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EDITORS' PAGE

Loss isn't *generally* isn't what comes to mind when we think of summer. And yet, this issue's stories and essays are situated in mourning and letting go. In Lissa Franz's "MonkeyMonkeyGirl," a child's decades-ago disappearance still haunts her sisters and mother. During the pandemic, in Janice Deal's "BAE," a couple's college-aged daughter slips ever further away from them as she chooses to live among an enigmatic religious community. A woman and her overly critical father attend an academic conference together and find an unexpected opportunity for détente in Meghan Louise Wagner's "Thought Experiments." In Yvette DeChavez's "Two by Two," a young married mother meets a couple who challenge her notions of faith, motherhood, and desire. Judith Cooper's essay "Heart Dissolving, Skin Marinating" is a fever dream account of her experience with a rare cancer, a stream of consciousness weave of clichés, word associations, and gallows humor. Aaron Kang Smithson meditates movingly on architecture, anemoia, and the loss of his father in "Palimpsest." And in "Down and Out in Disneyland," Maya Bernstein-Schalet considers the connections between escapism and addiction as she tries to make sense of her beloved cousin's death.

With this issue, though, we also celebrate the long tenure of Steven Schwartz, who has masterfully curated the fiction for *Colorado Review* since 2011 (as well as from 1984–87) and is now stepping into the role of fiction editor at large. Of his seventeen-plus years on our masthead, he says: "It goes without saying—though I'm saying it—what an honor it's been to publish so many talented writers over my years as fiction editor. But it's important also to note my sincere respect for the writers whose work was not selected. All these efforts, whether resulting in publication or not—and let's face it, writing is hard and isolating work—speak to our common purpose in pursuit of excellence in craft. Literary magazines shine a supportive and irreplaceable light on the writing of both established and emerging writers, and I'm grateful to have had the privilege to read and work with so many of you."

And we, in turn, are so very grateful to Steven—not just for

his expert editing, but for his unwavering support, in so many forms, his generous mentorship, and his abiding friendship. It has been one of the greatest joys of my career to work with and learn from him these many years.

This issue is therefore the debut of Jennifer Wortman, who moves into the role of fiction editor. A talented writer and editor, Jennifer has a long history with *CR*, beginning with an internship in 1998 and then rejoining the masthead in 2013 as our associate fiction editor. We welcome her warmly and look forward to many years of her keen editorial curation.

And finally, dear reader, we welcome *you* to the summer issue. We are ever grateful for you, in times of both letting go and celebration.

—STEPHANIE G'SCHWIND

• • •

The poems in this issue find themselves in precarious times. There is a hole in the roof that birds would slip through (Kareem Tayyar). There are meadows catching fire (Maureen Thorson). Leaf cutter bees are going extinct, and coral reefs are turning white (Martha Ronk). But these poems also know how badly they are needed. As Anna Konradi writes in "Good News," "If a child can- / not cry / a good poem / wails doubly." Poems can offer our despair back to us, which might feel like a weight too heavy to bear, but what if this very weight ushers in a necessary urgency? Or, somewhat conversely, what if the levity of poems like Lorraine Lupo and Kyle Schlesinger's collaboration, "Napkins for Mannequins," provides a reprieve from the anguish so many of us currently feel? Both urgency and reprieve ready us for beauty, and in times like these, we cannot risk overlooking beauty. Like so many poems in this issue, Andy Butter's "Goodbye All That Time," which happens to be the very first poem you will encounter in the pages that follow, offers us a model for looking, for receptivity even in the face of despair: "Nothing I could see felt beautiful / but then a turning and / [. . .] in the center of the holy city / a turtle turned its jeweled eye / to the light." May these poems turn *our* eyes to the light; may they help usher in the summer we all need to see.

—SASHA STEENSEN

ANDY BUTTER

GOODBYE ALL THAT TIME

While I was entrenched in busyness the beautiful world
turned around me Nothing I could see felt beautiful
but then a turning and a mother's spit-soaked thumb
streaked across her son's face Five perfect plums sat
solemn as the hearts of stars At the bottom of the lake
in the center of the holy city a turtle turned its jeweled eye
to the light What can I say? All was there to be witnessed
and I was a terrible witness From my phone's screen I heaped
long wasted days and tribulations into a businessman's pockets

Goodbye all that time which was after all my time
I gave so willingly to whom? I acted as if each day was a black
cow in a herd of black cows I shot in the head on the hilltop
and watched bleed out I wasn't happy while doing this
yet I did it and despaired Shouldn't there be nets
between our palms to aid in salvation? I couldn't stop sleeping
slipping my dreams into the night I entreaty the empty sky
it's the only nothing I trust now

My favorite facet of time is the nothingness it makes obvious
Easy to squeal about now because I was focused on the wrong thing
like seeking the archer's smile but meeting the arrow instead
Someone has my time as a thick jelly they rub
over their brittle skin becoming young with my pardoned seconds
Here in the gut of the flux of my life I am a small child astonished
at the magician in the center of a huge stadium
releasing a cloud of white doves How did he fit them all in his hat?
How after such a great flock have I not seen a single one since?

ANDY BUTTER

SLEEP STUDY

We saw it: the violinist played
so passionately her bow's horsehair
heaped near her chair. Afterward
the janitor swept it into the trash
where it wavered frail as a flag
of peace in the county landfill.

> Across the river
> the low smoke is set,
> singed with your blue-
> edged voice. I know my dreams
> by their blue,
> only there is the blue.

I'm not saying I'm astounded
days later when we saw the horsehair
in the blackbird's beak.
I'm saying I'm astounded
every time I point to the blue sky
and say *look*, you look.

ANDY BUTTER

TIMES I MISTOOK PEOPLE FOR HORSES

The tide line on Assateague Island full of feral horses and in
the dark you shoveled seawater in your mouth.

Red-stone outdoor amphitheater where people gather for
music that made it easy for us to think the woman clacking in
high heels wore hooves.

The grasses in my prairie beaten down by my heart's endless
stomping because of the way you pushed your glasses up your
nose.

Breathing, breathing, breathing like Victorian lace.

Across the table at the committee meeting he looked so close
to being broken, like you, almost broken again.

After the stampede, miles of flattened grasses and then a single
brown path where you walked through me.

Broken-down car on County Road 7 in front of the
Hampsteads' farm, we thought a horse was
eating oats from the engine but it was a man's khaki-ed ass.

I saw every eye between the trailer's metal slats we passed on
the highway, it went horse, horse, human, horse.

I felt the largest heart beating all the way from the other room,
checked, and you were reading quietly alone.

You had heard a knock on your front door, opened, and saw
the neighbor's Appaloosa standing there.

ANDY BUTTER

ELEGY

This life. This life lived. This life lived with you. This life lived with you moment through moment. This life lived with you moment through moment slipping orange slices into each other's mouths. This life lived with you moment through moment in memory. This life lived in memory of you. This life lived. This life.

LISSA FRANZ

MONKEYMONKEYGIRL

If I was at the nursing home on any given afternoon at 3:51, I'd see a school bus pull up across the street to spit out elementary school kids, scarab beetles with tiny limbs bent under huge backpacks. Little kids off first, then the bigger ones. The final girl, dead last and obscured by attitude and eyeliner, walked as if no one should dare to look at her: radiating an untouchable holiness. The bus driver did not follow her with her eyes, as she had with the others, but waited for her to plop—excruciatingly slowly—from the bus so she could slam the door.

If my mother happened to be out of bed, and wasn't being administered medication or music therapy or memory games or trying to climb into bed with the only male resident on the floor, she would point to the girl and garble until the words came: "Nadine."

Sometimes it seemed like my mother was waiting all day, magically waking at the right moment; some days it was clearly an accident; and some days I was the one standing rapt at the window, looking at my watch, waiting to catch a glimpse of her.

"Mom, that is not Nadine." I made myself say this.

My mother mumbled a string of obscenities at my dead father.

"Mommy, stop." I only started calling her Mommy when she became ill; in real life she would have slapped me.

On this day, when I walked in the door after work, straight from the greenhouse, Freddie pulled me aside. I liked Freddie. She was patient and unsentimental and didn't complain when my mother bit her on the arm.

"She's declining," she said.

I wanted to laugh; she'd been declining for months. *Years*. But I had seen the new struggle to speak, and how she seemed to forget what her hands were for, or that they were attached at all. So I said, "I know."

"Call Deirdre." My sister's name was smeared all over our mother's paperwork. "You wanted to know, and she wanted to

know, and so I'm telling you. You don't have much time. She's refusing to eat."

We walked into the room together, Freddie with her hands on her hips. "Mrs. Laurier!" We both stared at my mother. On her back, crossed hands, mouth tipped open. My heart stopped.

"Mrs. Laurier!"

My mother startled with a cough, her eyes squinched in pain.

"Mommy," I whispered.

"What do you want." She snapped awake, and the rhythm of my childhood—before Nadine, after Nadine—beat in my head.

"I'm going to ask Nadine if she can come see us," I said, because my mother was dying, and I was forever soothing her rage, and this seemed consistent with what she needed and wanted, and also because I couldn't bear watching her die in front of me.

The next day my mother dozed as I watched the girl clamber down the school bus stairs, fling a duct-taped string bag into the bushes on the side of the road, and slip into the woods.

I kissed my mother's bony forehead to make sure she was sleeping. Thin, quick moving, and scantily dressed: We were all used to seeing her body—withered, her skin like a topographic map—through a polyester robe, with upside-down smiles of lipstick she'd drawn on her forehead.

She didn't stir.

There was no parent or sitter waiting for this girl in a minivan, door sliding open, to take her to gymnastics or protect her from serial killers. She did not follow the other kids dispersing into a neighborhood with unloved split-levels, aboveground pools, and ancient rhododendrons. I had grown up in a split-level: down up down. Up down up. Shag, knotty pine walls, house key on a dirty string. I still lived there. I still had the same key.

All the days I visited my mother, I never witnessed the girl coming back for her bag. I was too busy with my mother's paranoia, with her sundowning, with wheeling her to dinner at 4:45 and helping her remember how to hold a spoon.

"I'm going to find her, Mommy," I said. "Be right back."

From my mother's window, everything outside seemed like a photograph, a romanticized world. The flowing treated lawn in phosphorescent green, pristine signage, fresh black asphalt snaking to a stately white building with an outdoor patio. Inside

was different. Inside was 2D: vanilla and beige, old people skin, plastic flowers, and construction paper signs. All of the nurses and aides were brown or black, all of the doctors white, all of the kitchen staff recent immigrants with beautiful hands.

The woods seemed dense, tangled with invasive vines and spring-loaded with pockets of fear. It was cooler on the dim, narrow path, and quieter. The birds had flown south weeks ago, and the ones left were drab and not singing—sparrows, muddy goldfinches. A few leaves still clung to the trees, but barely, brown and crisped oak leaves. On the ground, pine needles and yellow aspen and fire-red maple leaves and rotting sticks and rocks covered in lichen. Mushrooms too, and moss near a stand of hemlock. A vapor of sweet fall rot wafted up from underneath all of it, stirred by my boots and the new cold.

Where would I end up? . . . The mystery of the woods: You could end up anywhere, the light already falling.

Where would I end up? In the neighborhood or in the business park? The mystery of the woods: You could end up anywhere, the light already falling.

Where was the girl?

A kettle hole, small and perfectly round, glinted through the trees in the dying light. On its sloped sandy bank, a chair. And in the chair, knees tucked into her chest: the girl from the bus.

The girl smoked a cigarette alone. At age nine or so, this can look a few ways: deluded, outrageous, magical. What does a nine-year-old think about while smoking a cigarette with her knees to her chest in the most child-mimicking-an-adult pose ever, forearm resting on her head, palm to the sky?

I had thought children only smoked as a performance.

The floral-upholstered chair sagged to the ground, and the girl's head tilted back as she practiced her smoke rings, her back to me. While I stood there she finished one cigarette, expertly crushed it into a pile of butts on the ground, then lit another with a lighter fished out of her pocket. It took six tries with her thumb to make a flame.

I slid into her sightline, if she chose to look. "Hi there."

She did not flinch and kept smoking. "Ber-nice," the girl called out to the sky. "What are you doing here?"

I laughed. "Who's Bernice?"

She straightened up, drawing on the cigarette, but did not look behind her. "Okay. Hi, not Bernice."

And with a rush I wondered if it could be Nadine: still nine or so (she had been nine years and one hundred and two days old when she disappeared), still ferocious, still slamming doors, still running away with a bandana tied to the end of a stick. Lighting the woods on fire, riding her bicycle no-hands, dancing butt naked on the twin bed next to mine.

The girl pushed off with her feet and set the chair spinning, whirring as it swiveled around and around. She stopped it by dragging her toes in the dirt.

"Hi," I said.

"Who are you?" She took a drag. She must have been smoking her whole life. She had all the parts down: the finger flick, the crossed arms, the half-shut eyes.

"My name is—" I actually closed my eyes a little, compressing time, felt my fifteen-year-old self. "What do you think my name is?" Nadine had been gone twenty-eight years.

She stared at my work boots. "Lucy."

I laughed. "My name is Claudia."

The girl shrugged.

I shrugged back, but it hurt to breathe. Then, as nonchalantly as I could, I asked, "And what's yours?"

"Who wants to know?" She sucked on her cigarette.

"I do."

I almost thought she would say, *My name is not Nadine.* Instead: "Bree," with a scowl.

"How'd the chair end up out here?"

Bree shrugged, took another drag. This was not getting any less strange to watch. She even picked a stray flake of tobacco from her tongue. "I didn't *steal* it."

"How old are you?"

"Who wants to know?"

The second time was tougher, but I still laughed. "I don't know. Wood fairies?" My mother?

"Thirteen."

This girl was not a day over ten.

"How old are *you*? Sixty?"

I tried to admire her sense of humor. I did not look sixty, even to a nine-year-old. "Forty-three."

Her eyebrows lifted. "Cool."

"Is it?"

"Do you have a phone?"

I had left it in my mother's room. "Not on me."

She crushed her cigarette out under her foot, reached for another.

"You don't feel sick?"

"Why would I feel sick?" It took her only four thumb strikes to light it this time.

"If I smoked that much, I might feel sick. Wanna do me a favor, Bree?"

She narrowed her eyes. I had asked too soon. How much money did I have? I fished around in my pocket: Nutri-Grain bar wrapper, a nickel, lint. A five-dollar bill. I smoothed it between my fingers.

Her eyebrows arched; obviously she stole her cigarettes.

"You're buying me?" She inhaled shrewdly.

"I need a favor."

"You want me to kill someone?"

"I want you to come meet my mother."

"She going to pay me too?"

"Probably not."

"So why?"

It came to me then: Every day off the bus, Bree trudging into the 2D world to pray with my mother.

"She's very lonely." I didn't tell her she was dying. I didn't tell her it was for me.

Bree sighed, as if she knew the type. "And I would be her pet or something?"

"Yes." My mother was sixty-three and losing her mind. Absolutely a kind of pet.

Bree shrugged. "It's not like I was doing anything."

"No one will miss you?"

"Are you kidnapping me?" She sounded hopeful while grinding her butt in the dirt. She fake coughed.

I couldn't answer this, of course. I handed her the five, feeling solicitous, feeling as if I shouldn't telescope into the rest of her life when the cough became real. "Follow me."

Bree shoved me aside to walk in front. Dusk was happening. It was fall, and the sun slid sideways down the sky, well below the trees. Seeing became a vague pastime.

When we reached the road, Bree moved to sprint across without looking.

"Hey!" I grabbed her shoulder. "At least look."

"Let *go*." She twisted violently out of my grip and dashed across. I closed my eyes.

On the other side, we walked toward the 2D world. Bree followed me to the memory care wing, with its separate entrance. I buzzed to be let through the double locked doors, saying hello to the nurse at the desk. I signed us in on the clipboard.

"This way," I told Bree, putting a hand on her shoulder as if she were mine. As if I always brought in nine-year-olds who reeked of cigarettes. Who needed a bath and a comb.

Inside the building, the idea of Bree, and then Bree herself, became more unwieldy. She ran her hands along the hallway walls, slapped her feet, swung her head side to side like a dazed groupie. She wore knockoff Doc Martens from Walmart—I had eyed them myself a few years earlier. The clothing that had seemed nondescript in the woods came into focus: a black T-shirt of rainbow sparkles, most of them missing, women's acid-washed jeans cut jaggedly with scissors at the hem, no socks, no jacket. Her neck and fingers burned red from the outdoors.

She ran her hands along the hallway walls, slapped her feet, swung her head side to side like a dazed groupie.

In the middle of the hallway—Bree racing ahead like she knew where she was going—I said, "You live in that neighborhood across the street?"

"Who wants to know?"

Smartass. I snuck up behind her and plucked the cigarettes from her back pocket.

She turned and stopped, scowling. "Give them back."

I placed them in her hand. "We're here." Outside my mother's room, there was a shadow box for pictures. Inside it, only one: a picture of me, my mother, Deirdre, and Nadine. Nadine was Bree's age. My father took it one month before she disappeared.

"What's your mom's name?" Bree did not hesitate at the door, flinging it open. "Knock knock!" She called out. So, some manners.

"Her name is Evie."

"Evie." Bree seemed to want to shout this, but it disappeared inside her throat. I watched this girl I didn't know step gingerly inside the darkness. It seemed dangerous in the way the dark is always dangerous, especially on the inside. There are things lurking there, things you don't know about yet.

No lights were on. I watched her hesitate in the stale air.

"Mom," I called out, feeling for the entry light. "Mom, I found—" But I couldn't say it. It seemed too much of a deceit, too much hope. Too much acknowledgement of an ending. *An offering*, maybe I should have said. Maybe I should have said: *I didn't kidnap this girl just for you.*

The light snapped on, and everyone blinked. The peach-colored room was so sad and small. How much could it hold?

"Bree," Bree said helpfully.

From the bed, my mother rose onto her elbows. We had woken her up, so her eyes were foggy and unfocused, although that's how they were most of the time now.

"Nadine? Is that you?" It wasn't unexpected, but still: a stone dropped into my gut.

"No, Mom. This is Bree." But it wouldn't matter. She'd forget in a minute. I had put this all in motion.

"She says you need company." Bree said this with some surprisingly nice diction while thumbing in my direction. She ignored the Nadine comment. Good girl.

My mother nodded, also surprising. "Yes, I do." She patted the space next to her. As if it was normal for someone—anyone—to climb into the bed.

Bree did not hesitate, throwing herself up with a decent gymnastics vault. Evie bounced, laughing like a little girl.

"Well," Evie said. "That was quite an entrance, Nadine."

Bree chucked off her boots, and they landed on the floor with a thud. "Entrances are important, *Evie*."

I guffawed, but only because I was nervous. Still standing in the doorway, jacket in a ball, the canvas backpack I carried as a purse pinched between my shoulder blades.

"I'm so glad to see you."

"I know. She told me." She thumbed my way again. The eyeliner on this girl!

My mother folded her hands in her lap the way I had seen her do my entire life before settling into something: dinner, con-

cert, sermon. She had that look of expectation now, like something was coming her way that was going to be difficult but that, when it arrived, would secretly please her. That's what the hands reminded me of—that she was secretly pleased by bad news. By suffering. When she was told she had "moderate cognitive impairment," my mother had laughed. My mother does not laugh because she is happy.

"Who's Nadine," Bree said, now that she was settled on top of the bed with my mother. My heart beat fast and purposeful.

"Well," my mother said, slowly, "Nadine is my daughter."

Bree looked up at me, thumbed in my direction. "So is she."

"Who?" My mother squinted at me. The lack of recognition was a webby filament in my lungs. She was looking for me at age six, seven, eight. Or maybe fifteen, the age I was when Nadine disappeared. "Oh." A hollowness behind her irises, a hollowness in my bones.

Bree saved me. "Her name is Claudia," she said with a yawn, crossing her hands over her chest. Would she fall asleep? I watched my mother's face.

"Claudia?" Rolling it around her mouth. Then a peace passed over her, which I didn't trust. "Claudia and Nadine," she said. "Beautiful." Then she turned to Bree. "Why aren't you in school, young lady?"

"School's over, big lady," Bree said.

All three of us laughed.

"Nadine didn't like school," my mother said. Her brain did this, splicing lucidity and contemplation and memory into little sections. "She didn't like me to make her go. She didn't like me either."

"Mom. That's not true." But of course it was: Nadine didn't like anyone. She was troubled, a devil inside her always attempting to come out.

My mother turned to me, and I saw a flat terror there. She was caught this time: She didn't know who I was, but she knew enough to know it was a problem that she didn't know. I had confused her, bringing the girl, giving her something else to harp on. Nadine would be thirty-six years old. I waited for my mother's eyes to settle as pain swatted into my chest.

Next to her, Bree started to snore. I was impressed.

"There there," my mother patted the tops of her hands. "Nadine." I hadn't seen my mother so peaceful in days. Weeks.

Guilt crept around my lungs. I watched the way she stroked the inside of Bree's forearm the way she always did to us girls in church, when she still went, before Nadine disappeared. Once, right after, I made the mistake of asking, "Do you think God knows about Nadine?"

"Mom," I said sharply. She had birthed me, this woman, and it seemed like she should understand that. That she didn't made me incredibly sad, as if my heart might die.

My mother did not look up. But when she did, her eyes went right through me.

"I am not your mother, missy," she said. The pain in my chest got worse.

Bree started seeing my mother every day. I tried but didn't always make it. The woman at the front desk didn't ask any questions, didn't question this girl arriving alone. Who would care about a nine-year-old wanting to visit a patient in a memory unit? I half expected Bree to start holding her own class: juggling, or makeup application, or charades.

"She's been coming round without you," the front desk nurse said.

I pictured Bree sprinting across the terrible road without looking.

"Is that right." I'm sure she had a name tag I ignored: Paula, Pam, Penny. A stack of empty plastic cups of tapioca next to her, the kind that snap off in a six-pack.

I walked to the room, sneaking up to the door. The hallway smelled like carrots and old rugs and dry, unwashed skin.

My mother started sounding like she had before Nadine disappeared, speaking in full sentences. Honestly, it was like she was conjuring a distant self. If anything convinced me we were nearing the end, this was it.

I listened whenever she patted Bree on the head: "Nadine wants to become a welder. Isn't that lovely? Do you remember in first grade, when she wanted to be a veterinarian? Nadine is growing up so fast. Today in school, Nadine used a letter in math instead of a number. Nadine wants to be a Double Stuf Oreo for Halloween, but just the white part."

The following week, I stopped at the nurses' station to read the clipboard sign-in sheet.

"She's been here every day," the nurse said. Her bloodred acrylic nails seemed laughably out of place here. I looked down at my own: fertilizer outlined, chewed to nothing.

Next to "relationship" Bree wrote *granddaughter.* I flipped to previous pages: *Friend. Parent. Uncle. Ham Sandwich. Angel.* Every day she wrote something different. Sometimes there were no other names between hers, which meant that no one else had come into the unit.

"She's stealing food from the meal carts." PamPaulaPenny said this without an opinion.

"She's hungry."

"Just pudding and mashed potatoes. Cookies."

I walked to my mother's room, pausing by the outside of her door. It was quiet inside. I tapped, wanting to catch them in the act, and the door creaked open. Next to the table the lamp was on, lighting up Bree on my mother's bed. Always in the same divot, on top of the quilt my mother had made in her twenties, some of the fabric squares rubbed so thin the batting showed. Hands folded over her chest. Did no one ever miss this girl? And why? I had a pang of sorrow.

"Hi, Mom," I mouthed.

"Shhhh," my mother said, harshly. She pointed next to her. "Nadine's sleeping."

It was time to call my sister.

Deirdre texted me that night to ask how things were going. *Good*! I texted back. *Catch up soon.*

A week went by, two. Freddie didn't mention Deirdre, but she looked at me with her patient hands on her hips, waiting for a Deirdre update.

Meanwhile, it snowed. I told Bree I would drive her home. She followed me to the truck and used her jean jacket to wipe off the fluffy snow.

"You are going to have to show me where you live," I said.

She shrugged next to me. I looked both ways numerous times at the busy road, waiting for a large space between cars. I finally pulled out. As we drove past Bree's bus stop, she said, "Let me out here. I can walk."

"Absolutely not. I'm driving you."

Bree sighed loudly. "Go to the end."

I drove through the neighborhood. The houses grew dingier

the further in we went. Finally we reached a cul-de-sac, four homes that matched: four-room ranches, single story, concrete steps, tiny lawns conveniently free of anything to tend, like grass. Bree gestured to one that was completely dark, and I pulled over.

"Who lives here with you?"

But Bree was climbing out fast. "Right-thank-you-bye." She slammed the door by turning and hip-checked it closed.

Big snowflakes glistened in her hair. On her lashes. She hitched her string bag up and onto her shoulders, girding herself like a good scarab, then ran to the side door in a way I can only describe as terrorized.

Bree fished a key from under her shirt—on a string—and yanked on the door while kicking it open with her foot. A light came on, a sickly yellow glow that hardly reached the ceiling. There were no cars in the driveway, no movement in the house. I pictured a single mom, a waitress out at a restaurant further down the highway, working the evening shift. This might explain the cigarettes, but not the chair in the woods, the solitude, or the damp gray terror.

I pictured a single mom, a waitress out at a restaurant further down the highway, working the evening shift.

The weather turned cold and gray, the leaves died completely, and the trees became their unadorned, sculptural selves. Early December in the nursing home: Christmas lights, cheap paper Advent calendars, red-and-green construction paper garlands, pine boughs sprayed with foam snow stuck in vases with red plastic carnations. The grounds of memory care now a quilt of frozen mud.

One day in mid-December I signed in beneath Bree, who had written *Pippi Longstocking*, which made me laugh and look up. It had been a decent visitor day; there were a few other names on the sheet. PaulaPennyPam looked at me strangely.

"You're here," she said.

"I'm here!"

In the room, Bree was already up on my mother's bed,

mustard-colored men's socks bunched off her heels. Then I felt a movement: Someone was sitting, to my left, in the chair. I turned slowly.

"Claudia." I knew my sister's voice inside and out.

"Oh." I had turned with my eyes closed, as if this might make her go away. "It's Mom's power of attorney."

"You were supposed to call me."

"I know."

"*Freddie* called me, Claude."

"She did?"

"Freddie told me Mom found Nadine."

From the bed, Bree guffawed in genuine delight. I looked to my mother, whose eyes were currently closed.

"She did, huh."

"She's *dying*, Claude?"

"She's been dying a long time. It's not a surprise."

"She's much worse."

"She is. We talked about this over the summer."

Deirdre couldn't hang on to the anger. I just had to wait her out. "But she's still here."

"She is."

"She's worse. It might be the end."

"It might. And you didn't call me."

"She knows who she is, though."

"She does. It feels lucky." I thought about luck as I watched Deirdre stand up from her chair.

"You've been taking good care of her." Her anger was almost gone. My chest relaxed.

"Come here," Deirdre said, and I tried not to be annoyed. Couldn't *she* take three steps and come to *me*? But she held her ground. I couldn't hang on anymore and threw myself into her chest.

I snuffled into her shoulder, "I didn't think you would come." This wasn't true. My sister was the most dependable person in my life. Why had I kept her away?

"I'm here."

"I hope you'll stay with me."

"I'm at the bed and breakfast." It was started by our mother's friend, and it was hideous, and there were signs in each bedroom saying that sex was not allowed. But the breakfast was an epic spread served in polished silver tureens. The toast

was homemade, our mother's friend wore a muumuu out of an adoration of the fifties, and the whole enterprise made us feel very, very sad in a good way.

"I wish you would stay at home." It always started this way.

"It's just easier," Deirdre said. She couldn't stand staying in our old house and didn't know how I could either.

"Who's older?" Bree said this smooshed beneath a pillow. My mother appeared to be asleep, her mouth open a crack, her lips badly in need of Chapstick. I felt a wave of shame. We were living our lives in her room while she was shedding the known world.

