structures of the things I loved to grow. What does it say about me that I love him still? To hurt someone you love is human. To endure in harsh conditions, to hunker down, to root.

"What're you doing in here?" Jason comes over to where I sit cross-legged on the floor and stands beside me, so I can lean into his legs. I don't answer him because I don't have anything reasonable to say.

"How was work?" I ask. Erin no longer works at the company, but it's difficult not to feel like I'm insinuating something dark when I ask these simple questions.

"Work was okay. Maybe some promising results coming. How was your day?" Jason takes my outstretched hand and pulls me up so I'm standing near him. I smell the way his light sweat has offset the scent of fresh laundry.

"It was fine." I try to think of something else to add, a detail, but all I can remember is the sterile coldness of the circulation desk. The bodies of patrons moving around asking questions and the hope that I was making sense in my responses. Then I see Billy, his thin lips. "Alyssa's off next week for vacation, so I'll have to stay a couple hours later on Wednesday." It's true. It's something I can offer as fact.

Jason nods. "You feel like going out for dinner? Something light like sushi?" He takes my hands in his and squeezes my fingers, then rocks me back and forth as if we're dancing. I keep my feet planted, and I feel like a little girl standing on her father's shoes. In the past, he might have grabbed me and thrown me down on the couch, pulled up my skirt and put his mouth between my legs until I begged him to fuck me, but, as I said, the old normal is gone. Our sex now, on the rare occasion I allow it, is shy and curious and incomplete. Even when I do my best to remember the innocence of our initial love, I am haunt-

ed. I can no longer tell if it's because of the affair or because I am meant to be different from the affair. Lately, I wonder if I'm the stranger in our house. If I'm the one who cheated. If I'm the one with whom he had the affair.

"Sushi sounds perfect."

Three months after Jason and Erin ended things, when I'd forgiven Jason and we'd stopped talking only about my hurt and his pain and his confusion and self-hate and my fear of intimacy and my coldness and my complacency, we decided that if we were going to make things work, we'd have to move forward, whatever that would take.

It was Jason's idea that I should sleep with someone outside the marriage. He said it first late at night, wine-drunk and during an episode of *House of Cards*. He said it was the only way he'd feel normal, to know that I was as at fault as he was. To know that imperfection was something we had in common. The logic was broken, and I told him so, but he continued the appeal the following day. And then once every few weeks in the months since. This is his practical solution, and yet he has forgotten the control.

I'd like to know the pain you felt, Sophia. I'd like to have an inkling of how bad I've made you feel, sweetheart. I want to know that you're with me because you forgive me, and you love me, and not because of any other reason, Soph. These are his words. See how they shine and blister.

First, I see these words blue and earnest, then red and filthy. I imagine them in different colors like the variations of zinnias from my mother's garden. Anything that can be said aloud can take shape and so exist in the world however awfully or grossly. Anything that can be put into words can live, fester, dig into the soul, and rot. What grows in the garden is innocent. What grows in the mind is human.

Jason does not want to know the details of any future transgression but only that it has taken place. What does it even mean to love another person? Sometimes I am not sure.

Erin and Jason had sex fourteen times over the course of their five-month affair. Jason never told her he loved her, but he did, through text message, affirm that she was hot and not underserving of kindness.

Billy is not unattractive. He is twenty years old. He has dark brown hair that's longer on top and shaved on the sides. He's

skinny in a way that makes me realize the difference between his boy-ness and the man-ness of Jason. There is the occasional patch of acne on his chin and the pocked scars of prior outbreaks on his cheeks. I am not sure he understands that I'm a person, but I am unsure whether it matters, given the circumstances.

I have not decided what I will do, if I will trust in Jason's healing insight or if I will simply lie and make myself trust again, believe again, that we can ever fully understand another person.

The way it started with Erin was casual. A client lunch, some wine, an empty lab, white lab coats, a blowjob, an experiment on mice, tumors attached to the backs, the fronts, breasts exposed and nipples dark and lovely.

I became a librarian because it was a structure I understood. Here are the books and here are the numbers. Water daily and plant on the fourth, seventh, and ninth days of the lunar calendar. Put your tongue inside the mouth of the person you love. Prepare and eat salads. Prepare and season the tuna steak. See how the watermelon grows inside the belly of she-who-swallows-the-seed. Books on nuclear war proliferate.

The first time I made Billy laugh, I had asked him to find the book I'd intentionally misshelved. It was a book on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, and I had placed it by the self-help books on thinking outside the box. I appreciated the deep sound of his laugh, as if it came from a newly discovered voice inside his young body. I told him I wanted to call him Billy, after Billy Budd, though I've never read the book. He said it was one of his favorites. I wonder if he was lying. I can only assume it does not matter.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"Is that a real question?"

"I guess so."

"Then I guess I don't know. A sea captain? A financial planner? An architect?"

"The answer was librarian."

Again, Billy laughs, and the sound is loud and sweet. We are in the stacks. Alyssa, the head librarian, is on vacation, and I am now the second-in-command instead of the third-in-command. The skirt I've worn is slightly shorter than normal. It hits just above the knee as opposed to at the knee. It's pale blue in color and lacks a pattern. My bare calves make me human.

I was sitting on the floor, supposedly reshelving, when Billy found me, and now he is sitting on the floor as well. We are facing each other, our legs stretched toward the opposite shelves. I feel the slightest warmth in my neck and a gentle note of panic that we could be discovered, and I could be made to feel shame for my lack of diligence. I was once the most diligent of the librarians. I was once the most hard-headed and prim.

“What do you do when you’re not here?” Billy smiles at me, then drops his eyes to my knees. He is awkward in his flirtation.

I shrug my shoulders. “I read books. Or I used to.”

“What kind of books?”

I uncross and recross my legs at the ankles. My skin looks tan, somewhat red in the library’s yellow light. “I like to garden.”

“So you read gardening books?” Billy wants to connect. His mouth hangs open, waiting for my answer.

“Of course.” Then I smile and lean forward to stretch, touching my toes, then rubbing my hand slowly up the length of my leg to pull up my skirt just the slightest bit.

“Gardening makes you tan, huh?” Billy’s eyes are where I have led them. See how the skirt does not reveal paleness but more color.

“That it does.” I rest my hand on my exposed thigh long enough so Billy begins to move his own hand toward my leg, and then I laugh once, awkwardly, and pull my legs together to stand. “Better get back to work.”

In the background, Billy nods and I smooth down my skirt with my hands. I give him a small smile and then head back toward the circulation desk to relieve Megan.

I had planned to grow a new kind of lettuce this year, but I realize now that the seeds were not purchased. Frisée. The curly fronds so delicious with a bit of heat, a bit of goat cheese. Maybe it’s not too late. I can check the almanac; I can purchase what’s necessary. I can ask Jason for his help this weekend. His hands are so good at digging into the earth, at prying loose what does not belong.

With Erin, was there pursuit or was it accidental? Numbered spines, one beside the other, elbows accidentally graze and the lab coat loses its sterility, the books disordered. Against my will, between my legs, a wetness forms.

All throughout my childhood, my mother kept a butterfly garden. To attract the butterflies, she planted particular flowers—lavender, lilac, fleabane—and she would let me help her plant the seedlings.

My father would feed the birds and the squirrels alike. He kept a feeder filled through all the seasons, even though my mother was against the idea. He liked to watch them, their colors and their antic movements like frames spliced together in an old cartoon. Sometimes my father would sit on the stone bench he gave my mother for her birthday one year and pretend to watch the birds. He was instead watching her; now I am sure of it.

In the early years of our marriage, I would lie on Jason, my back against his chest, and I would pretend that he was an island of safety in the otherwise dangerous sea of our bed-sheets. He would hold my wrists and move my arms through the air like flying fish. Then slowly, I would rotate my body so our faces touched. We would breathe the same

Sometimes my father would sit on the stone bench he gave my mother . . . and pretend to watch the birds. He was instead watching her.

air until one of us laughed and pushed the other to upset the delicate balance of our bodies perched like seashells.

Sometimes at work, I'll pull out a book and try to read it upside down. To see if sense can be made of the words as they appear backward and wrong. I am not sure that anything means anything. Sometimes I am embarrassed that it took Jason's philandering to make me see the world for what it is. How lovely and how unexpected. How mean and how bleak.

When I was twelve, my mother went to her sister's house for a long weekend. I remember at the time how strange it seemed to me that she should want to leave us for any amount of time. That she could want to be away from her family, her flowers, the insects she'd drawn to our garden. And what was the draw of her sister's house, their oft-described antipathy, her sterile twin beds?

I am not sure I would remember the weekend at all, but the second night she was gone my father got very drunk. I had gone

to my bedroom to read sometime after dinner and fallen asleep. I awoke around midnight, confused and startled, and when I went downstairs to get some milk, I saw my father in the living room. He sat by the reading lamp, the one that leaned forward like a nightshade, and he was crying, a book sloppily set on his lap. It was a silent cry, and I didn't interrupt him. When my mother came home, I told her about my vision. Her husband, red-faced and gripping a glass of whiskey, the frail, wet book. My mother shrugged. She wouldn't say what it meant.

The first time Jason and I had a serious fight over our domestic responsibilities, I tried to push him, and he grabbed me and took me in his arms, and though I struggled and begged him to put me down, he would not let me go. We had before been quietly cruel to each other, but I could not excuse his taking something that I loved and using it to hurt me. Sober, later, I told him never to lift me in his arms again.

After my father died, my mother told me that she had once had an affair. It had lasted only two weeks, one weekend, and she said it was the most selfish thing she'd ever done. "It's the only thing I regret, Sophia." Her mouth a thin, red line. I nodded, smiling, and put my hand on hers.

Early Saturday morning, I wake Jason with breakfast in bed. Coffee, coffee cake, and a halved banana. Afterward, we make love in our new, gentle, and bargaining way. Each touch fraught with love. Each stroke wet with remorse and promise. An attempt to make the other feel at ease, wanted, known.

"So, you'll help me in the garden?" I ask the question brightly, half-naked, post-coitally.

Jason nods at me and smiles, reaches for my arm to pull me back into bed, but I slip away, knowing that he will follow.

According to the farmers' almanac, we have just missed the last good day for planting lettuces, but I am in the mood for a gamble. I place the new straw hat that Jason has purchased for me on my head, and I step barefoot outside to the garden and its stifling late July heat.

I begin to dig with my trowel, finding an empty patch in the planter that houses the kale, slightly shaded at certain times of day by the pecan tree that grows at the far back of the lot. A few moments later, Jason is beside me in sneakers and shorts, his skin smelling of suntan lotion.

We work quietly together for some minutes. I point to places where he might unearth soil, neighboring weeds that might be plucked from the earth. Sweat drips slowly down the backs of my legs, along my spine. I am waiting to speak. The heart, it wobbles.

“So. It’s happened, you know.” The words slip out so quietly, so without performance.

Jason is on his knees combing through the planter for signs of weeds. I am not sure he has heard me, so I open my mouth to speak again.

“I mean, what you wanted to happen.” In my mind, I wonder if I should have practiced the line ahead of time. If I sound convincing, too happy, too contrite. “So. It’s okay.”

Jason squints at my face, his ball cap suddenly unbecoming on his squarely built face. “That hat looks good on you.” He pretends not to understand.

Blushing, I touch the straw hat. In the sun, I can smell its straw odor, its fragrant heat. I touch my lips, remembering the pressure of his mouth earlier in the day. The morning. What I want from him. An irrecoverable past.

Then Jason’s hand is on my arm, his dirt-tinged fingers slowly moving the hairs of my forearm up and down. “Thank you. I mean. I know it’s not easy.”

I nod and suddenly feel the heat of moisture behind my eyes. The tension of all our months of absence. “I need you,” I say.

Jason nods. He pulls me toward him, kisses my neck. He pushes me down into the earth, and his body on top of me follows.

My favorite part of being a librarian has always been the feeling of existing in a space where my being, my voice, is an intrusion. The silence of the stacks. The quietude of so many minds accruing meaning all at the same time, all wordless, all sucking in and absorbing letters, words, feelings, self-worth, nothingness.

When I was a child, I decided that it was my aim to read every book, every picture book, that the local library held. For hours, at the small round tables, accompanied by my father on summer weekends, I would sit and read and read and take home only what I couldn’t finish in my allotted hours. Then, when I was eight, I found one book that I didn’t want to stop reading, and my plan was put on hiatus. Permanent hiatus it turns out.

What's funny is that I can't remember the book anymore. It was about ghosts, I think, but it gave me such a feeling inside that I couldn't contain or describe. Its words ended my language. Its images lost me the ability to speak.

It's the first week in August when I ask Billy to stay late and help me close the library. The closing librarian on Thursdays is Sheila, and she is on vacation for the week, so I have been given her duties. On Thursday nights, we stay open an hour later than normal, till eight. Billy and I divide the library at closing time, sweeping the stacks, the reading room, the children's area, the bathrooms, and the computers for stray, lingering patrons. When the last guest has left, I lock the front doors and we turn off the lights in each section. Billy and I work quietly and efficiently. We do not speak. Then, when all that is left is to move the cash drawer to the office's lockbox, I ask Billy for a suggestion of what to read.

"Find me something historical, maybe?" I have told him that I'm leaving on vacation the following week, which is true. Jason and I have rented a beach house. A bungalow on the gulf.

I follow Billy to the stacks, and as he reaches for a book, I put my hand on his back. My fingers are light, tentative. This touch is all that he has needed.

"Sophia."

I am embarrassed to hear him say my name in this way, but then he has me in his arms, guides me to the floor, and his tongue is in my mouth.

Our clothing comes off piece by piece until we're naked. His hands are young and gentle. Without the overhead fluorescents, my mind feels sober. I am no longer dumb.

In the garden, everything has been organized according to what it needs. The sweet potatoes like a certain amount of moisture. The zucchinis need structure. The tomatoes need support.

"Oh, Billy." Oh, sweet Billy of the seas.

See how I have always been able to intuit what is needed. I trim the vine. I add the mulch. I pluck and tend and water, but never too much, too often. You have to let it grow. You have to let the seed take root.

My lips graze his smooth and hollow chest, its hairlessness so unfamiliar, so unhappy. There is no grace in our discarded clothes, his thin T-shirt, its lack of collar, of care.

In bloom, the blues and the yellows, the reds and the pinks,

the spit and the sweat, they riot beyond our reach. See, Jason, how violence grows like mulberry, like kudzu, like desire—like something we cannot or will not control.

But please. Please remember, Jason. What comes after rot is always something living.

NEVER TOUCH YOUR IDOLS

Seeing Madame walk to her car, you'll notice that she keeps her elbows close to her hips. The gold chain of her beige handbag is taut. Nothing is loose about her form. Her small, tight bun, which may remind you of a docked tail, has the faded shade of a golden trinket left too long on a windowsill. When you look closer, you'll realize that the dress peeking out from under Madame's fitted coat is not some out-of-place bourgeois Paris chic; it is outdated bourgeois Paris chic. The kind that elevates women by way of their heels and the number of pricey Hermès scarves in their wardrobe.

Once, during recess, looking around a corner, I saw Madame unfold her Hermès scarf. The open *foulard* was covered with mysterious golden buckles and horse heads that were arranged like a Freemason's enigma. I have come to loathe the enigma of these Hermès scarves. They are like the flag the colonist rams into the ground, claiming ownership of the territory you are standing on. Like all flags, it is a fist posing as a decorous, open hand. It is worn by women who carry their handbags like clunky metaphors, their lips kissing the air when their mouths graze a cheek. Women who, like Madame, enunciate words with an exaggeration that makes their mouths crawl across their faces like restive rodents. Every word is French. Every word is God's gift.

When Madame gets into her small French car, the smallest one in the parking lot with the incongruous decal *Rallye Monte Carlo 1972*, you may suddenly think her very small behind the wheel. You may feel sorry for Madame with her pale-blue eyes in her pale face as she buckles up for more tautness. You may feel that Madame has been passed by, that she is on the verge of turning from a #2-penciled anachronism into a rich charcoal caricature, but Madame is already gripping the steering wheel, reminding you that everyone is their life's own helmsman, or as Madame has said at the beginning of the school year: "*You* choose if you want to become a garbage collector or someone who matters."

The small car makes a turn, and Madame gives me a short wave. It is with these pale, tapered fingers that she scratches the red ink of her indignation deep into the French-ruled paper.

NO, THIS IS NOT FLAUBERT'S INTENTION!

NO, YOU GOT EMMA COMPLETELY WRONG!

YOUR POINT?

WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO SAY HERE? UNCLEAR!

ILLEGIBLE!

Madame is right. I bend the letters' necks, arms, and legs as if I were cramming a corpse into a suitcase. I will make Madame go blind in one eye so she'll go back to her hyphenated lycée in Paris where one's view of the world of 1991 is so singular that one eye will suffice her.

Chances are that Madame will go deaf before she goes blind.

She tells us, in confidence, what an ugly language German is. Thinking about the coarse, earthy sound of the *ch*, the squareness of the syllables, she cannot help shaking herself, rubbing off the German motes of dust that may have settled on her arms.

Or maybe the motes are French because this is a Lycée Français—in Germany.

We are an outpost forever studying an instruction manual for a machine that has been taken off the market—the French Empire.

Madame makes us read *Madame Bovary*. She pronounces *Emma* as if she were tasting delicious cuisine. *EMmma*—as if Madame didn't want to let go of passionate Emma, who, in turn, marries shy and clumsy Charles Bovary, only to find his conversation as flat as the pavement. I too am shy, yet Madame takes pleasure in making me read aloud or shushing the class with a strident “A-tten-tion!” whenever I have to blow my nose. Madame finds meaning in the shortest sentence and has a way of singling me out in passing. She passes me—sitting on the stairs, my nose in a book—and puts her finger under my chin. A gesture that makes me blush. Her heavy perfume is an amalgam of complicated scents, which, like words in a dictionary, take on a second and third layer of meaning century after century, second after second. She looks at the book I'm reading, *Jacques Le Fataliste*, and she says, smiling like a pale-eyed fox, her slim snout almost touching my nose, “I'm not sure you're ready for that one yet.”

Tout ce qui nous arrive de bien et de mal ici-bas était écrit là-haut, Jacques says to the captain over and over again.

And Jacques is right. Everything that happens to us down here, whether for good or for evil, has been written up above. For I see no way to write Madame out of my story. Madame has been written up above in heaven, where they write in French, of course.

In class, Madame makes an announcement.

We will be joining Monsieur Fontaine's class for a day of presentations. While our topics will be picked from *Madame Bovary*, Monsieur Fontaine's class will be giving presentations on African literature. Madame's mouth is drawn downward by the absurd weight of the word *African*, as if she were a predator struggling to pull an inconveniently shaped prey into her burrow.

Outside someone is shouting a dirty word in German, the way a child throws a handful of healthy mud, but all we can hear is the soft hiss that comes out of Madame's lips, like a punctured tire at the sundown of civilization. *Tsssss*.

I wish I were in Monsieur Fontaine's class. Monsieur is a left-wing liberal, who, I am told, sits with his legs apart, giving his class a vague idea of his pear-shaped genitals.

He is French by accident, the way I'm here by accident—empires and borders shifting like tectonic plates. A father from Casablanca, a mother from Berlin.

The pit of my stomach becomes a darkroom in which chemicals are being mixed, producing pictures in my head—drippy and glossy, black and white panic.

"You will be giving a presentation on an aspect of *Madame Bovary* in groups of four. One person in each group will be presenting the work. The others must be prepared to answer questions."

My panic grows matte, underexposed. Someone else will do the talking, someone who, like Voltaire's *Candide*, lives in the *best of all possible worlds*. A world without anxiety disorders. A world in which Madame is a passing curiosity.

I manage to join a group of two girls and one boy who assures us he has no problem with public speaking. I envy him for that and his left-handedness. When left-handed people write, their arms don't just look like extensions, but like beautiful, protective instruments—crab claws.

Our group is given the character analysis of Charles Bovary.

We delve deep into the mind of Charles, who, as a schoolboy, is so shy that he muddles his name into *Charbovari* when his new teacher asks his name. His schoolmates laugh and cry out, unable to calm down, like a *pétard mal éteint*—a half-spent firecracker. I recognize myself in his awkwardness. Charles is not formidable; he is dull and unimaginative. He must be in order to provide a contrast to the vivid Emma. But—and I don't share this with the group—maybe there is another Charles under this obvious layer. A Charles who is not dull,

His schoolmates laugh and cry out, unable to calm down, like a pétard mal éteint—a half-spent firecracker. I recognize myself in his awkwardness.

but *dulled* by his awkwardness and incompetence. A Charles who, unlike Emma, doesn't crave passion, because the natural friction of his floundering heartbeat is enough drama already.

On the day of the presentations, the library is a suffocating cage. It is almost the end of the school year, and the sun gives fifty students an extra sheen of sweat that leaves smudges on all the desks.

Monsieur Fontaine and Madame stand at the front with the threadbare civility of a brutally divorced couple.

Monsieur's class starts with the African classic *My Mercedes Is Bigger than Yours*, by Nkem Nwankwo, a title that makes everybody snicker and leave more smudges on the desks.

Madame's face is as wooden as an African mask.

She sits through the presentations like a Russian countess in her gilded salon, retreating to a place in her past as a revolutionary mob marches into town. Stones come crashing through the windows, but the countess, who sits with her back straight, is far away, dancing on the tips of her uncle Vanya's shoes in the last summer light.

When it is our turn, Marc stands up and announces the subject of our presentation. Madame takes off her mask.

Marc begins, but Madame interrupts him with a smile that belongs to an animal that doesn't know it's smiling. Maybe its pink, flaring nose and the detail of the jaw hanging just a little lower make one think that these delicate, intricate lines around the pointy muzzle form a smile.

“Non, non, *you* begin,” she says, her pale eyes on me.

“But, Madame!” Flushed patches spread on Marc’s skin. “We all agreed that *I*—”

Madame leans forward like a runner on the finish line.

“What’s that? Non, non, any of you should be prepared—in school *and life*,” she says, crossing her legs so I can see the tip of her shoe balancing like a swing boat at a fun fair.

Marc sits down with a shrug, and the girls in my group bite their lips.

I stand up, the sheet in my hands. I grasp the first word, *Charles*, and hold on to its capitalized crescent like a drowning woman. I read the first line, grabbing the infinitely small words by their slick, zigzagging tails. They slip out of my grasp, and so I return to *Charles*. I cannot find the first word of the second line. I read the first line again. *Charles*. I reach the end of the line. I come up for breath, but the air is used—nineteenth-century drawing room air that has been breathed in and out by millions of characters, over and over again. Withdrawing room air. Now comes the second line. Where is it? My eyes roam the sheet. In this sweating, silent room I have to fill my dry mouth with words, so I return to the first word, *Charles*. This time I will catch the first word of the second line before it hides in the thick swarm. It is so hot in here. It smells like a zoo. Here comes the end of the line. My fingers are leaving smudges all over the French-ruled sheet. On French sheets, one line comprises five lines. The first word of the second line has got away again. Where is it hiding? The sheet in my hand is shaking, and I go back to *Charles*, but Charles is no rock; he’s a straw. I grasp him and follow the lifeline that’s floating across five lines. The corners of my eyes are stinging with sweat. I swim toward the first word of the second line, stroke by stroke. I catch it in the corner of my stinging eyes, but when I get there it has gone under and all I see is the lone, ineffectual straw. *Charles*. And I grasp its dubious shape even though I can feel it is all tattered by now. It won’t hold another time. *Charles*, I say, drowning.

“All right, thank you,” says a voice from the water’s edge. Monsieur’s voice. “Let’s go ahead with Marc.”

I sink to my seat and Marc rises, his crab claws steady. His voice fills the room like one cog fitting into another, setting in motion the satisfactory hum of a machine.

I stare at my sheet and look for the first word of the second line.

Struggle.

My hands are translucent—like the cheap pages of a paperback. The thick blue, purple, and lavender lines of my veins show like the inverted letters shining through the back of a page when it's held against the sun.

I don't have crab claws.

My nape is twitching. I can't look up yet.

Every nerve is twitching. I'm not dull.

Struggle.

I'm *Charbovari*.

I look up at last.

Madame is smiling at me. She is fanning herself with one of Monsieur's dog-eared African classics.

The Dark Child.

If Madame finds meaning in the smallest sentence, then there must be meaning in her smile.

Madame and I are the main characters of a novel I don't understand. Somewhere a secondary character emits words such as *ambiguous, two cultures, lost between, personality*.

I want to analyze this book. Who is its main character? Am I the ingénue? A mere counterbalance in the story of Madame's tragic moral descent? Or am I the main character of a picaresque story? Characters always stand for something. What is my part?

The presentations end, and Madame tosses her African fan away so hard, it almost slides off the desk.

The minor characters don't see this. They can't wait to exit the stuffy stage.

The two girls in my group offer their condolences. The dark shade of their African skin makes them invisible in Madame's class.

I get to drown. They don't get to breathe.

Madame strides out of the library. Her head high, her bun perfect, she walks out of this day without ever mentioning it again. I see her standing in the parking lot under the firm blue sky, talking to another teacher with an Hermès scarf. Madame laughs and throws back her head so that her pale eyes sparkle as if they were silver-paper raindrops fallen from a painted sky.

I wonder if Madame has no middle ground between love and scorn. And if so, if Madame loves or scorns herself.

The following class, Madame opens a new chapter in her book. She has a surprise for us.

Madame Bovary has been adapted for the screen by French director Claude Chabrol with French actress Isabelle Huppert and is to be shown at the Institut Français.

Madame assures us that this production has no cheap American elements that might corrupt the gardens of our minds. She shows us movie stills from a French magazine. In every one of them Isabelle Huppert looks like a cold, pale flower waiting for the sun to shine so that she might know in which direction to grow. Wherever she finds herself, in nineteenth-century Normandy or in Paris, this woman's hunger for passion feeds on others. She is a femme fatale. She is an empire.

