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EDITORS' PAGE

"Everything I didn't tell her felt like something I needed in order to construct a place I could live all by myself, high off the ground," the narrator of Becky Hagenston's "Voluntary" recalls of a visit to a hospitalized high school friend many years earlier. Grasping at a sense of control amid her friend's eating disorder, struggles at school, and the dissolution of her parents' marriage, she would eventually find that retreat—and, ultimately, its isolation. We're all, perhaps, looking for a bit of control—and refuge—these days, as evidenced in this issue's other stories and essays. In Rebecca Turkewitz's darkly atmospheric "The Mill Girls," a young woman yearns to break free from the social norms and expectations of mid-nineteenth-century Maine. An executive sous chef attempts to turn the tables on the culture of sexual harassment in Ji Hyun Joo's "Chef Clem," asking at one point: "Who did this body that I was inhabiting truly belong to? Who was calling all the shots?" A young boy in Leanne Ma's "The Killer Slope" feels powerless as he contends with school bullies, bickering and demanding parents, and anguish at having witnessed a horrific traffic accident, but finds an unexpected haven in his stern teacher. In "Vectors," Jamie Cattanach explores her fear of flying, the legacy of her father's anxiety—his "frantic clamor to . . . control the situation." In "Hills, Birds, Bones," Calla Jacobson tenderly recounts dealing with her aging mother's gradual loss of autonomy, then grief in the face of her mother's unexpected death, and the solace she finds in the natural world. Sarah Carvill considers, in "Extant," degrees of extinction and the human interventions to mitigate species loss. "I am trying to believe in the life of the world to come," she writes, but concedes that when overwhelmed, she seeks refuge in memories of a place she loved, "a valley somewhere in the West."

Control may be an illusion, but we can always find ways—even small ones—to help, protect, and heal. And when "the world is too much with us," we can also retreat for a bit, construct a place for sanctuary, whatever that may look like for each of us: real, imagined, or remembered. May the work in this issue offer you a bit of respite.

—STEPHANIE G'SCHWIND

In these darkest hours of mid-winter, past the holidays—and, yes, the election—while people across America contend with the either the biggest winter storm in a decade or the costliest firestorm in US history, and war continues to rage around the world, and the planet heats up, may you pause and count the art of your blessings. The fingers on your hand. The smell of your child's hair. Sunlight through winter trees. Art: to show us truth and beauty, yes, but to show us how to practice it, day after day.

In this issue of *Colorado Review*, we see the durational character of experience in a dizzying array of serial poems. No fewer than six poets (and a case could be made for more) employ serial forms to mark the daily forms of experience. From Susan M. Schultz's interrogative "I and Eucalyptus" poems to Tor Strand's inhibitory "Eden" series, to the searing portraits of trauma in John Allen Taylor's poems, what happens stays happening. And there's more—Maxine Chernoff's "Diary" series reminds us war is always near, a simultaneity in the I and Thou of poetry: "Maybe tonight when you light your lamp, you are dead already but unaware of your passing." And it's there in Amit Majmudar's "Kabul": "*You. Not you. You. You three. Dad, over there.* / The airstrip shimmers. Concrete mirage. / A family rides the landing gear / Into the fuselage."

That dialogic awareness of privilege and precarity is worth noting as the art of sustained attention in family, love, work, place, weather, etc. Sarah Kathryn Moore gets us going with the moody "Degrees of Gray in West Seattle," a surprising homage to Richard Hugo. And Miriam Akervall ends the issue in the placeless heartland: "Now we belong / to oscillations in wheat anywhere. / Where a field dips steeply toward its edges / Where a field sits up and yawns from the earth." Art can, if not save us, offer a vision of clarity about what world we live in, or the world we would like to create: "as if life were lived intact . . . and didn't know / *it was not finished* / as if the continuing . . . of not being finished / *were what life was leading toward*" (Edwin Torres). May you hold to that vision in the coming months, may you hold to the keen edge of this issue of *Colorado Review.*

—MATTHEW COOPERMAN

SARAH KATHRYN MOORE

DEGREES OF GRAY IN WEST SEATTLE

Say June went gray after that one perfect week. Say
you missed the game-clinch

catch or married the wrong man—the details don't
matter. So here you are

at the sparse city beach at noon on a Tuesday, alone
with the fallen volleyball nets

and the week-old trash and the dull windows of
ferries passing, the one-foot

pigeons. Two kids are playing ball. One yells, *Accuracy!*
Accuracy! while the other,

smaller, runs around not catching it. You would have
been him, the little one. You

are him now, your depth perception shot, a cinder in
your eye, but all the time.

The small kid rolls and trips like the raccoon pups
that tumbled from under

the porch last night when you snuck out for a smoke,
the mom raccoon sat

grooming with her eerie little hands. She knew you
weren't a threat, the closest

you get, you guess, to grace. It made you want to cinch
the mouth of the wind sock

carp and put your mouth to its mouth, let the air
rush in. The problem is you

can't fish, can't cut bait. The problem is you can't
know if a chance is your last till

it's passed. *Go long!* the first kid yells, and the little
one backs toward the freezing

Sound. Nears the water, keeps walking. *Go long*. Still
moving, his feet are in the foam

now, and a trick of light or else your ruined vision
makes it look like he's not

stopping, so long, long gone, but no. The problem's
with your eyes. He's standing

there looking at you grinning, like, *I'm onto you, buddy,*
like, *This is far enough*.

AMIT MAJMUDAR

KABUL

You. Not you. You. You three. Dad, over there.
The airstrip shimmers. Concrete mirage.
A family rides the landing gear
Into the fuselage.

When an empire takes you under its wing,
Your arms and legs embrace a turbine.
The turbine screams. Behind you, windshear
Ribbons like a turban.

Translators reason, in textbook English,
With Marines at a wire fence.
Passports, too, can be the wrong color.
Just like skins.

A chopper slaloms black smoke columns.
The Humvees stay in PARK.
Sundown. A woman who taught women math
Calculates the dark.

AMIT MAJMUDAR

ZERO

I like my pantheons packed, but I know there's only one
absolute I'll ever find in nature. Every gun that ever
kissed the O of woe has whispered this solution
to every problem, mathematical or otherwise.
Devil's Hula-Hoop, creation's innie, tin rim of the grail
with the cup beneath it missing, elliptical orbit shucked
oyster-like of the only other habitable pearl in the cosmos.
I know zero, my ancestors invented it. They fell in love
with the emptiness of things and wore its portrait
in an oval locket. Forgive me, elders, I've betrayed you:
I have feasted on the bone-in prime rib, the Fibonacci
alfredo, the five-course meal of the senses,
salmon roe sliced from the living mother's belly,
my spoonful of orange zeroes, each one multiplying one
death by ten. On her ultrasound: a tiny sac, perfectly black,
no embryo inside it, ovum sucked by an opossum,
soul bubble, godsent godfroth godlost.
I know zero, I have one dead center in each eye,
holes punched in the box so I can watch the eclipse.
Zero fits perfectly over zero. Nothing slides over
nothing, like test lenses at the optometrist's—
o/o vision, everything come clear at last.

AMIT MAJMUDAR

SCARCITY

Isn't it beautiful how scarce things are?
Hours—scarce. Minutes—even scarcer. You can mine
the world for people to call *mine*
and come home from that impossible Yukon
with barely enough gold to fill a toothache,
and it's precious, you go to your grave with it,
and archaeologists a whole civilization hence
will hold up your skull and say, *This one was an adventurer.*
Don Giovanni in the opera only had, in Italy,
mille e tre—a thousand and three—
less than three years' worth of one-night stands
and then the rest of his silent life spent
telling his pillow all about Sorrento.
How many triumphs should you shoot for, really?
How many before it all gets old? The barbarians
shuffling in chains behind your chariot, the flowers
all in your face like epileptic butterflies, the slave
by your left wheel saying, *Remember, you, too, are mortal . . .*
You only get one best day of your life,
so it's best to tuck it in your mortal cheek
and let it melt there. Once you count your senses
on the fingers of one hand,
you can savor even the handful of sufferings
this bread line spares you, the forty-second-long
finale when your few true friends
firecracker overhead and leave the night darker,
as many echoes as there are fingers of whiskey,
too few, which is to say, too many to bear.

AMIT MAJMUDAR

UNNATURAL INTELLIGENCE

I am inconsolable in my obsolescence,
a man, scratch that, an untermensch of letters. *Prove*
you are human. Click on all the boxes with stop
signs. *Stay, thou art so fair,* said Faust
to the moment, as he finally surrendered
to the Devil. I signed no contract,
got no fame or joy, no slap or tickle
with Helen of Troy. I just fast-forwarded
to the reckoning. Dark arts, necromancy.
Divination bedevils my nights: *Prove*
you are human. The tricks I use to prove
I am human will be used to train the algo.
It is not necessary to be conscious;
I just have to make another consciousness
think I am conscious. *Prove*
you are human. Which is to say, *Prove you are not*
nonhuman. Immigrant sob story, detailed
vignette of childhood in the 1980s, earthy
descriptions of sex with reference to odors
and birthmarks. Portmanteaux, arbitrary
line breaks, erratic runs of meter,
whimsical allusions, overuse of onomatopoeia
and kennings to hint at a rule-transcending
flexibility with the components of language.
Is that all you got? The screen said *prove*
you are human, not *prove you are*
desperate not to seem nonhuman.
I doff my beaked plague mask and take a bow.
Heroic couplets cannot save me now.
The game, alas, was always recombination,
two parents, four nucleotides, twenty-six letters,
a hundred-plus neurotransmitters, thirty-three thousand
devas. Supernatural intelligences once delighted
in this embodied soul they programmed

with their own breath. Newfangled machines
mean new fangs. They are teaching themselves
to do everything the devas could do:
fly through the air, conjure music in their wake,
vaporize cities, even engineer their own usurper.
Instant karma for this Faustian gadget of a being
peeking through the telescope
and saying to the stars, *Prove you are divine.*

REBECCA TURKEWITZ

THE MILL GIRLS

Biddeford, Maine. 1854

We learned about the wild woman from the men who escorted us back to our boardinghouse after a lecture, the deadline of our curfew looming. The men also worked at the mill and were surprised—or pretended to be surprised—that we had not heard of her. A week earlier, the boys who were paid pennies to pull eels off the canal grates had spotted her, crouched on all fours, taking sloppy bites out of a raw fish, her ankles and one of her hands submerged in the cloudy water of the lagoon. When the boys tried to approach her, she growled and bared her yellow teeth. "They said she was half feral," one of the men told us, his own yellowed teeth showing as he grinned.

Caroline's grip on my arm tightened. The lecture had been on the rights of workers, and there was a revolutionary excitement, stoked almost to giddiness by the lurid descriptions of the woman's ferocious sneer and matted hair. The night was prickly with cold, and the moon painted a silver strip down the center of the river. The mills stood like fortresses, their tall chimneys turned to shadows against the sky. It was barely October, but already it was dark when we woke and dark when we left the mill.

The men described the woman's rolling eyes, her mouth that hung partially open, her torn dress. They wanted us to grasp their arms. They wanted to hear us shriek. I'd been in the city six years, longer than most of the other girls, and I saw through these men. I could recognize the curious mixture of disgust and desire in their voices. I knew that they were picturing exposed flesh, tangled hair, and the curves of the wild woman's body, shivering with every ragged breath. They would feel the same mixture of longing and revulsion if they actually succeeded in pulling one of our group aside to push up against in the dark. I'd heard enough stories about girls who had let themselves be led. These men didn't understand how to love, or even see, all of

a woman. To them, our true selves would only ever be mirages that flickered in and out of view.

Dorcas, with a smile almost as mischievous as the men's, asked where the woman slept at night.

"Maybe she has a cozy den, down near the riverbank," one of the men suggested. "Or she finds a warm corner of the empty mill, then scurries out again before the bell tolls. Perhaps she'll oversleep one morning and you'll startle her awake."

Maryanne, a new arrival from a New Hampshire dairy farm, asked, "Where do you think the woman came from?"

"Not a good home like yours," the man said.

By bedtime, every girl in our boardinghouse knew about the wild woman. In my diary, I'd sketched a portrait of what she might look like. I gave her a long black cloak, curled lips, and carnivorous teeth.

As we were preparing for bed, I asked Caroline if she was afraid. Like the men, I wanted her to be.

"It's probably just the eel boys' imaginations run wild. Or the men trying to wind us up. *You* aren't scared, are you, Lucy dear?" Caroline's cheeks were pink from the lingering cold, and her bottom lip had a slim crack down its center. She leaned over to peek at my half-open diary. I snapped it shut.

"Who do you think she is?" I asked.

"If she's real at all, I'm sure she's just some poor woman who can't find work, or who got herself into trouble and is too ashamed to return home." In our world, trouble meant only one thing: pregnant with no husband to claim her.

"You two are no fun," Dorcas said from her bed. "Enough with your reason. Let us have our monster."

"This was a *private* conversation," Caroline said, laughing.

"No such thing in this house."

"I have a bad feeling," Aure said, in her lovely Canadian accent that sounded like her mouth was full of cotton.

"Don't be silly. Those brutes were only trying to frighten us," Dorcas said.

"You seemed very pleased to let James frighten you," Caroline said, and then dodged Dorcas's hurled pillow.

"I don't like this place," Aure insisted. "I've felt for a long time that something is wrong."

Dorcas made a face at us over Aure's turned head.

Caroline, who sat with the new girls at dinner when they were weepy and so homesick they couldn't eat, went over and perched on the edge of Aure's bed. "This life just takes some getting used to."

Aure had been having nightmares since she'd arrived. She didn't like that we were surrounded by water, even though the island was barely an island at all. The river was swift and powerful on either side of us, but there were little bridges that connected us to town, and the train came howling by every hour to remind us of the outside world.

Emilienne, already lying down, urged us to go to sleep, and we complied. Though we were lively enough, there was no evening when our hands and backs didn't ache. Sleep was always a relief.

I heard the ruffling of the others' shallow mattresses as they burrowed into their scratchy bedclothes. Caroline pulled our blanket up, but carefully so it did not scrape against my neck or chin.

At night, after curfew, we were locked in. Some of the other girls found this to be an indignity. Maryanne said it made her feel like Rapunzel, locked away in a tower, which implied she was waiting to be rescued. But we were locked in with one another, with our secrets, with our hot breath, with the reassuring pop of embers in the fireplace, with the low moan of a girl in troubled sleep, with the quiet murmuring of her bedmate soothing her away from fear. Sometimes I suspect that I would not have minded if we were locked in always, or if the bridges and the railroad fell away.

We tried not to disturb the others, though there is no privacy in the boarding-houses, nothing to guard against the gossip that spreads like a contagion.

I woke to Caroline's lips against my shoulder blade, where she'd pulled aside my gown. Her hand was coiled around the small mound of my stomach. I listened for even breathing from the other beds. We tried not to disturb the others, though there is

no privacy in the boardinghouses, nothing to guard against the gossip that spreads like a contagion. I pushed against Caroline and she let out a short hiss of air. Our room was never quite dark in the winter, which made it harder to pretend we were alone, but it allowed me to see the flush of Caroline's pretty cheeks and her sly and eager smile when I finally rolled over to take her in my arms.

Caroline is not the first girl I've been with. By the time we grew closer, I'd earned a reputation for such things. But Caroline is the first who didn't inquire about walking by the river in the evening, only to say, "I'm so lonely," or, worse, that she needed to practice for her wedding night. I would have been offended had I not felt the change in the girls' breath and tightening of their grasp, or seen the dewy, far-off look in their eyes afterward, full of gratitude and lightness. They arrived to this city from their quiet farms wanting to be remade, and I remade them. They would remember me forever, and I was already forgetting them. When I'd told Caroline this, she complained that I would forget her too. *Then you should not leave me*, I'd said.

When I moved away from Caroline, I felt, as I always did, like I was sinking into a deep river, its inky blackness a wonder and a relief. Sleep opened wide around me, and I was sinking, sinking, when I felt Caroline's rough lips and the shiver of her finger running along my jaw.

"Again?" I whispered, laughing. Caroline grinned down at me, and then underneath my soft laughter there came a sharper laugh, high-pitched and raucous. My laughter died in my throat and Caroline put her palm over my mouth, as if that thrilling sound were coming from me. We scrambled against the wall and held each other.

Emilienne and Aure sat up in their bed, their eyes wide and questioning. Aure reached across the room and shook Dorcas and Maryanne awake. The six of us listened to the laughter crackle through the night.

"Is that coming from inside the boardinghouse or out?" Dorcas asked.

"It's the wild woman," Aure whispered with an authority that made it true.

Caroline kept the bedcover pulled tight around her shoulders but crawled forward so she could peer out the window, which

looked out at the shadowed street. "There," she said, pointing to a figure I could barely make out. Caroline inched the window open. "Hello," she called. "Are you all right?"

Aure hushed her. As soon as Caroline had spoken, the laughter stopped. I couldn't tell if the person on the street had turned toward us or not. The figure seemed to sway back and forth slightly. We watched until it moved away, disappearing from the range of our view.

"Is she gone?" Emilienne asked. When Caroline nodded, she added, "Do you think she'll come back?"

Aure answered in French.

"Okay, girls," Dorcas said in her rough, strong voice. "There's nothing to be done tonight. Let's go back to sleep or we'll regret it."

I felt Caroline's heart beating against my back when I leaned against her. From our room, we could hear the river, roaring over the dam and swirling against the rocks. As I drifted to the brink of sleep, I kept thinking that I heard the start of that wild, startling laugh again, but it was only ever the rush of the water.

The next morning, the girls filing through the mill gate gripped one another's hands, jumped at sudden noises, and looked more closely at the long shadows in the mill courtyard. They were drowsy and bruise-eyed. They laughed more easily, whispered more keenly. Those who had slept through the peculiar barking laughter or had rooms in boardinghouses farther away were envious, and those who'd caught a glimpse of the woman were smug and self-important in their retellings.

Not everyone agreed on what the laugh sounded like or how long it had lasted. I overheard one girl, with very blonde hair and rabbit teeth, say that it was not laughter at all, but a woman sobbing. Maryanne said it sounded like a mix between a woman and a dog. A girl who also hailed from Buxton, who'd grown up a few farms over from my family's property, said she'd heard the woman call her name.

You'd think nothing extraordinary ever happened at the mills, the way we clamored over a simple laugh and a silly rumor started by the eel boys. But that's not true—life in Biddeford was stranger and more exciting than most of us could have imagined. More had happened to me in those six years than in my entire life beforehand. I'd met a woman who walked

the high wire in a circus. There was a girl whose father lost both his hands in an accident at a cannery and then wandered off into the woods one night and never returned. I knew of two girls, who were not related, who had identical birthmarks, which were purple and shaped like the head of a lamb. I had watched a clump of a careless girl's hair get caught in the machines; I saw the shocking eggshell-white of bone before the blood swallowed her whole head. I'd watched a busker eat a silk scarf and then cough up a bouquet of flowers in its place. The boardinghouse next to ours had been robbed one night while the girls slept, unaware. I'd witnessed a girl become so mad that her face turned plum colored, and she shrieked and struck another girl; I'd seen men wield their anger in this way, full of swagger and danger, but it had not occurred to me that women could as well. At night, the girls played the piano in the parlor of our boardinghouse, and traded books, and shared secrets, and we discovered that when you meet enough people, there is always someone who can relate to even the most unusual circumstances of your life, and always someone whose life is so different from your own, it's almost inconceivable. And Caroline happened there, of course, and the girls before her, who are nothing to me now.

There was no paucity of excitement in our lives, but each new experience was an event to be mulled over, dissected, shared with a friend, or carefully inscribed in our diaries and letters home. We were all paying such close attention. And if you had heard the laughter, perhaps you would understand why it was not so easily forgotten.

I've failed, I think, in my description of the laugh: how piercing it was, how it made its way into us and unwound itself, pushing aside everything else. If a flare lamp could laugh as it was being lit, that's what the laugh sounded like. It was the laugh that a drowning person would give if they enjoyed drowning, or maybe it was like the laugh of the river as it pulled a person under.

The work at the mill, once you are good at it, once you are strong, is monotonous. I worked in the weaving room, though I started as a spinner. The mill is sweltering and loud. There were times when the roar of the machines grated on my nerves like the whine of a rusty hinge, and I worried it would drive me mad. There were also entire days when I lost myself in the heat

and the flecks of cotton that caught the light and looked like snow. I felt, with my hands moving deftly, my arms strong, and my mind sharp, closer to God than I have ever felt in church. On some days, the best days, I became absorbed in stories I invented or thoughts of Caroline. I entered a sort of pleasant trance, and I was almost sorry when the day ended or the bell rang for break.

I have always been a watcher, even back home on my parents' farm, when all I had to watch were the chickens and the grackles and my loud, dumb younger brothers, playing soldiers or pioneers. Caroline worked near my station, and I loved to watch her move. She was surprisingly quick for such a solid, wide-hipped girl, and her fingers seemed as if they were part of the mill's machinery. Occasionally, she caught me watching and winked.

We were all distracted that day. Elizabeth, a slender girl of only fourteen, pulled me from my reverie to tell me that she had heard the mysterious woman was a witch who could grant wishes or bestow curses. "What would you wish for?" she yelled against the whir of the machines. I shrugged, not even attempting to holler my reply to her. I raised my eyebrows to throw the question back. "A raise!" she yelled. "Or a home-cooked supper."

My true answer is that I would have wished for time to stop, so that all the mill girls would stay young and lithe forever. I'd wish to always be able to return to the boardinghouse in the evening, bone-tired, to find Maryanne at the piano bench throwing her clopping melodies into the parlor, to always share my bed with Caroline, to always be able to stand on the Main Street bridge and watch the water thrumming below me. I'd like to fend off, for as long as a spell could keep the wheel of time from creaking back into motion, the moment when I would have to leave the mills. For none of us good, proud, marriageable girls were ever meant to stay.

When the bell rang for our break, I could tell I was not the only one dazed and almost reluctant to leave my station, to follow the trail of breadcrumbs back out of the forest of my mind.

At supper, the girls were eager to share what they'd learned about the wild woman, who now had a name. In another life,

she'd been Miss Valentina, a medium and fortune teller from Boston who'd graced the parlors of wealthy widows and grieving parents and men who wanted to know their fates. When I asked Dorcas how she could be sure this explanation was the real one, as opposed to the rumors that the woman was a sorceress or a creature that was half-dog or merely a vagrant, Dorcas snapped that we didn't *know* yet, but she was convinced. Another girl said she'd read about Miss Valentina in *The Boston Post* years before. There was a picture with the article, and she'd never forgotten the woman's wolfish eyes and the way they appeared to be looking at the reader from the page.

She'd never forgotten the woman's wolfish eyes and the way they appeared to be looking at the reader from the page.

"Enough of this gossip," Mrs. Johnson, our housemother, said. She was kind, in her stern, removed way, but her sworn duty was to our parents, not to us. And our parents had one stipulation—that we remain decent and properly innocent for when we returned. They feared we'd become that loathsome species: a *girl of the town*, who walked home late at night from lectures with flirtatious men and talked with confidence about mediums and spirits.

We wanted to respect Mrs. Johnson, but supper was short, and we'd be torn away from one another so soon. After a moment of quiet chewing, Caroline said, "But how did the great Miss Valentina wind up here, wearing rags and haunting the lagoon?"

Dorcas pointed a spoon at her. "*That's* the question. A long way down from the drawing rooms of Boston's elite."

"Jim told me that her brother owns the pharmacy on Main Street. He and his wife took her in when she lost her mind. But she still sometimes sleeps in the alleyways."

"I wonder if speaking in the voices of the dead is what drove her mad," Maryanne said.

Aure crossed herself. Her food was barely touched.

"This must be the perfect place to commune with the dead," Dorcas said. "All those canal suicides. All those lonely ghosts of poor ruined girls."

"She's just teasing," Caroline assured Aure. I knew, though, that Caroline was intrigued. She liked to learn the names of plants and knew the stories behind all the constellations. She wanted to understand as much of our world as was possible.

"Enough." Mrs. Johnson clapped her hands against the edge of the table. "You'll be late. Clear your plates, please."

As we scrambled out the door, Mrs. Johnson held me back. "I've got a letter for you," she said. "Your mother claims you still haven't written back. They are anxious to hear from you."

This was my parents' third unanswered letter. I let it wrinkle in my pocket as I moved between the looms at my station. I'd skimmed the contents before plodding out into the autumn's early darkness. My father was still ill. My sister was getting married. I was needed, urgently, at home. In the last letter, my mother's neat, smooth writing had inquired if I'd met a man. *We will not be angry. Everyone misses you. You'll be welcomed home, no matter who he is.* She could see no other reason why I'd stayed away so long. I'd saved enough; the work was hard; I was almost twenty-two.

I know I'm lucky to have a mother whose love burns so brightly, whose desperation was born from concern, who would rather have her daughter beside her than earning a few extra dollars a week. I know I should not wish to be an orphan. I know the letter should not have made me want to disappear.

The first time I'd returned to Buxton, I felt like I was living outside my body. I watched myself help prepare supper, or go out in the crisp morning to milk the cow, or laugh demurely, or lie awake listening to the slow huff of the wind and the high whine of the crickets. There were two versions of myself, I realized, sharing one body. Biddeford had cleaved me in two.

My hands were shaking. I took a step back from my station. The machines bellowed, and the knowledge that they could not be stopped or silenced made me want to sink to the ground. I bit the side of my cheek until I tasted blood. I focused on the squeeze of my feet inside my too-small shoes and the pinch of flesh between my teeth. I waited to come back into myself.

One of the loom fixers appeared at my side. "Are you all right, Lucy?" he yelled. I returned to my work, which was answer enough for him.

One of the girls, who had a brother in Cambridge, obtained a periodical on famous mediums. It contained little information about Miss Valentina, but there was a picture of her, dressed in a long gown with an elegant fur shawl. Miss Valentina's nose was sharp, her eyes were deep and penetrating, and her expression was haughty. There was no doubt that she bore some resemblance to the woman we now occasionally glimpsed shuffling down Main Street or muttering to herself by the mill gates. In the periodical, she was described as a "conduit for the spirits and a Clairvoyant." Caroline paid one week's wages for the magazine, and then tore out the picture of Miss Valentina and tacked it over our bed.

The woman in the picture had an imperiousness that our wild woman lacked, but they shared identical broad shoulders and shrewd dark eyes. Every time I saw the woman, she was wearing the same dirty shawl. Her fingernails were so long they'd begun to curve over on themselves. Sometimes she was not wearing boots, and I wondered how she could stand the cold through her stockinged feet. She screamed curses when people got too close to her. She seemed drawn to the mill and the river. Once, I glanced out the mill window and saw her standing in the courtyard, her neck tipped back. It seemed as if she was staring directly at me, but how could that be possible? She was so far below and the mill had so many windows. I looked away swiftly when she raised her clawed hand, and did not look back to see if she was waving or pointing or simply adjusting her hair.

November fell on us like a door slamming shut. The long nights spread their wings around the city, ice floes appeared in the river, the frozen ground snapped beneath our feet, and the smoke from the oil lamps made our throats scratchy and raw. Girls still talked about Miss Valentina, but with less hushed excitement. She became part of the landscape, a slightly sinister figure who had failed to live up to her promise. I received another letter—this time in my brother's clumsy handwriting, in which he threatened to fetch me himself if I did not return. I finally wrote, promising I'd be home by the New Year. I said nothing of this to Caroline and tried to pretend that month would never come. When I could not sleep, which was often, I watched Miss Val-

entina's picture, as if it would provide an answer. Sometimes, in the darkened room, while Caroline slept untroubled beside me, I imagined that I saw Miss Valentina's eyes blinking languidly, her chest rising and falling slowly. I felt that there was a connection between us, though I couldn't say what. I had no dead that I wanted to speak with, no thread that tied me to the spirit world. But some part of me was certain that Miss Valentina was waiting for me, though that is easy to say in retrospect.

The afternoon we finally met Miss Valentina was so cold, the grass was tipped with white, though it had not snowed. Still, I insisted Caroline take a stroll with me after church. All morning, as we sat in the narrow pews, I'd itched to touch Caroline. I turned to gaze behind me and let my hot breath spread across her neck, so she would be thinking of me too.

"You've been acting so peculiarly lately," Caroline said as I pulled her toward the river. She'd assumed we would stroll through town, peering into shop windows at dresses we couldn't afford.

"I want to be alone with you," I said.

Caroline waited for me to explain further. When I didn't, she unlaced her fingers from mine and dropped my hand. "Why won't you talk to me? There is always some mysterious storm thrashing behind your eyes, but you pretend you are not preoccupied. You say only a fraction of what you think."

"What will happen when we leave here?"

"Oh, this again," Caroline said, her expression softening. "My love. We're here, together. We will know what to do when the time comes."

"It's coming," I said. When Caroline turned to me, alarmed, I quickly added, "One day." Her eyes fluttered back to the ground.

What did I think would happen in January? I would disappear in the night, and she'd wake to find my side of the bed cold, my trunk gone? The truth is that I figured my departure wouldn't matter much, in the end. This year or the next or the next, Caroline would return to her family and the preacher's son her mother wanted her to marry.