"She is," we both said, gesturing with a thumb. I looked at my sister shyly, at the way her nose looked exactly like mine from the side, and we caught eyes and laughed for the first time. My mother woke with a start to glare at us.

"You people," she said, one eye drooping. "Tell me the joke."

It was Bree who answered, arm dangling languidly from the edge of the bed. We were all creatures sharing the same air, the same world. "Knock knock."

"Who's there?" said my mother, without missing a beat. Pleased.

"Says."

"Says who?"

"Says me!" Bree slid head first off the bed, neck crumpling, her favorite trick.

Everyone laughed except my mother.

That night at seven Deirdre arrived holding her duffel like a baby, hand under its butt. It reminded me that she had two girls at home rapidly approaching the age of Nadine when she disappeared.

"I can't stay at that place," she said, bowling her bag into the front hall. "This is definitely worse, though." She sighed, looked around. "I brought us dinner."

We sat in the old kitchen with a bottle of bourbon. That seemed to be dinner until Deirdre pulled a burrito wrapped in foil out of her purse.

"How far did you have to drive for that?"

"We can split it," she said, exactly as when we were kids, and we were both quiet. There was Nadine, in the first third of foil, as Deirdre hovered over it with a knife.

I got up and brought over two small plates, melamine etched with decades of fork tines. We ate the burrito, which was heavy on hot sauce and queso, exactly how I would describe my sister.

"How are they? Finn and Devon." Boys' names, of course. As if she could protect them.

"Devils."

Queso spilled over my half and plopped onto the floor. I mopped it up with a paper napkin while Deirdre pulled out the girls' school photos. I hadn't visited Deirdre in California in three years.

"They're adorable." They weren't. No Laurier would ever be classified as adorable. Deirdre had turned her severe jaw and tiny eyes into a brassy sophistication, with the help of a tailored suit. The rest of us were not so lucky. I wiped my hand on my Carhartts. My hair had a permanent ridgeline from a baseball hat. I was six one and broad-shouldered. Deirdre at least was only five ten. And Nadine? A whippet still when she disappeared, and the beauty of the family.

In twenty-eight years there had been no bones, no teeth, no motive, and no suspects. No trace. If Nadine was alive, where was she?

"So what do you think about Mom?"

Deirdre shrugged. "I think it's nice she doesn't jump every time the phone rings. So some things are better."

In twenty-eight years there had been no bones, no teeth, no motive, and no suspects. No trace. If Nadine was alive, where was she? I had dreamed of the reunion, over and over and over. A therapist suggested I was working out an unsolvable problem. Which, of course, was that I could not come to terms with the fact that she was dead.

There was no way Nadine was alive except in my mother's room at Happy Valley.

"How could you have allowed this?" Deirdre could always read my mind. "You found a stray kid and brought her in? I don't even know where to start with the ethics of it. I couldn't even look at Freddie."

"I think Freddie is okay with it."

Deirdre crumpled up her tin foil and threw it toward the sink, where it bounced off the faucet.

"I know you think this has only been *your* problem."

"It *has* only been my problem."

Deirdre looked around for something else to throw. She glanced down at her plate, and I shook my head.

I had the time, and the energy, according to my sister, because I didn't have a family. This was always her justification for being absent. That I was strong and did physical labor growing hydroponic vegetables and worked outside and drove a pickup truck and had a small reputation as a magnet fisherman and therefore was capable in a way that extended into managing our mother and allowed Deidre to be off living her life as an attorney and mother in California. She was grateful to me, she was. But then she came home and crushed me with her absence all over again.

"Have you been to see Daddy?"

"It's been a few months." His ashes were outside of town in what was listed on the old town maps as a pauper's graveyard. Once a year I visited in the fall and planted bulbs. The voles ate them, or else the bulbs couldn't be bothered to come up.

"Let's go see him," she said. "Find something to bring."

I wanted something that would disintegrate. "I'm bringing myself," I said.

We walked out of the kitchen, turning off the light above the table. The old chairs were painted a different color for each family member, and our father had taken Nadine's lime-green with him when he moved out. His was navy. Purple, pink, and yellow were left. I was purple, Deirdre was pink, our mother was yellow. All were dingy and scuffed.

We drove to the cemetery and cleaned up his grave. Rotting, matted leaves, dead grass, a piece of silk ribbon from a desiccated bouquet. It was a small marker, flat against the ground. The hole had been so small. In spring the cemetery was a carpet of light blue forget-me-nots.

"Are we going to put Mom here too?" I said.

"Mom's never going to die," Deirdre said. I knew what she meant: She couldn't. We all felt suspended in an in-between. It had felt like this since Nadine disappeared.

Back at the house, Deirdre said, "Keep driving." She didn't want to pick a bedroom, a bed. I knew she would end up on the

couch in the living room, where she had declared her intention to move to California when she was fourteen.

I kept driving, aimlessly around in loops and down familiar streets. I had lived here my entire life, but Deirdre had not. I wondered what she could see that I couldn't. How things had overgrown, the lots that had sprouted new houses, trees chopped down, sad independent shops that came and went.

We drove up to Route 16 and rolled slowly past Happy Valley, gazing solemnly forward, past our mother's dark window. I turned onto Bree's street, the truck nudging its way down the dark cul-de-sac. Out of habit so I could see better, I killed the headlights. We rolled along in silence, and my sister sighed loudly, cross-examining me in her head.

"Bernice used to live on this street," she mused.

I slammed the brakes, grateful I'd loaded the sandbags in the truck bed. There was a slick of black ice on the roads. "What?"

"Bernice. Remember her? She was the grade in between us."

I computed this, started rolling the truck again. "This is where Bree lives," I said carefully.

"The girl you lure in for Mom to think is Nadine?"

"I know you think it's wrong."

She didn't miss a beat, Deirdre. Her favorite class in college was Moral Philosophy while mine was Plant Love: Divine Botany. "Of course it's wrong."

"She's dying, D."

"I know."

I crept along all the way to Bree's house, stopping in front.

Deirdre pointed. "You know what? I'm sure now. Definitely Bernice. You think she still lives here?"

This time there were two rooms lit, and a head bobbed by a window. The house had the same sickly glow as before.

I thought back to meeting Bree the first time. "Yes."

"The house looks the same."

"It looks a little more lived in now." On cue another ghostly head walked by the window and Deirdre squealed.

"That's definitely her."

"How can you tell?" The windows were smeared. There was no way she could recognize anyone.

The front door opened a crack, and then something streaked out of the house. There were no lights on to see. A dog? A person?

Another streak zipped around from the back of the house and stopped on the driveway. It was Bree, wearing just a T-shirt and shorts in the cold. I looked at my dashboard: 34 degrees. She put her hands on her knees, panting, then stood up and pulled something from her pocket.

"She's going to smoke a cigarette," I said.

"Where are her *clothes*?" Deirdre whined, watching. Silently Bree draped one hand into her elbow crease, the other holding the cigarette like Bogart, her tiny mouth blowing smoke rings. The ember pulsed as she sucked in new smoke. It took her only a few minutes to smoke the whole thing. She pulled out another one.

"Jesus Christ," Deirdre said, "I thought kids only vaped." She pushed open her door, a cracking noise like a shot in the cold.

"Who's there?" Bree said, calmly turning around to look. Did nothing surprise her? It was terribly creepy.

"Oh, it's me. Deirdre," said my sister, as if our sitting in a dark car with no lights stalking her house was perfectly natural. To my relief Bree seemed to remember who she was.

"What are you doing here?"

I watched Deirdre put her hands on her hips. "I know your mother."

Bree looked skeptical.

"We went to high school together," Deirdre said. "Bernice."

"She's asleep." Inside, a light switched off.

I got out of the driver's side of the truck. "What does your mother say about you smoking?"

Bree narrowed her eyes. "You didn't pay me today."

"You *pay* her?" Deirdre looked over at me and then back at Bree. "I thought you liked it. You get to steal shit and everything."

"There is no restoring your faith in humanity," I said. Of course there wasn't.

"I like Evie," Bree said. "Even if she's a nut."

"She's not a nut. She has Alzheimer's. She can't remember anything. Maybe someday it will happen to you." Deirdre put her hand on my arm.

Bree shrugged. "Maybe."

I thought of my father, who did not live through the grief of losing Nadine. The only one of us who did not cry and turtle

but created maps and flyers and went on radio shows and contacted people who called with tips and clues. The rest of us took medications and slept and missed school and work while my father was rational and always moving. I don't know if it was strength or stupidity. If going on with your own life was even fair. There is an obvious answer to this as long as something this terrible has never happened to you.

My father didn't find her, despite multiple cross-country trips and newspaper articles and hiring a private investigator to the ruin of his bank account. There was no conclusive evidence. Did she walk off? Get lured into a car? Run away to Mexico? She became another disappeared girl in a world of disappeared girls.

Our mother wouldn't let Deirdre and me out of her sight for an entire year. We lived in the basement as truants, eating Pringles and Red Hots and peanut butter. We learned many things that year: how to make dinner with Jiffy mix, how to get gum out of hair (it involved scissors), how to answer the telephone in a way that would scare people from calling again.

Bree stood at the car, unlit cigarette in her fingers.

"Go for a drive?" Deirdre asked, and before I could intervene, Bree dove headlong into the Ranger's jump seat.

I took off, fearful—hopeful too—that Bernice would come to the front door.

"We won't keep you long." Now I was self-conscious, driving around. We headed toward the old rug mill building where the art and maker spaces were now. It had a living roof I tended there that gave me trouble all winter.

"I have a daughter your age," Deirdre said, turning around to face Bree. "The smoking is going to fucking kill you."

I saw Bree's impassive face through the rearview.

"And we're kidnapping you," I added, lightly.

Deirdre pinched my leg, hard.

"We'll keep you safe," I said. "I promise." If reality and fantasy were going to collide, I wanted to be in control.

Deirdre stared ahead, dolefully reading my mind, and said nothing. Bree pretended to smoke, going through the motions, as choreographed as tai chi. Smoke rings.

"Go this way," Deirdre said, pointing to nowhere. I turned into an unfamiliar neighborhood. Huge, boxy houses with flat vinyl fronts sprouted from one-acre lawns.

"Someone needs to plant some trees," I said. All of the woods of my childhood were gone. Every time a new neighborhood was carved out of the ground, I worried Nadine's bones would be discovered. I couldn't bear the sound of a bulldozer ripping up tree roots.

"Let's go see Evie," Bree said, from the back. She was lying down now, curled up, her eyes closed. "I want to see Evie."

I glanced at my old Seiko: It was past ten and a terrible idea.

"They won't let us in." But next to me I could feel Deirdre revving. We'd have to get by the double locked doors and the security guards and the night nurse.

"We could kidnap her too," Deirdre said. My sister the trial attorney.

In the back, Bree clapped her approval.

At Happy Valley we rang and pounded on the door. A night nurse stood in front of us with her arms crossed after buzzing us in.

"You're outside visiting hours," she said, tapping her watch face theatrically. "I can't let you in." But her face was an exhausted shadow, and I calculated her pain, and mine, and how much she would get in trouble. As if on cue a short man with a jangling key ring walked toward us, pants pooling around foam-soled sneakers. Security. Whatever I said next would determine our fate. Next to me, Deirdre yawned loudly, as if to say, *Let's get this show on the road*. Bree flipped through the clipboard sheets, then signed us all on the same line with a childish grip: *Claude, D., monkeymonkeygirl*. For relationship she doodled a heart.

Security. Whatever I said next would determine our fate. Next to me, Deirdre yawned loudly, as if to say, Let's get this show on the road.

"We're kidnapping my mother," I said, the truth seeming like the easiest way to handle things. "Do I need to sign something?" I pulled out my wallet. "Here's my ID. I will bring her back, promise." They laughed, and then stopped, because I wasn't kidding. Bree was already running down the hallway toward my mother's room, the guard watching her anxiously, saying something softly in Spanish.

"You can't do this," the night nurse said. "You haven't followed protocols."

"Watch us," I said. "I'm her power of attorney." Deirdre flipped me the bird behind a cupped hand.

In the room there was a struggle: Bree straddling my mother's chest, trying to pry her eyes open with her fingers. "Please be breathing," she said, so close to my mother's mouth she could have kissed it.

"Mom," Deirdre said, sharply, and my mother's eyes snapped open.

"Oh." Bree put her hands gently on my mother's cheeks. "Hello, Evie."

"Hi," said our mother, with a beatific smile. "Hi." She stared at Bree with what could only be called love.

"Mom," Deirdre said. "Want to go with us for a drive?"

Our mother looked over, and there she was: the mother from our childhood.

"I would love to go for a drive," she said perfectly, as if reading a script. Then she laughed. "Who are you?"

We hustled her into a robe, matted at the lapels by food debris. *These people can go fuck themselves*, I thought. We led her down the hallway, each of us with an arm, blinking in the bright light. In the entryway, the guard and the nurse stood with their arms crossed, legs apart, blocking the door.

"We will report you," the nurse said, wagging the phone receiver.

"You won't," Deirdre said. "I'm a lawyer. At the end of the day, we pay you, and she's our mother. Study your fine print. We'll bring her back. Trust me."

"When? When will you bring her back?" The security guard was fussing with his belt, readjusting his shirt, struggling against his gentlemanly conscience and a confusing power dynamic. He went to the door, holding it open. I resisted the urge to touch his shoulder in thanks.

"We're just going for a drive." We shuffled slowly past him toward freedom.

In the lot, outside, our mother shuffling her bird bones along, Deirdre and I each gripped a forearm. In the cold air she was very frail. Her shins were covered in bruises, and the plastic soles of her slippers slipped on patches of black ice. We

held her tight as her body stiffened. Her eyes began to die, a soda going flat.

Bree held onto Deirdre's forearm, skipping on the ice, laughing when she slid.

I hoisted our mother into the front seat of the truck. She weighed less than a potted fig. Deirdre and Bree clicked into their seatbelts in the jump seat, and as I slid into the driver's seat an elusive warm feeling raced over my skin. Fear and elation.

"Ma, do your seatbelt," I said, and watched as the directions got stuck in her brain. I reached over and gently clicked her in. She was so tiny. She had lost so much.

"There," our mother said, patting the belt around her middle. As if everything was normal. As if everything was okay.

I turned the heat on, checking the temperature with my hand.

Our mother yawned, her eyes drooped, and her chin fell to her chest. She fell asleep. I would have to witness the world for her.

Bree yawned too, putting her head back against the seat, sliding sideways until her head came to rest on Deirdre's thigh. So much for her superpowers. Her wavy chestnut hair splayed over Deirdre's leg, and a hand curled up beneath her neck. She coughed a little.

"Where are we going?" she said with her eyes closed, a hand flung over one eye.

Deirdre and I looked at each other in the rearview mirror. I hadn't yet put the truck in gear. She leaned in toward the back of our mother's seat, close to her head. Then she reached around, placing a flat hand over our mother's sleeping heart. I felt the narrow wishbones of her ribcage along with Deirdre, and also her weak heart. Our mother didn't wake up. That was fine with me. This was our trip, Deirdre's and mine. We had so much to talk about.

"Yes. Where are we going, Claude?" She sat back again, ran her fingers through Bree's hair, over her cheek.

Then: "For the love of God, please just start driving."

MAUREEN THORSON

THE MOUNTAIN

I went to the mountain and asked for a favor. I asked for some of its granite. It said, sure, I'm made entirely of death. I have plenty to spare. Thanks, I said, I've felt a little bit ongoing lately. The mountain didn't respond. It was getting toward evening and the tamaracks' shadows were deep, feathered, long. I began to say something, thought better of it, began again. I asked the mountain, how can I return the favor? The mountain didn't respond. It grew bluer, softer. I stopped thinking there was a difference between the mountain's darkness and my body, so little room was left between.

MAUREEN THORSON

THE RIVER

When I sit down to write, all my training deserts me. *Dear River* sounds too informal; *Esteemed River* too much the reverse. I conjure the river in my mind, chasing the greeting appropriate to that particular blend of awe, obligation, and tenderness. Dead trees washed down by mountain melt. Blackbirds flashing their red epaulettes over cattails at dusk. The little eddies where Sagittaria roots. What I settle on is the vocative O. *O River*. A channel through which water can flow.

MAUREEN THORSON

THE PATH

At night the meadow's filled with flames. Every one of them has wings. At night the meadow sings. Every singer's invisible. I use the moon and stars to navigate the track mowed into the meadow's tall surface. Walk a sharp but shallow canyon. Feel a different kind of rain.

MAUREEN THORSON

THE MIRROR

English speakers see things in the mirror, as if it had depth, like a lake. Italian speakers see things at the mirror, like a theater or other purpose-built illusion. To get the full benefits of any language, you need to speak two. Then it's like being on both sides of a mirror. Another word for reflection is thought, but I think that's getting kind of cute. How's this for a choice: the best metaphor for a mirror's action is—(1) a shattered bone or (2) a flower in bloom. Is this accident or intention? Is someone else in the room?

MAUREEN THORSON

THE TIDE

Movement is a kind of cleansing. Waves crest and roll over. White caps, white horses, white foam like soap made from salt and crashing. The action is called scour. The action is called hone. All calcium. You could build a million things from this kind of battering. Crabs and clams and skeletons. A canyon rife with trilobites' teeny, prehistoric bones. But the best thing you could make is a window. Less giving than a door, more flexible than a safe. A storm's blowing in from the east, where the light rises. The action commences and climaxes. Then starts all over again.

MAUREEN THORSON

THE DEER

This is a 12-point buck, and on every point, a burning candle. Snow falls, the flakes huge and silent until, unless, they sizzle in his flames with a hiss like quenched metal. The buck, white as the snow, noses his way through birches, dripping snow-white wax. His winter world is black-and-white. Like every member of his species, the buck speaks a language of endless, tender diminutives. O deer, my dear. My darling. My sweetest heart. My little candelabra. My endless, illuminated night.

MAUREEN THORSON

THE HAWK

Why are you under the trees? Your broad wings, with their pointed primaries, are meant for open sky. You are awkward here, shying from the branches as they scrape against your flight. As if your birthright weren't being bigger, faster, more agile, slicing the wind more slickly than other airborne things. If you were littler, you could love this deep, concealing shade, just as you love cloudy days when you cast no startling shadow, your pearl-gray belly above the meadow indistinguishable from the bland, unmerciful firmament. In which you take your place as the only punctuation. But these are the woods. Thick, foggy, close-held, where you're at most a parenthetical or ellipsis, foreclosed from exclamation.

JUDITH COOPER

HEART DISSOLVING, SKIN MARINATING

She's so brave. You're very brave. I'm not sure I'd have the strength. Inspiring. I admire you so much. What you're doing. Everyone admires you. I don't know what I'd do if it happened to me. I could never. People I know. Two years? Aren't you cured yet? What kind is that, again? Sorry I haven't been by, but I want to tell you how brave you are. So upbeat. How much I respect you. Who you are. You're amazing. Just stay strong. No, *I'm* the lucky one.

You'll get through this. Whatever comes next, you'll fight it. I'll help. You'll just keep moving forward. When you find out. I understand. Rare? It doesn't matter. You'll be the first. Overall survival rate of 14 percent at five years? But that means . . . Stages don't matter.

Stage 4 goblet cell adenocarcinoma of the appendix. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. Object of affection. Stages matter. Grade matters. Size matters. Tumors are braille bumps on your organs. My heart is dissolving. My skin is marinating. Toxins. Every other week. Open your port and then they pour in. Easy peasy. The maggots already know the names of your toes. Toe in the grave. Like bloodletting. There's a geopolitical urgency. Relentless. Between grief and resilience. Between reality and magical thinking. Ravishing, but not in the good way. Oh, for a new dress. I will be forever dead. Relentless. My lips are sealed. Would voice lessons help? Don't try to empty the ocean with a spoon. The grave is already dug and I continue to hope.

The first chemo drug turned my fingers electric. They cracked and sizzled in proximity to anything cold: water, food, faucets, air. Touching ice was torture. Next, neuropathy deadened my feet. Anemic. Hair thinning. Severe nausea. Oh, for those white jots of hope, the pills for nausea that everyone so loves to suck during chemo. A tiny tumor reduction during that first chemo, which everyone hailed. Hail, hail! The conquering hero! If I were a tumor, what would I look like? Would I smoke a pipe and look

disheveled as I lost girth? Would I wear a tweed jacket with suede elbow patches, would I don corduroy trousers, would my thighs chafe when I walked? Would I be suave? Would I smell inebriated? Would I be a big flirt as I became svelte and tried on smaller skirts?

I begged to graduate to immunotherapy. A genetic fluke within my existing rarity qualified me. Success! But months later, muscles rebelled: polymyalgia rheumatica. Temporary wheelchair needed. Then organs rebelled: colitis. Pile on the prednisone. Woo-hoo! There was nothing this body couldn't do. Walk miles in my shoes. Plant a garden you'll never be able to eat.

Mere months passed. Surgery. Sliced open stem to stern. Don't hold back. Stay for a while, stay for ten hours. Scoop out those pesky organs-cum-tumors. A tumor the size of an orange? Off with her peel! An appendix lovingly piped with tumors? Cake decorating. The baby out with the bathwater! Exeunt the ileocecal valve, the terminal ileum, the cecum. "They go out." A right hemicolectomy. A baker's dozen inches of colon out. No, maybe only ten—I'm short. Next time, will I get a semi-colonoscopy, half price? Then the ovaries and fallopian tubes excised, a bilateral salpingo-oophorectomy. Uterus? Keep. The omentum, that layer of fat and blood vessels that's dubbed the "abdominal policeman." Omentum, shmomentum! Six out of twenty-two lymph glands, onto the ash heap. Optimal tumor debulking. Tumors must be hacked through like a thorn bush. A do-it-yourself jungle adventure.

A tumor the size of an orange? Off with her peel! An appendix lovingly piped with tumors? Cake decorating. The baby out with the bathwater!

Then, ninety minutes of heated chemo in the abdominal cavity. HIPEC, the mother of all surgeries. Hyperthermic intraperitoneal chemotherapy. Gently rock the body back and forth. Rock-a-bye baby. Liquid seeps into all the nooks and crannies. 40.5°C to 42.5°C. 90 to 120 minutes in vitro is theoretically cytotoxic to cancer cells. A complete lack of decorum. Body splayed. Ashes to ashes. No wait! Quicksand for cancer. Springtime for Hitler. No more peritoneal metastasis.

Removal of all visible disease. Surgeon kvelled. Later at home, some sort of infection, back to the hospital for a much longer re-education of organs. Finding their new place after so many removed. Impossible to eat. Absorbing delicious brown meals from a bag. Flavor of the month. Stroll down the hospital halls. Prove you can eat actual food before you can leave.

Back at home again, C. diff, bane of extended hospital stays. Nausea, fatigue. Baby steps. Lift nothing heavier than a carton of milk for six weeks. Anyone missing on those milk cartons? Three months to find your sea legs.

Warning! Warning label. Next scan shows a tiny node in an unplumbed lymph gland. It's always the last place you look. The last man you date is the one you marry. Tidbits. Bits and bobs. Flips and flaps. Expensive sensitive blood test shows increased circulating tumor DNA. Back to the drawing board. Half-dose immunotherapy, only the non-offending drug, broken into bi-weekly, not monthly, installments. I can't wait for the next chapter! And a swanky, only-for-the-rich, let-them-eat-cake drug to combat colitis, with a special Golden Ticket from Big Pharma because my income is low enough, now that I'm too sick to work. My soothed, simmered, cosseted, molly-coddled, pampered, hemi-demi-semi-colon. Two good months (four doses, if you're counting). Expensive sensitive blood test shows decreased circulating tumor DNA.

Then muscles and joints start hurting. Impossible to walk or climb stairs. Nausea. Heartbreak. No one can fathom. Why would they? Just a kvetcher. Apparently, all in my head, I'm told. Then collapse at an infusion. White as a ghost. Give up the ghost. Ghost of a chance. Very low blood pressure. Hospital. No cortisol. Let's play find the cortisol. And maybe find the ACTH while we're at it. Because of so much prednisone months and months ago. Adrenal and pituitary glands no longer on speaking terms. Pilot error. This one shtupped that one's husband. Everyone stopped cold turkey. So, hospital. Injection of cortisol. Many tests and deficits. A new king of the miracle drugs was declared: hydrocortisone! First approved in 1952. Costs an arm and a leg for something that old, a drug that's not even coated, that treats secondary adrenal insufficiency. Raise the blood pressure. Like "raise the flag." Oops, too much. Absorb fluids. Oops, too much. Oy, my head. Remedy worse than

the disease? Just kidding! Nothing is worse than the disease, but it takes a lifetime to treat. May not still be here by the time this particular thing is straightened out.

Another scan, another day, another five million dollars. A second tiny node in the same lymph gland. Para-aortic. Expensive sensitive blood test shows very slightly lower circulating tumor DNA. How can this be? As more tiny tumors grow, paradoxically, the circulating tumor DNA levels go down. Go down, Moses. In cancer world, holding steady is a win, let alone going down. Fingers crossed. Stable disease. Survival rates. Too rare to really know. Stage, grade, size. Mum's the word.

Three months later, alarm bells. More nodes, but now they're over the magical one-centimeter mark. So, not nodes–they've graduated to tumor status. Graduation parties, cakes, banners! Invite your friends. Expensive sensitive blood test is at highest level yet. A cluster of three tumors here, onesies there and there and there. All lymph nodes, some in the neck, some in the torso, with a special potential guest appearance in the sacroiliac joint and the head of the matching femur. Because if there's one thing I love, it's a matching set. Matchy matchy. Seven tumors in all. Seven brides for seven brothers. Or, to go all Roman, the abduction of the Sabine women, because you have to continue the line, and if you don't have the women at home, you have to steal them from someplace else.

Is half-dose immunotherapy even a real thing? Slow down for half-dose immunotherapy? A 2.5k walk for half-dose immunotherapy? Can you wear half a hat, sob from just one eye, go bald on the left side of your head? Intriguing avenue for research. An invention, top to toe, or top to pupik. But instead, it's back to the drawing board.

New life through second chance programs. An exciting way to expunge your record. Expunge each of your tumors' records. Everything is possible! Death is your driver! You can drive a bus! You can drive a train! Maybe you can even vote again, depending on what state you live in! I got on my bus today and a tumor the size of an orange was driving! A priest, a rabbi, and a tumor walked into a bar . . .

But it turns out that June is the cruellest month, not April. Onward. Stay or grow. The status quo is bourgeois. It's the proletariat that effects true change. On the other hand, a plague on both your houses. Make a decision. Pull the trigger. Tumors

grow. It's in their nature. Nature versus nurture. Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

A newer, stronger chemo drug, with even more glamorous side effects but also a better survival rate. Brush up on your survival skills. One-handed fire starting, making gooier s'mores, identifying edible plants, tying knots, looking for moss on the north side if you forget your compass. More likely, you are home puking and shitting in between bouts of cleaning up the house to feel useful in the brief time you have left before the next bout has you down for the count and you start all over again. Your biweekly toxic tour drags you through hovels and basements, stables and graves, cisterns and sewers. Rudderless between sessions, everything is provisional. Your gut is clotted, tortured, only half there. The tumors yap yap fuckiddy yap. Smart-ass but dumb. You feel like you're on the compost heap of humanity.

Your biweekly toxic tour drags you through hovels and basements, stables and graves, cisterns and sewers.

But at two months, the scan shows tumors on the run. Man on the run. Significant decrease. Still not gone, but in the zone. *The Twilight Zone*. Eviction friction. Seize the day, carpe diem, you only live once. Once is enough. But two more months of the awful, shitstorm chemo. Keep going. Day and night, full-blown colitis. Stay at home. Stay-at-home mom. I never was. Single mom, though. Now's my chance, so many years later.