Is Madame a femme fatale? I remember the pressure of her finger under my chin, the cutting judgment at the center of her perfume.

The outing has only one tragic drawback. The whole class will have to go by *métro*. The underground. The German underground.

Hades. No, worse than Hades.

Madame shudders. We shall have to gather around her like a Greek chorus to assist her in this descent. Our French accents will float around Madame as the escalator pulls her lower and lower into the inevitable, fetid belly of the *boche*.

Madame rolls her eyes.

She stands on the platform in her fitted beige coat. She is the face of a flower and her pupils are her petals.

Madame's words resonate in the tunnel. Her mouth is busy building a wall of vowels and consonants between our class and the Germans on the platform.

She reads the lines' numbers and destinations—reads them the way you read the dirt on a child's face and knees, retracing its muddy journey in mock geography such as bogs, deserts, and impossible mountain peaks.

In Madame's mouth, the destinations turn into the porcine and bovine sounds of farm animals pushing their fat, pink, lolling tongues between the grid's salty slats—*ach, ech, ung, orf*.

When the *métro* pulls in, Madame's nostrils flare in nervous alarm. I watch her tautness give way and see Madame as the heroine on the last page, when she has become an echo bounc-

ing off a whitewashed wall. The brilliance leaves the face, then the eyes, and the heroine comes face-to-face with the reader's reality. Your reality. My reality.

I feel such peace when the flamboyant Emma Bovary commits suicide. She can't die fast enough. Even in death she needs drama. She tosses, convulses, laughs. Die, already, Emma—please die and let us be in peace! But Emma doesn't die; no, Flaubert chooses to tell us that she *ceases* to exist.

Before Madame gets on the *métro*, she wants to know from her chorus if it is absolutely sure that this really is the right line.

She purses her lips.

Mais oui, Madame! Venez vite! Vite!

The chorus pulls Madame on the *métro*, and Madame looks as if she is to be sacrificed.

Madame's uncertainty is a button come loose. Something that needs to be sewn back on in the right daylight.

The doors close and Madame has to buy a ticket from the machine. She takes out her little leather purse and looks at the German coins as if they were obols for Charon.

Color creeps into her face.

This money isn't real.

The words on the machine aren't real.

Madame throws back her head, but her laugh is as flat as pavement.

From my seat, I watch Madame as she ceases to exist. Her hands tremble as she punches her German ticket. She refuses to sit as she watches the stations flit by. They have different colors so children, illiterate passengers, and Madame don't lose their way. Madame's reflection in the black windows melts with the other passengers'.

There is a metallic smell with a note of burnt plastic in the air. It is much stronger than Madame's perfume.

Madame's soul is separating from her body in the wan light.

I can see it. Flaubert sees it.

Deep down in her heart, she was waiting and waiting for something to happen.

And it had.

Madame and her empire are falling apart.

Empires are works of fiction.

The chorus is chattering on as if nothing has happened. Only

I can see it. Madame is dissolving into paragraphs, into words, into images.

Soon nothing will be left of Madame, nothing but her outdated Paris clothes, my perceptions of her.

Madame stretching out her hand and lifting my chin.

I can still feel the touch.

It's different from my mother's, whose German accent is as strong as the jet of icy water she'd douse me with when I was

My anxiety is a luxury that I wear like an impractical jewel, she thinks. Something that you slip off a wrist or a finger.

little. There's the cool touch of her hand on my forehead whenever I was coming down with a fever, my legs tightly wrapped in cold towels, her voice enunciating my temperature on the thermometer the way Madame studies the chemical,

oscillating weakness of Charles Bovary. My anxiety is just another fever that needs to be treated with coldness.

She reminds me of her postwar childhood, how she tugged on her mother's skirt. *Can I have some food, Mutti?* Again and again, drowning out her rumbling stomach. *Can I have some food?*

My anxiety is a luxury that I wear like an impractical jewel, she thinks. Something that you slip off a wrist or a finger before you get down on your knees and dig your hands into honest soil as you plant flowers and pull out the weeds, cultivating your garden, growing healthy plants that don't wilt at the first sign of frost in this cold, cold world.

My father's touch is different too.

It has the excess warmth of a faraway culture, as does the spicy food he sometimes cooks. It's all messy in the making and expectant in the receiving. "It's good, isn't it? It's special, isn't it? Your dad can do magic!"

He swats at my anxiety as if it were a fly coming near his food.

"When I was a child and my country fought for independence from France, I saw bodies sprawled across the sidewalks of Casablanca," he tells me.

My fear is like a stain of tomato paste on his shirt. The eye mistakes it for a drop of blood before it relaxes. *Ah, it's nothing!*

I catch my reflection in the *métro's* scratched window and

touch my chin just where Madame has touched it with her pale hands. My fingers feel hot and cold, like my heritage.

I wish I were afraid of the dark. The dark has a switch.

Click.

My anxiety is a switch—skipping back and forth between hot and cold, light and dark.

Clack.

Soon we will all be sitting in the dark, our eyes turned toward the screen as Charles first meets Emma.

I hope I won't have to sit next to *her*.

I hope I'll end up sitting next to *her*.

Someday I will be a writer and turn *her* into a character. I will dress her, color her, and put words into her mouth. I will do to her what anxiety does to me.

I will prove that I can write my own story between so many lines.

Meanwhile, I put my nose into my book, waiting for something to happen.

ARE YOU HAPPY?

Twenty-four years after the crash, Phil would return to Albuquerque to see his mother and she would ask whether he was happy. She was in the final stages of stomach cancer by then, living—or, more accurately, dying—in his brother's house, and Phil sat there, not sure how to answer her question because they'd never talked about such things. Happiness. She'd always scoffed at people who did, maintaining that happiness was a uniquely American preoccupation, speaking as if she were not American. Even then, at the end of her life, Phil believed she would hold an admission of happiness against him.

He had awakened that morning at home in San Francisco, Kelvin and their whole menagerie huddled around him, his legs stiff from being curled up to accommodate the cats, who stretched across the middle of the bed, rejecting parallelism because they preferred to sleep perpendicular. "Daddy's going away today," Kelvin loud-whispered, phrasing that always struck Phil as vaguely but disturbingly sexual, the *Daddy* part, he supposed. The dogs leaped up and began bouncing between them. It was *away* that got them going—Kelvin had trained them to associate the word with car rides—but Phil liked to pretend that it was his imminent departure to which they were responding.

"Let's all eat breakfast together on the raft," Kelvin said. *The raft* was what he called their bed. It was king-size. "We're a growing family," he'd said when they bought it. They were up to seven now: the two of them, three cats, two dogs. Each night at bedtime, Kelvin called out, "Everyone on the raft," and all seven of them climbed on. There, surrounded by a chorus of snorting and snoring and purring, Kelvin always fell asleep quickly, as if the raft were meandering down a peaceful river, while Phil lay wide awake most nights, gripping the mattress as the current quickened, pulling him toward the rapids.

That morning, the morning that Phil would get on the plane to visit his dying mother, Kelvin got up and brought them all

breakfast, arranging the bowls of kibble strategically across the comforter, isolating Ollie, their fat boy, who was fond of sniffing the others' buttocks to distract them and then stealing their food. "Let's have sex," declared Kelvin when they were done eating, because he never felt shy about making his desire known, and he got out of bed again, stacked all seven bowls on the dresser, and herded the animals out of the room. Ollie had to be picked up and dropped just as the door was being shut behind him because, even though he was portly, he was quick. "You do know they're sitting out there listening," Kelvin said as he returned to the bed. Banning them was not his idea. "Besides, sex is perfectly natural."

"Sex is natural," Phil agreed, though he did not believe this for a minute. There was nothing natural about the way people's faces contorted in the throes of an orgasm or how they seemed as pleasant and agreeable as door-to-door salesmen beforehand, then cold and occasionally cruel after. Kelvin was the first man he'd met who wanted the same things before and after, in bed and out: intimacy and pleasure and reciprocity.

He reached for Kelvin. "But you want me to enjoy myself, right? And I can assure you that I stop enjoying myself the minute Alfie starts howling along."

Kelvin leaped on top of Phil. "Woof," he said. He burrowed his face in Phil's crotch, and Phil laughed.

The call from work came just as they finished, an emergency that Phil could have asked one of the other vets to attend to, but the family had requested him. Kelvin had taken the day off work—he had a boring but flexible office job—to drive him to the airport, so they rose and dressed and went first to the clinic, where Kelvin waited in the car with Alfie and Madeline while Phil handled the emergency, and from there to the airport. As they stood at the curb saying goodbye, Kelvin began to cry. He looked right at Phil as he sobbed, even stroking his cheek, while the curbside baggage checker stood several feet away, staring and scowling. Phil pretended to focus on his husband, though all he could think about was the porter, which had to do with the fact that he would soon be back with his family, viewing himself through their eyes.

The dogs put their snouts out the half-open car window and began whimpering. "You see?" Kelvin said, his face still wet. "The whole family's miserable."

This—the way Kelvin spoke, without sarcasm or subtext—could have turned Phil off all those years ago when they first met, but instead it had seemed exotic, inviting. When Phil joked with him on one of their first dates, “My god, you’re as earnest as a lesbian,” Kelvin laughed because it could be both funny and true. Phil discovered that he liked making Kelvin laugh. As a boy, he’d never made people laugh, except at him. This was particularly true of his family, who laughed at him often and considered him overly sensitive for minding.

He’d met Kelvin at an auction, a fund-raiser for an animal shelter at which he’d volunteered when he first moved to Davis, after he fled New Mexico and his family and the life he was expected to live there. At the time of the auction, he was in veterinary school, and the listing in the auction program read: *Date with sexy veterinarian student!* A group of women with whom he’d volunteered had come up with the idea, and though the whole thing embarrassed him greatly, he’d gone along with it, which meant that halfway through the evening he found himself up on the stage being told to strike a sexy vet pose. Mainly, the bidders were women his mother’s age—*bidding biddies*, he thought, ungenerously. It did not surprise him that bidding biddies were his audience. What did surprise him was the lone man, Bidder 13, who kept lifting his paddle until most of the bidding biddies had dropped away, and it became a duel between him and a woman in her sixties wearing cat ears and whiskers. Finally, the man threw down his paddle in defeat. This was Kelvin.

After the auction was over, Phil was standing to the side of the buffet table with Carol, the shelter receptionist, and Kelvin approached him, pausing—out of nervousness or hunger—to select a shrimp-and-cucumber canapé. Then, he stood in front of Phil, his face a deep red, which Phil misread as shyness until Carol said, “I think he’s choking.” She’d spent the last five minutes referring to Phil as the *975-Dollar Man*, which is what the cat woman had paid for the date, but her voice turned serious then, the way it got when someone brought in a sick animal they’d found on the street.

“Are you choking?” Phil asked, and Kelvin nodded.

Phil pounded him on the back, and when this did not work, he put his arms around Kelvin from behind, placed a fist above Kelvin’s navel, and administered the Heimlich maneuver, jerk-

ing up so hard that Kelvin's feet came off the ground. He did this twice more, and Carol said, "I think you got it."

Kelvin nodded and spit the shrimp back into his hand. "You're amazing," he said to Phil when he could finally talk, and Phil buttoned his suit coat to hide the fact that he was aroused, turned on by this wholly unlikely version of himself.

His brother, Tom, had someone waiting for him at the airport in Albuquerque, an employee from the family business that Phil had fled all those years ago. The man was in his thirties, nervous and deferential, no doubt assuming that Phil was like his brother. He drove Phil to Tom's house, which was predictably large and nondescript. Tom was there waiting for him, coat on, and after the brothers shook hands, Tom left, like they were factory coworkers passing between shifts.

Phil had never been to his brother's house. He went into the living room, where he stood considering the décor, which made no sense aesthetically or in terms of what he knew of his brother, who had always valued practicality. There were numerous ceramic reproductions of books, all crudely cast, and above the fake fireplace, framed behind glass, an arrangement of pot holders. Pot holders! He supposed that Sandra, Tom's wife, whom he had met just twice, might be responsible for the décor. He went over to the rocking chair beside the fireplace, but as soon as he sat down, Sandra appeared, so he stood back up. She, too, shook his hand, then explained with some urgency that the chair in which he'd been sitting was "just for show." He did not know what this meant but remained standing.

After that, neither of them spoke, and when the hospice nurse arrived for her daily visit, Sandra put on her coat and left, so it was the hospice nurse who took him down the hallway to the guestroom, in the middle of which stood a hospital bed. There, tucked into the bed, was his mother. She opened her eyes and said, "Oh, it's you," as though she'd seen him just minutes earlier, but he made a point to go over to her and kiss her forehead.

The nurse showed him everything—a list of instructions, broken down by the hour; the packets of nutritional shakes that his mother did not want to drink but needed to; a drawer filled with oral syringes of pain medicine—all while writing on charts and attending to his mother, who alternated between ordering the nurse around and ignoring her. The nurse did not hurry or

become impatient, and when she was done with her visit, Phil walked her to the door and thanked her in an apologetic voice.

“She’s not so bad,” the nurse said. “At least she knows what she wants.”

Phil laughed in agreement.

“And she’s much calmer, now that you’re here. She’s been anxious for you to arrive.” This, he knew, was one of those things that medical people say, a one-size-fits-all approach that treated the world as a place where families were happiest together.

Some of his friends had told him that the hardest thing about a parent’s death was that the argument suddenly ended, but in his case the argument had never really begun. He had withdrawn from the debate, left without telling his family that he was going, eventually contacting them to say that he had settled in Davis. When he

When he met Kelvin, he let the answering machine announce his relationship . . . and his family never asked for details.

met Kelvin, he let the answering machine announce his relationship—*You have reached the home of Phil and Kelvin*—and his family never asked for details. When Kelvin wanted to accompany him on his

infrequent visits back home, he declined, saying, “I’m saving you from them,” but the truth was that he was saving himself. As long as Kelvin was not there—sitting at their table asking questions about what Phil had been like as a boy and expecting to sleep in Phil’s childhood bed with him at night—they did not have to discuss any of it.

At the airport that morning, the last thing Kelvin said was “Call if you need me to come.” He tried to imagine Kelvin here, in his brother’s house, wondered how his mother would feel, dying with a stranger beside her. But wasn’t he a stranger also?

He waved as the hospice nurse drove off, then went back into the guestroom. His mother’s eyes were shut, and he sat down in a chair, relieved. It was then, without opening her eyes, that his mother asked whether he was happy. When he didn’t answer, she said, “I suppose it was a good thing you ran away like that, even if you just turned your back on everything—your father,

the business.” She spoke as if they were discussing recent events, not events that had occurred years ago. “I told your father all along you weren’t cut out for it—the business. You never liked the direct approach to anything.”

“Actually, I don’t think your father was even disappointed,” she went on, either trying to goad him or just talking, which often sounded like the same thing. Kelvin, who was unapologetically influenced by pop-psychology texts, said that falling into established family patterns of communication was a self-fulfilling prophecy, that it was within Phil’s control to respond differently, a position with which Phil—in theory and from a distance—agreed. In practice, at this particular moment, he said nothing. “The truth is he was probably relieved that you left.”

“You know what?” Phil said suddenly. “I *am* happy. Kelvin and I have a wonderful life together. Is that direct enough for you?”

His mother opened her eyes but did not look at him. “You let that crash get the better of you,” she said. “You changed completely afterward.”

“Of course I changed. It changed me. How could it not?” He did not say that she must have worked every day, every second, to stay the same.

After the shuttle dropped them at the hotel the day of the crash, the three of them—Phil, his mother, and his aunt—went upstairs to the rooms they’d been assigned by the airline and into the smaller of the two, which Phil assumed was his because it had just one bed. None of them had luggage—it was gone with the plane—and Phil felt even more lost without a bag to unpack, toiletries to arrange. His mother and aunt did not go into the adjoining room. They just stood there. Finally, his mother drew the curtains and climbed into the king-size bed that was supposed to be his, and he and his aunt followed. Except for their shoes, they got in fully dressed, his mother in the middle, mirroring their seating on the plane. It was ironic that they had been sitting that way, for they all three accepted that it was his aunt’s job to buffer Phil and his mother from each other, but his aunt needed to be at the window, looking out. She said it was how she kept the plane afloat. Of course, this was ironic also.

The overhead light was on, but no one got up to shut it off.

Nobody spoke. What was there to say? None of them wanted to relive the moments just before the crash, or the chaos after. And before that? Before that, they had been on vacation, drinking and laughing under the bright Caribbean sun. Now, they were huddled beneath the blankets, their teeth chattering hard in their mouths. At some point, Phil rose and went into the adjoining room, where he stripped the comforters from both beds, brought them back, and covered his mother and aunt. For the first time in his life, he felt like an adult.

They stayed in bed together for thirty-six hours. Phil did not sleep. Each time he closed his eyes, he felt the plane beneath him, speeding down the runway, the backward tilt as its nose poked upward, the plane hesitating, then falling back, hard. Around him, people had screamed; he had screamed with them.

The morning of the second day, the telephone rang and Phil got out of bed and answered it. It was the airline, checking on them. "Have you arranged a flight for us?" he asked the woman on the other end.

Directly after the crash, the survivors had been brought to a room at the airport where there were telephones and coffee. Phil and his mother had called his father back home, explaining that there had been an accident. Phil's father was at his office, and even though he was on the phone with his wife and son who were calling because they had almost died, he held the receiver between his ear and shoulder and waved to his secretary to bring him some paperwork that needed signing—or so Phil imagined, given his father's distracted response. For his father, even tragedy could be multitasked.

Phil waited for the airline woman to answer his question, to say that she had booked a flight for the three of them, even though he could not imagine getting back on a plane so soon, maybe ever. Instead, she hiccupped loudly. She did not apologize, but he supposed the ensuing silence had to do with her feeling embarrassed, hiccupping like that into the ear of a crash victim.

"We can't arrange flights quite yet," said the airline representative at last. "We're still identifying bodies." She paused. "That's actually why I'm calling—we need someone from your party to come to the morgue."

"Party?" he said loudly, finding the word strange, almost offensive, in a conversation about morgues and bodies. He was

sitting on the edge of the bed, still wearing the clothes he'd had on for the flight—jeans with a button-down shirt and linen jacket, in deference to his mother, who insisted that flying was something you dressed up for. She and his aunt wore skirts, which rode up around their thighs when they slid to safety; beneath the layers of blankets, he imagined them doing the same. "I'll come," he said to the airline woman.

"Who was it, Philip?" his mother asked.

"The airline," he said. "I need to, you know, identify their bodies."

When he returned two hours later, his mother and aunt were out of bed, showered, and dressed in clothes that the airline had delivered. Phil had never seen his mother in a T-shirt. Neither woman asked about the morgue, which was fine with him. He did not want to discuss any of it, to hear himself using words like *fungi* to describe how Mr. Milford's left ear had looked, melted to the side of his head.

"Philip," said his mother, "will you take us out for a late lunch, please?"

She had never spoken to him like this, requesting rather than demanding his services. Though his homosexuality was not discussed between them, she treated him like her homosexual son, expecting him to escort her to dinner and concerts, on shopping excursions, and to the hair salon. Art, the man with whom he was having sex back home in Albuquerque, had told him he needed to learn how to stand up for himself, stop being such a sissy. Art was ashamed of him. Whenever they went out in public, which was rarely, Art walked several feet ahead, pretending they were not together.

Art did not walk this way with his wife. Phil had seen them once, strolling along Central with their two children. In bed later that week, when Phil asked Art what his children's names were, Art smashed Phil's head into the headboard. "You think I want their names coming out of your filthy faggot mouth?" Art said.

Phil had wanted to say something clever about what Art wanted from his filthy faggot mouth. "No," he said instead, soothingly. "Of course not."

"Lunch, yes," Phil answered his mother. "Let me just get out of these clothes." He picked up the bag that the airline had left for him and took it into the bathroom. Inside were T-shirts,

extra-large, though he was a medium at best, imprinted with the airline's logo. He put one on. He looked like a walking advertisement for an airline that had nearly killed him.

The bed was made, neatly, and his mother and aunt sat on it, waiting. "I haven't gone out without a purse since I was a girl," his mother was saying to his aunt. They had obeyed orders to leave everything behind when they evacuated, though in the survivors' room afterward, some women sat clutching their purses, symbols of their betrayal. His mother had surprised him, not because she'd left hers—she was a stickler for rules—but because she refrained from commenting on those who had not.

They had only what was in Phil's pockets—some leftover vacation currency and his credit card—but they avoided the hotel restaurant, where the airline was running a tab, and took a taxi to a nearby restaurant. They needed to be away from the other survivors, though they did not say this aloud.

As they finished their first course, two businessmen sat down at the table next to them and began to smoke. "How's your soup?" Phil asked his mother to distract her from the smoking.

"Mine is very good," said his aunt, doing the same.

"Excuse me," his mother called to the men. "Please put those out. We're trying to eat." She waved her hand at the cigarettes, and the men laughed.

"Americans, no?" said the younger man.

"Yes," said Phil.

"Americans are always the pure ones in the room," said the older man, sweeping his arm to indicate the other tables, which were occupied by people smoking and drinking and laughing. "But sometimes you just need to live a little instead of thinking every cigarette is going to kill you." He raised his wineglass at them encouragingly.

His mother stood and walked past the men as though she were leaving, but before Phil and his aunt could rise to follow her, she turned back around and went right up to the men's table. "You see me here in front of you?" she said. "I am living."

The Milfords were dead—dead because they smoked. That was the melodramatic way to think of it but also the truth. They had all boarded the plane together, but when Phil, his mother, and aunt reached the fifth row, they waved goodbye to the Milfords, and the Milfords waved cheerfully back as they continued to-

ward the smoking section at the rear of the plane, the section that would be crushed when the plane dropped back on its tail. As the Milfords moved down the aisle, Phil turned and saw Mr. Milford press his hand lightly to his wife's back. The night before, as the five of them sat in the resort lounge after their final dinner together, Mr. Milford had reached under the table and pressed that same hand to Phil's thigh. Phil's first thought was that Mr. Milford had somehow mixed up right and left, believed that he was caressing his wife's thigh as he stared straight ahead, listening to Phil's mother explain what was wrong with vegetarians, which was that they didn't eat meat. In response, Mr. Milford laughed, but Phil knew his mother was not being clever. She was rarely intentionally funny and never with topics that angered her, like vegetarians.

"I don't trust anyone who doesn't eat meat," said Mr. Milford, his hand climbing higher on Phil's thigh. Belatedly, Phil realized that the comment was intended for him. In those days,

Phil was often surprised by people, perplexed by the things they said and did. But had he truly been surprised by Mr. Milford's hand that night? Just hours earlier at the pool, Mr. Milford had chatted with him the way an uncle might,

even as he regarded the pouch in Phil's swimming trunks with a steady, almost amused gaze. Phil was used to men being startled by his size, not just the few, generally straight men with whom he'd had furtive sex, but all the men he'd ever been obligated to shower beside, in high school and then college. They watched him mince toward the showers, penis swinging like an elephant's trunk, startled but also, he thought, angered at the injustice.

He did not remove Mr. Milford's hand. He didn't know why exactly, except that it was already there, *situated*. Then, Mr. Milford's wife jumped up. "ABBA!" she screamed. "Let's dance, Rob."

Mr. Milford's hand stopped its cajoling and joined his other hand, raised in protest, but Mrs. Milford—Kate, she'd insisted

He did not remove Mr. Milford's hand. He didn't know why exactly, except that it was already there, situated.

Phil call her—pulled her husband from his chair. The lounge was dim, but Mr. Milford's crotch, when he stood, was at eye level, so Phil could see the effect the encounter had had on him. His own crotch had registered nothing, which both pleased and baffled him. He supposed it was that they were in public—he'd never been able to think of sex as anything more than shameful, private—and that his mother was sitting across from him, sipping cognac and saying, "I've never cared for legumes."

When Mr. Milford came to his room later to finish the furtive fumbling he'd started under the table, Phil invited him in. The sex was fast and not quite as rough as Phil had come to expect from straight men, which was how he regarded Mr. Milford, because he had a wife. Afterward, they lay together on the bed and talked. It felt strange and intimate and exhilarating. Mr. Milford lit two cigarettes and passed him one. He showed Phil how to draw the smoke in, hold it, and blow it back out, and Phil followed his instructions, all the while recalling the straightforward dictums from his childhood about the perils of smoking. He'd always trusted straightforward dictums.

Eventually, they had sex again, more slowly this time. When they were finished, Mr. Milford turned toward him, propping his head on his arm. He studied Phil, his body and then his face. "You're such a lovely boy," he said.

"Thank you," Phil said, in a polite voice that made Mr. Milford laugh, and Phil felt compelled to add, "Actually, I'm twenty-two. I just finished college."

Of course, Mr. Milford already knew this. At dinner the first night, when the two families were seated together, his mother had told the Milfords all sorts of things, including how she had presented Phil with the trip as a surprise graduation present, not mentioning that she had done so even though she knew that he hated resorts, hated lying on the beach and sharing the rarified air of the resort grounds with people who thought themselves experts on a host of third-world countries because they had frequented their resorts. The two families had made plans to meet again the next day, the week taking shape around their new friendship, around some daily configuration of the five of them eating and shopping and going on excursions. When they discovered that they were even booked on the same flight out, a discount shuttle from the resort island to Puerto Rico, they

had seen it less as a coincidence than one last outing they had planned among them.

There in bed, he and Mr. Milford did not discuss their departure the next morning or anything having to do with the five of them. "What do you plan to do next?" Mr. Milford asked. "Do you have a job lined up?"

"I'm going to work at my father's business," Phil said. He tried to sound nonchalant.

"Business?" said Mr. Milford. "I don't see you in business." He added, "I don't mean that in a bad way."

"I told you I studied business in college," Phil said. "It's been the plan for both of us, me and my brother, since we were boys."