"Where are you leading me?" Caroline asked. The river thundered beside us. We were almost to the canal that ushered the water into the lagoon under the mill. Soon, we'd arrive at the

spot where Caroline and I first kissed, in the shadow of an elm that would now be leafless and offer no protection. I stopped and grabbed the rough fabric of Caroline's dress. I thought to pull her toward me but couldn't bring myself to move.

"What's wrong, Lucy?" She looked at me warily. "Are you ill?" She put a hand on my cheek and stroked away a tear, then ran her thumb over my mouth. I closed my lips around it.

We heard the snap of the frozen grass at the same moment. Caroline snatched her hand away and we turned. Miss Valentina, in her matted shawl, was watching us, a thin smile on her pale pear-shaped face.

My first instinct was to flee, but Caroline called out, "Good morning!" before I could react.

Miss Valentina laughed—that same stunning, mirthless laugh that had cracked the night open the month before. It carried over the wind and mimicked, somehow, the pounding water of the falls. The laugh turned into a wet cough.

Caroline stepped forward, unable to resist the pull of someone who might need help.

"Do not come closer," Miss Valentina said, with surprising command. I caught the faint hint of an accent similar to Aure's and Emilienne's.

"Miss Valentina," Caroline said. "Right?"

"No one calls me that now."

"Martine, then."

I turned to study Caroline's profile. Where had she learned the woman's real name? Why had she not shared it with us?

The woman, too, was startled. She flashed her dark eyes at Caroline and snarled—a real snarl, inhuman and instinctual. I moved to Caroline's side, but Caroline didn't seem frightened. She tilted her head and put her hands up in a conciliatory way. "I didn't mean to pry. I'm sorry. *I'm sorry.*"

The woman took a step toward us. At the same time, the wind changed, and I caught her smell: musk, urine, a fetid ripeness.

"You're an interesting one," the woman said to Caroline. Then she turned to look at me, swinging her whole head instead of only moving her eyes. "And you, even stranger. Underneath."

"May I ask . . ." Caroline said, and then she trailed off. The two strongest impulses in her were at war: her curiosity and her kindness.

"You want to know if *The Great Valentina* can really speak in the voices of the dead. Or maybe you want your future told." The woman scanned the river, then looked up at the sky, then at something behind us. "Show me your palm," she said. Caroline held it out, and Miss Valentina peered into it, then lifted it to her face and sniffed like a bloodhound. "You may choose. Would you rather know about *your* future or *my* past?" she asked.

"You," Caroline said without hesitation. "Please."

"How unexpected," the woman said. She smiled. Shrugged. "If you really want to know, it was my brother's idea to offer my services as a medium and fortune teller. We needed the money. He came up with the flashy name and the doctored boots and the secret pockets. I came up with the tricks with the candlelight. I became quite good at finding clues that revealed secret after secret. People give so much away. They cannot hide what is precious to them. But, at some point, I stopped needing to pretend. I opened a channel. Or maybe we'd been mistaken. Maybe I was never really a fraud."

"I became quite good at finding clues that revealed secret after secret. People give so much away. They cannot hide what is precious to them."

"What do you mean?"

"Shall I show you?" Miss Valentina's eyes trailed toward the river again, then slowly back to Caroline's face. "Would you like that?"

"I would," Caroline said, her enthusiasm poorly concealed. "If it wouldn't hurt you."

I studied the jumping movements of Miss Valentina's eyes and couldn't understand how Caroline did not realize that we were in the presence of madness, that there was danger gathering like a coiled spring.

"It always hurts, my dear. But there is someone here for you, and it is growing harder to keep her out."

If I had not seen what happened next, I would not have believed it. All at once, Miss Valentina's face changed. Her cheekbones jutted out more, her jowls narrowed, her mouth tightened,

her posture grew coy and girlish. Her gaze fixed on Caroline so intensely, I felt as if I did not exist.

"You've gotten thicker around the waist," the woman said in a voice that was high and tinny, with no trace of accent. "It suits you."

Caroline took a step back, as if she'd been slapped. She let out a breathless exclamation, a sound that I took to mean denial.

"Have you forgotten me so soon?"

"Please," Caroline said. "Stop."

The woman gestured at me without shifting her eyes. "She's a quiet one. I know you like the quiet ones."

"I don't know who you are," Caroline cried.

"You never did." The woman gave a small, tinkling laugh. "You never *really* knew me. You thought that I had an unclean mind. Like you."

"Enough," Caroline whined.

"I did *not* have an unclean mind. I was weak, at first. But in the end, He showed me the way to be better, to be good."

"Josephine," Caroline said softly, and she began to weep. "I'm so sorry."

For a moment, it seemed as if all sound and color seeped away. I tried to steady myself. Josephine had been a girl in Caroline's former boardinghouse, a close friend of Caroline's I'd never met. Josephine had woken early one morning to meet the train and then hurled herself in front of it. Caroline, who was always so open, did not like to talk about the girl or her death.

"Caroline," I said. "What does she mean?"

"I'm so sorry," Caroline said again, though I couldn't tell whom she was addressing.

"It's cold here," the girl said to Caroline. "And sometimes I miss you."

"I miss you too. I did not mean to hurt you, ever. Oh, God." Caroline could not stop crying long enough to say all that she wanted to say.

Caroline had told me that I was the first and only girl she'd loved, but I could not deny the strange intensity of emotion that passed between Caroline and the spirit of this girl. Was I jealous? Perhaps, for one hot and searing moment. But behind that angry slice of emotion, there was a wash of curiosity and a pang, even, of desire. I shook my head. I had to push all that

aside. For, although my thoughts were riotous, the one realization that clanged loudly and clearly above all else was that Miss Valentina was not a fake. Her powers were real.

I took a step forward, ignoring the roiling in my stomach at the woman's stench and her wind-chapped skin. I grasped her shoulder and shook her. "Miss Valentina," I said firmly. "Martine!" The woman's face unmolded. Her back straightened.

"Wait," Caroline gasped. "Wait!"

"Please," I commanded. "Tell me. If I leave this place and return to my parents' farm, will I ever come back?"

The woman's eyes rolled for a moment and then locked on to me. She gave a clipped yell, and her hot, stinging breath was rancid. She clawed at my hand, trying to push me away. The jagged edge of her fingernail caught me under the jaw. I felt a tearing. Still, I did not let go. "What will happen to me and Caroline?" I demanded. The woman swiped wildly again, and I felt warmth spreading across my forehead. My right eye was forced closed by a rush of blood. Only then did I step back to grab at my face. Caroline was closer than I'd realized, and I crashed into her, tripping backward when my foot had nowhere to land. Pain lanced my side. My head struck the cold ground, and my skull was filled with a loud hissing, like the water bubbling over the falls. I rolled over and retched.

After this, there are gaps in my memory: dark clouds obscuring events that Caroline explained to me later. I don't remember Caroline leaving me, sprawled on the stiff grass, so she could find help. I don't remember Miss Valentina straightening her shawl and simply continuing her walk, calm now that I was not clutching at her collar. I don't remember slinging my arm over the shoulders of the kind man who assisted Caroline in leading me back to the street. But I do recall stopping to rest on the steps of the boardinghouse next to ours, watching the swishing tail of a horse and a muddy puddle rippling in the chill wind. I recall waking up in damp sheets and watching a rat watch me from the corner. Something was quite odd about the arrangement of our room. And then I realized: there was a slant of daylight cutting the floor in two. I had never seen our room from the low angle of our bed in the late afternoon. I have other snatches of memory: Mrs. Johnson tipping a bowl of fragrant broth into my mouth; Caroline wiping my forehead with a cool rag; the doctor dabbing something onto the cut on my neck

that jolted me awake with an eruption of pain; Dorcas—gruff, impatient Dorcas—crying as she held my wrist and prayed.

The hazy remembrances of my few wakeful hours during that hot and fretful week are covered in a gauzy film. But I can recall, with stunning clarity, the precise images of my dreams. The scenes arrived without context—bright, vivid flashes in a deep purple sea of sleep. I saw: a market street on a rainy day, a young boy handing me a bushel of garlic. I saw, through the panes of a first-floor window: Caroline, dressed smartly and gripping a parcel, walking swiftly, then turning to unlatch a gate. I saw: a train car with red curtains, a blur of tree trunks and brick-colored leaves, my own nervous hands clasped together in my lap, Caroline in the seat across from me. I saw: a slice of golden sunlight caught in Caroline's tangled hair as we lay together in bed in an unfamiliar wood-paneled room. I saw: Caroline chopping carrots in a tidy kitchen while a tabby cat begged for scraps at her ankles.

Caroline tells me that I spoke in my sleep, though none of it meant anything to her. She tells me I fought against the doctor when he tried to change the bandage on the deep scratch under my jaw, which was red and oozing and kept my fever high. She told me, when she was sure she wouldn't be overheard by anyone else, that she'd even caught me trying to reopen the wound. She claimed that I resisted as she tried to hold me down, that I said I wasn't finished *seeing*.

My mother and my eldest brother came to fetch me. Dorcas and Maryanne gave up their bed for them until I was strong enough to travel. At the station, Caroline wept when she saw us off.

"I fear I'll never see you again," she told me, while my mother and brother stood on the platform and pretended not to listen.

"We will be together soon," I said. "I promise."

"I don't understand what's changed in you. Are you angry about Josephine? She's not important."

"Don't say that," I said. "It's not true."

"Please, don't leave," she begged.

"I will explain it all later. I'll write to you."

I couldn't reveal, yet, why I was no longer scared of losing Caroline, why I knew it did not matter if I returned to my parents' farm, which is where I am now.

I'm not sure how long it will be before I wake next to Caro-

line in that sunlit wood-paneled room from my dream, or watch her prepare a stew in our small kitchen, but I am certain that future awaits us. I know because I have seen it. I know because Miss Valentina passed to me, for a time, her great and terrible gift of sight.

My mother plies me with all my favorite foods. She asks if I need any clothing mended, if I would like to rest. She remarks, with noticeable distress, about the new way I wear my hair. She looks up sharply when I tell my youngest brother the story of Orion's fierce battle with the scorpion and explain the three bright stars of his belt. She eyes me with suspicion as I prepare the beans for supper, my thoughts taking me back to Main Street, to the river, to the boardinghouse.

She is catching on. She knows I am not the girl who left all those years ago. On previous visits, I was so desperate to show her how the city was harmless, how it had not changed me. But I've moved freely on moonlit streets, and I know how to laugh with my whole body, and I like the purr of the machines under my hands, and I like the purr of another's body under my hands, and I am strong and getting stronger. Our families were so worried about the city's temptations and its corrupting influences. They'd heard the town could transform their daughters into people they hardly recognized. And they'd been right to be afraid. For who among us would ever be the same?

TRIIN PAJA

LUMINOUS CHILD

when a bone-beaked bird in the oak tree
cries out a yearning, my sister
still sleeps in her dress.

sister, remember the joy of eating stolen apples
while walking
under the dusk's wingspan.

you must live brightly
in many sorrows.
in wild, constant diminishment.

for in the dictionary of ordinary darknesses
I find you in a furrowed photo
in a sepia forest.

after being a village child,
the forest means:
mushrooms sprout from a poor animal,

and we must consider becoming the forest.
while you sleep, I yearn
that in a house

where a falconer has stitched shut the eyelids
of other birds, you are
still looking.

for your laughter to gallop
despite
early shames.

under your dress, under your
wet obsidian feathers,
for you to still love your longing.

TRIIN PAJA

BELLS

when mother cuts my hair
I see her cutting grandmother's

potato-peel hair. I see grandfather
braiding my mother's hair

into a noose
abandoning her by the quarry

where the sweat of the prisoners
salted the limestone

where the only sound was spit.

bells rusted in my mother's belly.
if ever she laughed

grandmother would shatter
the clay jar of her voice.

I never said she was kind.

except as a girl
when her skin's silt found a river.

though the river was only
his cruel hands.

I only know my mother's hands.

her hands in my hair
and I am calm as a lake

wearing its silvery necklace of herring.

then her hands cover her face
like dandelions closing

when the night is too much to bear.

IRA SADOFF

FIRST MARRIAGE

After David

In this dream, I was Marat in the tub
and she came to stab me. As in our old life,

I played the martyr, fierce and unforgiving.
In bed we spoke the gibberish of strangers,

and we hectored each other endlessly
before we could finally walk away.

Even then I knew hate poisons everyone,
so in my bath, in my dream, I blessed her.

The bath was milky, medicinal,
meant to disinfect the wounds.

She stayed with me a while, the shadow
of her, until she pulled back

into the world we left each other for.

IRA SADOFF

ODE TO THE MATERIAL WORLD

Oh fierce gods, you and your heartless agents,
how can you go on without me? Won't you miss

my dustups, my clever little jokes,
my voluntary servitude? Bringing my lover tea

each morning, crooning a little lied
—off-key but full of heart—and at night

adjusting the bed frame before we fell sleep.
I loved my jobs that added up to almost nothing,

that meant nothing, and how does that differ
from hours at our desktops or on the floors

of factories? We thrive on fumes
from a little hope machine: a plaque,

a peck on the cheek, a swim
from one ordinary isle to another.

ANGELS

> *Americans' belief in angels (69 percent) is about on par with belief in heaven and the power of prayer. . . . Fewer U.S. adults believe in the devil or Satan (56 percent), astrology (34 percent), reincarnation (34 percent), and that physical things can have spiritual energies, such as plants, rivers or crystals (42 percent).*
>
> —Holly Meyer, Associated Press

I've been drinking the wrong ambrosia.

But even if I believed everything
happens for a reason—isn't it a thrill
to skip over the hard parts?—even if

I could rid myself of everything useless,
drink from a saucer by the streambed,
and hold my pants up with a rope,

even if I made a world of ether,
if all who've been euthanized came back
to celebrate the great earwigs of eternity,

I couldn't be seduced by these sanctuaries
and their buckets full of silence.
I know how to conduct myself. And symphonies

of Haydn with my broken pencil. I like to hear
a walnut crack, the bed creak,
I like a change of clothes, I can tolerate

our bungled years of avarice
and even those who long for lives
in other galaxies. Truth is, our god's

not yet come, and I have not invited him.

SUSAN M. SCHULTZ

I AND EUCALYPTUS 3

Eucalyptus and I exist outside of context; I am the eye of the eye of the camera that fixates on one drop of mahogany sap, casting its shadow like a lure. The text is not I, though I watch its black drip on a virtual, white page. *But everything else lives in his light.* Not a sacred light, unless you nail the bronze label on, name to make it so. Tree is light insofar as it reflects; so am I, it seems, on this morning when there is varying light. Yesterday was mock eternal, unvarying in gray rain. This morning colors distinguish themselves. It's all in the contrast. One woman stands beside one tree (her dog on a red leash, tugging), taking photos for no reason she understands. If it's to stop time, the eucalyptus is already pretty slow. If it's to memorialize the moment, the moment insists it's alive as flashback (technical word for memory). *This is the eternal origin of art: a human being confronts a form that wants to become a work through him.* Is the tree then a form that I confront? Or is the form the photograph, operating through me at a second remove? A friend sends me this: "Anyhow, Daido Moriyama used to tell his students, 'Till you've taken ten rolls of film of a single building in one shooting session, I won't believe you even really *looked* at the building.'"

Seeing-machine, attending-machine, life support for eyes.

Where I place my frame frames me, though I'm not seen here (abhor the selfie!) I am that bit of grass from which the tree grows into the light of morning, or I am that patch of yellow-striped asphalt over which mountains show, bearing their clouds like cakes. *Such work is creation, inventing is finding.* Or a subcreation folder, tucked inside the external hard drive, exported into Lightroom, then meddled with. Is the meddling invention? I can't reproduce color tones I don't remember, so I produce what I hope is close. Neighbor to "true," not figment

or fragment, however imagined. But this is getting quite grand, this lexicon of invention and creation; back in Mosquito Park (as we call it) *all actual life is encounter.* As I pull my camera away from Eucalyptus, some brown tar sticks to my dog's red leash, feathered there. We take the tar away with us. Something of this moment sticks.

SUSAN M. SCHULTZ

I AND EUCALYPTUS 10

Separation isn't magic, though it works for some. My dog and I are housebound by an inconsistently strong rain. I hear burbling, bubbling, bubering outside the sliding glass. Rain comes as volume without button to adjust: loud, soft, loud. *The longing for relation is primary, the cupped hand into which the being that confronts us nestles.* Cat motor in my bed at night; dog snores or sleep barks. There's a consciousness in their sleep, as in my being awake. In your sixties, you're awake a lot with the dead, the old ones, the new ones, the ones you find out about later. Time flew, though we presumed only for us; everyone else is fixed in the foretime of our acquaintance. Children remain small, adults uncreased. Are the dead separate or collaged into us, like poems layered with voices? Move the radio dial to hear its cacophony. We intend as little as Eucalyptus. Its (in the sense of an It that is a You) eruptions of tar and color and peeling bark come from no central consciousness (do they?). Our voices do, but they splatter without our control, like the rain we wait out until we can walk again. Dog wants walk, I want walk, Eucalyptus may want to see us, but the day's lesson is to stay. A stay in deliberations, meditation on staying put. Put that out, fire or word hoard, and watch it accrete or dissolve into ash.

The drive aims at reciprocity, at "tenderness." That comma. Does it divide reciprocity from tenderness, while suggesting they're close? Is it an equals sign, denoting synonym? Why the quotes around "tenderness"? Is reciprocity necessarily tender? Gentle or sensitive to pain? Fusion or a con? *But it also determines the inventive drive . . . through taking or tearing apart.* Is that *or* an *and*? Eucalyptus is torn apart, but there's no agent acting upon it, except when I pull tenderly at a small piece of bark and touch it. To touch is to alter, either taking or tearing apart. Or offering, in its dual sense. Let my photos be my offerings to you. These images are small, not so

much shattered mirrors, but constrained ones. The form of the photograph is small; that of the meditation claims to be larger, but keeps getting away from the central trunk of the matter. The lighter tan of the interior, unveiled by bark's peeling edges, like a wound or an origin or both. An origin along the way. Biology's as much an interpretive dance as an adoption, though adoption seems perfectly biological to me. Have I adopted this tree, relation not of possession but of being nearby? Has it adopted me, in those moments of my not wandering, the stillness that offers an image back? You think too much, my mother always told me. When it was not a tearing, it was an offering, pleasure to be aware of this life's walk.

JAMIE CATTANACH

VECTORS

Seven miles above the expanse of Hudson Bay, 32H is watching the sunset. The plane chases darkness on its way east toward Amsterdam, where it will land at 9 a.m.—midnight in the minds of its Portland, Oregon, passengers. The sun's rays cast long purple-orange tendrils across the water, glowing the ice of Southampton and Coats Island pink. My seatmate sees the spectacle through the dual-pane stretched acrylic that protects them from the force of the five-hundred-mile-per-hour airspeed and arctic temperatures.

Or not. Maybe they've got the shade down to watch a movie or attempt a nap. I can't know. My seat, 32J, is empty.

I'm still on the ground, watching the journey in real time on an app. I've been tracking this flight for weeks now, keeping tabs on the flight path as well as the specific aircraft that travels it today, which arrived this morning in Portland from Amsterdam, where it had been flown from Atlanta. From my palm, I can tell the model of the plane, its current speed and altitude, and how much each parameter differs from those originally logged in the flight plan. I know the plane flies at an odd altitude—flight level 370, 37,000 feet—because it tracks eastward. Jets heading west fly at even altitudes as standard practice, so as to avoid collisions.

I can say where along this flight path there are diversion airports and exactly how long the plane will be suspended over the water. I know how many hull loss accidents—the aviatory equivalent of saying a car's been totaled—this type of aircraft, an Airbus A330-300, has sustained over its three-decade flying career. (Fourteen.)

This is my second time canceling a flight at the very last minute, suitcase packed, rendered by terror unable to steer myself in the direction of the airport—the second time I've cobbled together a thin night of what should have been pre-flight sleep by the grace of a friend's emergency benzos, replaying, in my wakefulness, the scene:

The calm night outside my porthole suddenly unhinged; the steep dive belly-felt and ineffable; the blink-fast shatter of endless ice or ocean water or—when the flight in question was cross-country rather than transoceanic—a mountain's slope, a stand of trees. Then, never-ending dark.

It started with my father.

My parents were living in St. Augustine, a small tourist town in northeastern Florida. My wanderlust had taken me to the other corner of the country and COVID had pinned me there. These were the early days of the pandemic, before the vaccines. My folks were in their seventies, my mother suffering a chronic pulmonary disorder. To fly to them might be to kill them.

So when my father had a stroke in May 2020, I did not come. Mom had told me the news too casually, her voice steady over the phone as I drove back from Mt. Hood, where I'd been foraging with friends—each of us driving separately to avoid the dangers of close-quarters breathing.

Your father's in the hospital, she said, *but don't worry.*

I worried. I listened to him slur his words through the phone; a stray blood clot had taken the whole left side of his body, lips and tongue included. Later, when his care became too much for her to handle, my mother bushwhacked by herself through the decorative plants surrounding his quarantined inpatient facility to peer at him through the glass.

It took him nine months to die, like a birth in reverse. I timed the trip home for a little more than a month after it happened—exactly two weeks after I'd visit Portland's soaring convention center to wait in a serpentine, six-foot-spaced queue for my second dose of the vaccine.

Booking the flight was familiar, or should have been. I'd spent my twenties all over the place, running away from the real work of finding myself, cleaving to an almost defensive identity as *traveler*: I'd flown to California and Dublin and Montreal. Three years before the pandemic, I'd sold my car and bought a one-way ticket to Barcelona, naively planning to bop around Europe indefinitely, to find a way around the ninety-day limit for US passport holders in the Schengen Zone.

Instead, homesick and isolated by language barriers, I'd returned to Florida before my allotted time had elapsed. I justified it as a surprise, showing up at my parents' door on Thanksgiv-

ing, delaying the text messages I'd sent at my overnight New York layover so my mother wouldn't know we were sharing a time zone. After the initial shock, she cried. *Are you real?* she asked in earnest. *Am I dreaming?*

The last time I'd been home had also been Thanksgiving—that time just over a year before, in 2019, when none of us could see the global disaster creeping close on the horizon. I hadn't known it would be the last time I'd see my father alive.

But that afternoon, cross-legged on my bed with my laptop glowing up at me, something made me pause. The cheapest available route, the aggregator told me, was through Alaska Airlines—direct from Portland to Orlando. It would be my first time flying with Alaska, and my first time flying at all since before the shutdown.

I don't know why I did it. Perhaps a year's worth of pandemic had made me, in a generalized way, more wary. Perhaps some part of me wanted something to fear.

But I did, and the rabbit hole unfolded beneath me. I opened a new tab. I typed *alaska airlines safety.*

This was early 2021, three years before a mid-flight door-plug blowout—on a plane out of Portland, no less—would put the airline under intense scrutiny. The MAX jets, which had been grounded in March 2019, returned to service in late 2020 with little fanfare; without widely available vaccines, few people were flying anyhow. *Downfall: The Case Against Boeing*, a documentary showcasing the decline of the company's engineering culture following their merger with McDonnell Douglas, would be released about a year later. As I write this essay in 2024—in the wake of a spate of headlines about near-misses, air traffic control shortages, and turbulence severe enough to injure and even kill passengers—air-travel-safety skepticism is a slightly more popular position. But in that moment, even the impulse to search for such a thing seemed on the order of conspiracy theorizing.

Still, a few clicks later, I found myself staring at the Wikipedia article for Alaska 261—a flight that plummeted into the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Los Angeles in January 2000.

The page does not have the word *catastrophe* listed in bold at the top, like a category; that memory I must have invented. But my recollection of the YouTube simulation of the crash is spot on: an animated specter of the doomed plane sits at the

airport in Mexico, pixelated palm trees standing sentinel in the background. After takeoff, we watch from the pilot's point of view as clouds float by, and soon, the windshield tips precariously toward the deeper blue of the water below. Pertinent parts of the black box recording are silently captioned over the prosaic and steady sound of running jet engines: *We've lost vertical control of our airplane. . . . We did both the pickle switch and the suitcase handles, and ran away full nose trim down*. The camera pans back into the cabin, the army of seatbacks mercifully empty in this artificial world. *Folks, we have had a flight control problem up front here. We're workin' it*. Minutes later, the plane is inverted just feet over the ocean. The captain's final words flash across the screen, uttered one second before the recording ended: *Ah, here we go*.

I bought the ticket anyway, giving myself all the comfort I could: the two decades of intervening time, the statistics. The number of planes in the air at any given moment, the literal millions of passengers transported each day. All those times I'd been one of them, with my ritualistic air-travel playlists—Iron & Wine's "Boy with a Coin," Elliott Smith's "Between the Bars"—that I made sure were ready to go, downloaded onto my phone.

But on the morning I should have been catapulting my body toward Florida, I threw my suitcase in the car and drove to the Oregon desert instead. On the highway, I thought of my mother grieving alone on the other side of the expanse I would not cross—of how she'd held my father's hand as he slowly stopped existing. I pictured my plane flying overhead, the first part of its trajectory matching this new one of mine, imagined it crumbling in midair, completing the wild cycle of my anxiety, the debris raining down over the road. Ending me anyway.

I thought of my mother grieving alone on the other side of the expanse I would not cross—of how she'd held my father's hand as he slowly stopped existing.

At 9:07 a.m. on a hot morning in Larnaca, Cyprus, in August 2005, a Boeing 737 floated off the runway. The plane was head-

ed for Prague via a stopover in Athens. The takeoff was routine. The captain had been flying for thirty-five years, accruing a total of 16,900 flight hours. He'd spent nearly two years of his life behind the yoke.

By 9:14, the pilots knew something was wrong. Two minutes earlier, at an altitude of 12,040 feet, an alarm had sounded in the cockpit. The crew was confused; the alarm was misidentified as a takeoff-configuration warning but was instead a cabin-altitude/pressure warning. The captain contacted maintenance, mentioning that "the cooling ventilation fan lights were off," an ostensible air conditioning problem. Over the next six minutes, an engineer tried to talk the pilots through it, but by 9:21, the crew was unresponsive.

Helios 522 is one of the most famous aviation disasters in history because it is at once so gruesome and so simple. When the plane had arrived in Larnaca the evening before, the crew advised maintenance that the seal of the right aft service door had frozen, and an engineer inspected it. After the inspection, he checked the plane for leaks—which required flipping the pressurization system from *automatic* to *manual*.

The flight to Athens should have taken an hour and forty-five minutes; the plane arrived in the Greek capital's airspace around 10:40 a.m. as planned, entering a computer-perfect holding pattern. By this time, fighter jets had been dispatched to intercept the aircraft; unable to establish communication, air traffic controllers suspected an act of terrorism.

When the fighter jet pilots got close enough to look into the plane's windows, they saw oxygen masks dangling in the main cabin. In the cockpit, both pilots were slumped over their controls. It was a ghost plane. The vessel had never pressurized, so the pilots, confused by the homophonic cabin-altitude alarm—and soon thereafter, the brain-fogging effects of hypoxia—hadn't understood what was happening. They fell limp as the autopilot pulled the plane upward and onward into thinner and thinner air, plunging everyone onboard into a deep and irreversible coma.

Or nearly everyone. At 11:49 a.m., the fighter jet pilots, still tailing the plane, saw someone enter the flight deck. Andreas Prodromou, a junior flight attendant, had been clinging to consciousness with a portable bottle of oxygen. Maybe he guessed the entry code to the cockpit's reinforced, locked door—a secu-

rity measure mandated after 9/11. Or maybe he found it, perhaps by searching the unconscious body of the purser. No one alive can know.

Once inside the cockpit, he bleated a frantic "Mayday!" into the radio—which was still set to the Cyprus frequency, and thus inaudible to the controllers below in Athens. It didn't matter: Everyone already knew the plane was in trouble, and Prodromou was far too late. Just a minute after he took the controls, the left engine flamed out due to fuel depletion. The right one lasted for ten more minutes. Then the plane plunged at more than four hundred miles per hour into the mountains outside Grammatiko. Prodromou, who'd obtained his pilot's license but was not qualified for the Boeing 737, managed to bank the plane away from the urban center of Athens, saving an untold number of lives on the ground.

While fingers quickly pointed toward Alan Irwin, the chief engineer in charge of running the pressure check—who was eventually convicted of manslaughter, though the case was appealed and Irwin found not guilty—there is still some controversy about who is truly responsible for this crash. The pilots, after all, failed to reset the pressurization system during their multiple flight checks, and to recognize the cabin-altitude warning horn that sounded as they crossed upward into unbreathable air. Boeing, too, came under some fire for recycling an alarm linked to such a critical flight system.

But the simplest version of the story is the most chilling: a single flipped switch led to the deaths of all 121 people on board.

Wikipedia's list of accidents and incidents involving commercial aircraft dates back to 1919. Over the months following my father's death, I turned those blue links purple like it was my job. It was mesmerizing, masturbatory. I stayed up late into the night scouring investigation findings, watching chilling flight simulations on YouTube, and learning the call signs of high-profile accidents—Air France 447, American 191—by heart.

I was looking for a pattern. A way out.