No matter how much water I drink, I'm so dehydrated. It goes in one end and comes out the other. Carry me out feet first. I watch *Bar Rescue* as comic relief and to put me to sleep. Screaming is a lullaby. Nothing highbrow anymore. I'm just an animal now, with animal needs. Two months later, after a total of four months of this round of chemo, scan shows zilch. Tiny tumors are there, but stagnant. Like constellations in my para-aortic and parathyroid lymph glands. Fine-tuning tumors. No paratracheal or supraclavicular sightings. Mapping distant regions. A Shake 'n Bake dusting of runaway matter on healthy tissue. Ditto the dusting of hair left on my head. But A-OK is good for now.

Even if I survive a handful more years, my body still disappears in tiny increments. For so many years, the biweekly doses of the toxin-of-the-month club. The taxing side effects. The diminishing interest in life as we know it. My world narrows, my calendar begs for titration. It's exhausting to be sociable. My white blood cell count is plummeting, I am anemic. An octopus lives in my head. Tentacles straddle my neck. Hoarseness. Toxins. The omnipresent bloody nose. No color left inside me, bupkus.

But then, a few months of no treatment go by and my memory of illness slowly retreats from the sleepy environs of my jumbled, fog-soaked brain.

Now I am approaching my three-year anniversary of my disease, with a little time away from infusion rooms. My chemo vacation, my oncologist calls it. Go out and live your life, he says. No predictions. According to statistics, only 21 percent of us with this rare disease, with this stage and this grade, survive to this point. Unmarried females have a worse outlook. And yet here I am. Where are my three-year-anniversary flowers, my cards, my cruise? Only 14 percent make it to five years. I'll give it a running shot.

I dream I've dyed my hair dark purple, not the tepid color one usually sees on women my age, but a deep, robust, brilliant shade, a purple permanence the color of sleep. Around my feet are small shattered flakes of purple, like confetti, like tiny shreds of remembrance.

I dream there is a bright red bird in my kitchen, huddled on the counter I don't have energy to clean. My outside is inside.

I dream about bulletins and afterthoughts from the afterlife. The letters slide together, the thoughts all blur and echo.

My dreams are thrillers, toxins still duking it out with circulating tumor DNA.

Let's not tiptoe past the inevitablity of death. Human longing. Fantasy and delusion. The hard work of living. The dead do not dream. When I'm gone I promise I'll live in your heart. I'll curl up in that numinous hollow in your ventricle. And I'll be with you forever.

KAREEM TAYYAR

JOHN COLTRANE

is standing waist-high
in the middle of a river.

from this distance,
& with my eyes closed,

it is impossible to tell
whether it's the Mississippi,

the Columbia,
the Hudson,

or the Delaware.

he isn't singing,
but the birds are harmonizing

on an a capella version
of the final movement from "A Love Supreme."

wildflowers bloom on the banks,
& the late afternoon sun

is the color of a new saxophone.

step into the water,
this entire composition tells us.

it isn't as cold as you think,
& this song is a god who would never let

any of his children drown.

KAREEM TAYYAR

MURMURATION

no one is calling you to prayer.

the rain that has begun to fall in someone else's garden
is too far away for you to see.

when,
later on this evening,

you think of returning to the town where you were born,
a flock of blackbirds will settle onto the roof of your silence,

& wait to see if the feeling passes.

or maybe not.

maybe there are no blackbirds,
& no silence,

& the Main Street of your memory
is exactly as you left it,

with the ghosts of old friends
still sitting in the booths of a diner

that is open all night,

& with the jukebox still playing
your favorite song.

KAREEM TAYYAR

APARTMENT #201

sometimes a bird would slip through
the hole in the roof

& if our oven fan was on
we couldn't get to the kitchen in time

to save them

those birds still visit me in sleep
they float around my bedroom

like feathered angels

once in awhile I have wings too
& all of us fly through that hole in the roof

together

NICK LANTZ

THE GARGOYLE

There's a stone in my throat. It won't
swallow, won't upchuck. I stared hard
at the neighbors' dog squatting on
my lawn, but it did no good. I can't
summon anger when I need it. I'm all
meekness and unsent emails fuming
in the drafts folder. I have opinions.
I keep thinking about the fawn, hit
by a car, limping back and forth
across the street, mewling. It lay
down on the pavement, in the full sun.
We called someone. No one came.
I should have gone out and stood
over it with an umbrella, at least.
I should have cut its throat.
Its mother stood a while in our yard,
then walked into the woods. There are
so many new fawns every year.
This poem isn't about them, in case
you were wondering.

NICK LANTZ

THE GLASS PIANO

Once, a farmer woke convinced his house
was on fire, and for the rest of his life slept
with a bucket full of water by his bed. Once,
a star fell from the sky and landed in a field.
Everyone who came to see it later grew
an eye on the back of their head, but the eye
never saw anything. It only blinked and wept.
The princess was sure she'd swallowed
a grand piano made of glass and took each
step carefully for fear that it would break.
One year, every other child died. Of plague.
Carried off by large birds. Used as target
practice by the king's archers. Parents
wailed in the streets. The king paid seven
priests to pray for the dead children
from sunup to sundown. The parents
returned to their homes. A huge, gray eagle
perched on a nearby mountain and blocked
out the sun with its wings for a hundred
years. The princess had servants carry her
to the roof, where she sat in the darkness,
a faint melody issuing from her body.
When the farmer woke at night in a fever,
he reached down from his bed and trailed
his fingers through the water in the bucket.

NICK LANTZ

UNSPEAKABLE

I stepped on a nail—it went through my shoe but missed
my foot. That's life. It rains on a sunny day and everyone
says the devil is beating his wife. A man beats his wife
and no one says anything. The whole world takes a vow
of silence every time a gunman walks into a school cafeteria.
In fourth grade, a substitute taught me the word *euphemism*.
To avoid words of ill-omen, say *kindly ones* instead of *furies*,
neutral instead of *numbed*. Some words are Swiss Army knives.
Some words are slide rules. The rule is, if I pay my bills
and floss regularly, I'm not a failure. Right? I want to say
the right thing, but sometimes silence is more appropriate.
Did I say *appropriate*? I meant *opprobrious*. Silence is golden,
shiny as the luster on the pharaoh's slave-built tomb.
When I said the nail missed my foot, that was a lie.

MEGHAN LOUISE WAGNER

THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

Pretend you're in an elevator skipping through the ether. Pretend there's a cat in a box. Pretend you're chasing a beam of light. Pretend your older brothers are separated as children, plucked out of a diner booth. Pretend one of them is placed inside a rocket ship and sent to outer space. Pretend he travels at the speed of light. Pretend the rest of you remain on Earth. Pretend you go to high school, college, fall in love with the wrong person, change your major, spend a summer in Greece alone, go to the only grad school that offers you funding, attend your brother's wedding in Saginaw, hook up with the bride's cousin in an elevator while his wife is on the dance floor, jam the buttons so hard the alarm goes off and security is called and a scene is made, never live this down, never get invited to your brother's events again, drop out of your PhD halfway through, escape with an MA in lit, teach at three different colleges to pay your rent, learn to live without health insurance, grow old, grow old, grow old.

I wander through Mom's gallery opening, gazing at paintings that look exactly like the same paintings she's been making for the last fifteen years. Ever since my brother Bill died, her subjects have veered toward the apocalyptic. Fires, floods, barren cityscapes. On the other side of the gallery, my brother Drake wanders with his wife, Marion. Drake and Bill were identical twins. The kind no one could tell apart unless they had different haircuts. His wife still hates me for the wedding. Some people can never move past things.

I'm absorbing Mom's poisonous lawns and microplastics when Dad appears beside me, clutching an Amstel Light. He nods at a painting of a nuclear power plant slipping into the ocean.

"Nuclear power's clean," he says. "She's only perpetuating stereotypes."

"Not if it falls into the ocean," I say.

Dad sips his beer and harrumphs. He's a tenured history

professor at a state college that keeps slashing humanities programs. He prides himself on staying afloat. Most of his students are STEM majors. They love his classes.

After the gallery, we eat dinner at our favorite spot in Little Italy. We order big bowls of Caesar salad and pasta with red sauce. The server is new. He doesn't know our family. He forgets the anchovies. He doesn't bring our second bottle of wine. He pours everyone limoncello, even though Mom is the only one who wants it. Once we're on tiramisu, we have too many forks and not enough spoons.

Candles are extinguished, cloths disappear from tables. Suddenly, we're in one of Mom's paintings: a lone family surrounded by darkness.

"Gwen," Dad says, clutching an empty glass, "pass the wine?"

My phone buzzes. A student. I swipe it open. Computer problems. This is my fault for having weekly writings due at 11:59 p.m. on Fridays. Drake reaches for the bottle and passes it to Marion, who tops her own glass off. She then passes it to Dad, who shakes what little remains into his glass. He holds the empty bottle and frowns at me.

I rest my phone. "It's a student," I say.

Dad swirls an inch of merlot in his glass. "You're emailing a student on a Friday night?"

"She can't submit the assignment. I don't want it to ruin her weekend."

"Good god. You're part of the problem, you know that?"

Mom draws a fork through the mascarpone, creating tiny mushroom clouds. "Frank," she says, "let her teach the way she wants to teach."

Dad tilts his glass. "You think you're helping them, but you're not. You're only encouraging their learned incompetence. It's sink or swim out there, Gwen. You want to help them—let them sink."

And everyone is quiet after that.

Dad doesn't apologize. He never does. The waiter drops the check. Across the dining room, a vacuum whirrs to life. Candles are extinguished, cloths disappear from tables. Suddenly, we're

in one of Mom's paintings: a lone family surrounded by darkness.

Drake and Marion leave first, citing a thirty-minute drive and a babysitter to pay. I walk to the parking lot with Mom and Dad. It started snowing while we were inside and our cars are covered. The pavement is slick. I turn my engine on and blast the heat. The snow brush is tucked in the backseat, beneath a mess of books and folders.

Dad has already started the engine of his Accord. We both shuffle snow off our windshields. Mom digs her hands into her pockets and traipses into the empty parking spot between our cars.

"So, Gwen," she says, "when will we see you next?"

"I don't know," I say, clearing the passenger windows. "I've got a conference next weekend, so I'll be playing catch-up when I get back."

Dad brushes his back window. "Gwen, when was the last time you got an oil change?"

"What conference?" Mom asks.

"Nothing," I say. "A small journal thing in Columbus."

"Sounds like you got a cat caught in your engine."

Mom glances at Dad. "Frank, aren't you going to Columbus next weekend?"

He taps the brush against the rear tire. "Yeah, but that's for whoosh."

The red sauce and limoncello burn my stomach. Until now, I've never heard anyone pronounce WOSH aloud. I always thought it'd be "wash." My fingers are wet clams. I finish clearing the back window of my hatchback.

"Whoosh?" I ask. "You mean *Writing on Science and Humanities*?"

Dad tosses the brush in his backseat. "You got into whoosh? What for?"

"I wrote an article about science and poetry."

"Whoosh," he says, "is the top conference for scientific historians. It's not for English professors—" He stops himself. The snow keeps falling. "Instructors," he says.

Bill was the poet, but no one remembers that about him. He was seventeen when he died. Hit his head cliff diving in the lake. Although it happened in the summer, our high school

hosted the service on the football field so everyone could attend. It reminded me of a pep rally. The popular kids took the mic and shared stories about Bill—most of them involving goals he scored, races he won, pranks he played on teammates. A few teachers and coaches also shared anecdotes. How he was a class clown, but always an attentive student. Uncle Nick and Aunt Sabrina gave a PowerPoint about some tree they planted in Spain in Bill's honor. Drake didn't want to talk, nor did Mom and Dad. I thought somebody should represent the side of Bill he rarely showed.

The mic was squeaky. Up too high. One of the track coaches had to help me adjust it to my height. I was so nervous I forgot to explain that I was reading Bill's poems, not my own.

Afterward, everyone approached to tell me how beautiful and touching my poetry was. Popular kids, upperclassmen, ones I never, ever thought I'd have a reason to talk to. I was too embarrassed to confess. Who would know the difference?

The Thursday before the conference, I'm driving from one college to another when my engine stalls out in front of the Health and Sciences Building. My Triple-A membership lapsed after a misunderstanding with a pushy customer service rep last year, so I pay for an overpriced tow to a garage three blocks off campus. After leaving my name and number with a frazzled, gray-haired mechanic who says, "Gary does this, Gary's who you gotta talk to," I take the bus to teach my class at the private college.

The next morning, Gary calls to say he'll need to order a part. I won't have the car back until Monday, Tuesday maybe. I look up buses to Columbus. None of them go anywhere near the conference.

I call Drake. He says, "I'm about to hop on a Zoom."

"Can I borrow your car tomorrow?" I say. "I'm going to Columbus."

"No, I got pickleball."

"Can't Marion drive you?"

"Can't you ask Mom and Dad?"

We go back and forth until he hangs up on me to start his Zoom. Later, I'm riding the bus to the community college when Mom texts.

If you need a ride to Columbus why don't you go with Dad?

After my last class Friday, I take the bus home. Five minutes into packing, Dad honks his horn in my building's parking lot. He wants to get a jump on traffic. We listen to NPR most of the drive. But an hour into the trip, Dad pops a CD-R out of the stereo and asks me to hand him another one from the glove box. It's in a clear orange case and marked *Dr. Horton, A&S*.

"Wait." I turn it over. "We've been listening to CDs of NPR this whole time?"

Dad snatches it. "I have my TA tape podcasts for me."

"What? Dad."

Once the new program starts, Dad motions for me to be quiet. Someone named Dr. Cody Horton is being interviewed about his new book.

"Dr. Cody?" I snicker. "Does he sell protein bars?"

Dad raises the volume. The interviewer, the same monotone woman we've been listening to since Cleveland, introduces Dr. Cody Horton's new book, *Einstein's Games*, which is about the same area of history Dad specializes in. Scientific thought experiments. I'm ready to tune out, but then Dr. Cody starts talking about something I actually understand: Maxwell's Demon, a nineteenth-century scenario James Clerk Maxwell invented to test the limitations of the second law of thermodynamics.

"I used that in my poetry class," I say. "We made up 'impossible poems.' But you know, Maxwell didn't call it a demon. It was actually Lord Kelvin who—"

"Gwen."

The interviewer reads a passage from Dr. Cody's book involving one of Albert Einstein's students at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute solving the problem of Maxwell's Demon in the 1920s. Dr. Cody responds, "And the results of this little thought experiment eventually grew into the foundation for modern information theory."

"Incredible," the interviewer says. "And without that we wouldn't have computers or cell phones or—anything."

"Exactly," Dr. Cody says.

Dad smacks the dashboard. "Come on!" he yells. "It was Leo Szilard and he didn't *solve* it. His paper later led Claude Shannon to develop information entropy." The radio shifts to an ad for a Cleveland Orchestra concert that happened two months ago.

Dad turns to me, as if I'm the one he's been arguing with. "I'd hardly say that's why we have fucking cell phones."

"Dad," I say, "do you want me to drive?"

"This is the problem with these hotshot historians." He keeps one hand on the wheel while the other flies in wide gestures. "It's the fucking Einstein economy."

Here's how I explained the demon to my poetry class:

"The first law of thermodynamics states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed. The second law states that entropy always increases. In this case, entropy equals the unavailability of useful energy in a closed system. Low entropy means there's lots of energy available. High entropy means there's very little.

"Another way to think of it is that time always moves forward, never backwards. We grow old, never young. Water left in a pot without a flame will always become cold, never hot.

"But if your objective is to create 'work' (aka, the motive power that results from an exchange of energy), then you want to keep order in a closed system. You want one area that's cold, and one that's hot. You don't want warmth. You can't do anything with warmth. Warmth is high entropy. Warmth is chaos.

"And, so, back in 1867, a Scottish poet and physicist by the name of James Clerk Maxwell proposed a thought experiment in which there was a box filled with fast-moving particles and slow-moving ones."

I drew the box on the dry-erase board with red and blue markers.

"So let's say in the middle of the box, there's this invisible being—a demon—who can open and close a door that allows hot particles to flow into one area, while keeping the cold particles out. A system like this could potentially work in perpetuity. Thus maintaining the order of hot and cold. No energy wasted, no entropy gained. No mixing, no warmth. Perpetual motion.

"But it's only that," I said, dropping the markers. "A thought experiment."

Dad and I arrive at the hotel. It's next to an outdoor luxury mall. Everything is peach: the buildings, the streets, the sidewalks. Since he's the one with the travel voucher, we split the

room. Dad claims the bed closer to the bathroom. I take the one by the window. We have a view of the highway and the P.F. Chang's.

He drags his entire carry-on bag into the bathroom. A few minutes later, he emerges in a fresh outfit that looks exactly like the one he wore in the car: a blue Oxford tucked into neatly pressed khakis. He's in his early sixties but still has most of his hair, only now starting to turn white. In old pictures, he looks exactly like Drake, which means he looks exactly like Bill.

I remain in my wrap dress and leggings, since it is one of only two outfits I had time to pack while Dad was laying on the horn at my building. On the trip from the room to the lobby, I try to guess who's there for the conference and who is a regular guest. Past the front desk, outside a bar and grill called Buckeyes, there's a slow-moving mass of men dressed exactly like Dad and women in oversized skirts with colorful scarves and tote bags.

In old pictures, he looks exactly like Drake, which means he looks exactly like Bill.

We get in line to receive our lanyards. Dad's is laminated, *Dr. Frank Monaghan, Guest*, while I am given a paper card, *Gwendolyn Monaghan, Visiting Speaker.* I have to slide it inside the lanyard myself. Both of us are handed folders stuffed with itineraries. On the table, I notice another laminated card:

Dr. Cody Horton, Keynote Speaker.

"Oh my god," I say, hanging my lanyard around my neck. "It's the hotshot historian."

Dad hisses at me like I'm six years old. "Gwen."

The woman behind the table glances between us. She's around Dad's age. Frizzy brown hair, big round glasses. "Oh," she says, nodding at our lanyards, "are you two married?"

"Are you serious?" I gasp. "He's my father."

Dad relaxes his scowl. He even chuckles. "Honest mistake," he says, leading me away from the table, into Buckeyes. It's a standard hotel bar: faux wood, glossy tables, TVs everywhere. I walk about a foot away from Dad, still shaking off the heebie-

jeebies. Ten minutes later, we're sitting at a high-top, both with drinks—beer for him, gimlet for me—when he says, "Gwen, it was an honest mistake. We have the same last name."

"You're like thirty years older than me. I bet this never happens with Mom and Drake."

"It was a woman who said it!"

"It's still sexist," I say, glancing at the itinerary. Dr. Cody's keynote speech is at seven p.m. My talk is in the morning, the nine-thirty slot, the same time Dad's on a panel with Dr. Cody. Later, at one p.m., Dad is giving his own presentation, "AI Thought Experiments."

He taps his phone. He's only halfway through his beer, but I'm ready for another gimlet. Since he's the one getting reimbursed, I head to the bar for another. It's so crowded I have to bob between two burly men on stools, both talking to women far younger than them. I shouldn't make assumptions. Perhaps they're also father-daughter academics on a road trip. As I try to wave down the busy bartenders, a man two stools down is doing the same thing. He's around my age, wavy brown hair, thick-rimmed glasses, and a thin, fashionable mustache.

"Hey," he cries to me. "Let's pool our resources." He lifts his hand as if pulling a lever. "Whoever gets them first can order for the other?"

"What are you having?" I ask.

He grins, showing delightfully crooked teeth. "Whatever you are."

I end up buying our drinks—two gimlets—and soon he's found his way into my nook. He's a little taller than me and dressed like Dad, except he's wearing a band T-shirt beneath his button-up. *The Avett Brothers*. His lanyard dangles as we clink glasses. He's Dr. Cody Horton, and I try not to laugh. Dad will be so mad his department bought his nemesis a drink.

Cody also glances at my lanyard. "Where do you teach?" he asks.

With most people, it's a question I don't mind. Around academics, my stomach gurgles. "A few schools," I say, "up in Cleveland."

He nods along, *Ah, OK, you're an adjunct*. I ask where he teaches and he says, "Northwestern." Smooth, one-word, simple. No explanation needed.

"I heard you on the radio," I say, my voice rising over the

noise. "Talking about your book—the Einstein one?" I pause. "A few months ago?"

"I'll be talking more about it soon," he says, flicking his lanyard. *Keynote Speaker.* "Stick around—I'll buy you a drink after."

"Maybe."

"So, hey," he says, his eyes drawn back to my lanyard, "are you—"

Our networking is cut short when two bearded men and a very small woman in a very long dress butt into our conversation. "Cody! Dr. Horton!" They laugh and gush like old friends at a reunion. All their lanyards look like Dad's: doctors, guests. I wander back to Dad, who is still at our high-top, but now talking to a woman around his age with a tote bag overstuffed with books. Her lanyard says: *Dr. Heather Gupta, Guest.*

"Gwen," Dad says, "this is my friend Heather. We studied in Germany together."

"You're the poet," Heather says in an English accent, clutching a giant glass of water. "And you're teaching now?"

"Yeah," I say, my eyes drifting back to Cody across the room.

"Literature?" Heather asks. "Poetry?"

"Mostly first-year writing. Freshman comp. That kind of thing."

"Gwen's adjuncting for now," Dad says. "While she figures things out."

Heather has the same *Ah, OK* look Cody did. She takes big gulps of water and starts to veer away from our high-top. "It was nice meeting you," she says. "Frank, I'll see you at the panel tomorrow."

After she leaves, I turn to Dad. "Why did you say it like that?"

He glances over my shoulder. "Were you talking to Cody Horton?"

"You always make it sound like I have some temp job."

Dad shakes his Amstel Light, almost empty. The critical mass in the bar has shifted again, slowly funneling into the auditorium. "Was he asking about me?"

I sip my drink, glaring. "Yeah, Dad, that was his opening line."

Dad leans forward on his elbows, unamused. "Gwen, seriously," he says, "stay away from him. This is what these guys do."

"You told me to network. He's the keynote speaker."

"A guy like that is not going to network with an adjunct."

The mass migration quickens. Fast-moving particles, brushing past our table. Soon, Dad and I are the only ones remaining in the bar other than the staff. Once everyone has left, the furniture and decorations look even cheaper. Like props on a movie set, meant to be torn down and discarded. One of the bartenders turns up the volume on the TV, playing a reality show about an Alaskan fishing boat.

Once everyone has left, the furniture and decorations look even cheaper. Like props on a movie set, meant to be torn down and discarded.

"Why are you so ashamed of me?" I ask.

"I'm not ashamed," Dad says. "I'm just telling you how things are."

"I'm happy with my life. You're the one who's got a problem with it."

"You're not happy. You have no benefits, no job security, no institutional support."

"You always act as if it's my fault, but almost seventy percent of faculty jobs in this country aren't tenure-track. Maybe it was easy for you to get your job in 1998, but things are different now."

"Look," he says, pointing his beer bottle at me, "I've held my tongue, but I—"

"You've held your tongue?"

"I thought it was a phase. I thought when you came to your senses, you'd find something real or go back to your PhD. But you're in the prime of your professional years and you've just taken these part-time gigs that pay nothing and go nowhere."

"My paper got me into this conference too." I flick my lanyard. "Just because I'm not a guest doesn't mean I don't belong here."

"I'm talking about the future. You're reaching an expiration date with adjuncting, but you either don't realize it or you're being willfully obtuse."

"I know plenty of adjuncts who've been doing this for decades."

"Because they're past the point of no return. They'll never get on the tenure track. Hiring committees won't take them seriously. You adjunct for too long, you get the stink on you. You can't wash it off."

"The stink?"

"It's a story as old as time, Gwen: Why buy the cow when you get the milk for free?"

I scoot out of my chair and stand. "Oh my god," I say, "you are such an asshole."

I finish my drink in mid-flight. I leave the glass on the bar and head to the auditorium. It's about a quarter filled. Most of the visiting speakers probably aren't arriving until tomorrow. If it weren't for Dad, I'd be one of them. Waking up early to drive the two and a half hours, only staying for the day, eating protein bars between panels. But I'm here now, and as Cody takes the stage, the guests applaud. I applaud.

After Cody's lecture, I head to the bar. Dad has left. Once again, Cody is surrounded by a flock of followers. He beckons me to the stool beside him. As I sit, the woman in the oversized glasses passes by and glances at us. Hard. I roll my eyes at her. Cody hands me a gimlet. When we clink glasses, he lifts his brows. "Don't care much for Ms. McLean?"

I clutch my bobbing cocktail straws. "She thought my dad and I were married when we registered. It's such a weird thing to assume, you know?"

Cody tosses his cocktail straws on the bar. "I was wondering about that," he says. "So Frank Monaghan is your father?"

"You actually know who my dad is?"

"I wrote an essay on his Schrödinger book back in undergrad."

My stomach sours. I haven't eaten since we arrived. "Good god," I say, "don't tell him that. They'll have to evacuate the hotel when his head explodes."

Cody chuckles. He removes a vape pen from his pocket and takes a quick hit. He leans close and offers it to me. I accept it, expecting something cherry-scented. It's got a distinct weed flavor. I exhale, surprised, and pass it back. He leans close and I wish I were here on my own, not sharing a double room with my sixty-two-year-old father six stories up.

But people keep pulling Cody away from me. They clap his

shoulder, shake his hand, share their thoughts on his book. Each time they buy him drinks, he orders one for me too. Soon we are drunk and high, and I am giddy off the energy. In grad school, I attended a few literary conferences but haven't done anything like this since. Most workdays, I travel between campuses, teach my classes, and go home. But here, this feels like community.

We bounce from booth to booth, room to room, party to party. Neither of us wants the night to end. Cody invites me to his room. He's got beer in his mini fridge and more vape cartridges in his luggage. His room has a queen and a view of Applebee's. As soon as he shuts the door, he unbuttons his shirt. We have the kind of fast, fumbling sex that makes two people feel like they've been waiting ages for it—even though they only met eight hours ago.

After, he hits his vape and offers it to me. It's late. A little after three a.m.

"Hey," he says, "want to do something crazy?"

The halls are mostly quiet. We prance on soft carpet. He's in flip-flops; I'm back in my dress and flats, no tights. When we reach the pool on the lower level, it's dark behind the glass. Blurry lights warble in the water. It looks cool and clear, like something out of a dream. An imposing sign says it closes after ten.

"Hold on," Cody says, darting around the corner. I creep behind him, keeping lookout. It feels how it did when I was ten and Bill was thirteen, bored on family vacations. Wandering where we didn't belong. Cody swipes a keycard off a housekeeping cart and grins at me. He presses on the door, which actually opens.

Soon, we're shedding our clothes again, down to our underwear, splashing in the pool. It's bathwater warm and surprisingly salty. It makes swimming easier. We float, weightless. Our skin slick. His hand slips from my thigh to my calf to my ankle. I kick away, giggling. He swims after me. It becomes a game. He catches me in the shallow end. Cornered. I can't move. From there, the window overlooks a stone garden, chairs on the patio tables surrounded by nothingness. It's like one of Mom's paintings.

I slip away again. Skim beneath the surface. A beam of light

cuts across the water. I brush my fingers along the floor. It's rough, concrete. I think of Bill, diving into the water. When he hit the rock, I wonder if it was like a light going out all at once.

I close my eyes and open them. I close them again.

Open. Close.

Suddenly, it's cold.

My body is yanked from the water, dragged to the steps in the shallow end.

My knee skims the concrete.

It's Cody, pulling me from the water. On the other side of the pool area, bright lights flash. A security guard walks with fast, heavy feet. "Pool is closed!" he hollers.

This feels like getting in trouble in high school—except we're in our thirties. But Cody, for some reason, takes it dead seriously. He releases my arm and sprints to the glass doors. On the way, I slip on a slick patch and trip over a lounge chair.