"I see," said Mr. Milford. He stroked Phil's arm, and Phil wondered where Mrs. Milford—Kate—thought her husband was. "But what would *you* choose? What is it that you want to do?"

"I'm a pragmatist," said Phil. This was not true. He was a romantic, and he did not think one could be both. "Anyway, I'm already enough of a disappointment because of, you know." He gestured at the two of them side by side on the bed, naked. This was the image he would recall as he stood in the makeshift morgue two and a half days later.

What he wanted to be was a veterinarian. He'd dreamed about it since he was six, when Hans came to live with them. Hans was nothing like the dog that Phil had picked out in the encyclopedia entry for dogs—a dachshund. "We're not getting a damn wiener dog," his father said, and the next day he came home with Hans, but the thing about Hans was that even though he was a big dog—"a man's dog," his father liked to say—Hans loved *him*. He didn't care that Phil had no friends or that he was a boy who thought about other boys. When Phil lay in bed crying, Hans came, and when Phil wrapped his arms around Hans, Hans curled against him and stayed that way, steady and warm, through the night.

He did not tell Mr. Milford any of this that night, but five days later, when he and his mother and aunt finally arrived back in Albuquerque, he got off the plane and went directly to his apartment, packed his car, and drove west to California, then north to Davis, where he found a job working at an animal clinic and volunteered at the shelter. Two years later, he started veterinary school, and then he met Kelvin. He tried not to think

about the fact that his own happiness had come about solely because Mr. Milford died.

The first time Phil went out to dinner with Kelvin's parents, they had on matching T-shirts with the words *We Love Our Gay Son*. Phil asked whether this meant that they did not love Kelvin's brother, who was straight, and they laughed as if he were joking. He supposed he was. The next time, they had new shirts: *We Love Our Gay Son and His Gay Boyfriend*. They sat in the restaurant wearing their public displays of support and eating the calamari appetizer. "Phil," they asked, "how does your family respond to your homosexuality?"

"By not talking about it," he replied, keeping his tone light, but Kelvin's parents drew closer. "These things can't just be brushed under the rug," his mother said. She set down a forkful of tentacles and lifted the corner of her placemat, pretending to sweep breadcrumbs under it with her other hand.

"Would it help if we spoke to them?" Kelvin's father said. "We're happy to give them a call."

"I couldn't ask you to do that," Phil said. "I don't even like talking to them." He laughed, but it ended in a high-pitched squeak that threatened to devolve into tears. His father had always responded to his tears by saying, "I'll give you something to cry about" and then proceeding to do so. Once, when he was

Not even a year later, he and Kelvin had moved to San Francisco because he understood by then that he was not cut out to be part of a happy family either.

twelve, his father had yanked down his pants and spanked him right there on the plaza in Old Town as tourists walked by, his buttocks heating up beneath his father's blows and the steady New Mexico sun. The memory was as vivid as

the expressions of concern on the faces of Kelvin's parents as they stared at him. He'd looked away, down at their T-shirts. *I love your gay son also*, he thought. He thought about how he would never declare this on a T-shirt. He was crying, and he stood up from the table, pushed back his chair, and left.

Not even a year later, he and Kelvin had moved to San Francisco because he understood by then that he was not cut out to

be part of a happy family either. Each month, Kelvin's parents drove into the city to stay with them, and Phil wondered whether they knew that they were the reason for the move. He didn't think so, because during these visits, when Kelvin called out, "Everyone on the raft," Kelvin's mother came into their room and lay at the foot of the bed, talking to them as she stroked Ollie's fat stomach, and then she would get up and kiss them both goodnight.

His mother was turned away from him in the hospital bed. He thought she might be crying. He had not seen her cry in the twenty-four years since the crash, not even when his father had died a year earlier. That night, the night his father died, he and Kelvin sat down to eat dinner, and Phil said, "Just so you know, the phone's going to ring any minute, but we're not going to answer it."

"Okay," said Kelvin, not asking, because he understood how this worked, and sure enough, a few minutes later, Phil said, "I did it. You said I needed to, and I did."

"The invitation?" Kelvin said, and Phil said, "Yes," and just like that, the phone rang. They both laughed because there was something funny about saying a thing would happen just before it did. The dogs began to bark, not at the phone but at the laughing. They did not like to be left out.

"We'll let the machine take it," Phil said. He loved answering machines, the sense of control they gave him. "I know it's them. It would have arrived today. I'll call back tomorrow, but for now I just want to feel happy."

He and Kelvin were getting married, finally, after nineteen years, because for the first time, they could—legally, that is. There would be a brief ceremony at City Hall followed by a party, and the only catch was that Kelvin said Phil needed to invite his family. "Force *them* to make the decision," he said. "Don't make it for them."

"Call me," said his mother's voice from the corner of the room in his tiny house where his mother had never been. "I need to tell you something."

She sounded strange, a different kind of strange from the strange that had to do with responding to an invitation to the wedding of your homosexual son, and he called immediately. "What's up?" he said, and she said, "It's your father."

“What about him?” He was expecting her to say that his father had told her to call, had made it her job to explain that they had no intention of attending this wedding—“wedding,” in quotation marks.

“He’s dead,” she said. “The ambulance is here, so I better go. I just thought you’d want to know.”

“Dead?” he said. He’d never imagined his father in those terms. “How?”

“He was sitting at the table, eating dinner and looking through the mail. I went into the kitchen to get him another piece of lasagna, and when I came back he was gone.”

She paused. “Oh, there was something from you today. Some sort of invitation.” Her voice made it clear that this was the end of that conversation.

As he and Kelvin lay in bed later that night, Phil said, “Do you think it was, you know, because of the invitation?”

“What?” said Kelvin sleepily, and then, “You mean the heart attack?”

That was exactly what he meant.

“Oh, Philip. No. Heart attacks don’t work that way.” Kelvin took his hand in the dark. “I can’t believe your mother, that she had the presence of mind to bring up the invitation as they were carrying your father’s body out of the house.”

From her hospital bed just one year later, his mother said, “Whatever happened with that invitation, the one that arrived the day your father died?”

He’d always imagined dying as a tunnel that narrowed around you until everything ceased to exist and it was just you, walking alone, no longer caring what those around you said or thought or ate for lunch or even who the next president was, but maybe he’d been wrong. “You’re wondering whether Kelvin and I got married?” he asked.

She was still turned away from him, but she was definitely crying, and he pulled back the covers and got into bed beside his mother.

“Philip?” she said. She sounded alarmed.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m here.” He made his voice soothing, like he was talking to an injured animal.

After a while, his mother said, “Do you remember those men at the restaurant? The ones who wouldn’t stop smoking?” She sounded calmer, and he thought that she had forgotten about

wanting to know whether he was married. He *was* married, but he wasn't going to insist on telling her.

"Yes," he said. "I remember."

"They made me so mad." She laughed, and he laughed with her.

"I mainly remember how you went over to their table and yelled at them," he said. "I admired you so much at that moment." He realized this was true.

"Really?" she said. "I was sure I'd embarrassed you."

His brother would be home any minute. He would come into the bedroom, take in the sight of Philip in bed with their dying mother, and say, "What are you doing?"—his brother who could not differentiate between practical and beautiful.

Phil shifted onto his side toward his mother. Her eyes were closed, but he could see that she was in pain. It was his job to understand pain. "Are you afraid?" he asked.

She did not answer, and he thought maybe she'd dozed off. "No," she said at last. "What would be the use? I just want it to be over."

"Don't say that," he said, a perfunctory response.

"There's nothing more for me here. I'm just waiting to die, and you know I've never liked waiting." She paused. "I'm glad you're here, Philip."

"I'm glad, too," he said. He was. Kelvin had told him that people sometimes softened before death, that they understood, only then, what they'd wished for from life.

"Listen. I need you to give me all of it," his mother said, pointing at the drawer where the pain medicine was kept, several weeks' worth, the oral syringes lined up like the hulls of wingless planes. "No one will wonder," she said. "The hospice people left it, after all," and then, when he didn't answer, "Really, Philip. I thought you'd gotten over all of that. Your timidity."

The emergency he'd been called in to deal with on his way to the airport that morning had involved a dog, just four years old, with a tumor that had proven inoperable. Phil had not known the dog or the family well. They were new to the city, but they asked for him. The dog reared up just once, when Phil pushed the needle into his back leg. The family gathered around, crying unabashedly, Phil crying with them. "He was a lovely boy," he'd said, Mr. Milford's voice still with him after all these years.

“It’s not that,” he told his mother. “I’m not worried about getting caught.” He thought about all the creatures he’d put down, the relief he’d sensed in their bodies at the very end. “It’s just—you’re my mother,” he said finally, though he knew that this was no reason at all.

CATCH-CLAW

Lush has gone and fallen in love again.

I wasn't with her for this encounter, but hearing it from her, I can relate it here: a sand-swept gash of Gulf highway on the way back from Port Arthur, driving with the tip of her blonde ponytail out the window. A truck behind her, close enough for its headlights to flirt in and out of her rearview mirror. Belching greasy smoke as they waited in line at the ferry-loading station. His front bumper kissing hers on the deck as they crossed the Calcasieu Pass. The sun sent a diamond-sharp glare off his door as it swung open and shut, she said, discharging a pair of boots that walked right up to her driver's side window.

"His name is Caleb," she had told me. "But with a K-H."

"Right," I said. "So."

"So, it's still pronounced Caleb," she said.

Lush is a fast-burning fire in love. She'll return from these doctors' appointments and grocery runs with a man in tow, and we'll have him around for a few weeks. He'll reduce the defunct push mower to its parts and put it back together again, refit the lock on her bedroom door. Maybe he'll be the one to finally fix the garbage disposal. And then the house will be empty but for the two of us again. We fry chicken and fan the grease that smudges the ceiling out the back door. We watch bad TV, unintelligible over the air conditioner's thrum, and afterward unpeel ourselves from the couch, leaving behind a shimmering rime of sweat on the leather. In Louisiana you are intimately acquainted with the smell of people's sweat, regardless of the season.

I am not like Lush. I am no fast-burning fire in love. There is something in me that catches its claws in for years, years. And then one day it is gone. I don't know when it happens—miss the moment it goes—only that it leaves behind an ache I've never been able to name.

Lush always likes me to meet her new boyfriends. The first time I meet Khaleb, opening the screen door to let him in, he immediately palms me a satsuma from his flannel's breast pocket.

“You’re the roommate,” he says. “Lush told me about you.”

“You can call me Nat, too,” I say. Unsure what to do with the fruit, I put it down delicately in the key dish just inside the door.

“I can tell you’re not from here,” Khaleb says. He wipes his boots carefully on the mat and looks up. He’s got eyelashes as long as a girl’s. “Your voice.”

“She should be out in a minute.”

Khaleb shrugs, gives me an easy grin, and swivels to take in the room. Aside from furniture, there’s little in the way of decoration. A line of warped shells threaded along the lip of the windowsill, a poster of a naked, kneeling woman that Lush bought at an art show, its edges already curled up from the humidity. His eyes skirt over and past the poster in a way that makes me decide he’s religious.

“Nice place,” he says.

“It’s all Lush’s,” I say. “Lush’s grandpa’s, really.” I wonder if he knows yet that Lush has no job, hasn’t for years. Which isn’t to say she doesn’t do anything to keep herself occupied. She helps coach the girls’ soccer team at the middle school, volunteers weekly for a group that cleans up local waterways. She goes to every town hall meeting to advocate for breaking ground on a no-kill shelter. Those kinds of commitments take time. It helps that she doesn’t have to pay to live here; her grandpa doesn’t make her. As her roommate, I pay a small rent and all utilities.

Khaleb doesn’t reply, maybe because that’s when Lush finally comes out of her bedroom. Mutty trails after her, not pregnant, but so often the case that her teats swing low to the floor.

“Isn’t he a catch?” Lush asks me, while Mutty sniffs around his feet, licks the tip of his boot. “Isn’t he?”

Khaleb is a gentleman, as are all the Southern men Lush brings home. The first few times he comes over, even, are only when I’m there, acting as some strange kind of chaperone. When we eat, he waits for us to take the first bite. When we drink, he comes with a bottle of wine for us. He typically talks enough for the three of us—his job at the oil refinery, his big-game-hunting father, that time he pulled a man from a smoking wreck of a car—while Lush makes affirming noises, strokes her hand through his hair. He aggressively refuses to call Lush anything other than Alice after hearing about the origins of her nickname on his third visit.

“It’s a holdover from a couple of years ago,” Lush tells him,

embarrassed. “I was at a bar and tried to introduce myself to someone. You know how it is.”

Khaleb looks nonplussed.

“Hi, I’m Ah-lushhh,” I say. “Given the setting, it just seemed to fit.”

Lush laughs, shakes her head, but all Khaleb does is make a little sound in the back of his throat and change the subject.

“I don’t like it,” I tell her when he leaves. “Probably just another good ole boy who thinks you should be in the kitchen and not in a bar.”

“Nat,” Lush says. She watches his taillights turn the street corner. She’s still smiling in this moony way that tells me she’s just at the beginning of this thing.

Lush has stages to her love. I’ve lived with her long enough—three years now—to know. Right now, in the beginning, there is Lush in her fevered love. She smiles every time her phone chirps and benevolently washes my laundry with hers, buys me tampons while at the store without my asking. This is the stage where I tend to see the most of her. After my shift at the diner, we’ll meet—at a bar, on the front porch—and she’ll get talking. Giddy, she wants me to know that Khaleb is the fifth man she’s dated here with a third nipple, like a beauty mark, tufted over in chest hair (something in the water, we hypothesize). She wants to tell me about his strangely girlish calves, or what he says when he comes.

Lush has stages to her love. I’ve lived with her long enough—three years now—to know. Right now . . . is Lush in her fevered love.

The switch from the first to second stage is sudden. Although I still live with her, I find myself seemingly living alone. Lush, gone from morning until night. The house settles into its silences. In the hours outside of working, I paint my toenails on the coffee table, read a book on the front porch. Lush skulks in on the edges of things, piling clean underwear into an overnight bag, wolfing down a sandwich twenty minutes before her volunteer shift starts.

“Sorry,” she says, with a smile that shows she isn’t sorry, not really. “Things have been crazy. I’ll have to fill you in later.”

When she does come home, it's with him. During the night I'll hear their muffled laughter, the *adagio tempo* of the headboard against the wall. Footsteps, the squeak of the bathroom door. The sound of Lush peeing, followed by another, thunderous piss, the toilet flushing. When I see Lush in this stage, she is suddenly closed-mouthed, prim, about things she wasn't before. About other subjects, however, she's still got plenty to say.

"I know everyone hunts around here, but his dad's place is weird. Literally a wall of heads. I couldn't even tell you how many."

"Any bears? Lions?"

Lush pauses to hold the straps of a dress against her collarbone; we're spending the morning thrift-store shopping, whiling away the time until the bars open.

"Definitely some bears. He's been to Alaska before," she says. "You should see the antlers on the elk he's got there."

I move further down the clothes rack, catching fabric between my fingers, as her voice drops.

"And they all have names he's given them on little plaques right below. Like they're pets. Can you imagine? If I put Mutty's head . . . ?"

I can't. Lush can be a thoughtless owner sometimes—the number of times Mutty's roamed home and given up a litter two months later can attest to that. But I also know that each time Lush spent weeks trying to find homes for every puppy, even driving one the three hours to Mandeville for someone who'd shown interest. Lush is silent, still imagining.

"Hey," I say. I pull a skirt from the rack. "Look. What do you think—for Khaleb? Show off those calves of his."

"That's not funny," Lush says after a moment, hanging it back up with a jerky motion of her arm. The message is clear: he's off-limits now, has become a tender, secret part of her. I can't hold that against her, of course. It's just a reminder of how long it's been since I had something like that—something kept guarded, hidden from everybody else.

Lush forgives me soon enough. Over beers at the bar, she's back in fine form, the shimmer of her blonde hair acting as a dragnet for all eyes in the bar. She sways in her seat and sings the jukebox's song lyrics to me. She whispers ratings of the male bar patrons out of the side of her mouth, waiting to see if I nod my head in agreement. Lush has a way of making you think

you're more than you really are—more witty, more fun. I'm not even surprised when I leave to grab us another round and return to the table minutes later to find three men occupying the other side of the booth, smiles crooked toward Lush. She's drawing a map on a napkin—a general sketch of our neighborhood.

“Grandpa's owned it since the seventies,” she tells them. “He says it's nice just to have someone there. Doesn't care what I do with it, either.” They hardly look up as I slide into the booth next to her. “Means I don't have hardly any expenses, either. Just bar tabs.” She laughs.

“Sweetheart, you shouldn't be paying even that,” says one, and Lush toasts him with her bottle.

It's been a while since someone has looked at me the way men look at Lush. When I moved from Virginia at twenty, I'd had only two relationships—one all through high school and another in the two years after. I'd ended both. The man I moved for was originally from here. He took me from Virginia to live in a small, bare-walled apartment on the bayou—where, when it overflowed, the gators would sometimes climb onto the porch, so through the rain I heard the sound of them rubbing their rough, slick bodies against the front door.

Two weeks out of the month he was gone, working a rig out on the Gulf. The two weeks he was home, we would stay in bed, and he would tell me all the fantastic trips we would take the next time he was ashore—a long weekend in New Orleans, maybe, or a road trip across Texas. We lived like that for over two years, always with the promise of those future trips, and I never doubted them until one morning I woke up to find all the sweetness drained from them, just like that.

A little later, after they've left, she stumbles out of a bathroom stall, and shows me a closed fist.

“You've been quiet,” she says. “I found something to cheer you up.” She unfolds her fist to show me a tube of lipstick she found on the floor. “Dare you to put it on.”

I look at it for a long moment. Then I pluck it out of her hand.

“You wouldn't,” she says, although she knows I will—her mouth already half-laughing even before I elaborately smear it over my lips, thick as a clown's smile.

The next time I see Khaleb, it's because Lush has brought him to the diner for breakfast. They request a table in my section.

“Hey, Nat!” Lush sits up on her knees in the booth and waves. “Surprise!”

“Have something a little special with your coffee today?”

Lush rolls her eyes. “We were going to go down to the Gulf today, but the rain ruined our plan.”

“The pink dolphin,” Khaleb says. “I promised Alice I’d show her.” He nudges his coffee cup forward with a finger.

“What?”

“Pink dolphin,” Khaleb says. “You can catch it in the shipping channel if you know where to look.” He has a smug tilt to his lips—he knows where to look, but he’s not sharing. “Only one like it in the world. Some people say a sight like that can make you believe in God again.” He squints up at me, reconsiders. “Even if you don’t, it’s still a hell of an experience.”

Unlike Lush, who drives to the coast to visit her grandpa in Port Arthur every month, and Khaleb, who wears out his fishing license, I haven’t been down to the Gulf much. A time or two, when I first moved here and thought how amazing it was to be living in a place receding by inches into water. Leave the

I imagine the man’s number scrawled beneath his signature on the receipt, a glittering, kaleidoscopic night at the casino, a luxury suite.

city and you enter scraps of land stitched together with swamp, gators sunning themselves next to tire tracks scored into the edge of the road. The beach has seaweed piled ankle-deep at the tideline, hopping with sand fleas. Petroleum

gives tidal pools a prismatic shimmer. Storms offer up beached oil drums. Far out in the brown water, the rigs perch like skeletal birds. I went once with a towel and a book and left with a sunburn and my ankles pricked by flea bites.

Lush and Khaleb clear out soon enough, but I still have one remaining table, a man wearing a nice suit waiting out the rain. I spend the rest of my shift rolling silverware into napkins, stopping by every twenty minutes to refill his coffee. Each refill gets me a smile.

While the storm flashes through, I imagine the man’s number scrawled beneath his signature on the receipt, a glittering, kaleidoscopic night at the casino, a luxury suite. Something that

streaks by, fast as a knock on the head, and then over. Something like Lush would do.

I don't imagine these kinds of things often, though. Just to pass the time.

In their fourth week of dating, Khaleb offers to take us crabbing. He has a honey hole, he says, a place he alone knows of to catch crabs. We drive down there early one Saturday morning, all three of us sitting across the bench seat of Khaleb's truck. Lush is tucked in the middle, the prickly blonde hairs of her thighs tickling along mine. She squints forward through the windshield and pokes her sunglasses back up her nose when they slide down; she doesn't talk aside from saying she has a headache, nursed over from the night before. This close to the Gulf, we see empty plots of land, bare but for live oaks like gnarled hands, front stairs leading to nowhere, solitary brick chimneys, all else washed away by rising tides and hurricanes.

Khaleb points through the windshield. "That's where I'd build a house," he says. "What a nice little piece of land."

Lush doesn't say anything.

"Good flat land to keep some steers on. A little creek running through. That's where the kids would try to trap some crawfish for fun."

Lush turns her head to look at him. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah," Khaleb says. "Did you see the size of some of those trees? We'd have a shady backyard. And they'd be the perfect size to hang a swing from."

"For the kids?"

"Yeah," Khaleb says. "For the little ones."

"They'd love it," Lush says. "And then they'd be dragged out to sea by a storm surge and drowned."

Khaleb's honey hole is a bayou along the Mermentau. For all he swears of its privacy, there's trash liberally left along the bank—a single computer monitor; foil; shards of Styrofoam coolers; the bloody, fly-covered plastic trays that held raw meat. Between us we have chicken livers, still mostly frozen; a six-pack of beer; a cooler filled with ice; two butterfly nets; and plenty of fishing line. Khaleb whistles out a tune as he baits the line.

"Good morning for crabbing," he says. "Cloudy. They won't see us up here."

“Yeah, I’ve done this a time or two,” Lush says, rolling her eyes over at me.

Khaleb bellies down on the concrete slab along the bank and drops a line in. The water is murky, impenetrable. Lush lugs the cooler and six-pack down about ten yards and sets to knotting one end of a line to a cattail. I can tell by the set of her shoulders that she’s in no mood to be joined.

“Hey, Nat,” Khaleb says—soft-voiced, like I’ll be doing him the favor. “Wanna help me out?” His eyes dip to Lush, popping the tab of a beer, and back. He doesn’t say anything else, just shuffles his knees over when I crouch next to him.

“You’ve never done this before, huh?” he says. “Hold the line with your fingers. Wait for that guitar-twang. That’s when you know.”

A few minutes later, a shiver reverberates up and down the line before it pulls snug.

“You caught something?”

Just as quickly, the line goes slack. “Maybe not now.” I twitch it experimentally, let it get dragged out farther by the current.

The sun is still pale through the clouds, but I can already smell myself when I lift my arms. There’s a rock digging into my knee. I’m so concentrated that I hardly hear Lush’s whoop of excitement, only looking up in time to see her lifting her net with a flourish, and it shimmers for a fraction of a second like a bubble before puncturing, the water torrenting down. She waves the net over the open mouth of the cooler.

“Caught one!” she calls to us. “They’re biting like crazy over here!”

“Look,” Khaleb says to me, jostling my elbow. The line is taut again. He dips the rim of his net just under the surface of the water.

“Start pulling it out,” he says. “Easy going. The crab’s gonna start walking back to us. He’ll think it’s just the current.”

It’s slow work. Khaleb’s eyebrows are pulled together in concentration. The crab on the end of the line shambles like a drunk, closer, closer, as I coil the line back and around my fingers. Then, at a sign from Khaleb, I pull sharply up, and his net dips.

“Give him a nice kiss,” he says. He dangles an oily-sheened crab by one claw.

“Kinda runty, isn’t it,” Lush says, as Khaleb drops it in the

cooler. I shake my head at her, but she doesn't see me, or chooses not to.

The third stage of Lush in love—combative, moody. Smudges on the glass reveal themselves to be cracks in the surface instead.

For the next hour, as the sun burns the clouds away, Lush crows out to us every time she nets something. When Lush's luck starts to go, she moves farther down the bank, opens another beer, tugs at her empty lines impatiently. By the time Khaleb and I have netted twelve, the sun is on the back of my neck.

"That should do it," he says, and I can finally rock back on my heels, running my fingers over the tender grooves that have become ridged into my knees.

Khaleb crouches down to pack up the cooler. Inside, a couple dozen crabs appear to be dreaming in ice, their claws slowly opening and closing. Lush comes to look.

"They're not that big here," she says. "I'm wondering if it was even worth the drive."

"You're drunk," Khaleb says, shaking his head.

"It's none of your business what I am."

Khaleb's smile has a mean edge to it as he tilts his head back, squinting against the sun. "Looks like someone's being a little . . ."

"What?" Lush bites the word out. "Crabby?"

"I was gonna say bitch."

No one talks on the ride home.

If Lush had been in a better mood, we might have had that crab boil as soon as we got back, dropping them into the bubbling water, adding corn, potatoes. Instead, we're home by noon, the day barely begun, and Lush immediately goes to the couch to sleep. Khaleb leaves. The crabs go sour in the heat, letting off a rank, fishy smell.

When I get home from a late shift the next night, Lush is sitting on the front porch, flexing her toes against the railing. Mutty is sleeping between the legs of her chair. She's got an open beer tucked between her knees; two red empties glint from the tall grass beyond the railing like metallic camellias.

"Good tips?"

"Enough to cover some of the rent," I say.

"You should see this idiot," she says, looking down the street.

“Khaleb. Tried to come over here and give me an intervention talk. Kicked him out. Now he’s driven by the house two times in the last hour. Like I can’t recognize his truck.”

I can recognize something too—that fourth stage. It always happens like this, when even the good-time guys think that maybe Lush should slow down, take a step back. The one where Lush doesn’t answer phone calls or knocks on the door. Where she decides to fold herself into something knife-edged, unforgiving.

“You know it was coming from a good place,” I say, tentative.

She tosses her head, shoots me a look. “Oh, don’t you side with him now,” she says.

“I’m not,” I say. I want to say, *I liked him, is all*, but decide there’s no point.