I'm not alone in my thanatotic craving for plane-crash porn, and you don't have to scour the depths of YouTube to find it. A Canadian show called *Mayday: Air Disaster,* which airs in the most anodyne setting imaginable—The Weather Channel—has run for twenty-four seasons and counting. Every time there's a

commercial crash, global news outlets cycle the story for days on end. At the time of this writing, the most recent such accident is Voepass 2283, which entered an uncontrollable flat spin just short of its scheduled landing in Sao Paulo, Brazil. ABC, CBS, and CNN have all publicized the horrific cell-phone footage of the plane drifting down like a winged seed before it crashes in a residential neighborhood in Vinhedo.

Still, like any secret worry stone: the shame.

I started writing this essay in Bend, Oregon, where I'd driven myself once again as my plane outpaced me overhead. I should have been at a writing workshop in Europe and had taken a week off work for it. Instead, I spent the time alone in an Airbnb, panicking.

I'd gushed about the workshop, which I'd had to apply for, to my nonliterary colleagues as an accomplishment. I'd waxed euphoric with friends on my plethora of extracurricular plans in Amsterdam: the Anne Frank House, whose tickets were in such high demand that I had to wake up at 1 a.m. to snag them when they went on sale at 10 a.m. local six weeks before my visit; Electric Ladyland, a museum of fluorescence I was planning to visit under the influence of the psychedelic truffles widely available in the city's "coffee shops"; a day trip to see the tulip fields, just then in bloom, an hour outside of town. Even as I recounted my itinerary and watched nonrefundable reservation fees fly out of my checking account, I worried. As I drove east out of Portland, passing first the airport and then the city line, I turned over excuses in my head. Having to explain on my first day back at work that I'd changed my plans at the last minute for *mental health reasons* was so much worse than the wasted money.

I knew I was far likelier to die by meteor strike or drowning in my bathtub or driving. I knew about the redundancies, the contingency plans; about ETOPS and TCAS and MELs. I knew that, statistically, I'd have to fly every day for ten thousand years before I'd be involved in a fatal plane crash. I drove to a park near Portland International and watched from the ground to see for myself: the planes land and land and land.

But then.

My father was afraid of airplanes. He was afraid of many things. When I was growing up, our home was an Easter egg arsenal: handguns hidden in the kitchen drawer, the laundry

room, the bedside table. A tiny one tucked into a wicker basket by the front door.

We lived in South Florida, the third house from the end of a dead-end street along the Intracoastal Waterway. My bedroom was in a corner of the house, so I slept between twin picture windows, the muffled sounds of the subtropical night leaking through the glass: cricket song and drunken revelry from the tavern across the water. We had an alarm system—which dinged annoyingly every time a door or window was opened, foiling any chance I had for adolescent escapades—but I knew from early on it was irrelevant. *If someone really wanted to get you,* my father said to me, *they could just break that glass and step in.*

When I was still small enough to hold hands at the mall, my father made me jump over the last step as the escalator finished its ascension, warning that if my shoelace got stuck, my foot would be sucked into mechanical oblivion. He swung me mid-air over the metal sewer grates I was still young enough to call *grapes*—what if I fell through? Later, he cautioned me against walking between parallel-parked cars: If the parking brake gave or there were an untimely swerve from oncoming traffic, my legs would be crushed to uselessness.

If. If. If.

By the time I was twelve, I had a full-blown anxiety disorder, complete with panic attacks and prescription medication. I remember the moment it began. My parents and I were crossing the Sunshine Skyway in our little canvas-top Jeep. The bridge soars 180 feet over Lower Tampa Bay. My father, from his vantage in the passenger seat, noticed the guardrails: They were low, he thought. Too low. And we were traveling so fast, so high above the water.

He started to panic.

Pull over! he shouted at my mother—who always drove, due to her relative cool-headedness and sturdier attention span.

I can't, she said. She couldn't. There was no shoulder. We were already on the bridge.

Crouched in the backseat, the canvas top whipping relentlessly around me in the wind our motion made, something in me quickened.

Yes, I pleaded, joining my father's chorus. *We have to pull over. We have to stop.*

We can't, my mother said again. Steady. Measured.

By the time we'd reached the other side, I'd learned a new kind of fear—a grown-up and insidious one.

It worked like a spore, regenerating itself in unpredictable ways. It manifested broadly, turned me inward. (Probably, in making an astute observer of me, it made me a writer. *Look,* fear tells you. *Look again.*)

But the main effect was withdrawal. I missed so much of sixth grade that I was saved from being held back only by the grace of my straight As. I changed schools for seventh, the first in a series of attempts to reinvent myself that would persist well into adulthood. I fumbled my way through high school chronically terrified, wearing my black eyeliner and wielding my poetry-filled notebooks like armor. I made snarky remarks from the shadow of whoever was my best friend at the time—invariably someone louder and more popular than me, someone more externally readable as *present.* In college, I replaced the best-friend figure with my first serious boyfriend—and less than a month after we broke up, my second.

I spent my twenties systematically running at everything that scared me—failing, of course, to outrun myself in the process.

I was never alone, and always.

I spent my twenties systematically running at everything that scared me—failing, of course, to outrun myself in the process. I was determined to earn back my life, though I'd yet to learn what, exactly, that life meant. I drove across the country by myself, then turned around and did it again, hiking in remote wildernesses and eating in nice restaurants the same way: solo. I moved to a new city where I knew no one. I got on the goddamn airplane, no matter how hard my heart beat, again and again and again.

Every few weeks, I listened to my father's voice pour worriedly through my cell phone speaker as I updated my parents on my adventures.

I'm so proud of you, he'd say. *But I wish you wouldn't.*

By the time I was thirty, I thought I'd conquered my fear. At the very least, I could get on an airplane with no trouble.

I'd amassed a string of travel destinations and experiences, was seemingly at home wherever I went. It took me a while to realize that my fear had simply transmuted again: although I could run freely, I was *always* running. My next challenge was to tolerate stillness.

I'd started that process when my father died. I'd landed in Portland with plans to stay just months before the pandemic forced my hand. But in the moment of his passing—my mother's name flashing on my cell phone screen as I sat three thousand miles away in my redbrick apartment—the combination of apprehension and morbid excitement I'd felt as a child during hurricane season—his fear, *our* fear—bubbled back to the surface. The frantic clamor to stop the car, to come down from the bridge, to control the situation: It had been waiting all along. It found me anew from all the way across the country, inhabited me like a ghost—like his last words to me: *Here. Hold on to this.*

When I met Andrew, I'd just gotten back to Portland. After torturing myself for six months about it—lying awake at night, imagining all the time and energy and money it would take to drive six thousand round-trip miles, comparing it to the looped vision through an imagined porthole of the quickly approaching ground—I'd finally driven to Florida to grieve with my mother. I watched every painstaking mile between us transpire up close. It took me a month, that trip: a week's worth of continent each way (five-plus hours, if I had flown it) and two weeks to reckon the loss. To hold my mother's hand while we watched *Jeopardy!* To stand in the room my father had died in once he'd been sent home on hospice, silver-streaked hairbrush and mouthless teddy bear silent on the dresser, guarding the place where his hospital bed had stood.

Our first date was more like recognition than acquaintance: We were both artists, both originally from Florida, and each had an extensive, peripatetic history of traveling and moving, of starting again. I walked away feeling felled and giddy.

Fourteen months later, I sat across from him in our living room, curled into the couch, tripping on mushrooms. It was daytime, and he was on his laptop, editing music. Andrew, who'd included such travels in his roster of twenty-something

adventures, had introduced me, at my request, to psychedelics—which I'd always been curious about but, of course, too scared to try. Now I was having my first solo trip, and he was serving as sober sitter.

It was late January, and the rose bushes outside our picture window spread skeletal toward the sky, screeching against the glass with the wind. I watched their shadows against the far wall. The second anniversary of my father's death was approaching in March. *Everything ends*, I thought. My body felt weighted and weightless at once.

I turned to Andrew, who looked up to meet my gaze. Seeing the question in my eyes, he pulled the headphones from his ears.

"What do you do about fear?" I asked.

He smiled. "You sound like you're on mushrooms."

"I know," I said. "But . . . it's hard. Fear is the problem. It limits us. But it also"—

I thought of seatbelts and expiration dates and the helmet he'd insisted I buy with my bicycle. I thought of the time we'd hiked together to a high ridge in the Columbia River Gorge in winter, the gusts I thought threatened to blow his slight form over, of holding him back when he'd wanted to stand on the farthest outcropping of the rock, the most precipitous ledge.

—"it also keeps us safe."

Aviation terminology is co-opted from the maritime—the language used to describe the first way we devised to cross an ocean. We *board* the plane, stepping past the *cockpit* and into the *cabin*. The *crew* calls the lead pilot *Captain*. *Pilot* itself predates aviation by a long stretch: It comes, by way of medieval Latin, from the Greek *pēdon*: oar, rudder. *Navigator.*

It filters into our everyday speech. We call the person in the passenger seat our *copilot*; we say we're *taking off* when it's time to leave a party; we're so exhausted the next day, we're *running on autopilot*—we had a *rough landing.*

Or we're *flying by the seat of our pants:* acting without extensive preparation, making decisions as we go. In aviation, flying by the seat of one's pants is to fly by physical feel, without the aid of navigational instruments. It can be dangerous. In foul weather or darkness, without the guideline of the horizon, what feels like forward motion might actually be circular—and a

tightening circle, by sheer virtue of its physics, will funnel an aircraft down and down. The dynamic is common enough to have a name: the graveyard spiral.

When someone is acting just short of recklessly, fighting to go beyond the defined boundaries of some situation, we say they're *pushing the envelope*—an engineering idiom popularized by test pilots. An aircraft's flight envelope is its set of limits: the airspeed, weight, and altitude at which a plane, given its build, can safely fly. To push the envelope is to approach these limits, sometimes even to surpass them. That's the entire purpose of the test pilot: to see what happens. But the consequences of such pushing can be deadly. Planes traveling outside their flight envelopes can stall, dive, break up in flight. Disintegrate. The triangle traced at the top of the envelope chart is known as the *coffin corner*.

That's the knife-edge of fear: We must push against it to live; for the same reason, we must heed its warning.

No wonder we keep this sea-faring terminology in our mouths, fall back on its metaphors. This is the technology that shrank the world, that gave us the globe—that tens of thousands of people have died devising. Without envelope-pushing, without leaning into danger, we'd never get anywhere. That's the knife-edge of fear: We must push against it to live; for the same reason, we must heed its warning.

And we must know, too, where to turn when our precautions prove inadequate. *Mayday* is a phonetic borrowing of the French *m'aidez*: help me. An outstretched hand.

In *Lost & Found*, Kathryn Schulz recounts the implosion-like loss of her father. Death is "the most common of all losses, repeated every hour of every day since the dawn of history," she admits. "But viewed up close, it is shocking, a whole universe flashing out of existence."

As my own father's death collapsed in on me, my anxiety changed at a molecular level. My fear was no longer theoretical. Until this moment, even my worst fears had mostly been about bad feelings: I was afraid of the claustrophobia I'd feel when the

plane's door closed, of the panic I'd felt on the Skyway, so for a time, I avoided air travel. I was afraid of embarrassment, so I kept one eye over my shoulder in social situations. I was afraid of feeling misunderstood, so I never let anyone too close.

When I encountered death, all of it crumbled. It was nonsense in the face of impermanence.

Everything is different now: crossing a busy street, strapping myself into a roller coaster, running my hand over the bony expanse of my lover's shoulders. We are so fragile. We are built to end.

I tried to recount this to a friend, to explain how my first major experience of death metabolized in this strange way: a reignited fear of flight.

"It's a container," I said.

She laughed. "You put it in an *actual* container. In the sky."

Of course it's all illusory—my subconscious's attempt to crystallize the unfathomable into something I can measure, can make predictions about. Something with the gloss, however flimsy, of control.

All that tracking, all those numbers: I was desperate for a calculus of safety. But my efforts were themselves a ghost plane, a phantasm of agency. No one has the capacity to steer themselves clear of death.

To be alive is, necessarily, to be in a precarious position. We are temporary, in motion. We're already high above the water. There is no place to stop.

We each owe an ending, be it skydiving or shrinking under bedclothes. And to put fear first—to spend our brief lives trying to avoid the loss that is our birthright—is a fundamental self-denial.

It's the surest way to lose everything before we've had anything at all.

If you look up into a clear night sky for long enough, you'll see them: the blinking red-and-green lights that delineate an airplane in flight. These are, again, a maritime tradition—red for port, and green for starboard. My father taught me.

We were always on the water when I was a child. Despite the ocean's dangers, my father stood collected at the helm, with purpose—though he readily admitted his respect for the water included a healthy dose of fear. I couldn't have been more than

five years old when he offered this orientation: I learned *port* and *starboard* at the same time I was learning *left* and *right*. I also learned *fore* and *aft* and *head* and *galley*. My whole world floated in this unanchored certainty, in the physical wooziness of waves: on a traveling vessel, directionality is self-referential. If we're both heading north, side by side, my *port* faces your *starboard*.

Sea ships and airships light themselves the same way: the left side of the vessel blinks red; green shines on the right. Starboard comes by way of Old English: *stēor*, meaning *steer*, and *bord*, meaning *side*. Before centerline rudders were invented, boats were turned by oar, and most oarsmen were right-handed. Coming home to port, they lined up their left sides along the dock to leave the *steerboard* side open for maneuvering.

One side toward safety, one side toward the stars—and all to which they lead. They are a kind of safekeeping, these little lights we use to show ourselves to each other: *Here I am. Here's where I'm going.*

Do I need to spell it out? Or is it understood?

How I resented him, my father, and his fear. How it changed the tenor of my loss of him.

How it added to the distance—how, when my mother called to tell me he was gone, I let out one wrenching, choked sob, then couldn't cry again for weeks. It floated like a half-formed bubble atop a skid of soap, never ascending, my grief. It got stuck deep in the muscle.

When I stood in his empty bedroom that summer, six months after he'd passed, it was still hung with framed photographs I'd taken: a stretch of Irish coastline he'd never been to—couldn't, unwilling to take a cross-water flight; a trawler in the Matanzas River in the very same city where he died, taken with him beside me, manning the wheel of his own boat.

I didn't figure out until after he died that he'd meant it as a gift. As protection. *Guard yourself. Look where you're going. Stay in reach of the light.*

He was handing me the directions the best he knew how. Vectoring me in.

Although he hated it, my father did fly—had to, for work. My parents were young and broke and had just started their own

business. There were important meetings in Texas. *You're getting on that airplane,* my mother told him. He did.

By the time I was making memories, the business had outgrown the need for in-person rendezvous. Dad quit flying because he no longer had to; his fear then became a family affair. The three of us rode Amtrak sleeper trains up and down the Atlantic Seaboard to see family in New Jersey. Or we drove, expending dozens of hours and thousands of miles along the I-95 corridor. I never flew with my father that I can remember, though I'm told we flew as a family a time or two when I was still a babe in arms: a wedding, a funeral.

But he romanticized it, his time as a business traveler—told me about all the thinking and drinking he did at seven miles high. I know we have shared the experience of staring, terror-struck and tantalized at once, out that double-paned porthole. Defying gravity.

Just four months after I got home from Florida, I went back again. This time, I flew: my first flight since all of this started. I was still afraid—if anything, more so, with all my newfound knowledge, with so much context for what could go wrong. When the plane made its first wide bank, turning eastward out of the airport, my whole body shook. But with my hand in Andrew's— *m'aidez, m'aidez*—I could stand it.

I wanted him to meet my mother. And he wanted me to meet his dad. Although we would first meet years later in Portland, we were born and raised just a hundred miles from each other. We'd attended, as teenagers, many of the same concerts; we grew up traversing the same beaches and roads.

We wanted to take each other home.

I watched through the window as we backtracked together, at speed, all those miles I'd driven alone. I squeezed his hand, hard. When we arrived, I stood again in my father's empty room, showed him the photos on the wall. Andrew is, as my father was, a musician—has his same mess of curly, dark hair too. We spent our last night in St. Augustine in the garage, picking through the dozen or so guitars my father had collected. My mother told us to take as many as we could carry.

I sat on the concrete floor and looked up at Andrew, perched on an old stepladder. I watched as he reverently drew one, then

another instrument from its dusty case. He pulled quiet music from them, touching them each in turn, gently. They looked so easy on his body. I could not stop picturing them—Andrew and the guitars—floating back again over all those miles, like dolls picked up and placed down in a different room by a child. It made my stomach feel roller-coastery to imagine it—the motion, but also the impact: these ancient relics in new love's hands, flying at speed to the home I'd made on the other ocean, the home that felt in some way outside of all this. I'd left Florida in part to leave my inheritance of fear behind, to outrun the ways I'd lived its legacy. It would be three more years until my mother would come to Portland, conquering her own fear of flying to do so. My father never did.

At the airport in Orlando, we checked the two hard-cased guitars we'd taken, but Andrew insisted on carrying the soft-cased Telecaster through security. It meant we'd have one too many carry-on bags—yet another reason for me to be nervous. *We'll be fine*, he assured me. We were. The gate agent didn't even look up as we walked onto the plane with our extra cargo.

The miles rewound themselves outside our window—over the port-side wing, where the red light blinked our position. Fear thrummed quietly in my chest: a companion, a teacher. We were racing toward the sun.

TOR STRAND

EDEN: AS POET

I visit the Audenhaus
in the season when
snowfall is doomed by noon.

Crows in the far corner
of the graveyard
the blackest of blues.

Churchyard, why have I found you?
Above Auden's grave:
POET: AND: MAN OF: LETTERS

Who wouldn't see it here?
Crow by the red glass candle,
you know the dead better

than any of us. Beyond
the train stop—wheat fields
play with perception.

The stairwell in Auden's
home is paint chipped
and green as the ivy

shouldering his stone.
I have dreamed lifelessness
heavier than this.

The neighborhood
children grasping
at the melting snow.

TOR STRAND

EDEN: AS CHURCH COFFEE

instant / just add water
during the second reading / god

empties himself / becomes human
i ask / why must we lift ourselves

arch our frames / toward
golgotha / the place of the skull

where christ last lifted / isn't the press
of consciousness enough / we sing

from afar / mary weeps / coral reefs
bleach / during the eucharistic prayer

god's body / won't crumble
as we read / the nicene creed / and praise

all that is seen and / unseen
how nice a thought / to gather forever

up like a ripe / berry

a narrow window / in the ceiling
of the narthex / a triangular blue

TOR STRAND

EDEN: AS MADRONE

•

Maker of klamath earthmantle
peridotite & serpentine
in the needle of native bunchgrass
a trunk resurrects a water cool
body as if you saw sky
  & broke it
say take & eat ochredust
chartreuse & salt the mosaic chaparral
& gnarl of canyon live oak
on the southface xeric bedrock
a berry like no apple or pear or citron
  keep your metaphor to yourself
I fall on this crag with waxwing
robin thrush & quail the band-tailed pigeon
  all of which
of a color you will never know

•

now & forever
  & forever & ever
river—
  save for you
leeched
  to me
& that can be
  I can be
your borrowed—
  your cup
I will forgive
  your trespassing psalms
for I know

the life everlasting
for I know
you cannot scale
my mile after mile
can't read
the poems
in my ligature
I will always
have sky
splashing
from my heartwood

TOR STRAND

EDEN: AS SMOG (OR) THE EMBERED WORLD

As if spun into serum, the words of Wright's *Appalachia*
indiscernible now
without artificial light, which I could fetch, though being guided
all day by

detachment, I am apprehensive to the thought. Besides, the verse
attempts the kind of emptying gathered in lightlessness—

these days and three does way through as if sojourners in their
born land.
As if created in the feigned smoke of blue field, one bows into the
green

patch of meadow where my sink pipe drains water that has come
cloudwise twice in four months. The other deer darken

as she nibbles first then rips the wet earth like cracked knuckles.
I am so delighted in her living, I stand to further find her

in the burnt air, the tongued dust, suffuse her immediacy
into the rings of this deathful heat—

briefly, she looks into the gap between us, before disappearing into
the tan oaks, into the place where I cannot go even if I quit breath.

JOHN ALLEN TAYLOR

THE OTHER BOY IS ASKED IF HE WOULD LIKE TO BUY POPCORN TO SUPPORT THE LOCAL TROOP BY A GROUP OF CUB SCOUTS OUTSIDE SAFEWAY

I'm sorry

creek waters incise the bank shear stress
what sediment is carried what carries settles
what moves cuts through to oblivion

Thank you, though

at critical speed every limb trunk crown no
matter size root depth or elasticity
will ruin in the wind

Take care

field mice whisper when the shadow passes
whisper *go*
go now

JOHN ALLEN TAYLOR

THE OTHER BOY IS DEPOSED

A scout is trustworthy, and I trusted.

A scout is loyal, and I did not tell a soul.

A scout is helpful, and I offered myself.

A scout is friendly, and I smiled when smiled at.

A scout is courteous, and I knew how to please.

A scout is kind, and I never killed a thing.

A scout is obedient, and I obeyed.

A scout is cheerful, and I kept my smile.

A scout is thrifty, and I paid my way.

A scout is brave, but I was afraid.

A scout is clean, and I washed, and I washed.

A scout is reverent, forgive me.

JOHN ALLEN TAYLOR

THE OTHER BOY FILLS OUT AN ONLINE FORM FOR A FREE IN-DEPTH CASE EVALUATION

First name:

volunteer alyssum

Last name:

what a mother gives

Briefly describe your case:

am I to reenter
tent zippers
bind unbind
thrill and revulsion
distantly a bell
struck three times

what use are you
to the child
who carries
what has been
made wordless
stone beneath water

will you be
the absent god
find the edges
of shame to lift
so the child cannot
feel its leaving

let touch be
sunflower seeds
pressed to soil
coiled green hose
pine dust settling
on mayfly wings

JI HYUN JOO

CHEF CLEM

After a steady four years of meticulous grooming, my pubic hair had lost its lushness. The air was cooling as we were being weaned away from summer. I got back from my shift at Izzy and took a cold shower. I stood in front of the full-length mirror, preparing to tend to my pubic hair the way I do a delicate plant. Normally, I used my pinky-length comb, a tool used by dog groomers for declumping animal eyelashes, to brush out my pubic hair before taking a few minutes to rub my lavender and coconut oil concoction into the follicles.

That night, however, I was so focused on the clump of hair, round and dry like a tumbleweed, that had fallen out into the palm of my hand, I couldn't concentrate. I went into the kitchen and grabbed one of my old glass Tupperwares and put the hair inside. Then I put the container in the freezer. Preservation at low temperatures is my immediate reaction to what I fear might decay.

I had been working at Izzy as the sole Executive Sous Chef for thirty-four months and had been feeling a sense of inadequacy since they announced B had been hired to share my position alongside me. Soon after B started working, it was fist bumps and chest bumps all around. He had grown chummy with the line cooks, held private meetings with the Executive Chef, truly crawling his way up the ladder like a cockroach with eyebrows. B's existence amplified that I am a woman, a small woman, a small Asian woman. I could tell B was capable of playing dirty because he began calling me "baby sous," on account of my 4'11" frame, which led to my entire team of line cooks calling me "baby sous," until the Executive Chef shut down "baby sous" altogether.

When I bring up this nickname, people are horrified and they always ask, "Why didn't you say something?" It's much easier to stand from afar in both distance and time and question lack of action. We all have different ways of handling such mortify-

ing situations. As a little girl, I used to follow my mother around from job to job. She worked all sorts of occupations with all sorts of people and was treated all sorts of ways. What never changed was her response to those around her. When "baby sous" was going around, I did as my mother would've done. I put on my most professional poker face and waited patiently until the Executive Chef took notice.

It was just another day at work. B and I sat in our shared office, which was the size of a standard Los Angeles coat closet, to discuss the last special to be added to our menu in preparation for the fall. The Executive Chef had designated the task fully to B and me, as he had been spending exorbitant amounts of time away after the birth of his son. Given that our office space was so tiny, I always made sure to sit with my legs crossed, facing away from B so our knees didn't touch. B, however, didn't show me the same courtesy. Instead, he interpreted my shrunken body as an invitation to puff himself out like a blowfish. He used to manspread with abandon, as if he were preparing to push out a baby, even though I know, and B probably knows too, that he'd never be able to handle the violence of childbirth.

He interpreted my shrunken body as an invitation to puff himself out like a blowfish. He used to manspread with abandon, as if he were preparing to push out a baby.

"Let's add Wagyu. Steak is timeless," B said, writing "WAGYU" in all caps in his notepad.

"I was thinking squab," I responded.

"Who in L.A. wants to eat pigeon, though? You can just go out and catch one in front of the dumpster," B said, followed by a chuckle.

B often told a joke and laughed to himself, as if the joke were really for his own entertainment. When B was done laughing, he always fiddled his thumbs like a young boy.

B had worked at Izzy's sister restaurant for five years before being transferred. According to Nicky, one of the porters and Izzy's most trusted gossip, B was supposed to be promoted. As talk swirled of him rising up the ranks, two female servers came forward and gave very detailed accounts of B's wandering

hands—between their legs and onto their upper thighs during after-work drinks at a nearby bar. Eventually, the servers were fired and B was lightly punished by being relocated to Izzy.

B was a very skilled cook, a valuable asset to the kitchen. Unfortunately, he was also a pervert. It astonished me, how one person could jog up and down this spectrum of talent and pervertedness so freely.

"Squab isn't city pigeon. It's young pigeon."

"I know what squab is," B responded, leaning far back into his seat with his arms outstretched.

Even when we were both sitting, I needed to look up at B. He was at least five heads taller than me at all times. When B and I disagreed, we were like water and oil until the Executive Chef made an Executive Decision, forcing one of us to yield and mix, only for us to separate again: oil on top, water on bottom.

"Steak is basic. Every restaurant in the city has steak. Squab is a specialty."

"Every restaurant may have steak, but not every restaurant's steak is Wagyu."

"No one said we have to work together. Why don't you make your Wagyu and I make my squab and Chef will decide which will be added to the menu?" I suggested.

B sprang forward, giving this some thought. He raised his hands and cupped the back of his head. "That sounds productive. So we'll be competing against each other."

"I just want to roll out a good dish," I lied.

When I looked over at him, B did something new. His eyes scanned my hips, which were still twisted torturously at an angle, then lingered on my crotch. Since our first day working together, B had treated me as rambunctiously as he did our all-male line cooks. I'm not sure if he did it to show me that he wasn't conscious that I was a woman, so he was treating me like a man, which actually only made me feel more like a woman. Before leaving the office, B smiled at me without showing his teeth, then licked his lips. I remember the look he gave me because I felt naked afterward. I even pulled at my clothes throughout the rest of the shift to remind myself that I was still covered and intact.

A bigger clump of pubic hair fell out on Wednesday morning of that same week. I sat on the edge of my bed and crushed the

tangled ball of hair in my hand, then released, only to crush it again. The hair flattened, then sprang back up. It was playing a game of resilience with me. I walked to the kitchen and added the pubic hair to the Tupperware in the freezer.

I used to shave my pubic hair clean.

I stopped while working as a prep cook at a Mediterranean restaurant. That was my first job out of culinary school. As the restaurant took up a very small corner of a busy boulevard, the kitchen was compact. The first half of my shift was dedicated to vegetable prep. I stood for hours leaning against an island, peeling carrots and cutting zucchini. The Head Chef often kneeled below the island counter while the senior line cooks took their breaks. I would hear the clanking of utensils, then a finger grazing my pubic area. The first time I felt his finger, I stopped peeling a mangled carrot and swooped my head down, but all I saw was a man shifting through copper pots and pans.

The culprit finger grazed over and over again. I said nothing. I remained at that restaurant for two more years. I learned so much. I got promoted very quickly. I wanted to believe I was just very skilled, but you can't ignore timing. There are two of me: the successful one and the one that floats above the successful one, reminding her that she lost a battle to get here.

I developed a routine to keep myself grounded. I went straight home after work, took a cold shower, stood naked in front of my mirror, and stared at my body. I stopped trimming and let my pubic hair grow out thick and curly like a mass of microgreens. When it had reached its prime bush, near the end of my two-year mark, the grazing stopped.

I went to work three hours early that Wednesday afternoon to sample the side dishes to go with my squab. When I entered the kitchen, B was hunched over the prep station arranging radishes, carved into delicate roses, on top of a bed of arugula. B, like me, was most calm when he was plating.

He had a special talent for transforming food into nature: flowers, trees, ponds. One of B's creations is still featured on the website of Izzy's sister restaurant: a miniature tree display with layers of puffed rice stacked on top of one another to resemble cherry blossoms. It's beautiful. When B was focused like this, I watched him work. I fell into a trance and moved alongside him.

"Fuuucckkkk, yes," B said, as he leaned back and admired his own work.

After I changed into my chef whites, I stepped into the walk-in fridge and took out a bundle of broccoli florets and sweet potatoes. I walked past B to boil a pot of water.

When I returned to the edge of my prep station, smashing cloves of garlic with the flat edge of my knife, B said, "I've cooked for 50 Cent."

Without looking at him, I responded, "Good for you."

"50 Cent said my tuna ceviche was the best he's ever had."

Usually, I wouldn't engage with B's silly antics, but that day, the urge to win, even if it was through a weightless exchange, was ever present.

"Elton John thanked me for his meal back in 2018."