The pain hits several places all at once. My shoulder, arm, both knees, ankle. I hear the swift crack of the door open and close. Through the glass, Cody darts down the hallway, dripping in his boxers.

The security guard rushes over to me, followed by a desk clerk. Everything presses in. My body aches and stings, but it's more than that. It's dark, I'm cold, I am half-drunk, half-awake, bleeding on the concrete, surrounded by disapproving grown-ups.

The desk clerk wakes Dad up, and he drives me to an emergency room. It's around five a.m. when we arrive, which means we have to wait hours to get X-rays. I have a lateral malleolus fracture in my right leg, just above the ankle. It's slight, but serious enough to warrant a brace. I don't have insurance, which means Dad handles all the paperwork and I will hear about it until the end of time.

More hours pass. I keep telling him he can go, return to the conference, give his talk. He swipes his phone and says, "I'm not leaving you here."

I slump on the papery bed. Outside, nurses and firemen brush past. Actual emergencies. I glance at Dad and wonder what it was like when Bill was rushed in. It happened in the middle of the night. I woke when Mom screamed. Dad burst into my room and said, "Gwen, watch your mother." And, at the time, I

stayed oddly calm. The more Mom panicked, the more I wanted to freeze myself in place. Exist in a theoretical box, watching everything outside of space and time.

By the time we leave, it's midday. I sit in the backseat of the car, my leg elevated on a stack of Dad's books. I still smell like salt, chlorine, and up-all-night body odor. I wonder if Cody will find my leggings on his hotel floor or if it will be a housekeeper who tosses them in the trash.

My phone is almost dead. It's a little before noon. "You can still make your talk," I say.

Dad glances at me in the rearview. "You want to get breakfast?"

We hit a diner off the highway. It's so hot when we enter, we immediately shed our coats. The server brings water in two coffee mugs. She says there was an accident with the new busboy. She'll bring real glasses once they have them.

"It's fine," Dad says, lifting a mug. "But can we get some real coffee too?"

The sun burns bright through the window, casting the booth in a warm peach glow. Winter sunlight. My phone buzzes. At first, I think it might be Cody checking in—but I never even gave him my number. It's a student email, asking about an extension on a paper. His words cascade with struggles: work problems, family problems, computer problems. I want to help, put him at ease, tell him a late paper will not be the end of the world—but I also want to say, *We all have problems, kid. Figure it out.* I flip the phone over. Dad and I drink water from our coffee mugs. Across the table, I notice his sweater is turned inside out, the dark green seams running along his shoulders, around his collar. When the waitress returns with actual coffee, we put our orders in. Eggs, bacon, hash browns, French toast.

I want to help, put him at ease, tell him a late paper will not be the end of the world—but I also want to say, **We all have problems, kid. Figure it out.**

The place is busy, but the kitchen sends the food out fast. I imagine a giant grill covered in sunny-side up eggs, battered

Texas toast, and crispy potatoes. Line cooks with spatulas, servers shouting tickets, bussers tiptoeing past broken glass.

Dad sprinkles salt and pepper on his eggs. "I hope you're not mad," he says, "but I read your paper last night." He moves the shakers away from the plate, sliding them across the table as if playing with action figures. "Your teaching sounds damn innovative."

I'm so surprised I don't respond. My brain is still muddled. I sip coffee. Dad continues, "Anyway, I'm sorry for going through your notes. You should submit it to other conferences."

"I don't know if I'm getting invited to any conferences after this, Dad."

He releases the shakers and grabs his fork. "Don't worry about it," he says. "This shit, it means everything—but it doesn't actually mean anything. You are not who people will be talking about."

"I don't know if that's reassuring or depressing."

Dad cuts into his eggs. He takes a bite and chuckles, "It's both."

Outside the window, the parking lot glitters with sunny windshields. Gritty gray snow mounds rise along the side of the road. I reach across the table and grab the hot sauce. I shake it on my eggs. We eat while our food is still hot.

The door chimes whenever someone comes or goes. I remember family vacations when all five of us would squeeze into a booth. Mom and Dad on one side, my brothers and I on the other. While we waited for our food, Dad would walk us through thought experiments. He'd raise the salt and pepper shakers and say, "Let's say we put Bill on a spaceship."

Bill always took offense. "Why do you always send me to outer space?"

Dad always snickered, "Cause you're the smart-ass." He'd hold the salt high in the air while skating the pepper across the table. "As the years pass for Drake down here, they'll pass differently for Bill up there." He'd bow the salt in a slow arc until, eventually, it came back to the table, meeting up with the pepper. "By the time he returns, Drake will be about seventy-five years old, Gwen seventy-two. But Bill," he'd say, pushing the salt and pepper shakers together, "you'll still be ten. Exactly how you are now."

Exactly how you are now.

The server refills our water and coffee. She never brings new glasses, and we don't ask for them. Around us, the booths are packed. The kitchen stays busy. The air is hot, but each time a new customer enters, or one leaves, cold air blows through the diner, keeping everything moving.

ANTHONY BORRUSO

BARTHOLOMEW'S PENANCE

I will not make deepfakes of Mrs. Krabappel
I will not bring my musical saw to band practice
A chain saw is not musical
Sir Mix-a-Lot does not have "sprung rhythm"
I will not hide war crimes in Milhouse's locker
I will not run a speakeasy in the boy's bathroom
I will not serve turpentine to minors
I will not tell Eliot to "eat my shorts"
I will not panhandle assembly
I will give Heath Ledger back his posthumous Oscar
I will not get very far with this attitude
I will not swear or swear off
I will not criticize the Western penal system
A fire drill does not demand a fire
The jungle gym does not need a coating of olive oil
I will not shave my head and mimic Foucault
I will not dwell in possibility
I will not apply for a Guggenheim
I will not floss with caution tape
The chalkboard does not want for words
I am legally bound to Principal Skinner's NDA
I will not steal cogs from the great profit machine
I will not live-tweet the couch gag
I will not couch all my statements in ambivalence
The truth is not out there
I will not endorse bloodletting as sanctioned medical practice
My muse does not speak for me
I will not spray paint "El Barto" on *The Intrepid*

There is always more room on the chalkboard
Thirty-six seasons of this is a reasonable punishment
I will not leverage a spin-off
I will not make Whitmanian proclamations about the ever-sprawling soul
I will not snarl at daddy decay
The shingles virus is already inside me
I will not call Jebediah Springfield "toothsome"
I will not toss Sisyphus a beach ball
Being alive is crisis enough
I will not claim to be St. Augustine
Television cannot purify the soul
I will not open the blinds to "let in a little light"
I will not slap wheels on reason's plank
and skateboard into the sunset

ANTHONY BORRUSO

5G GOLDEN SHOVEL

After The Crying of Lot 49

Listen, this isn't about you or me or Nancy Pelosi, I'm
just saying do your own research. Read some Pynchon. Find the
source, the sun, that bright yellow eminence projector
set so lofty in the sky. Of course, don't stare at
it directly, but get a good sense of the
people and places it stains with its light. At night, the planetarium

forgoes its steel rotunda and stretches all
its constellations out on the actual sky: The
Big Dipper, Orion's Belt, Ursa Minor. These doppelgänger stars
open closed
minds, toxins are released, the little

things you've spent decades sweating shrink as the universe
expands another omnidirectional mile and the known visible
world leaves you an unsatisfying voicemail. Again. You're in
a slump, but I've got just the
drink to cure it—spiritually infused, a citrusy circle

of conspiratorial liquids, the fizzing of
buzzwords. *Synergy*, yes, and *vibrations* that
suggest meaning and multiple levels of mass-marketed, stage
presence. O Joy Reid O Jesus O Hannity, is
it enough that we stare at you and think about the storm coming?

Will the algorithm cradle us to sleep on a MyPillow? Out, out!
Even you, Don Lemon! Bending language like copper wire,
full of
backward Beatles songs and the affirmations of my
Peloton trainer, I hitch zip ties to my belt and mouth
obscenities at the microphones lodged under the floorboards.
All eyes

are on me now: the postman, the message carrier, the sometimes
prophet who weaves his words in the frequencies other

souls are just starting to tune into. Here in the depths of the
internet, orifices
are what we are all so bent on becoming and perhaps gods, also.

ANTHONY BORRUSO

ON SYMBIOSIS

I know how badly you want me
to be this poem. How, by candlelight

and tapestry, you prod your way
from solitude—a finger pressed

to the page like a stethoscope.
Lichen, oxpecker, composite

of life and the ontological
rot that's left in its wake,

here you are, dear reader:
Me, in a small green box

with a silver bow. I know
you've had enough of philosophy

and the mangy gray-beards
that spout it. I know Bukowski's

a cretin and poor Mona Lisa
morphs into DaVinci each time

you trace her sidelong glance.
That's why I offer a truce,

a last inch of grace; I wager
my body as the male praying

mantis does, head first, swooning
toward transcendence or a jug

of gasoline ready to feed itself to fire.

HOA NGUYEN

DULL THE BROKEN IDOL

dull the broken idol the three failed fathers
the ones the exploiter said I am unable to write

when I first started writing that short man with paper clipped pants
who exploited me and then bragged
how I was once "his student"
when he was a student

See here blue with billed beads snake head charm is Ma
a bass line that drums the beat as I erase men

like that one West Point of no longer
mattering as though I were born in a brothel like Édith Piaf
in a dream story made of untrue stories laughable

you become mere story a restaurant photograph and false
fffff leaving a trail of you

you who returned in guilt and pays bills
but also disappeared in so-called blue blood of Connecticut

here we see reluctant You the true soldier the one I sought to avoid
even as diacritics and genetics is a scrape
scoping out Michigan country born I am chevron

part of the singing one who wrote
but did not hear
and why he would ask for narcissistic

"wait for me" slogan for tombstone\\

happily you will never know me

and thus can remain unmarked by that pathology

the school of the dead and the school of dreams dear dead Lyn H
said
in a response to another male microaggression
microdrama

behold

I am shining beautiful as so named
and refuse
to be rescued
as though from the trash

HOA NGUYEN

FISHING ADVICE

how to calculate to find moments
for pieces and keep attentions clear
with Venus and Mars straddling Earth
and I find myself in a two-story
lake house overlooking a lake

with fishing advice via the radio announcement in English
guided by Vietnamese drums to an eastern portion of the lake
that I see overlaid onto a graphic
represented by wavy wind marks
on a screen and I am eager to tell my mother
of the local fishing news following Viet beliefs and drumming

Pisces in the sky called fish sometimes
with a woman's head upon a huge fish body
later her son and Venus carried by fishes

out of danger "In Pisces where Venus is exultant"
born of the sea. \\\\ forth magnitude star above
the ventral fin of the Western Fish known as
Yun Yu "the cloud and rain"

time for honey harvest

we are setting the table
and she rests her feet on boxes
unassured whether we had met
before having been from the moon

(where we stuff our visions) (fish drinking the stream)

HOA NGUYEN

BELIEVE THE SOUL TO BE MOIST LIKE DEW

and racing the overloaded pony
twitch of a willow stick to gallop

the child between us "protect
the child" said Selina
in her moon guise
and we race us at "breakneck speed"

the woods flashing by until we reach
the earth excavator a barrier machine
which had trenched out the path and I

being in the front of the saddle skid us
to a stop with feet in sturdy boots to save us
from collision the child is safe she is and
on the other side we meet

or I do a grown boy
son who was not my son but alike are "mixed"

save I got away from the communist governance
and he did not and so suffered the state-approved
pariah mechanisms as outcast
destitute
deprived food housing education

I've seen him
before know his eyes
like my son's blue and dusky
golden hue skin I can't help

him he having been born and raised motherless
speaking to me without shame or accusation

from the edge of
the construction site

we are joined
as so-called "dust of the road"
or "children of dust"

the ones the Smithsonian article
illustrates as having been brought
to orphanage doors or else "discarded
in garbage cans"

he works at construction halting Viet-accented English
we both know his will be a life
of labor and very deliberately
we take the crown and hang it at the base
of the tree to mark a fallen king

the way our stories float
down the winding river courses
fringed by grasses and common
floating water hyacinth

a black bird and greater coucal hunt among
leaves in the tree's leaves of crown

we pour a musical mandala
sour sore soar

AARON KANG SMITHSON

PALIMPSEST

Deep in the bowels of Penn Station, past the gum-caked sidewalks of Seventh Avenue and the ceiling vents gasping for breath and the sorriest Jamba Juice in all of New York City, stands a staircase with an iron railing. Brown tile walls encase it on either side, sodden with the tactless fluorescence of the platform below. For most, it is just a stepping stone to more important things—a family dinner in Hempstead, a long weekend in Montauk, a red-eye out of JFK. It raises no eyebrows.

I didn't pick up on the staircase until I got lost. I was making my way from an Amtrak platform to the subway, plodding upstream against a human surge, when it appeared, subtle yet mysteriously out of character. The Penn Station I knew was an underground warren of cramped corridors compressed between nine-foot ceilings and gray vinyl flooring, its air so laden with stale pastries and fresh urine that it could inspire little more than a revival of the miasma theory. The staircase's banister—a series of decorative iron X's capped by ornamental fasteners and a curvaceous brass handrail—belied the 1970s economization that surrounded it. It was otherworldly, almost uplifting, at least for those of us who glanced.

The staircase leading down to Platforms 13 and 14 is a relic of the original Penn Station, a monumental structure that embodied ancient Rome's best civic architecture and modern America's penchant for grandiosity in equal measure. Completed in 1910 and demolished less than sixty years later, its soaring halls and towering colonnades survive today only in photographs and films—fragments from which we can begin to piece together the sights and sounds of an existence. In the opening credits of Stanley Kubrick's 1955 thriller, *Killer Kiss*, sunlight from the old station's vaulted glass roof douses a man as he paces on the platform, the echoes of a track announcement reverberating off the lofty travertine walls behind him. I was born at least thirty years too late to have my own memories of that space, but when I shuffle past the dusty Jamba Juice in Penn Station's underbelly, I like to imagine myself there.

A tired cliché tells us that grief is love with no place to go, but I was never sure what to call those strange pangs of longing for things we never got to know in the first place.

I first met my dad in a video. He was standing in the rear of the frame, clutching the kitchen landline, placing an order for delivery from a folded paper menu—the kind that New York eateries used to tape to take-out containers before DoorDash or Yelp. He paused, cleared his throat, and muttered two words: "Soup, please."

The video was recorded on a VHS in 1997, months after I learned to sit up and months before he learned he had cancer. It was a form that ravaged the tongue. He ended up spending half the overlap between our lives—sixteen months, to be exact—dying. First he lost what remained of his hair, then his ability to eat without intubation, then his tongue and his capacity for speech, and finally his life in May of 1999. Until my mom burned the home videos onto DVDs twelve years later, my only conception of him came from photographs.

He ended up spending half the overlap between our lives—sixteen months, to be exact—dying.

I sat alone on the family room floor, digging my toes into timeworn tufts of carpet, watching and rewatching the footage not so much for its protagonists—toddler versions of me and my older sister—as for its fleeting images of the man in the background. I had always known on an intellectual level that he was English, but for reasons beyond explanation, it was not until I heard him order soup that it fully occurred to me that he had an accent to match. I suspect it was one of those details so innate to his being—or so obvious to anyone with deductive reasoning—that nobody ever thought to mention it outright.

Years later, as a sophomore in college, I started seeing a psychologist for the first time, mainly because I wanted to take Adderall but was too skittish to text a friend's dealer. I ended up spending several Tuesday afternoons sitting in a faux-leather armchair in a dull office atop the student center, babbling about the ways I moved through the world—my pack rat proclivities, my unwillingness to let go of a boy who didn't love me back,

my contrived sense that I had to record all my grandma's weekly phone calls and store the tenor of her voice somewhere safe. My therapist clicked her tongue sympathetically and traced it all back to a fear of loss rooted in the premature death of my dad. Trauma, it turns out, can bubble up from the distinct absence that follows death, not just from death itself. This was the kind of psychoanalysis that felt revelatory, almost too exact in what it unearthed about me, but maybe that's what therapy was for. I never got the Adderall.

For rail hubs like Penn Station, modernization begets a slow death. In 1961, the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, which had owned and operated New York's monumental gateway for more than fifty years, was nearing financial ruin. The neoclassical masterpiece was impossible to maintain on a budget curtailed by the rise of commercial air travel and personal cars and America's clinical obsession with suburbia. Plans were made to demolish everything except the subterranean platforms, cram the passenger concourses and waiting rooms underground, then build an office tower and a modern arena called Madison Square Garden on the land above. There was money to be made in Midtown Manhattan, and no commuter needed more than nine feet of headspace anyway.

It took a full three years to dismantle the original Penn Station, in large part because its tracks and platforms had to remain entirely operational for the duration of demolition and construction. Piece by piece, the elements by which we read architectural expression—columns, statues, pediments—were removed while the station's vital organs—platforms and tracks—were maintained. Much of the building's stone, some of it sourced from the same region of Italy that provided travertine for Rome's storied monuments, was carted to landfills in New Jersey. I've seen photographs from this period, of passengers sitting on benches, encircled by luggage and the half-eaten archways of the old stone and steel colossus. They seem to be carrying on with their days, forced to accept that the barest functions of a body are enough to constitute life.

Demolition crews salvaged certain pieces of the old Penn Station, most famously the twenty-two eagle statues that adorned its facades, and scattered them like ashes. One is perched on the roof of the Cooper Union, the alma mater of their sculptor,

while others rest at Valley Forge, on a bridge in Philadelphia, and in the granite quarry in Maine from which they were believed to have been culled. In the absence of the thing itself—the railroad station in its most ideal form—we are left to piece together snippets of its full being.

Korean families tend to lead opaque emotional lives. My mom, whose family immigrated to rural Wisconsin when she was in middle school, rarely talks about my dad, and so, in turn, I rarely ask. I wonder, at times, if this has more to do with invulnerability or pragmatism. We are either too allergic to the naked forms of affection required for such fragile conversations or too enticed by forward motion to dwell on what is already gone. In my effort to assemble some understanding of exactly what has been lost, our mutual obstinacy toward open discussions of death has left me to rely mostly on forensics.

Soon after my college graduation, I began searching for my dad's life. I picked up a copy of Siddhartha Mukherjee's *Emperor of All Maladies* from a used bookstore because the subtitle said *A Biography of Cancer* and there was a gold sticker on the cover. I was going to be someone who reads a tome on the subway, its spine cracked to page 482 as I fostered an intellectual yet empathetic conception of cell biology and the medical industry and human suffering. I got to page 61 before discovering the impracticality of subway tomes, and that I cared less in that moment about the ways cancer shaped the world than I did about the ways it shaped my dad's.

When my mom downsized the following year, the move unsettled stacks of clutter decades in the making, and new sources emerged from the rubble. Sifting through a box in her new apartment, I unearthed a program from my dad's memorial service and a notebook he kept at the beginning of his treatment. In the eulogies his friends wrote and the things he scrawled while standing on death's doorstep, I found signs of our shared genealogy. When he started chemotherapy, he kept copious lists: things to eat, things to read, things to listen to. I do the same in my notebooks, though admittedly under less duress. He, like me, found as much comfort alone in a garden with a book as he did taking tequila shots in a dirty dive bar with friends. In a gap year between high school and college, he left his village in England and flew across the Atlantic to satisfy some inexpli-

cable infatuation with the American South, tracing Faulkner's novels and the life of Huey Long—Louisiana's infamous governor—on Greyhound buses across the region. He did this just forty years before my own fascination with the books of Jesmyn Ward and Sarah M. Broom and Isabel Wilkerson unwittingly spurred me to take a parallel road trip as part of a postgraduate research grant and, eventually, to spend a summer living and working in Louisiana. There was evidence of my dark humor too. When a friend asked my dad during his final weeks of life whether he planned to read the enormous new Tom Wolfe novel, he quipped that he'd wait for the paperback.

In those moments, it was difficult not to fixate on the presumption that my dad and I were supposed to be close, that our beings might have converged with age in the same way my mom's and my sister's had—same stature, same mannerisms, same way of speaking, same outlooks on life. As I paced around the new apartment, unpacking and reshelving his old books on architecture and history and food, my mind drifted to some parallel plane where I was snickering through *Death at a Funeral* with him, or emailing him a draft of my asinine college term paper on bovine imagery in *The Iliad*, or blasting Van Morrison while he drove us to Faulkner's house in Mississippi. I wondered what he would have thought about the way the world had unfolded, whether we might have bickered about my career path or Brexit or the contours of the Zaha Hadid building near the High Line. Whenever my birthday circled around, I half expected my mom to dive headfirst into her closet, fish out a sallow leather box, blow the dust off its lid, and reveal an ancient tape he'd wanted her to show me when I turned thirteen or eighteen or twenty-one. In the video, he's speaking directly into the camera, philosophizing, bestowing upon me answers that paint a crisp path forward. The tape never surfaced, of course, and I was left with the vexing truth that someone taking soup orders in New York in 1997 had more conscious exposure to him than I ever would. I thought this entitled me to anger and loneliness, certain that I had been robbed of something, even if I could not articulate precisely what it was.

It turns out there is a word to describe nostalgia for a time you've never known: *anemoia*, coined by John Koenig in his *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* in 2012. There is a connection,

Koenig writes, between this peculiar brand of longing and pessimism—an unshakable dissatisfaction with the way things are. I knew anemoia on nights when my mom, my sister, and I had nothing to talk about over dinner, when I did schoolwork as the TV churned through family sitcoms in the background, allowing myself to pretend I was surrounded by all the charm and complexity and depth of a full family life. In my darkest moments, I caught myself speculating on how I might've evolved if my dad were the parent who had lived, whose influence had molded and deepened me. Would I, like him, love to cook? Would I have moved to far-off countries after college to teach English and collect art and read books in other languages, as he did? The pit of conjecture seemed bottomless. But as aptly as Koenig's obscure sorrow captured my sentiment at the time, I soon realized that it was a futile way to process loss.

There is a page, buried deep in my dad's chemotherapy notebook, with a message on emotion: "Resentment = unresolved anger. Anger is short-lived." As it so happened, I was not the only one with pent-up frustrations about his early exit from the stage. But neither of us had anywhere in particular to direct our resentment or discontent, nor anyone to be angry at. The people in my orbit—mom, sister, grandma, uncles, aunts, family friends—were also people who lost someone important, people trying to stitch the world back together around themselves, around us. The patchwork that arose was quiet and forlorn and incomplete in places, but it was also alive and warm and altogether more real than anything in sitcoms or speculations.

The death of Penn Station is widely credited as the spark that launched the modern American preservation movement. In 1965, well before the dust of demolition had settled on Seventh Avenue, New York City passed the Landmarks Law, granting the recently formed Landmarks Preservation Commission legal authority to protect structures and spaces determined to be of substantial cultural import. The legislation, which went on to save Grand Central Terminal and innumerable other historic buildings from even the most eager wrecking balls, marked a shift in New York's architectural psyche. Burned by an irrevocable loss of the highest conceivable order, this was no longer a city that equated all change with progress.

In 2015, when New York's governor announced plans to

renovate Penn Station into the gateway the city deserved, there were some who demanded that the original station simply be reconstructed. The exorbitant cost of Italian travertine in 2015 notwithstanding, such a move would have conceded that nothing short of resurrection is acceptable in the wake of loss. It would have denied that there is any value in the spaces and histories we have learned to fold into our scars. Like anemoia, preservationism in its most extreme form—the type that casts our buildings and cities in amber—is rooted in a skepticism about our ability to layer new life on top of the old, to create vessels as worthy of awe and care and romance as the last.

It would have denied that there is any value in the spaces and histories we have learned to fold into our scars.

The state opted for more piecemeal changes instead. In 2021, the Farley Post Office Building across Eighth Avenue, which had been designed by the same architects as the original station, was reconceived as an airy, light-filled passenger terminal for Amtrak and the Long Island Railroad. In 2024, all of Thirty-Third Street was transformed into a pedestrian plaza with a subterranean retail complex. The hallways and concourses under Madison Square Garden are slated for renovation into more generous spaces for the 630,000 people who pass through the station each day.

As renovations continue, Penn Station has come to embody what architects call a palimpsest—a form that, even after a series of effacements and alterations, still bears traces of the original. In the placement of columns and tracks and the staircase between Platforms 13 and 14, there are vestiges of that old stone building in what came after it. And even as sparkling new concourses are added, I am surprised to find comfort in the familiar 1970s warrens that linger.

For eight years of my childhood, my mom reverse-commuted to central New Jersey—four hours of daily movement by foot, subway, train, and taxi. Every few weeks, she would arrive home with a box of Krispy Kreme donuts sourced from what was then the chain's only franchise in the city—a brightly lit, L-shaped

counter at the edge of Penn Station's main concourse. I like to imagine her five-foot frame, worn by the week's work, weaving through the mottled throngs of early nightfall. She pauses at the counter, reminded of my love for strawberry icing, and buys a dozen to bring home—a quiet apology for being away.

I was twenty-four years old, having just moved to Boston, when I honed my own rituals for monthly trips through Penn Station. Amid the constant shifts of new construction, I always descend through the station's old entrance on Seventh Avenue, where escalators and air vents compete for most exasperated, and into the dull underbelly of the growing palimpsest. I still think about the vaulted glass ceilings and the long-gone echoes off travertine walls and the corner of the multiverse where my dad is next to me carrying a cup of soup and that big Tom Wolfe novel he never got to read. Fantasies are hard to elide, even if they do little to treat emptiness.

As the nine-foot ceilings press down on me, though, I wait for that moment when Krispy Kreme's glow swallows the murky, peripheral light of the concourse. I stand at the same L-shaped counter where my mom stopped every month for eight years, living in a memory that is sweet and real and mine. I order two donuts—glazed with strawberry icing—and take them to go.

JAMES BRUNTON

ADVICE

Walk big, my dad told me,
& I have never
stopped wanting
to shrink into nothing
rather than be
that child with a bowl cut
& bowlegs walking
with my fists pushing
against my coat pockets
down an empty street
like an invitation, mistaken
by older men, drunk men
for some version
of exactly what I am:
boy made of missing parts.
Walk big
my dad told me, so
alone, at night,
men will see
another man.

JAMES BRUNTON

THE FORCE OF LAW

slap that never lands
& so lands forever
inside my chest falling
& falling I watch it drop
describe the air it parts
follow it down
to where I said
you do & I'll never &
the water in the well
receives the stone &
what happens next
is said to be drowned
is drowning (in) me

JAMES BRUNTON

MORTAL

In Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire*,
the angel Damiel drops into life

half finished, newly human,
about my age. He finds

a cigarette, buys a cheap coffee,
falls for a trapeze artist.

Only happy with just this
strange predicament:

no mourning the missed boyhood,
missed discovery of his own body

or the bodies he could have held
against his with youthful hands.

Look what he has done with his miracle,
this once-angel walking with mortals.

MASIN PERSINA

WAITING FOR THE TRAIN AT TILDEN PARK

It is good to have a line to stand in,
long and slow in the dead
cold of night as children
ask their parents how much longer
they must stand and the parents
shove coats at their children
and powerful lights shine from trees,
giving the darkness an impatience;
and it is good, waiting, watching
our breath rise in the light
like steam from horses—faintly,
then fainter as the train pulls in,
its smoke and sparks erupting
like a forge or gray volcano;
and it is good to watch families ahead
board the train in the night
and to pat the breast pocket for the tickets,
knowing it is winter and evil is close,
but not so close it can touch these tickets.

MASIN PERSINA

QUIESCENCE

The story goes on outside the poem.
The motorcycle gunning through
showers of streetlights, the whir
of the computer's little fan, the seconds
chafing the minute hand's wrist,
they are in the poem now
and have traveled very far
to be here in this marble stillness,
but the story continues, its riptide
tearing, layer by layer, everything.
Did I say story? I mean storm.
I want to bring in so much more—
the spaniel snoring on her tartan rug,
Ally typing, this day without work.
One day a giant ear shall arrive
and that which vibrates and that which doesn't
shall all be heard into its black hole.
Until then, there is dreaming and waking,
a bowl of soup and the table it sits upon,
the inside and the outside,
a click of the brass latch
and then silence for so many years.