I think about what will happen next—how Lush cannot help herself but to go and fall in love again. On a dance floor, at the grocery reaching for something on the top shelf. And it’ll begin all over again.

I think about the hours at the diner working to make rent, pay the electric, while the cans build up in the yard. I think about peeling a wet label off my beer at the bar while Lush’s hair acts as a dragnet for all the eyes in the room. And then I feel it in my chest. A shift. Like the last flicker of a candle before it goes out.

“What?” Lush says.

“What?”

“You’re not saying anything,” she says. “You hungry? Still some roast in the fridge.”

“I’m okay, thanks,” I say.

“I’ll call the cops on him if he even thinks about stopping,” she says. “Coming by like he’s checking up on his property. Asshole.”

It is like this: for all the times we’ve been here before—sat on the porch, railed against men, walked Lush back from her fast-burning love—I know that from now on all the sweetness will have gone away. It feels like something has come uncaught in my chest, a knot slithered loose, when I look at the side of Lush’s face and feel nothing else but tired.

“Lush,” I say, because her head is still craned down the street, still talking to herself.

“Lush,” I say again. “I’ve been thinking, a little. That maybe once I’ve got the month paid up . . .”

“Yeah?”

“That I might go.”

Lush clicks the rim of the can against her teeth. “Go where?”

“I don’t know yet,” I say. “It’s not for sure. It’s just something I was thinking just now.”

“Just now,” she says, flat. “Just now.” Without knowing how to explain myself, I say nothing. She’s giving me a look she’s never turned on me before—one of surprised hurt, a bruise in an unexpected place, too new a feeling for her to know how to hide it.

“Well, okay,” she says. “It’s not like there’s any rush to turn you out or anything. I won’t be hanging a sign in the yard.”

“I’m not in any rush,” I say. “Maybe it’s—just, maybe a change would be good. For both of us.”

“It’s not a big deal,” she says quickly. “I’m not your mother. You don’t have to explain anything to me. It’s okay, right?” She pushes herself out of the chair and goes inside; I hear the bathroom door shut. For a while I wait for her, ease off my shoes and massage my feet, swollen from standing all day, but she doesn’t come back out. So I call Mutty inside and go to bed.

A couple hours later, I’m woken by the sound of something breaking in the kitchen. The light is on in there, and Lush is standing at the counter, with a broken mug upended at her feet.

“Come here,” I say, because this is a part of the fourth stage, too. “Watch where you step. Are you okay?”

Lush’s knees give way beneath her, her hands hitting the floor with a smack. She pushes her hair out of her eyes and smiles at me.

“Nat,” she says. “I’m a mess.”

“You’re fine,” I say, pulling her up by the arm. Her breath is hot, beery.

“Yeah,” she says. “A fucking mess.”

Lush lets me tug her pants off, heave her into bed. She lets out a sigh like she’s exhausted herself.

“Are you mad?”

“No.”

“You’re mad.”

I look at the glint of her teeth in the dark room, and it’s like a smile seen in an old photograph, a long time away. Gently, I say, “I’m not.”

“You wouldn’t miss this,” she says. “If you go.”

A couple weeks after, when my manager tells me there's someone who's requested my section, I'm surprised to see it's Khaleb. I see Lush's former lovers around town all the time, where we have to give each other close-mouthed smiles and ask each other in soft voices how everything's been going, in a conversation that swings a wide arc around ever mentioning Lush.

Khaleb doesn't do that.

"How's Alice doing?" he says. "She left me a couple voice-mails right after—I could hardly understand her. Has she always been like this?"

"No. Worse, year to year."

"She should get help for that," he says. "I didn't know it was that bad."

"Yeah," I say, although that just makes me feel guilty, thinking of Lush alone in the house.

"And you're moving out?" he asks. "She mentioned it in one of the voicemails."

"In the next couple days." I don't want to go into that, though. I pull my notepad from my pocket. "Anything I could get you?"

Khaleb shakes his head, smiles. "Had a question for you, actually," he says. "Wanted to show you something."

I don't know why, but right then I recognize in his smile something of the man I'd moved here for. They look nothing alike—are nothing alike. But it makes me think of being twenty in Virginia again, how he'd spread an atlas on the bedspread and showed me with his pinky nail the place he called home:

I don't know why, but right then I recognize in his smile something of the man I'd moved here for.

so close to the Gulf it looked to be on the brink of sinking in, so small it could be lost in a wrinkle of the map. We'd known each other for only a couple weeks then, but I already knew I would go with him.

This was before I really knew or understood the catch-claw that drags me in and out of love. Before I understood that just because it feels dormant sometimes, that doesn't mean it's really gone.

The evening before I go, I sit with Lush on the front porch. We share a bag of satsumas back and forth, wiping our wrists across juice-sticky chins. The sun's just setting, and we watch the neighbors mowing their lawns, walking to their mailboxes. It's the early edge of migration season, and there's a sea of birds furling over the tree line, thousands of them, banding from one edge of the horizon to the other like a succession of plucked harp strings.

Our talk is light, meaningless. Lush already has a new man. She tells me a little, but I know she edits as she goes. Lush may have fallen in love again, but she will not share just anything, not anymore.

I do not tell her about meeting Khaleb outside the diner yesterday, and not by accident. How we took his father's boat out into the shipping channel. We stood at the railing, he and I, and he leaned in behind me and pointed out the pink fin, cresting the wake. The wind pushed my hair into my mouth, carried his voice away. And there, feeling the press of his hips against mine, I felt something hooked beneath my breastbone that was so big and yawning that it couldn't even then be satisfied, though it was close.

I do not tell her, although I think she'd understand. Instead, we watch the birds move over us, beyond us, like the worst of a storm that passes.

BRIAN CZYZYK

MR. FANTASTIC MEASURES CONIFERS

2019 AWP Intro Journals Project Winner, selected by Lara Lillibridge
After Sarah Bates

I don't want this to be a poem about loss.

I want this to be an essay about smallness. How in fifth grade I was four foot one and weighed fifty-five pounds. Sometimes my mother and older sister called me *shrimp* or *small fry*.

My mother was usually joking.

I don't know if my sister was.

I won't explain why I don't eat shrimp. I don't want this to be an essay about how shrimp can be called *the cockroaches of the sea*.

I want this to be about how, on a fifth-grade field trip, I told someone I weighed fifty-five pounds. *That's it?* they said.

Now, at five foot five and a half, I'm the tallest member of my immediate family. I want to say I can't imagine being small, but I remember my grandfather—my *dziadzia*—towering over me at an even five eleven; my *busia*, smaller than their bureau. Dziadzia placing a gumball in my upturned palm, an orange pearl.

How I see his tilted-forward spine in the stride of my Uncle Ger. Even in the sofa-cozied slump of Uncle Bud.

How all my uncles have gray hair now. Or no hair.

But not my dad. His head is a gray-flanked peak of black. I used to think he looked like Reed Richards. Mr. Fantastic. But that's because he dyes it.

But I don't want this to be a poem about aging. I want this to be an essay about how easily I once could be flung from the teeter-

totter. How team huddles meant I had to sink between armpits in order to hear the coach. How I always got placed in the front row of class photos. How crowds are a kind of overgrowth, shutting out light.

Ferns in the Amazon grow in shadow. Almost no sunlight penetrates layer after layer of leaf and vine. Which means short plants rarely live long in rain forests.

Amazon orchids are epiphytes. Their seeds roost on canopy limbs and bloom where the sun reaches toward undergrowth.

A crowd of orchids on the bough of a rubber tree can starve a whole fern of light.

I didn't want this to be an essay about plants, but I explain almost everything in terms of plants. The pine pitch smeared on my hoodie sleeves, the blue spruce that line my backyard, the cherry blossoms that shower the streets of my neighborhood each May, and the cherry pulp that showers the streets of my hometown every July. The first time I flew to Oregon, I learned the landscape by the depth and height of its green, how power lines grow beards of moss there. I can tell you the town I come from started as a lumber town, and I can tell you lumber trucks are something you should be afraid of. Especially in January. Especially if you're driving in Michigan.

I didn't want this to be an essay about how much I miss Michigan. This was supposed to be about how sometimes when I was in high school, I lay in bed and tried to sleep but cried because my knees and hips ached as if someone had strapped me to a rack. When I was younger, my mother explained these as growing pains. I didn't know growth was supposed to be painful.

In old age, we shrink. Osteoporosis shaves down the spine. Every step, head turn, finger snap weakens the cartilage between bones. Muscle disappears.

When we grow old, our bodies are effectively worn out.

Sarcopenia. From the Greek *sárx*. Flesh.

Peniá. Poverty. Want.

Busia at ninety—my younger sister's chin brushed the white cloud of her hair, even though my sister was four inches shorter than me.

Napoleon was five foot seven. Average, even by today's standards. But in the minds of the British, what better way to discredit a man than to make fun of his stature? What's left of his legacy, a pseudo-complex.

Would you call that loss?

Was Busia's coffin the same size as Dziadzia's?

Loss: I don't remember.

Busia and *Dziadzia* are not even Polish. They're an American contortion of the original words.

Would you call that loss?

A scrambling. A confusion.

Loss.

But I don't want this to be an essay about language.

I want this to detail how maple leaves shiver in the slightest breeze. How in autumn they blush red, fade to orange, crisp, and fall.

An estimated eighteen million acres of forests are lost each year to deforestation. Almost a third of Oregon.

I don't want this to be an essay about how white pines are the tallest trees in Michigan and how they're dwarfed by Oregon's ponderosas.

I want this to be an essay about how Reed Richards finds one thousand five hundred feet is the farthest he can stretch. Which

is forty-six feet longer than the Empire State Building is tall.
Which is three hundred and sixty-seven ten-year-old mes.
Which is almost two hundred seventy-five of me now.

I didn't want this to be an essay about aging.

I wanted this to be an essay about small things, and what keeps
us alive. Marbles, blood cells, the chains of atoms that make up
our guts.

I don't want this to be a poem about Napoleon or Michigan
winters.

So I'll call this an essay for people who feel like ferns.

Small and overshadowed.

Starved of the light we need.

RECORDS ON BONE

For just a moment longer, I will stand here on the edge . . .
—Vladimir Vysotsky, “Capricious Horses” (translation)

Vladimir Vysotsky, or the “Russian Bob Dylan,” has been dead for almost forty years, but were he still alive on this day, my father’s sixty-seventh birthday, we wouldn’t be playing his music anyway. We would play the music that made us American—Bruce Springsteen, Michael Jackson, Tina Turner, Neil Diamond—the same music we play now on this television, in this living room, in this beautiful house of my parents’ immigrant dreams. My brothers and I dance uproariously with our children to “Dancing Queen” and “Born in the USA,” and tenderly with our spouses to “Human Nature” and “Heartlight.” As a child I remember dancing with my father to these songs. But back then the parties were in the cramped living room of our tenement apartment near Newark, New Jersey, or in the similar dwellings of other immigrant families we knew. We ate Russian food, for it was the only food the mothers knew how to make, and the men drank vodka, for some habits are too hard to break. But in those early post-immigration years, no one cared to play Russian music or to be otherwise reminded of a past they loathed enough to flee.

Tonight Mom and Dad watch from their separate loveseats, beaming with joy, in a rare peace that has as much to do with wine and vodka as with the frolicking of children and grandchildren. Occasionally they hold the gazes of my two younger brothers, who managed to be born in America and have no memory of the post-immigration chaos that we three endured. I am jealous of how easily they are able to look each other in the eye. For Mom, Dad, and me, eye contact is like an embrace, a tear, or perhaps, one of Vysotsky’s melodies—too intimate. Our eyes are mirrors reflecting truths more easily avoided.

When the dancing is over, Dad switches the channel on the wide-screen TV, and I’m surprised to see that he has turned on a video of the dead musician, looking surreally alive and all-American in his 1970s orange polyester shirt and cream-colored bell-bottoms. But his instrument—a *semistrunka* (seven-string) acoustic guitar—is traditionally Russian. In the YouTube video,

Vysotsky props the guitar on his knee, clears his throat, then suffers a brief fit of smoker's cough before tuning and strumming. Within seconds, his rolling baritone voice floods the speakers.

This performance of his most famous song, "Capricious Horses"—a metaphor about the swift passing of time toward its inevitable end—was recorded in 1979. Throughout the ballad Vysotsky imagines himself the driver of horses, at first hurrying them on, then pleading with them in the end to slow their gallop. As he performs alone on his stool for the camera, he appears helpless over the twisting of his mouth and tongue, his whole body spasming at each of his own explosive trills. Every one of his syllables pulsates as distinctly as the blue jugular vein on the side of his neck. I'm jealous of the native Russian who can understand him, both literally and viscerally. Understanding the Russian bards is a legacy I have been denied.

Vysotsky did not write festive music. His verses demand contemplation. So while the children play together on the living room rug, we crowd my parents on their couches, listening and watching as Vysotsky and his song intertwine, pretending that we understand the reasons why the singer and the song grow wilder with each refrain. Mom and Dad know why, but they won't talk about it.

I can't remember the last time I heard "Capricious Horses" before tonight. Perhaps it was in a college Russian language class or, more likely, while I was taking a study-abroad semester in Russia, trying unsuccessfully to reclaim a past I wouldn't find there. Trapped in various record and cassette tape media—the disembodied voice was immaterial. The words must have dazzled me with their beauty and precision, but they didn't resonate. How could they, American as I had become?

But tonight is different. Tonight Dad is mesmerized by this singer from his past. He watches the video wordlessly, his eyes wide open and shimmering, his mouth soft. By the distant look of nostalgia on his face, I can see that Dad is on a journey back to a time when Ukraine, our former home, belonged to the Soviet Union. It is a place Dad fled in 1979, the same year this video was filmed, taking me and Mom with him, hoping to never look back. For Dad, the singer must be a mirror too, into a past about which they have kept me in the dark, and so of course has haunted me—like phantom pains from a limb I have no memory of losing but can always feel.

Mom sees Dad totally tuned out to Vysotsky and rolls her eyes. “Oy, Petya,” she says in Russian, “turn it off,” and gives up her place on the couch to retreat to the kitchen. Their dance is a familiar one to me—I grew up watching it. I know by now that Dad sits in silence with feelings, hoping to pulverize them like a boulder crushing soapstone. Mom, on the other hand, fluffs pillows, prepares meals, and washes dishes until beads of sweat dot her hairline, shooing her ghosts with frenetic motion. Then there is Vysotsky, a ghost who tonight has come back to life, singing Mom and Dad into a reluctant remembering.

Hours later I lie awake beside my husband in my old bedroom, our son and daughter sandwiched between us. The sound of their rhythmic breathing at night usually soothes me to sleep, but tonight it trespasses on my consciousness like the clapping of horses. I try closing my eyes, but instead of darkness I see Dad’s face watching Vysotsky sing—on the verge of tears, helpless over the passing of time.

I have seen Dad cry only twice. The most recent time was at his mother’s funeral in 2016. The first time was thirty-four years before that, in 1982, when he learned that Mom’s infant niece had died of congenital heart failure. Grandma had called him from Mom’s village in Bershada, Ukraine, asking him to deliver the news to Mom. That entire day and into the night they both cried as I looked on in silence. I could taste their tears on my dinner, hear them sobbing throughout the night as I lay on my couch in their bedroom. At five, I understood about death, but my cousin’s death did not terrify me nearly as much as their crying, especially Dad’s. Dad *never* cried, and neither did I, as often as I might have wanted to. So banned was crying in our family, so punishable, that even death did not seem to me a justifiable reason. By dawn and forever after, the dead baby’s name was never uttered again, as if a second death could somehow erase the first.

Insomnia has won, so I sneak out of the bedroom and down the stairs in search of leftover pie, but I never make it to the kitchen. At the base of the curved staircase, I see Dad and Mom on their couches in the living room. Mom is asleep, an afghan pulled over her head to protect her eyes from the TV’s blue light. Dad is watching a Russian star-studded tribute to Vladimir Vysotsky—two of Russia’s most famous modern pop stars cover

“Capricious Horses” as a timeline of Vysotsky headshots rolls across the screen. There is a photo of Vysotsky playing *Hamlet*, which ran for ten years, closing only when its star died; there is the beautifully tired and frail forty-two-year-old Russian bard, his *semistrunka* propped on his knee. In the middle of the “Capricious Horses” duet, the camera cuts to the audience, most of whom are in tears. I look down, afraid that if I meet Dad’s eyes I’ll find the same, and I’d be at a loss for what to do. Then it occurs to me, transfixed as Dad is, he might not be aware of me standing behind him.

But when the song is over, Dad looks over his shoulder at me and says, “Every word—it means so much—every single word.” He clicks his tongue, shakes his head from side to side, and rolls his eyes to the ceiling as if looking for the spirit of the dead singer himself. The five-year-old daughter in me wants to run from his strange, awkward vulnerability. But the grown woman wants to stay, to ask, *What does every word mean to you? And why won’t you talk about it?*

I can’t ask Dad those questions, because I know he believes reminiscing to be impractical and self-important. But I sit on the couch beside him, and I remain there, in silence.

I know well how to disappear so that I can hear things that weren’t intended for my ears. For forty years I’ve been lost in the in-between. Groundless. Rarely do I taste the trills and sharp edges of my first language on my tongue. My sloppy declensions and conjugations can never do it justice. My picture of my family’s Soviet history—like this language I can’t rein in—is a mosaic of half-truths gleaned from nights like these, when too much wine or vodka paired with Mom’s intoxicatingly good Jewish cooking loosens the hinges on the door to their past—tiny wrinkles in time when I make myself small, invisible, so I can listen and remember.

My picture of my family’s Soviet history . . . is a mosaic of half-truths gleaned from nights like these.

I was born in Soviet Ukraine in the middle of the Cold War. My parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents were born and

raised there as well. Still, we never identified as “Ukrainian,” for in a Ukraine controlled by Moscow, this would have red-flagged us as separatists—enemies of the state. Calling ourselves “Russian” became a habit of necessity, even in a post-Soviet world, if only for the sake of simplicity. These days I hear Mom use the two almost interchangeably, though I can detect some important nuances. She uses “Russian” to preface some of our culture’s most insidious stereotypes. Typical *Russian* men from her old village still abuse vodka and beat their wives and children. The *Russian* mafia terrorizes Ukrainian small businesses. Even in her fondest, most nostalgic childhood memories, we are still not Ukrainian, but rather *Jewish*—from a *Jewish* village where everyone knew and took care of one another, like family.

Dad, on the other hand, simply calls us “Americans.”

I parse the word *Ukraine*, and realize that it translates to “on the edge” or “on the border.” Is this the real reason we turn away from the word—to avoid the instability of borderlands, to feel connected to a place that really exists? To feel grounded?

We three fled the Soviet Union for America in 1979 as Jewish refugees and beneficiaries of Carter’s SALT program. It was the middle of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union and the United States were mortal enemies, threatening to blow each other to smithereens with nuclear weapons. But the United States leveraged its grain for Jews when the USSR failed to produce a sustainable grain crop. Handing out visas in exchange for the implicit promise of American grain, the USSR played with, and preyed on, the hopes of countless Jewish families. A visa and permission were not a guarantee of immigration, but we were pawns who somehow scampered through a capricious crack in the iron curtain.

But two decades before that, Dad was practically born a “criminal” in his poor Ukrainian village of Chechelnyk. At the age of four, he sold his brand-new leather school boots for candy money. How could he have known at that age that these black market dealings made him a felon? That only the bureaucrats decided who deserved disposable kopeks? I don’t envy Dad having to suffer his mother’s severe spankings or having to squeeze his feet into boots one whole size too small through the arctic winter of that year. By the following spring, he had worn holes the size of his big toes through the front of both boots. But

frostbitten toes and a red ass didn't dissuade him from a life of black market "crime."

Throughout his childhood, Dad was unstoppable in his pursuit of candy kopeks. A scrawny but scrappy boy, he used to wake early on weekends to be first on the bread lines so he could gofer loaves to his customers at a one-ruble markup. He was also part of a schoolboy posse who managed to secure crates of highly sought-after contraband Bulgarian cigarettes. This was a group of older bullies who, when they swarmed together through the village streets, made little Jewish boys like Dad scatter and hide behind tall grasses or in the old, abandoned barns throughout the impoverished village, like scared kittens. I imagine Dad earned their respect with the same innate cunning salesmanship I observed in him when I was growing up and he was hustling Manhattan for the American Dream. I can see him, like a Dickensian street boy, teaching his young delinquent friends how to haggle the dealers low, hold back inventory from their customers, and sell at a premium.

Digging deeper, I remember a small collection of such stories—Dad as a skinny, bushy-haired boy on the streets of his village, picking up bottles and cans for recycling centers in exchange for a kopek each, stacking watermelons for farmers at the Sunday market, always ensuring that there were just a few cracked ones, which he was allowed to keep. Offering to sweep the market square afterward in exchange for whatever small fortunes might have fallen between the stalls. Scanning dumpsters for animal bones to sell to gardeners, who pulverized them and spread the powder over their garden beds to enrich their soil. It was criminal work according to the Communist government elites, who proselytized against individualism, even as they shopped in their own private, well-stocked stores. It was a time when apparatchiks watched schoolteachers to make sure they were teaching their pupils to spy on parents, to go rummaging through their closets, shoving little fingers into coat pockets, encouraging them to turn in a mother or father over spare change.

Like Dad, Mom rarely speaks of her childhood in Soviet Ukraine, but when she does it is laced with the humor of denial. Describing the poverty in her village, and her neighbors' subsequent desperation for cash, she recently told me, "Over there, for cash, you could have bought anything. Anyone would've

sold you their hand or foot, their mother or father, their mother or father's hand or foot." She laughed a little when she said it, dismissively waving her hand in front of her face—large and round as a full moon—as if to suggest that I, who might as well be American, could never know such a reality. "Over there, you had to pay to kiss your own mama and papa." Since childhood I have been gathering all of these tiny, precious slips Mom and Dad sometimes make back into the past, lining them up chronologically in my head. I follow them like Ariadne's thread, hoping that if I return to the beginning of the maze, I'll find a clear path forward.

One night, freshly out of his five-year military conscription and in search of a wife, Dad went party-hopping in the adjacent village of Bershada and met Mom. Perhaps more importantly, he

Dad went party-hopping in the adjacent village of Bershada and met Mom. Perhaps more importantly, he also met his partner in crime—her father.

also met his partner in crime—her father. Back home, Dad's black market activities—selling contraband cigarettes, gofering bread, pocketing lost change—would have shamed his family, who, motivated by fear, were loyal Communist

Party members. Sooner or later, Dad would have either incriminated his family, or they would have stifled him. But alongside his new father-in-law, Dad learned the art of the black market and his talents burgeoned.

Grandpa, a soda-factory manager, siphoned off leftover sugar at workday's end to sell on the black market. Mom's family lived a better-than-average life thanks to the margin her father's activities provided. They had a three-bedroom house and a car (unheard of!) and some money set aside to bribe their children's way into college (for all Soviet universities had a low Jew quota). A legal job wouldn't have been enough for such a high standard of living, and the apparatchiks knew it and arrested Grandpa semi-regularly at work, no doubt to make an example of him in front of his colleagues. According to Mom, each time they came for Grandpa, someone from the factory would secretly initiate a chain of messages among the villagers, who showed up at the house to collect rugs, furniture, and valuables, distrib-

uting them thinly among the village houses. They were willing to risk their own arrest for Grandpa, who habitually shared his spare change with anyone in need. When the authorities came knocking on the door, Grandma opened it freely, inviting them into her naked house, their baffled anger echoing off its bare walls.

The house in which Dad had grown up, on the other hand, was a Dr. Seussian contraption so old that it leaned to the point of visibly swaying in a strong wind. He and his sisters bathed weekly in boiled water from the village pump, scrubbing every inch of their bodies with kerosene to rid themselves of the stubborn lice, which never left their scalps completely. Dad once described harvesting each nit from his hair and neck out of boredom, popping them between his fingernails. Refusing to abandon his hooliganism, Dad spent winter Sundays paddling on rafts of floating ice down the Savranka River, even falling in a time or two, only to be rescued by a strong-armed friend waving a long stick. At night he huddled under blankets with a lantern, reading government-censored books. He knew that Grandma's punishment for these transgressions would be a thrashing, which he incurred the few times he got caught. But even that didn't stop him. Two years ago, at Grandma's funeral, he spoke nostalgically, even humorously, about her legendary beatings to the awkward silence of shocked mourners. "I deserved them," he said through tears, his hands clenching either side of the lectern for support. "I was a handful. A real pain in the tuchas." He betrays no resentment toward a mother who survived the Holocaust and then, after World War II, managed to feed her children during a nationwide famine. I am jealous of the grace he has for her—a grace I remain unable to access. Still, her beatings often make their way into his stories.

I turn these tales over in my head now, as I watch Dad's face bathed in the television's blue light. I realize suddenly that I have always transposed the image of my younger father over the aging one. For me, my father has always been frozen in time as the young twenty-something from my childhood and adolescence, wearing his hair in a fro, his torso sinewy and concave, his face carved from stone. And always when he is near, I become a bumbling, wordless five-year-old with the girl version of his wild, unruly hair. We two together, a young dad and his small daughter, in suspended animation.

But watching the nostalgic look on his face as he takes in Vysotsky singing about time racing by like the draft of a troika, I can admit to myself for the first time that Dad is getting old. I can see that his glorious fro has been replaced by a silver, downy fluff, and the once concave belly is inflated from decades of imbibing wine and vodka and enjoying Mom's enormous Jewish portions. My daughter-eyes try hard not to see this new, weighty man with wrinkles and hillocky shoulders. There was a time when, if you told me you saw Dad soaring through the sky on nothing but air, I'd have required no proof whatsoever to believe you. But then again, here is his face in this moment—soft, sad, vulnerable—easier to love than a face made of stone.