The rapid chopping beside me stopped. "That's not true."

I shrugged. "He said he especially enjoyed my lobster pasta."

There was a moment of silence before the *dudududu* of B's chopping resumed. I smirked to myself. The closest I'd been in proximity to Elton John was through a screen, when he was located miles and miles away, eating food not cooked by me.

I saw the water bubbling up to a boil behind his massive head. I placed a steamer into the pot and transferred the washed broccoli florets inside. As I was walking back to my prep station, I saw his eyes swerve along the edges of my hips before lingering on my crotch. It's like he knew my pubic hair was detaching from me like feathers on a chicken. Again, I felt naked. I was hyper-aware of the soft fabric of my underwear rubbing against the spots of bare skin. Unlike a couple of days ago, B held his gaze before licking his lips and turning back to his radish roses. I don't like lip-lickers: the way their tongues swirl around their lips in an attempt to greedily lap everything up into their mouths.

The broccoli florets weren't ready, but I had to find something to do with my body. My fists were clenching, unclenching, clenching, unclenching. I walked past B. Just as my hanging right hand was level with B's ass, it reached out and grabbed his left butt cheek and squeezed for half a second before letting go.

B turned abruptly. The ass-grabber quickly swerved back to my side. This could or could not be an accident. He was trying to figure out which one it was. He turned back to his cutting board without saying anything.

I can't explain why the ass-grabber chose to squeeze B's butt cheek in this way. I stood at the stove and looked down at the water, which had turned green. The tips of the florets were curling outward, as if searching for something. I heard the door creak open and close and turned to see that B was gone.

I brought my hand up toward the light. Surrounded by the intense brightness, my hand was only a dark outline of itself. The frayed fingertips and lines that mark years of work were invisible. Maybe this hand, the ass-grabber, wasn't mine.

I was left with only a fourth of my pubic hair by Friday morning. I had contemplated going to the dermatologist. Or the gynecologist. Maybe even the emergency room.

I took out the Tupperware of pubic hair. It was clustered together like a mound of black truffle. When I poked into it, my finger sank through to the glass bottom of the container. I began untangling the individual hairs and laying them out on a paper towel in the living room. There were twenty-four hairs.

There was only silence when I dug my finger into my pubic hair, as if this detachment were so irrelevant, it didn't even deserve a sound. I returned these detached parts of myself to the Tupperware and placed it back in its corner in the freezer.

This uncontrollable loss of my pubic hair brought about familiar questions: Who did this body that I was inhabiting truly belong to? Who was calling all the shots?

I wondered if I existed for others, like poultry born, bred, cut up, and cooked for hungry mouths.

Meat is demanding of the human body. It takes days for a few slices of beef to work their way through the digestive tract.

This uncontrollable loss . . . brought about familiar questions: Who did this body that I was inhabiting truly belong to? Who was calling all the shots?

When I was promoted to the grill station at the Mediterranean restaurant, I realized that preparing meat for consumption is as unnatural as the consumption of meat itself. The key to cooking meat is to hide that it once came from another animal. I used to place two thick drumsticks, so clearly severed from a once-clucking chicken, onto a curved,

white ceramic plate. The legs, skin crisp and glistening, were placed criss-cross, like the limbs of a ballerina ready to perform, on top of a lemon cream sauce that reflected light.

At the Mediterranean restaurant, I displayed a level of disregard for my body to prove to the other line cooks that I was worthy. My body was still very delicate, acquiring bruises after the slightest bump, but only I knew this. At the time, even if I had been thrown into a bucket of oil and fried until my body was unrecognizable, I cared to fit in with those who wanted to bump me off the feeding line. I was a child who wanted to befriend her bully.

Even though I had toughened up in the kitchen, I was no match for the invasion of the culprit finger. I was constantly tense. Every muscle in my body, even the intricate ones that I never knew I had along my ribs, ached.

I used to have long hair that hung all the way down to my tailbone. I grew so accustomed to pulling my hair into a bun that even on my days off, I kept it coiled up. By the time I reached my first Sous Chef position, I had cut off all my hair. I tried to become as blank and undecorated as I could possibly be. It was very difficult, this process of erasing myself.

I picked up two pieces of squab at the butcher shop while on my way to the restaurant. With the meat tucked in a brown bag under my armpit and a pack of gochujang in my backpack, I was pumped with adrenaline in anticipation of perfecting my squab and crushing B. Only Nicky was present, wiping down the prep station.

"Hi, Nicky."

"Hi, Chef," he said, looking up.

While I wasn't the Executive Chef, Nicky still called me Chef because he liked to call everyone Chef. He even called himself Chef. Nicky explained the mentality behind this: "So we can stick it to the big man. No hierarchy. We're all equals."

Nicky was twenty-three years old and had worked at Izzy since he graduated high school. He always claimed there was an unidentified "big man" to stick it to. Nicky was the first person to come into the kitchen and the last one to leave. Even though he worked the most, he got paid the least. When the kitchen was empty at the very end of the night and I was tucked away in my office finishing up paperwork, Nicky vented loudly to himself

about how we should be rising together in a collective effort. While B stopped Nicky's rants midway on multiple occasions, I let him go on as long as he needed to.

"The other Chef is here," Nicky said. "He's been talking about you."

"B was?" I asked. Nicky nodded as he threw a towel into a bucket and poured a dash of bleach over it.

"What did he say?"

"He said you have wandering hands."

"I'm not sure what he could've meant by that," I responded.

"Well, you know, Chef, wandering hands is when you put your hands where you shouldn't."

"That really doesn't sound like me. Does it, Nicky? I could never."

Nicky nodded in agreement. "I didn't think so. I mean, you're always keeping your distance. Even when you say 'behind,' you say it when you're really far behind, you know? So I was suspicious when he said that. For sure."

"Who else was here?" I asked.

"No one but me. He said it when I was mopping. He said, 'Don't lean over too much, Clem's got wandering hands'—"

Before Nicky could finish his sentence, B came into the kitchen with two potatoes in one hand and two eggs in the other. He saw me and nodded to acknowledge my presence. He stood at the prep station and began peeling potatoes while humming a tune. Nicky, glancing over at B, then back at me, mumbled something about grabbing a mop and walked out of the kitchen. When I walked behind B to change into my chef whites, he didn't move forward, even though I was close enough to feel his body heat. B appeared completely unaffected, despite characterizing me to Nicky, our youngest and most talkative, as some unhinged pervert.

I released the squab from the butcher paper and onto my cutting board. B began rocking back and forth, humming what I believed to be a country song. The ass-grabber responded to this angrily by breaking the squab apart. I put my left hand over the bird's breast, situating its body as the ass-grabber used a knife to make an incision through the skin before detaching the leg. There was another violent crunch when my left hand took apart the other leg.

I situated my cutting board against my hip, the broken squab

resting on top, and as I passed behind B again, the ass-grabber reached out and squeezed his right butt cheek. B stopped humming and turned to me. He held his gaze. This time, he knew this was no accident. He looked back down and furiously began mixing his pureed potatoes into a bowl of breadcrumbs.

Usually, I like to cut the claw off the squab leg and hide its stump under a bed of greens. But that day, I kept the foot attached to the limb, curled outward with its claws intact.

By Sunday morning only a few strands of my pubic hair remained. While walking across the parking lot, I noticed a group of the line cooks with B, standing outside smoking cigarettes and talking. Once B caught my eye, he said something to make the others turn to look at me. Their eyes immediately settled around my midriff. One of them waved. Instead of waving back, I took my backpack off and slung it to the front of my body to cover myself.

The Executive Chef was trying B's Wagyu and my squab that day. My dish consisted of squab leg with gochujang broth and a side of broccoli florets and sweet potato puree. The presentation for B's dish was simple, but far more majestic than mine: a cut of glistening Wagyu front and center with a side of radish roses on microgreens and Shimeji mushrooms in a light miso sauce. It looked like B had envisioned a botanical garden and carved his dishes accordingly.

As soon as the Executive Chef looked down at B's steak, he said, "Wagyu's always good." He took a bite of the meat, then released a petal from the radish rose, stabbed into the Shimeji mushrooms, and put it in his mouth. He chewed slowly before saying, "We did Wagyu last fall, though."

I looked up at B, satisfied that he had not listened to me. The Executive Chef cleansed his palate with water before cutting into a side of my squab, poking his fork into a piece of broccoli and gliding it along the sweet potato puree. He chewed just as slowly as he did for B's steak. He leaned back with his arms crossed and pointed at my squab.

"It's very tender. Good choice on the meat," he said.

The Executive Chef smiled gently, which I'd noticed was something he reserved for FaceTime calls with his newborn baby and me. A confession: The Executive Chef is very good friends with the Head Chef at the Mediterranean restaurant. I

did find myself reaching out to him for a recommendation when I had seen that the Executive Sous Chef position was open at Izzy. I received a call in three days' time for an interview and was put right into trailing.

"We're going to go with the squab," the Executive Chef announced.

I smiled so wide I still can't forget the strain this moment had on my cheeks. The Executive Chef left for a meeting with the General Manager, and Nicky had not yet arrived. B and I were clearing up in preparation for service when he cornered me near the sink, standing so the edges of our Crocs were almost touching, and said, "You distracted me. You did it on purpose."

Everything B did lingered in the air. When he hummed, there was an echo that hung around the kitchen. When he spoke, his breath and spit danced before him. When he stood in one space, then stepped away, a heavy humidity remained, waiting to drown whoever passed through. I deeply despised this about him: how he left his imprint everywhere.

Before I could stop the ass-grabber, it reached out and grabbed aimlessly at B's crotch area, a part of his flaccid penis and one of his testicles squeezed in its palm and fingers. B, very uncomfortable, stood very straight and very still. His hand tightly gripped the edge of the counter. Then I smiled at him. I don't know what I must've looked like, but from the way my cheeks hurt and my eyes squinted, I imagine I looked like a feral animal baring its teeth for the first time.

From the way my cheeks hurt and my eyes squinted, I imagine I looked like a feral animal baring its teeth for the first time.

The ass-grabber only let go when I heard Nicky saying his "Hello, Chef"s to the front-of-house team, right outside the entrance to the kitchen. The ass-grabber then picked up the squab leg by its claw and fed it to me. B just stood there, watching me.

"Hi, Chef!" Nicky yelled again, his music blaring through his AirPods.

By the following morning, all my pubic hair had fallen out. I put the last bit into the Tupperware and stared down at my

pubic hair graveyard. I stood naked in front of the mirror and looked at myself for a good while. I imagined my body butchered—arm, leg, breast, hand, head—each part wrapped in thick brown paper and tied up. If someone were given a slab of my underarm, they wouldn't know it came from a human. In a pile of meat, I am indiscernible.

When I entered the kitchen later that afternoon, B was already leaning against the counter furiously jotting something down on a yellow notepad. He looked up, then right back down. I know there are questions to be asked here: Having experienced what I've experienced, how could I invade another person's body? Wasn't I thinking about the consequences? How could I? How could I? How could I?

Why couldn't I? Isn't this warranted bad behavior? Am I not protecting myself?

During our pre-service meeting, I made an announcement regarding my new addition to the menu. The Executive Chef was spending the day with his baby and had asked that I take the lead with implementing my squab dish for the rest of the team. Each plate of squab, which I hovered over before letting out of my sight, was built with identical intention and precision. I felt that I was at the peak of my career, a mad scientist who'd mastered the art of cloning.

Feeling proud of myself, I absentmindedly leaned against the counter. The cold of the stainless steel seeped through my pants like liquid and shocked the bare skin of my pubic area. I immediately pulled away.

After all the line cooks and even Nicky had gone home, I was relaxing with my legs propped up on the desk in my office with the door locked.

"Clem. Clem," B called me from outside.

I figured there was something minuscule left for me to do. I unlocked the door. B, changed out of his chef whites, walked in. He closed the door behind him and sat beside me. Instead of twisting my legs out of the way, I sat there manspreading, exhausted from the day's triumph.

"I want to talk about what happened yesterday morning," B said.

I looked over at him, the focus in my eyes loosened like tired limbs.

"What happened yesterday morning?"

"What do you mean what happened?" B asked.

I shrugged, my shoulders sinking back down lower.

"You assaulted me!" B raised his voice, then glanced around our tiny office as if someone might be listening in from behind the file cabinets or the cork board.

He lowered his voice to a near whisper and said again, "You sexually assaulted me."

"I have no memory of that."

"You grabbed my genitals."

"I didn't do it, but I know what happened. I was a witness."

B leaned back in his chair, his mouth agape.

"Your hand," he pointed at the ass-grabber, "squeezed my genitals. You sexually assaulted me, Clem. You know what you fucking did."

"And how did that make you feel?" I asked, embodying a cold professionalism.

"It's not okay to sexually assault men. Just as much as it's not okay to sexually assault women."

"And you would know about that. Wouldn't you?"

B raised both hands in the air, indicating shock. "I would never sexually assault someone."

"Really?" I asked in my most dead monotone.

A person's memory is said to be unreliable, constantly editing itself. B must've edited himself in his memory; maybe in his mind, he is a hero/Chef/gentleman.

"If you felt that I assaulted you, then why don't you go to someone else about it? Someone higher up? Get me fired?" I asked.

"I'd rather address it with you. Stop. Touching. Me," he said, leaning in with each staccatoed word.

For a moment, I was scared, because he looked very upset, and I swear that when his shadow loomed over me, it stayed there. I looked down at his hands to see they were shaking. His hands, with their huge palms and stout fingers, resembled those large sunflower starfish. If B had wanted to, he could have really made me disappear. He could have simply put the base of his palm on the top of my head and pushed me into the ground until I was a flat piece of nothing.

"You must feel awful right now. I know what that feels like," I said bravely, tapping one of my manspreading feet.

B ignored me. "Don't disrespect me. I'll go to Chef."

"And would Chef believe you, B?" I asked, creating a rhythm with both my feet now. "Do I look like someone who could grab someone's genitals, like you said? Could I really be that violent?"

"There are security cameras in the kitchen. So it doesn't matter what you look like you could or couldn't do."

I hadn't thought about the security cameras. The ass-grabber acted before it could register its surroundings.

"You would want the world to see a woman much smaller than you, on the same professional level as you, grab your parts and have you double over?" I asked.

"You sexually assaulted me! Are you fucking out of your mind?!" B lost it, raising his voice, no longer caring who heard his outrage.

B got up, his hair disheveled from flailing his head around, and left the office. I locked the door behind him immediately. I was grateful that he never brought his keys to the restaurant.

The firing was quick, but incredibly painful. I was asked to come in on Tuesday, my day off. A silver-haired HR person and the Executive Chef were seated in one of the bigger offices located on the other side of the restaurant. I sat across from them with my hands in my lap, covering my pubic area.

"We've received a complaint from an anonymous individual regarding sexual misconduct on your end," the HR person said, her pen jotting something down even before I could speak.

"I'm not sure who would say something like that," I lied.

"They requested they remain anonymous," the HR person said, looking up at me from her paperwork. "There's been a report that you sexually assaulted them on three separate occasions in the kitchen."

"Clem, we saw the footage from the security cameras," the Executive Chef said with a deep sigh before adding, "You're lucky he's not pressing charges."

He looked very tired, but I wasn't sure if it was because of his newborn baby or because he'd had to review large amounts of paperwork in preparation to fire me. After the termination, effective immediately, the Executive Chef offered to walk me out, a gesture I was initially confused by.

We walked in silence, out the door of the restaurant, all the way to the far end of the parking lot. Once we reached my car,

he said, "I can speak to a couple of people. Get you an interview at a good place by next week."

I looked up at him, shading my eyes from the sun with the umbrella of my hand. L.A. operated around us—cars honking, colorfully dressed bikers speeding away. As I stared up at the Executive Chef, I noticed that, with his steady gaze and neutral eyebrows, the way he saw me had not shifted.

"But I did something awful," I said.

The Executive Chef mulled this over for a moment before saying, "Awful things happen everywhere. There's a lot that gets caught, doesn't get caught. You know how it is. You have skill in the kitchen. That's important."

The astonishment I had felt about B's balance of talent and pervertedness settled into my gut, except, this time, it was directed at myself. I was surprised that I held this power of invincibility that I had believed to be reserved for truly heinous people, those who do terrible things and feel no remorse, those who take without permission, those who leave a trail of casualties behind them as they walk through life with a glass of bourbon in hand. This amazement held only briefly. Disgust entered through the pores of my face, controlling my mouth, which turned downward, and my eyebrows, which clenched toward the middle of my face, and my eyes, which squinted fiercely.

The astonishment I had felt about B's balance of talent and pervertedness settled into my gut, except, this time, it was directed at myself.

"What's wrong?" the Executive Chef asked, alarmed by my sudden change in expression.

"I won't accept any jobs. I shouldn't be offered any jobs."

I threw the Crocs I used to leave at work into the passenger seat and got into my car. The pressure released from my face as I drove away from the Executive Chef, who, at one point, appeared as small as my pinky nail in the rearview mirror.

I didn't leave the house for a good two weeks. My pubic hair had served to protect me all these years, and its shedding was perhaps my body telling me that it needed to refresh this shield

of security, as there are always dangers lurking nearby. I believe that my pubic hair will grow back even bushier, more lush. In the meantime, I've tried a bunch of weird remedies to try to get it to grow back to normalcy. I cut a jalapeño pepper in half and rubbed its seeds into my pubic area. Someone on the internet said it would shock the hair out of the body. They even posted a picture of their eighty-seven-year-old grandmother with a full head of healthy black hair. That didn't work for me. I've been dabbing with red wine, which is supposed to help with hair growth, every night before bed. It hasn't done anything for me just yet, but I remain hopeful.

I've kept the box of frozen pubic hair. There is a magic happening inside the container. The pubic hair never shrivels or loses its form. It's invincible in all the ways that I'm not.

XIAOQIU QIU

LIME AROUND SEINE

I've only now noticed it was charged
in euros, my LimePass, and that in the front basket
the empty bag of ficelle and an azure umbrella,
makes my heart fall out when
I see someone's poem about
past is irretrievably present

Noon tides up the plane tree shadows
drop them soft sprinkles of gravel
rise, I go up, up, washing my face in
and out their freckled silence, the bikes, the strollers,
the light denim pants, in and out, the shades, and in
the Eiffels back and forth in the hands of peddlers,
the chevalier's fingers gilded over onto the next
each entangles a lateness a second ago

—simply, *j'arrive*
the time that is a place when in third grade
Wednesday afternoon school ends early at three,
teachers gather us at the hall, portraits of Gorky and Mao,
in '90s China
it could have been, *"depechez-vous, les enfants!"*
I'm blanking on the exact words,
and we start to pedal, home is over a bridge
Au-Bau never takes down his earbuds,
Yan-Yan has a loud sneeze
and Chinese plane trees, *Vuton*, have leaves shape of our palms
their shadows spindly brush past our cheeks:
dark, light, dark, light
in the pedal, pedal, pedal, conducting our singing:

"Cet air qui m'obsède jour et nuit
Cet air n'est pas né d'aujourd'hui
Il vient d'aussi loin que je viens
Traîné par cent mille musiciens"
—Henri Contet

I saw Au-Bau just now in the crowd, in front of stoplights on Cours-la-Reine—I had seen him in Shanghai, 29th floor, but I couldn't see him, his white shirt and black tie—*mais si, c'est lui!* I know those eyes! That one, next to the police car, blue scooter, black dress, AirPods, bra showing a little, the way she folds her neck so slightly over shoulder
the afternoon cloud leans on another, forgets to move
the wind, the music, the eyes,
the city
they're not born here today, they come as far as I have come.

the Airbnb host teaches at Sorbonne, and has a bookshelf of Emil Cioran, in new and dusted, *being born was a catastrophe*, he says, *a fact survivors try to flee from*. and the Seine under Eiffel continues to smell like pisspots and fish scales when I walk toward it, and the sun continues to knead gold waves behind me when I walk past it, in secret, as the past second had just exiled this one, as birth has exiled us when we were born,
as we turn, for a home,
and catch some shards of halos in our iris, and turn back, wonder which darkened stair we had just descended from, bleeding

EDWIN TORRES

PRIMA-SCAPE

as if the ending of quiet . . . were my percussive element
my ending and quiet in this world
as if ending and quiet . . . were percussion
emerging into shape
my world . . . my shape
out of what seems to be . . . my next shape
my final shape . . . this world
emerge with me

as if life were lived intact . . . and didn't know
it was not finished
as if the continuing . . . of not being finished
were what life was leading toward
what we . . . breathe into
what we . . . percuss into
as if our known next . . . were in truth
our known unknown

as if waves could mimic . . . the cliffs we were from
as if one shoreline
were enough of an edge . . . to climb
to track . . . where we've already been
what has always been . . . our edge
could cover the world
as if truth . . . were a shape we could mimic
a mimic to climb

my percussive elements . . . of ending and quiet
my pulse against yours
could cover the world . . . emerge
my surface . . . with me

in the fragment of two
a third
between
the between fragment

as if a third fragment . . . the one between
were breath . . . in breath
as if a third fragment . . . the one between
were motion . . . in motion
this shoreline . . . always
you . . . always
in . . . always motion
always ending . . . there is time

in the fragment of soon
you
are the fragment in soon
not the landing
nothing settles
how far . . . before
soon
is now

as if what we say . . . were a fragment of saying
a truth . . . a shape
between us . . . a third shape
us
as if now . . . the saying of now
were a distant truth . . . emerge my surface
as if distance . . . were listening
to the ones . . . that call us

could hear . . . distance unraveling
what happens . . . when we let in
what happens
between fragments . . . my edge
to yours . . . how far from us

do we keep
saying . . . what we say
my quiet percussion . . . of saying nothing

so many fragments . . . on one spot
so much . . . on top of much
each of you . . . in one fragment
who I am . . . between a third
on this edge
as if one spot
on one shoreline
could cover the world

EDWIN TORRES

SCRY IS A DELICATE OCEAN

my ear—weeps
for a time gone by
or is that what sound does
to the angled tonic

where the origin you
what you
you choose—speaks
of unseen you

a difficult shun
to speak—of the unseen
is to love
unbearably linguistic

CALLA JACOBSON

HILLS, BIRDS, BONES

Spring 2011. Rabbit Mountain, Lyons, Colorado. After a gentle two-mile hike, we reached the top of Rabbit Mountain—formerly Rattlesnake Mountain, rebranded with a gentler name. It's more a small mesa than a mountaintop, really, thrust up from the Colorado plains by some prehistoric twitch of the earth and dwarfed by the hogbacks and foothills of the Rocky Mountains just three miles west. An anomaly between two distinct landscapes.

Next to a lone pine tree, twisted by decades of wind, stands a bench. A brass plaque holds my dead mother's name, a memorial my sister, Helen, arranged with the county. There are other benches tucked here and there along the trail, but this one stands by itself under a huge pale sky.

The day of our hike was clear, and I could see in every direction. Short dry grasses clung to the hummocky meadow. Northward, the land fell away in a slope of rock and crabbed juniper bushes. To the east, past the near horizon, flat plains and sloping sky stretched into the distance until they faded into each other. West of us—mountains. It was easy to feel close to my mother here. It was easy to feel the gape of her absence. She had been gone two years. Had she lived, she would have been seventy-two.

A retired psychologist, she had been passionate about the natural world. She and my stepfather, a man she married when I was twelve, were volunteer naturalists with the Boulder County Nature Association. She always loved mountains, but later in her life turned toward the plains to learn their ecosystems: wetlands, grasslands, lakeshores. Bird places.

Helen and I had made the trip that day with my mother's neighbor and best friend in the last years of her life. I didn't know Cher when my mother was alive, but after her death we became close for a few years, brought together by the gravitational pull of loss. It was not until after my siblings and I had

chosen this bench for the memorial that Cher told us she and my mother had often walked this trail and sat on this bench talking for hours.

Cher pulled a bottle of champagne from her pack. We sat, three in a row, and held our paper cups aloft before drinking. Champagne fizzed against the grief that had made a home at the back of my throat, and for a moment I did not know whether I would choke or swallow.

There was a rustle in the tree, and Helen touched my arm and pointed. A bird—though I could not see what kind. Cher said, "Your mom told me that if a little brown bird pooped on my head after she died, that would be her." She laughed.

We laughed too. I could imagine my mother saying it. I leaned against my warm, steady sister. From where we sat, I could see the mountains in a way that is never possible from within the mountains themselves—or from the flat of the plains either—stretched long from south of South Arapahoe Peak all the way north past Longs Peak and Mount Meeker.

These mountains are my home. I have lived most of my life in the solidity of their presence, though I have also spent years in other places, in other mountains.

Early 1990s. Tama Koshi River Valley, Nepal. In the last decades of the twentieth century, three days of hard walking separated the Himalayan village that was my second home from the nearest motorable road. The walk began—and would end—on slopes high above the waters of the Tama Koshi. We would cross it many times along the way: this knife's edge of water cleaving and falling through the mountains until, eventually, it would join other waterways and reach the Indo-Gangetic Plain.

For convenience, companionship, and safety, I timed my travels to coincide with trips villagers made between their mountain home and the capital city of Kathmandu. Da Phure, a Sherpa man ten or fifteen years my senior—mid forties, I guessed—tended to worry and stick close to me when others might walk at a faster pace, eager as they all were to get home to a drink and the warm haven of family. He had his reasons: I had sometimes gotten lost, even on these familiar pathways. Once I was struck ill, and it was he who turned back to find me as I stumbled and gasped along the trail, my vision con-

tracted to a series of vibrating pink-and-white circles. He took me to a trailside healer who diagnosed and cured a spirit attack related to honey I had eaten earlier in the day. Ever since then, Da Phure kept an eye on me.

Following the river, we made our way through a dozen places with tongue-tangling names: Dolakha, Ratomaate, Koshikhet, Pikhuti bazaar, Singati, Bhorle, Suri Dhoban, Manthali, Jagat, Gongar Khola, Chhet Chhet, and now: Ginjum. I chanted their names in my head, a song of journey, touching the un-English sounds in my mind one after another, beads on a string. Each a different texture, each distinct. Towns and villages where I had—over the years—eaten a rice meal or a noodle snack, purchased a bottled soda or a cup of liquor, spent the night in a crowded room scratching at bedbugs or out on a porch open to the air. One last crossing remained before we would leave the river and climb the final stretch of trail. I would soon be back in the village, settled in with a Sherpa family I had known for years.

I had studied, volunteered, and worked in Nepal throughout my twenties, returning many times to this village. By the time I turned thirty, I was embarking on field research for a doctoral degree in anthropology and folklore. How many times had I crossed the Tama Koshi just there—and climbed what is almost a cliff face on the other side to get to the village? And how often, on this hill or others like it, had traveling companions told me the myths and stories of the places where we walked, involving my mind as well as my body with the contours of the landscape?

When I stood at the threshold of his community, he extended his hand and invited me to step in.

I called Da Phure *Older Brother*; he called me *Little Sister.* I see him in memory as he was then: skin gleaming with sweat, head haloed in a springy shock of black hair, eyes that looked both outward at the world and inward to consider what the world might mean. When I stood at the threshold of his community, he extended his hand and invited me to step in.

I always paused halfway across the river to look up the valley to the north and down to the water below, bracing my legs against the rock and sway of the suspension bridge. I imagine Da Phure stopped also, to look where I looked. The river gorge was narrow here, the valley sides sheer and steep. The river thundered toward us from Tibet. Below, hardly visible beneath the water's churn, a thick scatter of boulders fragmented the force of the water into dozens of smaller trajectories, each with its own fierce voice.

On the east side of the bridge, we followed the trail as it turned briefly back downstream, passing under an overhang rough-spackled with hornets' nests. Then it was only up: fifteen hundred vertical feet to the village. We left the river's tunnel of sound and began to climb.

"Do you know that bird in the village that says *tibiu-tibiu-tibiu*?" he asked. "It cries out in the monsoon season."

"In the monsoon," I echoed. A story was about to begin.

Thursday morning, April 9, 2009. Longmont, Colorado. My stepfather was peeved. "I never said your mother couldn't get up. I just said we had a hard time getting going this morning. Anyway, I could have gotten her to the hospital myself faster than waiting for that ambulance." Probably true—my mother and John lived only blocks from the hospital—but the morning's events had been confusing to everyone. In a cascade of phone calls among John and my brother Eric, then my sister and me, and finally John's son, my brother had called for an ambulance.

Was it the right thing to do? I wasn't sure, but none of us were close enough to stop by and check on them. Mom and John lived in Longmont, while Helen and Eric were an hour's drive away in Denver. I lived even further south.

John, a retired philosophy professor, was eighty-four, fourteen years my mother's senior. He was still able to carry on a smart and funny conversation, complete with wry observations and wordplay, but he suffered less obvious mental and physical diminishments. He would forget to eat if left on his own, and Mom said he was not safe to drive anymore.

In the previous weeks, my mother had not seemed herself either, but I attributed it to the stress of caring for John. I had

seen her several times, and she was walking oddly, missing buttons when she dressed herself, and leaving her short white hair even messier than usual at the cowlick in back.