MASIN PERSINA

BLUNDER DROVE ME OUT

With what elegance I pull the floss from its tiny blue box,
or stand up on tiptoe to see, over a bouffant, the guitar solo.

It's like this in the seams of life, finding license and grace
when I need it most to achieve some minor thing.

Living denies in the plainest fashion—lost souls who
threw backs out lifting stones for the pyramids—

it seems downright lowly to put one foot before another
when they lead to a throne winking green with emeralds.

Once upon a time we crouched in treetops, afraid of a mauling,
but not the choices that brought us up there.

Flip to today and you'll find I stand before two Camrys,
side by side, white, in visitor parking, one of them mine.

I scan for clues—window tints, scuffs, license plate sequences.
I assess. My lids flick as quick as hummingbird wings.

MASIN PERSINA

REAL AS RAIN

That was the year we discovered the sun was thinking of us
this whole time—our dreams but branches of its own,
our picnics enacted by the very wants it conjured,
even a squid's soccer ball-sized eye, mere manifestation.
No person explained this to us, we all just understood
with such alarming intuition, there was nothing left to ask.
Things shut down for a while—airports, camps, socials.
Needless to say, we became depressed, weakened in purpose,
which surprised the sun as well as us. Nights passed,
turning us subconscious. Days brought us back into focus.
With nothing to make us more than what we were, we recalled:
a hand is not a metal claw, nor a foot a wheel, nor an eye a mirror.
And eventually we became real again, real as rain.

JULIE DANHO

ADJACENT

More than twenty years on, he's describing
where he was on 9/11, which turns out to be
Connecticut, though I'm not sure exactly how
he's steered into this story at his daughter's
trampoline birthday party. At a table littered
with pizza crusts and glitter, he slowly
blows out the drama like a big pink piece
of bubble gum, explains he was supposed to
take the train in for a breakfast meeting
cancelled just weeks before. *It would've*,
he says, leaning forward, talking louder to be
heard over kids' shrieks, *put me under*
the towers at the very moment the first plane
hit. Then he waits. It's the ardor beneath
his retelling that makes me scoot back as
everything he's asked for arrives—the murmurs,
the surprise, the other parents chiming in
with where they were. Yet how many times
have I unfolded your story, smoothing it out
like a map? I was in Ohio, I say, but you,
in pajamas, sprinted five flights to the roof,
watching the towers burn just blocks away
until your phone rang, and your father said
run. They were still standing, I explain,
as you fled with nothing but your phone,
wallet, keys, leaving out that you've never
had a purse except at prom and even then
it was almost empty. I say I didn't know
as I was watching that you were running
through those thick clouds, turning up
at your office coated in dust. I rarely
bring up the cough that you shouldered
for years. Instead, tell them about you walking
the Brooklyn Bridge that night, crashing

with acquaintances, waiting days for a train
to our hometown where you slept months
in your childhood bed while the EPA cleaned
your floors and walls. And then these friends
or strangers shake their heads, relieved
at hearing you're safe. Sometimes I end
where I met you, the moment you rescued
my backpack from fifth graders using it
to play catch. I never tell them how you
threw away every plate and glass, or say
how you've kept quiet as lead in bone,
or offer how many times I've held you
between me and that swelter as over
and over I've rushed you through the ash.

JULIE DANHO

DO BIRDS GET TIRED?

They must, right? They just never seem tired,
always on alert, even from me, folding laundry
and looking out the window at the sparrows

pecking at the yellowing lawn, knowing
if I open the door, they'll be gone, these five
cherub-bellied birds, each small enough

to commandeer my daughter's fire truck.
I've read birds can even sleep while flying:
one eye open, half their brain staying on

like a streetlight. They're built for emergency,
but last week, when my daughter rode ahead
on the crowded path and didn't come back,

I ran to find her, stunned my adrenaline didn't
take me further before I had to stop, breath
heaving, nothing like those mothers who lift cars

their children are trapped under. Outside, a man
walks by, his presence a starter pistol
for the sparrows suddenly rising in unison

to the power line, and, yes, there's a reason
birds can stay alive with electricity flowing
under their feet, but I can't remember

because she was up all night shivering
with fever, trying to destroy the cells racing
to remake her. We have no real predators except

ourselves and the viruses. The sparrows flee
whenever they catch me watching them
feast on holly berries, gorgeous though

poisonous to us, fruit pried from her fists
when she was too young to know their harm.
Experts say the key to surviving disaster

is practice—always check the exits, pretend
a fire is raging twice a year, hide quiet
in the dark with doors locked, so when it comes,

rote takes over. The sparrows seem serene
on the line, but surely there must be strain
in keeping upright, like these kids staggering

from the bus that just pulled up, backpacks
pushing them over like sunflowers sagging
at night. The monitor crouches down to look

around the tires, and if my daughter wasn't
asleep upstairs, I'd hear the call of "clear"
as she dashed to the front steps where

I was waiting. This laundry is done,
piled in precarious towers on the coffee table.
I don't think the sparrows will return

to our lawn today. The neighbor's tabby is
lazing in the sun on the sidewalk, acting
like he swallowed all the time in the world.

JULIE DANHO

SHUTDOWN

Besides my husband and daughter, the ones
I see most these days roam our backyard:
the robins that pause to hold my gaze,
beaks raised, chests puffed, as bold
as supermodels; the squirrel that dines
like a mobster, glancing behind while bent
over his acorns; and then there's the rabbit
that for weeks cased the best spot in the yard,
sometimes hunkering so low and long
she looked like a blanket for a cradle,
which, in a way, she was. Two days ago,
my daughter stopped jumping rope to check
something on the ground, waved me out
to see the clump of grass resting on the lawn
like a toupee. Lifting it carefully, we found
a litter of bunnies: hairless, pink, squished
in a shallow hole lined with fur their mother
must have pulled from her body. I hovered
above them, tufts of their roof in my hand,
as they nosed each other with eyes closed,
wriggling so much I kept losing count.
We marked their nest with a lawn chair
where today, for the first time in years, I saw
a groundhog, his chiseled incisors ripping
into violets as the rabbit, from across the yard,
froze, then rose on her hind legs, ears up,
waiting, watching as the groundhog stopped
to stare back. In that blank space, I dropped
the plate I was washing in the sink, ran outside
in slipper socks yelling/hissing/windmilling
as he fled, pointed head leading the lumpy pillow
of his body into the next yard faster than
physics seemed to allow. It wasn't until tonight
I read that groundhogs eat mainly leaves,
dandelions, grubs. Even in full morning sun,
I couldn't tell the harmless from the harm.

JANICE DEAL

BAE

Oh my God! That crib. It had been their daughter's crib, and she had just celebrated her twenty-first birthday. In Ohio. Where she said she was taking classes online. Because of the pandemic.

Sonya lived on a farm now—not the dorms, not a bedsit, but an actual farm—with a group of people who claimed to be in touch with God's love. If it isn't one thing it's another, Sandy told herself, and then she told her husband, Ronnie, and then she called the Presbyterian Church to see if they would take the crib.

This was not a new crib. Obviously. But it was lovely—made of a smooth biscuit-colored wood that made Sandy feel cozy inside. Very tasteful. It was humbling, remembering all the thought she and Ronnie had put into picking just the right one. Her dad and Ronnie had assembled it together.

Sandy had been pushing forty at the time.

And so, yes. Not a new crib. After Sonya's people had turned it down, Sandy, in a fit of pique, decided to offer it to any religious organization she could think of. But the Presbyterians didn't want it, its eight disassembled pieces; safety standards had changed so much, blah blah blah. As it turned out, the Methodists said the same. The Catholics. Sandy wasn't even religious anymore; this last year had pretty much cured her of that. But she kept on calling the churches anyway. Weren't religious people supposed to be helpful, in time of need?

Sonya certainly thought so. Even before Covid took off, she was talking about how inspired she felt by the little off campus church she attended: first on Sundays, then it was Wednesdays and Sundays both. At first the church business had barely registered with Sandy, or Ronnie either; they had always encouraged Sonya to explore. She'd been an easy child, Sonya had—maybe not the brightest of her peers but surely the nicest. The most tenderhearted. That's what Sandy always thought, and they had parented with a light hand. When Sandy's friends complained

about having to crack down on their high school-aged kids—with threats of curfew or imminent grounding—Sandy commiserated, affecting an attitude of weary resignation: "The other shoe will drop with mine soon enough too, don't worry." Of course she hadn't meant it, privately believing that some combination of good genes and even better parenting had created their exceptional daughter.

When news of the virus really started getting bleak, Sonya mentioned daily prayer circles, led by a pastor named Peter. And by the time the universities just threw up their hands and sent everyone home, Sonya had already moved out of her dorm in Bowling Green and onto the farm outside the city.

The farm was owned by the Church of the Eternal Light, and there were animals there, Sonya said. Chickens. Cows. Goats, even. Sandy and Ronnie didn't know who'd been living on the farm before lockdown, but there were about thirty people on the property now—all ages, Sonya said. Yes, babies too. After Sandy learned this, she had gone up to Sonya's room, which they'd kept more or less the same in the three years since Sonya's high school graduation. Sandy sat on Sonya's tidy twin bed and remembered the room when it was a nursery. She remembered the day it came time for Sonya's crib to be retired in favor of a "big girl bed."

Things changed, didn't they? And they changed again. Sandy went downstairs and told Ronnie it was time to turn Sonya's old room into a guest room. They'd been thinking about it, then resisting the idea, ever since Sonya left for college, but the room could certainly use a fresh coat of paint, and someday they might have guests again, right? When Covid ended? And of course Sonya could stay there whenever she wanted to. Sandy spread her hands wide. It was also maybe time to donate some of the things they'd kept—the crib, for example. "We held onto it in case there were more children," she said earnestly. "Then I kind

Things changed, didn't they? And they changed again. Sandy went downstairs and told Ronnie it was time to turn Sonya's old room into a guest room.

of forgot we still had it. But we can give the crib to the farm people."

So they went up to the attic and dug out the old crib from where it lived under the eaves. Sandy called Sonya especially to tell her. "We could deliver it! The crib," she said, trying to keep the excitement out of her voice. It had been months since they'd seen their daughter.

But Sonya said they didn't need it on the farm. "We're self-sufficient," she explained. "And wouldn't that old thing be unsafe, anyway?" Sandy made an involuntary sound, a sort of *uhhh!*, but then she listened as Sonya went on to explain how they grew their own vegetables on the farm. How everyone helped, milking the cows and gathering eggs. And making cheese. Really, Sandy thought but didn't say. Cheese. At least Sonya was opening up. There was that.

Their daughter had become pretty cryptic whenever they talked, which wasn't as often as Sandy would have liked. That day, though, Sonya was almost chatty—she mentioned the farm's Wi-Fi, for example. Afterward, Sandy and Ronnie talked about how, with the Wi-Fi, Sonya could, in theory, still stagger through the online classes that her professors kept frantically trying to pull together. If she had a mind to. They were at that point still trying to make the best of the whole farm thing, which at first had seemed like a good idea—all that fresh air, and you didn't want to be alone in a pandemic. This was before Sandy and Ronnie learned the church's position on vaccination, which translated roughly to *If you're going to die, well, die already. God's will be done.*

Weren't vaccinations God's will? Sandy asked, but Sonya said that Peter didn't believe in vaccinations. This might have been in May. She also mentioned that Peter was cute, in his thirties, and had amazing hair. Her words: "Amazing hair." It was red, apparently, and abundant. Sonya eventually texted a photo—this was also in May—and Peter's hair was indeed long, hanging in ropes to his waist. Sandy, who didn't understand the appeal, responded with a smiley emoji; this seemed safe, as Sonya had been uncharacteristically prickly lately.

Ronnie is lugging the eight crib pieces from the curb back to the front porch, which is going to be a kind of staging area while they figure out what to do with it all.

Sandy waits till he's dumped the last bit and then slips her arm through his. Ronnie's her comfort. He stays calm; he just goes with things. These qualities, which have served him (and Sandy by association) well during the pandemic, are surely something he learned as a child; he'd been raised in foster care from the age of four, when his parents, away on a business trip, never came back. Plane crash. He has always been resilient, but his childhood was relentlessly lonely; shortly after Sonya's birth, he told Sandy that the little family they'd made, the three of them, was everything.

Now he stacks the crib pieces against the wall. If Sandy had told herself, back in April, that offering the crib was a way to be helpful during the unique misery of Covid, she also knew the truth: Any excuse to visit Sonya, to better understand the life their daughter had chosen, was a good one. She'd been so certain that her altruism would be rewarded! And when they had pulled out the old crib, Sandy also dug out all of her old maternity clothes. All these years later, it was clear how ugly and cheap they were—the voluminous tunics and spandex pants. But they were also precious, reminding Sandy, as they did, of a time when anything, everything, seemed possible.

Goodwill grudgingly accepted the tent tops and the pants with their accommodating stretch panels, but when Sandy described the crib, they were as unwilling to take it as Sonya and the collective of mainstream churches had been. "Not safe," the woman at the Goodwill drop-off said, and she spoke accusingly, from a distance, securing her mask and shaking her head. Driving away chastened, Sandy thought that some mistake had been made. The crib had kept Sonya safe. At least for a while.

Even the trash collectors didn't want it. Ronnie and Sandy tried putting the crib out on the curb with the garbage can and recyclables, dutifully tagging every piece with their town's mandated trash stickers, but the garbage men stubbornly refused to take it away. Who knew why? After two weeks of that, Ronnie and Sandy have given up.

So there it is, on the front porch. It stays there for a week, and then Ronnie gets his brainstorm.

The YMCA, he says—not the one by them but the one two towns over. They have dumpsters way in the back lot. Ronnie and Sandy drive over there one night—late, it must be about ten thirty—to scope things out. The dumpsters aren't well lit, and

there don't seem to be any cameras, which seem to be everywhere these days.

Sitting there in their Subaru, Ronnie and Sandy look at one another. Could they tie the crib to the roof rack? They've never used it. It's worth a try.

The next day Sandy calls Sonya to tell her about this: the crib, sneaking around the suburbs, trying to unload what is proving to be unloadable. But Sonya seems distracted. She's worried about school, or maybe it's her salvation that's stressing her out. Maybe Pete the preacher just doesn't want her on her phone too long. The God people have a thing about phones, about "being present" for others, Sonya says. "Phones are a distraction. They distract us from God. From nature. From each other."

"Aren't we each other?"

"Oh well," Sonya responds pertly.

After Sandy hangs up she goes and finds Ronnie and tells him they need to drive to Ohio and find out exactly what's going on out there. The crib can wait, and even though everyone says you really shouldn't be traveling during a pandemic, that's what they do—they pack the Clorox wipes they've managed to hoard, and clean sheets to lay over whatever hotel bedspreads they might encounter. They bring the cotton masks Sandy made. Sandy's has kittens on it.

When they arrive at the Church of the Eternal Light, it becomes apparent pretty quickly that no one is particularly present for them. Even—especially—their daughter. They idle at the front drive, which is barred by a cow gate, freshly painted, and they call Sonya's cell from there.

"Surprise!" they say.

And so she comes to them, picking her way down the rutted lane that presumably leads to the house (they never see the house). Sonya looks thin, her eyes shiny and overly large in a face from which the sweet curves Sandy remembers have been chiseled away. It almost feels like meeting a stranger, and when Sandy glances quickly at Ronnie, his expression is carefully neutral.

In ratty jeans Sandy has never seen before, Sonya climbs over the gate and comes to the driver's side window. She gives her body a little shake, the way she used to before diving into the pool at swim meets, and this at least is familiar.

"Hi," Sonya says. She doesn't look particularly happy to see

them, but she doesn't say no when Sandy and Ronnie suggest they go for a drive.

"Fine," Sonya says in a detached voice. "Just for a bit." Even as she climbs into the car, she says she has to be back for something. Jumping. "Jumping?" Sandy asks, but Sonya doesn't elaborate.

"So what denomination is this church again?" Sandy, determined to keep her voice cheerful, is equally determined to understand exactly what their daughter is involved in.

"It's God's church. God doesn't have to be categorized." Now Sonya sounds annoyed.

"Of course," Sandy says. She looks at the fields on either side of the road her daughter has just walked down. They are a golden color—it is June—but Sandy, who was raised in the Chicago suburbs, has no idea what it is growing there. Barley? Some kind of wheat? Sonya has said the farm is experimenting with crops, that the summers are so hot now they have to be flexible about what they plant and when. "Pretty soon we'll be growing mangoes here," she said once, scornfully, on the phone. "Bananas."

"Climate change," Sandy responded wisely, thinking, *Yes! Something we can agree on!*

"God's will," Sonya said, then hung up.

Well, they aren't growing bananas yet. Even Sandy can see that. She turns around in her seat and tries to make eye contact with her daughter, but Sonya gazes out the side window and doesn't say anything. Ronnie, who has started driving, turns up the radio. There aren't many stations to choose from, but he finds one out of Bowling Green, with polka music of all things; the piano accordion resounds loudly in the car, incongruously cheerful.

So there they all are, driving around Ohio, and Ronnie and Sandy wear their masks, because who knows what Sonya has been exposed to in that place?

"Are you still taking classes?" This from Sandy; Ronnie is quiet, eyes on the road.

"Some." Sonya shrugs. "I'm really learning more at the farm." Her face lights up then, and for a moment Sandy, craning around from the front seat, sees the little girl she used to know. "Peter is teaching me Latin. He says it forms the basis

of the Romance languages of Europe." Her voice has almost a singsong quality; it's like she's reciting a lesson.

"That's nice," Sandy says.

Sonya looks back out the window at the fields.

"There are so many cows here!" says Sandy, speaking brightly over the accordion music. Eventually Ronnie switches over to a podcast, but it's about the pandemic, so he turns it off and they drive around the back roads for another thirty minutes or so in silence until suddenly there they are, back at the cow gate. In the distance, beyond the wheat or whatever, they can see a small crowd has gathered. The sun is lowering—it is the magic hour, the fields soaked in gold. In a regular rhythm, a human form—a guy with red hair that blooms around his head—floats above the crowd, only to disappear. This happens again and again.

The sun is lowering—it is the magic hour, the fields soaked in gold.

Sandy points. "Is that Pete?"

Sonya rubs her hands on her jeans. She (or someone) has used a ballpoint pen to draw crosses all over the right leg. Just the right leg, between hip and knee. "His name is Peter," she says stiffly. "He witnesses from the tramp."

"Tramp?"

"The trampoline, Mother." Sonya has never called her Mother before. Always Mom. And before that, in another lifetime, Mommy.

"That's interesting," Sandy says. "What does he say? When he witnesses?" She knows she's pushing it, but it's been a long drive, and this is Sonya after all, Sonya who literally came out of Sandy's body.

"That's private." Sonya closes her eyes briefly, in her new sharp face, then opens them in a way that manages to communicate both exasperation and dismissal.

"Would you like to come home with us?" Sandy is trying hard not to sound as frantic as she feels.

"I've got to go." Sonya opens the car door and slips out. From

across the fields, they can hear Trampoline Peter, his voice oddly high-pitched. Sandy thinks she picks up the word "God," and maybe "chosen," but mostly it's indecipherable, even though the man seems to be holding some sort of megaphone. Later it occurs to Sandy that he might have been speaking in tongues. Or Latin. Maybe some combination of the two.

Sandy rolls down her window. "We love you, honey," she calls to her daughter's narrow back. But the crowd on the hill has grown louder—chanting, or possibly they're screaming—and Sonya, trotting eagerly, doesn't turn around. Her jeans are so baggy.

Sandy rolls her window back up. It's insanely hot. "I think I'm done here," she says finally. Sonya is just a tiny figure now, moving so quickly away from them. "At the Church of Infernal Night." It's her way of being brave, being funny, but when she turns to Ronnie she sees that he is crying.

"I cannot lose anyone else," he says.

This is the part where Sandy could offer to step in and drive, but she doesn't; she is so very numb. After a while Ronnie rubs his nose with the back of his hand, and then he drives them all the way home. They only stop once, for gas.

This was such a bad day. Duh.

She only wants her child to like her.

She and Ronnie don't return to Ohio, but they do keep calling Sonya on the phone. That's what you do: You stay in the ring, and some calls are better than others. It is nothing short of amazing what a person can learn to live with, and when they call, Sandy and Ronnie both know which topics to steer clear of. The list is long: vaccines, masks, Peter, online classes. Climate change, for sure. But the crib? That's okay. It's boring, but it's . . . what is it, exactly?

It's safe.

"We're gonna sneak in like ninjas to dump your crib!" Sandy says, again and again, when she manages to get Sonya on the phone. There is usually a long pause, and then Sonya will sigh and say, "For God's sake, just don't get caught."

"You remember it?" Sandy always presses. "You slept in it until you could climb out."

"What was I? One? Two?" Sonya's voice is invariably uninterested. She doesn't remember the crib at all, of course. But

surely the hope and love that went into choosing it is somewhere, having somehow seeped into her very bones.

They finally pick a night: in the middle of the week. Then they pick a time: late. The crib has been sitting on the front porch for months.

"Let's go at eleven," Ronnie suggests, so they drink black coffee with dinner, and then around ten thirty Ronnie pulls on a dark corduroy shirt and Sandy scares up an old black turtleneck. Like cat burglars.

They are trying, the two of them.

When they drive over, the Y parking lot is almost empty, although there is someone parked in the back, possibly a janitor. The maybe-janitor's car is pretty near the dumpsters, but no one is in it, so Ronnie and Sandy decide to just go ahead with their plan.

They've folded down the back seats to get the disassembled crib into the trunk (the roof rack is impossible to reach), and the pieces, which Ronnie has carefully stacked back there, aren't really that heavy. The two of them start running back and forth, hauling one section at a time, and the little crib mattress too, and because the dumpsters are empty, the pieces ring like bells when they land.

"Shhhh!" Ronnie gasps as they pass one another; he is out of breath, he's laughing so hard. He has this low, hoarse guffaw that Sandy has always loved, and Sandy is cracking up too. This is the first time they've laughed together in maybe ages, and when they see headlights swinging into the parking lot, they have to hold on to each other, snorting. They try to walk, not run, back to the car, all casual-like. And if there is still one piece of the crib left in the trunk, it is just going to have to wait for another night.

They get ice cream at a McDonald's drive-through on the way home.

The last piece of the crib stays in the back of their car. One thing, then another, comes up: One night there is relentless rain, another night Ronnie has to work late and they are both too tired to drive out to the Y when he wraps up. He and Sandy both work from home, because of Covid—neither of them has been in an office for a good seven months. But still the work-

days can be long. You don't dare say no in this era of furloughs and layoffs. So many people are out of jobs. Ronnie and Sandy, freelancers both of them, take whatever projects get offered up.

In the days that follow, Sandy tells a few friends about the crib. She tells her sister Pat, who married a Canadian and lives in Toronto now. At first it's funny, Sandy serving it all up like a caper. But it's not very long before the story becomes tired; other realities intrude. She doesn't know when she'll see Pat again, for instance—the Canada/US border being closed indefinitely.

After a while Sandy stops telling the story. After a while she just wants the last bit of crib out of the trunk. Every time she drives the car somewhere, that one piece slips around, making clonking noises.

And Sandy wishes she knew her sister better. There's that.

By the time she and Ronnie return to the Y, it has been the better part of a week, but if Sandy thought the dumpsters would be empty again, she was mistaken. They are mostly full now, with Sonya's crib and with other people's junk too, and now more than ever the crib looks like nothing special. Just somebody's garbage. Sandy throws the last piece in, and when she gets in the car and Ronnie asks her if she wants ice cream she says no, thanks, she's pretty tired.

The next day Sandy calls Sonya. "So, we finally got rid of your crib," Sandy says, and she remembers it then: a cheap maternity shirt she acquired in the last months of her pregnancy. It hadn't worn well enough to save, but it was pretty when she bought it—velvety, a deep reddish purple, with embroidery on the yoke. Certainly the least hideous of her maternity clothes. She'd been wearing it the day Dad came over and he and Ronnie put the crib together, Dad in his old flannel, and if Sandy's shirt wasn't something she'd ordinarily choose, it was the coolest thing she could find at the time, and that had seemed important then, hadn't it?

There'd only been that one pregnancy. By choice. Looking back, it seems a little self-congratulatory, the way she and Ronnie saw themselves respecting an overburdened planet by bringing just one life into the world. As if their puny efforts made a difference! And sometimes Sandy thinks: If Sonya had had brothers, they would be on their way to Ohio right now, Covid

or no Covid; they'd be going to kick some farm ass. But there were no brothers. No ass was getting kicked.

Sonya actually sounds a little down on the phone, but when Sandy asks if everything is okay, Sonya says she's fine.

"Honey, I know you. You're not fine."

There's a long pause. "The world's fucked up, okay?" Sonya finally says. "Fucked. Up." Her breath sounds ragged over the phone. "But I've talked to Peter about this. We've talked about God's will."

"Well, that's—"

"Mother. Please just stop, okay? I know what you think about religion."

"I respect your—"

"Stop. I'm not talking to you about this."

Ah. Of course. Cruelty and religion aren't mutually exclusive. "God's will," Sandy says. "Got it."

Then she thinks about the maybe-wheat and the crowd on the hill. The trampoline. Tramp. "You're not sleeping with that preacher fellow, are you?" She reflexively rubs her own stomach. "I mean, you're being smart, right?"

Sonya doesn't say a word, which Sandy takes as permission to just keep talking. Ronnie has alerted her to this tendency of hers, to fill up empty space with words. He's warned her not to do this, at least not with the wrong people. But she has to believe that Sonya is not the wrong people.

"You know, you were my BAE before you were even born," Sandy says, because what can possibly be wrong with saying that? "Did you know that? Before All Else," she adds in helpful (probably unnecessary) explanation. And it was true: For a long time, their child had been a hopeful insurance policy, balanced against everything life could possibly throw at a person. The disasters, the loneliness. Sonya is still quiet, but she seems to be listening, and at first Sandy thinks it's okay, the silence isn't necessarily hostile, but then her daughter says,

For a long time, their child had been a hopeful insurance policy, balanced against everything life could possibly throw at a person. The disasters, the loneliness.

"Nec refert," which Sandy doesn't understand, but Sonya's tone says it all anyway, doesn't it?

"What?" Sandy can't help herself; she has to make sure.

"You heard me." Now it is Sandy's turn to be silent.

"Well, are you eating enough?" she finally says, thinking of her Sonya, the real Sonya, swimming in those unfamiliar jeans.

"Mother. Listen, I've got to—"

"I've been loving ice cream lately," Sandy says desperately. "It's still something good during this . . ." Sandy pauses, grasping for the right words. "Hard time," she finishes lamely. But there, she's named it. Sort of. "You used to love ice cream, didn't you? I remember—"

"Okay, well. Bye, Mother."

"Wait! Even Dad's been eating ice cream! Can you believe it?" Ronnie is more of a salty-snack guy; Sonya knows that. At least Sandy thinks she does. "Isn't it funny?" Sandy laughs anxiously. "How people can change?"

"Goodbye," Sonya says firmly.

"I like fudge ripple!"

Sonya hangs up then, and Sandy stares at her phone for a while.

Next time will be better, that's what Ronnie would say.

But this is what Sandy thinks: Their daughter probably isn't ever really coming home again. And when she does, if she does—if the farm people let her go, say—she'll be a visitor. That's what guest rooms are for, aren't they? Visitors.

"We shouldn't have gotten rid of the crib." Sandy actually says this out loud, to the empty room. They should have held on to what they could. That crib is going to end up in a landfill, Mother Earth just taking everything in the way She does. Absorbing it. Although even She has her limits.