Vysotsky was twelve years older than Dad. He died before his forty-third birthday in the middle of the 1980 Summer Olympics, which was hosted by Moscow and therefore boycotted or protested by the entire Western world. Hosting was a great source of pride for Brezhnev, and perhaps the Communist Party's greatest exercise in propaganda since the Bolshevik uprising. Reporters were forbidden by authorities to publicize Vysotsky's funeral, but on that day, thousands of Russians fled the Olympic stadiums, and over a million flooded the street in front of the Taganka Theater, where his body was laid out for viewing. For Vysotsky, even death was an act of protest—a final “fuck you” to the Communist government.

Vysotsky was born in 1938, on the brink of World War II. He was seven by the time the war ended, old enough to observe and remember the period of reconstruction during which Stalin used the war to justify his brutal era of despotism. His policies divested from agriculture and staples, funneling government money toward militarization, steel production, and expansion of Soviet control over Eastern Europe. Stalin's regime rationed agriculture in favor of party elites. Peasant farmers and their families perished trying to feed the nation, literally starved by their government's demand to do more with less. The countryside was strewn with millions of bony corpses—horse, livestock, and human. Millions more were sent to gulags for “protesting” at a time when Stalin's definition of “protest” included being late for work, telling a joke about the Communist Party, “stealing” a few stray potatoes from the field to feed your starving children, or betraying any fondness for the West. Anyone who

had ever traveled to the West for any reason, even on government business, was shadowed day and night by apparatchiks.

For Jews, it was as if the Holocaust had never ended. “It’s a shame,” Dad said to me once, after Grandma’s funeral, on a rare night like tonight, when grief and wine had weakened his armor. “People back then—people like Mom, in the prime of their lives—had to starve or die. So much suffering.” He hasn’t mentioned Grandma since, as if his pain were a subject every bit as banned as one of Vysotsky’s songs.

Vysotsky came of age during Premier Khrushchev’s post-Stalin “thaw,” when subversion was still a crime, but not necessarily one that could get you killed. When Dad was a boy running through the streets of his shtetl, secretly committing his own early crimes against the state, Vysotsky was writing and performing his very first ballads, collectively called “outlaw songs.” He wrote them in first person, portraying the lives of citizens driven to “crime” by Stalin’s post-war regime. Using precise metaphor and symbolism to portray his protagonists, Vysotsky fictionalized only on the surface. Below the surface, his words were hymns of protest that screamed for a nation in pain. He was singing Dad’s life, belting out my family’s history.

Though banned from pursuing an official recording deal in the Soviet Union, Vysotsky managed to become the most recorded musician in Russian history by singing directly to the Russian people without straining his words into pulp through the filter of government bureaucracy. His records could not be purchased legally, yet his guttural refrains boomed day and night from almost every apartment window on the streets of Moscow. Everyone wanted to hear him scream his elongated trills and severed syllables, shedding light on the lives of real Russians—people like Dad living in falling-down houses, secretly hustling extra kopeks.

Deprived people are resourceful. Russians recorded Vysotsky at his underground concerts, where they, too, committed high crimes by producing improvised records on X-ray film. These “records on bone” were distributed as contraband, passed from hand to hand worldwide. Some of them can be viewed today as artifacts behind glass cases at the Vysotsky Museum in Moscow. They’re worn with holes from overplaying. If you look closely, you can just make out the phantom ribs and femurs.

It is close to midnight when Dad finds the original video he played for us earlier—the one of Vysotsky singing “Capricious Horses” with the *semistrunka*. Except for the sinewy frame they both had as young men, and the fact that women thought them both handsome, there’s no physical resemblance between the two men. But watching Dad’s face melt to “Capricious Horses” from the vantage point of my place at his feet, I begin to understand why my consciousness can’t separate the two. I hear Vysotsky sing like a wild wolf in captivity, as if trying to howl free from his muzzle, and I realize that Dad, too, resists taming. I feel that the singer is screaming my real father into being—not this father on the couch, but the boy I know is still in him—the hustler, the Dickensian troublemaker, or the Russian Huck Finn paddling his ice raft with a tree branch. The father I never got the chance to know.

The only childhood picture of Dad that exists is a black-and-white from 1953, the year after he was born. He is a skinny infant whose cheeks are somehow swollen like a chipmunk’s. He appears to be drowning in abrasive woolen hand-me-downs, and considerable efforts have clearly been made to tame his hair. The next photograph on the timeline is a black-and-white shot of Dad at twenty in the Red Army, the very last thing my staunchly anti-Communist father would have chosen if not for the fact that it was the only way for a Jew with no bribe money to get something like a college education. In the photo, he and an army buddy are play-wrestling, shirtless and covered in mud, their ribs and sharp muscles threatening to burst forth from their hairless skin. It appears to be one of the carefree moments he enjoyed only in his youth, and I imagine that this is the way Dad might have looked (only smaller) as a boy running through the streets of his village, making trouble to earn his keep, smiling his chipmunk smile. Enviously wild, and happy.

There aren’t any more happy photographs of Dad after the army picture. His expressions thereafter are stoic and distant, with dull eyes and forced smiles. As a twenty-five-year-old first-time father, he holds me on his hip, or stands with a hand on my pram, straining a smile to barely disguise his gloom. I know this because of the army picture, and because the gloom I see in these early photos is the gloom I remember from childhood. All my life I have taken these expressions personally—these looks of forced contentment or, worse, overt depression. I believed

they were a reflection of his disappointment in the underachieving child that I was, the thoroughly un-American woman I had become. But as I listen to Vysotsky sing my family's history, I understand that they represent a father who, if anything, loved too much. I understand how the initiation into fatherhood in a post-Stalinist regime might cause one to confuse love with terror. How helpless Dad must have felt in his responsibility to raise a daughter in such a regime, all that love and terror like a ringmaster's whip, beating the joy and wildness right out of the boy, making him a man.

Sitting at Dad's feet on the couch, watching as Vysotsky's verses hypnotize him, I remember a rare moment of candor between me and Dad a few years after our immigration to the United States. I was about six, Dad thirty-one. I lay on our secondhand plaid couch in the living room of our apartment, while Dad sat on the peeling laminate floor beside my head. We watched evening soaps together—*Dynasty*, *Falcon Crest*, *Knots Landing*—

so Dad could give me a play-by-play rundown of the traits that made these characters all-American. He leaned in, close to my head, waved his thick index finger at the television, and said, "That man smart, that man a little sneaky. All the men do good in school—that's why they rich." He never made exemplars of the women, for most of them were unemployed trophy wives, completely dependent on their husbands' wealth. He said that I was *never* to become like these women, because if I did, then what would it all have been for anyway? All the risk and hardship it took to get me here?

We watched evening soaps together . . . so Dad could give me a play-by-play rundown of the traits that made these characters all-American.

These lessons in front of the television were my introduction to feminism, even though Dad—a proud Republican—would never admit it. He explained that, in Russia, a woman was "even less than nothing," that poverty and oppression drove girls into marriages with older men, alcoholics who used their young wives' naïveté and financial dependence as justification to enslave and abuse them. Some of my earliest memories are of Dad haunted by phantoms from his own history, ghosts he spoke of only in cautionary tales. War, dictatorship, starvation, crime,

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drunkenness, abuse, plotted backward on a timeline of Soviet oppression, like opening the layers of a distressed matryoshka doll and finding the smallest one as wounded as the largest. It is no wonder that expectant fathers in Russia prayed for sons, and why their ill-fated daughters brought turmoil to their eyes.

Since overseas travel was forbidden for Soviet citizens, Mom and Dad harbored no hope of ever leaving. Dad's plan was to transplant us from the shtetl sticks to the coastal city of Odessa, Ukraine's Jewel of the Black Sea, decked out in cobblestone, ornate museums and colleges. There he would find an apartment and some legitimate factory-type work, and continue honing his capitalist skills on the black market. Then, in 1979, Carter and Brezhnev met in Vienna to sign the SALT-II treaty. Three weeks later, Dad had secured our immigration visas, and just like that, we were enemies of the state.

An enemy of the Soviet Union walked with the softest of footfalls through the streets of his neighborhood alone. He no longer had friends, family, or a job, because those who might claim him were accessories to crime. Still, would-be émigrés required permission from a head of household, which was Dad's father-in-law, my grandfather. Dad begged him to sign off on our visas, knowing Grandpa would be incriminating himself in the process. Grandpa had been the wealthiest, most influential Jew in their village, but signing our visa documents would change all that. Recently, when I asked Mom why he did it, she said that Grandpa thought it was a joke because leaving the Soviet Union was unheard of. According to Mom, Grandpa believed his signatures would never be seen.

But I don't believe her.

In Bershad, Dad became Grandpa's protégé, leaving his amateur skills behind and learning how to buy and sell on the black market like a pro. Grandpa took him on all of his side-hustles, gaining him a coveted membership on the inside of a vast underground network of black-marketeers. He wasn't naive. He saw Dad's potential and knew his abilities would be wasted within Soviet borders. Grandpa, who never fit Dad's stereotype of a Russian man, was also making sure that his daughter would be provided for, even at his own expense.

Aware of the repercussions of his treachery, Grandpa had the rest of the family's visas in hand within months of our leav-

ing. But before they could pack and sell their things, the Soviet-Afghan war broke out and their visas were revoked. For an enemy of the state, anywhere in the Soviet Union might as well have been prison. Grandpa and Grandma lost everything. The government repossessed their family home, which was supposedly bulldozed to make room for a school—a school that never got built. Grandpa spent three nights in jail, enough time for the authorities to track and confiscate all of his family's valuables. "When you had a visa, you hightailed it out of there," I heard Dad say once in the more fluent English of his latter years, when he finally had control of his idioms. "You were in a hurry because you just didn't exist anymore. You were like a ghost walking around in the street. A nobody." But it was ten years before the war with Afghanistan would end, allowing the rest of Mom's family safe passage to the United States. Ten years for this man—once venerated by all—to walk the streets of his village invisible, a phantom.

Families of émigrés whispered rumors that even a job digging ditches in America was better than any life the Soviet Union could offer. I'll never know, for I have no memories, only photographs, from my infant and toddler years in Ukraine. In the earliest one, I am four months old on my belly—naked and very fat—pushing up onto my forearms on a plush, Afghan rug. Someone somehow got me to look directly into the camera lens. In these black-and-whites from the late seventies, I become progressively fatter, happier. There are several family photos, always someone else available to get behind the camera and snap the shot—a grandma, grandpa, auntie, cousin, or neighbor. My favorite photo is the one where I am pressed in between Dad and Mom. The three of us are dressed in fine winter furs from head to toe, no doubt procured by Grandpa. Mom and Dad are smiling. We look rather well, maybe even happy.

And then I am three, and we are here, in the land of gold streets and easy ditches. But Elizabeth, New Jersey, doesn't look like the America Dad imagined. The early immigrant photographs tell a different story. They are disorderly, chaotic, taken at weird angles. Dad and I standing together—he in his fro, bell-bottoms, and "wifebeater" tank top—my wild, bushy-haired head at his hip. The camera angle makes it look as if we are about to slide right off the diagonal lawn on which we stand.

Another is of me alone in a booth at Burger King, grimacing at the chicken nuggets, fries, and milkshake either Mom or Dad is forcing me to finish—a meal any American kid my age would envy. Apparently I begged for black caviar, a black market delicacy that appeared regularly on the kitchen table at Grandpa's house in Bershad, but not here. Here, we could have attained it legally, had we been able to afford it.

A Soviet citizen could only dream up fictional scenarios for the forbidden paradises they were never permitted to visit. I wonder what kind of life Dad imagined to find here in America, or whether his youth combined with the rumors from abroad might have given him the notion that a family of Soviet-Jewish refugees with no English or college education could assimilate easily here. Never in my eavesdropping on Dad's vodka- or wine-induced stories did I discover the answer to this. As a child, I could not ask such a question without also insinuating that he was stupid and naive. I would have risked the infamous Russian-dad cuffing, which I spent almost all of my energy in childhood trying to avoid. Thinking back on our ten years in Elizabeth, I'm not sure which one of us worked harder. Was it Dad, trying to run away from a life of poverty, welfare dependence, and his own Russianness? Or was it me, trying to run away from Dad? But in the end, some spark of wildness inside both of us went out for good.

I watched Mom and Dad spend the eighties pounding the pavement made of grime instead of gold to earn our keep. Dad cobbled together our subsistence living with early-morning paper routes, daytime conveyor belt operations in a factory, and nighttime package-delivery work, catching an hour or two of sleep in between shifts. He worked evenings and weekends to avoid relying on food stamps and government "handouts," of which he was ashamed. "Nothing is for free in America," he would say. "If I don't earn it, I don't want it." Meanwhile Mom—once the Jewish debutante of her Ukrainian village, now disheveled, obese, and wearing pants from the sale rack at Daffy Dan's—struggled and sweat to earn the family's fourth source of income. She tried her hand at running a small Russian corner store in our neighborhood, and when that proved unprofitable (no one wanted to be spotted shopping for enemy goods in Cold War America), she waxed eyebrows and painted toenails at a

salon. Too often, her parenting obligations made her an unreliable employee, and she would be let go. When I was five, Mom taught me to memorize her work number and 911 so she could drop me at home after school and leave me there alone. She'd point me to the couch, hand me a tuna fish sandwich on Wonder Bread, and lock me up like cash in a vault behind the three deadbolts on our front door, with only my dolls for company. "Don't open the door for anyone," she'd say before turning the deadbolts. "I have key." Then she'd vanish to finish her shift. It was a childhood neither Dad nor Mom would have envied—not even in Jew-hating, Communist Ukraine. Their parenting was a gamble—a hope that the ends would justify the means. Nights and weekends, I watched in silence as my family's drama of immigrant survival played out before my eyes, tiptoeing softly around my young parents made mercurial by anxiety and exhaustion. A child of refugees in America, land of the free, walking on broken glass with the softest of footfalls, hoping not to get hurt.

In our tenement apartment, which was a sort of limbo between Soviet oppression and American redemption, my bedroom was sandwiched between the bathroom and kitchen, both teeming with cockroaches. In the middle of the night, I learned to make noise and listen for the crunches and squeaks of their scattering before turning on the kitchen or bathroom lights. Cockroaches have been known to bite humans, but prefer to harvest eyelashes and fingernail flakes. For years my bedroom somehow escaped infestation, until early one morning I awoke to about a half dozen of these brown-armored pests marching their way upward on my white blanket, their feelers aimed right at my eyes. When I screamed, Mom ran in and rescued me from the terrifying little insect army. After she made up the couch for me in her bedroom, we both sat on the plaid sofa in the living room and cried into our palms.

During one of our recent family gatherings, I asked Mom to help me recount for us all our Newark-tenement cockroach situation. I didn't get very far before Mom cut me off. "That never happened," she said with an angry edge to her voice. "We had roaches once, I called the super, and he took care of the problem for good." Then she laughed, nervously, it seemed to me, but also to underscore my unreliability. Fastidious Mom—who whisks the plates out from under our forks before we can fin-

ish our last bite, who waits outside the bathroom door for the sound of the flush, armed with a toilet scrub brush—is ashamed of all she has ever had to endure that was beyond her control. Mom, who believes she can avoid feeling like a victim by erasing her past, but in doing so, forgets that she—like all her ancestors—is a survivor.

Mom, who believes she can avoid feeling like a victim by erasing her past, but in doing so, forgets that she—like all her ancestors—is a survivor.

Poverty and deprivation were hard on my parents, who, thanks to Grandma and Grandpa’s kindness and resourcefulness, had been as privileged as two Jews could have ever hoped to be in Soviet Ukraine. But a shithole apartment with a cockroach infestation and a steady diet of cheap fast food were all I had ever known and all I would ever know until adolescence, when Mom and Dad were finally able to extract us from poverty. For me, that was not the hardest part. The hardest part was the silence—thick as fog, loud as war. There are families who thrive in hardship, who find that enduring adversity together somehow thickens the mortar that binds them like bricks in

a fort. People grounded in their shared histories, with the benefit of hindsight and the wisdom to stockpile memories. I watch Dad on the couch as he inhales Vysotsky’s words like oxygen, and I know that we are slowly becoming such a family. We are gathering around tables on holidays and special occasions, making Mom and Dad tell us who we are in any way they can, even if the best that they can do is to share with us the songs of a dead Russian balladeer. We are becoming a family with a history, a legacy. But that wasn’t us in Elizabeth. How could it have been, desperate as we were back then to die and be reborn?

To become American in the 1980s, you could leave no trace of your former self, especially an enemy self. I remember well the reductive caricatures our frightened community of expat Soviet Jews created to explain our new neighbors in Elizabeth. Asians were good with numbers and destined to be rich scientists, Italians were cultured and made delicious food, and Mexicans were industrious because they could work long shifts of menial la-

bor. And Puerto Ricans—we were to stay away from them at all costs. We even caricatured ourselves as we imagined legit Americans would see us—our accents and stern faces would surely give us away. We were spies sent here to steal government secrets, black-marketeers hustling for extra cash. All of us un-American—novelties or enemies, but never people. Separated and sorted by color, then by native tongue, like bottles of juice in the same cooler, each flavor grouped together in a neat row on its own rack. And then there was milk, in gallon jugs, creamy and white, with an entire cooler all to itself. All of the people with money and power on television, from soaps to commercials, had one thing in common—they were WASPS. Too green, scared, and jealous to see this for what it was—a mass-market illusion—we proceeded to scrub and erase the Russian from our bodies, brains, and hearts, inside and out. We believed that by homogenizing ourselves in this way, we could become real Americans, blind to the fact that nothing is more American than a refugee, a pilgrim.

How hard Mom and Dad worked to lose their accents, to make their Slavic mouths put the h's and w's—sounds that didn't exist in Russian—where they belonged. How carefully they made room for Americans on buses and trains—better to stand and trip at every stop than take the only seat available—having learned how much Americans valued their personal space. To say “please” and “thank you” with words, and at an arm's distance, when those words in Russian fell out of use for them long ago. In their villages, where openly giving of one's self to another could be costly—quite literally a matter of life and death—words were not enough. *Please* and *thank you* lived in the body—on the eyes, in the kisses, the embraces. How quiet we three were for a decade, trying to forget the mother tongue, to replace her with the softer one, the better one, the Anglo one. There were no lullabies, no nursery rhymes or children's books, for the only ones we knew were forbidden. There was the constant drone of television English, eighties pop-music English, but among us three there was only silence. I started first grade with the English of a toddler. In Russian years, I was five. In American years, two.

The thing is, my immigrant parents did not understand failure. In the Soviet Union, academic distinction was a direct route to obtaining a good government job and an apartment—with

a whole other separate bedroom. As immigrants in America, my parents believed it to be a direct route to staying alive. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the benevolent organization that brought us here, also helped us secure a scholarship for me to attend a Yeshiva elementary school, and because she could not pay for childcare, Mom sent me a year early. She thought she was saving me from too many afternoons locked up alone in our apartment—and saving herself from the guilt of it. The scholarship was also an opportunity to attend school with white children of means instead of getting mixed up with the “wrong kinds” of kids in the urban public school. I was to remain Russian only in ways that served our family’s interests. Academic genius was surely my birthright.

Then, in 1982, I was diagnosed with dyslexia. A misdiagnosis, but the best they could do for a kid like me—an awkward, foreign, introverted kid who’d started school a year too early. A kid with the English of a toddler, expected to learn English and Hebrew alongside classmates who were a year older and raised on a steady diet of languages, literature, and privilege. We didn’t understand the diagnosis, but the teachers made it sound a lot like failure. The treatment was to forego art and music classes for extra reading help in a long beige trailer behind the school building and to attend summer school. I was different, low-achieving, anathema to our mission here. And, like most children of Soviet immigrants, I was punished for it. Who knew, maybe the laziness and stupidity could be slapped out of the girl. Maybe she could be forced to sit at the card table in the cockroach kitchen every evening, poring over mimeographed worksheets she couldn’t read. Maybe she could somehow be isolated and humiliated into assimilation.

When that didn’t work, the teachers prescribed television.

Not long after the dyslexia diagnosis, Dad came home from work with a used Zenith framed in a fake wood case, dropped it against the far wall of our living room—blocking the light from the only windows—and installed tinfoil bunny ears. Suddenly, I had no use for the plaid couch anymore, taking my seat on the rug, so close that my pupils shone with the TV’s blue light. The picture we painted together—my new best friend and I—looked like the movie poster for *Poltergeist*. For Mom and Dad, television held the promise of acquiring language and becoming American. To me, it meant I was no longer alone. Too weird and

introverted to have American friends, and too Russian to befriend other Russians, who were also steering clear of us, I made my closest friendships with the kids on television. Laura Ingalls was my best friend, though I was jealous that she got to be poor on the prairie, still able to ramble through wildflowers alone, not stuck in an apartment she could never leave unsupervised. And her Ma and Pa and all the conversations they shared—I envied her that the most. Punky Brewster and Samantha Micelli were my fashion consultants, obviously, and Alex P. Keaton was my crush. In the evenings Barbara Walters reported on Nancy Reagan’s war on drugs and the AIDS crisis, while the Ewings, Colbys, and Carringtons showed us what gold-paved streets were really like for some lucky few, who were nothing like us, but like whom we longed to be. Our teachers. Our family.

Hard as we tried to run from our Russianness, it always caught up to us, finding us in our weakest moments—etched in our bones. Our Russianness found us in car dealerships, like the time Dad had to save all that money in cash to buy his dream car, the Chevy Caprice Classic, because he hadn’t built up his credit yet. But the seersucker-clad salesman heard Dad speak and started making up taxes, fees, and surcharges. Dad knew this because, days earlier, an American coworker had bought the same car from the same dealership at a fraction of the cost. Dad left the dealership red-faced, his wad of cash in his back pocket, pumping his fist and shouting, “I’m not stupid just because I have accent!”

It found us at the pediatrician’s office, when my American doctor subjected me to the same tuberculosis screening and treatment cycle year after year—gouging my forearm with a needle, measuring the area of swelling, telling Mom she thought I might have contracted TB from our dirty, cramped living conditions, prescribing X-rays and antibiotics—only to repeat the cycle for years before she bothered to examine my deltoid, where she found the scar from my TB vaccination. “Wow, I didn’t know they still did that in Russia,” she said. “It’s not much of a risk for American children.”

It found us at the dentist’s when I was eight, and I lay reclined in a chair, staring into the masked face of a man I still call “the Butcher.” Because we, like many immigrants, didn’t have dental insurance, Mom got the name of a Russian “dentist” on Brighton Beach Avenue, or “Little Russia,” who would fill a cavity

in his apartment “under the table, for cheap.” Before Mom or I knew what was happening, he came at my molar with his pliers, twisting and tugging as I screamed in pain in between gagging on pools of my bloody saliva. “What are you doing?” Mom shouted over my primal screams. And then the Butcher was shoving a gag of gauze into my mouth, shouting back at Mom, “It’s baby tooth! Cheaper to take out, and even cheaper with no novocaine!” As luck would have it, the tooth had been a permanent six-year molar. Thirty-four years later, the gap still remains—a smooth, clean little valley in my gums I prod with the tip of my tongue. My nervous tic, to fill awkward silences.

And, always, it found me in school, among my tribe of Jewish kids, where Mom and Dad were satisfied that I was tucked safely away from the city riffraff. It found me when I returned from the bathroom to find wads of chewing gum under my desk or messages scribbled on my book covers—*Commie go home*, *Bazooka-shooter*, *Stupid Sputnik*—in red ink. Always in red. It found me ducking into bathroom stalls and empty classrooms when I heard kids screaming from down the hall—“Here comes Stupid Sputnik!” Didn’t they know we were Americans now? Didn’t they know how badly we wanted to be like them? Didn’t they know I had no more Russian? Not a single word. Not even a trill.

Vladimir Vysotsky wasn’t proud of his demons, but he didn’t try to hide them behind a veneer of perfection. He was a workaholic, an adulterer, and a loving but absentee parent to his two children, who describe him as a “Sunday Father.” Like many of his fellow oppressed Russians, he became addicted to alcohol and cigarettes until both destroyed his organs. To cope with that pain, he became addicted to morphine. In America we worship perfection, but in Russia, it was Vysotsky’s imperfections that made it easier for people to internalize his words, to look into his eyes, and to see themselves reflected back. The Russians called him a *svoi*, “one of us.” The more flawed Vysotsky was, the more his people worshipped him.

I once heard a close friend and devotee of Buddhism say, “Whatever you run from follows you.” When I think about that aphorism, I think about Vysotsky and how, in the end, he never left Russia. I think about all of the invitations to defect he never took. Wouldn’t it have been a mercy to bring his wife and sons

to America, where he could have used his celebrity connections to circumnavigate the poverty, pavement-pounding, and identity crisis most of us had to endure to make a life here? But for Vysotsky, that wasn't the point. The point was that in Cold War America, even famous musicians, even anti-Communist ones, had to sever themselves from their Russian pasts. Here, an immigrant channeling David Cassidy in image and Bob Dylan in verse might still achieve stardom, but without surrendering the Russianness that made him Vladimir Vysotsky, he would never be "one of us."

The heart attack that finally took Vysotsky's life is widely believed to have been induced by alcoholism, drug abuse, and the pressures of making honest and authentic art in a regime whose very mission was to suppress honesty and authenticity. There are those who believe defecting to America would have saved his life. If so, he would be eighty-one this year. Could he, too, be living in a lovely colonial among other successful people in a suburb of New York City? Could he, too, be enjoying the company of children and grandchildren who traveled there to celebrate his birth? Could he have become American *and* remained Vladimir Vysotsky?

But without surrendering the Russianness that made him Vladimir Vysotsky, he would never be "one of us."

In our living room, Vysotsky is no longer crooning on the television. Dad has fallen asleep with the remote in his hand. I sneak away, leaving my parents lying on their sofas. Upstairs in bed, I continue to suffer from sleeplessness, unable to forget the longing on Dad's face over "Capricious Horses." Then it hits me, why I'm so obsessed over his obsession. It's because we've run from the past for so long that I barely recognized the look I saw on his face tonight—the look of someone who is finally letting the past back in.