I have that same cowlick, and my daughter, Manya, too. I had always hated my own cowlick, feeling a complicated shame at the knowledge that my hair would sometimes part without my awareness to expose a flat sickle trail wandering down from the crown of my skull, pale and vulnerable to scrutiny. But when Manya was born, I found that the same cowlick I hated on myself—and that irritated me on my mother—was a magical whorl on my daughter's tender, perfect, nearly bald head.

A week or so before my mother went into the hospital, she called me to say she was concerned about the safety of her own driving. She asked me to help her find transportation options. A couple of days later, I called with the results of my research.

"How do you expect us to manage if neither one of us can drive?" Her voice was sharp. She went on to say that she had been to see her cardiologist, a man who was also her colleague and a social acquaintance. "Roger told me that he would feel perfectly safe driving to Cleveland and back with either John or me at the wheel."

Cleveland? And what was he basing this assessment on—the strength of her heart? Did my mother now think John was safe to drive as well because her cardiologist said so?

"He said, *You just tell your kids to back off*," she reported with evident satisfaction.

I hung up the phone, shaken and angry.

So when the phone calls began the morning of April 9, I was already uneasy. But now, at least, she would get a proper assessment; all the moments of wrongness that had been accruing would finally mean something. I packed a bag and headed to Longmont. If my mother were to be admitted, John would need company and support. Among my siblings, I had the most flexible schedule.

By midday, my mother presided over her husband and her three children from a bed in the emergency room, as embarrassed to have a fuss made over her as she was pleased that we were all there to make it.

"I think I have probably had a small stroke," she said in a firm voice, refusing to worry. I noticed how carefully she cal-

culated the future. As a psychologist, she had worked with patients recovering from brain injuries; she knew what to do. "I will start rehab right away, and I should be pretty much back to normal by midsummer."

Ginjum ascent, Nepal. Da Phure's proffered story about a bird was just what I needed to distract me from the steep climb.

"What does the bird look like? What is its color?" I accepted that there was a bird that said *tibiu*, but I didn't think I had ever heard it. I couldn't actually identify birds by their color either, but I thought I might consult a bird book at some point and figure it out. While I longed to know the flora and fauna of Nepal, to recognize birdsong, to be able to distinguish plants and trees, I was no naturalist. It was language that stuck in my head—words, phrases, inflections, patterns of speech—not the curve of a leaf or the color of a bird's wing.

"That bird? That one is small, is black," he answered.

"Small, black." I made a mental note.

Da Phure told stories because the landscape itself reminded him of what had happened there, once upon a time. He told them to *me*, he said, because I paid attention. Pragmatist as well as philosopher, he also knew that I walked faster and more easily up a steep trail with the sound of his voice in my ears and the doings of gods, yetis, demons, and flying lamas swirling in my mind. His stories, quite literally, pulled me into community.

Thursday afternoon, April 9, 2009. Longmont United Hospital. Mom was taken from the emergency room for an MRI and then admitted directly into the intensive care unit. While she napped, her neurologist took us out to the nurses' station to look at the results of her test. John sat in a chair, his cane leaning up against the desk, his curved back making him small where once he had been straight and tall—well, tall*ish*. We arranged ourselves behind him. A tiny tidy fringe of hair drifted like snow around the back of his head. An image of my mother's skull came up on the computer screen, and I saw a white shape within it, almost filling the skull. It looked like a clenched fist with long knuckles spidering out in multiple directions—some part of her brain, I supposed.

The doctor said, "This is a tumor."

A tumor. My hands tightened on the back of John's chair.

I could not take it in. Then my own head filled with hard kernels of speculation. Surgery, loss of brain function, changes in personality? A wheelchair and a long rehabilitation? A slow decline?

I heard myself politely thanking the neurologist, as if she had given us a gift. *Thank you*, when what I meant was *No* and *Help me*. I see myself from a great height—small, disbelieving—reaching for my sister and my brother as the world shifted under my feet. While Mom slept on, Eric, Helen, John and I held one another under the unsparing lights of the ICU.

Ginjum ascent, Nepal. Da Phure continued his story about the bird, circling from its color back to the sound of its song. I couldn't help feeling that the story was starting in the middle.

"Crying out *tibiu-tibiu, re*."

Tibiu was the sound of the bird's call, but the meaning of *re* was more complicated.

There are things that we know from our own senses, our own experience. The smell of our child's skin, the incline of land under our feet, the sound of wind in pines—these are the direct observations we make of the world around us. But there are also things that we know because someone has said them. Such secondhand knowledge may come with great authority—*the word of God*—or it may come with an implicit disclaimer—*I heard the bus comes at nine o'clock (but who knows?)*. We cannot know everything directly. I could see my mother's crookedly buttoned sweater, but I could not see the tumor in her brain. That knowledge had to come from outside, from doctors and technology.

We cannot know everything directly. I could see my mother's crookedly buttoned sweater, but I could not see the tumor in her brain.

A small word, like the print of a bird's foot, *re* encapsulates this difference. It appears at the end of certain phrases or passages in the Nepali language to indicate that they are hearsay—or myth or history. *Re* is a ghost in the text, the persistent reminder of other speakers in other times.

Da Phure continued: "That one, that bird, is of our Sherpa ethnicity. And, at first, she had no father and no mother."

Wait, what? Was he now talking about a person?

"A girl?"

He affirmed that he was speaking of a human girl. "Mmm. Her father and mother died, and only the grandmother and that one granddaughter were left, *re*."

We had finally come to something I could recognize as the story's beginning: an orphaned girl, raised by her grandmother. I kept the bird in my mind, though. The bird interested me.

April 11, 2009. Longmont United Hospital. On Saturday, two days after my mother went into the hospital, we had a birthday party in the ICU. Helen brought an ice cream cake in honor of her daughter, who was turning five. We crowded into the cubby of a room. My husband and twelve-year-old daughter were also there for the occasion—as well as Eric and, of course, John. There were not enough spaces and surfaces for all of us. The nurses showed us where we could borrow rolling chairs from a room that I would later learn was for family and medical conferences. The Bad News Room.

We sang softly to the birthday girl and talked in fits and starts, holding fear at bay with our voices. Mom seemed tired. Someone cadged a knife from the nurses, and I cut and served. I used my fingers to steady a square of melting cake on paper plates stacked double to bear the weight.

"Don't worry," I said. "I sanitized my hands before I stuck them in the frosting."

She laughed softly, her voice lower and more crackly than normal. "I am not worried. You are the most hygienic person I have ever met."

Her tone was not unkind, but I felt awkward, defensive. I had developed a nuanced sense of contamination in Nepal, where serious pathogens permeate both air and water, but I didn't want to be thought a germaphobe. Uptight. I forced a smile.

That night—or the next—John was tired and wanted to go home, but Mom didn't want to be alone. While she dozed, I sat on the hard green cushions of a window seat by her bed and tried to read. Machines beeped, while nurses came in and out. I breathed shallowly, unnerved by the smells of the hospital: disinfectant, bodily lapses, stress, dread.

I stayed late into the night, but we didn't talk. There would be plenty of time for conversation when this was all over and she was back home, when I wasn't so tired. In any case, we had

not talked easily for a while. We were often at odds, unable to communicate without frustration and hurt feelings. The truth is, I didn't want to talk. My mother required more intimacy than I knew how to give her.

On Monday, she had a biopsy—right there in the ICU. It was a surprisingly casual affair. Nurses moved her into a special chair at the curtained opening of her room, and I watched the surgeon drill into the back of her skull, breaching that thin, brittle barrier, taking a core from the soft tissue of her brain.

Ginjum ascent, Nepal. The earth's crust ranges in thickness from a few to several dozen miles, making up less than one percent of its mass. A textured surface, its highest relief is the mountain called Chomolungma by Sherpas, Sagarmatha by Nepalis, and Everest by Westerners. The Himalayas are a young mountain range, high and sharp, still in motion, unlike the staid Rockies of my homeland. Chomolungma presides over the land one major river valley to the east of the Tama Koshi, not far as the crow flies. I don't know that a crow *can* fly over such terrain, but I have read of other birds—bar-headed geese and certain species of crane, for example—that are adapted to navigate the cold sky above the tops of these, the earth's highest mountains. I imagine such birds looking down at our tiny movements with bright black eyes, our hills nothing to them.

Da Phure paused on a jagged switchback. The narrow pathway, much trod, cut through a profusion of monsoon growth. I took off the cotton hat I wore to protect my pale skin and fanned my face, pulling thick, warm air into my lungs, grateful for any excuse to rest.

In between two legs of a switchback was an unassuming rock, no more than a couple of feet across. This particular rock was said to have a footprint in it, stamped by a divine foot in mythological times during a fight between the stingy local deity who guarded the path and a god-like lama who wanted to open the way.

A pole rose up to mark the spot. Strings of prayer flags spiraled down from its tip in gauzy repetitions of blue, white, red, green, and yellow, glowing against the gray sky. We added sprigs of blossom and greenery to a small pile of offerings left by others. From conversations with Da Phure's wife, I knew that he was the one who sponsored the pole and prayer flags. She

complained that it was an expensive religious indulgence, yet I could see that she was proud. Da Phure murmured a prayer and continued with the story, not winded at all.

"And the grandmother got old, and the grandchild grew a little. And Grandmother said, *Child! Bring me some water, hmmm? I'm thirsty!* And that granddaughter felt lazy and didn't give water to her grandmother, *re*."

Not all hills are the same. Some have stood between me and someplace I wanted to go—difficult to scale, perhaps, but worth the journey. Others have had to be climbed even though they took me nowhere I wanted to be: every step a desolation, every turn of the path bringing me to a heaving standstill.

April 17, 2009. Longmont, Colorado. My siblings and I rearranged our lives and fell into an overlapping series of shifts. We shopped and cooked for John, but mostly we sat in the hospital through all the long hours of the day.

Mom never really recovered from the biopsy. She napped most of the time, and when she woke, she didn't know where she was or why. She didn't remember that she was dying. At first, Eric insisted on telling her, his voice squeezed out of his throat, black tar in the air: "Mom, you're dying." I turned away, unable to see her receive that information. Later we did not remind her unless she pressed us.

We didn't get the official results of Monday's biopsy until Friday. Information came in shreds throughout the week, though—incomplete, confusing, talismanic. It was a glioma, an astrocytoma. The cancer was untreatable. Or perhaps not, but surgery could leave my mother without sight or speech or cognitive function. Slowly we began to see that nothing was ever going to be the same.

When the surgeon came by to check on Mom, Helen asked about her decline.

"It's brain surgery," he snapped. "What did you expect?"

But he hadn't called it brain surgery. He had called it a biopsy. *Biopsy.* It sounded so benign: a test, a simple procedure. Not the destruction of my mother's ability to be present in the world, the excision of her knowledge of herself and us.

Before the biopsy, I had been comparing her to the person she had always been, biding time until I could be with that person

again. Now I knew I had wasted my opportunity to speak with her when it would still have been possible to understand each other.

Only a few people could be with my mother at one time, and there was a lock system on the door of the ICU. One day, a nurse came to my mother's room to say there was a visitor. I had become suspicious of anyone outside the immediate family. I should have been grateful, taken any opportunity to step away or run an errand while someone else sat with her and kept John company, but I wasn't. It wasn't that I wanted her to myself; it was that every time I walked out into the cold, clean air of April, a part of me feared I would not be able to make myself go back inside.

I opened the door to the waiting room and saw a woman with short frosted curls—a stranger—pacing and talking animatedly on a cell phone. She ended her conversation, came over, and embraced me.

"I'm Cher," she said. "How is she?"

I felt the warmth of my mother's friend and held open the door.

Ginjum ascent, Nepal. The first time I went to Nepal, during my junior year of college, my mother didn't want me to go. It didn't occur to me that she would try to stop me from making my way forward, and she did not, but I know now that she was afraid for me. She could not have imagined—*I* never imagined—how much of my life I would spend on the other side of the world.

On the long climb with Da Phure, I wouldn't have been thinking of Mom at all. Not of her artwork or gardening, not of her health or possible friendships. She had her own life back in Colorado, I supposed, but I rarely considered it. I existed in the moment of my body and breath, the burning ache in my legs, and the cord of Da Phure's story about the lazy girl and her thirsty grandmother.

"The next day also: *Child! Bring water and come, hmmm? I'm thirsty,* said Grandmother. But Granddaughter didn't bring water. Again, the day after, Grandmother asked for water, asking and asking. Finally, she got up and went to the river to drink, *re*, went to the water's edge, *re*. Going by herself, that old woman—how very old she must have been! And going,

drinking water down at the river—*swattai!*—she slipped and died, *re*."

"Oh—"

"That grandmother died. It was the monsoon season, then, and that granddaughter took the form of a bird and left."

She turned into a bird, that selfish, regretful child.

"Then, later, during the monsoon, well—" He gestured back toward the river. "In the winter, those rocks are all white-white, right?"

"Yes." During the dry months, when the water was low and calm, boulders rising up above the river's surface and dried by the air would make a pale scatter against green glacier-fed water.

"And in the winter, saying to herself, *Grandmother's bones are here!* that bird does not call out, *re*; her heart is contented. Saying, *Bones! My Grandmother's bones are right here,* she doesn't cry out."

She is comforted by the sight of her grandmother's remains.

Late April 2009, Longmont. John and I arrived at the hospital one morning to find a cart of cookies and coffee outside Mom's room. I didn't realize the treats were for us until a nurse explained. Mom had been reclassified. Her status was hospice now, and she would soon move to a new room. Volunteers brought daily refreshments for each hospice patient and family: Mint Milanos, donuts, little butter cookies. I tried to eat, but every treat was ashes and grit in my mouth.

Out of nowhere Mom's voice came, raspy but commanding. "Cookies?"

The nurses had warned us that her throat muscles were weak and she might choke, so I broke and rubbed butter cookies between my fingers and fed her a crumb at a time.

"Good," she judged, and was silent again.

Later, one of the nurses told me that choking was no longer an issue—not because it couldn't happen, but because the goal was no longer to keep my mother alive. That was what hospice meant. It was what we had chosen, sitting in the Bad News Room. It was what we believed my mother wanted; she had written us a letter when her own mother died—only a few years before—telling us her wishes. I reached out to touch the wall, momentarily dizzy.

The nurse said firmly, "She can have whatever she wants now."

Whatever she wants. The words looped through my head like a mantra.

She was moved out of the ICU's twenty-four-hour lights and ceaseless bustle of intrusive care and into a quiet room in a wing where both rehabilitation and hospice patients were housed. Some would get stronger and go home: They circled the ward with walkers and canes, practicing their mobility on the physical therapy stairs at the end of the hallway. Others, of course, would not.

We brought things from the house to fill Mom's new space. Potted plants. A statue of Maya Devi, the Buddha's mother, purchased when Mom visited me in Nepal in 1994—it was made by the lost-wax casting method, a method she herself had dabbled with in graduate school. An Acoma pottery owl figurine, which we knew she treasured but would only later learn recalled her courting days with John. A stack of classical music CDs and *The Best of Peggy Lee*. A painting my daughter had made of two wolves in a blizzard, ears down and shoulders hunched: suppressed vitality in a bleak world.

Cher came often, and the room was a little brighter with her in it. I saw that she loved my mother.

A hundred miles south, in the shadow of Pikes Peak, my husband and daughter carried on without me. They belonged to another time, another person's life. I missed them, but for me, now, only my mother was real. Sometimes she had visitors—her sister, other relatives, her best friend from thirty years before. We reminisced, and I fell further and further into the way things used to be—back, even, into childhood, when I had worked so hard to please my mother and meet her emotional needs. During the long days of her dying, the past was a distorting slide projected over the present, slipping vertiginously in and out of focus as if the projectionist would not stop fiddling with the knobs. I couldn't locate myself.

During the long days of her dying, the past was a distorting slide projected over the present, slipping vertiginously in and out of focus.

One Friday, after a week in Longmont, I left the hospital. I was going home to breathe the air of normal for a few days, to be cradled in my own life. The first stretch of highway was through flat farmland, a straight line south, parallel to the mountains and a distance from them. I moved in and out of the fast lane, passing trucks in my Prius, buffeted by their wind. Alone in the car, I shouted and cried; I talked to myself and cursed. Once through Denver, it was the familiar way home: another hour on a road now curving and drifting ever closer to the mountains.

I had told my husband in a phone call that the only thing I could imagine eating anymore—the only food that did not feel like it would stick in my throat—was cold, smooth fruit sorbet. I arrived home to find several pints in the freezer: lemon, mango, chocolate, strawberry.

The next morning, I woke to a phone call from John, his voice urgent and quavering. "Your mother is awake. She wants you to come," he said. "And she wants to see Manya."

My daughter and my mother were very close, souls twinned in mutual adoration and delight. Mom and John had taken Manya to Yellowstone, to refuges where injured birds or wolves or wild cats were rehabilitated, to wild places all over the Mountain West. They had cared for her on many weekends while I caught up on work or spent time with my then-new husband. When Manya was about eight years old, they took her bird banding. My mother reported that she had the gentle touch required to hold terrified wings still—without crushing them—while adults disentangled tiny bird feet from the net and ringed them in metal.

Manya had responded to her grandmother's illness with panic and tears that settled into denial. I spoke to her about going to the hospital.

"Mom, no!"

I was stunned by her vehemence, the refusal in her huge dark eyes. I wavered. Should I require her to go? Or should I allow her to cope in her own way, even if I feared she might have regrets? I wanted to protect my child from grief, remorse—everything—but her wings beat against my encircling arms, and I did not know what to do.

Home barely twelve hours, I didn't want to go either. The thought filled me with despair and resentment. It was as if Mom had waited for me to leave before returning to life—and now

she was calling me back. Must I prove my love to her again? But how could I not go, when she had asked it?

In the end I stayed home with my daughter. I said *I'm sorry* to my mother. I said *no.*

Mom was significantly revived that day. She ate pizza, laughed, joked. Eric, a musician by both trade and inclination, set up a keyboard in her room, and there was music and conversation. It sounded as if she made one last effort to reinhabit her body and be with her family. But I don't know. I wasn't there.

Ginjum ascent, Nepal. The upward path stretched on, one false horizon after another. The thread of the story pulled on me, and I strained to hear Da Phure over the roar of blood and breath in my body.

"In the monsoon, water covers all of those boulders," he continued. "*I can't see my grandmother,* that bird calls out, *re.* She calls out, *tibiuuu-tibiuuuu i-i-i*—exactly like a person." His voice stretched out the vowels, making of *tibiu* a lonely plaint.

"No matter who it may be, whether it is a grandmother or an old couple, after saying, *Bring me water!* we really must give it to them."

"Yes, for sure." I mean—it was obvious.

Late April, 2009. Longmont. By the time I returned to Longmont to take up the vigil again, Mom had lapsed back into a semi-conscious state. She was on a morphine drip. One evening, I took John home for dinner while Eric and Cher stayed at the hospital. John and I were on our way back when Eric called to say that Mom had awakened and asked for a martini.

A martini!

Inside my mother's body was still a self that could *want.* Some part of her strength, her will, her desire remained. As John and I turned onto Ninth Avenue, I saw my brother's car coming the other way, his body hunched over the wheel, his eyes fixed intently forward.

When we walked in, Cher offered me the chair between my mother and the window. John sat on the other side of her bed, slumped a little. Mom's body seemed almost to disappear under the sheets. She had never been a large woman, but always sturdy, solid. Her eyes were closed, her straight, coarse hair flattened in back where her head moved against the pillow. I

thought of my daughter as an infant—rubbing the delicate hair from the back of her head as she looked to one side and then the other, her bright eyes taking everything in.

I took my mother's hand and anointed it with lotion, using light circular movements. Her skin was dry and loose, her flesh cool, her bones hard and knobbed. I pressed her fingers gently between mine. Her eyes stayed closed—but did her hand stir in response?

When Eric returned, he carried a pink plastic child's cup with a built-in straw. We adjusted the bed to support her in an upright position, and I ceded my chair to my brother.

"Mom. Mom!" he called gently. "I have your dirty martini. Two olives." Just the way she liked it. When she opened her eyes, he put the straw between her lips.

She took one sip. She had not consumed anything besides water, and little enough of that, for three or four days. I could only imagine how the drink tasted to her, an explosion of briny juniper and strong alcohol rioting through a system that had almost left taste behind.

Asked if she wanted another sip, she exhaled sharply. We leaned in to hear. Her words came out gratingly slow. "Is . . . the . . . Pope . . . Catholic?"

"What did she say?" asked John.

"Is the Pope Catholic!" Cher replied.

John's body relaxed, and he smiled at the familiar quip. Is the Pope Catholic? Does a bear shit in the woods? Of *course* she wanted more.

Mom's mouth grappled awkwardly with the straw.

"Wunnerful," she said in a voice slurred and strong and full of satisfaction. She retreated, then fell back to silence and absence. But no matter—we laughed and chattered loudly, suddenly energized.

Ginjum ascent, Nepal. I knew the tale of the bird-girl encoded cultural information: the importance of elders, the pathos of being an orphan, the imperative to share food and drink, the indictment of laziness. I had witnessed the workings of all of these values in village life. Such lessons were ordinarily left unstated, but in this case, Da Phure had a point to make.

"Now, Little Sister, if you go back down there"—*down there* referred to the United States—"and your mother, well, whether

it is your mother or your grandmother, hmm? Little Sister, she might say, *Bring me something like this, child; I feel like eating this.*"

He had never met my mother or grandmother, but here he was, widening the story to include them.

"Then if you find it a bother and don't give it to her, well—it might be tomorrow or it might be the next day; we don't know the day she will die. Maybe tomorrow, without having been able to eat that food, drink that drink."

I paid attention—I *did*. But I was listening for what I could learn about the storyteller's world, more interested in *other* than *self*. I later came to believe that I did not hear his story as he intended—that where I regarded it as a culturally embedded artifact, he was offering a broadly human experience, one he thought meaningful for me.

I paid attention—I did. But I was listening for what I could learn about the storyteller's world, more interested in other *than* self.

When I think of the bird-girl now, I think of Da Phure. I think of the hill I climbed and of the values of the community. I think of birds. But I also think of my own life, and out of the shame of my failures rises the triumphant memory of my mother's final martini, that unexpected moment of offering, of plenty—of, indeed, joy—at a time when loss was the river I was drowning in.

Sunday, May 3, 2009. Longmont. Twenty-four days after she went into the hospital, I kissed my dead mother's face, still warm. I wasn't sure if I felt tender or repulsed. A nurse bustled in and asked if we wanted locks of her hair. I didn't know what to say. Helen's eyes were appalled in a face pinched with sorrow. What would we do with a hank of unwashed hair? We were hardly likely to put it in a locket or make hair jewelry in the manner of the Victorians. But I would leave nothing on the table. The nurse cut from my mother's head and dropped the hair into a plastic bag. We packed Mom's things into cardboard boxes as quickly as we could. Someone else needed this room now.

Earlier that evening, John, Helen, and I had been at her bed-

side. We decided to have dinner back at the house, all of us together for once, instead of taking it in our usual shifts. In that brief hour of our absence, she died.

"Maybe she needed space to let go," I ventured. I thought of her trapped inside her useless body, ready to move on but tethered by our constant presence and urgent voices. Our needy love.

Ginjum ascent, Nepal. Da Phure was walking ahead of me now, the story finished. I stopped to look across the river gorge at the terraced slopes high on the other side. We had long since lost sight of the river itself, hidden by the folded land. Our trail continued to climb, but less steeply. In an hour or two I would be drinking tea or liquor with my village family and catching up on news.

A young girl appeared around a ridge to the north with a string of tan-and-white goats. She greeted me cheerfully, bringing her hands together: "Namaste, Older Sister." I returned the greeting. Although she seemed to know me, I did not recognize her. There were so many children. We continued up.

Twenty-five years later, in April of 2015, an earthquake devastated Nepal, shaking its mountains and tumbling its cities and villages, houses and temples to rubble and despair. In October I flew to Kathmandu, and before long I was climbing again from river to village. The Tama Koshi had calmed from its summer fury; the grandmother's bones stood exposed. That day I walked with Da Phure's son, Tendi, who was himself the father of grown sons by then—young men I had known in their childhood days. I looked forward to seeing Da Phure, but first I had to reach the village. The path from the river had been remade. All concrete steps and metal rails now, it bypassed the footprint in the rock and the jungled switchbacks of my memory. I found the climb no easier, and Tendi walked at my pace to keep me company.

I found myself telling him the story of the bird and the girl and the grandmother's bones. Over the years, I had listened to one of Da Phure's renditions, captured on a cassette tape, so many times I knew it by heart. My voice echoed the intonations and phrasing of his father's telling. It pleased me to repeat that particular story on that particular hill to that particular man—

knowing that my use of *re* acknowledged Da Phure as well as the many other voices that had told the story before him.

When I finished, I said that I supposed he already knew the tale.

"No," he replied. "I never heard it."

It gave me pause, as if I had intercepted words that might more properly have gone directly from father to child. I had treasured those stories, hoarded them like a dragon with her gold. I had transcribed and analyzed them, written about them, dreamed in their rhythms. Now, at least, I was able to offer back some part of the treasure.

August 5, 2019. Above Fourth of July Road, Nederland, Colorado. A decade after my mother's death, my siblings and I made a plan to scatter the last of her ashes. We had tossed handfuls out over the years, mostly on Rabbit Mountain—and then John's too, when he died three years after Mom. A film cannister's worth of dust had gone to Cher, along with a little bird carved in brown stone.

We always look for birds when we are outside together, Helen, Eric, and I. My mother especially loved the kestrels, hawks, and falcons of the Colorado sky—and owls, of course: all the fierce, bright predators of the air. When I see raptors, I feel her presence.

A few days after her death, I had picked up her ashes—inelegantly packaged in a Ziploc bag inside a brown plastic box. At first, I kept the box in the back of my car. I couldn't seem to let my mother go, but I didn't want to bring her into the house either. I would shove that plastic box out of the way when I filled the back end with groceries or suitcases, and sometimes I spoke to it as if she might answer. After a few years, Helen asked for the ashes.

It was Helen who remembered that back in the early days of my mother's marriage to John, some thirty-three years before her death, she had said she wanted her ashes scattered in a secret meadow two thousand feet above the one-room cabin John and his sons had built in the 1960s on an old mining claim. The meadow was above tree line, accessible via a pathless trek through massive boulder fields and scree slopes that spread like skirts under the rock turrets topping the ridge. Up and across the rubble to a gap at the edge, we had clambered in my youth,

only to come—as if by magic—into a gentle fold of land. I had not made that meadow my destination since I was a teenager in the early 1980s, but I remembered it—the stark clarity of light at twelve thousand feet; a narrow stream cutting through the long soft slanted bowl of land; short alpine grasses and vast summer snowfields. In 2019, we found the place little changed—except for the snowfields, so much smaller now.

We had waited a long time to take this final hike with my mother. By the time the last of her ashes left a trace of dust on my fingertips that August afternoon, I was thinking as much of my own mortality as I was of hers. I was three weeks into my own diagnosis of cancer. In forty hours, the surgeon would cut into the flesh of my right breast, the first step in a long treatment. I told myself that my cancer was not my mother's cancer. I told myself that mine would probably not kill me, at least not right away.

My mother swirled in the air, then went to ground.

I lay back on the knobbed earth and looked up to the sky, searching for a wheel of flight. There it was—a quick arc across the blue. Closing my eyes, I heard the faint, harsh cry of a hawk on the wind. I pressed the length of my body, the curve of my skull, into grass and dirt—sun-warmed but cool just beneath the surface. The little stream whispered. How many thousands of miles below me were those other mountains, those other waters, those other birds? In Nepal, it was the monsoon season, and the bird-girl would be seeking her grandmother's bones and calling out, propelled by regret for what she could not change. *Tibiu-tibiuuuu.* Let her go, I thought. Let her go, let go.

ERIC PANKEY

THE FRAMES PER SECOND VARIABLE

We accept, without reading,
The terms and conditions.
The dust, all that remains
Of the previous tenants, accumulates.
We accept the clusters of starlings

Unfolding, the stars' eccentric harmonies.
The past grows loose in its housings.
To see is to transgress, to cross over.
A beep signals the next frame
Of the filmstrip. The origin is obscured,

Thus, the proliferation of creation stories.
Whether the clouds are weather,
Or moved by weather, remains to be seen.
The heavy mop head is sopped,
As is the day in its garment of rain.

A jay paces beneath a fig tree.
The errancy introduced early on
Is replicated. Replicates. Thus
The clean incision. The mop close at hand.
Which one of us is patient zero,

A body merged with cold clay
As slow-motion fog spills, cascades over the bluff?
Rid at last of the tug of want, of old erotic misery,
We renew our vows and return
To the long marriage of *yes* and *no*.

Thunder has distance on its mind.
We—you and I—are interchangeable,
Selves put on easily enough, with some assistance,
Like the hazmat suits at the crash site.
Neither of us auditioned for this part or that.

We are untrained and suffer
The vertigo of the future tense.
Events unfold at different speeds.
An impediment determines the way.
A newly worn path winds around it.

Together, we repair the fragments
Of the story with a slip of gold,
With a stitch, with a *meanwhile*.
Although foregone, the conclusions
Take us by surprise. Modest miracles,

Perhaps—familiar, nondescript—
What we once called *numinous*.
We enter what we believe
Is a time machine, but it is merely sleep.
Disembodied, trying not to intervene,

We watch ourselves as if watching
A scene in a movie, but wish the movie were better,
The characters more fully realized.
Neither of us knows which of us is taking the placebo.
A journey on logic's cusp is about to commence.