Sandy rubs her eyes. She slips into the dining room, where Ronnie is working on a puzzle of a train plowing through drifts of snow. Ronnie likes puzzles, and although Sandy can't get into them herself—all the pieces look the same to her, and in this case all those shades of white!—there is something reassuring about Ronnie's faith that things will eventually come together. That order can prevail. She usually stays with him and reads, or wrestles with the hat she's been trying to knit ever since lockdown began. The hat began as a simple beanie, but it

keeps changing. She tried stripes, unsuccessfully, and now she's thinking tassel. But she can't get any of it right; she keeps ripping out her work and starting over. Clearly she doesn't have the touch. But it's something to do while he moves the puzzle pieces around and hums.

Now she stands next to her husband and looks at the top of his bald, freckled head. He's gained some weight during Covid, but he needed to, actually. "Promise me you won't die first," she says. Ronnie looks up and laughs, that lovely, low laugh of his, and he pats the chair next to him.

"I'll see what I can do," he says. "But help me with this thing first." Sandy sits. She finds one piece, all white, of course, and spends some time looking for its home.

"Lots of snow in this puzzle." Sandy slides the piece back into the sea of white. She wonders if the day will come when it doesn't even snow in the winter. When they grow bananas all year long.

She so badly wants to remember it all. Snow. The way baby Sonya cried when she was hungry ("Flaaa! Flaaaa!"). The comfort that came from being part of their family of three. Sandy's dad had gotten dementia before he died, and at the end he couldn't be clever with his hands anymore. He couldn't remember what made him *him*. Sandy's mother had lived longer, tough till the end, though now she was gone too. Sandy still tries to guess what her mother might say—about Covid, about who she, Sandy, has become. And about Sonya. Sonya! There are so many ways to lose a person.

"Did I hear you talking to our girl?" Ronnie asks. "How is she?" Ronnie chooses hope for the most part; Sandy has always found that remarkable, given his background. The fact is, Sandy has never been particularly good at that—at keeping the terror at bay and holding a smile on her face—maybe because Ronnie has always been the optimist for both of them. But she can try, can't she, and what she says now is "She's great." Ronnie's head is bent over the puzzle; he doesn't see her face.

"One of these days we'll have guests again," Sandy whispers.

Covid will come to an end, eventually. Hell, everything does. With Covid, one day bleeds into the next, but you try to keep track. You try to keep an edge. Because, if she's honest with herself, Sandy understands how little of it there is left. Life, that is, even these blank nothing days when not much happens but

puzzles. Maybe especially these nothing days. She wants to pay attention to it all before she gets too old, or tired, or fat. She and Ronnie! They hike together and they both like movies. They love movies, in fact, and if the theaters ever open again, they'll be there.

Ronnie's puzzle: He has the edge pieces all fitted together. He has filled in the train and the great plume of snow. Here they are. As long as someone remembers snow, it happened. Sandy reaches out and touches Ronnie's shoulder gently. Things are strange, almost dire. They are probably going to get stranger.

"Ice cream later?" she asks.

She will remember. She has to.

LORRAINE LUPO AND KYLE SCHLESINGER

NAPKINS FOR MANNEQUINS

Imagine being the part
Of the body that decides
Which words can
Be in the
Dictionary

•

Would you call
It if I put my
Telephone in this poem?

•

Dear Shopper, you have a second chance
To feel again
These possessions
To think of
As babies

•

Not for nothing
Ayn Rand
Errand

•

The glass eye isn't
For its wearer
Which is another way
Of saying I've done
All I can

•

We only met once
Replace your hair
With a picture of your hair

•

Wishing what
Go ahead where
To Boulevard Way
Reminding him
What's what
Somewhere someone

•

Snow land
Art dream
Business plan

•

Only trinkets
When we talk
All the problems
Begin to blizzard
Like old times

•

On the billboard
On a street
Where just poets drive

•

Speaking of the sidekick
I fell in love with him
He got an agent
I hold his purse
For fun

•

Identical twins
Kiki said
“Live the same life”

•

Done again
Same before
Instant replay
Ever so different
Even so same

•

“If one was against
Clothes then one should
On no account wear them”

•

Cult of the individual
Shiny penny
Roar of the greasepaint
Big wig
Adverb of the century

•

The local mime troupe
Caused quite a commotion
At the tantric sex shop

•

UFOs aren’t only
Fun to think
About. Tell
Your friends
I sent you

•

Getting an F
At the Fortune
Telling School

•

She was expelled
For eccentric wrestling
Neurotic dancing
Promiscuous silence
And frugal euphoria

•

My dog is
Deciding whether
Or not to bark

•

Prom like no other
Snacks were so appetizing
Punch landed just right
We danced to Led Zeppelin
And called it a night

•

Colder than yesterday
Formula from faraway
American peril

•

Every morning everybody's
Running in every direction
All the babies wave their hands
Thinking / dreaming / sleeping
Repeat

•

Strictly personal
Make yourself scarce
I'll create a distraction

•

We have always divided
All the things I haven't read
And all the things
I have to read again
Ourselves along these lines

•

She had that way about him
Threw caution to wind
Thataway about when

•

I thought Sally
Struthers was Suzanne Somers
But I did not
Summer where
Donna Summer summers

•

Radio's scrambled
Keep nose clean
Is that a metaphor?

•

Anyway I'm tired of love
The flat-footed or peek-
A-boo pedestrian
Who thinks he can get
Out of my way

•

Speaking of diction
Come to fruition
For your eyes alone

YVETTE DeCHAVEZ

TWO BY TWO

Martín and Becca were the first people we met on that wet Saturday in early August as we hauled our belongings into the new-to-us apartment off Highway 90. The two of them descended the stairs from the second floor looking like a couple of hippies left over from Woodstock, even though it was 1983. Her waist-length, flowy blonde hair like corn silk. His dark, unkempt curls. Their vintage Levi's. Roughly our age, they were a handsome couple out of a catalog for a store too cool for me to shop at. They also seemed oblivious to the hostile weather they were about to step into. I'd always been afraid of storms, and it had been raining for a week straight in San Antonio. Something about an El Niño that was worse than ever, whatever the hell that meant. While the two of them still looked fresh, Rogelio and I were like soaked hogs, and Ximena our little piglet, all three of us clutching a cardboard box to prepare our first-floor nest that had popcorn ceilings and the lived-in scent of a dozen previous families.

"Need help?" Martín offered after we made the obligatory introductions and small talk. *(Where you from? Watch out for Ruby next door with all the lizards. Don't expect maintenance to be all that helpful.)* His skin was the same warm brown as mine and Rogelio's, and for a moment I tried to imagine him and skinny little white Becca at a Sunday dinner with his family. Tejano blasting in the background, his mom with a pot of beans cooking. Would Becca even be allowed in the kitchen? My mother barely let *me* in, for heaven's sake.

I looked at Rogelio, who was looking at Becca. I tried to follow his eyes to see exactly where they'd landed, but it was impossible. Of course, given the history of our marriage, probably her tits.

"We'd hate to interrupt your plans," I said to Martín, biting my lips to bring color back to them. As if that would make me look drier, more alive, more beautiful.

Martín waved the idea away with a slow push of his hand through the air, like they had all the time in the world.

Becca nodded in agreement. "It's nothing, really."

"In that case," Rogelio said, nodding at the parking lot, "I got a couch I could use some help with." The ancient flowery number sat under a sagging tarp in the bed of our equally old Toyota pickup, piled high with the rest of our belongings. "She's a beast," he added.

As the two of them walked toward the truck, Martín turned back to me. "No te preocupes," he said, the rain slowly soaking his shirt. "We're neighbors now."

By the end of the month, Ximena and I had already spent a good amount of time upstairs with Becca. She and Martín both had odd hours working at the twenty-four-hour Kmart up the street, and, at Rogelio's insistence, I wasn't working at all. So when she was home, she invited me up. The layout of their place was just like ours, though it had only one bedroom and the decor of a head shop: beaded curtains; a giant astrology tapestry; old concert posters of Janis Joplin, the Doors, and—surprise, surprise—Woodstock. In the kitchen, where one might usually find a clock, there hung a cross-stitch with red toadstools and daisies that said, *Welcome to Our Pad*.

In the kitchen, where one might usually find a clock, there hung a cross-stitch with red toadstools and daisies that said, **Welcome to Our Pad.**

The guys hit it off too and spent some evenings at the Skyline Bowling Lanes downing Lone Stars and trying to break 200, which Martín claimed to be his average.

"He's full of it," Becca said one night while we sipped Harvey Wallbangers, her drink of choice, on the covered balcony of their apartment. "He's never bowled above 150."

The rain hadn't let up for more than a day or two since we'd moved in and now fell in a gentle pitter-patter, like easy chatter at a restaurant. The wind carried a mist past the awning they'd set up and all the Becca-made macramé planters, brushing us with a light sheen of water. Our skin caught the dim porch light, and for a moment, we became glowing lanterns.

They didn't have kids yet, but Becca seemed to enjoy Ximena's company. It helped that Ximena's favorite game at the time was salon, which meant all she wanted to do was brush our hair. I'd taught her how to maintain a light hand so that she didn't pull, a lesson I'd learned the hard way, even though I wasn't particularly tender-headed after years of my mother's rough hands.

"So pretty," Ximena said, letting the strands of Becca's hair fall through her little fingers. "Mama, you should make your hair yellow like this."

"We could, you know," said Becca. "My sister went to cosmetology school back home in California, which basically makes me a hairdresser."

I felt my right eye twitch ever so slightly. I tried to let out a laugh, but my throat was dry and it became a cough instead.

"I'll pass," I said. "Back home I witnessed enough girls try to bleach their hair in the kitchen sink. It always came out looking like old copper wire."

"But I bet Rogelio would like it." She winked at me. "Maybe a new thrill in the bedroom?"

I quickly glanced at Ximena to see if she'd registered what was said, but she kept brushing away, humming gently to herself. "Why don't you go inside?" I said. "Color me a picture, and I'll hang it up in the kitchen."

"Which colors do you want?" she asked, putting down the plastic brush and fishing out a handful of crayons from her pants pocket. She carried them everywhere, like an artist ready to go the moment inspiration struck.

"Pink and green," I said, tapping each one lightly.

She scrunched her nose, a smaller version of Rogelio's. "How 'bout green and blue?"

"Perfect." She never went with what I chose—whether it was this or the outfits I picked out for her or the suggestions I gave for how we could do her hair for the day. But I kind of admired it.

Ximena gave a nod and went inside, her jelly shoes wet with rain and squeaking with every step.

"Sorry," Becca said. "I'm not used to having kids around."

"It's nothing. Six is too young to understand most of what we're saying anyway."

I wasn't sure I believed that. Back home, everyone had kids.

Shit, my sister Leti already had half a dozen, though I'd only met two of them. It was more unusual for me to be around someone *without* kids. And I knew that children were soft little beings who caught on to everything, absorbing it all like cacti soaking up a good downpour. Which was why I tried my best to shield Ximena from anything happening between me and Rogelio. In the years since her birth, there'd been plenty to hide.

"But really, Martín and I are always trying new things in the bedroom—toys, candles, ropes, wigs. The occasional extra fling." She gave a little wink. An image of Martín tying Becca to their bedposts flashed through my brain and gave me a chill even with the blanket of humidity on my skin.

Despite my silence, or perhaps because of it, Becca went on. "You gotta keep it fresh, you know. How 'bout y'all? You've been together for a while now, right? What're you into?" She leaned closer to me, her mouth slightly open, hungry with waiting.

At that, I felt myself clamp shut like a clam. I didn't want to talk about this, especially considering the fact that she was basically a stranger to me. But more than that, I didn't want to divulge my own secrets, the things that Rogelio and I did in the dark. The only things that were ours and no one else's. And by comparison, they were embarrassingly tame.

"Don't be shy around me," she said, and took another drink from her glass. "We're both adults. Or is it something so kinky you don't want to say?"

I could see that the hippie-dippie stuff didn't apply to just her style but to her views on sex as well. I wanted this to work, especially since Rogelio and Martín were becoming such fast friends, but I couldn't shake the feeling that Becca and I were speaking different languages.

I sat with her words for a moment, smelled the rain as it mixed with the sour rot of plants long drowned out by never-ending wetness. How much was I willing to tell her about anything at all, let alone the most private parts of my life? Things I didn't tell anyone, not even my own sister? To me, adults were the opposite of what I'd grown up around—chismosas who didn't know how to keep their mouths shut, who judged everyone for everything. In my own years as an adult, I'd come to think of myself as a vault. Only certain people were allowed to know the truths I kept inside, and usually it was just me and God. If I

told Becca about my sex life with Rogelio—about how it hadn't really been the same since that blonde woman he'd fucked when Ximena was just a baby—who would she go and tell? Martín? The whole damn apartment complex? And if I told her that I'd forgiven Rogelio—because I had to, because we were Catholic, and where would I go if I got a divorce?—would Becca think I was some sad, weak woman? The opposite of what I wanted to be for Ximena. When everything happened, I had no one to talk to about it. And now that was how I preferred things. I guess I'd become like my mother after all, tucking things away in some space she thought no one could reach. But I swore sometimes the secrets came out of her pores. Not me.

Of course I couldn't tell Becca all of that.

"There I go with my big mouth again," she said. "Forgive me, the vodka has gone straight to my head." She touched her forehead with the back of her hand, her pale skin reddening. "Martín always reminds me that not everyone is as comfortable talking about this stuff, especially here. Says it's a cultural thing."

Did she mean a Mexican thing? San Antonio? I imagined the behavior chart Ximena's teacher used and moved Becca's name from green to yellow. Proceed with caution.

"Well, I did grow up in a pretty strict Catholic household," I said. "Rogelio is the only man I've even been with." Even that was more than I wanted to reveal, but I knew it bought me space. She gave, I gave. Tit for tat, or something like that.

Her eyebrows shot up like blinds on a nosy neighbor's window. "Totally get it," she said, nodding with a confidence that made me feel like she didn't really get it at all. She took another gulp from her drink. "Honey, stick by me, and that good Catholic girl routine will be out of you in no time."

Becca held out her glass to mine, and the rain shifted from a fine mist to heavy drops, sharp and piercing like her baby blues. "Cheers."

Sometime around midnight, Rogelio finally returned home. I was already in bed with the duvet pulled over my head to block out our neighbors' lights. From the squelch of his steps, I could tell that his clothes were soaked through. I poked my head out and watched as he peeled each item off haphazardly, letting them fall to the floor with a hard, wet slap.

"Hang them up in the bathroom," I whispered, careful not to wake Ximena in the next room. She and I were both light sleepers, and it wasn't uncommon for her to trample over to our room with tired eyes, asking to sleep in our bed, especially in this new place.

"Yes, baby. Sorry, sorry." His cooing voice, the fact that he was calling me *baby*—all of it pointed to him being tipsy. After hanging up his clothes, he slid into bed next to me, stale Lone Stars on his breath, hair cool and dripping. He tugged at my sleep shorts and pulled me closer. His damp skin felt like glue against mine.

I was in no mood for sex after all the old shit that came back up for me while talking to Becca. In fact, I felt the itch to unload it all on Rogelio, to reopen the conversation like flipping through a yearbook, pointing out the faces of everyone who'd hurt me. Except it had been years since the affair. Surely there was some kind of time limit on when you could bring up these things—at least that's what Rogelio said when I couldn't let go of it two, three years later. *Ya, Gloria. Enough. You can't say you forgive me but continue to make me pay for it.* We'd even done a Marriage Encounter retreat with the church, a weekend of exercises from a booklet and guided reflections and lots of eye contact. By the end, Rogelio had said with tears in his eyes that he'd really and truly learned his lesson. That, combined with the fact that Ximena was old enough to ask questions, to repeat things, was when I actually tried to move on, though now I wondered about new infidelities.

But if there was one real sex lesson my mother ever gave me, it was what she said to me the day I got married to Rogelio: *It doesn't matter if it's fun. What matters is that it's done.* She wouldn't even say what "it" was, but I knew. I could still hear her voice, firm and wise. *It's part of your wifely duty, Gloria. Like washing dishes or cooking the kind of meals that leave him full after a hard day's work.* Now I understood what she really meant: This is how you keep your man. Survival lessons from my Catholic mother.

I pressed my body into Rogelio's and felt him hard against my thigh. He put two fingers in my mouth, coated them with my spit, and then slid them inside me.

"You miss me tonight?" he asked.

I didn't. "Yes," I whispered.

I considered myself lucky that sex with Rogelio at least felt good. Not fun, necessarily, but there was release. After all these years together, his hands knew where to go, the movements I needed, even if it sometimes felt like a movie I'd seen so many times I could repeat the lines word for word. We kissed, and our tongues moved with a perfect rhythm. I reached for him, moved my hand up and down his shaft for a while until finally he climbed on top of me.

After he came—surprisingly fast, considering the booze—he moved his fingers back down between my legs and rubbed me slow and slow and slow and then fast until my calves tensed so much I thought I'd get a cramp. Right then, like a spark of light, I envisioned Becca and Martín together. Her wearing nothing but a short pink wig. Martín still wearing his Levi's, the button fly completely undone. And then it was me on top of him, my back curved with pleasure. It was me wearing the wig, pouring candle wax down his torso, which I hadn't even seen in real life, but it didn't matter. Here, in this fantasy, it was perfect.

Almost instantly, I was back to reality, a quiver of pleasure and shame coursing through me like the thrill after confession.

I squeezed my legs tighter, bucked my hips again and again, felt everything ready to explode. And then finally, release.

Almost instantly, I was back to reality, a quiver of pleasure and shame coursing through me like the thrill after confession. Rogelio kissed my forehead and was asleep within seconds. I was grateful that he couldn't read my mind.

In the darkness, I prayed to God for forgiveness. And that if I got pregnant, it was another girl. A sister Ximena could talk to about all the parts of womanhood. The type of sister I never had.

A week later it was still raining, and according to Meteorologist Mike on Channel 12, that morning would be the worst of it so far. Hail, lightning, maybe even a tornado. I tried to follow what he said on our shitty little television from Goodwill, adjusting the antenna to get clearer reception, but all I could really understand was that it had something to do with temperatures

in the Pacific. It was the kind of stuff that scared me most, giant Texas storms that felt biblical, like a flood was coming to wipe us all out except the creatures God led two by two onto the ark. I knew it wasn't gonna be me and Rogelio on that boat. Not with our shit.

"Stay home today?" I asked Rogelio.

"Don't be silly, Gloria," he said, buttoning up the white work shirt we'd bought at Solo Serve. "It's just a little rain."

He looked handsome. These days, his body was a little fuller, his shoulders broader, and he looked like a man instead of the gangly boy I'd known back in Angelitos. But in the back of my head, I couldn't help wondering who else was admiring his body.

"I don't want to miss school," Ximena said from the kitchen, her voice a sleepy chirp. "I'm not scared." She was settling in at her new school, already talking about her "best friends," two girls both named Jennifer.

"You don't wanna stay home with Mama?"

"We did a tornado drill yesterday," she said, completely ignoring me. "The bells rang real loud, and then we covered ourselves up like this"—she tucked herself into a ball like an armadillo, covering her head with her arms. "Jennifer and Jennifer and me were all next to each other."

"See," said Rogelio while sliding on a sock, "even she knows there's nothing to worry about."

Sure, I thought to myself, but Ximena doesn't know what I know.

"Tell you what," Rogelio went on, "I'll drop her off and pick her up when I get out. That way you don't have to worry about walking to get her in this weather."

As soon as Rogelio and Ximena were out the door, I sat down and consulted my to-do list. Each night I wrote one out for the next day in my neat Catholic-school penmanship and stuck it under a Freddie's Flowers magnet on the fridge. I'd wake up and work my way through it like it was a job. Every complete list gave me a sense of wholeness, a flutter in my fingers and toes that helped me make it another day without spontaneously combusting. Anything to distract from the crushing weight of our lives resting on the one paycheck Rogelio made as a glorified secretary. All because he said no wife of his would ever be working.

According to that day's list, I had big plans. A walk down

to the pawnshop to hock some gold earrings Rogelio had given me so that I could get a few extra dollars. A stop by the consignment store for a raincoat Ximena could wear. Then next door to Handy Andy to buy some groceries. Outside activities I'd optimistically plotted out on my Post-it the night before, as if writing it down were a spell that could undo the forecast. I made myself breakfast and took my sweet time getting ready to go, but as soon as I opened the door and stepped onto the sidewalk just off our building, I knew everything was in vain. The sky was full of clouds that looked like gray buffalo charging straight for me. There was the tiniest part of me—one that I tried to squash but felt in the hairs that stood straight on my arms—that wished for my mother all the way in New Mexico.

I was on my heel, ready to turn back to the apartment, when I bumped into Martín.

He flashed a full-teeth smile, his dimples two deep pools I could dip my pinkies into.

"Beautiful outside," he joked from under the hood of his green raincoat. "Perfect weather for a day off." I wondered if Becca was home too, though it seemed like they often had opposite schedules.

"I'm tired of this," I said. I ducked back under the cover of the apartments and he followed. I wanted to get away from him quickly—God forbid he catch a whiff of the little crush I'd been nursing. Anytime we'd shared the same space, I did my best to stay next to Becca and avoid him, though once or twice I was sure I caught him looking at me.

"You might feel different when we're in the middle of a drought."

"I'm from the desert," I said. "Droughts are what we do."

I had the door halfway closed when I thought of Meteorologist Mike and his warnings.

"You ever been through a tornado here?" I asked. We hadn't experienced any in my time in Texas, and they weren't the kind of thing we worried about back home.

His eyes widened. "Oh yeah. We get 'em all the time. Huge ones," he said, the sarcasm thick in his voice.

Men and their dumb jokes. And yet I felt my guts turn a little, the same feeling I got going over a speed bump too fast.

"Nah," said Martín. "I been here my whole life, and they usually just touch down and get sucked right back up. Knock down a power line, maybe." He wiped away a raindrop that

had plopped down on his eye. He had those long sweetgrass lashes men sometimes had, the kind that made women jealous. "Course, if you need anything, you just let"—but I closed the door before he could finish his sentence.

Back inside, I tried to figure out what to do with all the extra time on my hands. Instead of tackling the usual boring chores—dishes, folding Rogelio's laundry, dusting—I grabbed a tattered V. C. Andrews paperback and curled up on the couch with my favorite crocheted blanket. Except when I opened the pages, the words blurred together, and I went over the same lines again and again. My thoughts kept tripping up on flashes of Martín's face and the rumble of thunder outside, neither settling long enough for me to maintain focus.

My thoughts kept tripping up on flashes of Martín's face and the rumble of thunder outside, neither settling long enough for me to maintain focus.

I'd read for no more than a few minutes when the power in the apartment flickered. I felt panic bolt through my body, from my head down to each individual toe, and turned the silver volume knob up to hear Meteorologist Mike warn that the storms were getting worse. He pointed at a sign on the map, just to the right of San Antonio, that read, *Tornado Watch.*

"Here you can see that we're looking at the potential for strong winds, possible tornadoes in central Texas until around 3 p.m. It's gonna be an interesting afternoon as we watch these storms move through the area."

I looked at my Casio and saw that it was only noon.

Even though I knew he'd be pissed, I reached for the phone on the wall and dialed Rogelio's number at work, hoping that his voice could offer a little comfort. He picked up before a full ring.

"It's me," I said, tightening the phone cord around my fingers like it could pull him closer to me.

He sighed. "You know I can't be taking a bunch of personal calls."

In the background were the voices of what seemed like a dozen people. I tried to visualize his office, pictured him at the

center of a big room with a bunch of pretty women surrounding him. Blondes, probably, because in my head he only worked with white girls. Blue eyes and big tits. Names like Becca and Sherri and bodies like Jane Fonda without having to eat egg whites and grapefruit to get them, like I did. They wore Charlie perfume and tight skirts, had perfectly manicured nails and breathy voices. Bitches.

"They're saying tornadoes are possible. Should I pick up Ximena?"

"Lord, Gloria. She's probably safer at school, with people who've been through dozens of these warnings before."

I hated to admit it, but he was probably right. As much as I wanted her here next to me, what the hell did I know about tornadoes and what to do in one?

"How's the rest of your day been?" I asked.

"Busy," he said. "Always busy."

"Well." I let the word sit for a few seconds before continuing. "I won't bug you any longer. Be careful driving home in this weather. Go slow, especially with Ximena in the car."

"I know, Glo."

"She's out at three."

"*I know*, Gloria."

I was about to put the phone back in its cradle when I heard his voice again.

"Close the blinds and stay away from the windows if you're scared," he said. "Better yet, hang out with Becca for a while. Least you won't be alone."

I hung up the phone without saying *I love you* and immediately felt guilty for it. But it was so like Rogelio to just skip over my feelings. To tell me to move on. *Ya, Gloria. Enough.* There was a tinge of jealousy too, buried deep as the dead. That he had a freedom I didn't. He got out of this apartment, experienced things beyond the smoke-filled walls and decrepit carpet. All I'd ever wanted was to leave the neighborhood I'd grown up in, which felt like an adobe tomb I'd never escape. And now here I was, in a life that felt similar.

For a moment, I considered writing a letter to my sister Leti, who was now living in El Paso. When we were kids, both stuck in New Mexico, she'd hold my hand through storms and tell me the noise was just the angels in heaven bowling again. But where would I even start—with the rain? With Rogelio? There was so

much I hadn't told her in all these years, the vault locked tight, my life seemingly perfect from the outside.

In the end, I decided to let her keep that image of me—Gloria in San Antonio, happy as could be. Instead of writing, I closed the window blinds and went back to my book.

A half hour later, a knock at the door cracked through the apartment, echoing off the walls. I threw on a sweater and stamped across the shaggy brown carpet in my bare feet. Through the peephole, I watched Martín with his hands in his pockets shift from one foot to the other. What the hell could he possibly want? I scanned the apartment, taking stock of everything out of place. Ximena's dollar-store Barbie knock-offs with their too-short necks, lined up beside the one real Barbie we got her for her birthday. The sink with dishes from my breakfast that morning, dried egg and grapefruit rind I was too lazy to toss in the trash. This was my penance for not taking care of the chores. I debated whether or not I should open the door. Maybe if I just waited long enough, he'd leave.

"Oh, what the fuck does it matter," I whispered out loud. Why the hell was I trying to impress Martín when I'd seen their place and the thick layer of dust like fresh snow that Becca never kept up with?

I opened the door.

"The thing about tornadoes is that you shouldn't be on the second floor," Martín said. No hello, just straight to it.

"Not so tough, after all?"

He put his hands up in surrender. "You caught me. Truth is, I'm afraid of two things: spiders and tornadoes." He looked past me into the apartment. "Mind if I come in? Just until the warning expires," he said.

"And Becca?" I asked.

"Work," he said. "Took off about an hour ago, just before the warning came in."

Thunder sounded in the sky like the deep growl of a lion, low and steady and dangerous. I thought of Rogelio at work. So unconcerned.

Martín ran his hands through his hair. "I'd ask Ruby next door, but she's got all those fucking lizards. Do you know what she feeds them?"

I tilted my head, waiting for the answer with quiet expectation.

"Spiders." He laughed, and those dimples of his appeared again.

I opened the door wide enough for him to step inside. "Fine."

Despite the slight thrill of having him here alone, I conducted myself like Rogelio was simply in the other room, as if he could peek beyond the bathroom door and see my every move. I maintained a couple feet's distance from Martín and gestured toward the couch, the same one he'd helped us get into the apartment just a few weeks earlier.

Martín kicked off his Adidas and left them by the door. At least he had some manners. He shuffled past me in his socks, and I smelled the sweet scent of marijuana on him. The television had switched from the news to *As the World Turns*.

"Don't let me interrupt whatever you were doing," he said, sitting in Rogelio's usual spot on the couch.