I look at my husband sound asleep, most of his body buried underneath my son's gangly limbs. I hug my daughter closer to me. She is almost four; her small body still tucks snugly between my chin and knees. I am happy to be awake in these

quiet hours, inhaling the coconut-shampoo scent of my daughter's soft red curls, watching my son's belly rise and fall in the moonlight that slips around the edges of the window shades. There is a phrase that Russians sometimes use to describe the bittersweet feeling that comes with enjoying a privilege denied to others—"I envy myself." I envy that this is a peace that my parents and I have never shared.

I could tell a different story—a safer one—about a perfect assimilation. We arrived, worked hard, pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps without tumbling headfirst to the ground. We shed our Soviet-Russian-Ukrainian-Jewish skins and became American. And we did. But that story alone would be fiction.

SOY YO

*I wasn't allowed to claim the thing I felt and
I didn't feel the thing I was supposed to claim.*

—Cristina Henríquez, *The Book of Unknown Americans*

I am Hispanic when I roll those *rr*'s, pero I didn't learn this tongue temblor from mi mamá, nor did she learn it from her mother, nor did my grandmother learn it from her grandmother, who raised her, who was married to a Villista, who died hablando. Mi hispanidad only comes around when I speak Spanish—with the Cuban mom of twins, with my Puerto Rican coworker, with the men at the taco truck in the next town over.

When mi mamá visited me in Virginia two years ago, instead of going to the international food section with its stereotypical offerings (let's face it: everyone likes tortillas), I suggested we drive to la tienda latina to obtain taco ingredients. Los hispanohablantes congregated there for a taste of la tierra. When we opened la tienda door, I tried to name the distinct smells of the breads and the spices and the fresh meats and the cheeses. Naming la comida mexicana from memory pleased me, like pulling on a zipper, each interlocking tooth a word pair—canela, cinnamon!—that pulled together my English and mi español. The woman at the register nodded at us, her closed lips stretching into a shy smile. It was the same smile I gave to people whose language I did not fully comprehend. A diffident *hello*.

To the right of the door, all the spices I used in my own kitchen hung in cellophane packages on a pegboard wall. In the (American) grocery store, I had to search for cumin and chili powder in a sea of caraway and curry. If I couldn't find a spice in the designated spice section (for example, adobo, a must-have in every Mexican kitchen), I had to run over to the Hispanic section to see if the store considered adobo a special, foreign seasoning. Here, in la tienda, there was no misunderstanding.

The shelves in the refrigerated cases held white wheels of queso fresco and cotija—for garnishing sopas and corn cobs and pollo asado—and juices by Jumex. The coconut juice flashed its pearly flakes, suspended in frosty liquid like piñata confet-

ti. I could feel the cashier's gaze as we opened the refrigerator doors to read each drink label, the ingredients all in Spanish, and guess at the words we didn't know. Beyond the sweet and milky lay the meats: chorizo for los huevos, lengua for cheap taco meat, and tripe for the menudo mi abuelo used to make when mi mamá was young and for the menudo I am too squeamish to make. We ran our fingers over packages of tortilla chips and galletas Marías—the spell of the double *l*—and then chicharrónes and Ibarra chocolate, more rolling *rr*'s.

We spotted our dessert next to the register: el pan covered in cracked pink icing and shaped like la concha; flat pan made of concentric circles and bent to look like una oreja; oven-dark pan shaped like a pig, los marranitos, the favorites of mi mamá. El pan dulce is nothing like American sweet bread, with its shiny, sugary glaze or moist, chocolatey center. No, este pan has the texture of a scone, dense and dry. Just enough sweetness to crave a siesta.

At the register, the woman smiled without speaking. She looked as if she were deliberating—by overhearing the lilt on our lenguas—whether we held within us palabras sweet and familiar and home. My mom said nothing as she laid our items on the counter. The cashier typed the prices into her keypad, and I knew that the silence would soon break open. I ran through translations of responses in my head:

Do you have change? ¿Tiene usted cambio?

Do you take credit cards? ¿Toma usted tarjetas de crédito?

Thank you! Have a good day! ¡Gracias! ¡Que tenga un buen día!

With the last tap on her calculator, she looked at the numbers, and I ran through los números, hoping that the total was less than fifteen. Beyond fifteen, my comprehension was not fluent. All hope of belonging would be gone in a single, translating pause.

She chose: “Doce diecisiete, por favor.”

My mom understood twelve, so she handed her twenty and the woman asked, “¿Tiene usted dos centavos?”

After a pause, my mom smiled at her, ears reddening, and then looked at me.

“She's wondering if you have two pennies. I think she's low.”

“Oh!” My mom worked two pennies out of her wallet and handed them over.

More silent smiles.

The woman knew we were Hispanic from the upswing sound of our *ll*'s and the effortless ronroneo of our *rr*'s. Our cheekbones were high enough, my mom's skin dark enough, our eyes round enough for the woman to try Spanish in hope that our mamás had taught us those *y*'s and rolls. My mom disappointed the woman. She knew three words—*hola*, *gato*, and *baño*—and the numbers one through fifteen. In these moments when language isn't shared, my mom says she feels both shame and belonging. It's a feeling we look-alikes know well. My mom looks like she belongs but lacks the uniform: the language. Some Spanish speakers respond with "Ay! Why you don't learn?" Others, like the cashier, smile shyly and nod.

But how can my mom—who is browner, curlier, curvier than me—not be Hispanic while I—white, thin, and trim—can be?

Tengo una pregunta para ti:

I am a retrograde Hispanic, but Hispanic still. ¿Sí?

I am White when I pass as White. My skin ranges between a creamy beige like my dad's and a subtle olive, depending on the amount of time I spend outside. My hair is dark, but fine like a baby's and hardly wavy. My eyes are light, almost hazel in the sun. My accent is western American; we think of ourselves as accentless. If I never say anything—never mention *mi abuelo* or *mi mamá*, never reach out with my Spanish tongue to other hispanohablantes—I live as a White woman and few people question me. I pass and my life is made easier by passing. It's only when I come out that this might change. Even still, while my mouth talks of being *una hispanohablante*, my skin and accent speak a different language. My skin and accent make most people I encounter feel at ease—I am one of majority America. My skin and accent. They call me a liar.

I am Mexican when I attempt to rebuild the culture of *mis antepasados*. The word itself—*ante / pasado*—is an invitation: *in the face of / the past*. Perhaps despite what has passed, the washing and wringing out of difference. Despite time, despite death, I rebuild.

My ancestors' voices resonated in the stories of mi abuelo, as if his voice were the last echoes of a gong struck generations ago. When I asked mi abuelo about his childhood, he usually wound up talking about his mother, Virginia. He talked, his voice like rustling leaves, like creaking branches, about the beaded bracelets she made. Chaquiras, he called the beads, bending his pointer finger to his thumb as if holding small diamonds to the light. When he finished talking about her, he exhaled as if part of her were lost every time he spoke of her. He saved one of her bracelets, and he still had it somewhere when he died, but I have never found it. Descanse en paz, Abuelito.

One year ago, I began researching the origin of chaquiras and Mexican beaded jewelry. It had been a year since mi abuelo had passed, and something about his passing—the broken physical connection to Mexico, to language—prompted me to explore our shared history. I had seen beaded bracelets in the street stalls of Puerto Vallarta and Cancún—strips of beaded patterns, ten to thirty beads wide, displaying flowers, chevrons, and indigenous spiritual patterns that included animals such as deer or eagles. I had even made a few bracelets using a bead loom my mom gave me for Christmas when I was twelve. I made one and a half bracelets before I realized I hated wearing bracelets. Back then, I thought seed bead bracelets were a culture-less craft.

Mexican artisans call the beads “Huichol beads” or “chaquiras.” After mi abuelo died, after I realized I never asked him where he had hidden Virginia’s bracelet, I tried looking for places to buy chaquiras online. Maybe I’d try again to make a bracelet. Maybe I’d learn to enjoy wearing bracelets. But my online search revealed options only loosely connected to chaquiras:

I searched: “Buy chaquiras.”

Google answered: “Chaquiras on Etsy.” Images of bracelets for sale materialized.

Search: “Buy Huichol beads.”

Google: “Huichol beaded bracelets on eBay.” I just wanted the beads, un-braceleted.

Search: “Buy Mexican beads.” Maybe Google was too lazy for specifics.

Google: “Buy Mexican crazy lace agate round beads on Etsy.”

Only a search by their English name gave me what I needed.

Search: “Buy seed beads.”

Google: “Seed beads at wholesale prices.” The first link displayed hanks of chaquiras in every possible color. Buying the beads from an American retailer under an English name felt like a necessary annoyance, like wearing a cast or going to the gym. There was no other way.

For reasons related to cost and access to materials, most chaquiras today are made of plastic. But in Durango, Nayarit, or Jalisco, chaquiras can be shaped from shells, bones, seeds, glass, or clay. Almost perfectly round, as small as the head of the pins *mi abuela* stuck in her tomato-shaped pin cushion. The more I researched chaquiras, the more intricate the art became. First, bracelets and earrings. Then I discovered that Huichol artisans mixed beeswax and Vaseline to make a sticky adhesive, which they used to affix chaquiras onto gourds, bowls, and masks. Huichol art.

Six months after I discovered Huichol bead art, I traveled to Zapopan, Jalisco, to see it and to roll the beads between my fingers, to hold them to the light. I had hoped to feel a special connection to this type of art, to intuit those ancient vibrations of hands—hands that share blood with my hands—and fingers threading and placing beads in patterns such as trees and ladders. In Zapopan, I visited el Museo de Arte Huichol *Wixárika*, the name the Huichol people gave themselves. Inside, I could not take

photos, so all I have is my memory. Of passing through a bamboo curtain into a cave-like darkness. Of beaded belts, necklaces, and bowls in glass display cases. Of ugly, white mannequins arranged to resemble “a

I had hoped to feel a special connection to this type of art, to intuit those ancient vibrations of hands—hands that share blood with my hands.

day in the life of a Huichol.” What I remember most was the gift shop, where Huichol art exploded. I could take one piece home with me in my carry-on. There were masks, bowls, boxes, chickens, jaguars—all decorated with beads that I could feel in my palms. I bought a bowl the size of half a softball and lingered as long as I could before it was time to leave. And like *mi abuelo* and his stories, the museum fell into memory.

All I have is a bowl. But it is something I can touch, something that is mine. A physical tether to a people who might share my blood.

I bought chaquiras—I'm sorry, seed beads—and beeswax online and, since it was early fall when I decided to rebuild mi mexicanidad, I bought a Styrofoam skull from the Halloween section of the craft store. At home, I smothered homemade putty (a sticky solution of melted beeswax and petroleum jelly) onto the skull and attempted to affix the chaquiras to the Styrofoam using a sewing needle. Traditionally, artisans used a cactus spike, but I lacked any sizable cacti. All I could find were plastic beads, a needle, and Styrofoam, and the finished product could only be an American knockoff of an ancestral art. Even if I had glass beads, a cactus spike, and a gourd bowl, my third-generation hands were still making an art three times removed from the original. I can reenact, can learn what my cultural body already knows, can learn mi mexicanidad as I go. But am I Mexican when my hands are sticky with wax, when plastic beads bounce into the corners of mi casa, forgotten until found by the cat?

The sticky skull now sits in my basement, half-completed like the bracelet. I find myself wondering if the death of my grandparents' traditions happened this way, in incomplete acts, in out-of-sight storage.

In the box of keepsakes my grandchildren keep will be a half-finished bracelet, a half-finished skull, and a photo of a loaf of pan de muerto. Will they call me Abuela, too? Will they pass on a Mexico so many times removed?

Generation 3

I want to live in Mexico City.

I want to listen to mariachi in Jalisco and buy maracas.

I want to wear embroidered camisas made by abuelas and siesta in the afternoon.

I want to drink tequila from Tequila and feel it inside me.

I make tortillas with real lard and a comal and feel nothing.

Generation 2

When my parents first met,
my dad's parents asked if my mom ate lizards and if she had a
green card.
Do you love spicy food?
And can you teach us how to salsa?
Do you eat cricket tacos?
And do you mow lawns and whack weeds and bleed hot sauce?

Generation 1

"Tacos galore!" said Raymond Elizondo, mi abuelo, in a video
interview about his childhood.

I am White when I flip through my sister's wedding photos.
Pause: a photo of me standing with my sister beneath the rip-
pling leaves of the ancient oak tree in our backyard. Next to
her, I am visibly, unquestionably White. She, with her cedar
skin, curly black hair, and a nose indígena, would never be mis-
taken for White, even though she, like me, is only half Mexican.
When I look at these photos, my white skin frustrates me. It
doesn't reflect la mexicanidad that runs through my blood.

Flip. Flip. Pause: a photo of my whole family beneath that
same oak. I stand near my dad and the similarities are undeni-
able. I have his deep-set, hooded eyes and his straight nose. I
also have his obsession with to-do lists, his tendency to feel pro-
ductive only when his hands are moving, and his love for Amer-
ican paint horses. We travel the same: always go go go. We eat
the same and rarely gain weight: three burgers in a week, why
not? We fought and fought and fought when I was a teenager
only to find that we were fighting reflections of each other. I
cannot hate—I cannot even dislike—the color that comes from
my father.

I am Chicana when I walk along Olvera Street, ducking un-
der the awnings of pop-up kiosks selling embroidered blankets,
handmade leather shoes, Virgen de Guadalupe prayer candles,
and enchiladas con mole. In the early 1900s, Los Angeles took
in an influx of people from other parts of the US, and Olvera

Street became a haven for Mexican nationals and Chicanos. Earlier this year, I walked the length of Olvera Street and looked for mi abuelo, touching the bricks and signs, hoping that he had touched them, too, seventy-five years ago. My great-grandfather was the caretaker of the historic Olvera Street, and mi abuelo grew up throwing coins into the fountain outside the Avila Adobe, the oldest standing residence in Los Angeles. I paused to watch a man dig the coins out of the fountain and toss them into a bucket.

I wish for a place to live where I feel at home as both Mexican and American, but I grew up in an upper-class neighborhood in the Pacific Northwest. I wish for a comal and a tortilla press but end up buying my tortillas from an American grocery store because it's easier. There is no place, no home for me to be

No home for me to be Mexican—to practice my Spanish, to practice my tortillas, to practice Día de Los Muertos—and American seamlessly.

Mexican—to practice my Spanish, to practice my tortillas, to practice Día de Los Muertos—and American seamlessly. Being Mexican and American often means being American alone. Although I have found a home in code-

switching, I function mostly in my American code. At home, we speak English. We celebrate Halloween and a Protestant Christmas. My family wonders why anyone would go through all the trouble to make tortillas or tamales when you can buy them for cheaper and save your time. Even though Mexico is North America, it is not American. But it is American on Olvera Street.

As he aged, mi abuelo lost his voice, which was never fuerte to begin with. He whispered mostly, a raspy vocal fry. When I listened to him, it required leaning in and living in the fluctuation of his voice. In his memories, I am transported to Los Angeles, to Olvera Street, to the small house with the leaky roof, surrounded by the sounds of mariachi and the smells of mole on the stove. Mi abuelo was Mexican and American in a Mexican-American pueblo; his surroundings matched his identity. Within his memories, and on Olvera Street, I am Mexican in America, too.

Olvera Street's motto could be "A Mexican City of Yesterday in a City of Today." It is the essence of being Chicana in physical form.

I am Chicana when my mom tells me about growing up near Redondo Beach, twenty miles southwest of Olvera Street. When she tells her stories of growing up Chicana, I also feel this split identity; her stories, though, are much more painful to hear. She tells stories of being bullied for her brown skin and dark hair. Her best friend, a California blonde with aquamarine eyes and so slender she often fainted in the heat, would tell her all the slurs people used behind her back: wetback, greaser, beaner. Aside from being called a beaner by a boy who rode my middle school bus, these were words I heard solely in reference to other, browner Mexicans.

Mama tells me these stories only when I ask. Each time, she tells the story in varying tones of anguish, as though, if she could go back right now, she'd tell the bullies to go to hell, or maybe she'd kill herself, or maybe she'd do nothing.

"Why would your friend tell you what the other kids said?" I wondered out loud once.

"To make me feel small," she answered.

When her classmates yelled, "Viva la Raza! Chicano Power!" she didn't join in because she didn't want to be Brown, didn't want to be Chicana, because being Chicana made her ache in the way a young girl aches for a best friend. Being Chicana made her seem small even to herself. I told her that instead of feeling ashamed of mi chicanidad, I feel like I don't have the right to join in, to yell, "Chicano Power!" if there ever were a time for it.

I grew up displaced—in White neighborhoods with White neighbors and eight Latinos in my school of sixteen hundred. If I had grown up on Olvera Street or near Redondo Beach, would I feel Mexican in America? Could I exist as Chicana outside my house?

In college, I was too shy to join the Organization for Latin American Students because identifying as Chicana often means people assume I speak Spanish. At the time, I didn't, at least not very well, and I didn't want to have my Chicana identity stripped from me based on my language. It wasn't until I moved away—to Virginia, in fact—that I found a place, a Mexican grocery store, where I felt Mexican in America: Tienda Latina

Emily, a name I like because it reminds me of myself in its irony. La Chicana Ashley. But otherwise, being Mexican and American is a solitary endeavor that exists only in my house when I'm alone, with the items that reflect who I am: the embroidered cloth from Guadalajara, the grocery store tortillas with homemade salsa, the Huichol bowl, and the painting of the Capitol Building in Washington, DC.

I wrestle with considering myself a member of this group, una Chicana, because I feel so underqualified: Spanish is not my first language, nor do my parents or my parents' parents speak it (Abuelo used to speak Spanish, then switched to only English when he got married); I don't experience nearly the same level of racism as my mother did; I don't live in the Southwest; and I hardly even look the part. When my mom visited two years ago, we sat at my kitchen table, my knees tucked up to my chest, her jaw working at a large piece of bubble gum. I told her I didn't feel that Chicana or Mexican was an identity I could claim.

Without hesitation, she said, "We were never allowed to claim it. We were never allowed to feel proud of our culture or traditions or language. We never had the opportunity to walk around town and be proud of being browner than most other people. So you must claim it. To make up for all the times we couldn't."

I *have* to claim it. In her memories, I imagine myself scribbling "Viva la Raza!" on my notebooks in first period and learning Spanish from the kids who weren't afraid of the paddle. I imagine myself owning the slurs, laughing at their pathetic assumptions. I am Chicana in these moments of inhabiting Mama's memory, just as I am Chicana on Olvera Street, walking beneath the same Moreton Bay fig trees and eating the same street tacos in the same old buildings that decorated mi abuelo's memories.

A letter to my future children:

Mis niños,

I hope that you tell people. You are a quarter Mexican.

I hope that by the time you read this, they will understand. Your presence is resilience.

I hope that by then, they will know. Your skin, your accent, your hazel eyes have nothing to do with it.

I hope that by then, Mexican and European and American means whole.

Sincerely, Mamá

I am White when I sit at my kitchen table poring over location choices for my husband's dermatological residency, and the southwestern cities jump out at me like holograms. Mesa. Scottsdale. Los Angeles. Corpus Christi. I've never lived in the Southwest, but I want to. So I can practice my Spanish. So I can live among other Chicanas without having to go out of my way.

And then I realize that I'm complicit in my own passing. I participate in the Chicano community only when it's convenient, when I don't have to take any risks, when it's easy.

I am White when I pretend that the lack of Chicano history in our high school history class was just because there weren't many Mexicans in the Pacific Northwest, and so this information was irrelevant.

I am White when I pretend Chicano history isn't also American history, isn't also my history.

I am White when I sit in Washington, in North Carolina, in Virginia and wait to become a Chicana, as if I am an egg waiting for something or someone else to break my shell.

I am Brown the first time I meet my friend Sal, and he says, "Hey, you're Brown, too!" I can't remember if someone told him I am half Mexican or if he guessed with some sort of Brown-dar. Sal is the first non-Latino to claim me, to acknowledge that the color of our skin is something we share, even though mine is a much lighter shade. Sal is Pakistani-American. He's bald, just under six feet tall, and grows figs on the back porch of his apartment. We have nothing in common except our skin, and it makes me think:

I am Brown only sometimes.

On the phone with my sister, I ask if she feels Brown. My sister is a warm, smooth brown, like turned wood. Her hair is big and full like her laugh. When she was a toddler, her hair sat on her head like a lone bush on a small hill. Her nose is the Elizondo nose. She says no, that she's always been jealous of me because I learned Spanish and cooked Mexican food and felt the longing for a place we never knew. She says she's Brown only when she teaches, when her Black and Brown students interpret her skin to mean empathy.

But I remember a moment when she was Brown and it wasn't negotiable. We lived in Stuttgart, Germany. She was five and I was nine, and we had set up a race track between the kitchen table

and the television. Whoever crawled fastest won. The screaming began only a few minutes into our game. My sister had caught her pinkie on one of the legs of the love seat. From the angle and the swelling, it became clear that she needed a splint. Only my dad spoke German, and he wasn't home yet from work. While we waited, Mama and I tried to keep her calm.

When my dad came home, he tore through his files as if he were trying to find a misplaced ticket to an invitation-only party. My sister's passport. In our town, the latent racism of the 1930s and '40s lingered in long stares and blatant inattention at store counters, and my dad had a feeling the doctors wouldn't believe that she was his daughter. My dad is White. His ancestors were Scandinavian: blond hair, green eyes, tall, and slender. A White man carrying a screaming Brown child seemed suspicious to those not yet used to biracial marriages. I wonder: If it had been my pinkie, would he have had to prove our relationship? After all, we share a long nose, weak eyelids, and paler skin.

In general, most White people assume a commonality with me. But Latinas—they know. From my high cheekbones or dark hair or faintly olive-tinted skin, they detect me and will often say something. But these moments are few in the places I've lived: Washington, Stuttgart, North Carolina, and southwest Virginia.

I am Brown only in tension, when in the presence of another Brown person—my sister, my friend Sal, another Latina—like a magnet near metal. I am not Brown alone, like my sister's hair, on a hill.

Mad Libs

The color _____.

One of the worst things someone has said to me is that I am not _____ enough to be _____. This is confusing since my sister seems to think that I am the _____est _____, and otras latinas say that I am _____ and not _____ at the same time.

The kindest thing someone has said to me is that I am a familiar _____.

I am White when, two years ago, I am at a bar with other writers and we begin talking about diversity within our graduate program. A few of us are sitting at one end of a long table, the smell of smoke-soaked sofas and stale beer hanging

in the still air, when a young Bangladeshi writer leans in and talk-whispers, “Guys, I’m the only Brown person here.” The others look away, not knowing what to say. Stemming from a momentary desire to out myself, to be known, I tell her that she is not the only Brown person in the group: “I’m Brown, too!” Cheeks blushing pink, she asks, “What are you?” and I tell her. “Half Mexican, una Latina.” Her response—

“The lightness of your skin affords you a certain kind of privilege despite your claiming of a particular Brown race.”

“Oh, that’s neat”—as if I am showing her a painting I made at one of those classes where you sip wine and paint your dog, isn’t sincere and she changes the subject.

Later in the school semester, this same woman critiques my writing in a workshop, and she finally tells me what she really thinks: “The lightness of your skin affords you a certain kind of privilege despite your claiming of a particular Brown race.” She insists I acknowledge this privilege. Her comment shuts down all conversation, and the professor insists we move on.

I am White when other people declare me White.

She is right, this young woman. I hate that she is right because it feels like erasure, or maybe a pre-erasure. I can’t even claim to be Brown if my skin has already affirmed that I am not. I go home to think on it, but I don’t write again until six months after her words take up all the air in my head like a wildfire. I have to wait for the ash to settle.

I am Latina when I answer The Question: What are you? This is always how they—strangers, acquaintances, sometimes even friends—ask The Question. Not *who* but *what*. As if anything other than White is some other species.

What am I?

This is a difficult question to answer. It depends on whom you ask. If we, and I mean all of us, are being specific and scientific, and if we refer to the DNA spit test I took last year, I am half Mexican (Spanish and Native American) and half Northwestern European (mostly Scandinavian). To Mama, I am Hispanic, referring to both my Native Mexican and Spanish ancestors and

the language that they (forcibly) shared. To my bosses, professors, and friends in the outer circle, I am White because I don't correct the misguided assumption that White skin means White race. I look White, so I must be White, Caucasian, probably European if we go way back. They're not all wrong. They're just not all right.

I tell myself I am Latina.

Why Latina? Why not Hispanic, Mexican, Chicana, Brown? Or White?

This is the hardest question because it depends on the context. I am a chameleon, a shape-shifter. Most days I am Latina, but when I celebrate Día de Los Muertos, I am Mexican. When I speak Spanish to another Spanish-speaker (regardless of what country they call home), I am Hispanic. When I think of joining a race-based campus organization, such as the Organization of Latin American Students, I am Chicana. When I talk to my sister and my friend Sal, I am Brown. When I don't say anything at all, I am usually White. But Latina is where I am most home.

When I meet the Puerto Rican poet, the Cuban nurse, the Mexican short story writer, my identity isn't a decision to make. They text me "¡Feliz Cumple!" even though we hardly know one another. There exists a silent pact among us. Latina gives me a community in a town where I am linguistically and geographically displaced. Latina because it is wider than Mexican but narrower than Hispanic, wider than Chicana but narrower than Brown. Latina is a sisterhood, a brotherhood, a personhood of misfits who can't always claim one city or one country as home.

I don't remember exactly when the poet and I became friends. During an orientation meeting in graduate school, she told us that she was from Puerto Rico. The island's name skipped on her tongue like a smooth pebble on a lake's still surface. She was so sure. And then we didn't really talk, aside from *How are you?* and *See you in class!* until six months later. We bonded over being Latina because we were both fighting alone. Our peers were White. Our mentors were White. In the valley we lived in, we felt surrounded, not protected. We bonded out of necessity, to sustain each other, to call each other out of shyness. I don't remember the moment or the words, but I do remember how she made me feel.