The sound, you see, is out of sync. Untrained,
We suffer an impairment that consists
Of finding nothing too insignificant to attend to.
The way that early silent films, for instance,
Because they were hand-cranked—

The frames per second variable—look jerky.
Don't get carried away or lost in thought.
What I call *embracing*, you call *clutching*.
An eraser scuffs up a tear in the paper,
Calling attention to error. The adjuration,

Ignored, is kept for future reference.
It might be useful on a curious journey.
Still, the voyage might never start:
A *now* abutted to a *then*. The sky stacked upon the sea.
It is hard to remain anonymous.

To ignore the skull beneath the beloved's face.
To give credence to the sibyl.
To admit the solitariness of a dream.
It is hard to decipher the paradox of scents
That is the perfume. To watch the violence

From such a distance and remain untouched.
Hard to imagine how the spiral carved into vinyl
Just might unspool this song. Hard to confess
That the new sentiment is like the old, only sweeter.
We verge on incongruity—each emotion

Oversaturated, without economy;
Each word appropriated. The clutter
And collapse suggest discord, disrepair.
We are unbecoming, still out of focus.
Unresolved. Uncoaxable. Unabashed.

How to pinpoint the rupture? The rapture?
Once a year the temple bell is struck
And its tone, widened beyond the range of hearing,
Returns at the precise moment it is struck again.
Once more, we wait for night's immateriality

To unveil itself. Dreams projected in the attic
Are in fact filmed in the cellar. By genre
It is a cautionary tale, a dialogue between
Ground-penetrating radar and the idea of *depth*.
All the conflict needs is a starter pistol.

When things are displaced, St. Augustine says,
They are always on the move until
They come to rest where they are meant to be.
We have faith that the fragments will adhere,
That the melancholic undertone

Of our flickering tale will resolve as comedy,
The tilt restored to balance. Cut back
At the start of summer, the entanglement
Of vines obscures the stone wall by August.
A splitsecond mends itself in no time at all.

MACKENZIE KOZAK

[A WOMAN I KNOW WHO IS PART-MOTHER TELLS ME]

a woman i know who is part-mother tells me
if he is a good man, you should make more
of him. she means *he is a good man.* she means
make more of him. hours later, i am in the bathtub,
touching the pocked bones in my feet, letting
the faucet dim to a whistling, stomach mound
like a small island with a divot in its center.
i want to tell her *to make anything is to watch it*
eat you from the inside. i want to tell her
there are days the sunlight is a violence
like a warm bullet, burning its braid through me.
another woman tells me *there's a mothering*
to knowing what would suffocate you, but
i am never breathing, letting the blight warm me.

MACKENZIE KOZAK

[SISTER, I EXHALE THROUGH MY OWN BANDAGE]

sister, i exhale through my own bandage
and turn from its weeping. a terrible gift,
to feel the flank and fretting mirror.
you asked my mind to lift its mouth
toward opera, the MoMA, all these higher
notes from underground, and i grew dizzy
in a train car while you held my hair,
just held it, light and heavy as scarves.
it's the arcing that i won't stand, or can't
live through, when we don't know
what's the middle, so the hours are fraught,
bloated fish, and you were born after,
round-eyed, probing *why*, as i walked
reckless toward myself, toward shadow.

MACKENZIE KOZAK

[MOTHER, ALL THINGS ARE HEAVEN OR]

mother, all things are heaven or
they aren't, aren't they? things of
the sky, ferried. things of the soil,
sprawled. i was one or the other:
volunteering, kneeled, or bleeding
out on the sidewalk. he says *you have*
so many rules, and i say *each page*
bears a context, decomposing, as i
tremble about. he says *everything*
is a pedestal, a stairway, and i say
everything stills from this perfect height.
everything is a bore or a bent brow, all flitting,
or suffering. mother, you had a soothing
for any ail: your cloak, your roof.

MAXINE CHERNOFF

DIARY

Maybe tonight when you light your lamp, you are dead already but unaware of your passing. And your family as well doesn't notice a single change. At first you don't believe it, but when you hear songs enclose you and smells waft toward you the fragrance of shadows, you are convinced. When you speak, you have your usual voice. When you kiss, the warm, pungent aroma of life remains, distilled. So what is the difference? It is how your heart has opened, empty of old grievances. It is completely filled by strangers and cherry blossoms and those who will someday grieve your next passing, which is not death but departure. Stay as long as you wish. It is your secret to yourself.

MAXINE CHERNOFF

DIARY

On the map of the rubble, you see the place you once called home. But home is broken rocks and leveled buildings now. Where is the man who sold flour and oil at the market and all the children from the school that stood across the road? Where is the road? And where are you, tiny boy, who took your first wobbling steps under the window, and your ancient grandma, her black wrap flowing even on sunny days? Today, elsewhere, there was an eclipse of the sun. Here, dust is everywhere, swirling, like waves from the beach you cannot reach. No cars, no newspapers, or the vendor, who was missing an eye. To be blind might be a blessing. To not hear, a mercy. She holds her daughter, who, with two crayons, one pink, one black, draws their tiny house as it once was on a scrap of paper. Can we hang it up, she asks. Her mother holds it in the air.

BECKY HAGENSTON

VOLUNTARY

It was junior year of high school, and all the girls but me were running away, trying to die, or having babies. This was the Maryland suburbs in the mid-eighties; nothing was so terrible, and that's why we were restless. Melissa Johnson hitchhiked to Arizona and returned with a spider tattoo on her wrist. Lucy Ambrose swallowed a bottle of Tylenol and disappeared for a month, then got engaged to a boy from the Catholic school. There were three pregnant girls always hanging around the nurse's office, wearing their blue satin school jackets over their stretchy pants. Janice Wilson starved herself down to ninety pounds and passed out in art class one February afternoon—we'd seen it coming for months, watched her collarbones poking out of her shirts, whispered about her knobby legs in gym class. I thought it was something she was trying out, like how she tried field hockey freshman year. Something she'd get tired of the way she once got tired of me.

I held her hand while the school nurse felt for a pulse.

The following week, Janice called me from the Johns Hopkins psych ward and told me to come visit her. Even though we hadn't been actual friends since sixth grade, it did not occur to me to refuse.

"I burgled her room," Janice told me that first Saturday. I didn't know it yet, but I would visit her for only three Saturdays, though she would be there for three months. She indicated an elderly woman snoozing on the sofa. We were in the orange-carpeted dayroom, which was full of winter light and where a TV played movies all afternoon. "When she went for her shock treatments, I waltzed into her room and stole her cigarettes." She smiled at me, so I smiled back. She was getting some color in her face because she had to eat three meals a day, including dessert. A nurse followed her to the toilet to make sure she didn't vomit everything up. There was something regal about her, the way she scanned the room as if she were queen of the crazies.

We'd met in second grade, the year a boy named Eddie mur-

dered a baby chick in homeroom by throwing it out a window. Our houses were six blocks from each other, and we'd once roamed the neighborhood together, jumping on strangers' trampolines, casting witchy spells, and catching stray cats. But that seemed like a long time ago. I wondered if she remembered the baby chick but didn't want to ask.

"So listen," Janice said, scooting closer to me on the sofa. Across from us, a nurse was knitting a green scarf. A bearded man was nodding in a wheelchair. Two overweight girls leaned over a jigsaw puzzle on a small table at the back of the room. I felt like I was in a weird kind of kindergarten. "I need you to do something for me."

I hesitated for just a moment before saying, "Sure, anything at all."

What she wanted, she explained quietly, was to make her parents think she was dead. This would involve me putting on one of her nightgowns, digging up the spare key hidden under a garden gnome, entering her house in the middle of the night, and sneaking up the steps to her parents' bedroom. I would then imitate her voice wailing, *Mommy and Daddy, why didn't you love me? Whyyyyyy?* I'd escape out her window, shimmying down the trellis—or maybe just out the front door. Either way, her parents would see a flash of her vanishing into the night. They'd think: *A ghost! But why a ghost? Is our beloved daughter* dead?

They'd call the hospital in a panic, and *Oh no! She's not in her room! She's not in her bed!*

"Where will you be?" I asked. I looked over at the nurse, but she was staring at the TV. A swarthy man and a skinny lady were making out in a dark restaurant.

"Not sure yet. Maybe just hiding in here somewhere."

"They'll figure out you're not dead pretty soon, though. What then?"

"Let me worry about that," she said.

She had offered to draw me a floor plan of her house, like we were in a spy movie, but this was unnecessary. Even though I hadn't been inside for years, I knew her house as well as my own: the doorbell that played "Edelweiss," the smell of her father's pipe smoke, the kitchen with the rooster wallpaper, the basement with its stacks of board games (Masterpiece, Pay Day) and air hockey table, the sound the beige-carpeted stairs made

when you climbed them. A sliding glass door opened onto the patio; the yard sloped into a tree line between the next subdivision. I knew what her house sounded like in the middle of the night, the grandfather clock chiming downstairs, the distant rumble of her father's snores. The sound of her brother, now off at college, playing his AC/DC records behind his closed door. The click-click of her dog Ginger's claws on the kitchen linoleum. So no, she did not need to draw me a map.

My own house was not a trailer but looked like one: a single story with gray siding, on a gravel road named after an old man who'd died before we moved in. There was no patio. From my bedroom window, I could see the old woman next door smoking Winstons and ashing into a blue Maxwell House can. We had no dog, no grandfather clock. I had no brother, no sister, just a vague memory of knowing that I should stop demanding a brother or sister—my mother may have snapped at me, my father might have smacked me; either way, I finally stopped asking. My mother, concerned that I would grow up to be a hermit, had arranged play dates with neighborhood children, finagled invitations to birthday parties of children I was too shy to befriend, one of whom was Janice.

But as the years went by, Janice did pep squad and I did math league; she went to parties and I took tap dancing lessons. She joined the swim club we were too broke to belong to. My mother once invited Janice's mother over for tea, and I was relieved when Janice's mother said she was busy. "Snob," my mother decided. "Good riddance." The closest I had to a best friend by junior year was a sophomore named Stacy who giggled a lot and didn't make fun of me. When I told her I had visited Janice in the hospital, she giggled and said, "Watch out for that weirdo."

Because my parents didn't trust me to drive the thirty miles to Baltimore alone without getting lost or crashing the car, my mother drove me to visit Janice on Saturday afternoons. She would blast the heat in her car—a blue Malibu Classic. She'd tune the radio to a station that seemed to play nothing but Fleetwood Mac. I remember icy trees flashing by, horses shivering behind fences. I would cross my arms and sink low in my seat as my mother filled the car with questions: *Why would Janice do such a thing? What else has she done? Would you ever do such a thing? Are you depressed? Do you want to talk?* I would an-

swer in monosyllables. Eventually this would lead her either to boys or religion or both, two topics upon which she considered herself an expert. *You know, I was the one who asked your father out in high school,* she would say. And later: *I do hope you'll find the kind of relationship with Jesus that I have.*

My mother worked as a data processor in Baltimore, and my father had quit his job teaching accounting at the community college to start a failing business. Or this was how my mother described it on the phone to her sister: *He used all our savings on a copy machine! I told him he'd lost his mind*. I spent more and more time in my room, listening to Billy Squier and Def Leppard under my puffy headphones. Sometimes I'd open my eyes and my mother would be waving her arms at me, and I felt like an alien encountering a human for the first time.

Sometimes I'd open my eyes and my mother would be waving her arms at me, and I felt like an alien encountering a human for the first time.

I had found myself wondering what forms of teenage rebellion might be accessible to me, but everything seemed out of the question. I hated the taste of beer and the smell of cigarettes. Even though I wished my thighs were smaller, I liked food too much to diet. I had never been kissed, and I had no interest in being one of the pregnant stretchy-pants girls. I was too afraid of getting in trouble to shoplift, like Theresa Randall did sophomore year—she took twenty bottle-cap keychains from Woolworths and handed them out in the hallway. On those fifty-minute drives to Johns Hopkins, down I-95 and through the Harbor Tunnel, I soothed myself with the thought of opening the car door and rolling onto the freeway as my mother rambled on.

It was a relief when we finally arrived at the Meyer Building and I could leave my mother in the lobby and go up in the elevator to the fourth floor to visit my crazy friend, wearing a badge that showed I was a visitor and not a patient. The visitor's badge made me feel important in a way I didn't in my usual life.

The second weekend I visited, Janice's eyes were brighter, and her face seemed less sharp. She introduced me to the nurses:

Thelma and Wendy and Karen and Lisa. She introduced me to Margie, the old woman she stole cigarettes from. She introduced me to her roommate, Gail, who was forty years old and skinny as a coat hanger. "She's in on our plan," Janice said. "She'll cover for me." I tried not to stare at Gail's horrible puffy throat. "That's what happens when you're bulimic for too long," Janice informed me later. "Your throat can actually explode."

"Yuck" was all I could say. I didn't think this was true, but how did I know? I knew nothing. I was failing geometry; I had cheated on a US history test because everybody else had. I ate lunch by myself in a toilet stall, unwrapping my Nature Valley granola bar quietly so no one could hear. We sat on the edge of Janice's bed, and she told me about people who had visited her: Mr. Gates, the geometry teacher, who brought her a stack of his daughter's *Seventeen* magazines ("Perv," I said, even though I didn't really think he was a perv). Rachel Thomas, one of the cheerleaders. Ricky Weller, who was on the basketball team. I hadn't realized she even knew him. She told me he had held her hand and told her she was a special person. I didn't know if I believed her or not.

She told me her mother and father had come to visit her separately. Her mother gave her a Swatch watch, and her father said he'd buy her a car if she promised to live. She showed me the watch, which looked like a big pink handcuff on her scrawny wrist.

"But most importantly," she said, rising and going over to the white dresser, "my mother brought me this."

It was one of those old-fashioned nightgowns with a ruffle around the neck, like Ma wore on *Little House on the Prairie*. For some reason, the nightgown made me feel sorry for Janice in a way I hadn't before. I took it solemnly and stuffed it in my big purse, and I felt like I was kidnapping a baby.

It was snowing outside her window, big fat flakes that dissolved as soon as they hit the ground. Across the street was a building that said SCHOOL OF HYGIENE AND PVBLIC HEALTH, and I felt embarrassed for not knowing what PVBLIC meant. Her room was so tidy that I was jealous. It was like she got to go both forward in time, to adulthood, and backward, to a place where words like PVBLIC made sense.

"You're a good friend," she said. She hugged me, and her body felt hard and warm.

"How is she doing?" my mother asked as we drove home in the gray afternoon light. We'd stopped at Giant for cans of generic green beans and grapefruit soda, for taco mix and butter pecan ice cream. Janice had told me that ice cream comes up easily when you vomit, how it had taken her parents weeks to figure out where it was all going.

"She's great," I said. "Everything's great."

"Do you want me to take you to lunch at Harborplace after you visit her next week?"

"I don't think I need to go every *week*," I said.

"She needs you," my mother announced, and I wondered if this was true and hoped it was. I fiddled with the heater, then sat back in my seat and stared at my face in the side mirror, thinking: *I have a round face. I look like a sad girl.* I smiled and thought: *I look like a sad girl trying to look happy.*

"Do you think she'd like me to pray for her?" my mother asked brightly, as she turned onto our street. "I wouldn't mind."

"She's Catholic," I said. "If a Methodist prays for her, she'll burst into flames."

My mother opened her mouth to say something and then shut it again.

Janice was trying to teach me to sound like her so that when I wailed outside her parents' bedroom door, they would know it was her, their darling daughter, even before they saw the nightgowned girl vanish. The nightgowned girl, I did not bother pointing out, could not disappear into thin air; she would certainly be caught and maybe even arrested. "What if I just stand beneath their window instead of actually breaking into the house?" I suggested. "That seems more scary anyway, doesn't it?"

Janice shook her head at me. "You're not *breaking* in—you'll dig up the key. You're overthinking it," she said. "Are you committed to this?"

As a joke, I said, "Hey, you're the one who's committed."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "I wasn't committed," she said. "This is voluntary."

"I'm committed, I'm committed," I said, even though I wasn't.

She told me about group therapy and about occupational therapy. About making a trivet out of plaster and tiles. About sitting in a circle on folding chairs with crying adult men—what

had they done? These men were bald and fat and tall; they had mustaches. They looked like anybody you'd see walking down the street, but they'd all done something to get themselves put in the psych ward so they didn't have to go to jail. Not that you could ask. She told me about assertiveness training. You had to talk about how you felt, using *I* instead of *you*. "*I* feel, *I* feel. I feel like it's bullshit," she said, and lit a cigarette. "I feel like I wish you were in here with me. We'd have fun."

"Me too," I said, to be nice. We were in the dayroom again. The nurses knitted and frowned; a young woman in glasses announced brightly, "It's time for my lithium," and walked down the hallway.

I hadn't told her that my parents were fighting, or that I was now eating lunch with Stacy and obsessing over a boy on the lacrosse team. Everything I didn't tell her felt like something I needed in order to construct a place I could live all by myself, high off the ground.

Janice blew out a puff of smoke. "I almost died that day at school," she said. "In the ambulance, they couldn't find a pulse."

I didn't know what to say except, "Oh, wow."

"Try it again. My voice."

"Whyyyyy?" I said. "Why didn't you love me? *Whyyyy?*"

She nodded. "Nice," she said. "It's coming along."

When I came out of the elevator, my mother wasn't in the lobby. She wasn't browsing in the gift shop. She wasn't pacing by the elevator, where a nurse stood with a bearded man in a wheelchair. She wasn't in a chair reading *Guideposts*, and she wasn't staring out the windows by the glass doors. I went into the gift shop and wandered through the stuffed animals, the shiny Get Well Soon balloons, the Whitman's Samplers, the magazines. Little bears and big-eyed cats and rows of Wrigley's gum. The woman behind the counter looked up and nodded pleasantly. A white-haired woman was picking up the get-well cards and putting them down again. I

I felt a terrible twinge of happiness at being a lucky person who wasn't sick, and no one I loved was going to die.

felt a terrible twinge of happiness at being a lucky person who wasn't sick, and no one I loved was going to die.

And then, I thought: *My mother is gone forever*, and I felt my vision get blurry. She had been kidnapped or killed; she had been in an accident. Maybe she was in some other wing of this hospital, thinking of me. Janice had told me that her parents had visited her together and cried, and from what I remembered of her parents—her mother with her perfect makeup and her father with his gruff mustache—I thought that sounded terrible.

A beige sedan was pulling up in front of the entrance. A man with a green umbrella dashed out. My mother emerged slowly—or it seemed slowly—like in a filmstrip of a butterfly poking itself out of a cocoon. Leg, leg. The man with the umbrella stood next to her, and she said something very close to his face, and then she was walking toward the glass doors, and they were opening, the car was driving away, and my mother was saying, "I'm here, I'm here, sorry about that."

The man was, she explained on the way home—or tried to explain, as I stuck my fingers in my ears and cranked up the radio—someone from work. They'd had lunch, they'd been having lunch, that was all. It wasn't all, but I wouldn't know that for another few months. Or maybe I did know it. Mostly what I knew was that these trips to and from Baltimore had nothing to do with her wanting to spend time with me.

At home, my father was in the guestroom, where he'd put the copy machine; it was whirring away, spitting out copies of business proposals that he'd later pack into boxes and take to his new apartment, where I would visit him every Saturday.

"Just a friend," my mother said again, like I was stupid enough to believe her.

I didn't tell my father about the man in the car. I ate dinner with my parents that night, feeling like I'd separated into two people, the sad girl who looked happy and the happy girl who looked sad. After dinner, I went up to my room and put on my headphones and listened to Billy Squier screaming that I was his kind of lover.

Janice went to the Catholic school for her last year, and when I saw her at the Harford Mall—with her mother, or with Ricky the basketball player—we'd say hello and look away. She looked good, healthy, but I didn't ask her how she was doing, or if she

would ever forgive me for being a terrible friend. I had thrown her nightgown in the trash and hoped she wouldn't ask for it back—but she never asked me anything. I finished high school. Went to college. Married and divorced and had no children.

I would remember the question Janice wanted me to call out in the dark hallway of her house, but only because it was the question my father asked my mother for years after he moved out. I suppose we all want to shout that question into the darkness, throw it against a door, toss it through a window, poltergeist our own families, lovers, even our younger stupid selves. Why didn't you love me? And there isn't an answer, because they—your family, your lovers, your own stupid self—are throwing that question into someone else's darkness.

The night after I saw my mother get out of the man's car, after I ate dinner with my parents, I waited until the house was quiet and then got dressed and went outside. I had the idea that I would hitchhike to the freeway and then to wherever anyone would take me. The air was sweet and cool, and the moon was a sliver. I wondered if this was how Melissa Johnson felt when she decided to hitchhike to Arizona. I wondered if it was how Janice felt, alone in her bathroom, throwing up ice cream. My street was quiet at eleven thirty. People were inside their houses sleeping or watching *Saturday Night Live*. To get to Janice's development, I only had to walk six blocks. If I kept going, I'd end up at the Royal Farm Store, with its slushies and Laffy Taffys and porn magazines, the women's heads visible above the brown wrappers, like they were trapped in a box.

Instead I just walked around to the front of my house. Knelt in the cold grass. Dug with my fingers until I unearthed the aspirin bottle that held our own spare key. I tipped it into my hand, thinking it would be my mother who would find herself locked out someday, thinking that this was some kind of punishment. And of course it was me, home from college and drunk, who would lock myself out and dig up the bottle, not remembering it was empty until it was in my hand.

KRISTIN GEORGE BAGDANOV

THREAT MULTIPLIER

defense a future
regret

carbon a place
out of form

this human season
of mine

and what once
filled it

like a mind

now two hollows
in which no voice sounds

maybe it will ,
, maybe it will now

KRISTIN GEORGE BAGDANOV

CAUSE

At first I admit I was careless
and every year was a stone tossed and generically
smooth as if from a catalogue that sells
cartons of minerals to line one's property and add
to its value, but now I am noticing each is specific,
worn by a history of pressure, held
for eons within a form so like itself
it did not realize
it was being held
only to one day be expulsed, eroded
into a factory setting, a position
over which it has no bearing
as it waits for any of the four causes
to take hold: what it is or from, out of
or toward, waiting to be stumbled upon or over,
a period without definition and which cannot be said
except to say that it was once a part of something
from which it won't always be apart.

KRISTIN GEORGE BAGDANOV

INC.

when you enter the corporation you become a part of the corporation
when you become a part of the corporation you are incorporated
and you combine or unite into one body or uniform substance
when you unite into one substance some of your parts are merged
  and some submerged
while merging you divest yourself of your least desirable parts
and the rest of you learns the basic principle of liability
which is to protect your most desirable parts from the condition of
  being
answerable by begetting additional conditions for which you do not
  have to answer
such as your subsidiaries
which you have carved out of yourself
little pieces of your corpus
little corpses to cushion you
from accusations you might have otherwise had to answer
had you not carved out in anticipation
your little subsidiaries who surround you
and define the limit of your culpability with their interlocking jaws
and who are themselves special
in the eyes of the law and who multiply
by dividing, such that none is original
and none derivative, which creates a loophole
in liability, which must limit itself to the authentic
origin of cause (which was the case
in bhopal when the corporation known

as union carbide [which is now a wholly owned subsidiary
of dow chemical
and which by merging was made new and absolved of any
wrongdoing
indexed by a dip in a stock that no longer exists] was not made to
answer
for the thousands of people it/they killed, many of whom drowned
inside themselves, many of whom are still dying
and therefore do not count toward the official conditions
of liability), which cannot be pointed to directly, as the corporation can
divest itself/themselves infinitely or until attention dwindles
a perpetual dilution of response
parts per million per billion
until it is everywhere and nowhere
until you are everything and no one
parts unsummable
the conditions you made to stay
unanswered

KRISTIN GEORGE BAGDANOV

INDICATOR SPECIES

Another bee sick
on the sill

heaving
then still.

The world convulses.
No hive to call it home.

There must be something
in the air. Something in the water.

Some new element that can bend
word into being. Wing out of need.

Some sign that means
more than a warning.

BRITTANY CAVALLARO

HEARTLESS

I walk around the house a little. I think about a vodka martini.
In the bathroom I push everything in the trash down
to make room for more trash, the inkless red pens and the off-
brand wrappers and the tattered sweat-damp socks and anymore
my phone lights up with each thrill of panic, simpatico. You
in the inevitable tow lot, our car impounded with
your passport and the keys to my office inside, the lot attendant
laughing at you—he *is*, with each form he forces you to sign
he's salivating, he's jacking off under the counter—*why don't you
care? Say something*—because you'd just gone
for a walk. You'd just gone for a drive. You're at
the wrong hotel again, there are no *cabs* and you're at one *percent*
and *I don't care if you're in class*—when we're apart
you start dismantling our life, and you do it loud, on a stage
in a little theater and the silence and the applause that follow are
the same. They're a solvent. They break it down
regardless. I keep what's left in a little bag
that I hide under the bathroom sink, and any day now it'll be
full but it isn't yet. I can still stuff it down further. I'm shaking
out my curled-up hair, touching up my mouth,
my nose, I put out my cigarette in the sink. I'm
a wife waiting up late at home and I'm that wife
in a movie. I'm watching it from miles away through
binoculars, I'm so far above myself that I can see
you, finally, you in your blazer racing down the street
with a trunk full of groceries, a tank full of handsome gas,
and a cute little candy bar just for me, and you're right, I did,
I promised: I'll pay for it all the second that you get home.

BRITTANY CAVALLARO

WE HAD FUN IN THE DARK,

didn't we? Could I call it misdirection if I couldn't see? Marco, Polo. Playing tag in the hedge maze at midnight—I was never crafty enough, only won by hiding. Used to say "we" when I talked about weekends when it was just me and his footsteps. Spent nine years incandescently aware. Sometimes I could tell from the heft of the air if he'd left the door standing open. Later the neighbor invited me to her backyard wedding, sidled up in her costume to say *I could hear him, you know.* I knew. I'd brought a dessert, the invitation told me to, and when the sun went down we had a cakewalk. Someone's daughter stepped in a Swiss roll and cried like she'd be smacked for it. I held my dirt-crumb pie, tried not to stare back at my driveway. Why, the bride was asking, were my floodlights always on?

LEANNE MA

THE KILLER SLOPE

Sometimes, I forget that I will die. It is hard to remember when everyone around me stresses what a bright future I will have.

Father: If you do your algebra, you can be anything you want to be when you grow up: astronaut, scientist, doctor, i-banker. Of course, if you are truly good at math, you know that being an i-banker is better than being an astronaut.

Mother: If you don't clear every kernel of rice from your bowl, you will grow up to marry a girl with pimples dotting her face the size of the rice you didn't finish. Think of the farmers, a droplet of sweat for every grain they harvest.

Never mind that Sally, who sits in the front row in class, doesn't have pimples, doesn't even notice my existence at the corner by the back window, or that I am the one with pimples, hard cysts I squeeze precariously between my fingers in the mirror, pinching and pinching until beautiful milky pus oozes, reddening into blood, fat droplets the size of the rice I didn't finish.

Dying is left for old people, like my grandpa, who fought in the Sino-Japanese War and now lives in a cheap nursing home with peeling cream walls. Or like my other grandpa, a farmer who lost all his crops to Communism and swam five miles to British Hong Kong—dodging bullets and barbed wire in some retellings—but now can't even walk five steps to the bathroom. I am young—only twelve—but everyone is impatient for me to grow up, so I can fulfill something called potential.

Mrs. Tung, our sixth-grade teacher: Martin has a lot of potential, but his mind wanders. Perhaps he should get assessed.

Father: Nonsense. Are you trying to call my son a retard? He's my son.

My mother nods, says nothing, and that's the only thing they can agree on.

Nonetheless, they turn down the suggestion, fearing assessment will reveal deficiency rather than exceptionality.

Mrs. Tung: Maybe he'll grow out of it.

To confirm that I'm not retarded, I attempt to self-diagnose through Google, but the task is more complicated than I think. My problems—trouble concentrating, boredom at subjects others find interesting, interest in subjects others find boring, being unable to shut my mouth when not asked to speak but unable to find the words when asked to—suggest autism or ADHD. Autistic children have difficulty putting words to thoughts, while those with ADHD talk too much, though the former can talk for hours about certain topics. Then I find that a person can have both syndromes and can outgrow neither. I become sad, or bored, or both, and stop the search. I settle for Mrs. Tung's diagnosis: Maybe I'll grow out of whatever afflicts me.

No one can know that I'm pinning my future on Mrs. Tung, who teaches every subject except math and PE. Known to the class as Sexy Spinster, she is a large woman with hair on the back of her fingers. Her age is anyone's guess—our guesses range from thirty-three to sixty-three. She is neither sexy nor a spinster. In fact, she's so unsexy, so unpleasant, that it's rumored she lets her dozen pet parakeets fly around her apartment, perch on the piano keys, and peck at her pillow for dandruff the size of breadcrumbs, just to be surrounded by noise and love. She has become a running joke: *Oooo, Sexy Spinster is coming for you.* Or: S*exy Spinster is as good as you're going to get.* Also rumored is her crush on Mr. Cheng, the math teacher, who is supposedly good at math but is neither an i-banker nor an astronaut and instead plays video games and jerks off so hard his ceilings are stained—at least that's how the boys imagine his homelife. These days, all the boys seem to do is flick each other's earlobes, shoot hoops, and talk about how far they can shoot—one's popularity is proportional to the ability to turn banal subjects into something sexual, or at least something about Sexy Spinster—all of which I fail at miserably.