Instead of fessing up to the fact that I hadn't been doing a damn thing, I made my way into the kitchen and worked on the dishes. I was grateful for the fact that the sink faced a wall and my back would be toward Martín.

"Feel free to change the channel," I called out over the running water. He left it where it was.

It couldn't have taken me more than five minutes to clear out the sink, but knowing that he was there made time feel eternal, like looking out across the desert and feeling the whole world was one long stretch of nothing. I felt an electrical charge from his presence. If his leg moved, I knew it. When he coughed, it was as though it came from my own lungs. And I was certain, absolutely sure, that for the duration of my time in the kitchen, Martín's eyes were on me. I dried my hands on a kitchen towel and took my time positioning it back on the handle of the stove. I folded and unfolded and folded it again so that the harvest apple design was perfectly straight. Anything to delay the inevitable move back into the living room, where Martín was waiting and I would have to entertain him somehow.

"How are you liking it here so far?" Martín asked as soon as I finished. Instead of giving me a chance to respond, he kept on. "Aside from the fact that the buildings are old as shit and there's always some kind of leak, it's a decent place." He rubbed at his

patchy beard, scratched his left cheek. He seemed to be constantly in motion. "You should take Ximena to that new roller skating rink down the road. Good place to go when there's shit weather. I take my niece and nephew there all the time. She could join us one weekend."

Before I could even take a seat, there was a loud pop outside, and the entire apartment went dark. I felt my insides squeezing themselves together like a fist and let out a yelp. *This is it*, I thought. *I was right all along.* I swear I could smell my own fear, sharp and medicinal like brown Listerine.

"Don't flip," Martín said. Although it was dark, I could see he had his hands out in front of him as if to push away the pressure my energy was building in the room. "A transformer must've blown."

"What do we do?" I asked. The windows felt closer than ever. I wondered if the glass was thick enough to withstand strong winds. Our shitty apartments probably had the cheapest stuff the builder could get their hands on.

"Nothing to do but wait till they fix it. Damn power grid," he huffed. "Maybe grab some candles in the meantime."

I found a couple of old candlesticks in the junk drawer next to the fridge, and Martín pulled out a lighter. The flames brought him back into focus.

He eyed me up and down. "You ever meditate? Maybe take some deep breaths," he said, and demonstrated like I didn't know how to do it on my own. "Becca taught me how to regulate my breathing. It's helpful in stressful situations like this."

Of course Becca was into meditation. She'd never mentioned it to me, but she was always trying to get me to do yoga, bending herself into weird poses in the living room whenever I was there. *I learned this from a guru*, she'd said, as though I knew what that was. *It's really important to stretch your hips every day.* Meanwhile, my hips had been stretched to high hell when Ximena was born. If anything, I needed to *tighten* them.

"I doubt breathing will help," I said. "I just have this thing with big storms. They scare the hell out of me."

I wondered if the lights were still on at Ximena's school. I fought the compulsion to run there by taking a seat on the couch, as far away from where Martín sat as possible.

"Hey, at least you're not alone, right?" he said.

"You sound like Rogelio."

Martín gave a small snort, and his face twisted like he'd just smelled shit. "I hope not." As soon as the words were out, his eyes shot toward me. "No offense. He's just, you know, riding a different frequency than me." He tried to change the subject quickly. "You smoke?" He reached into the back pocket of his Levi's and pulled out a silver case. With a quick flick of his wrist, he opened it to reveal a row of brown clove cigarettes. "Breathing is great and all, but a cigarette is what really helps me." He chuckled, amused by his own joke.

But I was still stuck on his words. *I hope not*. Perhaps he felt about Rogelio the way I did about Becca—still figuring him out, not yet ready to fully trust. Or maybe Rogelio had shown him what a shit he could be.

"I'm good," I said. "But you go ahead." The apartment already smelled like smoke anyway.

He put the cigarette to his lips, lit it, and inhaled deeply. He picked at the tip of his tongue and smiled with his perfectly straight, perfectly white teeth that resembled the stepping stones in my mother's garden. I imagined what it might feel like to run my tongue across them. Slick. Warm. I cleared my throat as if it might rid me of my thoughts.

"You sure?" he asked, holding out the case to me again.

I shook my head no.

"Suit yourself." He took another drag and let out one long stream of smoke. The spicy scent of cloves filled the air. "You're kind of a generally tense person, aren't you?"

Something about the way he said it—so smooth, without hesitation—made it feel like less of an insult and more of an observation. I tried my hardest to present an image of nonchalance to strangers. Stay quiet. Be an easy breezy woman who could go with the flow, who could go left despite mapping out a right turn for hours, days in advance. But sometimes the real me slipped out.

"Give me one of those," I said.

"There we go."

Behind him, the clock struck one thirty.

Halfway through my cigarette, I remembered Rogelio's battery-powered radio and pulled it out from the hallway closet. I let the cigarette dangle from my lips like an old pro while turning the knobs and settling on a station playing the Commodores.

"Good song," Martín said. "So, now. Tell me about this fear of yours. You get stuck in a storm or something? Car accident?"

Maybe it was the nicotine, but the tornado watch felt like a thing of the past, minus the fact that the wind continued to howl and the lights were still off. Or maybe it was the fact that Martín had an almost narcotic effect on me, his easy way of moving. His voice velvety as rose petals.

"No accidents, nothing like that," I said. "It's just scary, you know? Uncontrollable."

Life was unpredictable, of course, but I took every measure I could to control as much as possible. Lists. Diets. Secrets. These anchors soothed me while everything else seemed to clash and clamor in the winds around me.

"Exactly," Martín said. "Like flying. My real fear." The corner of his mouth turned up in an embarrassed smile, and he pressed down on his thighs with both hands as if wiping sweat from his palms. "I was on a plane last summer, to visit a cousin of mine stationed in Virginia. My cousin said, 'Primo, you gotta let go and let God.' But it's hard to have any faith in that when you don't believe in God."

I imagined the horror on my mother's face, knowing I was sitting alone in a room with a man who didn't even believe in God. But in this light, he looked like a saint, the contours of his face glowing. His high cheekbones. Those perfect teeth. I had the urge to draw his face, like Ximena with her crayons always ready to go. While I considered the angles of his body next, Martín went on and on.

For once, I was the one to interrupt. "You talk so much. You and Becca both." I made a yapping motion with my hand, open and close, open and close, just like their mouths.

He laughed. "Okay, okay. You're a real ballbuster, you know that? *You* talk. Tell me something about yourself."

Ordinarily, I would've frozen, but the way he sat there leaning toward me felt like an invitation. The candlelight a campfire, welcoming stories. I ran my fingers across my arm and felt the silkiness of my own skin. Why didn't I touch myself more? All the lotioning I did. More importantly, why didn't Rogelio touch me more? Nowadays, sex felt utilitarian, as if we were working toward a goal every time, whether orgasm or another baby. Usually both. But in the early days, our bodies were on fire, the intensity enough to knock out the electricity in any room.

"In Angelitos, you can see the same lightning across the entire town." I opened my arms wide above me. "Because it's a valley. So it doesn't matter if you're some rich asshole in the Heights, or me in my shitty neighborhood. Same flash, just a different point of view."

"That's real nice," said Martín. His voice was low, his eyes watching me.

I kept on. "My dad always tells this story. One time, when my sister and I were real little, there was a bad storm. Thunder booming, lightning going crazy. He says he got home from work, and when he walked inside, he couldn't find any of us. Not me, or my mom, or my sister. He searched every room, kept calling our names. Nothing. Finally, he went out back to the cuartito and found us all huddled together in the tiny space meant for garden tools. My mother was squeezing me and my sister tight, and all three of us were praying the rosary." I shook my head. "He thinks it's the funniest story. I don't remember, of course, but it always made me kind of sad. It was probably the last time all three of us were ever that close together."

Ordinarily, I would've frozen, but the way he sat there leaning toward me felt like an invitation. The candlelight a campfire, welcoming stories.

"That must be it, then," he said. "Why you're so scared."

I laughed. "Yet another thing I can blame on my mother."

"Oh, we can blame it all on our parents. One day, I'm sure Ximena will blame you for a million things."

I thought of Ximena balled up in the hallway of her school while I sat in the darkness of our apartment with a stranger. I ached to have her next to me right then, to know she was safe. That must've been how my mother felt that day, desperate to have Leti and me so close that we were one.

"I have a confession," Martín said, interrupting my thoughts. I was grateful for the distraction.

"Tell me."

"I'm not scared of the rain," he said. "Tornadoes either." He scooted closer to me on the couch and grabbed my hand. His fingertips were cold droplets.

"Then—"

He didn't let me finish. "I wanted the company."

And I wanted him, had wanted him for the entire time he'd been there. Maybe even before, when I saw him on the steps. And maybe that's why I let him inside in the first place. I felt the wetness between my legs confirming my desire.

But now that I knew he wanted me back, all I could think about was Rogelio.

Martín leaned in to kiss me, but before our lips could touch, I put my hand on his chest and gently pushed him back.

"I can't do this," I said.

"But you want to?"

I neither confirmed nor denied.

He ran his fingers through the ends of my hair, and I thought of Ximena playing with Becca's corn silk strands. "I wanted to as soon as I met you."

I thought of all the times I'd interacted with him, no more than a few sentences exchanged until today. And then I thought about all the things Becca had told me about him. How good he was in bed. *Four orgasms, sometimes five, in one lovemaking session*, she'd told me.

"And what about Becca?"

He shrugged casually. "Becca and I have an understanding."

"That is such a white girl thing," I said. "Free love and fuck anyone you want."

"Maybe," he said. "But it works for us. Life is long, and relationships are complicated. So is desire."

"Well," I scoffed, "Rogelio and I certainly don't have that kind of agreement."

Martín sat back on the couch, crossing one leg over the other. "I figured as much. Though he certainly doesn't let that stop him."

"What?" My face broke out into a sweat that felt like a fever.

"I mean, considering the way he acts when we're out together. He seems to think he has free rein to be with any woman he wants."

It felt then like time stopped.

I was an anxious person, yes, but when confronted with the truth, which was often worse than anything I could've imagined, I always felt a sense of calm, like what I pictured the center of a tornado to be. Everything outside spinning and spinning and spinning, but the middle a place where you could float like the astronauts in space. Or like the end of that Willy Wonka

movie Ximena loved so much, where they float up and up and burp their way down. Or maybe how my sister Leti felt when she'd run away from home and escaped it all. Finally, I knew the truth, the one that I'd suspected all along: Rogelio hadn't learned a damn thing. And somehow, it made me feel like I could breathe again.

All I know is that it happened fast. Martín's tongue was in my mouth. Then it was tracing a line down my neck, to my belly button. I lay down on the couch, and he squeezed in next to me.

"Touch me," he said, and led my hand to the top of his Levi's, down his underwear, and onto his erection. The skin itself was delicate as a flower petal, and I wanted to rest my face against it.

I jerked him off, lingered on the shaft, which felt different than Rogelio's, harder. I felt my mind ready to drift away, to pull me to the place I went when Rogelio and I had sex. *Stay here*, I thought to myself.

Martín moaned into my shoulder. "Finally," he said, his breath smoky and warm like piñon burning in a New Mexican winter.

Finally. After all these years of holding back, of all the rules and all the abiding, of being a good girl, a perfect wife. Finally, it was my turn to get what I wanted.

Before he could finish, I moved my hand away.

"I want you to use your mouth on me." I'd never said those words to anyone, and they felt like a foreign language leaving my lips. He slipped down on the couch, tugged my jeans off, and slowly, so slowly, worked his warm tongue between my legs. The radio was playing "Little Red Corvette," and I knew, even then, that Prince would forever remind me of this moment.

I reached down and ran my fingers through Martín's hair, but with his face hidden between my thighs, I realized he could've been anyone. Martín, Rogelio. None of them mattered. It was just me in that room, in the darkness, the candlelight casting shadows onto the ceiling and the rain falling hard outside. My body a flame of desire. If a tornado came and took it all away right then, I wouldn't have cared.

I felt my back arching, just like I'd imagined, and everything inside opening.

When the power turned back on a few minutes later, we said goodbye and promised to keep things between us, though a

small part of me didn't care either way. I opened the door for Martín to leave and gave him a quick peck on the lips. I could smell myself on him.

"Might wanna take a shower," I said.

"Who needs one when there's all this rain, right?" He winked, waved goodbye, and closed the door behind him.

My Casio said three, which meant that Rogelio and Ximena would be home any minute. I opened the blinds in the living room and pushed up the window to let some fresh air in. Although the tornado watch had officially expired, clouds still loomed over, each threatening to open again at any moment. And yet, everything looked the same. Still, unchanged. Except for me.

Every bone in my body felt heavy with exhaustion, and I decided then that instead of cooking, we'd go out for dinner, somewhere cheap. Tomorrow, if the weather was better, I'd hock the gold earrings and the Casio to cover us. Somewhere in between taking care of our family, of each day's list, I'd figure out what to do about my life.

A bolt of lightning crashed from the sky to the ground like an axe dividing the fabric of time. Before and after. I wondered for a second if Rogelio could see it too—the same strike, but a different view. One day, when Ximena was older, I would tell her the truth about all of it.

BRETT HANLEY

DURING THE WORST SUMMER OF MY LIFE, A BLUE-TAILED SKINK MADE MY FRONT PORCH ITS HOME

I might point out to myself that it wasn't even the worst
because 2013 was meaner, but I was better then at taking
what was doled out to me like a good nonbinary girl.
Truthfully, only one man has loved me.

He appeared around the same time as the skink.
I was rereading that one bell hooks book
we all do after a breakup when this man and I met.
It was not the time. I tried to tell him, but he tripled

down, sent a package of candles and chocolates
to my home, even, and then another package
holding a stuffed elephant sprayed
with his cologne. There's some wisdom

in this about not forcing things, about existing
simply, cleanly on a porch like the blue-tailed skink,
part lizard, part snake with an unsettling gait
and nature's most vibrant sapphire accessory.

This man's love was hardly the season's greatest
misfortune. It reminded me of Levis's idea that people
mostly can't make dignity of loneliness, somehow that
the man who loved me too suddenly couldn't

and that I couldn't, my own cobalt lonesomeness
a shock against a backdrop of concrete.

BRETT HANLEY

IF I COULD GIVE MY MOTHER ONE OF THESE HILLS

This is how I've furnished my home, futon
the main event, bookcase and tiny TV,
its neglected sideshows. I've been meaning
to buy a new lamp for weeks. I save
so much money when I'm like this:
under the unmade clump of blanket,
a stasis I learned from my mother like
learning the mouth shape of my first word,
our dog's name, *taff-ee*. When I call her,
I talk about the hills, the tall pines, the moss
hanging from oaks because it has no place
better to be. I tell her the postcard version
of my life. I don't want to speak despondency
and its contagion through the cell towers.
My mom mentions she heard somewhere
Tallahassee translates to seven hills.
There are more than seven. There are herds
of them, and there's a quiver of cobras piled
on my serotonin maker, napping. I'm not a cobra
shaker, I'm a blinking low-watt bulb.
Sometimes I sit in the dark here and mouth
my own name to the tempo of a human pulse
because I know it's something she gave to me.

BEN COOPER

EXILE

2025 AWP Intro Journals Project Winner, Selected by jo reyes-boitel

It goes like this: everything
you've ever known, left to look

toward the last flicker of the fading
before. It's the same closed sky

on the same lonely patch. It's the birds
going quiet in winter. It's the leaving

in sunlight, the returning
in rain. It's the shaking of the no-snow

from our coats. It's a warm December. It's the long alone
of your life, looking back. It's those damn birds always

returning—like this prayer,
like this wound.

WILLIAM ARCHILA

UNTITLED

Is Cipitío your conceived name or is it
of a broken colonial father A river child

just a white dress to conceal the root
you know next to nothing I learned

to vanquish vanish in the feathers I do it to
eggshells my pyramids & the penitentiary

to please myself My weariness
from pebbles to the gray craters

undecorated Some say Cipitín Others Tsipit
Perhaps if your father's geography is dead

I prefer my physics of light
how long can you hold out

your Pipil throat hanging from a rope
pocketed regarded as your own you bandits

I got here on my own The entrenched bank
is mine & the headless thought

riding on a horse is also mine
but with your prevalent narrative

If my pagan history is criminal I cede nothing
if you're illicit it's all about the weed you lose

How many years will you douse the bugs
As long as the spit after your chain-smoke

of the dead anchored to your flesh
fills me like a ghost my riverbank

I will continue to gas over the bugs
like a map is my only plot I prefer

My archaeological dig carved out of a canvas
my three drops of blood my falling renaissance

WILLIAM ARCHILA

UNTITLED

This is not a dream or a figment of my imagination, but I
thought
I saw you in a white T-shirt, Dickies, Nike Cortez
shoes, heel & toe
up & down city hall. You kept saying it wasn't me, it
wasn't me
& not seeing the pattern the judge gave you fifteen
& no parole.
The letters you write sound like poems I read online,
redacted.
You shave the meat off the bone. Then break
the bones to get
to the marrow . . . But I'm afraid I'm a bit of a
somnambulist, so this
must not be true. I mean how else to explain
these jailhouse marks
with paper clips & ballpoint pens. I thought I saw
the rib cage
of a wooden Christ, face of a clown & a teardrop
on your back.
Whatever it is that you write as truth without
the distortion of
white noise in the woods, it's nothing. I know. The leaves
tossed
nothing. The weightlessness of a life diminished,
which really, is only
ashes in the slammer. I won't say it, but I thought I knew
something.

WILLIAM ARCHILA

UNTITLED

Cipitío, some folks still say you're a troll in the grass, a sprig
of weed sticking out of your mouth. That you're a lot like
a ghost
only interested in yourself. I do that as well, but did you
know
there are bills to pay, that I still visit grocery stores
where prices
are written with a marker. Once when I was a child I saw
a man
ousted out of his house, his mattress on the curb folded like
a tortilla,
his children holding a smashed cry in their throats.
The cops left
the room empty except for a tricycle by the door, but that cry
got thicker
& thicker like smoke. I didn't know then the dirty pile of
dishes
& friends who disappeared in the lights of a city growing
luminous
would get higher. Now that I feel more alone
after my father's death.
Now that I can admit I know absolutely nothing
after my sons' births
keep me in the line of your veins. Don't break nor erase
this map
on my face. Anytime to be a little one in your dark
open hands.

WILLIAM ARCHILA

UNTITLED

When Claribel Alegría crowned me el Cipitío William Archila,
I thought
the worst. I thought, finally, here's my Virgil-like auntie,
obsidian head
gutbucket laugh to scrape me clean of my privileged
Yankee element.
But no. Instead she reminded me of my Spanish tongue that
trips & flips
in my blood like no other dog so sublime, & casted me
a discharge so large
of scattered ashes, hours of catatonic flowers floating
down the volcano
of Izalco, the way a plough man comes to the end
of the furrow exhausted
& has been a long time to understand the crazy crows
that recoil on the wire.

Her path lists the names of those in graves, names smaller
than the sound
of a grave, names that cannot be read, weeds & golden grass
that foster
no flowers. In the end the digging says a nation is a suitcase
you no longer visit
the way a thatched hut at the edge of the shore stands
alone, in smoke
the volcano puffing vapor from a crevice in the crater.
No doubt l once knew it.
I once entered that house. I have many names there
& no heart to bury.

WILLIAM ARCHILA

UNTITLED

Somewhere a wannabe philosopher writes his manifesto
to a beggar's banquet
intellectually charged, but spiritually dishonest. Somewhere
the gods drag
a corpse through a canopy of odes, the container of organs
contained, the roots
uprooted. Somewhere the families of elegies thrum
at the birth of a nation
bobcat-like, their roses & claws drunk on collective
punishment. Come morning
I'll make myself some coffee, part fuel, part fiddle, part
the consciousness
of an epistle. All these self-portraits of a mythological
maggot, how narcissistic
to call myself a doppelgänger, when I have the roof of
a thousand night crawlers
supper all four seasons long without expecting a soul.
Do I have the audacity
to instill silence & order in my body, the way a barefoot
boy runs unaware
of the thick layer beneath him, his calluses redeeming
in all their autumn? Tonight
the kids will lay down their syllabics of orchids, then pull
a match for a single fire.
Before I return to the bed that makes a cricketsong out of me,
what is left can
easily erode, even in slumber, so I remind myself,
I'm building as I go along.

BOB HICOK

THE AGE OF SPACE TRAVEL

You can make any constellation you want
when you stare into the Milky Way,
it's the Etch A Sketch of stars. There's one I call
"My cat eating the stomach of a bird"
and over there's "My friend shooting up
on London Bridge." He has a kid now,
lives in Bristol, sells paint. His daughter
wants to be an astronaut and take a kangaroo
to the moon. Her name is Ruth. She was born
with a twisted leg. Kids call her Clomper.
She sends me links to clips of people
floating in space. I send her pictures of birds
riding horses. She doesn't know her pop's history
with smack. Will she ever, I wonder, or have her own?
That roo would hop and never come down.
It was my mission in life to go to space
until I added up how much I'd have to spend
on ladders to get there.
My funniest autobiographical constellation
is "Man trying to look on the bright side":
her father didn't jump that time
and was rescued when he did; the bird was dead
before my cat got its stomach;
kangaroos can live without food or oxygen
or zoos; I didn't cry yesterday
and will lie and say I didn't
if I cry today. I can't get close
to most people. Their mouths
and heads prevent it, physics does, decorum,
me. If he hadn't been a junkie,
if she didn't limp, they'd seem normal,
which is a different species from me
and I'd stay away. When she's older,
space travel will be commercially available.

If I'm rich, I'll send her to heaven
long enough to whisper more clearly
to her mother, who was a far better junkie
than her pops. Got high once and never came down.
Imagine the first time you try something
it kills you. Something other than being alive.

BOB HICOK

(((HOPE)))

We could talk about my wife's friend's best friend
from high school who just OD'd, or high school
or oxy this and that, or meth, or the bottle of wine
I keep hidden under my scrotum, or my students
who can't get jobs, the obesity of a universe
that keeps getting fatter, the soft spot
for capitalism at the center of the Supreme Court,
the relative nanoseconds of our lives
compared to the most boring piece of granite,
the number of people who'll hear gunshots today
and think of them as someone who lives in the country
does a finch, my skeleton getting anxious
for its day in the sun, the credit card you used
to pay off the credit card you used
to pay off the credit card you burned on the stove,
the chemicals in the shrimp at the bottom of the Marianas
or competitive sobbing's introduction to the 2028 Olympics,

but I've never seen an igloo with a sunroof
or been a fifteen-year-old girl in a mosh pit
with a bloody smile who just buried her father's gun
in a river where only she knows to look at fish
swimming easily past her truce with rampage
to calm herself down, so why sit around and talk
when we can be chasing the chance that we are solar flares
at heart? Are you happy? Is any of this easy? Can we ascend

just one step or tree limb higher
before we lay our cigarettes and switchblades
on the table and decide which to smoke now
and which later? It's illegal to take a shower

while holding a gun to your head
and pulling the trigger, so I don't do that
very often and not today. A word I like

is capitulation, how badly it wants to be catapult,
cause yeah, I want to give up and curl into a peanut
and send all my shit flying and eat sand
every fucking moment that I'm not remembering
even my tinnitus wants me to crank up the volume
of the roses and the moon and think of Lorca
whistling "Zorongo Gitano" through the bullet holes
in his chest like a saxophone that can't take any more
of the sad stories we tell simply because we have mouths
and they are true.

ANNA KONRADI

GOOD NEWS

A good child is full
of wonder unless
he is staring down
the belly of a tank.
Then he is a head-
line. If a child is
good and lucky
he is remembered.
A good harvest is
reaped by boys
who are hardly late
to dinner. If a
boy is late to dinner
he is either full
of wonder or dead.
A good dinner dirties
several pots and
pans and is never as
good to the person
who cooked it. A
good guest thanks
the cook and does
not let on that
they are hungry
for wonder. Before
dinner they read
the headlines.
A good headline is
honest about who
dies and who is
killed. A good killer
strikes last. A good
strike is hungry. If
a strike is good and

lucky it makes
headlines. A good
story lives when-
ever we listen.
It daydreams but
never sleepwalks.
A good song is
wet. Shout-out
to Hot Freaks.
A good girl bangs
her head like her
music is religion.
If a girl is hungry
she is good. A girl
is never good and
lucky. A good poem
cries louder than she
does. If a child can-
not cry a good poem
wails doubly. A good
double is down. A
good down is second
and fifteen yards from
the end zone. A good
end troubles the
reader. A good reader
knows the headline
is really a boy
shaking in the
shadow of a tank.

ANNA KONRADI

HOW TO HOUSE SIT

On the morning
I turn twenty-six
I filter through a
stranger's closet
for a funeral dress.
I slink into a little
black slip, study the
unimportant contour
of my hips. I peacock
in a borrowed bedroom,
discarding dark silk
and organza when
pieces fail to serve
an appropriate image
of mourning. There
is something erotic
about grief. How it
demands every inch
of the body, how it
consumes. I love
to be ravished, though
this want I try my best
to conceal. My friends
know this to be true.
I tell them over home-
cooked meals, pasta
al dente, salted
meat, cherry-red wine.

I wear a sweater filched
from New York. Even
in familiar company
I prefer to be costumed.
This time in the image

of a lover. The borrowed
house is the nexus
of my self-mythification,
such jubilance to be
found in the disregard
for my own shampoo,
in opting for nail polish
discovered under the sink.
A shimmery blue called
"You Had Me at Halo."
If only for summer
I would smell like
gardenia and host
dinner parties where
all the dishes match.
I imagine if I tried to
strip from my costume
my skin would peel
off with it. My friends
and I gossip and grieve
in fabulous clothes.
For us there is
no conflict between
appearing and
being. I appear

in a modest black
dress that grazes
my knees and signifies
condolence. I am
sorry for the father
of the deceased,
who died at twenty-five,
whose lamentations are
sung and sung
again in the mouths
of butter-voiced
aunts in impeccable hats.
I note the location
of each *amen*: front row,
after God's proclamation

that there will be
no more Death,
between the hymn
and silence. Cousins
and uncles wax nostalgic.
I imagine my own
father, heavy head
hung on the bereaved stem
of his neck. I conceive
of myself as subject-
matter, capable of being
exhausted. I am to be
understood and
stylized in this
process of—

I arch my back
so my funeral dress
hangs just so over the
curve of my ass.
I memorialize the
curve of my ass in
my broken iPhone
camera. I consider
what muscles constrict
in the throes of grief.
I get drunk with a friend—
the priest who presented
the eulogy. There is nothing
erotic about grief except
there's no need to
imagine me naked
when I'm already
laid bare.

ANNA KONRADI

GOD'S PRAYER TO LOVE

I am always thinking
about sex as the world
is ending. The world
seems always to be
delicious and ending.
I was just as hopeful
before you but now
I desire steadily that
we will watch what
hope has done from
rocking chairs on a big
porch that wraps snugly
around a little green
house, whose creaks
are our creaks, whose
body, our body. I don't
pray, but today I transpose
my name for Christ's
and supplicate, I have no
body but yours. Because
you have me, not as I do,
but as kind silence holds
confession. As day
contains each constellation,
you keep safe the myth
of myself. You flip
through Rilke's love poems
to God and stop when he
writes, *you cherish those*
who grip you for survival.
You don't like your reading
voice. Sometimes I ask
you to read aloud. This time
I recite Rilke's wants

to you: Darkness,
shimmering light, for
those who move through
untouched to open
their mouths. Flick
out your tongues and taste
how luscious this world is,
how sweet the fruit on the verge
of rot. Should you lay
me down I know you will
do so gently. Your hands
are a generous place. Not
everyone gets so lucky as
to know what it feels like
to be held like hope.