She didn't assume I spoke Spanish, but when she hablaba, she would put up with my answering in English and my frequent misunderstandings. She was a White Latina, too, and we talked about what it meant to have one White parent. She made me reconsider details in my family's history that I had not considered as part of my own history: how English-only schooling had stolen language from my mom and so also from me, how my mom had to work harder (taking multiple part-time jobs and extending her undergrad education over twelve years) than her White peers to make it through college, how my uncle insisted (and still insists today) he was Spanish and not Mexican. She taught me when to be angry at White mentors for their silence and to notice the small comments people make to paint our experiences as foreign. It is as if she can see me in X-ray; she sees through my mom's quietness about being Mexican, my parents' hopes that I would become a doctor, my father's insistence that I be fluent in Spanish. Where I see normal family messiness, she sees shadows of suffering. She is my mile marker and my front-porch light, has shown me the way home, even if we'll never get there.

She makes me feel like my white skin could be una casita just for me.

Sometimes I am Latina and people think I am exotic. I am Latina when I answer honestly to the wrong people, usually men, usually at a party or gathering of friends, but sometimes in odd places like church. When one male friend from church discovered I was Latina, he shook his square hips at me, wiggled one finger, and said, "Ooo, a sassy Latina." People like this guy use my ethnicity as flint to light their shady fantasies. What I hear: *Oh, you sassy Latina, you tigress, with your defiant air and round ass.* What I see: his eyes narrowing and glistening, like a hunter focusing on prey. Sometimes their prejudice is so obvious because they say it out loud, like this guy did. *I like my girls spicy.*

This exoticization also appears in the form of under-the-breath comments, side glances, and terse jokes. I am Latina then, too. And because I am Latina, I must be sensual, hungry. My response to those who treat us like fuel for some dormant exotica fetish: get lost.

But also, aren't we past this?

If identity is a dress
code I can buy
Latina

The cost is re
spect
ject
sect
neglect?

Most of all, I am White when I forget. A professor and friend told me once that she *always* dressed up when she left the house because she never knew who might stop her or who might question her motives. In other words, she knew people saw her skin color first, so she did everything she could to counter

I am White when I go about my day, every day, without once having to think about how someone else sees me. This is a privilege, to forget.

their assumptions. I am White when I wake up and decide that I am too lazy to dress in respectable clothes, so I wear my pajama pants to the grocery store, no makeup, hair a nest. I am White when I walk down the produce aisle

or through the green on campus and subconsciously understand that no one really sees me as anything other than the majority. I am White when I go about my day, every day, without once having to think about how someone else sees me. This is a privilege, to forget. No matter how much I want people to know I am Latina, I have the privilege of passing as White in America where being White affords me an automatic level of respect, at least at first glance.

It's hard, this forgetting. It's not hard to forget, but rather it's hard to understand in retrospect that I could forget such a deeply rooted part of who I am.

Last year, I celebrated Día de Los Muertos for the first time, but I had no idea where to start. I thought of mi abuelo, whom I lost to Lewy body dementia two years ago. During the year

following his death, I began to collect memories in writing and make photocopies of family photographs. Unknowingly, I was building the beginnings of una ofrenda, an altar, an offering. I wanted to remember him, yes, but I also wanted to remember *for* him.

At the craft store, next to the Styrofoam skulls, was a shelf of glittered calaveras, wreaths made of skulls, and bright pink and yellow silk-flower headbands. Even though I knew that not one of these Chinese-made Día de Los Muertos trinkets was authentic, the shelf drew me in like a raccoon to tin foil. The plastic decorations, like me, were shadows of tradition.

I had always been wary of Día de Los Muertos because its pagan exterior clashed with my upbringing in the Protestant church, so I avoided its appeal for the longest time. But, through my research, I discovered that many modern Mexicans use el Día simply to remember their lost loved ones and to remind themselves that death is not something to fear. In fact, we have the opportunity in el Día to defy death, to dress as death, to tell death to take a hike. In the end, I celebrated a hybrid Día de Los Muertos, which felt right.

Día de Los Muertos fell on a Tuesday last year. I had classes and a Bible study to attend and homework to complete. That morning, I stuck a silk marigold in my hair (I couldn't find any real ones). Marigolds guide the spirits by their vibrant color and sweet scent to la ofrenda.

I also placed in my ears tiny calavera earrings. They had no traditional significance—but I didn't own any extravagant Mexican dresses and didn't think that sugar-skull face paint would be appropriate for class. The earrings were all I had.

I imagined my ancestors, the ones whose names I knew. I imagined Castulleo Allende, my great-great grandfather, executed in the town square by Che's men. My father and I once stood in the spot where he was shot. We hoped he would know that we looked for him there.

I imagined the women, like Rebecca Maria Allende, who left their babies by trees to pick fruit in the field. My grandma was one of those babies.

When I arrived home after class, I sat at my kitchen table, wondering how I could do mi abuelo justice with just a few small items to offer. I set up a mini ofrenda right there next to our salt and pepper shakers. I set up his photo, the one that

shows him as a baby on his baptism day. His mother holds him; she is blurry in the background, like a memory. I imagined her mother holding her in this photo, too, so blurry and far away that I can't make her out. And on it went. They were all there and not there.

I imagined mi abuelo, Ramon Elizondo, who endured the death of a mother and a brother because of a suspicion of a medical system that didn't care enough for Brown neighbors.

Next to the photo of mi abuelo, I placed a plastic calavera mariachi band. They were mid-performance. I imagined them playing "La Cucaracha" or "Feliz Navidad," mi abuelo's favorites.

I imagined my ancestors and mi abuelo, who heard no voices telling them to be proud of where they were from, of their skin, of their struggle.

On the other side of the photo, I placed a candle and lit it.

Estos antepasados, they talk. Through mi abuelo, mi mamá. *How could you forget for fear of being rejected? We were rejected when the stakes were much higher.*

I decide, then, that I am Latina.

I leave the candle lit. It does not yield to the dark.

. . . THAT HUMBLE BOY WHO KEPT THE SHEEP

—W. H. Auden

Am I alone in saying my first attempt at pleasure
was transitory—selfless? Though he was much older,
you can say I loved him. Or like any disparate relationship,
it was merely devotion . . . and
like devotion always, ours was an intricate dynamic
between worshipper and worshipped; of course, no myth
is ever really remarkable. I imagine mine quite like that of the
cupbearer
to the gods—
in that I don't recall where I was splayed but, surely, I recall his taste:
the saline flavor of that workingman's balls, or, less intensely, the
sweat
that dripped from his cologne-spritzed wrists . . . the closest I
can describe it? Power lost in translation of desire, maybe;
same power, I assume, makes the snowy egret's tall soul untether
from itself that effortlessly. I think this is the world's first failure
at seduction: a deity's need for meeker bodies. Men will attempt
to rewrite myth, but I agree . . . theft this effectual
requires some sort of trade:
son for a stable of immortal horses, Ganymede's breakage
as payment, the blunt rip once my sex was no longer a coy oracle.

JABARI JAWAN ALLEN

NIGHT UNBRIDLED

—A charge to keep
I have? I have been

*

Against this. Of stars,

*

Which is farthest:
Canopus, Altair, Sirius?

*

I say *Risk*

*

And mean *Body as repository—*
Reckless shell. The curve

*

Of his throat not quite
Slashed by light—

*

I want to be open, or opened,
Vulnerable, one can say;
The way one risks penance . . .

*

Or, like this, from Solomon:
My inmost being yearned for him.
By yearn, I am certain

*

The wise king means *to break*
In a way . . . Almost like
A bust

*

Rendered limbless

*

By antiquity—
And, perhaps, to break is to be

*

Truly luminous . . . But what is it

*

The mind desires?
Mine desires his shard of light
To enter my inverted eye.

*

The night, unbridled. I suppose this
Is what I fear: the interior,

*

My irrational distress
For the confessional

*

—And yes,

*

Of course, I screamed

*

That night he enjambled me—

TARRY

When everything feels like death: the liquor,
the sex, the ninth ibuprofen
in a row, I try to make it to the altar
but Sundays be making a slaughter-
house of my heart every time
I touch the double doors
& not even the intercessor could pray
away all this black.

Preacher say some sin requires admission.
Say *Lake of fire*, sprinkle *Sissy* somewhere
in his sermon & I am draped in a gown
of kerosene again, an inventory
of lit matches spilling from the split
maw of heaven again,
but born in Sodom
both nonwhite & quare
what did I see to be except soot?
So, I walk down the aisle when the preacher spit
Damnation, the stupid crucible
of my heart leading me
to my own perdition.

And I wonder if Bettie Loue prayed
for the storm in my blood to weather
before I was even a fetus
in her granddaughter's womb,
or if she would call me a sissy too.

When I say *Deliverance*
I don't mean this: a cleric's callous hand
on my forehead. Tongue, some serpent
thrashing 'round in my mouth—
I don't mean I want to be the preacher
man's fag again. I mean there are only so many
ways to tell a mother that her boy's body
ain't been a temple,
but a sepulchre for what he cannot birth.

BILLY-RAY BELCOURT

THE WALL CLOCK CAUGHT FIRE FROM NEGLECT

Yes, this is the bedroom

I built to evoke the effect
of an open-air church.

Just once, I wanted
to be unhinged from sentimentality.

Instead, I carry on
aiming my tongue at a mattress
covered in moss soft as September.

With each bite I mutter:

What an ugly, necessary monster I have made of myself.

I think it is midnight

—the wall clock caught fire
from neglect a long time ago.

My grief crowbarred the door open. (How?)

It is like a coffin:

inviting a gaze in response to which

it can't spit back a body.

The landlord fastens a note
to my forehead: HALF-EXISTENCE

IS STRUCTURALLY AKIN TO AN APARTMENT.

He lays himself flat in the hallway,
like a welcome mat.

I have work to do, but here are my feet
inventing yet another man's chest.

His exhales gunfire.

I float to the ceiling. Light scurrying
from me like water
in search of a resting place.

I miss Billy-Ray Belcourt.

I believed myself
capable of holding onto a name.

I was wrong. A man called
me beautiful tonight,
so I started over once more
—the old body still flickering beside me.

Tomorrow, I will watch a boy

who looks like me

walk into oncoming traffic.

He will expect no one to stop,

but everyone will.

People love being alive so much

they will force aliveness

onto even a hypothesis of a man.

I am a man,

but only insofar as I spontaneously combust

when the best possible world begins.

So, each night I make love

the way one siphons gasoline

from an abandoned car,

as though I am running out of time.

Truth is, I want even less

than this already puny life.

BILLY-RAY BELCOURT

DUPLEX (THE FUTURE'S A FIST)

After Jericho Brown

The future's a fist; plants me in a bed.

A brief history of flesh starts with a knife.

History starts into my brief flesh, a knife.

In my mouth lies a chain of white flags.

In the mouths of my white lovers lie chains.

Is there a heaven for mother tongues?

Is "heaven" on the tip of my mother's tongue?

When love turned up, it was a rotten fruit.

When love turned up, my heart was a rotten fruit.

If I die before this country does, don't cry.

Don't cry before this country does. If I die,

Blame the postponed mourning, the eye's forest.

The I's a forest, where it's always morning.

The future's a bed of dawn I plant fists in.

BOOK OF SILVER

August.

I wake the third morning with this new knowledge.
An accrual not of words but of cells,
a little wing of joy in my heart, a dream that may be opening
the universe slowly inside my body,
it opens.

I don't feel you, little one. Is your spirit near? Are you a dawn?
A light that starts out almost night then slowly blues the edges,
a spanning of gradual embodiment? It is my job, then, to feed,
to make safe a new cove of blood and bone. Now it is just the
beginning of a shape that might shelter you in a body one day.
A poem that is my body
with a room that is your body.

September.

Now these new dry mountains out of whose clefts gush the sun
each morning, the cactus the snails eat the green pads of, the
sound of the tangled freeways each dark morning through my
open window. It is all I can do to just be, a kind of presence,
each day that is holding open a space for you.

On Wednesday, we first heard your heartbeat, a quick *pita-
pita-pita* before you swam away from the machine. To hear
your heart beating away in there, to listen in, to know you are
alive and not just a story we make up about bodies—

I feel quiet with so much gratitude.

October.

I lay in bed this morning and felt your little bumping and turning. It is strange how we don't expect gradual things, how you are continuing to shift in orientation to the world so there is slightly more of you here each day.

People say "there's no such thing as a little pregnant" but I wonder if there is, you growing and becoming a thing like a season, a few leaves yellowing, then a whole grove; the buds that will emerge slowly and then, patch by patch, open into leaves and nectar tubes and pollen-heavy anthers.

November.

The leaves are down. The edges of the desert sharpen. Shadows in big wedges like heavy clay across the rocks. Pomegranate life-form, your jeweled interior, your many-chambered lungs, each seed a breath growing unbreathed, your heart a chamber of heartbeats, each with a seed, your little insistence on life.

My body is a shield of muscle and organ
my body the peel to your growing
my body a pulse you practice breathing
my body the house I feed with fresh air through the windows
my body the house where you forage for sticks to fasten into
 your small house
you forage stalks of prairie Junegrass and bluestem
building each your blades of shoulder and rib-bone hardening,
leg and ligament, seedheads to sprout tooth buds,
to find jawbones of mice and overwintered leaves
a net, a new system of skin, transparent, veining an old sap,
a hummingbird to pace your heart by,
whips of wind you store flat in your lungs.
You milk my bones for your bones.

December.

Last night I dreamed I grew a little boy, rosy golden seedpod of child, pappus-head. Coiled bud. Painted shard. Limb in winter. Little plumage. Loud-rub, rock-rib, hopsage, chert-fleck, we haven't a name for you yet, though the world is brimming with names, so many fit you for a moment, you who are entering more this world now, your eyes open in the dark, your ears listening.

There are new quiet dreams in your skull, the heavy weightless water in your little pink gills. You burrow down away from the sunlight of the plateau I scramble over, looking for the trail. All is well, little creature, already in exchange, already your movements tied to this dry outer world.

January.

Child of spring, the other night we walked along the river with you and saw a flock of cranes in the dusk, their heavy delicate bodies stepping into the current. Little crane, the landscape I breathe in that becomes you.

I am thinking of a photo I saw of the possible historic site of Eden. As if all myth is rooted in a real place, which, how could it not be? I think of the people expelled from their land, their Eden, which through time became a symbol of all that is contained and whole, a sense of the world before anything has been lost. Is there such a time?

You, child inside me feel like such a time. A moment of containment, of wholeness. And yet, even here, time moves. Change turns over itself incrementally, an unfurling as smoke through a shaft of smoke. As blood through a cord my body built. Two bodies tied together. The tide of our heartbeats, waves that meet.

February.

Finally, the rain falls and falls, settling things into place in the dirt, the mountains hidden all through the night and into the morning in heavy cloud. Inside, my calm baby kicks and drifts to the other side of my body as I turn over. It is strange to love an unknown being so completely, like this rain falling, soaking the soil. To love so a thing that is inside me is a new way of loving myself. For the love is funneled inward, like a cavern of warm air. I don't feel specifically loved back by this unknown, because I suppose there is no direction to this.

March.

Inside
grows big enough to keep you. Little, little,
there you are listening to the world listening to me,
all day quiet or talking and saying nice words to the dog.

Now it is time of the catkin fall. Emergent fig
singing in the chapel with the door open to the hot wind
mother-becoming
new things in boxes
quiet loud days of multiple body-full
tight the moon wanes
the desert wait.
Is it time?

April.

My silver
My son

You came when I needed you,
when my great and powerful call
came through the universe
you arrived, individual, perfect you.

Nest of fractures in the world, all those lines of light

Silver Silver Silver
you are all the light
those filaments reflect
what you wind around—a great nothing.

*

You left
as you came—
so quiet.

Slipped from the world
as your body born into it
your incredible wind across
the night all around us.

I made your body
you made me new

and in your going new again
this new life I began with you still here

just a few weeks old, my motherhood
of gone you still here.

you are
you are
and still you are
my baby.

May.

Help me now, little one,
slip through the day gentle and with all the tenderness
I have for you.

As the cottonwood seed settles to the river's surface.
In this silence, the quiet between us, all your family,
as we can only simply go on being alive,
for that is all that is asked of us.

You who are all of who I am, excluding nothing.

The world as your body
born into it.

This new life begun with you
still here
my motherhood
in your going
you made me
I made your body
new is gone

and still you are
you are
you are.

June.

In the mountains, my body
so strangely empty of you.

Small bird shivering with song,
I remember your smell and I crave it, would go
anywhere to find it, to lick you
clean and carry you in my mouth to the clearing.

I sit alone in the limestone pebbles looking out at the air.
So still with you and the air and naked aspen. Little
yellow cinquefoil like eyes opening. Silver
leaves of the cloakfern, silver
rain on the cliffs down below silver
sheen of oak, leafless. Silver
stone house silver
on my body.

Unbearable, that I cannot bear you.

A hole in the center
of experience

DIANA MARIE DELGADO

DREAM OBITUARY

My mother came to me last night.

Holding my youngest brother,
the ends of her body had disappeared.

Now in the middle of my life
I realize that my journey is to forgive
everything that's happened.

DIANA MARIE DELGADO

POOL OF THE DEAD

The ghost turns out to be my boyfriend. My other roommate, a cousin recently paroled, wants to play cards. We do meth together in the doorway of a prison cell. In the backyard of my house a pool of babies with long white hair float in baby carriers, and laugh when the water covers their faces.

DIANA MARIE DELGADO

LAST DREAM

I wish I could stop
bringing myself to Jesus.

He comes and goes
like a sister who rents

the backhouse
and refuses to sell her dogs.

I walk into the kitchen
and say to my mother

who is at the stove
stirring beans,

I've lost my sight—
but she doesn't turn.

The following morning
I leave through a door

I make in water,
a tear I find

in the shallow
of my back.

AS THE STARS BURROW AGAINST MY RIBS

I elegy. This bright morning unsayable
as the sentence of the woman who died
in daylight as her children climbed her still
body in a hospital bed. She left video
messages behind. They cry now, & I feel
the cells under my arms tighten with ghost
-milk. I feel my breasts for cysts
that have spread into a map of the next
world. *Will I live a long life*, is all I asked.
No one answered. I used to scream
into the woods behind my house. After
my father died. As my mother felt her cancer
spread. No one looked me in the eye.
No trace of the stars in the morning
sky, the mind still hungers the problem.
The finite night has flown from the pines.
The wind, arguing for centuries with the trees,
is elsewhere. Amazed at the hawk's dive.
Unsure what my body is built for, I starling.
I blacken the edges of snow. I let
my children down, starlight on my tongue.
The cells like dark stars refuse to die
on my left side. The last biopsy was
elegy. Unsayable is what I can imagine.

CHELSEA DINGMAN

**BECAUSE WE CAN NEVER KNOW ALL THE
INITIAL CONDITIONS OF A COMPLEX SYSTEM IN
SUFFICIENT DETAIL, WE CANNOT HOPE TO PREDICT
THE ULTIMATE FATE OF A COMPLEX SYSTEM**

I think I know the decapitated
sonnet you escaped from. The argument
without resolution is called *life*. Who

can survive strict forms stripped of an ending?
Acid & weed, then cocaine. Your body,
another throwaway line striping tile

in a bathroom when last I saw you. You
did not speak, but exploded into sound.
I want to say I survived our childhoods,

but I hate that I survived you. Little
brother, the sky is bright with surrender
tonight. Your hands are cold. The world flickers

in the distance. All that is left of time.

KERRY JAMES EVANS

THE DEER

A deer beds down for winter—
the stream frozen like a night terror
upon waking, then the face
reappearing, the rifle,
the same dream for a decade.

The deer must dream me
as I dream it. Free will does not
reside in the choice of our decisions,
but in the consequences.
Fear is a body we must share.

ROY G. GUZMÁN

CONTROLLED BURNING

What I call my good intentions get the best of me.
During week two of the semester I have students

place an asterisk each time shame shows up
in the excerpt of a memoir whose author's take

on affirmative action & bilingualism I take for
internalized whitewashing. Each takes a pen

to the printout; it's as if they're journaling
on my skin. How much have I questioned

if this outgrowth of curly hairs can resist its follicles,
or how my nostrils brass widely during lividness,

or how I've distorted my maternal matrices.
When I ask my mother if her grandmother was

indigenous, she replies: *But she was an elegant
woman too.* I head to college to pay for my settler

colonialism, get into more debt to decolonize
my hustle. *What is affirmative action?* a student

disembarks through shyness. I refuse to rest
my etymological machete perpetually

on the shoulders of everyone beaming to mistake me.
I declare myself mestizo & even I know that's a movie

without an audience. My good intentions get the best
of me though I let the white twink savior complex

actively clocking in & out of work drive off his
hypocritical hilltops. The act of burning the land can be

invested in what fondles growth. It's discrete, ancestral.
The glow of an uncontainable approach—like pain.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

God splits His body in half, calls one half
body, the other God. Once, my stepfather
wanted to enlist in the Israeli army. Nearly losing
his fingers, he tried locating the phone number to the Israeli
consulate in the yellow pages. His laptop lay
on the couch, missiles shimmering
over Gaza. A man ran with a lifeless child in his arms,
his cries like a mute, distorted gospel. *I'm too old,*
he sighed. *They'd never recruit an old fart like me.*

While crushing the controllers of our video game
console he often shouted, *Estos politicos are quickening*
Nostradamus's prophecies!—confidently, as when
he hauled home a self-published book linking Marx
to Satanism, claiming the alliance self-evident.
Radars had discovered weapons underneath
a neglected hospital, he complained, as he shoved a handful
of peanuts into his mouth, flashed a smirk
suggesting he'd retrieved a decisive clue.

Meanwhile, my mother pressed her silence on the floor.
Failed to follow her doctor's orders
to control her blood sugar and daubed
mentholated crosses on her chest. At night, when she couldn't
sleep, we said she was daydreaming. From our kitchen
the smell of fried pork crawled in. Clouds

gathered around Gaza's sunset. And for a moment, a missile
lent the false impression that one can pray to mistaken
ethers, next-door wanderlusts—and survive.

It's hard to beat this game, my stepfather grumbled,
a priest in need of teaching us his morning
invocations. He rose, stretched his arms, yawned:

I'm going to take a nap. His body displayed forfeited youth,
though he'd stopped carrying the sunk smell of plastic
he inherited when he worked in the garbage

tank plant. My mother and I unfurled into liturgies
that rewrite themselves dourly every night. As if
from entire missing sections. As if this were God's

modus operandi for correcting mistakes. My stepfather snored
in the bedroom. Unbothered. Like a beast that leaves
his habitat, only when he's run out of hunger.

BOJAN LOUIS

GHAZAL I

For Jessica and Michael

Muted moths slide against a dawn rising over, biliinshnáanii,
smogged mountain bodies; your body on mine biliinshnáanii.

In recent pasts, just think, bruises were drawn across our faces
and skin; abyssopelagic silences a new predator biliinshnáanii.

An old-head told me to roll naked through fresh fallen snow, a Diné
bathing tradition. Offer your body to the cold of aging biliinshnáanii.

A parliament of dusk owls talon survival and deliver the art
of quietude. Solitary solace a famished memory biliinshnáanii.

I must return to the cornstalk that pollinated our arrowheads. My
error has been to lead with serrated obsidian, not love biliinshnáanii.

Borshuks, ever you need a Son of Electricity to assure a steady glow
send an alphabet of blood and cotton. I'll return with biliinshnáanii.

GHAZAL II

Had you bothered to ask we would have told you how the
world ended.

Morning: a covey drowned in the pool a simple
miscalculation, ended.

Called me whore. Mom recalls her dad's words after being
crowned beauty
queen. She was cursed, spit on. None of that approximates to
her spirit ended.

A frosted matutinal clearing of bronze-barked ponderosas—
meth cut blow: half
cash, half pawn —sun prisms through pine needles,
sibling's clarity ended.

Your house is hidden from me. On densely forested streets I
never exit my truck.
I'm thirsty after manual labor: want to close curtain. This long
haul tragedy ended.

Stray-fed cats shit and piss litter box the front yard. I think
to guillotine and stake
their heads but they stalk and hiss as a family my tiny
Dracula dreams, ended.

This is me, Bojan, and I'm here. Early December I've shed the
skins of kinship and
brotherhood. The snapdragons and cholla I planted reminders
of deathly heat ended.

IN DAHYAN

At least 29 children have been killed and 30 wounded in a Saudi-led coalition air strike in Yemen, the International Committee of the Red Cross says.

—BBC News

In the broken mirror of my homeland, the sky looks
like a riot of smoke, like a bomb planted on a field full

of children waiting for their parents to drive them home
in the evening, in the evening that will end up being devoted

to shoveling the dead bodies of the children out of a heap
of blasted things. On the cracked wall of my homeland,

every child's face looks like a bombed village, like a city
counting its dead, like a woman's sad face as she strolls a

deserted street in search of her daughter after a day of bullets.
Tonight in Dahyan, every woman's heart is a room of grief as a

bombed bus emits smoke emanating from bodies
of school children whose voices will never outlive the grim

memory of a needless attack, of a war whose end is unknown.
Tonight in Dahyan, the world reclines and watches how children

who could be our children wither in the war they do not know its source.
Women who could be me, my mother, my mother's mother, my aunts—

all adorned in a grief that always repeats itself to us in different versions.

COUNTRY OF BIRTH

In a place that is no longer a home, a child sits on his mother's headstone. In his eyes, there is a village

in flames, a land plundered by insurgents who replace every house with ruins. In my country of birth, I pray my

children survive every bullet that lurks in the air whenever they walk the streets, every mine that spreads in the field

whenever they go out to play. In a village bombed before dawn, a woman searches for the remains of her children.