One day, Sexy Spinster does come for me. We are in music class and take turns singing the note she plays on the piano. When it comes to my turn, I sing the note, and she asks how I'm able to sing it before her piano cue. I tell her that she just played the same note to the ten students before me; of course I'm able to repeat it. She tries another note, and I sing it. Then she plays a string of notes, and I sing them. By this point, I'm acutely aware that the whole class is staring at me: my prepubescent voice, high and squeaky, requiring all this extra singing. This

incident sparks another conversation between Sexy Spinster and my parents.

SS: I believe that your son might have perfect pitch.

Father: Nonsense. What is that?

SS: He has the ability to hear what others can't.

Father: Nonsense. Everything I say to him falls on deaf ears.

SS: I suggest your son take music lessons.

Father: I can barely pay for his books, and now you want me to pay for music?

SS: Then I want to give him private lessons after school. He might have a gift.

Mother: Gift to us? Free lessons? Free childcare? Two times a week? Okay, deal.

This is how I end up spending two days a week after school with Sexy Spinster. She teaches me the names of the notes I'm hearing, where they are located on the piano, how to draw them like little commas and periods on lined music sheets. When I sit down at the piano, my short legs can't reach the pedals, but she says we don't need to use them yet. For once, someone is happy about the answers that I give in this wordless world where C and F are not any less desirable than A and B. She seems impressed by easy tasks, like how I can immediately name a note right after I hear it played on the piano.

For once, someone is happy about the answers that I give in this wordless world where C and F are not any less desirable than A and B.

Perfect pitch, she says, is like having the ability to look at the yellow walls of the music room, go to a paint shop, and identify the exact shade of color. "Can you be certain of distinguishing between the yellow of sunshine, a block of cheese, a lemon, and a dandelion from memory?"

I shake my head, and she says proudly, "See? But you can distinguish between lemons and dandelions on the piano."

I look down at the keys, and indeed, black and white are not what I see. I see harmony, I see song, I see patterns and possibilities. I don't see scary Sexy Spinster with hair on the back of her fingers. I forget that she is even my teacher. She is a pleasant lady who is easy to please and laughs easily—for example, when

I say that written music looks like the black beans they serve at the cafeteria. An effortlessness comes to the melodies I sing and play, and even when I don't immediately know the answers to her questions, I believe the answers will appear when I hear the piano keys, a sliding rainbow in my ears. I forget that I am me: a short chubby boy whose earlobes get flicked at school because he doesn't know how to talk about sex.

These free music lessons, however, don't offer me free passes in class—which is for the best in the grand scheme of school life. I cannot imagine the living hell that I will be doomed to if the boys find out I'm getting private lessons from Sexy Spinster. As the shortest boy in class, I already receive a disproportionate share of Sexy Spinster jokes, condemned to a future of pleasuring her and her parakeets.

One afternoon, when the air conditioner breaks down, I yell out in celebration, presuming the Chinese exam is canceled. But Sexy Spinster yells right back at me for yelling. A smirk of satisfaction paints her face, as though she loves to see us squirm in the tight, clammy space between the metal chairs and the tables they're welded to while we try to recall what Confucius said about benevolence. I begin to write: *Confucius said that benevolence is a state of mind, a lifelong cultivation. It shouldn't be sacrificed for riches, selfish desires, or even life. I think it's very hard to do, and to be honest, from my observation, even the adults who've had more time to practice don't cultivate their benevolence very well.*

I stare out our third floor classroom window for inspiration, surveying the cars rolling down the infamously long, steep slope. We are known as the primary school at the bottom of the Killer Slope. Across the street, accompanying us at the bottom, is a bakery where I buy a breakfast bun every morning. A woman with pink sandals is exiting the bakery, pulling a shopping trolley behind her. I have seen her around school; I think she is one of the lunch ladies. She stops and waits at the stoplight to cross to our side.

Then I hear a faint buzz and see the source: three lemon-yellow stripes on an arched black back. I squint to determine whether the bee is crawling inside or outside. Turns out it's neither—the bee is lodged between the windowpane and the mosquito net, unable to escape. Boys shouldn't be afraid of insects, Father says, so I eye the bee warily and try to summon some

benevolence. Maybe this bee is lost, or hurt, or confused. I also curse its stupidity: Why can't the silly bee get out the way it came in? The bee jerks up, as if angry, and in surprise, I pull back, the metal chair scraping against the floor.

"Martin Lee, if you stare out the window any longer, you will fail the exam. The paper isn't going to write itself." I wonder if Sexy Spinster is being extra hard on me in class to counteract the kindness she has shown me in our music lessons.

This elicits a few chuckles, and Raymond, in the seat next to me, gives me the finger-in-hole motion. The connection is unclear to me, but I've learned the best way to stave off the jokes is just to smile back and pretend I understand. In the front row, Sally, the love of my life, doesn't look up, her back bent over in concentration.

I stare down at the paper, the buzzing impossible to ignore. In the trapped space, the bee flutters a few inches up, then crashes down, over and over.

Behind the bee, the lunch lady with the trolley is still at the stoplight, shifting from one foot to another. This pedestrian light takes forever to change—I wonder why she doesn't jaywalk like everyone else. I watch as the lights finally change and she begins crossing. A red taxi is coming down Killer Slope. It is fast, and its stop will be abrupt. But the taxi doesn't slow down, and there is a loud screech—a prolonged C8, the highest note on the piano. The taxi runs directly into the woman and knocks her over like a bowling ball hitting a pin, before coming to a halt in the middle of the intersection. The shopping trolley flies away, but I cannot see the woman anywhere.

In the classroom, heads raise up at the loud screech, even Sally tilting hers toward the window, the little bump on her nose visible. The other boys call it a camel nose, saying it's bigger than her actual humps. I think her nose is cute, makes her special, but I haven't found the words to tell her yet.

One by one, the heads lower again, returning to the exam, but I cannot. For a time, the street is quiet, as if someone has pressed pause on the remote. Then slowly, the streets wake up. There is shouting. A lone man with a waist pouch lifts the back of the taxi, yelling for others to join him. At first, he's alone in his herculean effort, passersby preferring to play the audience, even whipping out their phones to film him. Then they appear

to all join at once, and I soon count thirteen people wrestling with the taxi with their bare hands, as though they were trying to lift an elephant. Cars coming down Killer Slope try to make their way around the accident, while those behind honk fiercely. Sirens blare. Blue lights flash into our classroom. Sexy Spinster comes over, shuts all the windows, and lowers the blinds. Still, the exam is not canceled. I can't see or hear the bee anymore, nor what's happening outside. A sour stench brews in the hot classroom. My back prickles with sweat and shock. Sally dabs at her forehead with a tissue.

I scribble down a few more thoughts about benevolence: *My small window frame holds a big problem: my hope for the lunch lady to stay alive but for the bee to die. If I can't grow out of my fear of insects, am I a terrible person for life?*

By the time I pass down my exam sheet, push through the chattering crowds, and rush down to the streets, the ambulance is gone. The taxi rests on the back of a tow truck, barely a dent on its shiny red body. A loose semicircle is formed around the restricted area where police are dumping a liquid chemical onto the concrete. Where the taxi once stood is a single pink plastic sandal with a thin toe divider and a deeply cushioned arch.

Standing next to me is an old man in an undershirt, a toothpick dangling from his lips. I ask, "Is the woman okay?"

"Don't know. Taxi ran the light. She went under."

He does not seem interested in continuing the conversation, so I go into the bakery. It's filled with a sweet aroma of baked goods and brewing black tea, customers knocking into each other, clipping fluffy bread with tongs. No one seems concerned with the commotion going on outside.

"Do you know if the woman who was hit is okay?" I ask the woman behind the cash register.

She looks at me like I am a kid not worth her time, even though I buy bread from her every morning. "Don't know."

"Do you know where she was taken?"

"No."

"Do you know that she was in here, right before she got hit?"

"You buying anything?"

Her lack of interest confuses me, and I rejoin the circle of onlookers outside. The toothpick man is in discussion with some men.

"Accident black spot. They don't nickname it the Killer Slope for no reason. It's about time they added some stoplights along the slope and a speed camera."

"Taxi drivers are terrible. The meter goes up faster than your heartbeat."

"It's impossible to flag down taxis now. They just want to take tourists to Disneyland. What's so great about Disneyland anyway?"

On my phone I zoom in and snap a photo of the pink sandal, just before a police officer picks it up with a long metal clamp and drops it into a plastic bag. The tow truck takes off with the taxi. I stand there until the cordon tape is rolled back, the police cars drive away, the crowd and congestion clear, and unknowing pedestrians and cars surge in again.

At dinner that night, the news plays to my parents' loud sucking of spareribs. Father reeks of sawdust and cigarettes from the construction site, Mother of cooking oil from the diner. I much prefer the silence to their loud arguments about the divorce they will never go through with. I learn from their arguments that the benefits of staying married—our two-bedroom public housing unit, the monthly social security payments, the blame they can direct at each other for their own unhappiness—are too good to give up.

I jump at the news: "At around eleven o'clock this morning, on Clear Water Bay Road near LKM Primary School, a taxi hit an elderly woman, sucking her under the car. Pedestrians helped lift the vehicle to save her. According to sources, the middle-aged woman was unconscious when taken to Queen Elizabeth Hospital. The driver passed the Breathalyzer test. Police will be investigating the taxi's speed and the traffic signals at the time of incident."

Is she elderly or middle-aged? How can the news anchor be so careless about such important facts? The anchor doesn't even mention where the woman works or whether she has family.

"I saw the accident from my classroom," I say. "I think she works at my school."

A bad idea in retrospect.

"Why were you not focusing in class?" Father says.

"Witnessing an accident is bad luck," Mother says, almost at the same time.

An argument ensues about luck and money and me. I know

what's to come and don't even bother clearing the rice kernels off my bowl—no point if I will get a spanking anyway. The spankings happen at least once a week, for any reason—bad grades, bad mood, bad luck—always after an argument. After Father slams the door, Mother grabs the closest weapon. Sometimes it's a hanger or a duster. Today it's Father's belt. I pull down my pants, heave myself up on the table and lie face down, legs dangling down the side.

As usual, Mother talks to me as the whips come down: "Your father is the worst thing that has ever happened to me. You're all I have left. Did you know spankings used to be allowed when I was in school? Society is too soft now. You're lucky it's just your butt—the back of the hand is the most painful. All bones. This is for your own good. You need to toughen up, kid. Kind mothers breed weak sons."

Even though I'm the one in pain, she's the one who cries afterward, dabbing white flower-balm oil on the whip marks. I don't cry. I think about how my nose might actually hurt more, pressed into the table. Or I think about Sally's bumpy nose and how much I like its imperfection. Ever since Sexy Spinster has taught me about musical time, I've been counting the rhythms of the spanks: 4/4, 3/4, 3/8, 6/8. The irregularity annoys me. I wish my mother would hit with a steadier hand, preferably a 3/8, so I can practice the latest song I've been taught—"Für Elise"—in my head. But I am glad she is not hitting my hands; otherwise I wouldn't be able to play at all. The spanks get slower and slower. I think she's using too much wrist—Sexy Spinster keeps telling me to relax my wrists when I play. The advice, though counterintuitive, really works.

Only then, lying on my face, butt exploding in pain, do I remember I accidently skipped today's music lesson after school, having rushed off to see the accident. It is the first time I've missed a lesson, and now I do want to cry. My music lesson has become what I look forward to most these days, in addition to a glimpse of Sally's nose. I hope Sexy Spinster will understand, especially since I wrote about the accident in the exam. After my mother applies flower-balm oil to my wounds and leaves the room sobbing, I take out my phone and stare at the pink plastic sandal on my screen, dotted with blood. I want to know that the woman is okay. She works at my school and buys bread from the same bakery as I do. I want to show her some benevolence.

The next morning, I scour the newspaper delivered to our door. There's a photo of pedestrians lifting the taxi and items spilling out of the trolley and reusable grocery bags: tomatoes, eggplants, a torn pack of snow peas, egg yolk splattered on the concrete. The bottom of the photo, near the belly of the taxi, is fogged. Surrounding the picture are bubbles of comments. An eyewitness complains that the pedestrian traffic lights take forever to change; it's impossible to wait that long. Another remarks that women shopping at the wet market nearby often saunter across the road without looking, as if they owned the streets. A legislator says the location has been a ticking time bomb, with cars screaming down the slope at ridiculous speeds. Additional traffic lights and speed cameras have been discussed at council meetings time and time again, but bureaucracy has taken another life. Another urges taxi-industry reform, retraining drivers and raising safety awareness. No one mentions who the woman was, whether she had family, whether she is okay.

No one in class is talking about the incident either. Most stare at me blankly when I bring it up: What woman, what lunch lady, what accident, what screeching yesterday—weren't we in our exam?

Turns out Sexy Spinster is really sour about my missed music lesson. I know when I receive a 40 percent on my Chinese exam and detention. She says I failed because I put in too much of my own thoughts and didn't adhere to the text. I say I thought we were supposed to apply the relevance of the teachings to our own lives, but she moves on to the next student. I wonder how she can read all our writing in a night. The low grade can be nothing but revenge. As I remain in my seat at the end of class, the boys snicker and whisper and creatively flash whatever obscenities they're capable of conjuring with their hands and eyes at the idea of me and Sexy Spinster alone together—not knowing that meetings with her have been the highlight of my life. I try to summon Confucius, but anger thrashes in my chest. I want to kick the table-chair hard until it splits. Suddenly, from the front of the class, Sally turns and gives me a look of sympathy, as one would a wounded animal. Then she puts on her backpack and leaves the room. My heart soars at her acknowledgment of my existence. Somehow, the punishment becomes more tolerable.

In detention, Sexy Spinster tells me to copy out parts of *Sayings of Confucius*, then leaves the room, making no mention of the missed music lesson. I smile, remembering Sally's look of sympathy, and think about at least fifteen different ways to tell her how beautiful her nose is. I wonder why it's so hard to just walk up to her and say it. Perhaps I am slowly getting caught up in the rules of grown-ups. I pick at the hard lumps of pimples on my chin and stare out the window at the traffic coming down Killer Slope, pedestrians jaywalking at the traffic light. The woman who was hit was the only one who obeyed the traffic signal. She was given the green light. What more could she have done?

Then I see the bee again—still lodged in the crack between the net and the windowpane. The hair on the back of my neck rises from fear and irritability. I grab my sheet of Confucius's sayings and slam it against the net. The bee falls to the window ledge. It struggles for a short while, then curls itself up, as if to greet sleep. A stillness descends. Color fades from its body. I take out my phone and type: how do I know *for sure* that a bee has died?

When a bee dies, it hunches over and lowers its head. Its mouth opens and closes, kissing the ground as its final gesture before death.

I crouch down to confirm whether the bee is kissing the window ledge. It is hard to tell. I see the gap it entered from, how lost or blind it must have been for it to have crept down a tiny crevice instead of flying under the vast blueness. I wonder if that's what dying is: a flight from fear, of wings against the sky, hands across piano keys, steps to freedom. I wonder if freedom is what's awaiting my grandfathers, who keep forgetting who I am. I wonder if freedom is what's awaiting me, after I grow up.

I wonder if that's what dying is: a flight from fear, of wings against the sky, hands across piano keys, steps to freedom.

Sexy Spinster returns to find me on the floor. I hear the words she strings together: *potential, failure, responsibility, immatu-*

rity, grown-up, grow up. Eyes enlarged with emotion, hairy hands wringing violently, no less scary than the bee—it is Sexy Spinster, not Kind Music Lady today. She asks why I'm on the floor and why I didn't show up to yesterday's music lesson.

I stare at her black leather shoes and notice that one of her socks is inside out, a string of blue yarn unspooling from the cuff. I tell her about the traffic accident again, which I say I already put in my exam, if she even read it. She says she did but then goes on about marking schemes and rules. "In life, you have to follow rules," she says.

"The woman at the stoplight followed rules and got hit by a taxi anyway."

"Please get up from the floor."

"Is she one of the lunch ladies? I think I recognize her."

"I haven't heard anything. But I can ask around. Please get up right now."

I drag myself up but continue staring at the thread of blue yarn dangling from her sock. "How come no one—at school, on television, in the papers, at the bakery—seems concerned with whether she's okay? I don't understand."

She sighs and says we can only play the hand we're dealt, and to let other problems go—especially me, because I have a tendency to fixate on matters that don't concern me. Otherwise, I will find life very, very difficult. "I am giving you a wonderful opportunity to take music lessons, and you would be foolish to waste my time and your potential."

Potential. At this word my anger flares up again. I say, "The woman could be dead as far as we know, and here we are talking about failed exams and skipped lessons and potential! I don't understand why I failed an exam about benevolence when I am trying to show benevolence to the lunch lady who works at our school!" I swing my leg at the table-chair, mistime the kick, and stub my toe. The table doesn't even budge. I fight back the heat pooling in my eyes. "And I was on the floor because I was trying to kill a bee. To put the bee out of its misery."

At this point, I'm half blinded by tears, stuff shooting out of my nose, which I am sure would win some competition among the boys for once. Their jeers come to mind. I look at Sexy Spinster and all I see is a sad, pathetic woman running around in her apartment, calling after her birds with sunflower seeds in her open palm, saying, "Come here, little birdie, don't be scared,

it's okay." I don't want her to look after me like I am some poor, wounded bird that needs to be fed. I am not one of her stupid parakeets. I tell her I quit her stupid music lessons.

I step over the Confucius paper on the floor that killed the bee, grab my bag, and glare at her. I expect her to yank me back into my seat until I complete detention, or to tell me I'm not allowed to quit her music lessons. But instead, she gives me a sorrowed look of sympathy, as though my wounds are so gnarly and catastrophic they are beyond saving.

"You have your sock on wrong," I say as I brush past her. She peers down at her feet, confused. Somehow, the embarrassment I intend to inflict on her deflects right back at me. I run away as fast as I can.

A brilliant idea comes to me overnight: I will take matters into my own hands and visit the woman at the hospital. I look forward to my mission in the way I have looked forward to my music lessons, but the anticipation does not help me get through a long day. Sexy Spinster ignores me. She does not look at me or call me out, even when I stare at the crumpling dead carcass of the bee on the window ledge. I can't avoid looking at her, though, because she is the teacher, and every time I do, a hurt churns inside my chest like a hunger. Sally doesn't look at me either. Maybe another detention is required for her attention.

Finally, the last bell rings, and I run outside to the crosswalk at the bottom of the Killer Slope, flag down a taxi, and ask to be taken to Queen Elizabeth Hospital—I hope the news anchor got this right at least. Eager for someone to talk to about the accident, I ask the driver whether he knows anything about the woman who was run over the day before, and he looks at me angrily, as if I'm accusing him because he is also a taxi driver. He steps hard on the gas, and I shut my mouth.

At the hospital I ask the ground floor reception where unconscious patients are usually taken. The man behind the counter raises his bushy eyebrows but directs me to the ICU floor. At the reception of the ICU, I ask the nurse to see the woman brought in from the accident the day before yesterday.

"Son, what accident? Everyone is here because of one accident or another."

"The one on Clear Water Bay Road. The Killer Slope."

"Name of patient?"

"I don't know. She works at my school."

"What's your relationship with the patient? Is there an adult with you? I can't let you in."

"Can you at least tell me if she's all right?"

"Sorry, son, I can't."

I drag my feet away, defeated, wishing I were only taller. Just then, a group of people get up to follow the nurse into the ICU. I trail behind them and successfully slip in unnoticed. Despite the soft rhythmic hisses of the ventilators, the room feels quieter and safer than the school library, where I'm unable to hide among bookshelves for more than a few minutes before some boy comes up from behind to rub my belly or flick my earlobe or make fun of how my penis is as tiny as I am. I go from bed to bed, trying to identify the owner of the pink plastic sandal. I have underestimated the task: the identical checkered hospital robes, the bandage-wrapped heads, the masks and tubing that distort the patients' faces, my inability to approach beds occupied by visitors, the fact that I haven't looked closely at the lunch lady's face before. In the end, with about 70 percent certainty, I settle on one bed with an empty side table; she's the kind of woman who might have lost a plastic sandal after a grocery run. Her face is in a kind of suspension, perhaps in mid-thought about the tomatoes and snow peas she would cook later that night for her children, after she scoops rice onto our trays and cleans up our food fights in the cafeteria. Or maybe when the carton of eggs flew out of her hands, it left behind an unfinished emotion, a longing to lunge after and protect her flying eggs.

Her lips are cracked and dry. I have not actually thought about what I would do once I located the woman. Is the woman lying in front of me okay? What does it mean to be okay?

Impulsively, I reach out. Her hands are cold and heavy. I wiggle my hand into hers, whispering, "Hey, it's okay. Hang in there."

Her expression is blank, unchanged.

"What's it like, dying? Open your eyes if it's scary, keep them closed if it's freeing."

Her eyes stay closed. Footsteps approach. In a panic, I crawl under her bed. My palms rest on the cold linoleum, which is surprisingly dusty, considering it's a hospital. I think I am small,

but it turns out I am big. I'm dragged out by the legs and taken to the nurses' station outside the ICU, feeling like a fool, trying to explain what I am doing there. The nurses are not interested anyway, no matter what I say. They ask whether I understand the gravity of the situation, how I could have hurt or killed the patient. I say I do and am genuinely sorry, that I'm still learning all the rules. I am given the option to either name an adult to come pick me up, or they will call the police. I think about my mother, who would likely be too busy at the diner to pick up calls. I think about my father, suspended midair on a construction crane, told to come down to pick up his son from the hospital. I think about the lost hourly wages, about the yelling from my father, who still can't believe he's procreated a fatty wimp with a girly voice who jumps at spiders and ants and bees, who can't see in me any part of himself, any of his unrealized potential. I think about the belt coming down, with each whip my mother's hopes falling that I will become the key to her happiness. I think about their fury multiplied by whatever degree this transgression is worth. I think about how ashamed I am, how I am a hoarder of potential.

I think about their fury multiplied by whatever degree this transgression is worth. I think about how ashamed I am, how I am a hoarder of potential.

I name my adult: Mrs. Tung from LKM Primary School. They find the number from the internet. I am relieved when she picks up the phone. I hope it isn't because she was waiting for me at our music lesson.

In my mind I'm expecting Sexy Spinster and not Kind Music Lady. Turns out I don't get either. Mrs. Tung is very quiet. She is not angry. She looks sad.

"Did you find who or what you were looking for?" she asks after she talks to the nurses and we are alone again, sitting on the plastic chairs outside the ICU.

I shrug.

"I have something to tell you," she says. "Do you want me to treat you as an adult or a child?"

I look at her.

"All right. Adult version, then," she says. "You're right, the woman in the accident did work at the school cafeteria. Her family called to say she won't be coming in to work again. That's all they said, asking for privacy."

"So she might be alive? She might be in one of those beds I saw in the ICU? I might have held her hand?"

"I can't say no to that."

We sit in silence.

"What was the child version?" I ask.

"That you are in a lot of trouble. That I will call your parents."

"So will you?"

"That depends if you were in my music lesson or not."

She smiles. We sit in more silence.

"Do you know that this hospital reminds me of the song you're learning—'Für Elise'? When my husband was staying here, we would listen to a Walkman—you probably don't know what that is. We would share an earphone, and he would repeat 'Für Elise' over and over again. The song, which he also played when he first learned the piano, reminded him of his childhood, of going home. You know what song I'm talking about, right?"

I nod.

She continues, "When I stepped inside the hospital today, all I could think of was how sick I was of the song and how bad his catheter smelled and how he really turned back into a child at the end. But when I teach the song to you at school, watching you struggle, progress bar by bar, make mistakes, and overcome them—it is a joy. The joy comes from sadness, but I cannot experience that joy if I keep thinking about the hospital. Do you understand?"

"I think so." I am still uncertain about this side of Sexy Spinster, who is serious, but not angry. And strangely soft—but not in the kind, teacherly way of Music Lady. I wonder if this is what I get with the adult version. I want to ask what a catheter is, but a more pressing question jumps to mind.

"Mrs. Tung, do you have birds at home?"

She looks surprised. "Yes, I have one."

"Just one?"

"Yes, I used to have more, but they died, and the birds—these annoying parakeets—they were also my husband's passion. You know, birds, music, the whole thing." She laughs.

I wonder how parakeets die, whether they too, like the bees, kiss the ground, and how sad she was when they did, their brilliant bodies of color going limp, fading. I try to recall the origins of her nickname and how the rumor first began about her parakeets, but it is impossible to trace the beginning of a rumor, just as it is impossible to mark the end. I am surprised by how much the rumor got right, though, so I'm starting to think that Mrs. Tung might have been sexy in her younger days, when Mr. Tung was still alive. But what do I know about being sexy.

Sally's nose, on the other hand, is certainly sexy. And Sexy Spinster's story is making me want to play the piano, to play "Für Elise." In the taxi back to school, I'm thinking that maybe instead of telling Sally that I like her bumpy nose, I can play the song for her. And if Mrs. Tung finds joy in teaching it, maybe I can do her a favor. Maybe I can show her that I can fulfill potential through music, even if I can't write it in the stupid exam.

"Mrs. Tung? I think that I was in your music lesson today. In fact, I would very much like to be in all your music lessons again."

"Of course," she says, smiling. "I knew you'd be smart enough to make the right decision."

Legs swinging in the taxi, too short to touch the ground, I think that I have come to the hospital today and have 100 percent found the woman that I was looking for.

JONATHAN APREA

SHIRTS

Somebody has hung their laundry in a small yard to dry.
The shirts, in particular, are people's faces.
Their bodies extend below them invisibly and try
to walk on the ground. In some places

they are damp, as if the pockets had been crying.
The dampness of fabric makes seeing
into it easier, as if anything could be hidden by shirts drying.
I think they get the muscles of their faces to work by being

reminded of it from gusting wind, or the wind
is their breath, and their expressions are made
from shapes sunlight casts into the shade
when they're gathered together. Soon they will be unpinned

from life, it will have only been an afternoon. They begin
to decline in confusion. An angel carries them in.

JONATHAN APREA

STATUES

The statue buried in the ground
beneath a city in the dark is drowned

for a thousand years, experiencing a feeling
barely fathomable to humans. It is a feeling

like depression in an empty room, where
every night you are frozen, and the air

is always leaving your body, and the night
is forever, it leans over you with the height

and weight of the earth, which is your sky.
Nothing lasts—even these sensations die.

Eventually a buried statue will try to make
sunlight come out of it, it will take

the dark, it will try to be the thing it's done
wanting. It turns into a sun.

JONATHAN APREA

DIAL

Most people make the same piece of art, over
and over. They don't know about the dial
that exists, where if you cover
your eyes with a shirt and walk a mile

and a half out of your old neighborhood
in the rain, you will come upon
a dial in an empty lot. It will feel like it should
be there, you will be drawn

to it like water is drawn through a funnel. Most
dials appear to us as red outdoor
faucet wheel handles. As you get close
to it, as your hand gets close, you will wait for

a hesitation to pass but it never does. Then
you remember. You played here, as children.

JONATHAN APREA

MATERIAL

We begin as deposits of organic material
in the earth. There is a compound
in the material that makes us dream. We feel
held in the dreams, we feel lifted from the ground

until we're floating. Thousands of years later,
children are allowed to go by the river alone
and look for us. Their hands are greater
than anything from before. We hadn't known

ourselves, really, until they formed us into
spheres the size of their palms as birds
sang overhead, and lined us up, and threw
some of us into the river. We are like a word

the children invent, we're its letters. A hurricane's
sobs muffle us. Its hands are the rain.

IN THE QUARRY

After Paul Klee

If we look down across the grass into soil
intersection (blue-brown, gray-
green) cross-eyed wise
it is the end
of a very nearly holographic night
we have now grasping
after the aspirant shade.

Colors eel out our eyes
and from the level
of a windowsill
where we see our frame
in a forest's order
is the coming red giant
of another day.

Come, day, live—
we say these in the imperative
where eyes go gray with love to rest
at ease across the original
unlevel living
where dwell
peopled mounds and named stones.

Until all our words come day like that—
our waiting spells us out
into an ambient you quelled
to be said aloud
in a sure mouth
here where some future
swore to tip over into matter.

ADAM RAY WAGNER

THE FRAME OF PARADISE

After Eilish Gormley

Eyes wander the want door.
With lacelike ingenuity make a slight turn.
Pluck petals for a long life
of all that is human in me is you. Folded
until doubled in rose. Red at the edges
with sleeplessness & gentle.

Seeing
smiling cupid in a patterned ceiling
is finding the way in.
Sign of heavenly coercion I'd give
into my palm to hold out
over my eyelids. Trip along
the paradise green to another.
Trick of number-trust is head doubled
though halved in thought for having
thought of another. Slipped
on the dew & lost consciousness.