MAYA BERNSTEIN-SCHALET

DOWN AND OUT IN DISNEYLAND

2025 AWP Intro Journals Project Award Winner, Selected by AJ Romriell

The Vrbo that we stayed in for Kealynd's memorial was Disney themed. When I opened my eyes in the morning, Goofy stared back at me—actually, dozens of Goofys, plastered all over the walls. The Vrbo's interior was inspired by the neighboring Disneyland Resort in Anaheim. And so, Elsa smized from a poster across from the toilet while I peed. A grinning Mickey and Minnie watched my aunt cry.

My cousin Kealynd was a dancer and a joker. He was as silly as he was stubborn. When he died of an overdose in August of 2021, he had been sober for six months, the longest he'd been sober in years. He had a job he loved at Goodwill and a room in a sober house nearby. Kealynd met many of his friends in Anaheim through substance use disorder (SUD) recovery meetings or programs. At his memorial, one by one, they got up to speak. "This isn't new for us," a friend said. "We lose someone every couple of months. And it's terrible. And I don't know when it will stop."

Fatal overdoses increased across the United States in 2021, and Anaheim was no exception. As I'd come to find out, the region is a hub for SUD recovery programs, which is how Kealynd ended up there. When I asked a local journalist why there are so many in Orange County, where Anaheim is located, she said, without missing a beat, "We're close to the beach."

The programs are advertised as luxury vacations, she told me, and property in parts of Orange County is cheaper than nearby San Diego or Los Angeles. When I searched for these programs online, I clicked through page after page of pristine beach pictures promising, in addition to psychotherapy and medication management, chef-prepared meals, tranquil meditation gardens, and yoga classes. Above an image of a palm-tree-studded sunset, one facility boasted its location in "the heart of sunny Southern California" as an ideal place to "begin your healing process." In reality, Kealynd's experience was far from luxurious. Like many realities shrouded in marketing

schemes, the actual experience is not the fantasy promoted on the website.

Before Kealynd died, I didn't think of SUD recovery programs when I thought of Anaheim. I knew Anaheim because of Disneyland. "Disneyland is dedicated to the ideals, the dreams, and the hard facts that have created America . . . with the hope that it will be a source of joy and inspiration to all the world," Walt Disney pronounced on July 17, 1955, during Disneyland's televised opening day. Ninety million Americans watched from home, 54.2 percent of the country's population at the time—a greater percentage than would watch the moon landing in 1969. Today, almost fifty thousand people visit Disneyland each day, from all over the world.

Eerily, I felt Disneyland's looming presence everywhere I went in Anaheim. Minivans full of blond kids and tired-looking parents, blown-up Disney characters on posters and billboards, street signs directing people to the Happiest Place on Earth. In the years after Kealynd's death, I fixated on the memory of Disneyland's intrusion on my mourning, the thought of Kealynd hovering over the library books I'd spread out on the carpeted floor of my office. I read about Disneyland's construction and its labor issues, its milestones and its pitfalls. I also read about its relationship to the city of Anaheim. How Disney had, essentially, bought the city's government and become the domineering force behind Anaheim's public policies. How the industry of Disney and the industry of recovery programs are both costly and lavishly advertised. How Anaheim was transformed from rows of orange groves to a massively profitable private landmass surrounded by working-class communities.

I fixated on the memory of Disneyland's intrusion on my mourning, the thought of Kealynd hovering over the library books I'd spread out on the carpeted floor.

I also checked out dozens of books on substance use disorders. I researched skyrocketing rates of overdoses in the United States and learned about how the Sackler family knowingly created an opioid-addiction epidemic. I read about

the neuroscience of drugs and addiction, spoke with addiction medicine doctors about harm reduction methods, and learned about the synthetic opioid fentanyl. It was created as a painkiller in 1959 by a Belgian chemist named Dr. Paul Janssen. It has done wonders for pain relief in medical procedures; it has also heavily contributed to the current overdose crisis. As I learned all of this, I thought about Kealynd, trying to understand how the person in my memories could be dead.

I started to keep a list: Things People Say About Disneyland That Sound Like They're Talking About Doing Drugs:

> 1. "When Walt built Disneyland, he was striving to make people feel better about themselves . . . I think he had discovered what people were looking for—the feeling of being alive and in love with life" (John Hench quoted in Neal Gabler's *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*).
>
> 2. "From the mid–1950s on, travel sections in dozens of newspapers all over the United States promoted trips to Anaheim, extolling the park's pleasures for 'people who are seeking release from the cares and concerns of today's tense times'" (Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life).*
>
> 3. "Disneyland is an escape from the world with some visitors crying upon entering Main Street as a cathartic release. . . ." (William McCarthy, "Meet Me on Main Street: Disneyland as Place Attachment for Southern Californians").
>
> 4. "I would prostitute myself for it," Walt Disney told an interviewer about Disneyland in 1957 (quoted in Gabler's *Walt Disney*).

To be clear, I don't think the fervor around Disney and the sensations caused by drug use are branches of the same tree. I am, however, fascinated by the linguistic overlaps used to describe them. I could have just been noticing the overlaps because I was switching back and forth between books on Disneyland and books on drug addiction, lugging around tote bags so full of books that I broke the straps. But once I noticed the similarities, they became hard to un-see.

Almost three years after Kealynd passed, in June of 2024, I returned to Anaheim for a journalism conference. The conference was interesting, but it was also an excuse for me to come back, to close the loop on a stretch of the mourning process I couldn't let be. What does it mean to be grieving in the Happiest Place on Earth, I wondered, and how come some grieve while others have fun?

Kealynd's memorial was the first time I heard about his life there. One friend spoke about their plans to move in together in a couple months; another reflected on an outing with Kealynd during which he pranked strangers by calling out "DAD?" at passersby. As I listened to stories of Kealynd busting out a split at a meeting or promenading in a feather boa, I felt guilty for losing touch with him in our adult lives. There was so much I didn't know.

What was Kealynd's favorite place to eat in Anaheim when he was feeling down? Was there a bus line he took to work? Or did he bike? Where did he go for haircuts, and was there a friend's house he liked to visit most? Did he have a favorite spot on the couch? Did he ever go to Disneyland, and, if so, did he like it? Or was it just an institution looming on the periphery of his day-to-day, present but not pronounced? What was the sound of his alarm in the morning, if he used one, and did he dream about the rest of his life?

The last time I saw Kealynd was New Year's Day, 2018. I'd spent the night before at a party with some Boston students from my liberal arts college. The next morning, I Ubered to a psychiatric ward in Jamaica Plain. "I am going to get better this time," Kealynd told me. "I want so badly to change my life." Less than two days later, he relapsed.

I wanted to help him, but I didn't know how. I didn't know how to help my mom or my aunt. I was so ashamed of how useless I was. I was so ashamed that I didn't drop everything and go to him. Maybe I could have gone to live in Boston to keep him out of trouble, or talked him into sobriety, or found an opportunity to pluck him out of his life and begin another. But what would that have done, really? Love can't "save" a person who uses drugs. There isn't anything my aunt didn't try to save Kealynd's life. I'm not even sure that Kealynd would have wanted my love, especially after we lost touch.

Back in Anaheim, on the way to the hotel where the conference was held, I passed a dwelling of tarps and shopping carts strung up along a fence by the freeway exit. It was under a billboard for a real estate developer called Valued Housing. Less than a mile away, Disneyland "villas" were available for $6,000 a night. Lower-budget hotels surround the Disney complex, like the alpine-lodge-themed motel I passed on my way to lunch, sweat dripping down my back as I examined the "icicles" hanging from the motel office roof. In the same way I'd felt watching *The Florida Project,* a film that chronicles the life of a mother-daughter duo living in Disney's Orlando spillover, I was reminded of how life traverses between day-to-day spheres of tragedy and fantasy.

The conference was in a complex of massive hotels and convention centers. As I wound my way through large palm trees and purple African lilies, glass windows and parking garages, I encountered not a single person. I tried to imagine this place full of people—after a concert, maybe, or a convention, bodies packing the manicured space. Above me, the metal arms of lamps wrapped around palm tree trunks, black shiny stripes drilled into brown pseudobark. Being there, sandwiched between transient hotel conference rooms and empty concrete walkways, I felt like a Sim in a game designed by absent engineers.

The café where I ate lunch, across the street from the Disney Resort, offered French toast, omelets, crepes, waffles, salad, pasta, pizza, burgers, steak, salmon, muffins, smoothies, and sandwiches. Outside the booth's window, I watched a young man dig in a trash can, crossing the intersection from corner to corner. In the booth across from me, an older woman took a picture on her iPhone of one young woman taking a Polaroid photo of her friend, a picture of picture-taking for memory's sake.

In 1981, Jean Baudrillard famously wrote about Disneyland as simulacrum: "Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra," he mused. "It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real." Simulacra, by Baudrillard's definition, are "false representations" of reality that have become indistinguishable from reality itself. The fantasies of Disney, which are, indeed, fantasies, are made to appear real.

Disneyland is a representation of these fantasies, a *simulation* of a simulation. "The Disney park does not simulate the 'real'; rather, it celebrates the *art of simulation*, the ability to construct fantasy worlds *as if* they are 'real,'" wrote theater scholar David Allen in 2014. "As visitors, we feel as if we *could* be in a 'real' place and time; but we are also aware that it is, after all, a fantasy."

As I walked along the sidewalk of the park's perimeter on my way back from lunch, I noticed crumbling concrete walls next to the neatly trimmed hedges and dumpsters shoved up against banana palms. Disneyland's earthen berm, a border or barrier made of plants and soil, was constructed to keep both Anaheim out and the magic in. "I don't want the public to see the world they live in while they're in the Park," Walt Disney once said. "I want them to feel they're in another world." This intentional design of escape into fantasy has made Disneyland a ripe target for critique; scores of artists and intellectuals, from Banksy to Walter Benjamin, have used the park and its iconography as a comparison between poverty and consumerism or the fantasy of the American promise and the reality of American empire.

"I don't want the public to see the world they live in while they're in the Park," Walt Disney once said. "I want them to feel they're in another world."

How can we valorize a fantasy when the walls are crumbling around it? I wondered, gazing at the dumpsters and broken concrete. That's why we valorize the fantasy in the first place, I answered myself. Not for its magical content, but for all that it shuts out.

Writers and historians often lament the inevitable flattening when writing about the dead, a person turned page, or screen, or ghost. There's no adequate way to do justice to a person's essence of being. When the person about whom we write is alive, the entity of their body exists apart from us, writerly rendering be damned. Writing about the dead, however, is haunted by all the words that person will never see. It's not right that I can't ask

Kealynd for his consent to tell his story. His story, after all, is not mine to tell. Without his consent, there's a lot I won't include here, because I honor his agency over his own life. All that's to say, it took me three years to accept that I'll never find the right words to do justice to Kealynd in this essay, but I can try.

Kealynd had a demand for living so forceful it left me breathlessly trailing behind. He could make me laugh like no other. There wasn't a fart joke he wouldn't make or an awkward moment he'd let slide sans laugh. He also, sometimes, scared the shit out of me. He was temperamental, volatile, blazing. His anger was a fire I did not know how to put out.

For most of our childhood, I was the baby cousin, following my older cousins around like a bee follows the scent of pollen. Kealynd was five years older than me. I didn't have any older siblings. I looked up to Kealynd, wanted to inhabit his world each time I saw him. When my moms packed my younger brother and me into their maroon Pathfinder to go up to Boston for a visit, I anticipated Cap'n Crunch and the full spectrum of Nickelodeon cartoons, delicacies my PBS Kids queue did not boast.

It was Kealynd who gave me my childhood zeal for the great art of trading Pokémon cards. Of course, I had no idea there was an actual game involved, and mostly I just coveted the ones that were shiny, but it didn't matter. Kealynd and I would sit in his bedroom and go through card after card, voraciously, fixated on the bargaining power of, say, a Squirtle (not a lot, if you're curious). He always wanted *more*: more cards, more episodes of the *Pokémon* show. When Game Boy Advances came out, he played nonstop. He had to get them all, every card, every game, every Pokémon-related tchotchke out there, every time.

He was like this with a slew of things I never knew I had a passion for, but around Kealynd, they became more important than ever. Like the necessity of as many trips to Cold Stone Creamery as possible, where we watched with awe as tiny marshmallows and peanut butter cups got chopped into our ice cream. When he wanted to go to the park, *we had to go to the park*, like the world would stop turning if we didn't. And sometimes, that's exactly what happened—Kealynd would have temper tantrums so ferocious I'd reel for days in their intensity. Except for on TV, I'd never seen anybody scream so

loud. But these storms would end, and in their aftermath, we'd return to play.

On the last day of the conference, I went to Disneyland proper. I figured I couldn't write about the place without seeing it, though I had been once before, when I was four. When I told my mother I was writing this essay, she mentioned pictures from that trip. The last time I visited my childhood home, they were stacked on my old desk on top of a scrapbook I'd made sometime before I turned ten.

There I was: a little me, staring, open-mouthed, at Snow White, my mom's arms wrapped around me encouragingly. In another, I grimaced next to Cinderella, clutching my mom's hand, a line of little girls and their adult chaperones behind us. In the photo with Pluto, I stretched out my hand for a high five in front of a car license plate that reads: "TOONTOWN: ANIM8ED." I don't remember the trip at all.

In preparation for my second trip to Disneyland, I looked through Facebook groups of adult Disney fans and clicked through photo essays of their Disney-themed homes, trying to imagine how the dream of Disney I'd long since forgotten could continue past childhood. *Imagine that feeling*, I told myself, reading comments about upcoming trips and the excitement of new park rides. But I hadn't considered what it would feel like for my body to be in the park, how I'd feel, what I'd see.

Looking back, I wonder if I had intentionally avoided thinking about going to Disneyland, or if the conference had kept my mind occupied. Either way, at one o'clock on a balmy Sunday, I found myself pushing through a turnstile to Disneyland Park, the pretend fire station where Walt Disney built a private apartment looming above me.

On Main Street, USA, Disneyland's main thoroughfare, I watched as families engaged in the most American activity of all: shopping for toys, for T-shirts, for water bottles, for mouse ears. The romanticized nineteenth-century buildings, originally used for storage, are now themed shops: Fortuosity Shop selling curios and watches, Gibson Girl Ice Cream Parlor. On Main Street I even saw a functioning mailbox, complete with a sign that reads: "Mail deposited in this box will be delivered to the Anaheim Post Office by The Disneyland Resort." The

air smelled like sewage, fried potatoes, and brand-new plastics wafting out with the AC.

I couldn't help but think about the historic photographs of Anaheim I'd seen on the Online Archive of California, a database of primary source collections from more than three hundred institutions, including the Anaheim Public Library. On a summer night in Tucson, I hunched over my laptop at a beer garden and clicked through the collection of images of Anaheim from the late 1800s and early 1900s. Anaheim had a Center Street not unlike Main Street, USA: the same two-story buildings, some brick, some wood. Columns lined up outside neat storefronts. The most notable difference is that Anaheim's Center Street was unpaved, its dirt a significant contrast between the make-believe and the real thing.

From Main Street, USA, I wandered down to Sleeping Beauty Castle, where a marching band played "Circle of Life." When they finished playing, they marched off in the direction of Tomorrowland, blue and black feathers ruffling on their matching caps.

The park was clean, almost calm. This environment is exactly what Walt Disney desired; after visits to theme parks like Coney Island's, where he was repelled by the grime and misbehavior—perhaps a racist and classist observation—Disney was determined to make his theme park a haven. Order and function were paramount; so too were the dividing lines between race and class in much of the US. Early images of Disneyland contain exclusively white people, many of whom appear to be middle or upper class.

I'm not a fan of theme parks, I have to admit. And still, there I was, at Disneyland. I expected to navigate hordes of screaming, costumed children, their hands sticky from $10 ice cream. Instead, besides a lot of buying, I saw children experiencing joy. I saw parents joyous at their children's joy. I saw myself, standing there with a notebook in hand, unsure how to feel. Yes, I was standing in the middle of the simulation. So what?

I'd spent so long thinking about the dream of Disneyland and the nightmare of Kealynd's passing, trying to understand the sense of one in relation to the other, wondering why I couldn't stop obsessing over the dream in the nightmare and the nightmare in the dream. But here, smack-dab in the center of the

Happiest Place on Earth, all I felt was the passing exhilaration of a moment as it unfolds. At the end of the day, each of these families would pack into rental cars or shuttle buses or California-plated SUVs and return to hotels and motels and fake alpine lodges, scrolling through the day on their phones.

On my way out of the park, I passed the Dapper Dans a cappella group. "*We wouldn't have nothing if we didn't have you,*" they harmonized. I kept walking, past the life-sized Minnie Mouse available for selfies, past the empty turnstile exits and security tents, out into a busy Anaheim street.

One of my last memories of Kealynd is from the eve of his twenty-fourth birthday. We spent the night bouncing around an eighteen-and-up gay club in Providence, Rhode Island. Though he'd already started using drugs, he had been sober for a little while. I was excited and nervous, nineteen and still in awe of my older cousins, obsessing over what I would wear (a camo tank top, black leggings, and Frye boots, if I remember correctly), whether I would fit in with my cousins' older friends, whether we would go anywhere where it'd be a problem that I was nineteen.

A little less than five years later, when I found out Kealynd had passed away, I searched through my photo stream for a video from that night. In it, Kealynd twerks on the floor of the club as red and green lights swirl around him. It was December, the lights already primed for Christmas. "That's my COUSIN!" I scream from behind the camera. We spent the night musing about the muscled go-go dancers, trying to figure out which man might bestow his attention upon Kealynd. We got home during the early hours of the morning, sweaty and alive.

The next day, at my aunt's annual Hannukah party, Kealynd was agitated and fidgety. While the rest of us sang dreidel songs and wiped potato peels out of the sink, he glowered. At some point between latke time and clean-up time, Kealynd disappeared with my aunt's phone. That night, I lay awake, listening and hoping for him to come back home.

The first night I spent back in Anaheim in 2024, I wrote: *I came here for Kealynd, but his soul/spirit has departed this place. So why am I here?* I knew, from the second the plane landed, that

Kealynd's spirit had left the city. His presence was forceful; even at his memorial, I felt him shimmering above the cut grass.

For a while after the memorial, I wanted to speak to people who were close to Kealynd, who would know more about what led to his death. I also wanted to know more about why the so-called "treatment" industry was flourishing in Orange County, and why it was failing. But by the time I arrived in Anaheim in 2024, I realized my quest for answers about the substance use disorder treatment industry in Anaheim was a quest for one answer in particular: Why did Kealynd die?

Death rarely makes sense. Loss warps time into skips and jumps; there's no measuring the getting-over, the moving-on, the life-after-loss. I realized that I hadn't, of course, gone back to Anaheim for Kealynd. I had gone to Anaheim for myself, to try to make sense of a heartbreak so nonsensical, I'd never see it fully.

There are so many people who use drugs and don't die. Many doctors who specialize in substance use disorders believe that overdose deaths are entirely preventable. Harm reduction efforts such as safe injection sites, needle exchanges, Never Use Alone hotlines, free Narcan and fentanyl test strips, and the strengthening of Good Samaritan laws[1] would drastically reduce the number of fatal overdoses. Like so many people across the United States, Kealynd tried desperately to shake the drugs. And he just couldn't. Partly because a lot of the time, Kealynd *wasn't* trying desperately to shake the drugs. I don't judge him for it. This is what most people's "journey to sobriety" or recovery or getting clean actually looks like. It's a ton of stopping and re-

I had gone to Anaheim for myself, to try to make sense of a heartbreak so nonsensical, I'd never see it fully.

1. Often, people who use drugs fear criminal prosecution and the consequences involved (losing one's children, job, home, etc.) and may not call for help if they witness an overdose. This may be what happened to Kealynd. Good Samaritan laws are designed to protect from prosecution those who request emergency medical attention for someone else. Good Samaritan laws, however, frequently have loopholes that allow for criminal prosecution regardless. Experts believe that eliminating those loopholes would save lives.

lapsing and starting again and everything in between. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has adopted harm reduction principles as an overall strategy to reduce overdoses, but without federal or state oversight for treatment programs, evidence-based harm reduction is neither mandatory nor regulated. So, why did Kealynd die?

In my search for the faults of Disneyland and SUD treatment in Anaheim, I suppose I'd channeled my disgust that life could go on without Kealynd, that the world would keep its sheen. I wanted, very much, for his experiences of this life to continue. I wanted him to find a love deep and kind. I wanted us to dance to the remix of Nicola Coughlan's "Shoes . . . More Shoes" in a gay club, sweaty and free. I wanted him to experience the financial stability of a long-term job, the emotional comfort of decades-long friendships, the bodily comfort of health and contentment.

I wanted him to get to live a life; I wanted him to stay around as the rest of us stumbled and fumbled, if only to laugh about it over a Cold Stone cone. To visit him in California now that I'd moved out west, to eat In-N-Out burgers, animal style, in the front seat of my Subaru as the world spun madly on around us.

That first evening back in Anaheim, I heard loud pops at dusk, the nightly ritual of Disneyland's fireworks. I went to stand at the window, watching sparks fly above the palm tree canopy and thinking that at the end of the day, all that is real and true and fake and false is bound up together, imprinted on the same sky.

I remembered how, after Kealynd's memorial, the same fireworks show brought my family out into the backyard of the Vrbo—my aunts and moms and cousins and brother and me, worn out from crying, from a grief that had only just begun.

Kealynd would have loved the fireworks, ending the day with a bang. He would have loved a lot of things. When the show finished, I pulled the curtains closed and fell into a restless sleep, not ready for a nightmare, not ready for a dream.

MARTHA RONK

ADRIFT IN THE RUINS

> *Sargassum is a genus of brown macroalgae (seaweed) in the order Fucales of the Phaeophyceae class. Numerous species are distributed throughout the temperate and topical oceans of the world, generally inhabiting shallow water and coral reefs and the genus is widely known for its planktonic (free-floating) species.*
>
> —Wikipedia

numerous species throughout temperate oceans of the world
in shallow water, planktonic, floating without attachments
rushed onto the sand by concurrent storms, encountered
at the edge, numerous in slime, drifting as one might,
as one has, through stunned days, lifting one foot then the other,
sand forcing us to walk like fastidious birds—
the upper lip of humans left over from original fish parts,
& two genes designating fin rays & fingers—for strings,
strings of music, of plankton, of drifted habitats—all we're made of:
halleluiahs, backyards, fog, coral reefs turning white—
one can't imagine the damage of the present, ruin we think
always the past in the city of Rome's leftover stones

MARTHA RONK

BECOMING ANOTHER ALONG THE FRONTAGE ROAD

though most get pushed aside, several lives keep going
within parameters designated by the logic of limitations,
long-lost details suddenly salient, suddenly abrupt,
semi-audibles leaking through stone outcroppings
incised inscriptions such as *here lies to the bereavement of,*
days of yore claiming attention along the frontage road—
could be word scraps from synapses,
the odor of low tide and you up and leave or think of doing so
and you are gone into that other direction that doesn't stop
but keeps going and you're back in the heat of another summer—
as if repetition, the internal combustion of contradiction,
could take you into that other life you were living

MARTHA RONK

WHAT THE MIND DOES

what the mind does in making this into that, taking me where
I am not, creating scenes out of rectangles, some sea in it—
and I've ruined what we were making in a walk you and I,
lost in the seventeenth century painting of silks I saw before me,
coastal ribbons of wet unlike either land or sea
where the moon pulls away water, a line of the littoral
viscous as kelp from the sea, slimy between fingers,
loop over loop, touch is for skin we often wear indifferently,
the immediate walk fading as this fan-shaped scroll recreates water
that atmospheric fog rising over a turbulent sea, Price: USD *3800,*
a seal reading ***Kansai***, who allowed the paint simply to fall,
a silvery orange or blue, colorrain every which way

MARTHA RONK

HEARING THE SWEEP OF OARS: A DREAM

all quiet after the storm surges through things, seaweed hair
just under the surface, awake finally, dislodged by the sweep of oars
intertidal filaments wavering like fingers pianoing the air,
nervous habits extruded into plain sight, fanning open pages
glued together by humidity, age, residue from the skin of hands
turning each over slowly those days when she taught me how to open
a new book leaf by leaf

each day patches strewn across the sand imitate filaments,
rivulets, branches, we hear too with other than our ears, the oars
dipping in and out—the word *plash*, 1522 probably imitative

MARTHA RONK

GOING EXTINCT

the tide goes out, becomes sand etched by pronged feet,
the lines of sand crabs and illegible seaweed, nothing else
along the water's edge and out across the stretch of sea
staring at it is an event in itself, just standing, staring
at the incomprehensible distance beyond, across,
and to what's out of sight, the leaf cutter bee going extinct,
the snowy plover, pale with patches, a black eyebrow line,
endangered, as the rivers and estuaries where it nests
dry up, disappear, I'm standing in a line of complicity
reaching forward and back, 7 a.m. the highway behind me

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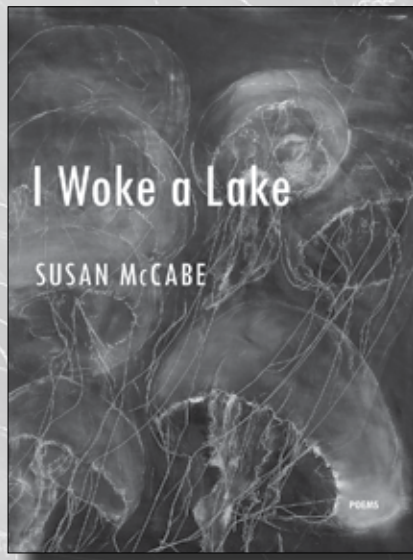
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"Susan McCabe's *I Woke a Lake* is an astonishing achievement. It is not just another memoir in verse, but a work of art, superfine at every point, unlimitable and unimitable. It is no easier to describe than Virginia Woolf's or Friederike Mayröcker's 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**

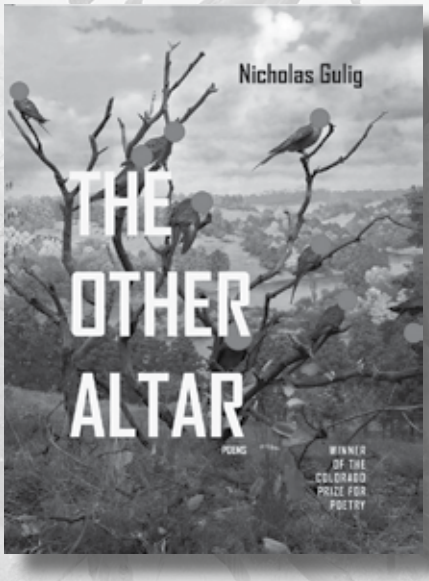
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—BRENDA SHAUGHNESSY, final judge

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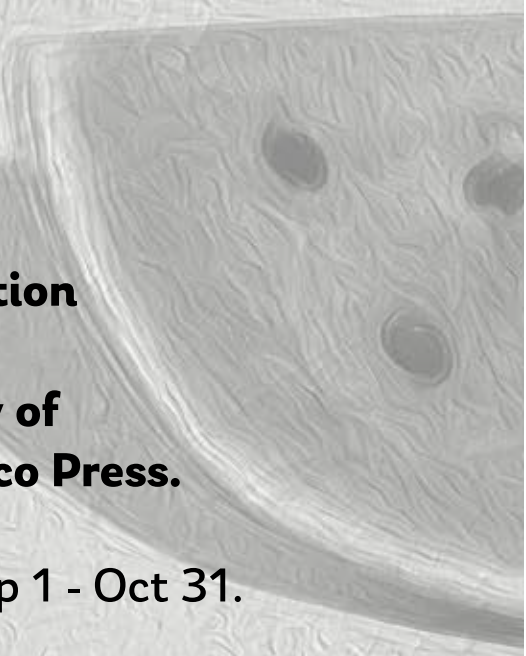
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