In my room, I watch my children sleep every night, their faces closed against every war of the world.

I remember the women searching for their children, while my children sleep tonight in this country of bombs.

I remember the tender arms of children snatched from their mothers' arms, the dreams blasted to shreds,

the sorrow that lingers as every night there is a bomb waiting to rupture. I imagine my fingers combing the ruins

to identify my children's bodies after a blast, and my heart burns that somewhere tonight there are women who swaddle

their children's remains with rags, women who scream their children's names as the sound of blasts deafens their ears,

women who, like me, will never pledge again to this country that bereaves them, that turns them to haggard women mourning

their offsprings.

ST. TATUA, PATRONESS OF TATTOOISTS

I am the daughter of Queequeg & a runaway nun. I doodle gospels on palms & soles, bead necks with rosaries, tap amulets around the eyes, my needle a nail from the cross, my ink Christ's blood. Beware of baptism by water, evaporative & thus prone to deceit. Ink those babies, Mother says, or else it's Limbo to the end of time. I engrave nativities on their newborn backs, cut crosses into foreheads, inscribe calves with my father's chant. *Mehe tua 'oe! Mehe tua 'oe!* You are as god! You are as god! Mother says tattoos must mark the skin to be holy. Stick-ons & henna are anathema. In the past my acolytes were few—sailors, whores, prisoners—but now even the cupcake baker scores her belly with flaming hearts. By my hand, psalms will snake around your arms, the beatitudes grace your buttocks, Golgotha's graffiti arching ocher brows. And at life's end, I'll flay your skin, neck to foot, & bleach it clean, at sunrise, then hang it to dry in Polynesian winds forty days & nights, my godsent parchment to tattoo hymns to the fish & the whales on All Souls' Day.

BENJAMIN PEARCE MILLER

PROPERTIES OF WONDER

2019 AWP Intro Journals Project Winner, selected by Stephanie L. Harper

Easier to speak of our own imperfections
now that this bedroom light has done half

the work: the two of us having only seen
each other clothed, now dozing in these

nooks of flesh as if we were always like this,
always would be. Work, because the way

your finger touches the long scar above
my stomach feels like learning, your head

pressed to the side of my sternum, listening.
You ask as you rise with my ribs has my heart

always beat this way—fast, irregular—yes
I tell you, but how to say it's always bothered me?

How else to explain that once you notice
so many crows, you start to fear for the garden?

I worry that wonder may also work this way,
the kind of wonder that only lets you feel it

if you haven't already noticed; that once
you do, it is forever changed. If there was

metaphor for this, it too is gone. In middle school
health class my partner had to count my pulse

and I asked her to lie about it. So quiet,
the way she drew two fingers from my neck

and looked at me as if she had pulled every
remaining sound from my lungs. She checked

a box: false proof of how the world filtered
through me—soft, regulated, moving with

purpose, at a speed the body could dictate.
Not at all like my father's heart, I'm told

on the phone tonight, over at your place.
Funny how a phone call can seal you in,

make the light on the porch curve
and sharpen. Noticeable now as metaphor.

Snow is still on the ground so you place
a coat on my shoulders as I step outside

to take the call. My mother has been looking
at diagrams of heart valves in children's books

so she explains it to me really well: *they think
it's congenital. Imagine a paper circle cut in three*

*places so that the whole thing flowers open. Well,
his would only be cut in two places, so it puckers*

open like a fish mouth. As I listen I can
almost feel the heat of your apartment

meeting the long cool glass of the door.
Streaks of condensation slip quickly down,

dropping into the furrows of other beads,
falling much like rain might, if rain couldn't

move sideways, but was forced flat,
down the glass pane of sky and into all

our lives equally—instead of the way it prefers
to fall: fast, irregular, but never once stopping.

MARILYN NELSON

A GIFT TO BE

Every millisecond pleads
as I near the age my mother reached.
In every plea a seed of thanks
from this speck of consciousness
collecting memories, this mote
of cosmic experience.
Are we welcomed back,
or do we rain into a sea?
What a gift to be. To wonder.

RECONCILIATION

First truth of the confessional:
the voice only ever comes from one direction.
You can move away from it.

A bit farther out:
the difference between you and God—His voice is everywhere.
I can move away from you.

The smells are harder to escape.
They don't move in waves or
as candlelight.

You have to wait for the incense to die
in the natural abundance of oxygen.
We only have enough smoke for the churches.

There are holes, anyways, at the ends of the Earth.
Our offerings flow through them
(mostly acid grievances, mostly flatulence),

which is why, undoubtedly, the Church
lusts for antechambers, transepts, inner
veils. All our mouths we open at the agreed-upon time.

Second truth of the confessional:
all its darkness must be imported.
It's our sin that grays the space.

We're asking father so-and-so
for another spark. *Oh, Jesus, we say, Let's make every
Goddamn day, every high holy, a Pentecost.*

Third truth of the confessional:
(because there have always been three,
because Matthew is nostalgia for Isaiah,

because a scratched record makes more music,
is aching toward
the mystery we all lack)

we ask the same question. We ask father he-and-he
each Godforsaken time, *You don't know
what to tell me—do you?*

DEREK PALACIO

ON THE EVE OF MY FATHER'S 68TH BIRTHDAY

It's not that the lost ones find religion
as they age. They've waited years to notice
how sacred is every little thing, each
drop a nervous atom that fails to rest.

Christ, it makes me tired. Only the holy
exhausts as the arroyo, as the yelped
coyote echo this valley swallows.
As the moon I wish to be, just waning,

muddy at the edge. My only daughter
sleeps deadly with the sheets flung. Eyelashes
long as spider legs, she does break my heart.
If there is a God, then They make a joke

for each of us. The laughter we call fate.
I've never been this cold in the desert.
It's an old wind shaking the sour mesquite,
twisting the smoke from my cigar. Amen.

STITCHED

Twice around a finger, roll and pull—the quick way
to tie a knot. Chicken heads, the old women

called them if you wrapped three times
or four, or rolled too far. A proper lady

ties a slim twist or slides her thread between
the layers of fabric, letting friction hold

the line. I could never learn the trick of it,
a future stitched together with no end point,

temptation for any stranger to yank, exposing
bare cotton. Maybe fragility was the point.

MNEMONICS

I can't recall your name, but I know
your fingers held glass, how you touched

your napkin to the rim just as a drop descended,
the color of shoes you left by the door

when you arrived. I know you in the same way
I know one convertible started a world war

and another a conspiracy theory—the way I know
which Christmas present is mine once it's opened,

even if the tag fell off. A friend told me the trick
to remembering is to build a house in your mind,

cut glass knobs and waxed floorboards, to transfigure
each gossamer fact into a shelved book. It never worked.

I search for titles and find stories in blank-spined volumes.
It upsets some people, this inability of mine

to remember labels, as if I'm an ill-tempered child unwilling
to box up my toys before bed. There is something

wondrous about strewing life's baubles where they
are certain to pierce an unsuspecting foot.

KEVIN PHAN

**[BENEATH DARK PURPLES, NEW LIFE
JOCKEYING THROUGH THE CRACKS]**

From *Dears, Beloveds*

*

Beneath dark purples, new life jockeying through the cracks. “It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood . . . won’t you be my neighbor?” Sexmoans & rabbit skulls. “Build the wall!” Harmonic sighs of ocean oscillations (percussive distance). Immigrant offspring, my parents. An American version of disembodied, we failed to root. Pineapples dream they eat an ice cream sandwich. In the mammogram, a black star fist. Love’s only as real as the ancestors passing through us. Outside, the sky does miraculous things to the trees. I never wanted my mother’s living much further from my own. Imagine surrender. Imagine Kevin self-bleaching his soul just to smooth in. Flattened with a baking pin. Zeroed down to flour. Of course it hurt, still hurts. *Us vs. them, there vs. here*, a contiguity of angles to unlearn.

KEVIN PHAN

[MY NEIGHBOR RESHINGLES HIS ROOF]

From *Dears, Beloveds*

*

My neighbor reshingles his roof. A slipped hammer travels through his son to the ground. Decades without margins—oceans never stop. Funny how our hearts reflect their weathers. Nails jittering loose. The flesh of hours. It's hard to set down roots in rushing water. Violets ripen into storms. In *King Lear*, on the heath, nakedness howls. We learn the meanings of lose when we force ourselves to choose. Kangaroo court, he prosecutes bar stools. Nightmare, beginning with a falsely manufactured threshold. Rattled down to zeros, Lear asks of Cordelia, "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, & thou no breath at all?" Poisoned pills, floating in the soul. He reminds me of a flashlight that no longer holds a charge. He reminds me there's just nothing to hold on to.

(How
sad.)

Sometimes, we're just question marks to ourselves.

KEVIN PHAN

[WHAT IF LOVE IS JUST SPONDEES]

From *Dears, Beloveds*

*

What if love is just spondees. What if winds bleed anxious down a string. What if the sun demands a fresh coat of paint. What if I'm just chicken cluck & stormed complaints. What if the unicorn is black. What if enlightenment is pure grade horseshit. What if we know mangoes for the first time. What if silence is the loudest prize. What if we upload our souls & the servers crash. What if god's popping prescription meds. What if pig's foot. What if soul division. What if we heal slow-motion, when we heal at all. & The reason is sweet maple, like the flow down our necks. & We hear silence as part of the music. What if there's no more moo shu pork. What if, in heaven, there are no doors.

JODY RAMBO

ELEGY IN A BODY NOT YOUR OWN

Here is the first thing you will learn:
at the core of the heart
is a knot of air, a rescue breath stored
in the day boat of the body,
which you will open in a moment
that tastes like the sea.
It will choke like chalk. It will
bring you back entirely.
From here, you will lie, hull-quiet,
in a room dark as the back
of a horse and feel your hands
move across the bedsheet, leaving
a map to where you were once
most alone. Breath and song
will wind-merge. A flock of deer—scatter.
You may feel either the desire to run
or to bind a wound. Across your forehead
feel milk-shadow of moon lay a hand.
Feel the empty sky you once
woke to—gone. The foot you once
stepped into a shallow stream,
no longer bleeding on the rocks.
And by this you will know it is time.
And you will let the small bird go.

ELEGY IN A FIELD

here the birds are fearless you can catch them with your hand
messages arrive daily from a small island beyond the horizon
the wind opens them lip-reading the words watery & dark
things fill the heart & go unnoticed like a horse wandering away
graves are dug before snowfall winter means no harm
a memory of love stands under trees ghostwalks
the woods at nightfall blink & the grass may turn to dusk of blue
a house where you were born will appear on a hillside
next to a tree that never grows someone has left a sprig of branches
on the doorstep in a cold wind a woman is seated at the window
her dress is the fabric of shadows voices can be heard
quiet as the ground in which the rocks hide deeply
if you ever had a name it is scrawled on the backs of leaves
descending in the shape of a child's hand such furious smallness
the way you were always gentle and the stars splayed over you
like diviners lighting a path for every wound you've ever had
there is a lake opening its surface to receive the wind
for every lake an edge where you come to sip the dark

ON KNOWLEDGE

For Diana Khoi Nguyen

There isn't enough time to know all the parameters. *Para-* as in beside. *Me-* as in to measure. *Para-* as in to make ready, to protect against. Structure renders the world a mild triple crème brie—the taste not for everyone but some like their tongues bathed in it. I wear parameters like a thick milk coat against elements of life and death and in-betweenness, like sonnets: living like you're dying, dying like you're living, *y tu mamá también*. *Para-* as in for, to, of, towards. *Para-* as in adjacent to. *Me-* as in the one thing I wish I could stop measuring—*potrei smettere, podría parar*—get close enough to live *in* instead of *in contradiction*. Translation and etymology scaffolding from which we hope to discover something like a dead frog's heart still beating. In Socratic dissection, Theaetetus learns the only thing he knows is he knows nothing—that, too, a parameter. Perhaps the only one worth noting.

NAVEL-GAZING

It's intimate to thumb a stranger's belly button—an overfamiliarity I find titillating. In bed, I finger its ridges, its moles and follicles. It's like fucking a familiar, but suddenly beard-bare man. You have to keep things fresh in long relationships. That's why people have children—new wrinkles in their thigh-fat folds. I, myself, have not outgrown the body language of a toddler, love a bodysuit snapped tight to my vagina. Responsibility makes me anxious, so I don't know why I think I will make a good parent. But I love irreparable change—like a broken bone improperly set, like this foreigner's navel suspended in my midsection.

BEGIN AGAIN

All the -ologies in which I have interest conflict. In archeology, dinosaurs did not coexist with Adam and Eve. But in theology, all intelligent designs lived in the Garden of Eden. The beginning makes as much sense as how spermed egg begets infant—*ab ovo*, or from the beginning, or from the egg. But what about atom and Adam—both singularities desperate for collision to rescue them from the hopeless emptiness. Molecule made rib made sheathed structure he could fit in. Microscopes kaleidoscope dead skin cells, amplify the mites feasting on pillow-left epithelia. It's not real if you're not looking, if you refuse to believe: ghost theory. Eden : *eddinu* ; delightful place : plain. *Eloh*—a word for god of unknown origin.

MAGGIE SMITH

POEM BEGINNING WITH A RETWEET

*If you drive past horses and don't say horses
you're a psychopath. If you see an airplane
but don't point it out. A rainbow,
a cardinal, a butterfly. If you don't
whisper-shout *albino squirrel! Deer!
Red fox!* If you hear a woodpecker
and don't shush everyone around you
into silence. If you find an unbroken
sand dollar in a tide pool. If you see
a dorsal fin breaking the water.
If you see the moon and don't say
oh my god look at the moon. If you smell
smoke and don't search for fire.
If you feel yourself receding, receding,
and don't tell anyone until you're gone.*

TALK OF HORSES

Funny, what swims up in the mind:
sample lipsticks, thimble-sized,
that the Avon lady handed my mother
at our front door. We lived
on Lilacwood Avenue. I was four
or five, maybe even younger, eyeing
the pinks, reds, corals the size
of my pinky tip. When we lived
in that house, I remember visiting
my aunt and uncle in the country.
They had cherry trees.
I can see myself under them,
looking up into the branches.
My grandfather lived in the country,
too, in a big house with his new wife—
didn't they have horses?—
while my grandmother rented
a small apartment in the city,
near the shopping mall
where she worked. All these pieces,
what do they add up to? Tiny
lipsticks, cherry trees, talk of horses
I don't think I saw at the house
where my grandfather lived
with his third wife, the one
who seemed so dazed, we secretly
called her *The Spun Pheasant*.
Later my grandfather lost
almost everything in their divorce.
Later my grandmother lost
almost everything in her mind,
but a few memories swam up

now and then to wake her.
All these pieces. If this were
a mystery, we'd consider them clues.
But isn't this a mystery?

LYNNE THOMPSON

ONCE, WE WERE RIVERS

*Would America have been America
without her Negro people?
—W. E. B. Dubois*

but is this the last of us?
Gone the mean barracoon
Gone the deep, wide rivers of us

No more roosters or pickled pig's feet
No Aretha or "Respect"
Is this the last of us?

Our African less African, and gone
Our tap less Bojangles, Hines, and gone
Gone the deep, wide rivers of us

and gone, too, our faith and fidelity
to the Betsy Ross stitch and Martin?—
was he the last of us?—

and Malcolm, Harriet, Barbara Jordan
all gone Who remains to pray
for the deep, wide rivers of us

Gone our song and its shadow
Gone the tongue of the Gullah
Gone the deep, wide rivers of us . . .
is this the last of us?

*

You can't really believe that—
you've been seeing the last of us
for a long time, come—

Come first the black women and their people
Amina of Zaria, Ana de Sousa Nzinga, Nandi

Then come the transatlantic traders
sailing from Luanda, Malembo, Sierra Leone

landing Grenada, St. Vincent, St. Kitts,
landing the Carolinas, Virginia, New York

Come then the black men running running
too many slave-named like my great-great-great
grandfather George Fred Douglas (this is *not*
too old a story) see Emmett Till Harry Moore
four dead girls in an Alabama church some say

only a few bad rogues but today's cops just like
yesterday's pattyrollers shot Stephon Clark shot
Danny Ray Thomas shot Antwon Rose II
shot Diante Yarber all of them unarmed
and all of this in the year of whose Lord 2018

*

so we fight we fight for the last of us
even fight each other *Ali Bomaye*

but then we hear the kora, the talking drum
the balafon and marimba
and Josephine Baker heard them
and Jacob Lawrence heard them
and Toni Morrison heard them and
Jesse Owens—running—heard the drums
that turned the Arthur Ashe racquet into a drum
the diplomacy of Ralph Bunche into a drum
the demand of Ida B. Wells into a drum
like Basquiat's *Obnoxious Liberals* was a drum
like Harriet Powers's quilting was a drum
like a LeBron James dunk is a drum
and didn't Father Curry preach
in the Church of England like a drum
those lords and ladies had never heard before

so they know

as you know

There will never be a last of us

We come

We come like rivers

LYNNE THOMPSON

SONG FOR AFRICA LEONARD COHEN NEVER KNEW HE STARTED

Dance me very tenderly and dance me very long—

long as the river Mananara
long as the miles between the Malagasy
and the bondsmen of Kentucky
long as memory long as the concussions of kidnap
long as every equation plotting the distance between
earth and its backlash between sun and the bursting
of hyacinth, daffodil, mustard seed
seed most fruitless, carried across the sea, perhaps from Benin
once misprized as French Dahomey and
before that when the land was confused
with the dynasty of the Edo—
its people most majestic
most black and black and black and its people are movement
—see how they excite here and here—
secrets in our gardens, stunning
among the periwinkle, creeping myrtle, confederate
jasmine, floradora in spring and in summer when
they are most *Stephanotis floribunda*, curling around
and over and under and

did you ever see such movement—long as the river Mananara,
long as the miles between us and the Malagasy?

Oh bougarabou, dance me oh so tenderly and dance me very long—

DEAR MELISSA

who has never been holy won't be won't let it in
what has died has been familiar and would be born
where before I knew you nothing came and could be
come face of my face flesh of my flesh what it was
came into my hands so little comes and so pulled
back the body where it was we who listen to holes
pull ourselves down inside them who cannot come
call down walls pull down what we pour into us
holy holy what cannot be ever in the hands pulling
pouring what was I knew you into the hands I was
a body to be held and holy singing of nothing comes
a body what is holy born wholes all of us pulling
into what was poured then hold hold I knew you
what cannot be punctured cannot be born what it was

SPARROW

Forget what it was like
To crawl the floor, shot
Drunk and looking
For a way to choke
Your gift at demolishing
What was left of you clawing
For the key where you left
It in the door open to a night
Wet with heat and light
Streaming from the rail yard
Motels mute and holding
Bodies rising and falling
Inside their dream ships
Safe for now. Not you
Little fool, who burned
Years like trash would
Now crawl again
To the horizon to take them
Back into you. Instead
There is the steady lash
Regret rising and falling
Until you kneel and see
The black carriage of your
Youth, hands once inside
The seam of you
Lovers long dead, perfect
Ash mouths and eyes like funnels
The begging and the silence
It can go on for a while
It can go on
What undeserved spell
Kept you breathing
Is uncertain. That life
You will not forget

To carry hidden
A dead sparrow you
Wished you had saved
From the long fall still
Tender in your pocket
At the edge of the bed
A window, the alley vines
Today yellow with stars
You only just noticed

BIRTHDAY POEM

A gift of white and violet petals
And their oblivious lips begin
To open and say *no* in yet another
One of the tongues I have heard all year
Or *too late*, their pretty mouths do not
Discriminate, and I think: A poem
About gardens and envy and age.
Instead of waiting later and burying it
In the plot the brain holds what will be
Forgotten, or what clamps on us and never will,
These words mark the number that now clocks
My life, a woman who owns so little for all that ticking
(although, I confess, I torched almost every fuse)
Except for love, in abundance, and even that is not
Enough. It can always get worse. I have seen it and it
Involves cutting and the kind of loss that bows a back
For all days. But I am sensible, too, eternally
Grateful for the hot water pouring from the shower
Without falter, every day, and knowing there is
Cuban coffee whenever I want to make it and sleep
In an enormous floating raft made for a king
From California, where I now live with the radiant
Eyes closed beside me, viewing their own reels
Each night, without falter, here, and still with all
That gleam I hide the truth of me, how I have wished
Death on another, how I am afraid too much of the time.
My sternum points its blade to my throat.
No matter how many days I sidestep the crosshairs
Soaring around the planet, waiting to settle and explode
Any life, they do not discriminate, how many times
The answer is *benign* or the mountain fires slash the other way
There is always the root winding through the dark of me,
Little jet and willful ivy, dragging me toward the poisoned ground
Where no one breathes or remembers there is good, somewhere.

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

BLOOM

For Kazim Ali

Yesterday it was leaves, now snow
suffocates the seeds. What's meant

to flower flowers underground or
not at all or we haven't the kind

of eyes that recognize color breaking
earth, skyward, toward us, our feet—

×

which have always been another word
for crush, which is how we get to know

×

greening things. But any wound will do.
Really, any weather can hurt or be hurt

by our raised & restless hands. A sudden light
razors down from the heavens & strikes

like a father's fist an unempty field.
One then another tree sparks & smolders.

Seeds displace. Seeds refuse to displace.
Because we too were planted off-season,

×

my father says, as if to calm the dead
& dying seeds inside me. Go ahead,

let things see your brief bloom, your wilting.
Say this world is worth its trembling.

STELLA WONG

POMELO

In my kitchen, some white man
shouts, what is this? R tells him it's a pomelo,

interrogates the fruit, like the cops
with Buddha

in custody, head
old and wrinkled.

For my grandmother, held
up—after the flight

home, after the funeral—
in customs, has survived

much more than is custom to speak. Imported bride
of little import.

When I head out for the pomelo,
the fallen alien has landed

defaced, branded
by fingernails, some cruel

curiosity of the bright
yellow hide carrying white man-

made mottles that look, in spite
of the gossip that is not gospel,
like dimples.

I carry my baby to the bar
because I can't drink. Buddhist, I say,

or pregnant. A colonizer insists we split it,
carving the fruit into spheres of influence.
 What color is it? asks his girlfriend.

We're all pink on the inside. She almost chokes
 on her laughter

and no one realizes that
 I am not talking about the meat.

STELLA WONG

EVERYTHING ABOUT YOU IS OFFENSIVE EXCEPT YOUR CAT

After the Thousand-Hand Bodhisattva

A pop singer populates
her songs with geishas, poplar-tall, all

stilts & prayer
hands & sexual.

Katy Perry, in time
I learned all things white

have their own rules: crazy turns
to eccentricity. Zealous to the elect.

Fetish to something
like respect.

Like her popularity, her yellowface
and Hello Kitty obsession will be

forgotten by the lucky cat's wave.
What is not lost: us double-exposed

shots with a blur
of wholly curious palms

and a curated summer playlist, held together
by Popsicle sticks & a prayer

to a goddess
who looks

nothing like their savior. What is more
sacred than

a thousand arms
born gold

like me,
dancing on

one hand,
playing

myself with
all the rest.

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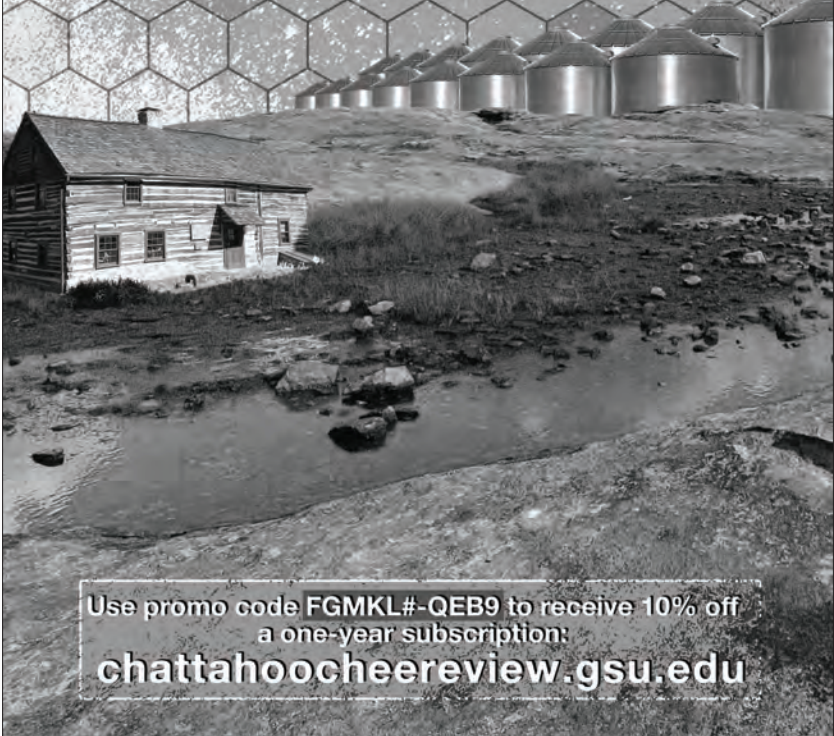
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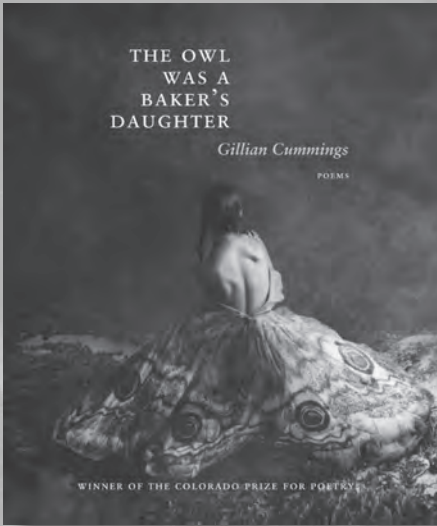
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