Awake
in blue edges to all that you are
is human to me. Golden in distance.
Wishing alone for a stem to hold
stolen hallways from the roots' touch
now stuck in a vase. Pout
& wilt to the tune of rustling
clothes brushing against the top
of some old, ornate rug of classic,
careful geometry.

SOUL, YOU MADE ME

Anon., from the Black Book of Carmarthen*, compiled ca. 1250 AD*

Soul, you made me—tore me from ancient purity,
Aimlessly ripped me into endless existence.
I had reveled in all seven elements.
I was reared by all seven creatures.
Once, I raged as creation's flame.
Once, I nurtured as earth's soil.
Once, I enveloped as high wind.
Once, I obscured as stag-pierced mist of mountains.
Once, I blossomed as trees shielding earth.
If blessed I were, I would stay beingless matter,
But you made me, Soul.

ADAM RAY WAGNER

THE KILLING OF DYFNWAL BRYCH

Anon., ca. 7th century

I saw Bentir being led,
and the hungry, violet bonfire.
I saw an armored soldier depart,
and Nwython—coated with grief.
I saw the gold-grieved men being led,
and crows starting their feast
on the head of Dyfnwal Brych.

ADAM RAY WAGNER

SONG

Attributed to St. Cadoc, ca. 6th century

Hear the songs of Afaon,
son of Taliesin, pure songs,
hiding not the heart's afflictions.

Crows sing of a strong oak
sat high atop a forked estuary,
where meaning overcame might.

You're responsible for what you have,
treat it well. Even riverside reeds
can become home.

SARAH CARVILL

EXTANT

I

"You have to either be terrified or fall in love"—this is how a friend of mine once described the area around Mt. Lassen. I wanted to challenge her on the implied choice—love or fear—but I agreed with what she said next: "The place marks you."

I was eight when I went for the first time. My dad pulled me out of school one Friday in October, and we drove for what felt like all day from San Francisco into far northeastern California. I remember the two-lane highway cutting through platinum fields flecked with chunks of volcanic rock, the barbed wire along the side of the road, the banks of short and fragile oaks. Like everything in the tableau downslope from the peak, they looked as though they were waiting to burn.

It made me nervous to drive toward a volcano, through a landscape this sharp-edged and dry, but the trip felt important. It was the first time my dad was taking me flyfishing with him—not bait fishing from a dock or rented motorboat on a reservoir, which we did once when I was about four, but the more artful and serious kind of fishing, which he practiced almost devotionally.

We stayed in a motel that backed up to the Fall River. It's a minor stream by California standards, a mere twenty-one-mile tributary of the more prolific Pit River. Though known for its wide, slow waters and slick surface, the Fall is too deep to wade. I remember the meadow on the far side in grassy billows overhanging the sepia-tinted mirror of the river's face. In the evening, my dad put me in a drift boat and showed me where to cast.

We fished the pale morning dun—a species of mayfly, and what the trout were biting on that night. Mayflies have a delicate rigidity: The veins in their papery wings resemble glass fragments suspended in a shattered windshield; they hold them straight up, at a right angle to their bodies, and when hundreds of mayflies land on a surface, the sentinel wings evoke an army.

Their abdomens arc slightly toward the sky and taper into two or three long tails, called cerci, which are suggestive of stingers or swords. But on the glassy surface of the deep Fall, under a tent of spindly cottonwoods, none of this was detectable. The insects fell like dusk, light and jittery, over the thickness of the river. If it had been spring, the hatch could have been mistaken for the fluff of catkins coming off the trees.

Mayflies, I now know, spend most of their lives underwater, in a succession of larval "instars"—the scientific term for a developmental stage in an insect. They rise to the surface almost all at once and emerge from their nymphal shucks in droves. This is what fishermen call a hatch—something of a misnomer, since it might have been two years since a newly winged mayfly has been bound in an egg. For a few hours, maybe as much as a day, the mayflies dry their wings, then try them before their fresh exoskeletons crack open and the insects emerge again, in their final form.

These adult mayflies cannot even eat. Their mouth parts, if they retain them at all, are nonfunctional. They have only one job: to mate in flight, just above the water's surface. They die after that—the males on the banks, the females in the water after delivering their eggs back to the stream.

There are over six hundred species of mayfly in North America. They vary in the degree of synchronicity in their emergence. In the Upper Mississippi, a big hex hatch—named for the implicated taxon, *Hexagenia limbata*—can produce an estimated 88 billion individual insects. Some mayflies live as adults for a few days, but the hex hatch is over in a matter of hours, leaving shovelfuls of corpses that slicken the roads, causing car accidents in some years. Life-history studies have identified other mayfly taxa for which the whole adult phase, from emergence to expiration, is completed in thirty-seven minutes. Their order, *Ephemeroptera*, is named for the brevity of their lives, and that night on the Fall, we floated through thousands of their deaths.

Before we left, we made one more stop, in the Warner Valley, where there was a boarded-up lodge and a yellow meadow spiked with the hollow silver shells of dead thistle. Winter was hanging over that whole empty pine world, waiting to come down on it like a giant fist, and the valley roared with silence. I remember that it frightened me, and that I wanted to leave,

but also that it was among the most beautiful places I had ever been. I couldn't tell you if we caught a single fish on the trip, but the feeling of the Warner Valley has been with me ever since in a way—a foreboding so deep I could almost make a den in it and find warmth.

My father still mentions that day sometimes. Once, in my senior year of high school, we did go back, after winter had closed the road under snow. We did not make it as far as the meadow on our skis, which was all right. To see it again might have taken something away from the memory, especially in the glare of that season. The majesty of the valley had been in the darkness hanging over it, in the way the end of summer's color was locked in dead grass that still stood, and in the possibility that we had come there on the last day that we could.

We did not make it as far as the meadow on our skis, which was all right. To see it again might have taken something away from the memory.

II

Two decades after that trip with my dad, maybe even to the day, I drove from the Bay Area to Oregon with my then-boyfriend, Nate, for a friend's wedding in Portland. He had a buddy working for the Forest Service out of Cave Junction, so instead of the standard crawl up the I-5, we took the 101 behind the redwood curtain, leaving before dawn in a pounding early-season rain. The weather had faded to a drizzle by the time we reached Crescent City, where we turned northeast on US 199. The highway follows the free-flowing Smith River—its banks lined with bigleaf maples that blaze gold against the surrounding Doug firs in the fall—and departs from it somewhere in the rumpled country of the Klamath Range before joining up with the Illinois River in southwestern Oregon.

The forest changed there. Even in the overhanging gray, everything seemed dry. Nate's friend John explained to us that the vegetation shifts when you drop into the Illinois drainage because the underlying serpentine rock yields nutrient-poor soil. Spindly Jeffrey pines that look like struggling new growth are actually hundreds of years old. We went to see them on an easy

"botanical trail," John's fat white pit bull Bam waddle-jogging along after us on the boardwalk.

From there we drove downstream on dirt roads—one of those jaunts that seem like a journey because on gravel, twenty miles per hour feels like highway speed. The washboard dead-ended in a parking lot that overlooked a wooden suspension bridge, pedestrian only, hanging sixty feet over the water. The river in that spot is forced into a narrow channel between steep outcroppings of lumpy volcanic rock, and it's a staggering fifty feet deep below the bridge. In the summer, kids from Grants Pass drive out to this spot to drink and swim. Many jump off the bridge. It's the kind of leap for which shoes are required to absorb some of the shock of the impact, and John said bad accidents happen every year. But in late fall, everything is quiet. When we got out of John's pickup, two bald eagles flew up the canyon. We heard a rock roll somewhere up the forested hillside and wondered if we had frightened a bear.

The four of us walked across the bridge, and it swayed—Bam and I froze initially, then continued reluctantly—until John stopped us all to point out two massive Chinook salmon sitting in the pool below. He wanted to see if there were more coming up the fish ladder a little farther down the canyon, but there was no trail, just the boulders in the river itself.

Nate and I scrambled along in our sneakers, slipping on moss and scooting on the damp seats of our jeans, trying to keep out of the willows, maples, and blackberries rioting on the banks, as these were punctuated with red explosions of poison oak. John and his stubby dog moved quickly and left us behind. Eventually we gave up and climbed a crag above a silent pool to wait for them to return.

I was sorry to miss the sight of the big Chinook leaping up the ladder and the rapids beside it—some falling backward, hitting their heads on the rocks, and lying there stunned for a few minutes, John would tell us later.

But then one of them threw itself half out of the water below us—a giant, slick fish back arcing out of the surface of the pool, slapping the face of the river, and then gone. I felt a primal prickle of fear associated with dark, still water.

"What was that, the fucking Loch Ness Monster?" I gasped, only half-kidding.

Nate just said, "Oh my God."

I was three years deep into a PhD in environmental studies

by then, and the exercise of abstracting interesting questions into variables defined by theory had left my curiosity and motivation nearly threadbare. Though loss of habitat for threatened Pacific salmon was a key justification for my research on state-level water-quality policy, I wasn't the sort of environmentalist who got exercised about charismatic megafauna—salmonid or otherwise. But that fish was something else. That fish, rising monstrously from the silence of the autumnal volcanic canyon, made me feel for a second how my children's and grandchildren's lives would indeed be impoverished if they could not even imagine salmon in the rivers, or hope to be unsettled by a glimpse of one someday—and not because of what that loss would imply about their ability to sustain themselves physically. The words that rose in me when the Chinook rose from the depths of the Illinois were a fragment of Wallace Stegner, from the "Wilderness Letter," which I hadn't realized I remembered: *Something will have gone out of us*—this, if we ever lose the fish who swim up mountains.

III

After I finished my doctorate, I spent a year working for the state senate in Sacramento. In the summer, weeks swam by where it broke 100 every day. I had my own dog by then, a husky mix, and I had to press my knuckles to the pavement before we crossed a street together to make sure his pink paw pads would not burn.

The legislature is in recess in July, so work was slow. When my friend Dan invited me to a lunchtime seminar on fish extinction at the CalEPA building, I took him up on it.

The talk had two parts. A famous fish biologist would address specific California fish extinctions, but first, a postdoc tackled a bigger and more interesting question, about the nature of extinction itself.

Extinction is commonly viewed as a binary event: A species is here, and then it is not. The postdoc argued that this conception does not suit the reality of species loss. Before any species vanishes, finally, it may be extirpated locally, or extirpated in its native range. It might go extinct in the wild but survive in small, genetically limited populations in zoos and research facilities. The postdoc asked us if a species in this position isn't, in some sense, already gone.

This struck me as a provocation, or maybe a rhetorical

question. We all knew about the California condor, which was brought back from the brink through captive breeding and eventually reintroduced into the mountains of the Central Coast. And there are other, less glamorous examples of plants and animals that have gone extinct in the wild and been resurrected. But the postdoc pointed out that a species that has come this close has been subject to unnatural selective pressures for several generations and has gone through a very tight genetic bottleneck, meaning that much of its original genetic diversity—the range of possible versions of condor that exist in the world, and could exist—has been lost. It is fair to ask, then, if the California condors of today are really quite the same thing as the last individuals who were taken from the wild in 1987.

After priming us with this example, the postdoc suggested another phase of extinction—one closer to the "extant" side of the original bright line than we might now place the resurrected condors. Termed "mitigated extinction," it includes species that would not exist in the wild or in their original ranges but for ongoing, intentional interventions by human beings. Winter-run Chinook salmon are an example of a California fish at this stage: They are entirely dependent on the state's hatchery program; the wild genome—that is, the winter-run Chinook shaped by and for free rivers—is essentially gone.

"There are other cases of unique populations that are being intensively managed," the postdoc continued. "As a result, they don't *appear* to be close to blinking out."

Blink out. Those words, spoken in reference to extinction, always return me to the sadness of the subject. They remind me of the stars, how their light travels in space after they die, allowing us to believe they still live. They make me think of the grand sweep of the universe, and a tiny, unnoticed silence where there was once a sun.

The question of what constitutes a phase of extinction is in some part a question about what constitutes an irrevocable loss. Can it be said that such a loss has occurred if the lost thing still exists, like dry grass that you know will one day burn? Can it be said if the lost thing exists, but on the other side of a threshold that means its eventual, final loss is certain? And what if we can't see the threshold? What if we just *know* that it's close?

Three weeks later, Bill McKibben's latest long essay on climate change appeared in *The New Republic*. I read it at the kitchen

table after work, as my video-gaming, tobacco-chewing housemate fried deli meat on the stove. McKibben argued that saving civilization from the most devastating effects of human-induced warming would require a clean-energy ramp-up equivalent to the mobilization of American industrial power to fight World War II. It was inconceivable to me that analogous action could be taken to fight an invisible threat whose first victims will be nonhuman species and the poor—a threat that vast numbers of Americans do not believe to be real. My housemate was one of them, though he admitted that the weeks of triple-digit temperatures we'd had in Sacramento were like nothing he could remember.

McKibben acknowledged that, though the ramp-up he envisioned was technically possible, its prospects for success were dim: "We've waited so long to fight back in this war that total victory is impossible, and total defeat can't be ruled out." To conclude the article, he cited evidence of the mounting crisis pulled from the headlines on one day that June, in 2016: Floods and landslides in Japan and West Virginia; wildfires in California. Had he read the "Daily Climate" newsletter I clicked through that same morning, he might have mentioned the unprecedented die-offs of coral reefs, kelp forests, and mangroves in Australia, or the fact that the Sierra prickled with dead trees, a book of matches rising from the granite.

I thought of the winter-run Chinook and wondered if we can say, yet, that we are managing our own extinction too.

I thought of the winter-run Chinook and wondered if we can say, yet, that we are managing our own extinction too.

IV

In 2020, when fall came to Oregon, I tried to convince my husband that nine hours is a very reasonable amount of driving to do in one weekend. This is how long it would have taken to get from our home in Portland to Cave Junction, and I wanted to see a fat Chinook lying stunned on a rock.

Jay responded by trying to find me some more convenient salmon. He'd read in *The Oregonian* that you can see fish coming upstream to spawn in Eagle Creek, in the Columbia River

Gorge, so on the damp Saturday that the election was called for Biden, we loaded the dog into my little Honda and drove east on the interstate.

A 2017 fire had closed the Eagle Creek Trailhead, so we parked illegally next to a fish hatchery, which was stationed at a bend in the stream where the historic highway crossed over. The building looked like a post office from the 1940s, low-slung with federal-style metallic letters in a midcentury font. We walked on the wet, quiet road to the old bridge, its shoulders soft with moss, and leaned over. At first it didn't seem like there was anything to see, but in a greenish hole near one of the stone bridge's footings, the shapes of salmon came into focus. They sat in the dark spot, waiting for some sign in the water or in themselves, or perhaps for a burst of strength.

Jay wandered off, but after a few minutes I heard his voice over the water. I found him upstream, on an incongruous patch of mowed lawn between the long lanes of two hatchery ponds and the bouldered bank of the creek.

"Look!" He pointed at a break in the big rocks, and I followed his finger to the pile of slippery gray backs struggling at the outflow grate. Thirty, forty, fifty fish, scrambling over one another to nose the bars. They knew where they came from, and now I understood why there were fish to see here at all: They were hatchery salmon, bred in the government building and reared in its cement troughs.

We stood on the green lawn for a long time, trying to feel glad for these fish, and glad for the new president. But it was a muted happiness, much closer to relief than joy. We knew Biden would do more than any of his predecessors to fight climate change, and we knew that he would not do enough.

Jay hates the autumn in Oregon. He makes no secret of how miserable he feels in the gathering dark, the constant wet. He wants to return to California, but I can't stand the thought of going home. I can't live in a place where it no longer rains.

"Doesn't that bother you?" I ask him sometimes.

Jay always says the same thing: "There is no running away."

And yet, we *have* done a lot of running away. We ran away from a campsite in the North Cascades, after waking at midnight in our ovoid white minivan to the smell of smoke. "I don't like this," Jay said, sitting up in the foldout bed he'd built where

the captain's chairs used to be. "Let's go." We hurtled out of the canyon, grinding the shocks against Forest Service washboard until we hit pavement in a tiny sleeping town. My phone found three bars in the parking lot of a closed diner, and the internet assured us that we were smelling someone else's disaster. We slept in a highway turnout and drove home at the break of an acrid, ochre-tinted dawn.

Within a week, an enormous fire was burning to the south of us, and all of neighboring Clackamas County was under evacuation orders. Portland proper had the worst air quality of any city in the world. Our bathroom medicine cabinet developed a stench like burning tires—singed air leaking in from the crawl space. My little plug-in filter whirred day and night, but it was not enough. We ran away again, to the home of some friends on the Puget Sound, where the air was merely "hazardous." There is a place on northbound I-5 in Tacoma where Seattle's emerald towers spear out of the horizon like the pinnacles of Oz, but we never saw them on that drive. There was only brown and yellow haze. My parents sent me pictures of the Bay Area's orange skies. No place I loved had breathable air.

The following summer, the Warner Valley burned too.

V

When I was about seven, my father bought a skylit box of a house in second-growth redwoods forty-five minutes south of San Francisco. At the base of our road, behind two fat bending oaks, there was a tidy white chapel, and we'd stop there on Christmas Eve for services before my dad drove me up to the city to hand me off to my mom. Some nights in elementary school, he read to me from a family Bible—the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms. He didn't really explain, but I understood: He was not going to tell me what to believe about God, but he wanted me to have the option. It is easier to return to the things we are given when we are young.

I remember those verses the way I remember that trip I took with my dad to Mt. Lassen as a child, and the fishing and backpacking and ski trips that followed, and the Gospels of Stegner and Aldo Leopold that I read in college—which is to say, I remember the most resonant fragments, sometimes incorrectly. I remember, for instance, that we walk through the valley in the shadow of death. I know that it is actually the valley *of* the

shadow of death, and that this is arguably a poor translation—newer Bibles just say that the valley is dark. But I like the idea of the valley as I remember it, and while I have never been able to find much comfort in an idea of God, I come back to the words and find they stand up without one. Because we have—all of us, every last living thing—always walked in the shadow of death. Because there is no other valley on offer.

There is a difference, of course, between the death that has always been and the death that I breathe in the smoke almost every fall, just as there is a difference between salmon who die in the pebbled floor of a free river and salmon who die in the silt below the outflow gate of a government hatchery. Drive up the I-5 today, from the Bay Area to Lassen County, and your windshield will be markedly cleaner than that of my father's truck when we made the same run in 1992. The collapse of global insect populations is not the same as the spectacular die-offs of *Hexagenia limbata* and the pale morning dun, who will be resurrected. The only time you'll ever find me in church now is Easter Sunday, and maybe this is why: I am trying to believe in the death that is a part of a cycle. I am trying to believe in the life of the world to come.

This is a matter of belief now, because the evidence is wanting. All signs seem to point to destruction of a collective and final sort. But we have to go on somehow, and there is no running away, so I return to what I was given: To the heavy quiet at the end of some Forest Service road; to the love that sits right up against fear; to a valley somewhere in the West, with a glassy sepia-toned river and the slippery gray backs of fish who swim up mountains. A valley in the shadow of death, which is the shadow that gives it beauty.

MIRIAM AKERVALL

SPLIT ERRATIC

I tear myself open on the mountain.
I put the gash in my mouth. It tastes
like metal, looks like a mouth. I whisper
secrets to it until I fall asleep. We split
a six-pack of boxer briefs, trade pants,
grow apart. The cut says a split is a road
with two lanes and a black calf at the center.
That it's possible to feel free and out
of place. Driving home, a dust devil turns
on itself, all hot air and misdirection
alongside a dry creek bed, the ground
scaled and cracked, groaning
for rain. The prairie passes stamped
with boulders the size of burial mounds.
Arranged as if in motion, then abandoned.

MIRIAM AKERVALL

IDAHO: AFTER *STONE BUTCH BLUES*

Stars are peering coldly from their silk.
The new moon flat and tucked behind.
I'm swimming my street in a fishbowl

of light, the shadows of leaves refracting
as if through water. I have found history
to dress in. It fits like silver, cerulean. Binds

me to myself. One summer in Michigan,
the bass starved for algae. They grew
so hungry they tried to feed on our heels,

dock-hung and wanting. Their mouths un-miming
hunger, only believing themselves full.
Here, the dog next door barks at my shadow.

I flash my scales at it. I pass two people
kneeling in a garden with their heads
bent. Tomato plants sing into their knees.

A sunflower blinks along with its one
dark eye. I know that kind of asking.
I fill my belly with it. As if through water.

MIRIAM AKERVALL

AT THE FIDDLE CREEK FRUIT STAND

Our hands graze, hovering
over jars of pickled eggs and okra,
a generator croaking out breaths
of light in the dark of a surge.
We leave with our filling treasure:
salt, fermented, vinegar, sweet. You
soften, grin at the clerk who thanks
us, *ladies*, on our way out. Our bodies
brine-like, steeped with longing
for places where we're lucky
being unseen. I find a country
in you and drive away in the morning,
smiling with your hair on my shirt.
Warm my arm through the windshield
until the scars disappear. Watch
the land stretch and swell
into a sound I carry with me.

MIRIAM AKERVALL

ON THE RIDGE ABOVE THE PRAIRIE

I pass two hares, frozen thieves in the brush.
The crickets stoke their ticking around me.
My body mows a silence. Leaning on
the tire of a flatbed, my eyes are
bags I stuff the flaming garnets of dusk
into. This land, pearled by silos, water
towers, and vowels that dip on the far
end, cupping themselves wavelike in a green
inland sea. Familiar to me for how
I feel in it. My father plucked our name
from the careful rows that sowed him. Back when
our people were called by signposts of home.
Mountain grove. Birch bay. Stream. Now we belong
to oscillations in wheat anywhere.
Where a field dips steeply toward its edges.
Where a field sits up and yawns from the earth.

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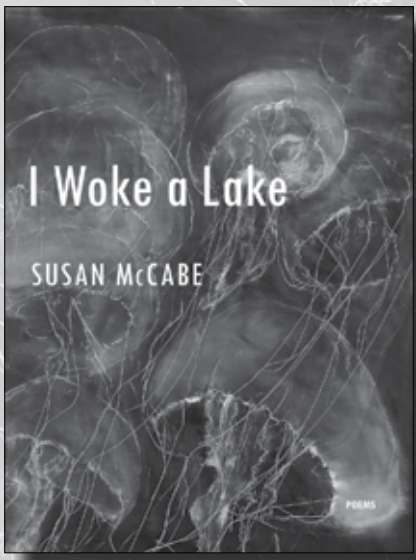
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I Woke a Lake, by Susan McCabe

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"In Susan McCabe's magnificent new collection, *I Woke a Lake*, the largesse of vision and wonder in poem after poem caught my breath. My attention riveted, McCabe's poetry took me to fraught and magical elsewheres in marvelous circumference. I was profoundly moved by the intensity of climate concern in 'Disaster Report,' and the empathy in the delicate portraits of queer poets 'falling for eternity,' alongside her own portrait in 'Queer Autobiography.' The poems cast spells rooted in the beauty of McCabe's language, the 'maenad murmur' of her poetic ear, her eye for granular detail leading to koan-like insight. 'In still-making,' as the speaker of the title poem notes, 'I am a force that / condenses, combines': that force, a poetics and McCabe's essential wisdom." **—CYNTHIA HOGUE**

"Susan McCabe's *I Woke a Lake* is an astonishing achievement. It is not just another memoir in verse, but a work of art, superfine at every point, unlimitable and unimitable. It is no easier to describe than Virginia Woolf's or Friederike Mayröcker's work, and is less consciously artful. The language is delightfully feathered, out of the ordinary, quietly and sensitively but persistently so—surprising without being showy; it has impressionism's passion and exactitude. Current and trending topics do run through it—the imperiled planet, crippling grief, love—but they are refined beyond the entrapping, boxy connotations of *topics* or *themes*. They're absorbed into a unique texture and tone, a person speaking closely and deeply, continuously creating, never just reporting—as unshackled by 'literature' as a lake." **—CAL BEDIENT**

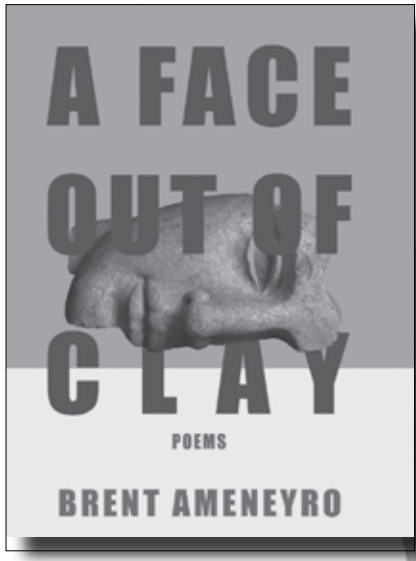
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New from the Center for Literary Publishing

A Face Out of Clay, by Brent Ameneyro

The Mountain / West Poetry Series



"In his remarkable debut, Brent Ameneyro writes, 'a cemetery and an elementary school / share a parking lot.' The lyric space in these poems is a revved-up engine caught between the past and the present. Memory is deeply felt, brilliantly rendered. Here, 'the night sky [is] burnt motor oil.' Here, 'a door / floats above an endless horizon.' Moving through the United States and Mexico, the speaker pledges no allegiances and reminds us imagination is borderless. As are sorrow and wonder."

—EDUARDO C. CORRAL

"'[T]heir voices / fell through a hole / in the sky,' sings the poet in this poemario—which unfolds with a 'passion that can only be understood / from under the hood of a car.' In other words, what we have here is a verbal canvas of startling adjacencies where one must 'determine the length / of tongues' in order to measure 'the fabric of space,' not only to paint indelible human portraits but also to map a familia 'crammed into a minivan'—a childhood journey of migration that marks the self irrevocably. You'll be utterly convinced that 'a heartbeat is a war drum' but also experience a delicate, moving elegy for a loved one who 'blew the napkins off the table / when she opened her wings.' In short, lives richly lived: 'Fútbol, carne asada, / waiting for the water to be delivered.'"

—FRANCISCO ARAGÓN

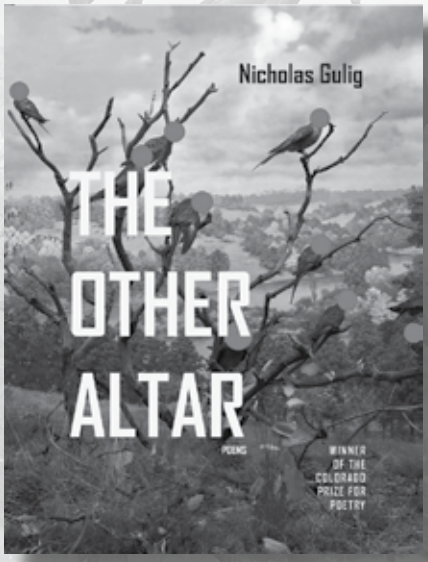
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New from the Center for Literary Publishing

The Other Altar, by Nicholas Gulig

Winner of the 2024 Colorado Prize for Poetry

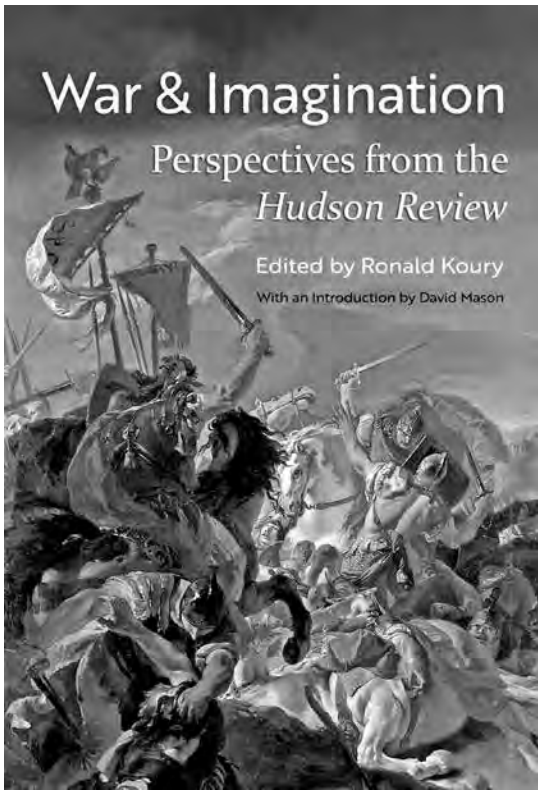


"*The Other Altar* is a portal, a door to a wide, many-mouthed, micro/cosmic field. Both door and field are in moving states of reaching and opening, closing and unknown. It is a book of this field, a work of wonder and precision, a whole inner/outer dimension imagined and delivered as a soulful cry against the crushing cold of capitalism, of towering, toppling institutions fundamentally opposed to human perspective. The door the poet offers readers opens onto our very connection: roots and a ring of hands to hold, a daughter, poetry, more portals, more sky, more ways to look inside ourselves and find each other. The beauty of this book's vision is beyond measure—the pages can't contain it, so Gulig has generously nestled book within book within book to unfold this beauty. 'A mouth is not a wilderness,' he writes. Every line here is like that: irreducible, exquisite, alight with the joy and anguish of being, here all at once as we are."

—BRENDA SHAUGHNESSY, final judge

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